Possibilities of enhancing quality assurance across ODL programmes: A focus on the Zimbabwe Open University’s SELECTED UNIT HEADS’ perceptions

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Abstract

The study reports on an investigation into the possibilities of enhancing quality assurance across Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). A questarview with open-ended questions was administered to three (3) criterion-sampled Faculty Dean (FD), Manager and Director, respectively. The questions posed were related to how the possibilities of quality assurance could be enhanced across all programmes at the ZOU. The study aimed to further understand how the enhancement of quality assurance of programmes at the ZOU could be effected in practice. The study established that, unlike previous studies on quality assurance, quality assurance across ODL programmes at ZOU entails carrying out awareness campaigns and putting in place quality management systems in compliance with ISO 9001. The results also indicate that quality assurance, in respect of the ZOU, is university-unit bound. Furthermore, the results indicate that communication at the ZOU is considered the nerve centre of any successful quality assurance processes or activities. The researchers recommend that all units of the University work in symbiosis of one another in search of quality assurance and quality assurance enhancement. A further recommendation is that the university has no option other than holding regular workshops on quality assurance and quality assurance enhancement all year round in a bid to sensitise all staff categories in the University units about quality assurance and quality assurance enhancement.

Key words:-Quality, quality assurance, quality assurance enhancement, possibilities, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), ODL programmes, distance education.

Introduction

This qualitative case study focuses on the possibilities of enhancing quality assurance across Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes at the Zimbabwe Open University. The case study which makes a particular reference to the Zimbabwe Open University’s Faculty Deans (FDs), Material Development Unit (MDU), and Quality Assurance (QA), Directors and Managers’ perceptions view quality assurance enhancement (QAE) as an aspect of institutional quality management that is designed to secure steady, reliable and demonstrable improvements in the quality assurance of ODL programmes at the ZOU. In this context, quality assurance enhancement is seen as the process of taking deliberate measures at the institutional level to improve the quality assur-
ance of learning opportunities through ODL programmes. Put slightly differently, in this study, quality assurance enhancement is perceived as continuous improvement or innovation in respect of the ZOU programmes in order to ensure that such programmes meet the standards set by the institution or another body such as ISO 9001 through the process of quality assurance.

Background to the Study

For some academics, QA and QAE are perceived as almost antithetical concepts. In this study, the two concepts are seen as complementary. To this end, the two concepts are considered important to quality management of ODL programmes in order for ODL institutions such as the ZOU to deal with the stiff competition that is snowballing within the ODL arena. In this sense, this study concedes that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions operate in an extremely competitive environment. Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is one such ODL institution that is facing stiff competition from conventional universities locally and externally in terms of quality assurance (QA) and quality assurance enhancement (QAE) of the programmes it offers. Mapolisa and Mubika (2013) who explored total quality management regarding research supervision of Postgraduate students’ dissertations at the ZOU seem to lend credence to the two preceding statements when they posit that QA is inevitable in contemporary Higher Education (HE) institutions. Similarly, the 4th African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) (2014) notes that QA is a must in today’s HE institutions. Also in concurrence with Mapolisa and Mubika (2013) and the 4th ACDE Brochure (2014), are Mapolisa and Ncube (2012) who after studying the efficacy of team leadership in enhancing quality work output and performance at the ZOU came to the conclusion that QA and QAE are the gateway to the production of credible and reputable ODL programmes.

Kurasha and Gwarinda (2011:5) in their informative study on strategy and quality assurance at the ZOU aptly make the following observation:

It has also been noted that by establishing a QA unit in 2007, ZOU has a head-start which it can use to advantage in this field. In fact, ZOU already has a board member on the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (QAAA) of the African Council for Distance Education.

Prompted by ZOU’s membership to the QAAA and ACDE, Kurasha and Gwarinda (2011) conducted a study on financing a sustainable quality assurance model for national development through ODL in Higher Education in the context of Zimbabwe. They found out that many of ZOU’s graduates are accepted for postgraduate studies in the region of which they conclude is an indication of their quality, comparability and equivalence.

With regards to challenges that tend to undermine QA in ODL institutions, Floyd (2005) in Barasa (2008) focuses on collaborating for quality with special reference to some principles and some examples in the United Kingdom. In the same vein, Floyd observes that there may be disagreements over resources and perceptions of unequal contributions which may be divisive.

Early research by Pant (1986) examined quality school education through ODL and came up with two critical findings particular to QA. First, the scholar observes that the unprecedented economic development coupled with the growth of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has placed the human resource development programmes in the developing countries at the centre stage of their developmental agenda. No country in the world can survive with dignity unless its population at large possesses essential survival skills and minimum knowledge in various fields. In Pant’s (1986) estimation, the developing countries of the world have
been endeavouring to meet (i) the challenge of numbers, (ii) the challenge of credibility of education and (iii) the challenge of quality of education. Pant’s second finding indicates that for meeting these challenges, educational planners and administrators need to up-scale the formal schooling at an unprecedented scale. The worry, however, centres around how large scale finances may be mobilised for making provision of additional schools, additional teachers and requisite equipments and other infrastructural facilities.

**Statement of the Problem**

For most ODL institutions in developing countries, quality assurance and quality assurance enhancement are seen as being synonymous. The consequences of such conceptualisation of the two concepts, inadvertently, triggers the misconception that subjecting ODL programmes to QA routinely leads to excellence in terms of programme approval, monitoring, periodic review and statutory and regulatory body accreditation. Pant (1986) seems to capture this rather vexing situation aptly when he advances two opinions on the issue. Firstly, in their endeavour to “reach the unreached” and develop human resource, the developing countries are up-scaling their open schooling programmes; thus providing appropriate responses to the challenges of number, credibility and quality of education. Secondly, although all sections of society can be beneficiaries of the open schooling system, it is a boon to those who are socially and economically deprived and are unable to attend conventional institutions for a variety of socio-economic and other reasons. It is in the context of the above-cited multi-faceted positions that the researchers seek to empirically critique the following question:

How can possibilities to enhance quality assurance across ODL programmes from the perspectives of all the ZOU’s Faculty Deans, Material Development Unit and Quality Assurance Directors be made a reality?

**Purpose of the Study**

In view of the attendant quality assurance challenges, concerns and efforts being made by institutions, it is worthwhile interrogating the issue of enhancing quality assurance as it relates to the context of South African universities (Mhlanga, 2008:6). The study seeks to extend this line of critique by focusing on the possibilities of enhancing quality assurance across ODL programmes from the multi-perspectives of the ZOU’s Faculty Deans, MDU and Quality Assurance senior personnel.

Pursuant to the preceding research question, the study was guided by the following five sub-questions:

1. How is quality assurance across ODL programmes understood in the various units of the ZOU?
2. What aspects of ODL programmes require quality assurance most?
3. How is quality assurance across ODL programmes enhanced in the ZOU’s units?
4. What challenges do the ZOU’s units face in implementing quality assurance across ODL programmes?
5. How could quality assurance possibilities be further enhanced across ODL programmes in the ZOU’s units?

**Delimitation of the Study**

The study was delimited to three (3) units of the ZOU based at the National Centre namely, Faculties, Material Development Unit and the Quality Assurance Unit. Theoretically, the study was confined to the possibilities of enhancing quality assurance across ODL programmes at the ZOU.
Limitations of the Study

The study was confined to the National Centre, yet there could be other participants who could have meaningfully added academic value to the study in the ten (10) Regional Centres. These participants constitute Regional Co-ordinators, Quality Assurance Co-ordinators and Student Advisors. In our bid to go round this challenge, we targeted three units, whose participants we believed would adequately mirror the views of the potential participants based in the Regional Centres and, therefore, provide us with the data we were seeking. Also our study was a case study which naturally suffered from lack of generalisability (Punch, 2004; Creswell, 2003 in Kabanda, 2012). In our effort to put this challenge under check, we conducted a multiple-case study of the selected ZOU’s three units. Lastly, our choice to use the e-mail questarview was somehow a challenge to the not-so technologically-compliant participants. The researchers eventually printed the questarview to enhance expeditious completion of the instrument.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study needs not be over-emphasised. First, the study is bound to contribute to the existing body of knowledge with regards the symbiotic relationship between QA and QAE by generating new knowledge regarding possibilities of enhancing QA across ODL programmes. Such generation of new knowledge in quality assurance is synonymous with the pursuit of academic excellence. Ncube (2013) rightly butresses the above significance in two short sentences. First, academic excellence at ZOU is more than an abstraction. Second, it lives and breathes the Mission and Vision of the University.

Our study also sought to inform ODL providers, managers and administrators on how the provision of quality assured ODL programmes has become the approach of choice in reaching the “unreached”. In pursuit of this noble desire, Neube (2013) aptly contends that in order to address the challenge of reaching “the unreached”, ZOU needs to respond by adopting a multi-media approach including open learning, distance education, ICT based learning programmes, contact classes, self study and more importantly learning of requisite skills.

One other value of this study concerns the provision of possible strategies to enhance quality assured programmes at the ZOU and beyond. On this note, we paid heed to Pant’s (1986) advice that it is now high time that the developing countries should give the impetus to the open learning system, along with expansion of the formal system of education, for “reaching the unreached” and for opening ample avenues for life-long education.

Review of Related Literature

In this section, we examine literature regarding the conceptions of quality, quality assurance and quality enhancement. The researchers also make a critical analysis of finding of related studies’ on quality assurance in our bid to expose theoretical and practical gaps that make our present study a possibility.

The conceptions of quality

The definition of quality has not been universally agreed upon. To begin with, Barnett (1994) in Mhlanga (2008:21) attempts to inform us about why quality is rather hard to explicitly define by asserting that:

Consequently, our methods of evaluating quality spring from more deep-seated beliefs as to what counts as quality.

But, and more significantly, these beliefs over what counts
As quality themselves derive from more fundamental assumptions of the ideal nature of higher education.

Perhaps the most comprehensive definition of quality is provided by Harvey and Green (1993) in Mhlanga (2008:21). According to Mhlanga (2008) and Harvey and Green (1993) give five conceptualisations of quality, viz:

- quality as exceptional (excellence);
- quality as perfection;
- quality as fitness for purpose;
- quality as value for money; and
- quality as transformative.

Mhlanga (2008:21-2) gives four sentences that aptly capture quality as excellence:

In this conceptualisation, quality is perceived as something distinctive, something special, which cannot be attained by many. The notion of excellence in higher education probably derives from this conception. Analyses of mission statements for most universities seem to suggest that many universities draw from the notion of excellence in benchmarking their performance. Quality assurance policies for the University of Botswana, the University of Zimbabwe and the University Witwatersrand for instance are underpinned by institutional vision and mission statements that are framed around the value of the excellence.

**The concept of quality assurance**

Having unpacked quality as a concept, it is now necessary to analyse quality assurance. In our estimation, quality assurance is both context and purpose-bound. Our preceding point of view is echoed by Mhlanga (2008:68) who surmises thus: “There is an intricate relationship that exists between the studied institutions and their social, economic and political contexts.” In respect of this citation, we concur with Mhlanga (2008) on the grounds that an analysis of quality assurance practices of given universities entails understanding the peculiar contextual factors of the individual institutions.

In addition to the context of quality assurance, Mhlanga exhorts that quality systems can be explained with reference to the purposes they serve. As Barnett (1994) in Mhlanga (2008) has indicated, different quality assurance systems serve different purposes. Barnett goes on to assert that on the one hand, they may serve the purpose of self-improvement, whilst on the other they may act as state-surveillance mechanisms and, therefore, serve accountability purposes. Of significance to the analysis pursued in our study is also the notion of power suggested by Luckett (2005) in Mhlanga (2008). In Luckett’s (2005) view, quality assurance systems are replete with power tensions and the dialogue structure is controlled by unequal power relationships. Luckett (ibid) further remarks that in this regard, key questions that need to be asked in analysing any quality assurance system are: Who is in control of the evaluation? Who initiates it and who owns it? Is the ownership internal or external to the academic community? Our study uses the notion of purpose and power tensions in analysing possibilities of enhancing quality assurance across ODL programmes from the perspective of the ZOU’s FDs, MDU and QA personnel. The researchers also agree with Mhlanga (2008:62-3) that, “using these two notions as analytical lenses, an attempt ought to be made to show whether the systems are self-enlightening or accountability-driven.” In this regard, we attempt to reflect this abstraction in Figure 1.
The concept of quality assurance enhancement

Quality assurance and quality assurance enhancement are not the same. While the former is concerned with determining that objectives and aims have been achieved, the latter focuses on making improvements within the process. Middlehurst (1997) posits that quality assurance enhancement forms part of a wider framework in which quality control, quality assurance, quality enhancement and transformation are stages in the management of quality. In this regard, she argues that the belief that QA leads naturally to QAE is incorrect. In amplification, she explains that most quality efforts are, to a very large measure, centred around accountability while those of quality assurance enhancement go beyond. In this regard, it could even be argued that accountability and quality assurance enhancement are not automatically connected. To be sure, they are sometimes even in conflict with each other.

Biggs (2001) defines quality assurance enhancement as the internal mechanisms that an institution puts in place to continually review and improve the practice of quality assurance practice. In most institutions where quality assurance enhancement occurs, improvement of programmes is a function of internal review and monitoring processes, usually reliant on student feedback, examiners’ reports and internal programme audits.

Methodology

The researchers employed a qualitative study methodology. Qualitative research methodology is based on the philosophical viewpoint that reality is subjective, thus the world exists but different people construct it in very different ways (Kaputa, 2011). Kaputa (2011) goes on to indicate the advantage of qualita-
The researchers used a multiple case study of three (3) ZOU units based at the National Centre: Faculties, MDU and Quality Assurance. The researchers preferred the use of a multiple case study because it permitted them to gather experiential data based on the possibilities of enhancing quality assurance across ODL programmes at the ZOU held in the minds of FDs, MDU and QA personnel.

In regard to data gathering, the researchers made use of a specific type of purposive sampling called criterion sampling to select the participants namely one (1) Dean, one (1) Quality Assurance Director and one (1) MDU Manager out of a possible total of ten (10) participants. The researchers settled for criterion sampling because it allowed us to select participants or cases who met a certain criterion (Kombo and Tromp, 2009). It was relevant to this study because FDs, MDU and QA personnel hold knowledge and experience of QA as practices that obtain in their respective units.

With regards to the design of the research instruments, the researchers distributed a questarview with five questions on demographic data and six open-ended questions derived from the study’s research questions by e-mail. The open-ended questarview questions enabled the participants to go to town about possibilities of enhancing QA across ODL programmes at the ZOU, albeit that they were somehow reluctant to respond to the e-mail questarview until they were given a printed and signed questarview.

This study’s data analysis was a process rather than an activity. The researchers began data analysis right from the time we came up with this study’s research title until the stage of writing the research report. The researchers employed thematic content analysis which according to Silverman (2006) enables researchers to generate new knowledge from the themes that will have emerged from the data. In this context, we analysed our research data against research objectives, related literature and the methodology itself.

In the data discussion phase, the researchers made use of direct quotes to help us make sense out of data (Thomas and Nelson, 2001). The researchers used tables containing two columns of emerging themes in the first column and then substantiating them in the second. In this regard, the researchers also observed the ethic that participants had the right to participate or not participate in our study (Leedy, 1997).

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

In a bid to interpret research findings in a logical sequence, the researchers maintain that data presentation, analysis and discussion are synchronously done starting with the characterisation of the participants and then enriching them with the actual research findings for the purpose of enhancing coherence and cogency in the report presentations.

In the findings and discussion, the researchers present a synopsis of the participants constituting three categories (units) at the ZOU. Tables 1-6 present a cross section of the perspectives by way of emerging themes and the substantiating statements that supportively give meaning to the data.

As is evident from Table 1, the participants raised diverse perceptions of their understanding of quality assurance across ODL programmes in their units. Chief emerging themes from the Faculty Dean was that quality assurance across ODL programmes is not an event, but a process because it ensures that all programmes meet the minimum standards at every level-analysis, design, development, implementation/delivery and control throughout. The FD also felt that quality assurance is rooted in continuous evaluation. The FD’s perceptions largely concur with the
perceptions of Mhlanga (2008) and Barnett (1994) who exhort that quality assurance systems can also be explained with reference to the purposes they serve.

The Director’s perceptions of quality assurance across ODL programmes which indicate that quality creates a quality culture and ensures product and service acceptance by end-users and customers, is compatible with early research finding by (Mhlanga, 2008; Luckett, 2005; Barnett, 1994, Harvey and Green, 1993) who talk about quality as a perfection, quality as a fitness for purpose, quality as value for money and quality as transformation. This perception corroborates with the perceptions of Mhlanga (2008:23) who argues that quality is defined in terms of “the value addition”. The Director’s perception also seems to tally with Chakanyuka, Chiome and Chabaya’s (2008) perception that quality assurance is about creating a quality culture throughout the University and having in place a system which ensures that products and services offered by the University are acceptable to end-users and customers (Director).

The perceptions of the Manager about quality assurance were principally about the development and production of quality instructional materials. These findings are not objectionable in the minds of Mbon, Etor and Osim (2012) who observed that efficiency of any educational institution depends, to a large extent, upon how effectively the developed material resources are utilised. Also echoing the Manager’s perceptions are Chakanyuka et al. (2008) who propound that there is need for continuous improvement of the competencies of lecturers, especially in information and communication technology, and the skills to manage the multi-media delivery notes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging themes</th>
<th>Substantiating statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting minimum standards</td>
<td>Ensuring product and service acceptance Ensuring that all programmes meet the minimum level-analysis, design, development, implementation/delivery, evaluation and control throughout (Faculty Dean).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous evaluation</td>
<td>Ensuring that programme quality is a function of continuous interactive evaluation throughout the delivery process (Faculty Dean).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development and production of quality instructional material</td>
<td>Quality assurance ensures the development and production of quality instructional materials in order to delight our customers (Manager).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation of a quality culture</td>
<td>Quality assurance is about creating a quality culture throughout the University and having in place a system which ensures that products and services offered by the University are acceptable to end-users and customers (Director).</td>
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Table 1: Understanding of quality assurance across ODL programmes by ZOU units
Table 2: Aspects (in order of importance) of ODL programmes that require quality assurance most in ZOU units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging themes</th>
<th>Substantiating statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspects of ODL programmes be of the same weight</td>
<td>…They all should have the same weight (Faculty Dean).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality culture</td>
<td>…quality-cultured Academic and Administrative staff (Director)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality service delivery</td>
<td>…effective and efficient service delivery (Director).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent first impressions in the University</td>
<td>…excellent first impressions of Regional Centres and National Centre (Director).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality learning materials</td>
<td>…learning materials of unquestionable standard (Director).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality programme infrastructure support</td>
<td>…Programme support exceeding regulatory requirements (Director).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement of Quality Assurance in programme development</td>
<td>…There is need for quality assurance to be involved in the development of course outlines in the faculties (Manager).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Assurance checking to precede MDU checking</td>
<td>…Quality Assurance should check the manuscript before it is submitted to Materials Development Unit in order to iron out issues of content (Manager).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Turn-It-In anti-plagiarism software</td>
<td>…Turn-It-In software package should be employed by faculties to monitor the degree of plagiarism in draft modules (Manager).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations and religious implementation of stage by stage corrections</td>
<td>…Corrections noted at any stage of quality check should be implemented (Manager).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting deadlines</td>
<td>…There is need to adhere to timelines to speed up the development and production process (Manager)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The perceptions of the three participants regarding aspects (in order of importance) of ODL programmes that require quality assurance were that all aspects should have the same weight, quality-cultured Academic and Administrative staff, quality service delivery, quality learning materials, quality programme infrastructure support, involvement of quality assurance in programme development, quality assurance checking of manual to precede MDU checking, use of Turn-It-In anti-plagiarism software and expeditions and religious implementation of stage by stage non-conformities and finally meeting deadlines. These insights seem somewhat novel. These “novel” sentiments tend to add more weight to advocacy for the promotion of the adoption, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of quality assurance processes across all staff members at the ZOU.

In principle, all staff members would be involved in pursuing quality programme development in the manner their job descriptions dictate to them. This perception seems
to be in tandem with the view of Mapolisa and Ncube (2012) who hailed team leadership for its ability to enhance quality performance and work output. The same participants’ perceptions also appear dovetail with the sentiments by Chakanyuka et al. (2008) who found out that participation and involvement of staff in conceptualising the vision and mission for quality will increase their ownership and acceptance of the vision. Above all, Floyd (2005) in Barasa (2008:101) comments that materials development can benefit collaboration in two main ways. One is by reducing unit costs and the other is by increasing quality.

Other perceptions emerging from the ZOU’s selected units’ participants with regards to quality assurance enhancement across ODL programmes were that, quality assurance is enhanced by carrying out quality awareness campaigns and effective implementation of quality management system in compliance with ISO 9001, intended use of the results-based approach, and valid quality check templates used by the unit to ensure the development of quality learning materials. These relatively new views underline the magnitude to which quality assurance enhancement across ODL programmes could be made a reality at the ZOU. These findings compare favourably with a three-fold view advanced by Revised Working Paper on Academic Excellence (2005); (i) self-studies and external programme reviews; (ii) awards of accreditation through professional accreditation associations; (iii) strategic planning purposes with quality assessment measures and benchmarking; and (iv) a variety of assessment methods.

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carrying out quality awareness campaigns</td>
<td>…We carry out quality awareness campaigns (Director).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A quality management system in compliance with ISO 9001</td>
<td>…We call for the effective implementation of a quality management system in compliance with ISO 9001 (Director).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended approach result-based approach</td>
<td>…Not yet implemented, but we intend to follow a result-based which will be tracked using Project Management techniques such as PERT and monitoring systems (Faculty Dean).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various quality check templates used by the unit</td>
<td>…There are various quality check templates used by the unit to ensure the development of quality learning materials (Manager).</td>
</tr>
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**Table 3: Quality assurance enhancement across ODL programmes in the ZOU’s units**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging themes</th>
<th>Substantiating statement</th>
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<tr>
<td>Implementation of quality assurance across all units is misconstrued to be the sole responsibility of the Quality Assurance units.</td>
<td>…The implementation of Quality Assurance across all Units is perceived by some Units as the sole responsibility of the Quality Assurance directorate when in actual fact it is the responsibility of all Unit Heads (Director).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grey areas in the way funds are allocated to Units that deliver service</td>
<td>…As a result there are grey areas in the way funds are allocated having gaps in critical areas which directly impact on service delivery (Director).</td>
</tr>
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**Table 4 cont’d: Challenges experienced by units in implementing quality assurance across ODL programmes**
Their participants’ perceptions of the challenges their units face in implementing quality assurance emerged as: implementation of quality assurance across all Units is misconstrued to be the sole responsibility of the Quality Assurance Directorate by some Units, grey areas in which funds are allocated that deliver service, inertia to implement University resolutions and approved procedures, new Faculty devoid of hands-on practical experience and lack of good communication among stakeholders and above all, failure to meet stakeholder deadlines by some stakeholders which undermines quality of materials. These findings are context-specific to ZOU’s different units. However, they appear to be pertinent to ODL institutions that deliberately search for enhancement of quality assurance across their programmes. These findings tend to transcend with Floyd’s (2005) ensuing three findings in Barasa (2008: 102-3):

1. Another difficulty is that individual academics and departments often have a strong wish to do things in their own way.

2. Another major challenge is that of finding the right partners and even when this is achieved, there can be difficulties in setting up collaborations in an effective way, as well as processes of communication, progress chasing and so on.

3. There may be disagreements over resources, and perceptions of unequal contributions which can be very divisive.

As researchers, we seem to perceive the synchronous use of human, financial and material resources coupled with teamwork, meeting deadlines and boldness by the University to consciously and religiously pursue a quality assurance roadmap to be some of the new insights in our study.

The perceptions of the selected ZOU participants on the possibilities of further-enhancing quality assurance across ODL programmes in their units were, inter alia: imbedding systematic strategies, need for complete buy-in for quality assurance strategies across the board, collaboration of the ZOU family with students, graduates and
other stakeholders, and involvement in mod-
ule production right from the beginning until
the camera-ready copy is produced, as well
as making sure that quality assurance activi-
ties move hand in hand with the activities of
other stakeholders. These perceptions, to a
large extent, seem to be consistent with those
reviewed in our present study. The present
study’s findings are adding valuable knowl-
edge. Kurasha and Gwarinda’s (2011:5) ear-
lier study which highlighted that the Univer-
sity is promoting quality education by:
• holding stakeholders workshops on ODL
  and Quality Assurance with all Unit
  Heads;
• conducting short courses for its Univer-
sity personnel at no charge;
• launching long-term courses in Quality
  Assurance at Masters’ and Doctoral lev-
els;
• meticulously recruiting staff dedicated to
ODL rather than careerists looking for
greener pastures;
• procuring requisite equipment for qual-
ity assurance operations whenever pos-
sible;
• managing the mission of the University
and the unit to facilitate staff mobility,
research and publications in quality as-
surance; and
• keeping the ODL at ZOU in the lime-
light nationally and internationally.

As can be seen in Table 6, the participants
came up with three vital perceptions. Their
emerging perceptions were around the use
of the course team approach in module de-
velopment, the use of Turn-It-In anti-plagia-
rism software to ensure the development of
quality modules and the adoption of a busi-
ness design model that is quality assurance-
driven in academia. The researchers are cer-

<table>
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| Imbedding systematic strategies is critical                                      | …Imbedding strategies is not only in the front-end analysis of each programme but also in
  the design and delivery process of each programme and bearing in mind that the traditi-
  onal classroom environment-based university will soon be a thing of the past - if not al-
  ready. (Faculty Dean).                                                         |
| Need for complete buy-in for quality assurance initiatives across the board collab-
  oration of ZOU family with students, graduates and other stakeholders          | …There is need for a complete buy-in for quality assurance initiatives across the board. (Di-
  rector).                                                                           |
| Collaboration of ZOU family with students, graduates and other stakeholder       | There is need to ensure that everyone within the ZOU family does his or her work well and
  in time with the ultimate objective of delighting students, graduates and other stakeholders (Director). |
| Involvement of quality assurance in the development of modules right from the begin-
  ning until the camera ready copy is produced.                                   | …We recommend that quality assurance be involved in the design and development of modules right
  from the Faculty until the camera-ready copy module is produced (Manager).…Its activities should run parallel
  with activities of the stakeholders involved in the development of the modules (Manager). |
| Quality assurance activities should move hand in hand with the activities of other
  stakeholders.                                                                  |                                                                                          |

Table 5: Possibilities of further-enhancing quality assurance across ODL programmes in the ZOU units
tain that these new developments incrementally add academic value to Floyd’s (2005) findings in Barasa (2008: 104-110) which highly recommend use of collaboration in ensuring the achievement of quality as follows:

- ensure ownership of curriculum planning/design, ——collaboratively developed materials, ——collaboratively developed learner support and/or logistical systems, ——collaboration of assessment frameworks, ——collaboration on quality assurance systems, and collaboration on research activities,
- establish clear framework for collaboration,
- be circumspect in entering partnerships and
- earmark resources.

The preceding current research participants’ perceptions appear somehow new to the realm of quality assurance. The researchers are sure that in not-so-distant future they might help in opening new frontiers of knowledge and practice in the area of enhancing quality assurance across ODL programmes.

Conclusions

In summation, we present the six areas which highlight and illuminate the participants’ perceptions in answer to the six sub-questions that have been advanced in the first quarter of this study. In addition, the emerging themes help us to draw the following conclusions mainly because they show how valuable quality assurance and quality assurance enhancement across ODL programmes can be. The six areas relate to ODL, but the emerging themes are more broadly applicable.

The data of participants

In terms of demographic data of the participants, the researchers make the ensuing three conclusions.

First, the effectiveness of quality assurance and quality enhancement across ODL programmes largely depends on the maturity, exposure, expertise and educational qualification, as well as experience of the human resources of all units of the University.

Second, the researchers conclude that the manner in which quality assurance and quality assurance enhancement are understood is University unity-bound. The way how quality assurance and quality enhancement are understood in the various units of the University is a reflection of the job descriptions that obtain in those units.

Third, the researchers also conclude that aspects of ODL programmes that require quality assurance tend to be inherent of quality culture, team leadership, quality learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging themes</th>
<th>Substantiating statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MDU recommends the use of the course team approach in module development</td>
<td>...MDU recommends the use of the course team approach in developing the modules (Manager)....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of Turn-it-In ensures the development of quality modules</td>
<td>The use of the anti-plagiarism software will go a long way to promote the development of quality modules (Manager)....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption of a business design model that is quality assurance-driven in academia</td>
<td>Adopting a business design model is the best way to address the issue of quality assurance in academia. (Faculty Dean).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Any other comments particular to the researcher’s attention concerning quality assurance at the University
materials and collaboration in all quality assurance processes and activities.

With respect to conclusions concerning the actual research data, the researchers make four major conclusions centred around the research questions.

Participants’ perceptions on quality assurance enhancement

In the light of participants’ perceptions on quality assurance enhancement across ODL programmes, we conclude that campaign programmes, quality management system in compliance with ISO 9001, intended results-based approach and various quality check templates are symptomatic of the degree of effectiveness of quality assurance across ODL programmes in a university.

Challenges faced by units in implementing quality assurance

With regards to the challenges faced by units in implementing quality assurance across ODL programmes, we conclude that effective communication is the nerve centre of all successful quality assurance processes and other activities in the university. Also any failure by the University to synchronise the use of financial, human, material, physical and technological resources, team work and University commitment to implement quality assurance approved regulations and procedures can be likened to an undetonated landmine along a University highway.

Possibilities of further enhancing quality assurance across ODL programmes in the ZOU’s Units

In regard to possibilities of further enhancing quality assurance across ODL programmes in the ZOU’s units, we deduce that regular conferences through free quality assurance workshops prepare university workers for quality performance. Research and publication in the same area (Floyd, 2005) in Barasa (2008) make university workers ready for quality assurance across ODL programmes. Effective implementation of quality assurance processes is an indisputable indicator of successful, credible, reputable and marketable universities and their most sought-after programmes.

Any failure to put into practice possibilities to enhance quality assurance across ODL programmes forces the quality assurance process to remain in its embryonic stage that is devoid of visible and tangible results.

Overall ownership of the quality assurance process

Our last conclusion is that overall ownership of quality assurance process and activities decorated with effective collaboration is not only the key to the attainment of quality assured ODL programmes but a strict roadmap leading to the real terrain of quality university education.

Recommendations

The afore-mentioned findings and conclusions enable us to make the ensuing recommendations:

- The University has no option but to hold regular workshops on quality assurance all year round in a bid to sensitise all staff in the University’s units about quality assurance and quality assurance enhancement.
- The researchers recommend that all units of the University work in symbiosis of each other in a deliberate pursuit of quality assurance and quality assurance enhancement across ODL programmes.
- The researchers also recommend the timeous provision of adequate quality resources as one of the sure ways of implementing and achieving quality assurance across ODL programmes.
- Quality assurance processes and activities in all units of the University need to
be implemented synchronously rather than asynchronously since all units will be pursuing one goal—that is, provision of quality assured ODL programmes.

- Quality assurance and quality assurance enhancement should not be confused with Institutional Management by Walking around (IMBWA).

- The researchers further recommend that a study of this nature be extended to all University units and other universities for the sake of comparability meant to extend new frontiers of knowledge in the field of quality assurance across ODL programmes.
References


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