

## Observance of Quality Assurance practices in Open and Distance Learning

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to establish the perceptions of staff members at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) on the institution's observance of ODL quality assurance practices as expressed by the Commonwealth of Learning Framework (CoLF). The qualitative research paradigm and the case study research design were adopted. The case of one of ZOU's regional campuses, Matabeleland North, was used. A population of 25 regional staff members was targeted and a sample of 10 (n=10) was selected using the Purposive sampling method. Questerviews were used as the technique where Questerview guides were the actual instruments used to generate research data. The study found out that most staff members at the regional campus were of the view that the ZOU generally implemented the different quality assurance practices in ODL in line with the COLF. Specifically, the findings revealed that this was in the areas of registration of students and examination processes, quality of learning materials, monitoring of tutorials, feedback for programme and learning materials review, staff qualifications, suitability of infrastructure, research and staff development, management style and the role of student and staff associations. The researchers, therefore, concluded that quality assurance practices in ODL as articulated by the COLF were being observed to a very large extent by ZOU which is consistent with its vision of 'becoming a world class open and distance learning university'. Accordingly, the researchers recommended that while staff members largely perceived the observance of quality assurance practices by ZOU, there may be need for higher education open and distance learning (HEODL) institutions to share their experiences in order to adopt standard best practices characterised by a common culture of excellence in ODL.

**Keywords:** Open and distance learning, quality assurance, quality assurance practices.

## INTRODUCTION

Progressive organisations the world over generally strive to attain satisfactory to high quality levels in their work and products. This is essentially so in order for institutions to satisfy their clientele as well as key stakeholders. While this may be realised through different approaches, 'quality assurance' is arguably the most contemporary strategy and a standard mechanism. The International Standards Organisation 9001: [37] Quality Management System (ISO 9001: QMS) Certification [1] defines 'quality assurance' as basically a system of measures and controls established within an organisation to try and manage the quality of the goods or services being provided. Ogonor [2] cited in Nyenya and Gabi [3], resonate that quality assurance entails "a set of activities or procedures that an organization undertakes to ensure that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or service".

As noted by Paul [4], product and service quality improvement methodologies were largely popularised as quality assurance concepts in the 1960s and 1970s by American academics including Deming,

Juran and Crosby. It is this precursor that gave birth to the contemporary concept of quality assurance (QA). Accordingly, many contemporary organisations have since embraced QA as a central concept in ensuring that they exercise and maintain a culture of excellence in their day to day work thereby ensuring quality service. 'Quality assurance' is closely related to the traditional 'quality control' approach but takes a more holistic approach as it is based on the idea that identifying and removing the causes of defects is a more pragmatic and cost effective solution [5]. The Commonwealth of Learning [6] has since identified QA as one of the major critical success factors in ensuring quality in education including open and distance learning (ODL).

In the same view, the Commonwealth of Learning (ibid) report that in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, the fundamental purpose of ODL is mainly to create wider access to educational opportunities. However, access alone is not sufficient; hence, ODL needs to be augmented with critical success factors including quality assurance in order to contribute to clients and stakeholders' satisfaction. In

the current study, ODL students are the clients while the industrial market, central government and other interested parties are the stakeholders. Thus, quality assurance in fundamentally helps organisations to meet standards and benchmarks set by the organisation and external regulatory bodies. In addition, it enhances organisations' capacity to meet or even exceed the expectations of their clients and key stakeholders [7].

The researchers' broad work experience in education in general and quality assurance at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) in particular largely informs them that quality assurance is the springboard of excellence within any institution including the ZOU. The ZOU is a distance higher education teaching and learning institution that was created by a Zimbabwean Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20) in 1999 [38] and its establishment was in line with the Government's realisation after independence that the majority of the people in Zimbabwe was hungry for tertiary education [8, 9]. With a broad vision of '*becoming a world class open and distance learning university*', the ZOU operates through a National Centre and 10 Regional Campuses dotted across all the country's provinces; with the virtual region being the institution's 11th Regional Campus. The ZOU is a multi-disciplinary and inter-faculty institution of higher learning that offers Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes.

Writing on 'Higher Education and Open and Distance Education as a Strategy for National Development', Kurasha [10] notes that;

*The establishment of the Zimbabwe Open University was a culmination of research into the needs of the nation, needs of the economy and a clear sign of creativity by the stakeholders to provide an institution flexible enough to cater for the broad human resource needs especially at the dawn of the knowledge era.*

The same source further notes that ZOU largely caters for students in Zimbabwe and different parts of Southern Africa; and is unique in that it essentially allows for flexibility of both entry and study. Notably, the ZOU is the only ODL mandated and leading ODL tertiary institution in Zimbabwe and second largest in Southern Africa after University of South Africa (UNISA). ZOU provides knowledge, competencies, values and dispositions that are for the development of competitive human resources; using well developed distance teaching and open learning methodologies. Lifelong learning for social inclusion in a dynamic and fast changing global village is ZOU's fundamental beacon [9, 11].

In the sole interest of ensuring quality in all its activities, ZOU established a Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) in 2007 with the express goal of helping to improve operations in the institution [12]. This Unit is essentially a strategic department within the ZOU which

operates at national level as a directorate as well as at the institution's regional campuses. Thus, the establishment of the ZOU's QAU is in harmony with the Commonwealth of Learning (ibid)'s position of recognising quality assurance as one of the major criterion or condition for organisational excellence and a critical success factor in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). It is against this backdrop that the current study sought to establish the views of staff members at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University on the institution's observance of ODL quality assurance practices as articulated by the Commonwealth of Learning Framework.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While quality assurance has been noted to be one of the major critical success factors in ODL, the problem at stake is whether or not the ZOU, from the view of its staff members at the Matabeleland North Regional Campus; observes quality assurance practices as largely articulated by the Commonwealth of Learning Framework (COLF). The researchers conceptualise the problem under study from the perspective that excellence at any organisation including the ZOU is essentially measured by the extent to which these quality assurance practices are observed.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to establish the views of staff members at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University on the institution's observance of ODL quality assurance practices as articulated by the COLF.

## Research Questions

The current study was guided by the following specific research questions;

- What does the concept 'quality assurance practices' mean to staff members at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the ZOU
- Are staff members at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the ZOU aware of quality assurance practices that are observed by their institution
- What are the perceptions of staff members at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the ZOU with regards their institution's observance of specific ODL quality assurance practices as articulated by the CoLF?

## Significance of the Study

This study is important in that it will shed light on the views of staff members at one of ZOU's regional campuses regarding quality assurance practices observed by their institution with reference to those pronounced by the COLF. This will be useful to the ZOU management as it will know the extent of knowledge by staff members at the regional campus in question which may have a bearing on the knowledge level of ZOU staff in general and the need to involve them in in-service training regarding their institution.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

This study was restricted to Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the ZOU. It focused on the investigation of the views of staff members at the regional campus regarding their institution's observance of ODL quality assurance practices as enunciated by the COLF. Thus, the study site is located in Matabeleland North Province, which is one of Zimbabwe's ten provinces [13].

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **Concept of 'Open and Distance Learning'**

Open and Distance Learning; also referred to as Open and Distance Education or simply Distance Education, is generally described as planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result, requires special techniques of course design, instructional techniques, methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements [14]. Kurasha [10] says that;

*The concept Open and Distance Learning can be defined through many approaches, including, the absence of a teacher, use of mixed media courseware, use of industrialized processes, and correspondence, independent and flexible home study as the key aspects.*

For Kurasha, therefore, some of the fundamental rudiments of ODL are 'openness' and 'flexibility'.

Many authorities concur that ODL is an instructional arrangement in which the tutor and the learner are geographically separated to an extent that requires communication through some media such as print or other form of technology, though often complemented with face-to-face interactions [15-19]. Notably, ODL as an educational framework can be distinguished into various categories; all in sum comprising the mode of delivery and learning which is a learner-centered type of education; open learning with a wide range of choices to the learner; open access with flexible entry requirements, flexible learning, distributed learning and of paramount importance; it falls along the continuum of flexible time and place [20].

The ZOU Annual Report [11] elaborates 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. It involves approaches to learning that focus on freeing learners from constraints of time and place while offering flexible learning opportunities.*

Notably, contemporary distance education has been blended to be described as open and distance learning (ODL) essentially to imply an education system which provides access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both [21]. From the foregoing, this trend in higher education, particularly in the developing world, has undoubtedly paved the way for the expansion of ODL, which has in practice seen the establishment and growth of ODL institutions such as the ZOU and UNISA.

#### ***Quality Assurance as an Integral Component of Quality Management***

Quality Assurance (QA) which this paper gave as a background to is considered a central part of quality management (QM) as it involves coordinated activities and processes meant to direct and control an organisation with regards to quality; essentially focussing on providing confidence particularly to customers that quality requirements are being fulfilled [22]. It is fundamentally an organisation's management strategy that ensures that its product or service is consistent and essentially meets the expectations of the customer or client. It is important to emphasise that QM is focused not only on product and service quality, but also the means to achieve quality while premised on four related quality components, namely: planning, control, assurance and improvement [23]. Thus, QM is essentially realised through an institution's quality management system (QMS).

The International Standards Organisation [24] elaborates that many organisations, big and small, generally have a quality management system (QMS) or set of quality assurance practices in place to assure quality or the excellence of its work. A QMS, thus, defines an organisation's methods of working, or processes and procedures, then attempts to use various measures and controls to continually improve them. Most QMS use quality assurance audits (QAA); which are a review of activities against descriptions of how organisational activities and processes should operate in attempts to identify where the opportunity for improvement exists [25, 22, 24]. The same source notes that irrespective of the tools used, an effective QMS depends on being able to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of organisational processes or series of activities or processes then the implementation of improvements in a controlled or systematic manner. Furthermore, an effective QMS should ensure that a consistent and acceptable level of quality is being achieved in goods or services delivered to customers or clients [26].

A study by Dobrzanski and Roszak [27] revealed that some of the benefits of introducing and maintaining a QMS within an educational institution include:

- Achievement of organisational goals and objectives
- Improvement of quality of the realised didactic process
- Improvement of work organisation
- Transparency and readability of responsibilities and entitlements
- Supplying documentary evidence of organisational processes and activities
- Increase of awareness of quality issues among the employees
- Fulfilment of requirements of the customers
- Professional management and leadership
- Improvement of reputation

This paper acknowledges that the ZOU is one ODL institution that has, through execution of its QMS has since benefited from the many advantages of QA as those given above and many more.

#### **QA Practices as Articulated by the Commonwealth of Learning Framework**

The COL [28] is of the view that 'quality assurance practices' exhibited by any organisation are the true measure of whether or not the organisation practices quality or not. The same source fervently argues that quality in ODL particularly in higher education institutions is measurable through the institution's observance of specific quality assurance practices (QAP). QAP generally entail the strategic determinations, activities, processes and procedures undertaken by an organisation to establish a culture of excellence.

The COL (ibid: 158) articulates that in the context of QM, the following quality assurance practices are some of the more important benchmarks for measuring quality within an ODL institution;

- Registration of students and examinations are administered with the highest level of conscientiousness and professionalism
- Learning materials are standardised and moderated to suit the academic level of learners
- Learner performance is monitored and learners at risk identified. Timely educational intervention is provided for learners in need
- Attendance of learners and tutors at specified contact sessions is monitored and considered critical by the provider
- Both full and part-time academic and administrative staff are highly qualified and experienced to offer the best of service to clients and stakeholders
- The work of tutors in supporting and assessing learners is monitored and evaluated regularly

- Feedback is sought from tutors/mentors as well as from learners for the review of programmes, courses and learning materials
- Knowledge, skills, competencies and values acquired by students are consistent with the expectations and emerging trends of the industrial market
- Customer focus (meeting customer requirements and striving to exceed their expectations) and the continual improvement of the institution's overall performance, leveraging clear and concise process performance measures are key quality objectives
- Suitable or appropriate infrastructure is used for both administrative and academic purposes
- Research by staff and staff development are considered an essential component of the institution's professional development and growth
- Management establishes a unity of purpose and direction; focusing on the creation and maintenance of a conducive internal working environment in which staff members are fully involved in achieving the organization's quality aims and objectives
- Student and staff associations are established, functional, recognised and well empowered to represent their constituencies on issues and structures of institutional governance

These Open and Distance Learning quality assurance practices define the prescription by the Commonwealth of Learning on how ODL institutions may be measured against a culture of excellence in their work.

It is imperative to indicate that the COL is an intergovernmental organisation established by the Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1988 to encourage the development and sharing of knowledge, skills, resources, technologies and values in ODL [29]. Thus, the different 'quality assurance practices' exhibited by an organisation can be viewed as its measurable culture of excellence. It is against this reviewed related literature that the current study is contextualised.

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted the qualitative research methodology which; according to Creswell [30]; echoed by Marshall and Gretchen [31] is appropriate when a social problem needs to be explored, or because we need a detailed understanding of the problem or issue at stake. The qualitative approach was informed by the constructivist philosophy

*Which entails that knowledge is constructed and not given; in other words, individuals make sense of their world by constructing their own representations or models of their experiences. Knowledge cannot be passively accumulated but is the result of active*

*cognitive processes undertaken by individuals as they organise and make sense of their experiences [32].*

In the current study, the ZOU staff members at the regional campus in question were considered as the individuals who perceived their institution's observance of ODL quality assurance practices as articulated by the COLF.

The case study design was adopted; which was largely considered for its important hallmark that it is concerned with a rich and vivid description of events relevant to the case [33]. In this study, the case of one of ZOU's regional campuses, namely, Matabeleland North was used. A population of 25 regional staff members was targeted and a sample of 10 (n=10) was selected using the Purposive sampling method. The key to purposeful sampling is to select cases for systematic study that are information rich and involve participants who have knowledge and experience with and are often affected by the situation under study [24, 35].

Questerviews were used as the research technique while Questerview guides were utilised as the specific instruments for the generation of data. Consistent with qualitative inquiries, the researchers were, however, the primary tools for the gathering of the qualitative data [36]. Data gathered was presented in accordance with the specific Questerview questions, and summarily focused on answering the research questions.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

A total of ten staff members who comprised of four (40%) females and six (60%) males took part in the study. From these, four (40%) were academic staff members while six (60%) were support staff members.

In item 1, a total 9(90%) of the participants indicated knowledge that quality assurance practices entail strategic activities, processes and procedures undertaken by an organisation to establish a culture of excellence while only 1(10%) was unsure. This revealed that almost all respondents were informed of what quality assurance practices are. The only one who was unsure may simply have found the definition used in the item question a bit complicated to comprehend.

In item 2, all (100%) students agreed that registration of students and examinations at the regional campus were administered with the highest level of conscientiousness and professionalism, while in item 3, all (100%) participants also agreed that learning materials, in particular, study modules, are standardised and moderated to suit the academic level of learners. The researchers deduced that the ZOU's registration and examination systems, as well as learning materials are all characterised by high levels of professionalism, which in essence points to high credibility with regards the institution's education and graduates.

In item 4, a total 8(80%) of the participants agreed that learner performance is monitored and learners at risk identified while at the same time timely educational intervention is provided for learners in need. A total 2(20%) disagreed arguing that more often than not, a student who encounters problems in his or her studies is rarely given remedial study material, but is simply expected to work closely with the tutor and other students in order to improve; which may not directly involve the provision of timely educational intervention to the student in need .

In item 5, a total 9(90%) agreed that the attendance of learners and tutors at specified contact sessions, and in particular the tutorials, is monitored and considered critical by the provider. However, only 1(10%) participant disagreed and argued that learners are free to attend tutorials or not as there seems to be no policy which enforces students to attend tutorials if they can independently use study modules and share learning experiences on their own.

In item 6, all (100%) participants agreed that both full and part-time academic and administrative staff were highly qualified and experienced to offer the best of service to clients who are the students as well as to key stakeholders. This in essence meant that the ZOU has high quality academic and support staff members who are capable of delivering quality service to both learners and stakeholders.

In item 7, 8(80%) agreed that the work of tutors in supporting and assessing learners is monitored and evaluated regularly for the benefit of learners while the other 2(20%) were unsure about this. As viewed by most participants, ZOU students, therefore, were provided with high quality tutoring which is both monitored and evaluated by the institution. Those who were unsure argued that some tutorials went on without being evaluated by either the institution's authorities or the students.

In item 8, a total 8(80%) agreed that feedback is sought from tutors or mentors as well as from learners for the review of programmes, courses and learning materials, which implied that the voice of learners is highly recognised in the institution's continuous review of its programmes, specific courses and learning materials particularly study modules. However, 2(20%) were unsure, arguing that they as students, unless it was a case of an omission, had never been consulted in such institutional reviews.

In item 9, as many as 8(80%) agreed that knowledge, skills, competencies and values acquired by students at the ZOU are consistent with the expectations and emerging trends of the industrial market. If these views are something to go by, it then implies that the institution is capable of meeting the industry's current and emerging demands. Some 2(20) were, however,

unsure arguing that as far as they knew, the institution was rarely, if ever, involved in carrying out industrial needs analysis with regards the kind of graduates industry preferred.

In item 10, all (100%) participants agreed that customer focus & the continual improvement of the institution's overall performance, leveraging clear and concise process performance measures are key quality objectives at ZOU. Thus, customer focus at the institution which is largely characterised by understanding current and future customer needs, meeting customer requirements and striving to exceed their expectations is also one of its quality objectives..

In item 11, a total 7(70%) of the participants agreed while 3(30%) disagreed that suitable or appropriate infrastructure was being used for both administrative and academic purposes at the regional campus. Those who disagreed gave examples of academic staff who are sharing an open space which compromises the confidentiality of faculty information. In addition, the Reception also shares open space with a Secretary which also compromises confidentiality of information for both the Receptionist and Secretary.

In item 12, as many as 9(90%) participants agreed that research by staff and staff development are considered an essential component of both staff members and the institution's development and growth. For them, this was evidenced by ZOU's establishment of a viable Research and Innovation Unit whose mandate is to drive research endeavours meant to add new knowledge to the existing body of knowledge. In addition, the institution has an open policy where staff members are allowed to advance themselves academically and professionally, which has seen many staff members, both academic and support staff participating in amazing upward occupational mobility. However, the only one (10%) who disagreed claimed that while staff development is an essential component of the institution's development and growth, sometimes the institution denied a staff member to undertake a programme if they find that it is not in line with his or her work key result areas.

In item 13, all (100%) participants agreed that the ZOU management, at both regional and national level, establishes a unity of purpose and direction; focusing on the creation and maintenance of a conducive internal working environment in which staff members are fully involved in achieving the organization's quality aims and objectives. The researchers deduced that staff members are, therefore, generally well acquainted with the institution's quality aims and objectives which are spelt out annually by the institution's Quality Assurance Directorate and authenticated by institution's Chief Executive Officer or Vice Chancellor.

In item 14, which was the last on the Questerview guide, all (100%) participants agreed that student and staff associations at the ZOU are established, functional, recognised and well empowered to represent their constituencies on issues and structures of institutional governance. Thus, this specifically refers to the institution's befitting roles by its Students Representative Council (SRC), the Zimbabwe Open University Academic Staff Association (ZOUASA) and the Zimbabwe Open University Non-Academic Staff Association (ZOUNASA).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the above findings, the study concluded that;

- Most staff members were of the view that their institution generally implemented the different quality assurance practices in ODL in line with the COLF.
- Quality assurance practices ranged from issues pertaining to registration of students and examination processes, quality of learning materials, monitoring of tutorials, feedback for programme and learning materials review, staff qualifications, suitability of infrastructure, research and staff development, management style to the role of student and staff associations were the major ones noted in the study
- The researchers, therefore, concluded that quality assurance practices in ODL as articulated by the COLF were being observed to a very large extent by the Zimbabwe Open University; which is consistent with its vision of 'becoming a world class open and distance learning university' [39].

The study, accordingly recommended that;

- While staff members at the research site largely perceived the observance of quality assurance practices by their institutions positively, it may be necessary to determine if the members are themselves practising quality assurance practices at the regional campus
- There is need for other higher education open and distance learning (HEODL) institutions to share their experiences with Zimbabwe Open University in order to adopt standard best practices characterised by a common culture of excellence in ODL
- A similar study may need to be conducted by the entire institution in order to complement the current study which was restricted to only one of its regional campuses.

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