Enter-Institutional Quality Assurance for Open Distant Learning Programmes With Particular Focus on Women's University in Africa

Education

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine the effectiveness of quality assurance in Open Distance Learning (ODL) at the Women's University in Africa (WUA) since its founding in 2002 by two visionary women, Professor Cynthia Hope Sadza, former Commissioner of the Zimbabwe Public Service, and Dr Fay Hung, former Minister of Education and Culture in the Zimbabwe Government, to tackle head on, the issue of gender disparity through the provision of gender sensitive University Education.

The study adopted an empirical approach on course evaluation in the provision of a Bachelor of Science Honours Degree in Sociology and Gender Development Studies at WUA as a pilot programme. The study identified some limitation in the existing scheme of evaluation and raised pertinent issues. The study established that WUA's quality assurance policy provides clear guidelines for internal and external audits. The study concluded that expertise in the field of distance education is crucial for the implementation of effective inter-institutional quality assurance agenda.

The study recommends regular professional development programmes.

Introduction

From its inception in 2002, the Women's University in Africa (WUA) planned to adopt a dual mode of learning delivery in order to adequately realise its mission of reducing Gender disparity by providing gender sensitive and socially responsive educational training and research, using appropriate technology in Africa. The Institution believes that through Open and Distance Learning (ODL), it will extend its influence beyond regional and continental borders in, as it seeks to be the best university in Africa in promotion of gender equity and equal opportunities.

External quality assurance in ODL at WUA was initiated to improve and enhance educational products and outcomes. This entails developing and producing learning materials, academic programmes, services and support which ensure quality performance of learners. This entails developing and producing learning materials, academic programmes, services and support which ensure quality performance of learners.

The findings of this study are intended to inform WUA quality assurance policy and practice as well as to inspire further ideas to underpin the general development of this newly formal university activity.

The Concept Quality

Harvey and Green (1993) opine that notions of quality in ODL mean different things to different stakeholders. Thus, quality is a social and political construct. It is open to continual re-examination and re- interpretation.

The Concept Quality Assurance

Harman (1998) considers quality as systematic procedures meant to gain confidence of key stakeholders in management and outcomes.

Purpose of Quality Assurance

Mahabels (2005) states that quality assurance facilitates recognition of standards of awards. Thus, it encourages public accountability; helps informed students' choice; contributes in improving teaching, learning and administration.

Methodology

The study used the case study research design for it was seen to facilitate in-depth analysis of perceptions of the informants on quality assurance. For data collection, the study mainly used the qualitative methodology. Where data needed to be reported in figures, the study used the quantitative methodology.

Discussion of Findings

In keeping with the recommendations of Wiersrma and Jurs (2009), qualitative data in this study is presented in the form of coded themes that are formulated from the major questions from the interview schedule. Similarly, in line with the recommendations of Wallen and Fraenk (2001), data obtained from the questionnaires is presented in the form of pie charts, graphs and tables.

Data Obtained From Interviews

Two administrators, one for Academic and the other for Administration, were interviewed separately to solicit their views on quality assurance issues.

Data Collected From Administrator (Academic)

Below, are views that were given by Administrator (Academic) regarding quality assurance at WUA:

Suitability for Quality Assurance

The findings show that the pursuit of quality at WUA is a process which is built into the practices of ODL. Quality assurance system is integrated into all components of the university. The study has revealed that in programme development, an inter-institutional framework has been developed to carry out audits. Regulations for the programmes are sent to other institutions for assessment.. The external examiner is expected to produce a report indicating areas which need improvement. The study has established that at WUA course and material designs undergo a rigorous quality assurance exercise. Writers and designers are provided with training on how to write for the distance learner. When materials have been written, peer review takes place through editing of materials. Materials are also evaluated and revised on the basis of feedback from students and tutors. This is done at the end of the semester when students fill in questionnaires for modules.

The study showed that student support at WUA is varied. Support comes through provision of information on guidance on how to effectively complete assignments, important dates, course outlines and assignment marks. Students are given two

assignments per course each semester. Tutorial letters for each course are written. Lecturers mark assignments and write constructive comments. Such comments are then discussed in tutorial. Assignments are moderated to establish fairness, consistency and credibility in the marking and awarding of marks. Quality is further enhanced when the moderator addresses common mistakes made in assignments.

Open Distance Learning Policy
The study established that to spearhead the quality assurance agenda, a policy has been developed at WUA. The policy gives guidance to all practices and set standards.

Data Collected From Administrator (Administration)
The Table below, shows data, with emerging themes supported by substantiating evidence, collected from Administrator (Administration):

Emerging Themes	Substantiating data
Availability of trained personnel at WUA to handle issues associated with inter-institutional quality assurance.	WUA has the best pool of trained personnel. The University acknowledges the efforts by ACBF for sponsoring capacity building programs that have constantly ensured quality attainmen
Recruitment trends at WUA and their efforts to address gender equity.	The current trends reveal that 85% are women, and 15% are men. Subsequent empowerment of women is a crucial instrument to ensure quality attainment
Institutions that work collaboratively with WUA in attaining quality academic and administrative services	WUA signed some Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with other institutions, namely, University of Zambia.
Institutions that work collaboratively with WUA in Quality assurance.	ZOU spearheads the editing, content reviewing and desktop publishing of WUA modules. WUA also gets modules from UNISA. DEASA had been instrumental in research and publication workshops, exchange of information and capacity building programmes.
How does WUA make use of exchange programmes in quality assurance?	Currently, WUA does not have programmes in place, but plans are underway.
Challenges faced by WUA in attaining quality.	Currently, WUA faces logistical challenges, particularly with regards to teaching materials.

It is crystal clear that administratively, WUA is better placed to handle issues linked to quality assurance. The existence of enabling strategies that are provided by capacity building programmes should go a long way in ensuring quality. The MoUs signed by WUA linked to quality should enable the University to achieve its intended goals.

Learners' Perceptions on User-Friendliness of Gender Studies Module A
The figure below, shows the responses of students to the questionnaire on whether the Gender Studies Module A was user friendly:

Figure 1: User-Friendliness of Gender Studies Module A
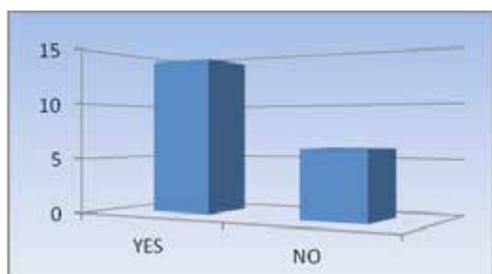

The findings show that 14 (70%) of the respondents indicated that the Gender Studies module A addressed the learners' individual needs, while only 6 (30%) did not share such view. Thus, the Gender Studies Module A addresses the issue of quality. Mc D Partridge in Siyakwazi and Siyakwazi (1999) observes that individuals are different. Thus, teaching and learning processes and experiences need to be tailor made.

Students indicated that the language used was appropriate. They stated that daily practical examples were used. They felt that self-evaluation exercises were very useful for further interrogation of new concepts.

Learners' Perceptions on the effectiveness of Social Psychology Module B
The figure below, shows the responses of students to the questionnaire on the effectiveness of support services of the Social Psychology Module B:

**Figure 2: Effectiveness of Social Psychology Module B**
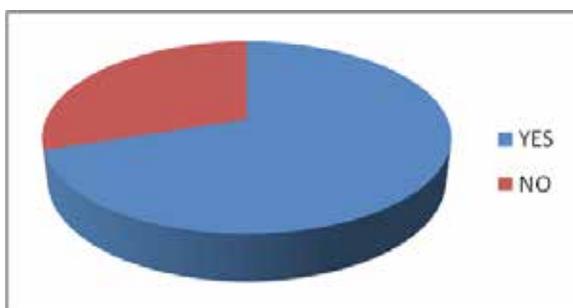
The study established that 15 (75%) of the respondents felt that the learner support services in this Module were effective, while only 5 (25%) held a different view. Thus, it is clear that learner support services are vitally important for quality assurance attainment.

Learners' Perceptions on the Meaningfulness of Assessment and Evaluation of Activities of Anthropology Module C
The figure below, shows the responses of students to the questionnaire on the meaningfulness of assessment and evaluation of activities of Anthropology Module C:

Figure 2: Meaningfulness of Assessment and Evaluation of Activities of Anthropology Module C
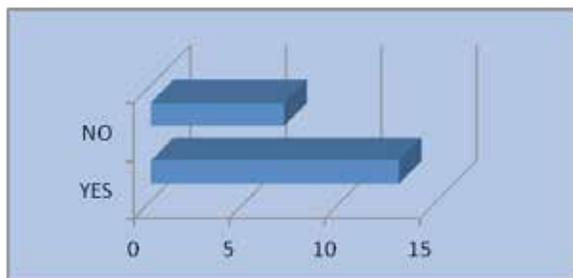
The study showed that 13 (65%) considered the Units in this Module have meaningful and comprehensive activities meant to enhance effective assessment and evaluation, while only 7 (35%) held a different opinion. Thus, it is crystal clear that quality is attained when assessment and evaluation techniques are meaningful in both content and substance.

Summary of Findings
The study revealed eloquent evidence that quality assurance at WUA serves an important part in the quest to improve academic and administration standards. Quality assurance is the bed-

rock of all teaching and learning processes, if any institution of higher learning is to compete regionally and globally. The study established that both internal and external assessment have distinct characteristics that ought to be observed to ensure quality. Diagnostic, formative and summative evaluation is critical in order to ensure the attainment of quality. The study showed that quality assurance policy will live a long way in enhancing effective attainment of quality. Various sartorial policies that regulate and govern the conduct of key stakeholders in ODL were identified. Principal strategies, such as peer review, were identified as core to the attainment of quality. However, limited resources were found constraining other key strategies, such as staff exchange programmes which provide staff with opportunities of learning what institutions of higher learning in other countries do in ensuring quality. The existence of comprehensive modules is eloquent evidence that WUA is making determined efforts to attain quality. However, the issue of quality assurance is challenged by attitudinal, technical and logistical setbacks. These challenges need to be effectively addressed.

Conclusion

This study has clearly shown that inter-institutional ODL quality assurance is key to the attainment of academic and administrative standards at any institution of higher learning. The study stresses that without effective inter- institutional quality assurance programmes, teaching and learning at university level would be rendered meaningless and directionless. Thus, training of tutors, module writers, content reviewers and any other critical stakeholders is the bedrock of quality assurance.

Recommendations

The study recommends that:

- Quality Assurance policies need to be constantly reviewed in order to improve inter- institutional quality assurance mechanisms.
- Staff development programmes need to be intensified.
- Tutors, module writers, content reviewers and other personnel need to be constantly trained.
- A Quality Assurance Committee needs to be put in place.
- Quality Assurance criteria for examiners need to be put in place in order to inform future processes.
- Further research on this seemingly grey area is needed to generate more information.

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