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Editorial

The Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA), the official regional distance education association of the fifteen member state Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), was painfully aware that although Southern Africa is the cradle of distance education, the region had ironically lagged behind the rest of the world in promoting and disseminating distance education research. Accordingly, DEASA established the International Journal of Open and Distance Learning (IJODL) in September 2007 as a referred scholarly publication directed at promoting the regional distance education agenda through the propagation of empirical research. Since the inaugural issue came out six years ago, the IJODL has become a credible platform for scholarly engagement for regional and international open and distance education scholars and practitioners. In keeping with its mandate, the IJODL remains resolute in developing and promoting a robust regional research agenda and encouraging and developing nascent researchers who are committed to high quality empirical research.

The Journal’s commitment to quality is now bearing fruit as attested by the quality of articles that has steadily improved over the last five years. Increased rigour in the use of the double blind peer review system and the editorial policy’s insistence on quality research articles have combined to account for the acknowledged improvement in the calibre of contributors and manuscripts that make it to the IJODL editorial desk. As a result of improvement in the general quality of manuscripts, the IJODL is now experiencing significant steady growth in readership. In addition, the reputation of the IJDOL, as a credible journal committed to the promotion and dissemination of empirical research articles of high quality, is also increasingly becoming widely acknowledged. Accordingly, the general quality of articles contained in the current issue attests to IJDOL’s commitment to quality empirical research.

Overview of this Issue’s Articles

The current issue contains articles which explore the general theme of enhancing access and success in education through the provision of ODL programmes. Specific areas of focus include policies for resource mobilisation in support of distance education provision and gender mainstreaming in ODL, while a majority of articles address quality issues in distance education provision. In looking at these articles, one realises that while access to higher education appears to be a major motivation for introducing distance education across Southern Africa, a preponderance of articles on quality suggests that there is greater concern for the quality of distance education among regional scholars and practitioners. However, the predominance of articles on quality in the current issue of the IJDOL provides a refreshing insight to the Journal’s readership, especially policymakers who often find themselves drawn to distance education because its cost-effectiveness and potential to widen access to higher education. Therefore, the reader should find the findings and recommendations of the articles in this issue challenging and enjoyable because of the new insights and perspectives that they represent.

One of the articles by Leonorah Nyaruwata examines policies and strategies for resources mobilisation used by public distance education institutions and the challenges faced these institutions in establishing and maintaining the quality of research, teaching and learning under conditions of resource constraints. The study is concerned that, while governments under allocate distance education because of a misconception that it is cheaper, ODL institutions appear to be doing little mobilise other sources funding for distance education. In all the four institutions investigated in this study, the results revealed a general under-development of resource mobilisation policies. In addition, there are no deliberate strategies to engage the private sector and other sources and to recruit and/or outsource expertise in resource mobilisation in support of ODL institutions.
A study by Stanslaus Tichapondwa uses benchmarking as a tool for exploring and mitigating the challenges of balancing the quality-quantity equation in the provision of distance education services and products. The study established that there was lack of shared understanding between and among sampled senior executives, professional staff, middle management and regional staff on the meaning and purposes of benchmarking. Thus, while benchmarking could and often benefits the provision of distance education programmes and other practices, a lack of shared understanding often undermines the choice, purpose, benefits, and value of investing in benchmarking visits.

A third study on the comparative performance of distance and fulltime learners by Sukati et al conducted at the University of Swaziland, a dual mode university, investigates the perceptions of a sample of lecturers who teach both fulltime and part-time students. While there are many comparative studies, the context for this study was ideal for a comparative investigation because both groups of learners were pursuing the same programme and courses, sat common examinations, were taught by the same lecturers, and would successfully graduate with the same qualifications. For a variety of reasons, the lecturers concluded that distance learners performed relatively less than their fulltime counterparts.

Finally, a qualitative study conducted by Mushi et al at the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) examines the voices of women on gender mainstreaming. There is underrepresentation of women among both staff and students at OUT, contrary to popular view that distance education favours female student participation. At OUT, female students constituted 30% of the student population, while the situation was even worse among senior academic staff where only 14.3% of professors were female. An examination of women’s voices revealed that most women were not equipped to interrogate gender perspectives and practices in relation to existing policies, guidelines and plans. The study shows that there was need to develop and implement strategies for promoting gender balance through gender mainstreaming in a variety of human resources practices.

T.J. Nhundu PhD
Editor-in-Chief
Resource Mobilisation for Open and Distance Learning Provision: Policies and Strategies in Zimbabwe

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Abstract
Zimbabwe open and distance learning organisations lack financial and material resources for efficiently teaching, learning and undertaking research. This study examined the policies and strategies for resources mobilisation employed by four ODL institutions in Zimbabwe, as well as the challenges faced in establishing and maintaining the quality of research, teaching and learning. The study employed the qualitative research paradigm, using case study design. Data collection methods used include in-depth interviews, document analysis and participant observation. Data were analysed through conventional content analysis. The population for the study included ODL institutions’ bursars or financial directors, deans and personnel drawn from resource mobilisation units. The findings were that policies specific to resource mobilisation were under development in all four institutions. However, one of the focal organisations had established a centre for continuing professional development, which raises third stream income through offering short courses. The study indicates the challenges faced by these institutions include lack of credibility for ODL graduates or products and, hence, failure to lure organisations that support the institutions in cash or kind. The study recommends the formation by academics of teams or clusters to bid for commissioned research called for by international organisations. The study also recommends that a comparative study be conducted to examine resource mobilisation strategies and challenges of ODL and conventional institutions. The other area for further research is to examine role of the leadership of institutions in resource mobilisation.

Introduction
In education the quality of programmes, research, teaching and learning depends primarily on the quality of resources used. In open and distance learning (ODL) institutions these resources include financial, human, physical, learning material and technology. According to Ojo and Olakulehin (2006:1) “The dynamics of globalization, plus the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT) have resulted in a tidal wave of information that has, in many cases, overwhelmed many countries’ around the world. In turn, these radical changes have led to greater need for resources to sustain this tidal wave and improve the quality of education in an information age context.

In developing countries such as Zimbabwe, the growth of ODL is severely constrained due to lack of financial, human, physical and technological resources and infrastructure. ODL organisations lack finances for developing e-learning infrastructure, equipping staff with e-learning expertise and construction of permanent buildings. Thus, from a resource mobilisation perspective, the study examined policies and strategies for resource mobilisation used by Zimbabwean ODL institutions to generate financial and other resources needed by these institutions, as well as the challenges they faced. This paper gives the background to study, the problem statement, the purpose and the objectives for the study, the related literature review, methodology, findings, conclusions and recommendations.

Background to the Study
As a force contributing to social and economic development, open and distance learning is fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of mainstream educational systems in both developed and developing countries. This growth has been stimulated in part by the interest among educators and trainers in the use of new internet-based and multimedia technologies. In addition, if the fundamental right of all people to learning is to be realized, it
is now accepted that traditional ways of organizing education need to be reinforced by innovative methods, in particular distance learning.

Unfortunately, in Zimbabwe there is under-investment in higher education institutions. This, in turn, has not only affected the quality of education but also the quality of graduates produced by institutions lacking basic provisions such as research grants, adequate e-learning technology infrastructure and teaching and learning resources. As a result of underfunding of the higher education sector by the Zimbabwean government, the technological equipment used in many higher education institutions is generally out-of-date, primordial and old-fashioned. In this regard, Mutenga (2012) reported that the computer-student ratio at many tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe is pathetic and internet usage is characterised by information processing that goes on at very slow speed. It has also been observed that gross underfunding of higher education institutions by the Zimbabwean government since the 1990s has severely affected the quality of education. There are insufficient funds to buy the latest teaching and learning technologies, teaching materials, infrastructure and improve curricula. In addition, additional funding for research, teaching and learning that conventional and ODL institutions used to receive from businesses, international organisations, and the donor community has since dried up.

The term resource is used to include money, information, materials, energy or skills. These resources are of strategic importance for the attainment of the objectives of organizations or individuals. Therefore, the term ‘resource mobilisation’, used to refer to a process of raising different types of support for the institution, is critical during times of diminishing resources, such as experienced in Zimbabwe.

The term resource mobilization, although technical in sense, merely refers to the sourcing and organisation of resources. Resources in ODL institutions include many different things, not just money. These may include support from stakeholders and material and non-material contributions from the private sector and community. Resource mobilisation can also be explained as a relationship management process, which involves identifying people who share the same values as your organization and taking steps to manage that relationship.

Thus in real terms, resource mobilization involves expansion of relations with resource providers. This process is a social concept that is applied in different fields such as banking, agriculture, community development, education, health and others. Resource mobilization does not only mean use of money but its extensiveness denotes the process that achieves the mission of the organization through the mobilization of knowledge in human, use of skills, equipment, services and infrastructure. It also means seeking new strategies of resource mobilization and effective and efficient use of available resources. The process of resource mobilisation can facilitate flow of resources from various sources and catalyse the flow of additional resources from public and private institutions. How the Zimbabwe ODL institutions have mobilised financial resources for effective research, teaching and learning activities in this era of scarce higher education financial resources has not been well documented.

The Problem Statement

In view of the above background, the problem for this study is stated thus: Zimbabwean ODL institutions are experiencing inadequate financial resources because they have not implemented appropriate resource mobilisation policies and strategies.

Research Question

The main research question driving the study is: ‘How do Zimbabwe ODL higher education institutions mobilise resources for effective research, teaching and learning?’
The sub questions for the study are:

1. To what extent have Zimbabwe ODL institutions implemented policies in resource mobilisation?
2. What strategies have Zimbabwe ODL institutions used to mobilise for the different resources needed for research, teaching and learning?
3. What are the challenges faced by ODL higher education institutions in resource mobilisation?
4. How have Zimbabwean ODL institutions solved challenges for effective resource mobilisation?

Methodology

Research design

This study used a qualitative research paradigm to provide a broader picture of resource mobilisation policies, strategies and challenges. Qualitative research was used because it is a system of inquiry which seeks to build a holistic, largely narrative, description to inform the researcher’s understanding of a social phenomenon of resource mobilisation (Creswell, 2007).

The case study design was used to examine current real-life situations in ODL resource mobilisation practices and provide the basis for the application of best practices (Stake, 1995). Qualitative case study was used in this study to facilitate exploration of resource mobilisation phenomenon within its context, using a variety of data sources. This ensured that the issue of resource mobilisation was not explored through a variety of lenses, which allowed for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood.

Sample

The study was conducted on a purposive sample, also commonly called a judgmental sample, selected based on the knowledge of the participants' understanding of resource mobilisation policies and strategies in ODL institutions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The participants were drawn from resource mobilisation departments, registrars' offices, marketing departments and faculties. Participants included finance directors, managers from relevant departments and faculty deans. These participants were chosen because of their involvement in and knowledge of current trends in resource mobilisation in distance education. The sample was drawn from four Zimbabwean ODL institutions, namely the Zimbabwe Open University, Open Learning Institution (UK), Central African Correspondence College (CACC) and Women’s University in Africa (WUA).

Research Instruments

The research took place in natural settings of Zimbabwe ODL institutions employing a combination of interviews, participant observations and document reviews.

A semi structured interview was used to generate data. Items were written on the interview schedule and structured to encourage participants to focus on particular issues such as financial resources, technology, resource mobilisation strategies and challenges faced in resource mobilisation. Open-ended questions were also included to help participants elaborate on points of interest. The second tool used was participant observation.

Participant observation refers to a data generation method in which the researcher takes on a role in the social situation under observation. The researcher immersed herself in the resource mobilisation study in order to know key actors in ODL institutions and their practices. The aim was to experience events in the manner in which the subjects under
Leonorah Tendayi Nyaruwata

The researcher also used the document review tool to generate data. Document review is a way of collecting data by reviewing existing documents (Patton, 2002). Documents reviewed were hard copies that included annual financial reports, funding proposals, meeting minutes, newsletters, and marketing materials.

**Data Generation**

Data were collected over a two month period from June to July 2012. Interviews typically lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. The interview process was divided into three stages: pre-interview, interview and post-interview stage. Participants were given a copy of the schedule prior to the interview, a time and place was agreed upon, informed consent was obtained prior to conducting the interview, and the results of each interview were transcribed immediately.

The researcher drew an observation schedule to check on e-learning technology facilities and equipment, library facilities at regional centres and in the offices of practitioners. In reviewing the documents the researcher had a set of questions to interrogate the documents with the purpose to understand the strategies for resource mobilisation documented in the policies, meetings and reports read.

**Data Analysis**

Conventional content analysis was used to analyse transcribed interview data, while coding categories are derived directly from the text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Transcription of each interview was read line-by-line and then divided into meaningful analytical units called “categories.” The researcher coded data after locating meaningful categories. Triangulation was used for cross-checking and verification of data from different information sources, including interviews, theoretical models and research methods. Stronger conclusions were drawn from comments made by more than one participant. Other conclusions were drawn from interview data and compared to related literature.

**Findings**

Findings from this study are given under the following headings as directed by the analysed data: resource mobilisation policies, resource mobilisation strategies, resource mobilisation challenges conclusions and recommendations.

**Resource Mobilisation Policies**

Participants mentioned that they did not have substantive resource mobilisation policies. They indicated that the policies were at different levels of development in these institutions.

**Resource Mobilisation Strategies**

Data reveal that ODL institutions in Zimbabwe use a variety of strategies for mobilising resources. Some of the strategies mentioned by participants include ‘friends of the university’, making a list of options for funding, contacting alumni, offering ground breaking programmes, establishing resource mobilisation directorates, establishing companies and raising money from research and consultancies.

*Friends of the university*

Data reveal that ODL institutions use a strategy they call friends of the university. This is a strategy where the university organises friends of the university consisting of prominent and credible citizens who have a track record of fund raising campaigns. This committee when formed with the approval of the university council will host various events at the university to
attract potential funders, including alumni bodies, philanthropists, foundations, trusts, private corporate and non-corporate businesses to align their interests with available opportunities for funding. At one of the universities visited the researcher was shown a block that was built by funds from the friends of the university. Data also reveal that some employers of ODL graduates who were approached to be friends of the university declined without give reasons.

List of options for funding

Another strategy revealed from the data is where the university makes a list of options of opportunities that the university would like to be funded. The university provides the list of opportunities for funding to funders. This assists potential benefactors align their interests with available opportunities for funding. Data reveal that although some organisations could have responded positively to this strategy, no institution studied received funding through this strategy during the past five (5) years because of severe hyperinflationary economic conditions that prevailed in Zimbabwe during the period covered by this study.

Alumni

This strategy has proved to be a viable strategy from the data generated. Data show that two of the universities studied had assets like a library block, books, a huge generator, etc., all provided by the alumni. Data also revealed that all the universities studied had active alumni both within and outside the country. Data indicate that these institutions set up simplified, easy-to-execute online payment systems whereby alumni can choose to either make a regular periodic contribution or a one-off donation.

Ground breaking programmes

Data indicate that two of the universities used offered ‘ground-breaking programmes’, such as a programme in gender studies and agro economics. Data show that participants to these programmes were sponsored by international organisations. Data also revealed that ground-breaking programmes could also target public sector corporations, private enterprises, farming communities, banks and financial institutions.

Resource mobilisation directorate

Data indicate that two of the ODL institutions studied had resource mobilisation directorates. The other two had marketing departments that share the resource mobilisation responsibility with the finance department.

Business entities

What emerged from the data was that state institutions receive government funding which is not enough to achieve the university’s strategic plan. Meanwhile, private ODL institutions that do not receive government funding, depended on donor funding and generating third stream income by designing different strategies of providing various products and services to the surrounding community and the society at large.

Some of the strategies are income generation through establishing business units. One of the institutions studied had established links with an international donor by providing farming courses to women as an income generating project. Another strategy that is common among both state and private institutions was the creation of centres for professional development or lifelong learning, which provide short courses. The courses are offered to different levels of people from youth to adults and could also be tailor-made to meet client needs. These are evening, weekend and public holiday courses, offered through block release or distance education mode.
Income from research and consultancies

Data also indicated that there was limited income flowing into ODL institutions from consultancy services and virtually none from patents, intellectual property and innovation. Data also reveal that these institutions are starved of senior academics with doctorates and/or professorial level. For example, among the four ODL institutions studied there were seven (7) professors and 30 doctoral holders. According to participants, this contributed to limited resources coming into the ODL institutions through research and consultancies.

Challenges Faced in Resource Mobilisation in ODL institutions

Data reveals that ODL institutions in Zimbabwe experience several challenges in resource mobilisation. The challenges include lack of credibility of ODL product, economic instability, ignorance on the importance of ODL on the human resources development, lack of knowledge on the credibility of ODL to produce knowledge and innovation; more pressing needs for the government to fund and unavailability of loans and grants for ODL students.

Lack of scholarships and loan facility

Data revealed that ODL students do not qualify to apply under Government cadetship scheme, a policy where university students apply for government financial aid in form of loans that will be paid back once the student is working. Cadetship applies to students in conventional universities only. Under this scheme students are under government bonding for a period equivalent to the time they were received financial support. Opportunities for loans were also very limited in ODL. However, some donor organisations provided scholarships to private ODL institutions, targeting mainly women students. This is now viewed as resource mobilisation since the money from such scholarship is quite substantial for the university budget.

Limitations of the Study

The major limitation for this study was in the form of literature. Review of related literature indicated that there are very few studies in the area of resource mobilisation in education, let alone higher ODL institutions. While there are various reports on the planning process for resource mobilisation, these are mainly found in developed countries, particularly non-governmental organisations and mega or research think tanks. The other limitation was on methodological issues. Lack of empirical studies on resource mobilisation in higher ODL institutions also brought in lack of examples of methods used in resource mobilisation studies.

Discussion and Conclusions

This qualitative research demonstrated that Zimbabwe ODL institutions require to establish resource mobilisation policies if they are to be successful in resource mobilisation (World Health Organisation, 2008). The study concludes that in view of getting inadequate financial resources from government, ODL institutions need to have innovative strategies for resource mobilisation. This strategy is consistent with Holloway’s (2001) observations following an examination of several resource mobilisation strategies located within a strategic overview of planning and management effectiveness.

Based on the findings of this study, it could be concluded that Zimbabwe ODL institutions do not have resource mobilisation policies. Another observation made from this study is that these institutions have no capacity for resource mobilisation because they lack resource mobilisation experts on their staff. It is also concluded that Zimbabwean ODL institutions lack financial, physical and technological resources to achieve set goals and that this could be mitigated engaging in resource mobilisation. It has been concluded that Zimbabwean ODL institutions use strategies for resource mobilisation that are generic; there is need to
consider strategies that are unique to the Zimbabwean context of severe scarce financial resources and monetary liquidity crisis. IDRC Venture for Fund Raising (2010) and UNAIDS (2000) say E-mail/Internet resource mobilization can enhance and extend an organization’s reach because unique information could be made available directly to one’s constituents, subscribers, and members without geographical constraints. This study also concluded that ODL institutions in Zimbabwe face resource mobilisation challenges that include lack of credibility for the ODL product, lack of knowledge of the importance of ODL in national human development strategies and competing educational priorities for government. Finally, it is also concluded that lack of provision of scholarship and loan facilities for the ODL students has also disadvantaged resource mobilisation in state ODL universities.

Recommendations

1. The study recommends using the E-mail/Internet resource mobilization strategies in identifying donor organisations that support ODL institutions in cash and or in kind in addition to the current strategies.
2. Future research in this area could be a comparative study of ODL institutions and conventional universities resource mobilisation policies, strategies and challenges in order to learn the best practices.
3. The other area for further research is to examine roles of leadership in resource mobilisation.

References


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Benchmarking Quality University Education: Riding on the Shoulders of Giants?

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Abstract
This article focuses on the challenge of balancing quality and quantity in the provision of products and services in an open university. Using benchmarks, the study strives to establish how institutions ensure quality, and hypothesises that any employee who has been with an open university for at least one year would be aware of extant institutional quality systems and procedures. To measure benchmarking efforts objectively, theoretical positions were applied. Executive managers, professional staff, middle managers, and regional staff were sampled. Three methods were used to collect data: written questionnaire, oral interview, and content analysis of documents. One key finding was that there is a discrepancy of perception between executive management and the three other groups regarding quality assurance initiatives in the organisation. Interpretation of data was through tallies and descriptive statistics, while findings were presented in themes related to research questions. The study confirmed potential applicability of benchmarks developed elsewhere, as well as adding to the literature about benchmarking. A major recommendation was that where systems have been put in place, driven by top management, cascading procedures should be carefully planned and implemented.

Introduction
A university is an institution of higher education and research. The word ‘university’ is derived from the Latin universitas magistrorum et scholarium, roughly meaning ‘community of teachers and scholars’ (cf. Lewis, 1966). In developing countries, such as those of Southern Africa, several Open and Distance Learning (ODL) universities are being established alongside conventional ones. Increasingly, education policy on access is being steered more and more in favour of ODL on account of its perceived benefits of capacity to increase enrolment, cost effectiveness, technology basis, and capability to transcend geographical distance. Notwithstanding that, Mhlanga (2011, p.181) makes the following critical observation:

In most of our countries where this form of education has not been mainstreamed, and where regulatory policies have been largely implicit, we face the huge challenge of convincing the public that open and distance learning is not a second rate alternative.

As an institution par excellence in terms of scholasticism and intellectual pursuit, one wonders how an open university (OU) ought to manage itself and earn a reputation of quality and efficiency often ascribed to its more established conventional classroom-based counterpart.

Even among comparable providers of ODL products and services, customers tend to have preferences for one provider over the other. Given the many familiar and unfamiliar ODL institutions, accessible on the internet, one wonders what it is that makes their products and services qualitative and competitive. The present study seeks to empirically explore the issue of benchmarking as a critical quality assurance (QA) engagement whose importance may not be commonly shared currently. The appointment of a Chief Executive Officer of an institution and all essential academic and non-academic staff is not a sufficient condition for guaranteeing the quality products and services emanating from the university’s subsequent activities.
The Background

The justification of ODL as a mode that is capable of filling a gap left by conventional university education is a given. Scholars in the area (Holmerg, 1981; Mishra, 1998; Moore and Kearsley, 2005) have confirmed this, but it is the statistical information that makes the case for ODL even more compelling. The average rate of school attendance in continental Africa is said to be 81% at primary level, 34% at secondary level and 6.5% at higher education level. For sub-Saharan Africa, the average rate of higher education attendance is as low as 4% against an average of 10% attendance rate in all developing countries (cf. Murphy et.al, 2002). This implies that planned development of ODL universities can also stimulate a rise in the percentage of university enrolment.

It is against this background that one institution, the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) has been chosen as a case for deeper enquiry. The institution dramatizes its development towards open university status, alongside well recognised players in Southern Africa, notably the University of South Africa (UNISA); the Open University of Tanzania (OUP); and the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), to name only a few.

BOCODOL, which has five regions, was created in 1999 as a distance education college. This was the year ZOU gained its university status, thus making BOCODOL six years younger. It attains open-university status in 2013, that is, 14 years later than ZOU. Notwithstanding the age difference, it suffices to observe that in terms of presumptions about setting up ODL systems, both institutions are supposed to have made significant progress. BOCODOL is ISO certified, and conducts regular internal audits. It also has external auditors – the Botswana Bureau of Standards (BOBS), the Zimbabwe Open University, and Namibia College of Open Learning (NAMCOL). Based on its vision, mission and core values, it is guided by strategic plans. The current one (its fifth) is from 2012 to 2016. Since the previous strategic plan, the institution adopted the balanced score card for translating the strategy into operational terms. A roadmap has been developed accounting for core business activities into the future.

Admittedly, both ZOU and BOCODOL are young institutions than UNISA and the Open University (UK). This does not mean the two young institutions have nothing to offer regarding quality provision. McKinnon, Walker, and Davis (2000:3) observe that “…there are always universities living on past glory unsupported by current performance, and universities, particularly young universities, whose performance is well ahead of their current standing”.

Given the foregoing background, it is worth adding that both institutions are expanding phenomenally infrastructure-wise and in terms of technology uptake, but more so in terms of student numbers. The benefits of such expansion should lie squarely in the provision of quality higher education. Quality, which refers to a product or service that is fit for purpose, is dependent on measures consciously taken to ensure high standards. It is how ODL institutions and to what extent they strive for quality that the present study seeks to explore before extrapolating findings to similar providers.

Benchmarking can take two forms, firstly, measuring the efforts of an institution against set criteria for excellence or, secondly, measuring such efforts by combining criteria of excellence with a comparison of how other institutions perform. Benchmarking is used in the sense McKinnon, Walker and Davis (2000) defined it. These scholars define benchmarking as the provision of a standard that something can be judged by, while a benchmark is a standard that can be used for judging how good or bad something is. In the present study, BOCODOL’s performance is mainly judged against specific benchmarks.
The Problem

While there is a resurgence of purposefulness to offer quality products and services by tertiary institutions in sub Saharan Africa (cf. Tichapondwa, 2011); and while there is sustained effort by ODL scholars to support quality products and services through research (cf. Nhundu, 2011), there still remains a gap about what both new and old tertiary institutions do to ensure quality. Literature (e.g. Abrioux, 2009; Lockwood, 2010) shows that ODL, at all levels of education, has the capability to increase access.

However, the problem observed by Mhlanga (2011) in his discussion about the quality of open universities can be phenomenal. He notes that there is a real challenge of balancing quality and quantity so that the distance mode of delivery can not only remain competitive, but also yield significant social and individual returns. Thus, the problem of awareness possessed by managers concerning benchmarking and the research procedures currently followed in open universities (cf. Tirivangana, 2013), together with criteria used to ensure quality, warrant systematic investigation. By and large the problem under investigation seems to be a managerial one, and Tau (2011:31) has these words to say about it, “Unless systems and processes for quality assurance are pre-determined on the governance of an institution, its management can be both chaotic and haphazard”. In view of this observation, two hypotheses are projected:

Hypothesis 1

At any given point, a practicing ODL institution will have in place some systems to ensure quality provision of products and services.

Hypothesis 2

An ODL employee who has worked for at least one year in an institution will have awareness of quality assurance procedures used in the particular institution.

In order to test the hypotheses, the following questions provided focus to the study, beginning with the primary one, namely:

i. How do institutions ensure that the products and services they offer are up to standard and competitive?

Complementary to the primary question are these subsidiary ones:

ii. How can benchmarking efforts be objectively measured?

iii. What evidence exists in practice about benchmarking (within a given institution) as a quality assurance measure?

Taking into account the problem under investigation, focus now turns to available literature about benchmarking.

Literature Review

Open universities often have impressive mission statements, for example, “A university of choice for life-long learning”, or “Towards world class status…”. I single out two critical issues, which are linked very closely with the primary question to do with how institutions ensure that the products and services they offer are up to standard and competitive. Firstly, it is demanding to be an institution of choice or a world-class university, even when offering a few areas of study. Secondly, monitoring whether a university is succeeding in its aims is quite demanding, unless systematised. This brings into focus the issue of benchmarking, or qualitative comparison (cf. Massaro, 1998; Martin, 2003).
Being clear about what benchmarking involves is an important first step in evaluating processes of a university. Benchmarking tends to be confused with collecting statistics or performance indicators (Fielden, 1997). For the present study, the definition by Jackson and Lund (2000:6) is preferred:

Benchmarking is, first and foremost, a learning process structured so as to enable those engaging in the process to compare their services/activities/products in order to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses as a basis for self-improvement.

By implication, therefore, benchmarking is either a process involving the active participation of two or more organisations on agreed practices, or comparing institutional processes with quality criteria, or both. Garlick and Pryor (2004) come up with three points justifying the importance of benchmarking, and these are:

- reporting against external requirements;
- the extent to which there are real processes of improvement as an intrinsic part of the evaluation process; and
- the extent to which involvement is encouraged across a wide spectrum of stakeholders

Benchmarking, therefore, has everything to do with the issue of quality.

As observed earlier, quality refers to characteristics of a product or service, which make it fit for purpose. A quality system consistently meets customer requirements with enhanced satisfaction through effective application of sound educational management systems and activities. “Quality assurance, on the other hand, refers to the conscious steps taken by stakeholders in the distance education system to ensure adherence to quality” (Mhlanga. 2011, p.183).

Delfgaauw (2000) sheds more light on the shift in expectations. Traditionally, university has been taken as the repository of knowledge, characterised by a ‘trust me’ attitude. There has been a shift to a ‘tell me’ attitude by society, and then a ‘show me’ position taken by the world. Garlick and Pryor (2004, p.2) also concur with this view. There has, therefore, been increasing demand for evaluative mechanisms that demonstrate how stakeholder expectations are met by the institution. This evaluative state is characterised by the use of auditing benchmarks to “account for performance and promote improvement (Jackson and Lund, 2000, p.3).

In an attempt to answer the question: ‘How can benchmark efforts be objectively measured?’ the model by McKinnon, Walker and Davis (2000) is adopted. The approach distinguishes two kinds of benchmarks, namely, criterion referenced and quantitative benchmarks.

Criterion referenced type defines attributes of good practice in a functional area, while quantitative benchmarks distinguish normative and competitive levels of achievement, showing where practice is quantifiably different in some institutions. The differences will signal good practice. In essence, evaluating quality involves identification of measures that will give a valid and balanced picture of parameters that distinguish good universities. As McKinnon, Walker and Davis (2000, p.3) put it “…benchmarking needs not only to identify successes to date, but also vital signs of adaptation to the future”. Dynamism and rapid rates of adaptation to new challenges are typical characteristics of a quality ODL provider.

To measure whether the institution conforms to quality standards, McKinnon, Walker and Davis (2000) have identified sixty-seven benchmarks out of which fifty have been selected for application as benchmark criteria for the present study. These fall under nine broad categories outlined below.
The benchmarks can be used in combination with the theory of the balanced score card (BSC) proposed by Kaplan and Norton (1992), answering the questions: Where is the organisation heading? How do we get there, relative to our goals? “The balanced scorecard is a strategic planning and management system that is used to align business activities to the vision and strategy of the organization, improve internal and external communications, and monitor organisational performance against strategic goals” (http://tutor2u.net/business/strategy/balanced-scorecard-introduction.html).

The originators of the model (Kaplan and Norton) suggest that organisations should focus their efforts on a limited number of specific, critical performance measures, which reflect stakeholders’ key success factors. The BSC produces a balance in four key business perspectives: financial, customer, internal processes, and innovation (cf. Bourne & Bourne, 2000). In using benchmarks, the following benefits of the BSC shall be kept in mind, and evaluation of institutions conducted accordingly. A summary of what the BSC can help leaders achieve strategic goals is derived from Cobbold and Lawrie (2002a) as follows.

- helps companies focus on what has to be done in order to create a breakthrough performance;
- acts as an integrating device for a variety of corporate programmes;
- makes strategy operational by translating it into performance measures and targets;
- helps break down corporate level measures so that local managers and employees can see what they need to do well if they want to improve organisational effectiveness; and
- provides a comprehensive view that overturns the traditional idea of the organisation as a collection of isolated, independent functions and departments

The primacy of the BSC, therefore, is that it addresses three quality assurance elements:

a. the outcomes or past activities (lagging indicators);
b. measures of the drivers of future performance (leading indicators); and

c. measures of the rate of change of performance (learning indicators)

Thus, a conscious combination of the benchmarks and the balanced score card ensures that an institution provides quality university education, supported with increased student completion rate. Arguably, an institution’s relevance is manifested in society through the medium of its graduates, hence the importance of making sufficient imprint on such graduates during the course of their study in an institution.

One of the societal expectations of a university, regardless of its type, is that it should have a positive impact on society in terms of development. It is expected to be a catalyst for social development and should bestow special qualities upon those who go through its curriculum. This is how society evaluates the standing of any institution; to do what is expected of it. Barnett (1992) (cited in Mhlanga, 2011) explains four core activities that directly impact on student development and student experience in an educational institution. These four are supported by other activities as reflected in figure 4 below.
According to Barnett, the core activities that impact directly on learners in any teaching/learning situation are:

- the quality of the programmes and courses learners go through,
- the quality of teaching support provided,
- the quality of teachers that mediate the learning process, and
- the quality of assessment systems

No institution can achieve quality service if there is laxity in any one of these core dimensions of educational provision in terms of quality. Barnett further argues that around these four areas, there is a belt of support factors – some kind of enhancers, which include:

- an institution’s academic development plan,
- research and development,
- linkages with strategic external partners like industry and professional bodies, and
- access and recruitment policies and practices

Thus far, it becomes overtly clear that benchmarking quality university education can be achieved through a combination of measures as explained above.

In her paper presented at the International Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (INQAAHE) conference held in Abu Dhabi in March 2009, Lemaitre (2009) gives some of the functions of a university. She argues for three practical ways of improving the quality of an institution’s delivery practices:

a. doing better (improving) what an institution has always been doing;
b. changing from traditional practice and doing new things in new ways – being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMPROVEMENT</th>
<th>CURRENT SITUATION</th>
<th>CHANGE: NEW ISSUES, NEW APPROACHES</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doing the same but better</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovate and improve</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The model is presented below.

Briefly explained, there are three alternative ways of enhancing quality in higher education, namely, doing the same thing better; innovate and improve; and changing to new issues and approaches. Quality benchmarks could readily be applied in any of the alternative ways. This is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

The implication of the model is that it can be used in combination with the benchmarks proposed above, taking into account ideas about the balanced score card, as well as ideas about quality enhancement as defined by Barnett (1992). Quality assurance in higher education is about innovation, which can be defined as the deliberate application of information, imagination, and initiative in deriving greater or different value from resources, and as change that creates a new dimension of performance.

Methodology

An ODL institution was used as a case study. The sample was identified through purposive sampling, where a sample is selected with a purpose in mind. We usually would have one or more specific predefined groups we are seeking. In the present study, the sample comprised four strata, namely,

- executive management (Vice Chancellor/Executive Manager, Deans, and Directors) - 5 participants;
- lecturers/tutors (professional staff) - 12 participants;
- staff in the regions (including regional managers) - 6 participants; and
- middle managers (departmental heads) - 13 participants

Thus, the total number of participants was 54 altogether. One of the criteria used in selecting participants was that they should have served in the institution for more than one year.

A written questionnaire based on pre-determined benchmarks (cf. McKinnon et al., 2000) was circulated for completion. Before distribution, it was piloted on four employees’
representatives from each of the four strata. This resulted in a cross validated questionnaire in terms of clarity of instructions and the clarity of individual benchmarks.

The questionnaire comprised 50 closed questions, requiring respondents to tick evident, not evident, or partially evident. The questions were under nine categories, characterising features of the institution: governance, planning and management; external impact; finance and physical infrastructure; learning and teaching; student support; research; library and information services; internationalisation; and staffing.

Oral interviews, following an interview schedule, were conducted with two representatives selected purposively from each of the four strata. This was supported with use of the third method of content analysis of quality assurance documentation availed by the institution. The objective for content analysis was mainly to verify existence of quality assurance systems and procedures.

Responses from the first two instruments yielded data that established patterns and regularities in the thinking and practice of benchmarking. The third method, content analysis, yielded data about systems in place, as well as those that ought to be in place but are not. Responses to the questionnaire were quantified and expressed as percentages, while those from oral interviews, because they were based on themes, were interpreted qualitatively. Findings from content analysis were interpreted both quantitatively and qualitatively, depending on the type of information collected.

In sum, therefore, the use of mixed methods, a kind of triangulation, had the potential of giving better insight into the problem of quality university education. By locating it in the narrower context of a case study, the same problem and researched solutions can be located in the wider educational context of ODL universities in the sub region and beyond.

Findings

The findings are presented around the two hypotheses and related questions, starting with Hypothesis 1:

At any given point, a practising ODL institution will have in place some systems to ensure quality provision of products and services.

This is closely linked with the primary research question: ‘How do institutions ensure that the products and services they offer are up to standard and competitive?’ Information was solicited through the oral interview, starting with the question, which solicited participants to spell out what they considered to be the core activities of the institution. This was followed by the second question, requiring them to specify how the institution ensures whether the activities are done the right way and up to standard.

The majority listed core activities in this order: management of finances; responding to queries by students and tutors; offering good courses and study materials; good tutoring; and research. Regarding how the institution ensures quality, four ways came out repeatedly and in this order: external auditing of finances; external auditing by reputed quality assurance agencies; following a strategic plan; and lastly, use of the balanced score card.

If we go by Barnett’s core activities (discussed above) for a university, we can conclude that there is a mismatch between them and the perceptions of the interviewees. Only two, offering good courses and study materials and quality teaching are compliant. There was no mention of quality assessment systems or the quality of teachers who make things happen. At the same time, research is an enhancer rather than core business as perceived by respondents. The other two, management of finances and responding to queries would not be considered core.
Based on what respondents consider to be core activities, there is an indication of what the institution does to ensure quality. It was striking that there was no mention of benchmarking, though respondents indicated some important steps taken by the institution such as strategic planning, external auditing and using the balanced score card. This confirms Hypothesis 1 at the basic level of awareness. It demonstrates that employees are aware that quality is important, but what is probably missing is the higher level of awareness concerning what core activities are, and how these should be benchmarked.

One question from the oral interview: ‘What do you understand by benchmarks?’ revealed some gap. Responses revolved around four main areas, and these are:

- creating a budget and visiting established universities;
- conducting workshops on best practices;
- developing and sharing policies and procedures; and
- carrying out research in order to establish gaps in institutional systems

While these are reasonable, there seemed to be some misunderstanding about what benchmarks are, what workshops should be about, and what exactly would be the nature of policies and research carried out. This was revealed in the oral responses when respondents were asked to explain their answers. While visits are important to establish how others do it best, the issue of innovation and improvement of the current situation, as advocated by Lemaitre (2009), did not come out as explicitly as expected.

In conclusion, the oral interviews seem to have revealed some degree of awareness about quality assurance systems being in place, and that the institution was doing something about quality. It is the depth of such understanding that seemed to be wanting.

Hypothesis 2 was stated thus:

An ODL employee who has worked for one year or more in an institution will have average awareness of quality assurance procedures used in the particular institution.

It was addressed by responses to the written questionnaire. Fifty benchmarks from the model by McKinnon, Walker and Davis (2000) were used as criteria to measure the level of employee awareness, thus also addressing both the primary research question and the subsidiary questions dealing with objective measurement of benchmarking, and what benchmarking evidence is observable in the institution under investigation. A total of 36 out of 40 participants (83%) responded to the questionnaire as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Executive management</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Lecturers/professionals</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Regional staff</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D Middle Managers</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fifty benchmarks used as criteria fall under the categories of governance, external impact, finance, learning and teaching, student support, research, library, internationalisation, and staffing, as listed earlier. Participants were expected to tick Evident/Not Evident/Partially Evident/Not sure against each benchmark to demonstrate awareness of institutional development over the past one or more years. Within that period the organisation under investigation has gone through a number of strategic plans and is working on the current one, which has already been cascaded to employees. As examples, some benchmarks required respondents to indicate whether:
• strategic planning is clear to all;
• the reputation of the institution is systematically and positively cultivated;
• there is a well-documented asset management plan;
• academic staff are peer reviewed;
• there is a research training management plan;
• there is an international policy linked to the strategic plan;
• there are procedures in preventing and resolving staff conflicts

There were cases when some participants missed out some benchmarks, and that interfered with percentages.

Table 2 below captures the overall response by different groups expressed in percentage to the nearest whole number. Below it is a graphic representation of the statistics.

**Table 2: Overall response**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Evident %</th>
<th>Not Evident %</th>
<th>Partially evident %</th>
<th>Not sure %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Figure 3: Overall responses](image)

On average, the highest number of participants who confirmed that 37% of benchmarks was evident comes from Group A (the Executive Management), while the lowest comes from Group B (lecturers/professionals) who find only 16% evident. Group C (Regional staff) have the highest number of 36% benchmarks, which are not evident, followed by Group B with 32%. Group B (lecturers) and Middle Managers (Group D), say they are not sure about 28% of the benchmarks.

It is concluded that executive management think many of the benchmarks are evident, and not surprisingly so because they are at the forefront of driving quality issues. However, it is surprising that lecturers score very low in terms of the evident indicator, considering that they are the ones concerned with the core business of developing study materials and teaching. Under the Not evident indicator, regional staff has the highest percentage followed by lecturers. The possible conclusion is that those far removed from headquarters, where most quality assurance activities are generated and discussed, are less aware. It is still, nevertheless, surprising that lecturers, who are headquarters based also say many benchmarks are not evident. It also comes as a surprise that professional staff and middle managers are in the forefront of being not sure, more especially that the majority of them have worked in the organisation for more than three years.

Table 3 takes the discussion further by examining a combination of statistics for two related
responses: *evident* and *partly evident*, on the one hand, and *not evident* and *not sure*, on the other. The former represents a positive state, whereas the latter signifies a negative state. Below the Table is a graphic representation of the statistics.

**Table 3:** Combination of related responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Evident and Partially evident %</th>
<th>Not Evident and Not sure %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4:** Combination of related responses

The point is that a benchmark that is evident is a given, and one that is partially evident is on the way to being perfected. Executive Management find 64% of benchmarks in this category evident and/or partially evident, while the lowest statistic of 37% on the same response category is from regional staff. Low response level from regional staff might reflect the issue of distance from where policies and procedures are generated. However, distance alone may not fully account for this variance with executive management, since this score is not significantly different from the perception of professionals (40%) and middle managers (41%). In fact, the high score by executive managers is atypical, since the scores of the other three groups were closer to each other, indicating congruence of perceptions.

Some intervention needs to be done about a benchmark construed as either not evident or somebody is not sure whether it is in place. This is more so for the latter, which has implications for what best ways an institution can follow in order to bring about increased awareness. Professionals have the highest statistic of 60% in these categories, closely followed by middle managers (57%). There are executive managers who also express the view that as many as 24% of the benchmarks are either not evident or they are not sure about them.

Table 4 below contains the highest scores representing each of the four groups on all four measuring scales. The results show no clear pattern across all four groups of respondents.

**Table 4:** Outstanding individual responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Evident %</th>
<th>Not Evident %</th>
<th>Partially evident %</th>
<th>Not sure %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For example, the individual who scored highest for evident (52%) is from executive management, while the not evident indicator is scored highest (74%) by a respondent from the professional category. Characteristically, executive management thinks many of the benchmarks are partially evident (50%). It is the not sure indicator of 84% from a professional that is as surprising for its source as it is for its vast difference from the lowest score of 18% by an executive manager and 22% by a regional staffer.

When the law of averages is applied to the indicator of evident for all four groups, it emerges that 24% of the benchmarks are evident. Thus, when used as criteria to measure benchmarking and quality assurance more objectively, it can be concluded that BOCODOL is currently pegged at 24% in all its efforts since it was established by an Act of Parliament as a distance education provider in 1998. However, it should be noted that this is at the level of benchmarks only, and not when compared with any other institution. It is probably understandable that as more concerted effort is made to take the institution to full open university status, evidence or lack of it will significantly change for the better at various stages of the current strategic plan.

Finally, following content analysis of existing quality assurance documents, it was established that the institution has several of these. Examples are: enrolment policy, assessment policy, partnerships policy, guidance and counselling policy, and a few others. Their availability answers the question to do with how institutions ensure quality products and services. However, in response to oral questions, respondents revealed that they were not sure how policies came to be written. Regarding the existing policies, it was not clear where they would access them to check for information. Thirdly, there were certain operational areas where policies were urgently required but were not in place.

**Limitations of the Study**

Before proceeding to the discussion section, the limitations of the study are noteworthy. Firstly, there was no comparison of the institution with any other one. This is a shortcoming in terms of expectations about benchmarking procedures. In mitigation, however, an in-depth study of the one ODL institution was conducted using benchmarks applicable to any established university. The second limitation is that the institution under investigation is not yet a university. Notwithstanding that, however, BOCODOL has been a provider of tertiary open and distance learning programmes for the past seven. The fact that the institution gets accreditation and is registered with regulatory bodies implies that there is purposeful ambition to comply with quality expectations. The third limitation is that the researcher is a member of the organization, and the issue of bias arises, thus compromising reliability. Most fortunately, internationally applicable benchmarks (cf. McKinnon, Walker, and Davis, 2000) were drawn upon for the adjudication of the BOCODOL inside story. They are universal, and their application is, therefore, objective.

**Discussion**

It was hypothesised that employees with over one year experience in an organisation should possess a degree of awareness of quality assurance issues. It now remains to demonstrate the contribution of the study to knowledge, come up with recommendations, and specify what future research should account for.

**Contribution of the Study**

The investigation has made a contribution at both the theoretical and application levels. Beginning with the former, it has confirmed that benchmarking criteria by other scholars can be successfully applied for purposes of self-introspection by an institution. Equally, the ideas proposed by Lemaitre (2009) have been demonstrated to be instructive. They guide the institution under investigation and comparable ones on how the current situation analysis
should serve as a point of departure for innovation and improvement. The two points combined speak fluently about a key contribution, namely, creation of literature about benchmarking for the institution, but more importantly, for similar institutions and open universities worldwide.

In terms of contribution at application level, the investigation serves as an indication of what can be done with benchmarks that have been successfully developed for use elsewhere. Thus, such benchmarks have been universalised in the sense that they were used in the present study to stimulate and catalyse dialogue. Their transformative potential and their trustworthiness to stimulate on-going discourse among scholars has been demonstrated.

**Recommendations**

Results showed that there is lack of a shared understanding about what the core activities of an open-university are between top management and other employees. At the same time, there is no common understanding of what benchmarking involves. The result might be individuals concentrating on what they think is best, though it may not be core business, leading to a creation of 'ivory towers of isolation', also described as silos. Cognisant of the fact that cascading is done whenever an innovation occurs; failure to achieve common understanding implies that cascading procedures have to be revisited.

It was conclusively established through the findings that the institution has in place some quality assurance systems, which synchronise with benchmarking. Given this positive, it is recommended that the Corporate Services section of an open university should create a strategy to make capital of this and come up with well defined, and constantly monitored procedures to ensure doing the same things better than how they are currently done.

Professionals and middle managers seem to be in the forefront of being not sure about evidence of benchmarks, and they also think many of these are not evident. Given their closer proximity to decision-making than regional staff, one would have expected a comparatively more positive response from them. A recommendation is strongly made that the Corporate Services Department of an open university should re-examine the fifty benchmarks used in the study, and do the following:

- Critically isolate those benchmarks where stakeholders indicate *Not evident/Not sure*.
- Assess how best to address each one, for example, “…systematic effort to diagnose reasons for declining retention rates”.
- Assign lagging benchmarks according to categories, and request that specific departments come up with practical recommendations, which can then be implemented.
- Come up with a standing Benchmarking Committee, which will also pay attention to possible risk factors.

For institutions, which use the balanced score card, it is recommended that the issue of benchmarking and quality assurance be reflected in the key performance areas of departments and individuals.

One encouraging thing that was reflected in the data is that there are some policies in place. The negative side about this is that it is indeterminate how these come into being, and where they are kept for reference purposes. It should be observed that the institution under investigation has its way of creating and availing policies, but the important point equally applicable to comparable open universities is that there should be in place what I wish to call a policy about policy development. This recommendation should then be taken into account with issues of how best to avail such policies. An open-university is expected to avail policies in a central place, e.g. the library or its website so that both new and old staff members can
readily access them.

Finally, findings abundantly demonstrated that it may not necessarily be a question of having been in an institution for a length of time that is commensurate with enhanced awareness of systems in place. It can be argued that among intervening variables, that is, factors hindering appreciation of quality assurance initiatives are:

- the individual employee’s deformed attitude towards what the institution stands for;
- inadequate training and prior experience about ODL and educational practice;
- distance from headquarters where systems about quality are normally generated; or
- forgivable ignorance about governance of an ODL institution; and
- unwillingness to embrace change when it inevitably comes

These all impinge on operations, and while it can be fairly easy to isolate them, the major challenge lies in how to effectively address them. The critical point, nevertheless, is to recognise them for what they are before action can be taken. It is a fact that sometimes we fail to recognise the ailment and only treat symptoms instead.

Further Research

The present study is by no means broad and exhaustive enough to warrant broad-based application. However, in its own way, it stimulates dialogue at the micro level. Such dialogue has the potential to ignite more ambitious studies, and one has in mind investigations involving three or more ODL institutions both budding and established ones. Such studies would obviously call for better funding as they will involve travelling to source if only to secure authentic data in situ. It is also noteworthy that the benchmarks proposed in the model by McKinnon, Walker, and Davis, 2000) are not cast in stone and definitive. Further studies, will, therefore, be expected to take into account newer insights about benchmarking.

Conclusion

By applying criteria to measure presence of evidence or absence of certain benchmarks in a case study, it was established that currently, the institution in question has 24% benchmarks evident. This is no mean achievement given that attainment of quality is not a destination, but a journey. Such a journey takes effort, recognition of gaps, commitment and entrepreneurship on the part of drivers of quality. Entrepreneurship is particularly applicable to ODL practice, which is characteristically industrial in its nature and structuring. In a large measure it depends on planning, formalisation of procedures, standardization of products, and centralized decision-making before decentralisation. All this calls for entrepreneurship and more entrepreneurship. The former refers to entrepreneurship within the existing ODL business operations, while entrepreneurship is the catalyst that disrupts the stationary circular flow of a university’s systems, and thereby initiates and sustains the process of quality development.

McKinnon, Walker, and Davis, who are giants in their own right with regard to benchmarking, have inspired the present discussion. By riding on their benchmarking model, institutions are able to see beyond their present practice regarding quality provision of education via open and distance learning mode.

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Assessing the Quality of Higher Distance Education Provision at the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning

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Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning

Abstract
This paper reports on the results of an empirical study which investigated the quality of services and products offered to Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) learners, a Sub Saharan African medium size open and distance education institution. The main purposes of the study were to determine whether factors that are considered important to effective delivery of distance education were in place in the focal institution. The study also determined the quality of distance education provision using perceptions of staff and students in six main quality areas, including course development, teaching/learning, learner support, institutional support, staff support, and assessment and evaluation, with a view to creating awareness and promoting commitment to quality at all levels of the institution.

Two 5-point Likert scale questionnaires for staff and learners were used to collect data on all six quality dimensions. Quantitative data analysis undertaken using SPSS 21 focussed on descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. While the results showed that distance education provision in BOCODOL incorporated all six factors considered important for effective distance learning, the levels of development of the factors varied widely. In turn, this variation was also reflected in the perceived levels of quality across the six quality dimensions. In addition, the role of technology in improving quality was evident in the three areas of learner support, teaching/learning and institutional support, which were perceived by respondents to be of least quality. Finally, the results have the potential for raising awareness among administrators, academics, and learners of the importance of monitoring the quality of distance education and the need to incorporate quality benchmarks into institutional policies, procedures and practices.

Introduction
In many African higher education settings where distance education is widely used, it is either used alone or in combination with conventional contact education. The relative cost-effectiveness, potential to increase access, affordability, flexibility, techno-friendliness and learner friendly approaches to teaching and learning are among many of the reasons that account for the African distance education revolution. However, many Sub Saharan African (SAA) countries introduce tertiary distance education because of its relative cost-effectiveness and unparalleled potential to increase access to education.

According to Murphy et al (2002:11), the main purposes for tertiary distance education in Africa are often to “increase overall enrolments in tertiary education and to reach learners unable to attend on-campus programmes because of living too far from facilities or because of working schedules that do not permit them to attend regular classes.” Cost-effectiveness and access are most attractive to SAA countries, especially among Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states that are currently experiencing unrelenting pressure to stretch education budgets and increase to double digit the regional tertiary gross enrolment ratio that is among the lowest in the world.

For Botswana, which has an average population density of 3 people per km² and a proliferation of remote settlements scattered across the vast inhospitable Kgalagadi Desert in the central and southwest, equitable provision of education using conventional education approaches presents serious logistical challenges. Therefore, distance education is a very
attractive option for Botswana because of its unparalleled capacity to reach under-served groups, especially those in remote isolated settlements and across wide geographic locations and varied jurisdictions.

With the general acceptance of distance education provision in Botswana, a national distance education policy aligned to the regional ODL policy was recently developed to guide and regulate national initiatives in distance education. In addition, a public open university is under establishment to leverage on current tertiary and pre-tertiary distance education initiatives. While the focus of distance education initiatives was initially directed at increasing access, now that distance education has taken root and is growing exponentially, quality has now become a major issue in distance education provision in Botswana.

With mounting pressure for quality improvement coming from several stakeholders, including government, learners, employers, regulatory authorities and the public, ODL institutions are being challenged to undertake continuous improvement in the design, development, delivery of instructional, assessment and harnessing of technology. To this end, the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning, which is currently transforming into the Botswana Open University, has responded by developing and implementing a raft of policies, systems, and processes directed at fostering quality distance education programmes.

Given growing general concern over the quality of what goes on in distance education institutions (Shelton, 2011), particularly within the context of Botswana, this paper reports on the findings of a study that used the perceptions of staff and learners to determine the quality of distance education provision at an ODL institution that is in the process of transforming into an open university. In doing this, the study gave consideration to several distance education quality indicators, including content design, development and delivery, learner and staff support, assessment and management processes. A determination of the quality of these and other indicators, using perceptions of staff and distance learners, would provide stakeholders with the assurance that the establishment of the Botswana Open University would not address access issues only, but would also not compromise the quality and standards of programmes and academic awards.

Meaning of Quality

Quality is one of the most nebulous concepts in educational discourse for which there is no universally agreed definition, since its meaning can easily change for different stakeholders (COL, 1999; Twigg, 2001; Fresen, 2002), among them educational leaders, policymakers, learners and distance education professionals. Others contend that quality is a difficult and complex concept that is dependent on several factors, including content, curriculum, technology and perceptions and characteristics of learners and staff (Meyer, 2002). In spite of perceived conceptual complexities and lack of consensus, growing stakeholder demand for quality means that higher education institutions continue to come under considerable pressure for continuous improvement in the quality of products and services. However, for a country like Botswana, which aspires to enter and compete in the global knowledge economy, stakeholder concern for quality higher education is further driven by unabated desire to produce internationally competitive skilled labour force.

Although there is no universally accepted definition of quality in education, quality is generally associated with attributes of goodness or excellence in educational products or services. As a result, attempts to determine quality in the provision of distance education often seek evidence that is considered indicative of quality. Typically, such evidence has both quantitative and qualitative attributes (Cavanaugh, 1999). Examples of quantitative indicators include progression rates, completion rates and learner evaluations of the learning experience, while ratings of learning materials, teaching-learning interactions, learning process, pace, and content represent qualitative indicators.
Indicators of Quality in Open and Distance Education

Traditional quality measures, those mainly informed by input and process measures and in which the lecturer plays a key role in assuring quality, are not appropriate for the more learning outcomes-focussed distance education. Unfortunately, regulatory bodies in countries that lack quality regulatory frameworks that are specific to distance education often use the same quality measures for conventional higher education to assess the quality of distance education. For example, a report of surveys of twenty-four Southwest Pacific and South East Asia region countries revealed that, although distance education was introduced in 1970s and individual institutions have quality assurance practices and procedures in place, only two countries had legislation specific to distance education (James et al, 2011). Where there is no legislation for distance education, regulatory bodies often find themselves using conventional higher education quality measures to measure the quality of distance education. This also holds true for the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region, where most member countries do not have distance education legislation, although the region has the longest history of distance education in the world.

The lack of national legislation to guide the development and provision of distance education programmes is a setback to many distance education institutions (Igwe, 2009), since such legislation also provides for distance education governance, quality assurance frameworks, and funding structures. Distance education quality assurance frameworks are important in light of growing evidence of concern over the quality of distance education, as reflected in the interest and growing discourse in literature on the quality of distance education. In the absence of distance education quality standards, regulatory bodies use conventional higher education quality standards to assess distance education, contrary to Meyer’s (2002) caution against wholesale acceptance and use of conventional education quality standards and guidelines for distance education. The use of these traditional education quality standards often results in distance education being held to higher quality standards than conventional education.

However, a literature search shows that there are several distance education-specific approaches that could be used to evaluate the quality of distance education. Studies undertaken to investigate and determine the quality of distance education have yielded better, but not convergent, understanding of indicators that are essential to ensure quality in the provision of distance education. Of interest to this study are those by Benson (2003), Butcher and Wilson-Strydom (2012), Chaney et al, (2009), Husson and Waterman (2002), Lee and Dziuban (2002), Leh and Jobin (2002), Marks et al. (2005), Sloan Consortium (2004), Trentin (2000), Yeung (2001).

For example, Butcher and Wilson-Strydom (2012) identified 10 main quality issues that could be used as a framework for assessing and determining the quality of distance learning experience. These include institutional support (vision, planning, & infrastructure), course development, teaching and learning (instruction), course structure, learner support, faculty support, technology, evaluation, learner assessment and examination security. On the other hand, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000) suggests a similar framework for evaluating distance education, comprising 7 key quality dimensions of course development, teaching and learning, course structure, institutional support, learner support, faculty support, and evaluation and assessment. This framework is also similar to the common quality indicators catalogued from literature search by Chaney, Eddy, Droman, Glessner, Green, and Lara-Alecio (2009), which includes teaching-learning effectiveness, learner support, faculty support, technology, course development, organizational impact and evaluation and assessment.

A relatively condensed distance education quality evaluation framework proposed by Husson and Waterman (2002) comprises 5 key quality measures of course development,
the instructor, assessment, support services and technology. Cory (2008) also proposed a similar but shorter framework consisting of course design, content, the instructor and support systems, while Lee and Dziuban (2002) proposed a 5-dimension framework comprising administrative leadership and support, on-going programme concerns, web course development, learner concerns and faculty support.

Finally, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (2002) came up with the following 7 themes which they considered essential for evaluating the quality of distance education: institutional mission, institutional organisational structure, institutional resources, curriculum and instruction, learner support, faculty support and learner learning outcomes.

In spite of lack of consensus on quality measures for distance education, analysis of the literature shows many commonalities among various quality frameworks. Following analysis of the literature, this study settled for a six-measure framework that was adjudged appropriate to satisfy this investigation into the quality of distance education provision at BOCODOL, given the given its size, experience, resource availability and planning priorities. The six quality measures comprise course development, teaching and learning effectiveness, institutional support, learner support, staff support and evaluation and assessment.

There are several minimum standards that define and describe each quality measure. For example, since course development often involves teams of varied skills, ranging from instructional designers, content experts, curriculum specialists, graphic designers, to editors, producing quality distance learning materials requires that course development guidelines are put in place to guide the work of team members. Another important quality standard is that learning materials must engage learners, promote critical thinking, be learner-centred and undergo regular reviews to ensure their alignment with programme standards.

Standards for teaching and learning effectiveness require that distance learners receive comprehensive information, including pre- and post-registration packs containing admission, recognition of prior learning requirements, course scheduling, course requirements, regulations, policies, tutorial attendance and guidelines on form, structure, and conduct of tutorials. As much as good distance learning materials foster active learning, tutorials must promote independent learning (Moldovan, 2006), tutor-learner and learner-learner interactions and provide timely and constructive feedback. Meanwhile, Institutional support standards include a documented and reliable technology plan (Shelton, 2011) and technical support that ensures electronic security measures (e.g. password protection, encryption, off-site back-up systems) is operational to safeguard quality standards and integrity and validity of information.

Since the provision of robust and comprehensive learner support services in open and distance learning is central to learner success and retention (Thorpe, 2002), the quality of these services is also central to the quality of learner learning experience. Learner support standards include information on pre- and post-registration activities, admission requirements, tuition and fees, course and supplementary materials, assessment requirements and other support services. Other critical quality standards for learner support services include learner provision of technical support on how to access electronic databases, interlibrary loans and archives. Equally important to learners is the technical training on how to access and manage various delivery technologies and learner access to a toll free number for seeking academic and administrative support and through which learners have access to a customer complaints handling system.

Staff support standards include staff qualifications, experience and commitment as well as the resources that are made available to staff. Such resources may include technical training in course development, use of various technologies employed in the delivery of distance
education, and staff induction into distance learning environment. Evaluation and assessment standards are concerned with the evaluation of distance learning courses and assessment of learners’ products. The evaluation of courses requires that standard evaluation instruments are developed and used by learners to provide regular feedback on content and tutor performance. On the other hand, the valuation of learner outcomes includes assessment of learner performance in coursework, examinations, research work and other products.

The Study

In order to cover respondents drawn from five regional centres widely distributed across a large and sparsely populated country with an average population density of 3 people per km², a quantitative descriptive survey approach was adjudged the most appropriate research design for this study. The study was designed to offer insights into the quality of distance education provision using perceptions of distance learners and staff concerning five quality measures of course development, teaching and learning effectiveness, institutional support, learner support and evaluation and assessment.

The target population for this study comprised 60 fulltime staff that is intimately associated with delivery of distance education programmes. These included academics and staff from core academic support departments and centres, such as instructional technology, research and innovation, quality assurance and counselling. Given the small size of the target population, the questionnaire was administered to all 76 fulltime academic and core academic support staff from the main campus and five regional centres. Simple random sampling was used to select a sample of 250 learners from a target population of 340 distance learners from the School of Business and Management Sciences who had a minimum of two semesters of distance learning exposure. The learners were drawn from all five regional centres.

Data collected from staff and learners covered five quality indicators, while the sixth quality indicator (staff support) was excluded, since it was adjudged that learners would not be competent to assess the level of support provided to staff. Data from both staff and learners were collected using a 36-item Likert scale questionnaire. Both staff and learner questionnaires were made up of 5 sections containing common items on ‘course development’ (6), ‘teaching/learning’ (6), ‘institutional support’ (7), ‘learner support’ (7) and ‘assessment and evaluation’ (10). All questionnaire items were calibrated as follows; 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=undecided, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree, so that a quality indicator with a high mean score indicated relatively high perceived quality and vice versa.

Electronic copies of the questionnaires were sent to all five regional centres, where those for learners were downloaded, printed and hand-delivered to respondents during face-to-face tutorial sessions, while staff received theirs via email for downloading. Out of the 76 respondents who received the staff questionnaire, 43 usable questionnaires were returned, while 154 usable questionnaires were returned from 340 learners, representing rates of return of 57% and 45%, respectively. These percentages are considered adequate for generalizability of results, based on statistical analyses used in this study.

Gender-wise, 15 (35%) of the 43 staff respondents were male and 28 (65%) were female. A majority (74%) of these respondents were learner support staff, while the balance was from academic and course development departments. Similarly, a majority (30 or 70%) were from regional centres and the rest from the national centre. Meanwhile, gender-wise learner distribution shows similar trend to that of staff, where females were in the majority. Of the learners, 97 (63%) were females and 57 (37%) were males. Of these learners, 82 (53%) were pursuing diploma while 72 (47%) learners were doing degree level programmes.
Items on ‘course development’ addressed quality issues, such as use of course design, development and review, clarity of learning outcomes, currency of content and pilot-testing of instructional materials. Quality measures for ‘teaching/learning’ included items on tutor performance and course content evaluation, formation of self-help study groups and learner-tutor interactions, while the indicators for assessing the quality of ‘learner support’ recognized the importance of communication systems in improving learner success on distance education programmes. Some of these quality indicators included provision of self-contained information packages, learner access to course information and technology, and use of library and electronic databases, and access to relevant policies, and guidance and counselling support.

The measures that were used to assess the quality of ‘institutional support’ included training in the use of technology, library and electronic databases, learner access to ICT technical support, sufficiency of library resources, reference materials and interlibrary loan facilities and calendar stability. Finally, among the quality measures used to assess ‘assessment and evaluation’ are clarity of communication to learners on the forms and methods of assessment and expectations thereof, provision of assessment feedback, turnaround time, accuracy and security of assessment records.

The Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21 was used to analyse data. Descriptive and some inferential statistics generated from staff and student questionnaire data were used in this study. Typical statistics used include mean, sum, standard deviation, percentages and correlational analyses.

The results in table 1 below show corresponding rating scores on the perceptions of staff and learners concerning the 36 common quality measures drawn from the five quality indicators. The mean scores for both staff and learners for the 36 quality measures are also rank-ordered from highest to lowest. According to table 1, the overall mean score for learners was 2.88, while the overall mean score for staff was 3.46. Although staff perceptions of the quality of distance education provision was higher than that for learners, a T-test analysis failed to produce statistically significant differences in the perceptions of the two groups at the 0.05 level.

Table 1 also shows that the highest rated quality indicator item by staff was from ‘assessment and evaluation’: ‘All assignments due dates are given to learners at start of the course’ (\(\bar{x} = 5.54, sd = 1.067\)), while the least rated quality indicator item was from ‘learner support’: ‘Learners have access to library, interlibrary loan facilities and electronic databases’ (\(\bar{x} = 2.04, sd = 0.824\)). Learner rating scores, on the other hand, show that the highest rated quality indicator item was from ‘course development’: ‘Courses are designed to engage learners in high order thinking skills’ (\(\bar{x} = 3.70, sd = 1.269\)), while ‘institutional support’ measure: ‘Learners receive hands-on training in use of library and library electronic databases’ received the least rating score (\(\bar{x} = 0.97, sd = 1.572\)).

Meanwhile, an analysis of the comparison of staff and learner rating scores (table 1) also shows that of the ten top quality measures rated by staff, 5 were from the ‘assessment and evaluation’ (AE), four from ‘teaching/learning’ (TL) and one from ‘course development’ (CD), while 4 of the learners’ ten top rated quality measures were from ‘teaching/learning’ (TL), another 4 from ‘assessment and evaluation’ (AE) and 2 from ‘course development’ (CD). In contrast to the top ten rated quality measures, staff ratings for the bottom rated quality measures show that 6 were from ‘institutional support’ (IS), while two each were from ‘learner support’ and ‘course development’. Corresponding learner ratings for the bottom rated quality measures show that 5 were from IS, 3 from LS and 2 from CD. However, table 1 further shows that measures from both learner and institutional support quality indicators were not rated among the top ten quality measures, as were items from teaching/learning and assessment and evaluation that were not rated among the ten bottom quality measures.
The combined top ten rating scores of staff and learners show that 17 of the 20 quality measures were from ‘assessment and evaluation’ (9) and ‘teaching/learning’ (8). In addition, no quality measures from these two quality indicators were among the ten bottom-rated quality measures. However, this does not mean that these two quality indicators are necessarily more important in contributing to the provision of quality distance education programmes. In fact, it could be argued that items from 'learner support' and 'institutional support' quality indicators, which dominated the ten least rated quality measures, have relatively greater contribution to the overall quality of distance education. ‘Institutional support’ quality indicator, which includes documented technology plan, reliability of technology delivery system, and centralized distance learning system (IHEP, 2000), is also critical to quality provision because of the centrality of technology in the provision of distance education.

### Table 1: Rank-ordered mean rating scores for learners (N=154) and staff (N=43) on 36 common quality indicator items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Measures</th>
<th>Quality Indicator</th>
<th>Learner Perceptions</th>
<th>Staff Perceptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Courses are designed to engage learners in high order thinking skills</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>3.69 1</td>
<td>3.85 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutors encourage regular interaction</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>3.63 2</td>
<td>3.88 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners always receive constructive feedback on all assignments</td>
<td>AE</td>
<td>3.81 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners are required to form self-help study groups</td>
<td>TL</td>
<td>3.85 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners receive clear instructions to retain copies of all their assignments</td>
<td>AE</td>
<td>4.15 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutors direct learners to resources and services needed</td>
<td>TL</td>
<td>4.19 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All assignments due dates are given to learners at start of the course</td>
<td>AE</td>
<td>4.53 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended learning outcomes for all courses are clearly stated</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>3.46 8</td>
<td>4.46 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic honesty measures are implemented, during invigilated tests, exams, etc.</td>
<td>AE</td>
<td>4.31 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners are always provided the opportunity to evaluate courses</td>
<td>TL</td>
<td>4.13 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners receive well-defined standards and guidelines for writing assignments</td>
<td>AE</td>
<td>4.19 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignments, tests, examinations, etc. results are always accurate and reliable</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>3.83 12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marked assignments are always returned within stipulated turnaround time</td>
<td>AE</td>
<td>3.54 19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners are always provided the opportunity to evaluate tutor performance</td>
<td>TL</td>
<td>4.16 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners are provided with self-contained information packs during registration</td>
<td>LS</td>
<td>3.88 9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calendar dates for major activities are stable and rarely changed</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>2.85 29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester starting and closing dates in the calendar rarely change</td>
<td>LS</td>
<td>3.27 24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners are given relevant policies e.g. academic integrity, assessment, etc.</td>
<td>LS</td>
<td>3.69 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The technology used facilitates the attainment of learning objectives</td>
<td>TL</td>
<td>3.46 20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners have access to all available course information</td>
<td>LS</td>
<td>3.65 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All exam timetables are availed to learners at least a month in advance</td>
<td>AE</td>
<td>4.12 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End-of-semester exams results are released within period specified in the calendar</td>
<td>AE</td>
<td>3.15 26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners are given information on complaints handling procedures</td>
<td>LS</td>
<td>3.42 22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courses are evaluated using standard course evaluation instruments</td>
<td>AE</td>
<td>3.65 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners have opportunity to evaluate course materials at the end of semester</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>3.65 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners use standard evaluation forms to evaluate course materials</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>3.23 25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance and counselling is readily available to learners</td>
<td>LS</td>
<td>3.35 23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners have ready access to technology needed for their courses of study</td>
<td>LS</td>
<td>3.00 28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommended reading materials are readily available in institutional libraries</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>2.35 35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular reviews of course content makes it current</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>3.46 34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners have access to ICT technical support and assistance</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>3.08 27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional materials are piloted before they are used by learners</td>
<td>CD</td>
<td>2.73 30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners have access to interlibrary loan facilities</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>2.85 31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners have access to electronic databases</td>
<td>LS</td>
<td>2.04 36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners are provided with sufficient library services</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>2.50 32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners receive hands-on training in use of library and library electronic databases</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>2.50 32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key:** AE = Assessment & Evaluation; CD = Course Development; TL = Teaching/Learning; IS = Institutional Support; LS = Learner Support
learning. The fact that in this study both ‘learner support’ and ‘institutional support’ measures were not among the ten top rated quality measures, but predominated the least rated quality items, may have negative implications for the overall quality of distance education provision.

Table 1 also shows that, on the rating scales of both staff and learners, library and technology related quality measures received the lowest quality rating scores in spite of the importance of libraries and technology in promoting the quality of distance learning. For example, the learners’ lowest rating score was for ‘learners receive hands-on training in the use of library and library electronic databases’ ($\bar{x} = 0.97$), while ‘learners have access to library, interlibrary loan facilities and library electronic databases’ was the lowest score ($\bar{x} = 2.04$) for staff. The other quality measures rated lowly were to do with insufficiency of library facilities, lack of learner access to interlibrary loan facilities and library electronic databases. On the other hand, both learners and staff were in agreement that learners had no access to technology required on their programmes of study and did not have access to ICT technical support and assistance. Similarly, the unavailability of recommended reading materials in institutional libraries is a major handicap in attempts to improve the quality of distance learning in an institution where print materials remain a primary and dominant factor in promoting the quality of distance learning.

These findings undermine the quality of provision of distance learning, since the application of modern ICTs, including electronic technologies and databases and access to Internet-based ‘virtual library’, promote the quality of distance education provision (Saint, 2000). Similarly, IHEP (2000) also reported that the provision of hands-on training and information to learners on how to access learning materials through electronic databases, interlibrary loans and other library resources are important benchmarks for quality distance learning.

A Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient computed to determine whether the ratings of staff and learners related in a monotonic function produced a strong positive Rho value of 0.815, indicating general agreement between the perceptions of staff and learners. This further shows that, in general, quality measures that received high rating scores from staff tended to receive correspondingly high rating scores from learners and vice versa. However, although there is strong positive correlation in the ratings of staff and learners, as indicated by the value and direction of the Spearman rank correlation coefficient, a closer examination of the rating scores of the two groups, interestingly, shows that staff was consistently more generous in their ratings of almost all quality indicator items than learners.

Meanwhile, Table 2 shows that the highest rated quality indicator by staff was ‘assessment and evaluation’ ($\bar{x} = 3.93$), while learners rated it second. On the other hand, ‘teaching/learning’ was rated highest by learners ($\bar{x} = 3.39$), but came out second according to staff ratings. This shows staff perceived the provision of ‘assessment and evaluation’ services was of the highest quality than the other four quality indicators, while learners’ perceptions were that the quality of services associated with ‘teaching/learning’ was the highest. Similar differences in staff and learners’ perceptions concerning distance education quality indicators was also reflected in ‘course development’ and ‘learner support’, where the former, which was ranked third by learners, was ranked fourth by staff and vice versa. Differences were also observed in the values of the scores. Learners consistently scored lower than staff on all five quality indicators.

Although the results of this study established a monotonic function between ordered rating scores of staff and learners, the observed differences in the rankings of the two groups raise the question of whose perceptions should be relied upon in determining the quality of distance education provision. Differences were observed in both the ranking of quality indicators and the size of mean rating scores assigned to these quality indicators. It might be prudent to consider the learners’ perspective, since it is their learning experience and success that is affected most by their perceptions of quality.
However, while the two groups of respondents might have disagreed on the quality indicator

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Assessment of 5 distance education quality indicators and 36 quality indicator items by staff (N=43) and learners (N=154)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Course Development</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional materials are piloted before they are used by learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended learning outcomes for all courses are clearly stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courses are designed to engage learners in higher thinking skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners use standard evaluation forms to evaluate course materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular reviews of course content makes it current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners have opportunity to evaluate course materials at the end of semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching/Learning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutors encourage regular interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutors always direct learners to resources and services needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners are required to form self-help study groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The technology used facilitates the attainment of learning objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners evaluate the course and contribute to its improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners are always provided the opportunity to evaluate tutor performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional Support</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners are provided with sufficient library services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners have access to ICT technical support and assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners receive hands-on training in use of library and library electronic databases</td>
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<td>Recommended reading materials are readily available in institutional libraries</td>
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<td>Learners have access to all available course information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners have ready access to technology needed for their courses of study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners have access to library, interlibrary loan facilities and electronic databases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners are given information on complaints handling procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners are given relevant policies e.g. academic integrity, assessment, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance and counselling is readily available to learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment &amp; Evaluation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All assignments due dates are given to learners at the start of course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners receive clear instructions to retain copies of all their assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All exam dates and timetables are availed to learners at least a month in advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courses are evaluated using standard course evaluation instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic honesty measures are implemented during invigilated tests, exams, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners receive well-defined standards and guidelines for writing assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners always receive constructive feedback on all assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignments, tests, examinations, etc. results are always accurate and reliable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marked assignments are always returned within stipulated turnaround time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End-of-semester exams results are released within the period specified in the calendar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall quality index</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Combined quality index</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
with the best quality in the provision of distance education across the institution, there was agreement in perceptions of staff and learners on the quality indicator with the least quality. Both staff and learners rated ‘institutional support’ as of the least quality compared to the other five quality indicators.

Meanwhile, the results of this study show that all seven quality measures for ‘learner support’ and ‘institutional support’ did not feature among the ten top rated quality measures. ‘Institutional support’ had the least mean rating scores of 2.74 and 2.22 for staff and learners, respectively. In addition, when the rating scores of learners and staff on the five quality indicators are combined and rank-ordered, ‘learner support’ and ‘institutional support’ had the least mean scores of 2.98 and 2.48, respectively. These are the only quality indicators with mean scores below 3.00.

![Fig 1: Comparative mean rating scores of staff and learners of 5 quality indicators](image)

Looking at both institutional and learner support, one finds that the separation of the learner and tutor, in time and place, has important implications for the quality of distance teaching and learning experience, yet staff and learners found these two quality indicators the weakest in terms of quality provision. This research has also shown that the use of technology in promoting meaningful learning cuts across these two quality indicators. According to Bates (2000), the effective use of technology affects the quality of instructional design, content, delivery and other learner support provisions. In addition, the quality of several items under institutional and learner support quality indicators, including access to adequate library resources and instructional technology and training in technology, library, and electronic database use, etc. significantly affect the quality of the distance learning experience.

Meanwhile, quality indices were computed for each quality indicator, as indicated in table 2 above. Quality indices were obtained by dividing the mean scores for each quality indicator with the maximum possible score of 5, which represents the highest possible quality attainment for any quality indicator. Therefore, quality indices were obtained by dividing the arithmetic mean score computed for each quality indicator by 5. Given a possible range for quality indices of 0.00 to 1.00, where 1.00 represents the highest possible quality attainment and 0.00 indicating absence of quality, the indices computed were interpreted on the basis of this range.

As expected, the overall distance education quality index for learners (0.58) was less than that for staff (0.68), indicating differences in quality perspectives between staff and learners.
Both staff and learners were responding to the same questionnaire items. On the other hand, a combined quality index obtained from averaging the scores of staff and learners was 0.63. This indicates that the institution’s overall perceived quality in the provision of distance education products and services was adjudged by the sample to be at the level of 63%.

A quality indicator by quality indicator analysis shows that only two of the six quality indicators had quality indices above the combined overall quality index of 0.68, while the other three had quality indices below the combined overall distance education provision quality index. ‘Institutional support’ had the lowest quality index (0.50), followed by ‘learner support’ (0.60) and then ‘course development’ (0.62), while those with quality indices above the combine overall index were ‘evaluation and assessment’ (0.74) and ‘teaching/learning’ (0.72).

That ‘institutional support’ had the lowest quality index is not surprising since there is currently minimal use of technology in the institution which, until recently, concentrated in open schooling where learners had very limited or no access to modern ICTs. However, the introduction of tertiary programmes in the last seven years has witnessed gradual use of technology, including e-learning through the Moodle platform and other internet-based communication tools. The results of this study also suggest that a lot more needs to be done to improve the quality of provision of ‘institutional support’ services, especially since access to and training in library use, e-learning, and on-going technical support and assistance foster learner and staff satisfaction (Sloan Consortium, 2009) and improve technology uptake.

However, what might be worrisome and surprising for the institution is the emergence of ‘learner support’ as the second least rated quality indicator, given that without a robust learner support system, learners would find it difficult to succeed on their programmes. Unless the institution provides sound learner support services, which promote and create meaningful learning experiences, distance learning may be unproductive for learners (Kehrwald, 2007). An earlier study carried out by Otukile (2011) in the same institution concluded that there was need for implementation and rollout of a new learner support system. However, what might be required is a review of the current system to determine and close perceived gaps and address challenges of studying at a distance.

Conclusion

This study has evidentially shown that ‘learner support’ and ‘institutional support’ are the two main quality indicator areas of immediate concern for the institution in its attempt to improve the quality of distance education provision. While the history of the institution and the recent introduction of technology in the provision of distance learning may partly explain its relative underdevelopment of technology and why both staff and learners have expressed concern with the quality of institutional support, the same could not be said of ‘learner support’. The institution prides itself of a long history of very successful learner support infrastructure and system that was synonymous with the provision of quality support to learners. However, the low rating scores on the quality of learner support services suggests the need to review the system to determine its relevance, efficacy and robustness. Since tertiary learners were part of the sample for this study, it could be that the institution took learner support services for granted, because of past successes. The findings of this study might suggest the need a review of the learner support system to determine its appropriateness for tertiary programmes. Previous success might have also cause the focus to shift to other quality indicators, such as assessment and evaluation, at the expense of learner support services.

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Institute for Higher Education Policy. (2000). Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education. Washington, DC: IHEP


Lecturers’ Perceptions on the Academic Performance of Conventional and Distance Education Students at UNISWA: A Comparative Study

C. W. S. Sukati, C. M. Magagula, E. Chandraiah & M. M. Sithole, University of Swaziland

Abstract
This study investigates the perceptions of lecturers within the Faculty of Humanities (FOH) at the University of Swaziland concerning the educational performance of students within the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) as compared with their counterparts on the same programme who were learning using conventional face-to-face (CF2F) mode. The humanities programme was chosen because the IDE and CF2F students studying this programme were doing the same courses, sat the same examinations, were taught by the same lecturers, and would graduate with the same qualifications. A questionnaire was administered to all the 24 lecturers in the FOH. Twenty two lecturers returned the completed questionnaire. Findings of the study were that the perceptions of the lecturers were that the IDE students’ performance was below that of CF2F students. Reasons given for poorer performance were that IDE students (i) did not get enough face-to-face sessions; (ii) did not read their materials; and (iii) were too young to handle independent study as required in distance learning. Recommendations that were advanced by the lecturers to improve IDE at UNISWA were that IDE should have its own teaching staff, reduce IDE class sizes and more workshops should be held for writers and reviewers of distance learning materials in order to improve the course materials.

Introduction

Many Universities in developing countries are faced with the dilemma of having a large number of students seeking to enrol for programmes and courses at the universities than the number of available places. The demand for places therefore far exceeds the supply of the places at universities. Most unfortunately, this is happening at a time when the Governments are facing financial challenges and are gradually reducing their budgetary allocations to the universities. This has prompted the universities and Ministries of Education to look at other viable options of offering mass university education at lower costs. Distance education (DE) has been identified as one of the alternatives of dealing with this dilemma since distance education requires less physical facilities and is more industrialized in that it can cover many students (Moon, 2005). Many governments are now convinced that open and distance learning (ODL) is the only viable option in achieving the objective of making education available to all (Tawo, Arikpo, Ojuah, & Chukurah, 2010). In support of this notion, and further emphasizing the strengths of DE, Daniel (2007) contends that DE allows education to break the “iron triangle” in that it increases access, improves quality and cuts costs. Gourley (2006), in supporting the important role of ODL, pointed out that:

We have come to a point where we have to accept there are other models – and if the conventional university sector is unwilling to accept this – we just have to look to the private sector (and the Open University movement around the world) which is moving ahead in leaps and bounds to demonstrate what is possible. (p. 5)

UNESCO (2002) also confirms this view when it asserts that many countries are looking at open and distance learning as a major strategy for expanding access, raising quality and ensuring cost effectiveness. In line with this view, the University of Swaziland (UNISWA) created the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) in 1994, in order to reach a wider population. IDE was charged with offering university level full-time programmes and courses using DE delivery methods. It was to use the same facilities and the same teaching staff members (on a part-time basis) that are already hired full-time and used on conventional
face-to-face (CF2F) programmes of UNISWA. The IDE delivery mode is that students are given a few face-to-face contact hours as support in each course, and the bulk of the teaching and learning is through specially prepared course modules, and prescribed texts for each course that they study.

As this concept of running a distance education programme alongside one run on fulltime basis (dual mode) is new in Swaziland, questions have been raised concerning the calibre and quality of education given to students taught by the two methods and, in particular, the quality of output from the DE programme. This comparative study targeted students who were doing the BA Humanities degree at UNISWA because IDE (DE mode) students and their fulltime counterparts in the Faculty of Humanities were taking exactly the same subjects and courses, sat the same final examinations, were subject to the same assessment techniques and calculation of final grades and were taught by the same lecturers. The perceptions of staff members who taught both groups of students would therefore be appropriate in providing information on the academic performance of the students in both the IDE and the Faculty of Humanities. In an attempt to measure the academic performance of the students in CF2F and in DE, this study collected and analysed the information on perceptions (defined here as the attitudes, judgement and feelings of the lecturers regarding the students) (cf. Tekinarsian, 2009) of the teaching staff members in the Faculty of Humanities at UNISWA, who taught both groups of students.

Objectives of the Study

This study, conducted to investigate the Faculty of Humanities academic staff members’ perceptions, was guided by the following objectives;

- To evaluate the quality of the course modules produced by staff members for DE learners.
- To compare the academic performance of students taught on CF2F and those taught by DE mode in their assignments, tests and in the final examinations.
- To determine reasons why students in DE perform better or worse than fulltime students in academic work, and find out what could be done to improve DE teaching and learning at UNISWA.

Therefore, the overall goal of this study was the improvement of distance teaching and learning at UNISWA. This was done by soliciting the teaching staff members’ perceptions with regard the quality of course modules used, the academic performance of DE students, vis-à-vis that of students taught by CF2F mode, and the reasons why DE students performed better or worse than those in the CF2F programme. The distance education mode used in IDE is such that students are given self-instructional course modules and further receive some face-to-face support in the form of lectures, tutorials and counselling. This study is, therefore, important in that it provides information on the perceptions of lecturers on (1) the quality of course modules that were used in DE teaching and learning, (2) on the academic performance of DE students compared to CF2F students, and (3) on the adequacy of the DE system and (4) what needs to be enhanced and improved. Such a study has never been conducted for UNISWA. In addition, a study such as this one on teacher perceptions is important because other studies on this subject (see Seyfried, 1998) have reported that one of the three direct effects on grade point average (GPA) was teacher perceptions, and that teacher perceptions were a stronger predictor of GPA than academic ability. This is in line with what Asikhia (2010) has eloquently stated, that “The enormity and consequence of poor academic achievement call for serious concern. The more reason why scholars have not ceased to turn their research beam light on the subject matter.” (p. 240)

Although the question of the effects of teacher academic expectations on student
achievement is rather controversial, implications of such perceptions (referring to students’ social, emotional and/or academic characteristics) for student assessment can hardly be questioned (Bonvin & Genoud, 2006).

**Review of Literature**

Students applying for admission into the BA Humanities degree at the University of Swaziland are free to choose whether they want to study through CF2F or DE mode through IDE. Empirical studies have been done, using students’ grades, to compare the academic performance of the UNISWA humanities students studying through these two modes. The first study was done by Magagula and Ngwenya (2004) and the results of this study were that DE students performed better than the students who were studying through CF2F. The next study done by Sukati, Magagula, Chandraiah, Simelane and Sithole (2010), however, arrived at a contrary conclusion that there was no significant difference in the achievement of students enrolled in the DE and CF2F modes. Hence, the research studies that have been done in Swaziland to compare the performance of DE and CF2F learners on the BA Humanities degree have not agreed on which mode is better.

The above findings are consistent with several research studies conducted in other parts of the world on this subject. While many studies have found no significant differences in the academic performance of students taught by DE and CF2F methods (Bernard, Abrami, Lou, Borokhovski, Wade, Wozney, Wallet, Fiset, & Huang, 2004; Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, & Tan, 2005), there are other studies that have found that there are significant differences in the academic performance of these two groups of students. One set of studies has reported that DE students performed better than CF2F counterparts (Hughes, McLeod, Brown, Maeda, & Choi, 2007; Shachar & Neumann, 2003). On the other hand, another set of studies, while reporting significant differences in the two groups, found that CF2F students performed better than DE students (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004; Deka & McMurry, 2006). The question of which mode produces better academic performance is, therefore, still a highly contentious one. As Bernard et al. (2004) noted in their study, the answer to this question cannot be found in a single study. Similarly, the answer cannot also be found only from analysing the examination scores of DE and CF2F students as done in studies by Magagula and Ngwenya (2004) and Sukati et al. (2010). The perceptions of the lecturers who teach both groups of students are also an important contributor to the answer to this question.

These empirical findings notwithstanding, lecturers who teach both groups of students form their own opinions and perceptions on the students that they teach regarding their academic performance and the teaching materials used. These perceptions are also an important contributor to the question of which group of students performs better. These lecturers, as the people on the ground, also have perceptions on what should be done to further improve the performance of DE students. Therefore, a study of perceptions of lecturers is necessary as these could significantly influence their judgements of students’ academic abilities and achievement. In turn, these perceptions affect lecturers’ expectations and assessment of students (Seyfried, 1998). Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research studies, particularly in Swaziland, that focus on the perceptions of lecturers on students’ academic achievement. This study is an attempt to contribute to this gap, and to provide research findings to justify practice and inform decisions about changes in policy and/or practice. Basically, the study collected information from the UNISWA lecturers in the Faculty of Humanities who taught both DE and the CF2F students. The study sought to determine the lecturers’ perceptions concerning students considered to perform better between DE and CF2F students.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

The study was a survey and its design was descriptive and used both qualitative and
quantitative techniques. The target population for this study was all the 24 lecturers in the Faculty of Humanities who taught both DE and CF2F in the 2005 academic year. As the target population was small and could be reached, all 24 lecturers were included in the study. Therefore, this was a census study.

**Instrument and Data Collection**

A questionnaire, designed by the researchers, was used to collect information from all the lecturers who taught the two groups of BA Humanities students. The primary purpose of the questionnaire was to find out lecturers’ perceptions of the academic performance of the two groups. The researchers pre-tested the questionnaire first on the staff members in the Faculty of Commerce, who also taught courses in both DE and in the conventional Faculty of Commerce full-time programme. Based on the findings of the pre-test and feedback received from the Faculty of Commerce lecturers, the questionnaire was revised and modified accordingly before it was used to collect data from the staff members in the FOH. This aspect of pilot testing was considered necessary, as many researchers have stressed the importance of pilot testing in determining that the subjects are capable of completing the survey and that they can understand the questions (Creswell, 2012).

The questionnaire contained 22 items that covered (i) respondents’ demographic variables, (ii) lecturers’ perceptions on course modules used on the DE mode, (iii) lecturers’ perceptions on academic performance of DE versus CF2F students on assignments, tests and examinations and, finally, (iv) lecturers’ perceptions regarding necessary interventions to help improve the academic performance of IDE students. Most of the questions on the questionnaire were Likert-type scale where the lecturers had to tick appropriate responses. Lecturers’ participation in this study was voluntary. Of a total of 24 lecturers, only 22 submitted responses analysed in this paper.

**Data Analysis**

Questionnaire data was analysed using the descriptive statistics obtained from the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS version 10). Data analysis was guided by the research questions. The matrix tables were drawn to summarize the information and frequency tabulation and percentages were computed to provide answers to the research questions.

**Results and Findings**

There were 22 (92%) staff members in the Faculty of Humanities who completed and returned usable questionnaires. Of these, 12 (55%) were males and ten (45%) were females and all of them taught one or more courses through DE and CF2F. Two (8%) of the lecturers did not return their completed questionnaires. Fifteen (68%) of the staff members had also prepared a DE course module and seven (32%) had not. Out of the 22 lecturers, only one had taught for less than three years in IDE, and hence most of the respondents were familiar with DE and CF2F modes used and students' academic performance on both modes.

The first set of questions asked lecturers how they found the quality of the course modules that were used by DE students and to give reasons for their answers. The lecturers’ responses were as follows:

Of the 22 respondents, 10 (42%) believed that the course modules were well written because (i) the authors had excellent background and subject matter expertise; (ii) the modules provided sufficient details; (iii) students had little difficulty in understanding the material; and (iv) the data and information in the modules came from first rate intellectual research and from a number of sources.

Ten (42%) lecturers viewed the quality of the modules as average. The reason for this, according to the lecturers, was that it was not conceivable that one text (i.e. the course
module) could cover details about all concepts in a particular course. Subsequently, the subject coverage of each module was, according to the lecturers, incomplete and/or shallow. Some other reasons given by these lecturers for rating these modules average were that some of the course modules were poorly structured, not properly organized, mostly theoretical, and not interactive enough for self-instructional and self-learning style.

Two lecturers (8%) believed that course modules were below standard because the coverage of the course content was inadequate. In order to do well on each course students needed more materials, which were not included in the course module. Another weakness pointed out by the two lecturers who rated the modules to be below standard was that the course modules did not have enough self-assessment questions and lacked practical activities.

Overall, the lecturers found the modules to have the strengths and weaknesses as presented in Figure 1. The results indicate that the strengths that were most popular among the lecturers were:

- Inclusion of unit objectives, self-assessment questions, exercises, references and activities (40.9%); and
- Use of simple and clear language, brevity and sequential progression, easy to read, and user friendliness (27.3%).

Other strengths cited by the lecturers were:

- They make a comprehensive coverage of the topics, use a diversity of sources and are well researched (9.1%); and
- The modules are relevant to the subject and the Swazi context (4.5%).

The weaknesses that were prominent were that:

- Some modules had not been revised despite changes in the subject and courses (18.2%);
- Syllabus coverage in some modules was shallow and they were incomplete (18.2%);
- Some were weak in self-assessment questions (SAQs) exercises & student activities, and were not user friendly and interactive (13.6%) enough.

Figure 2: Strengths and weaknesses of the modules
The following weaknesses were also cited, that:

- Some contained material beyond the level of the students (9.1%);
- Some were poorly written and have factual errors and some relied on just one text (9.1%);
- They give unequal attention to topics, and thus some topics were inadequately treated (9.1%);
- The layouts of some modules were not done well and did not use diagrams, colours and pictures (4.5%).

The second set of questions tried to find out the perceptions of the FOH staff members of how the DE students performed on written assignments when compared to the CF2F ones and the reasons for their response. Their responses are as shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Comparison of IDE and CF2F students on their performance in assignments and reasons cited

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lecturers’ Perceptions on Performance in Assignments</th>
<th>Number of Lecturers</th>
<th>Reason(s) for Perception(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DE Above CF2F</td>
<td>1 (4.5%)</td>
<td>Above average because students:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(i) Participate actively, are keen to learn and take their work seriously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(ii) Are motivated and have more time for their school work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE Same as CF2F</td>
<td>8 (36.4%)</td>
<td>Same performance because students are taught the same thing by the same Lecturers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE Below CF2F</td>
<td>11 (50.0%)</td>
<td>DE students perform below because they:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(i) do not read their course materials;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(ii) do not get enough face-to-face contact hours;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(iii) do not get proper teaching and attention from the CF2F Lecturers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(iv) write poor answers to questions asked on the assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE Much Below CF2F</td>
<td>2 (9.1%)</td>
<td>DE students much below CF2F because the DE students are too young to handle independent study as required in DE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>22 (100%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results show that one lecturer indicated that DE students’ performance was above that of the CF2F ones. Eight lecturers (36.4%) indicated that the performance of the two groups was the same. Fifty nine per cent (59.1%) of the respondents (N= 13) indicated that it was below to much below that of full time students. The reasons given for DE students performing above or at par with the CF2F ones were that DE students were keen to learn, highly motivated and took their work seriously. The reasons given by those who claimed DE students performed poorly were that they had very few face-to-face contact hours, did not read their course materials, thus the quality of their answers was poor, the students were too young to handle independent study, and did not get proper teaching and attention from their lecturers.

The third set of questions tried to find out the perceptions of the FOH Lecturers on how the IDE students performed when compared with the full time students on tests; and the possible reasons for this. Their responses are as shown in Table 2 below:
Table 2: Comparison of IDE and CF2F students on their performance in tests and reasons cited

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lecturers’ Perceptions on Performance in Tests</th>
<th>Number of Lecturers</th>
<th>Reason(s) for Perception(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DE Above CF2F</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Same performance, because DE students are motivated, keen to learn and take their work seriously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE Same as CF2F</td>
<td>7 (31.8%)</td>
<td>DE students perform below because they: (i) do not read their course materials; (ii) get too few face-to-face contact hours; (iii) do not get proper teaching and attention from the CF2F Lecturers; (iv) are less committed to their studies; (v) are passive and rarely participate in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE Below CF2F</td>
<td>12 (54.6%)</td>
<td>DE students much below CF2F because they do not read their course materials and thus the quality of their answers is poor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE Much Below CF2F</td>
<td>3 (13.6%)</td>
<td>TOTAL 22 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in Table 2 above, no one said DE students performed better than full time students on tests. Seven (31.8%) lecturers said the performance was the same, 68.2% (n = 15) indicated that the DE performance was below to much below that of full time students. The reasons cited by the lecturers on why the DE performance was below to much below that of fulltime students were that the DE students did not read their course materials, are less committed to their studies, are passive and rarely participate in class, did not get enough contact time as there were too few face-to-face sessions, did not get proper teaching and attention from the CF2F lecturers.

However, it would appear that there is a contradiction here between performance in assignments and in tests. In assignments it was indicated that students were motivated, participated actively, were keen to learn and took their work seriously. In tests the opposite has been indicated to be the case, why? This is an area that requires further research. Despite this, however, it looked like the lecturers' perceptions were that DE students' performance was worse in tests than in assignments when compared to that of CF2F students.

The fourth set of questions tried to find out the perceptions of the lecturers of how DE students performed compared to full-time students on the final examination. The lecturers' responses shown in Table 3 below provide interesting perceptions that are explained in greater detail in the ensuing paragraphs.

As indicated in table 3 below, large proportion of the respondents (72.7%) indicated that the DE students performed below to much below fulltime students. On the other hand, two (9.1%) lecturers said DE students performed above fulltime students, while 18.2% (4) lecturers said performance of DE students was the same as that of full time students. The reasons given by lecturers for the poor performance were similar to those given for performance in tests above, as they evolved around DE students not reading their course materials and not having enough face-to-face contact time and attention. Reasons given for better DE performance revolved around students' keenness to learn and the view that they take their work seriously. They are further said to be motivated and to have more time for their studies.
Table 3: Comparison of IDE and CF2F students on their performance in the final examination and reasons cited

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lecturers’ Perceptions on Performance in Final Examination</th>
<th>Number of Lecturers</th>
<th>Reason(s) for Perception(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DE Above CF2F</td>
<td>2 (9.1)</td>
<td>DE students are keen to learn and take their work seriously. They are further motivated and have more time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE Same as CF2F</td>
<td>4 (18.2%)</td>
<td>Same performance because students are taught the same content by the same Lecturers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE Below CF2F</td>
<td>14 (63.6%)</td>
<td>DE students perform below because they: (v) do not read their course materials; (vi) do not get enough face-to-face contact hours; (vii) do not get proper teaching and attention from the CF2F Lecturers; (viii) write poor answers to questions asked on the final examination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE Much Below CF2F</td>
<td>2 (9.1%)</td>
<td>DE students much below CF2F because the DE students are too young to handle independent study as required in DE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>22 (100%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fifth set of questions sought the lecturers’ perceptions on IDE students’ overall performance compared to their full-time counterparts. The results are such that the assessment by the majority of the respondents, 81.8% (N = 18) found IDE to perform worse than the full-time students. The reasons cited for this poor performance were similar to those given for poor performance in tests and the final examination, namely, not reading their course materials, not enough face-to-face contact sessions and attention, and too young to handle independent study. Only one respondent (4.5%) found the IDE students to perform better and 13.6% (N = 3) found the performance of the IDE students to be the same as that of the full-time students. As in the case of assignments, tests and the final examination, the main reason given for performing better was that IDE students participate actively in class, are keen to learn, and take their work seriously.

When asked whether DE students would perform better if the DE programme stood on its own and IDE was transformed into an open university, over one third (36.4%; N = 8) of the lecturers responded that IDE students would perform better than the CF2F students if IDE was an open university. About eighteen per cent (18.2%, N = 4) believed that distance education students would perform the same as they do presently, even IDE was transformed into an open university. The remainder of the lecturers either believed that distance education students would perform worse (13.6%, N = 3) or had other opinions on the subject (31.8%, N = 7).

The final question asked the Faculty of Humanities lecturers concerned what could be done to improve DE at UNISWA. The responses given are as shown in table 4 below.

The three popular recommendations, as seen from the table above were:

1. That the IDE should have its own dedicated teaching staff to reduce stress, burnout, fatigue and pressure on the overloaded FOH full-time staff. This was indicated by 27.3% (N = 6) of the lecturers. Perhaps that is why many of the lecturers 36.4 (N= 8) said the performance would be better if the IDE was an open university.
Table 4: Suggestions for improvement of DE learning at UNISWA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Suggestion</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student-centric</td>
<td>Students to be taught to read their modules &amp; other materials and be up to date.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer-centric</td>
<td>Improve the remuneration for IDE Lecturers.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have IDE dedicated staff to reduce stress, burnout, fatigue and pressure on full-time staff that is overloaded.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All the part-time Lecturers should be taught how to do it right.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module-centric</td>
<td>Sponsor subject/department workshops to review/evaluate &amp; update modules.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make modules more detailed and improve their content, presentation and teaching aids.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>The number of F2F contact hours need to be increased for each module.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classes are too big and should be reduced.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. That the IDE class sizes were too big and needed to be reduced. This was indicated by (22.7%, N=5), of the lecturers.

3. That the IDE should sponsor and promote subject/departmental workshops to review/evaluate and update modules (13.6%, N=3).

Discussion

The findings of this study on the quality of the course modules that are used by the DE students show that the perceptions of the FOH lecturers were that most of the modules were of an acceptable standard, as indicated by 20 (90.9%) of lecturers who reported that they were average to well written, while only two staff members (9.1%) indicated that the course materials were poor to below standard. Other findings of this study on lecturer perceptions varied greatly. Some lecturers’ perceptions were that DE students performed above CF2F while the majority found DE students performing below their CF2F counterparts. In general, more lecturers’ views were that the CF2F students performed better than DE students on assignments, tests and final examinations. However, this finding contradicts the results that were found in the empirical study that was done by Sukati et al. (2010), which reported that the performance of these two groups of students did not significantly differ. It also differs markedly from the results of the study conducted by Magagula and Ngwenya (2004), which found that the DE students performed better than the CF2F students. The question that arises is why the different findings in these studies? This is an area that needs further investigation.

Perhaps, the Bonvin and Genoud (2006) study sheds some light on this question. Their study revealed that research on teacher perceptions usually focused on judgements of student academic achievement (like in this study) and that these perceptions do not only relate to the students’ academic characteristics but that they also have to do with students social and emotional characteristics. Bonvin and Genoud (2006) further claim that these perceptions are not necessarily explicit, but can presumably influence teachers’ judgements of students’ academic abilities and achievements in a significant way. In turn, this affects the expectations and assessment of students. It is suspected that this could be the case in this study, and that the FOH lecturers’ perceptions on academic performance of the DE students may possibly have been moderately “contaminated” by a number of factors and characteristics attributed to the lecturers’ perceptions of DE learners and learning materials and conditions.
The study also supports the findings of other researchers that, although dual-mode institutions (like UNISWA) in theory offer courses of exactly the same standards on- and off-campus, in practice they have to overcome many difficulties to do this (not least the lower level of interest that academics often demonstrate towards the demands of their off-campus students, and the lower status accorded the distance education operation within a traditional institution (Rumble & Latchem, 2004). The quality of education delivered through DE means is, therefore, of great concern to educators, many of whom are trained and used to the CF2F system. Hence, DE has not received universal acceptance in relation to traditional face-to-face mode (Shacker & Neumann, 2003; McDonald, 2002). For these reasons, getting a result as found in this study should not be surprising. Bowin and Genoud (2006) also clearly articulated that although the question of the effects of teacher academic expectations on students’ achievement is rather controversial, the implications of such perceptions for student assessment can hardly be questioned.

The study presented several recommendations from lecturers on what they think could be done to improve distance learning at UNISWA. The main recommendation made by the FOH lecturers was that the IDE should hire its own full-time staff members to teach DE courses, and not rely on the FOH staff members, as this was too much work for them. They intimated that the current set up overloaded the FOH lecturers, resulting in work overload and burnout. This was perhaps the reason why they claimed that the DE students did not get proper teaching and attention. Another major recommendation was that DE class groups were too big and needed to be reduced. This was the case because class sizes in the FOH were smaller and when the lecturers came to teach DE students, they found large class sizes. Therefore, lecturers found it difficult to effectively teach such classes as they were not used to this. Interestingly, improving the remuneration for DE part-time lecturers was only seen by a minority of the respondents as necessary to improve distance learning at the University of Swaziland, as this was chosen by one respondent only. This is rather surprising as many lecturers who teach in IDE keep complaining that the payment that they receive for IDE work is too little. One would have expected this to be a major issue to improving distance teaching and learning at UNISWA.

Conclusions

This study has revealed that the perceptions of the FOH lecturers who teach DE students believe that the CF2F students perform better than the DE students in assignments, tests and final examinations. These findings are not only unique to Swaziland, since Abdullah (2004) echoes this when he noted that despite the many benefits of ODL, the general perceptions about DE in Asia were not entirely positive. However, this is not in accord with the findings of the analysis of marks obtained by these students done by Sukati et al. (2010) and Magagula and Ngwenya (2004). It would appear that the lecturers’ perceptions, as found in this study, are in conflict with these studies. Perhaps these false perceptions are a result of the lecturers’ knowledge that the DE students come in with poorer grades and are taught face-to-face only for a few hours in each course. May be it is not fair to compare a perception study with a study which analysed assessment marks. Perceptions are just perceptions. They can be false and they can be true.

Notwithstanding this fact, lecturers need to change and accept that the DE mode is also a good teaching system. They need to accept the fact that students who may have got poorer results in high school do catch up with those on the CF2F programme, who often come with better high school grades. They need to further accept that on completion of the programme, DE students are at par with their full-time counterparts. To further improve DE at UNISWA, lecturers pointed out the dire need for IDE to have its own teaching staff to reduce stress, burnout, fatigue and pressure on the FOH CF2F staff who are overloaded, and also for DE classes to be reduced.
References


Women’s Voices on Gender Mainstreaming in ODL Institutions: The Case of the Open University of Tanzania

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Abstract
One of the major potential benefits of open and distance learning (ODL) is to widen education opportunities to those who were prevented by historical, socio-cultural, and economic barriers from accessing higher education. Since a majority of the disadvantaged are women, gender equity and balance in education is among the benefits of ODL. However, to date there is still women underrepresentation at ODL institutions in Tanzania. For example, the enrolment of female students is less than 30% at the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). This situation is even more severe among senior staff of OUT, where female professors constitute only 14.3% (OUT, 2012/2013). Therefore, gender mainstreaming in the institution has been identified as a strategic tool for enhancing gender equity in education.

This paper, which is based on a qualitative research study, examines the voices of women staff at ODL institutions on gender mainstreaming. The purpose of the study was to register voices of OUT women staff in order to assess their understanding of gender mainstreaming and analyse their views on policy, plans, procedures, and practices that were either inhibiting or promoting gender mainstreaming at the work place. The findings of the study show that women staff at OUT understand gender mainstreaming to be ‘a process of increasing women participation in all aspects of the organization’. The study also found that most women at OUT did not interrogate gender perspectives and practices in relation to existing policies, guidelines and plans. However, some women voices indicated that certain practices were gender blind, while others indicated that positive gender sensitive initiatives required strengthening. As a way forward suggestions of strategies for enhancing gender balance through gender mainstreaming are proffered.

Introduction
For a long time in history, women’s voices have been silenced by socio-cultural traditions that did not allow women to air their views even in matters concerning their own lives. Socio-cultural dispositions and stereotyping have created and reinforced the relationship between discrimination and silence. Social construction of gender and the relationship between sexes has rendered women’s views not valued within communities, while men’s views, tasks, roles, and functions are highly valued. For example, women in many tribes of Tanzania were traditionally only allowed to listen and not allowed to contribute to men’s talk, especially during community meetings. Women were not allowed to contribute even in matters concerning their own livelihoods, including child bearing, family resources and education.

In contemporary society policies, structures, procedures, and practices play a very important role in shaping conditions of life. Unfortunately, in doing so, society often institutionalizes the maintenance and reproduction of the social construction of gender. Often this construction of gender contains an unequal power relationship with male domination and female subordination in most spheres of life, including family and workplaces. Discrimination of women steals their confidence and courage to dare act or speak where men are in control. Due to women’s oppression research and literature on gender often focus on women. This is because gender inequalities are still more often a manifestation of women’s lower status in income, power to make decisions and access to education, services and resources.

Gender mainstreaming is a process that aims at redressing such situations in order to widen opportunities for both women and men to acquire resources, social services, and power to make decisions. Therefore, it is important to examine gender mainstreaming at institutions,
such as the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), which provide educational resources and services. This paper analyses the voices of women on gender mainstreaming in open and distance learning (ODL) institutions. The paper is based on a qualitative research conducted at OUT. The authors provide highlights on the study, including rationale for the study, problem, objectives, research questions, literature review, methodology and findings. However, the authors focus on discussion of the findings presented under thematic areas formed through clusterization of related perspectives of the participants.

**Background and Rationale for Examining Gender Mainstreaming at the OUT**

The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) is an institution of higher learning offering programmes through open and distance learning (ODL). One of the major benefits of ODL is the capacity to widen access to higher education by extending opportunities to those previously denied by historical, socio-cultural and economic barriers (URT, 2012). Therefore, gender equity and balance in education is among the envisaged spin-offs of ODL. Unfortunately, there are still gender imbalances in ODL institutions including the OUT.

In response to UN declaration and pursuant to national frameworks and also for the sake of harmonious human relations, there is need for each institution to mainstream gender into its policy plans and practices. Through declarations and protocols at regional and sub-regional levels, African nations have expressly supported gender mainstreaming initiatives. For example, the Nairobi Looking Forward Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action (1995) and Gender Development Declaration of the Southern African Development Community (1997) are expressions of the support to gender mainstreaming.

At policy level Tanzania has been in the forefront in promoting equity and equality for its citizens, both men and women. The Tanzanian constitution of 1977 provides for recognition of equality of persons; in turn, the constitution has incorporated a Bill of Rights, which bans discrimination on all grounds. Article 9 of the constitution further provides for respect of human rights as provided for in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, while Article 21 asserts that every citizen of the United Republic of Tanzania has a right to participate in the governance of the country, directly or through their elected representatives. Finally, Article 22 provides for equality of opportunities and equal rights through equal terms and conditions to hold any public office.

Pursuant to these provisions, the Constitution establishes an affirmative principle as a temporary measure to rectify the historical gender imbalances. In addition, Tanzania is a signatory of various international conventions related to gender. The government has endorsed and adopted the implementation of various strategies and plans of actions as an effort to promote gender equity and equality in Tanzania. In order to address gender issues properly, Tanzania formulated the Women and Development Policy in 1992. This was replaced by the National Gender Policy in 2000, which directs the formation of gender focal points within government structures at all levels.

In response to national policy and directives, OUT has undertaken initiatives to mainstream gender in its policies and plans. The OUT Charter provides guidance on systematic execution and accountability for gender concerns at OUT headquarters and throughout its regional centres. The OUT Five Years Rolling and Strategic Plans, which are regularly reviewed, include gender equity and mainstreaming as one of the priority objectives. In addition, institutional structures provide for a Gender Steering Committee as one of the decision making participatory organs of the university. Efforts towards institutionalizing gender issues at OUT have led to the establishment of the Gender Unit of OUT under the office of the Vice Chancellor.
The Problem

Despite these commendable efforts presented above, gender balance and mainstreaming has not yet been comprehensively attained at the Open University of Tanzania. There are gender imbalances observable in areas of student enrolment and participation, curricula, staff recruitment, human resource development, leadership and institutional culture. Student enrolments, for example, indicate that female students constitute less than 30% of the total enrolment. By 2011 male academic staff constituted 65% of the total, while women constituted 57% of the administrative staff, most of them in low cadre jobs (OUT, 2011).

The OUT situation indicates a mismatch between policies and the situation of gender equality practices at the institution. This study was deemed necessary so as to examine policy and practices at OUT in relation to gender mainstreaming.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research were to register OUT women staff’s voices, assess their understanding of gender mainstreaming and analyse their views on policy, plans, procedures and practices at their workplace that were either challenging, enhancing gender mainstreaming or gender blind.

Research Questions

The questions that were addressed through this study were as follows:

1. Are the members of the staff at OUT aware of policies and plans that are supportive to gender mainstreaming at the institution?
2. Are the policies and plans being translated into gender mainstreaming actions and activities?
3. Which plans and practices are envisaged to be supportive to gender mainstreaming at the institution?
4. Which plans and practices are envisaged to be challenging to gender mainstreaming at the institution?

Literature Review

The literature review for this study focused on an examination of gender mainstreaming and related concepts. The following is a brief presentation of the literature that was reviewed.

Understanding Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is a globally accepted strategy for promoting gender equality. Gender mainstreaming is not an end in itself but a strategy or approach (Forestier, 2013; Stromquist, 2013). It is a means to achieve the goals of gender equality. Understanding gender mainstreaming requires clarity on related concepts of gender, equity and equality.

The Concept of Gender

Gender refers to social attributes and opportunities associated with being female or male and the relationships between women and men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are largely socially constructed and learned through socialization processes. Gender determines what is expected, allowed, and valued in a woman or a man in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, and access to and control over resources as well as decision-making opportunities. Gender is part of the broad socio-cultural context.
Gender Equity

Gender equity is the quality of being fair and just to both men and women. It includes fairness and justice in the distribution between men and women of responsibilities, access to resources, control over resources and access to socioeconomic and political benefits. It embraces affirmative action, where and when necessary. This implies that gender equity does not mean sameness between women and men hence where there are gender inequalities positive discrimination in favour of the disadvantaged group or individual is encouraged. Gender equity is a step towards gender equality.

Gender Equality

Gender equality is between women and men. It refers to equal rights, responsibilities of women and men, girls and boys. Equality implies that women and men have equal rights and access to resources, services, responsibilities and opportunities. Gender equality entails that the interests, needs, and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration. Therefore, gender equality is not a women’s (feminist) issue, but concerns men as well. Equality is a human rights issue and a precondition for and indicator of justice.

Gender Mainstreaming for Achieving Gender Equality

The term gender mainstreaming was logged in global policy at the Beijing conference in 1995 and accepted as a development methodology for achieving gender equality (United Nations 1995, 1997). Specifically, gender mainstreaming is a strategy for making women’s and men’s concerns and experiences an integral part of designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programmes and activities in the socio-economic and political spheres of society. It involves a process of incremental change in policies, strategies, and activities for the benefit of both women and men. Gender mainstreaming is a process of assessing and bridging gender imbalances. Therefore, policies, plans, programmes, and decisions should incorporate gender analysis at all levels in order to contribute to equal outcome for women and men (Forestier, 2013). Gender mainstreaming is more than gender analysis; it involves all the steps between analysis and incorporating that analysis into the policy and programme decisions that will contribute to equality of outcomes for men and women (Hunt 2000, UNDP; UNESCO, 2012). The ultimate goal of gender mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality.

Methodology

The study was mainly a qualitative research with descriptive statistics used for elaboration and clarification of issues. A sample of 100 women from different categories of OUT staff, at different work stations and age groups was purposively selected from the target population, which comprised all 306 women staff at the institution (OUT, 2013). Documentation, interviews (in Kiswahili/English languages) and 3 focus group discussions were used to collect data, while content analysis and discourse analysis were used to analyse data. Related ideas and perspectives were grouped into thematic areas presented in this paper as part of the findings of the study. The research focused on women participants, mainly because they are the more negatively affected of the two gender groups.

The Findings

The following is the presentation and discussion of voices of OUT female staff on gender mainstreaming at OUT based on their experiences as OUT female workers/employees. The participants were women in different positions at the Open University of Tanzania, including administration, human resources, academics, secretarial, registry and office attendants. Their age profile indicated that the majority of the respondents aged 18 to 45 (76) and only a few (24) were above 46 years of age.

According to the findings of this study, the prevailing understanding of gender mainstreaming
was that it is ‘a process of increasing women participation in all aspects of the organization’. Most women interviewees did not interrogate gender perspectives and practices in relation to existing policies, guidelines and plans. However, some voices indicated that certain practices were gender blind and some of the positive gender sensitive initiatives required strengthening, particularly at implementation level.

Analysis and Discussion of the Findings

Participants Understanding of Gender Mainstreaming

The research findings show that gender mainstreaming is a new concept for the majority of female employees at the Open University of Tanzania. Most of the interviewees viewed the concept of ‘feminization’ as representing gender mainstreaming, while others saw gender mainstreaming as being biased towards women and against men. There were also some interviewees who saw it as merely a process of emancipating women from male domination. The following verbatim statements are typical of some of the sentiments expressed by participants:

‘Gender mainstreaming is giving women a chance to take leadership positions’.
‘Gender mainstreaming is taking actions to address women issues’.
‘Gender mainstreaming is to remove discrimination of women by men.’

More participants however, were aware that the concept of gender included both women and men. This emerged during focus group discussions (FGD) where some participants enquired why the research included women only when the focus of the study was on gender. The researchers explained that this was one of the three phases of the research. The second phase will constitute men’s voice and phase 3 will target comparative analyses of the voices of both men and women. The researchers further explained that this first phase of the research has focused on women participants, mainly because the analysis of the gender situation of OUT indicate that women are the more negatively affected of the two gender groups.

Gender Mainstreaming and OUT Policies, Procedures and Structures

The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) has contended that gender mainstreaming strategies can be identified in three spheres/arenas, which include (i) the organization’s structure, policies and procedures and its culture, (ii) the substantive activity that it undertakes (its programme) and (iii) the impact of this work on increased gender equality in the broader community (Schalkwyk, Thomas & Woroniuk 1996:4). As reported earlier, Open University of Tanzania has several policies on student affairs, staff recruitment and deployment/placement, staff development, research and publication, HIV/AIDS, research and consultancy, quality assurance, and gender mainstreaming, which guide all major institutional practices. In spite of the existence of these policies, the majority of participants were ignorant of their existence. The participants contended that the policies are not made available to all employees. For example, one of the interviewees summed the sentiments of the participants concerning the policies when she observed that “They are kept as grey literature in the library hence most workers are not aware whether policies are gender mainstreamed or not”.

Only a few of the participants reported, during focus group discussions (FGD), that they were aware of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) gender policy that was awaiting printing but did not know its content. Her response shows the level of ignorance concerning the policy and related structures;

*I have heard about the gender policy, the Gender Unit coordinator talked about it at a certain meeting; but I have not seen the document. Where and how can I get it?*
Where is the OUT Gender Unit office?

Some of the women employees who have come across OUT policies but are not fluent in English language expressed that they could not read and understand the content of the policies because of the language. According to one participant,

*The documents are written in English language. They should be translated into Kiswahili language so that the majority of us can read and understand them.*

Another participant retorted,

*Even for those who can read and understand English they need to be guided by experts because the policies are written in a technical language that is not easy to understand.*

Such statements from the participants indicate a feeling of exclusion from the contents of the policies and even the policy formulation processes used to develop gender mainstreaming in policies. On probing further on the issue, it was revealed that normally those who are eligible to attend forums where draft policies are discussed hold certain positions. The majority of these positions are held by men.

The participants also questioned some of the policies on gender mainstreaming.

*When you look at the OUT policies you wonder! Currently all the top leadership positions are held by men. Women make about 30% of management. But the policy aims at increasing the number of women in management positions up to 40% by the year 2015. Why not 50%? That policy is gender blind.*

A participant lamented, with concurrence of other participants who added;

*What does that mean? Does it mean there are no women to hold top administrative posts?" ....Why can't the policy aim higher for women?"

Such statements indicate that given the opportunity, female staff at the Open University of Tanzania could interrogate institutional policies and identify gender mainstreaming issues and probably suggest viable strategies to address gender disparities.

Regarding the organizational structure, OUT institutional structure provides for a Gender Steering Committee as one of the decision making participatory organs of the University. This is a high powered Committee chaired by the Vice Chancellor. However, the participants noted that the committee is not representational. They noted that members of this committee comprise heads of faculties, directorates and administrative departments, the majority of whom are men because most senior academic and administrative positions are male. This situation indicates gender imbalances in participation in decision making processes at the institution.

**Gender Mainstreaming Activities at OUT**

Majority of the participants were not aware whether there were gender mainstreaming activities at OUT. For example, one participant reported that “*I have been with OUT for more than a year now I have never heard about gender activities*”, while another retorted, “*I have recently heard about a social activity to commemorate the ‘a women’s day. That is all’*.

The findings also indicated that there is no clear strategy for advocating gender mainstreaming at the institution. The following statements from respondents denote this situation

*Sometime back, about 3 or 4 years ago we had a seminar on gender. It was good. I*
thought the event was to happen every year.

I think last year there was a workshop on gender and HIV/AIDS. Only a few were selected to participate. I do not know what they discussed”.

Fortunately, I participate in the RSP workshops. There is where I have heard about OUT gender policy and action plans. But only high ranked academicians and administrators participate in RSP workshops.

**Gender Sensitive Policy and practices**

Participants from the faculties indicated that there were gender courses in almost every faculty. However, these are not coordinated and not all students study these courses. In some departments gender courses were available as electives. Meanwhile, the findings of the show that there was no gender programme offered at OUT, which could provide skills and in-depth understanding of gender and gender issues. Such a programme could, in turn, produce more gender experts. As a result, one participant observed that “If OUT had a gender studies programmes like they have at Makerere we would have more gender experts.”

It was also revealed that in recent years advertisement for the recruitment for posts at OUT includes a statement that encouraged women to apply. Some of the participants required an explanation on this. They asked what difference it makes if the criteria for recruitment (e.g. GPA) are the same for men and women applicants. The explanation was that if a man and a woman had the same criteria then the woman will be selected for the post.

**Gender Blind and Gender Insensitive Policies and Practices**

Some participants who had read the policy on study materials writing indicated that it was gender blind. This is because “It does not mention gender at all. It is silent about gender issues in instructional materials”.

Also guidelines for staff development were identified as gender insensitive. The succession plan was given as an example. According to one participant, “it does not take into consideration the natural roles that may not fit in the rosters guided by the staff development succession plan’.

Participants noted that while the facts and figures indicated gender imbalances in all cadres, the policy targeted to address only the middle cadre. They also noted the absence of women in top management positions and the absence of men in the lower cadre jobs. For the participants this was an indication that some jobs are fit for women and others for men; thus adhering to gender stereotyping in job allocation. Based on socio-cultural inclinations and gender stereotyping some jobs, such as secretarial, clerical, and housekeeping jobs were branded as women's jobs. In the same token, some jobs branded as men's jobs, included high managerial positions, scientific and technical oriented jobs. This is also a manifestation of gender insensitivity. As one of the participants categorically stated, “Gender blindness and lack of gender sensitivity nurtures stereotyping characteristics, including the idea that women cannot occupy top positions in an organization; they are neither tough nor proactive and aggressive”.

**Voices and Silence**

Participants indicated that they had not been voicing their gender concerns because they did not often participate in the forums that discussed gender issues. Those who participated in some discussions on policy and procedures explained that sometimes they were not sure it was the right place or they were the right persons to raise gender issues. Participants in FGD reported that the discussions were an eye opener. The following are some of the
statements by participants;

… this is good. I have learnt something about gender mainstreaming…

We should meet more often.

… we could use such meetings to ask those who have knowledge and experiences on gender mainstreaming to educate others.

The participants urged women employees to collaborate and to give a helping hand to each other so that “those in higher positions should pull others who are below. And those in lower positions should push others who are above. This way we will reach very far”.

Suggestions for Transformation

Transformation means taking steps to make changes for the betterment of the situation. Most of the participants agreed that OUT was increasingly taking some strides in gender mainstreaming, but more needs to be done if OUT was to achieve gender equity in the near future. The participants’ recommendations included the following:

- OUT need to create awareness of all employees on what constitutes gender mainstreaming through gender sensitization meetings, seminars, workshops and events.
- OUT management should make policies available and accessible to all.
- OUT to train staff on gender and gender mainstreaming in so that staff are able to identify the presence or absence of gender mainstreaming in policies, plans and practices.
- OUT need to increase the budget for gender mainstreaming activities. Disseminate the OUT gender policy. Enhancing research on gender and gender related issues.
- OUT should strengthen the Gender Unit which, in turn, would coordinate gender mainstreaming activities and address gender issues. According to one participant, “The gender unit should establish a gender help desk …. If I had a gender issue I would not know where to go”.

Concluding Remarks

From the voices of women staff at the Open University of Tanzania we note that discrimination and exclusion from decision making processes, lack of awareness and limited knowledge about gender mainstreaming are challenges to gender mainstreaming efforts and gender equality at ODL institutions. Such challenges may be mitigated by organizing gender awareness and gender sensitization seminars, workshops and meetings. In addition, participation in decision making processes could be enhanced by ensuring gender balance among participants and capacity building, through training in gender analysis and mainstreaming, so that OUT staff and students gain knowledge, skills and competences in these areas. It is also important for institutions to undertake gender analysis of all institutional policies and to ensure that all members of the institution (employees and students) are aware of the gender mainstreaming strategies and activities.

We also conclude that gender blind policies are in most cases gender insensitive. Therefore, institutions need to engage gender experts to interrogate policies and procedures, to ensure that they contain correct conceptualization of gender and that gender is mainstreamed in the documents.
ODL institutions need to establish and strengthen a strong gender coordinating unit, which can provide leadership on gender mainstreaming and act as a focal point where students and employees can share expertise and experiences on gender issues. These could provide opportunities for airing views and concerns network and collaborate for the purpose of enhancing gender equality at the institution and beyond. Institutions should also encourage and support learning from good practices in gender mainstreaming.

Finally, ODL institutions should encourage and enhance research on gender and gender issues. They should also document and learn from good practices on gender mainstreaming and share research and experiences on gender mainstreaming, equity and equality. Good practices could be from within or outside the institution. One mechanism would be establishing a databank of research and literature on gender at institutional level, which could scale up to national, sub-regional and regional levels.

References


The Role of eLearning in Open and Distance Learning (ODL): A Polytechnic of Namibia Case Study

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Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL), Polytechnic of Namibia

Abstract
The Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL) at the Polytechnic of Namibia (PON) is responsible for the management and delivery of distance education programmes. These programmes are offered primarily through print-based study materials and supported through tutor-marked assignments, weekend face-to-face tutorials and vacation school offered once a semester. However, students’ learning can be hampered when studying in isolation, living far from Regional Centres and not having easy and regular access to tutors. E-learning has the potential to address these limitations without reducing the flexibility that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) offers. COLL initiated eLearning in 2010 and currently offers nine online courses. The eLearning courses offered through COLL draws heavily on the social constructivist theory of learning and uses best practices in its design and implementation. This case study examines the effectiveness of COLL’s eLearning courses through the analysis of questionnaires completed by eLearning students. The findings of this study show that the eLearning courses that focus on collaborative learning activities, a paced learning format and regular tutorial support are highly favoured by the students over the traditional distance education mode of study.

Introduction and Background
It is argued that, for African countries to become knowledge economies, heavy investments need to be made in tertiary education to develop graduates with skills in Science and Technology (Yieke, 2005). A knowledge economy can be defined as:

production and services based on knowledge-intensive activities that contribute to an accelerated pace of technological and scientific advance as well as equally rapid obsolescence. The key components of a knowledge economy include a greater reliance on intellectual capabilities than on physical inputs or natural resources (Powell & Snellman, 2004:2)

It is clear from the definition that the key to Namibia’s development lies in using education to develop the intellectual capabilities of its people. In order to accommodate the various profiles of the student population, the Polytechnic of Namibia (PON) offers full time, part time and distance education modes of study. The Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL) at PON is responsible for the management and delivery of distance education programmes. Distance education is seen as crucial to the development of Namibia because it students to study while managing their family and work-related responsibilities.

Distance education at COLL is offered primarily through the use of print study materials. CDs, DVDs and radio tutorials usually supplement the print study materials. Distance education tutors support the students through tutorial letters, feedback tutorial letters, tutor marked assignments, face-to-face tutorials and vacation school.

PON has 10 Regional Centres situated throughout the country fully equipped with computer labs, wireless Internet connectivity, webcams, headsets, library books, and designated study areas and classrooms for tutorials.

Despite all the efforts made by COLL to provide distance education students with a supportive learning environment, they face challenges that could hamper learning. Studying in isolation, living far from Regional Centres and not having easy and regular access to tutors are some of the challenges distance students face. To address some of these
concerns, COLL introduced eLearning as a fourth mode of study and started to offer online courses in 2010. To date, it has successfully developed and offered 9 online courses.

The aim of this study is to find out if eLearning can enhance Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and hence is guided by the following questions:

1. Why did the students choose to study through the eLearning mode?
2. What were the benefits and challenges of studying through the eLearning mode?
3. What is the impact of eLearning on ODL?

This paper will start by discussing how eLearning courses are developed and offered through COLL. The effectiveness of studying through the eLearning mode will be assessed from the analysis of questionnaires completed by the eLearning students. The paper will conclude with some recommendations on how ODL institutions can use eLearning to enhance the delivery of distance education courses based on the lessons learned at COLL.

**eLearning at COLL**

**eLearning Course Development Process**

For the purposes of this paper we will use the eLearning definition followed by PON:

"eLearning refers to the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to deliver education in combination with face-to-face classes or completely online. Other tools like PowerPoint, Wikis, Blogs, Podcasts, Simulations, Digital portfolios, Video-conferencing and other emerging tools will be incorporated and offered together with the VLE (Polytechnic of Namibia ELearning Policy 2009, p.3)."

eLearning at PON is offered through the VLE called Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE). Through the VLE, students can interact and communicate with both students and tutor, submit assignments and access their course materials and course information without the limitations imposed by time and place.

All eLearning courses offered through COLL follow COLL’s eLearning house style and are designed using a team approach which includes course developers, content editors, instructional designers, language editors and a quality controller. The Coordinator: Educational Technology coordinates the course development process.

All eLearning course developers go through a two-month intensive blended training program made up of two modules, namely Online Course Planning and Design and Online Tutoring. The first module focuses on the pedagogy of online learning and on the practical skills to work with the VLE, creating podcasts, digital video tutorials, automated assessments and PowerPoint presentations with animations and narrations. The participants are also trained to use social media such as blogs and wikis, which are embedded in the VLE. The second module focuses on online tutoring as the course developers also tutor the eLearning courses they develop. To help the participants learn how to work with MOODLE, they are provided with manuals namely MOODLE Manual for Students and MOODLE Manual for Course Developers. The other manuals they receive during the training are eLearning tutor handbook, eLearning House Style Manual and Teaching and Learning with multimedia.

All eLearning courses use the existing distance education study materials that have been designed by COLL together with prescribed textbooks. Students are directed to supplementary resources on the Internet and/or the ones developed and uploaded by the course developers on the VLE.

Before being offered, all eLearning courses and developers/tutors have to be approved by...
the department in which they are housed to ensure that they are of the same standard as the other modes of study and meet COLL’s quality control criteria. Students are required to complete a pre-registration form and are only allowed to register in the eLearning mode once they meet the following criteria:

- have passed all course pre-requisites,
- are computer literate, and
- have regular access to a computer with Internet connection either through the Regional Centre, Internet Café, home or work.

**Instructional Strategies used in COLL’s eLearning courses**

Online discussions feature strongly in the eLearning courses. In higher education academic discourse is considered vital for learning because it helps students develop skills to analyse and critique the existing body of literature, construct arguments and defend their position using evidence to support their arguments (Bates, 1995). To develop these skills, students need to interact with each other. Bates identifies two forms of interaction crucial to learning namely individual, which is the interaction of the student with the learning materials, and social activity, which is the interaction of students with each other and the learning materials (Bates, 1995). The value of learning by interacting and discussing with others has roots in Vygotsky’s social development theory (Learning Theories, 2012). Vygotsky maintains that students learn better when they interact with their peers under the guidance of a tutor or teacher who facilitates the learning process, than by learning independently (Learning Theories, 2012). He also believes that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development (Learning Theories, 2012). In any group there are always those who are more knowledgeable on the topic of discussion than others. The interaction between the students will therefore result in those with less knowledge on the specific topic learning from the more knowledgeable ones.

In the eLearning courses, students meet weekly to perform tasks and take part in discussions because frequent participation helps to sustain interest and students perceive the usefulness of learning this way (McConnell, 2006).

Learning is paced, with information broken down into manageable chunks. Students take part in different learning activities each week to ensure that they achieve weekly objectives. The online activities contribute to 40% of their semester mark. They are expected to complete two assignments that contribute to 60% of the semester mark and an examination is written at the end of the semester.

**Support for eLearning Students**

The tutor throughout the course supports the students. Personalised, regular support and feedback on their online activities and assignments, provided by the tutor are essential for reducing dropouts (Alexander, 2001) and increasing student satisfaction (Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen & Yeh, 2008). To churn out the graduates who will be successful in today’s knowledge economy, it is important to focus on the creation of knowledge and not the acquisition of knowledge. Such an endeavour requires the support and guidance of tutors who are experts in their fields (Njenga & Fourie, 2010).

Students are required to attend a compulsory orientation session where they are given their print-based study guides and MOODLE Manual for Students, and meet with their tutors. Once the orientation is completed, all other learning and interaction is conducted online. As of 2011, trained Regional Coordinators offer the orientation at their respective regional centres and students do not have to travel to Windhoek. The orientation is important because students are new to this mode of learning and without preparation they may withdraw from the course (Alexander, 2001). Fears and anxiety in dealing with technology
can discourage students from benefiting from eLearning and/or reduce enrolment in the eLearning mode (Sun et al., 2008). The orientation helps to alleviate any anxiety students may have regarding learning via computer and the Internet. While the vacation school is mainly for the distance education students, it is open for the eLearning students to attend too.

**Progress of eLearning at COLL**

Table 1 outlines the progress of eLearning from 2010 till the present day and shows that the number of courses has grown with more students from the regions enrolling each year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>New courses offered through eLearning</th>
<th>Number of lecturers who completed the training</th>
<th>Students who completed their course in the eLearning mode</th>
<th>Students who dropped out</th>
<th>Number of students who received orientation at the Regional Centres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Semester 1</td>
<td>Semester 2</td>
<td>Semester 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Did not start</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Did not start</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5 (Currently in training)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Methodology and Methods**

This study was governed by the belief that the social world of the study's participants can only be understood from their standpoint (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). Therefore, the subjective nature of this study places it in the interpretivist paradigm through which the study uses the students’ experience to assess the effectiveness of studying through the eLearning mode. Drawing from Sun et al. (2008), it is evident that listening to the experiences of students is vital because the successful implementation of eLearning depends, among other factors, on the students’ level of satisfaction with the mode of study. This means that if students have been previously frustrated with eLearning, they are unlikely re-enrol for it. Furthermore, students perceptions are important to eLearning, since one of the biggest stumbling blocks to implementing eLearning is people (Njenga & Fourie, 2010). If lecturers and students do not see the educational effectiveness of eLearning, they will not use it (Collis & Moonen, 2001).

**Methodology**

The aims and research questions require an in-depth look at a real world situation where eLearning has been applied in an ODL setup. Case studies are particularly useful to answer questions that require an understanding of a particular case and where context is crucial to studying the case at hand. Thomas (2011) defines case study as “analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions or other systems which are studied holistically by one or more methods” (p.23).

**Methods**

This study employed questionnaires with open-ended questions to obtain data. A purposive sampling technique was used as only the eLearning students were approached. Questionnaires were sent to all 46 students who completed eLearning courses. 17 students gave feedback. While the response rate was low, it still provides a snapshot view of how students are responding to studying through the eLearning mode.
Limitation of this Study

Due to the reliance of this study in a specific context and poor response rate from the participants, it would not be possible to generalise the results of this study. However, the findings of this study provide valuable insight into how students at PON experience the eLearning mode and the possible impact it can make to ODL.

Data Analysis

Codes were given to ensure anonymity of participants. Data was analysed by using the constant comparative method to elicit themes and by allowing natural units of meaning to emerge through classifying, categorising and ordering them. The units of meaning were clustered under themes and narratives were written to describe them. The findings are arranged around the research questions.

Discussion of Findings

Reasons for choosing the eLearning Mode

From the following comments, it is very evident that flexibility of eLearning was a main reason for choosing this mode of study:

- *Besides working and studying part time, I have the responsibility of taking care of my elderly mother and thus cannot attend classes regularly.* (S1)
- *Part of my duties is to arrange and co-ordinate corporate functions as well as taking charge of the corporate branding of our branches in all towns. Thus, with the projects lined up for the next few months it will not be possible to attend to all my semester subjects. I decided to try eLearning since it offers me the option to still participate in my studies but not necessarily have to be at the office and in the classroom.* (S2)
- *I am currently running a small business whilst at the same time doing a course in I.T. (Part Time) and I could not fit Professional Communication into my already congested timetable. eLearning, at the time, seemed like a better alternative to the usual distance mode of study and a couple of weeks through the course I still have to be persuaded otherwise.* (S3)

This is not surprising given that students with multiple responsibilities appreciate a mode of study which allows them to fit studying into their hectic schedule (Sun et al., 2008).

The other reason cited was the interest in learning through technology:

*Move with the changing world of technology.* (S4)

Another reason cited was the interest in learning through a different mode of study:

*I am an IT student and I just thought it was the right thing to do. I also wanted to experience a different mode of study other than distance or full/part time mode of study.* (S5)

These responses show that flexibility of learning triumphs over the interest in technology.

Benefits of studying through the eLearning mode

*a) Easy Access to Study Materials*

All the course materials were made available to the students through the VLE and this
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seemed to support learning as evidenced by the following statement:

*I learn more doing the eLearning course. The info is right at your fingertips if you need to read up on a specific topic.* (S6)

b) Improved Learning

The students found that the learning activities challenged them to read more and do research:

*The learning activities helped us to read more and do some research.* (S7)

COLL’s eLearning courses places emphasis on collaborative learning through online discussion forums. Some of the benefits of collaborative learning are: deepened understanding of the content through the sharing and discussing of ideas, increased motivation in learning through regular contact with the tutor and other students, enrichment of learning experience which comes from working with students with different backgrounds, and experiences and more involvement with the learning process by reflecting on their own learning (Ryan *et al.*, 2000). The students enjoyed the group discussions and saw the value of collaborative learning as evidenced by the following comments:

- Chats helped to learn. In the sense we (students) shared our problems with our tutor, all at the same time and I also learned from my fellow students. [Group discussions] are my preferred mode of study. Because I get to read my fellow students’ posts and sometimes learn from them. I think my fellow students learned from me. (S4)
- I comment on my classmates tasks and they also comment on my tasks. If I don’t understand I consult one of them as well. (S5)
- Everyone in the group is doing their part and is available for comment and explanations when and where needed. (S1)
- You deal with the content twice, first to complete your assignment on your own and then with the group, following the tasks and discussions and getting input/comments on tasks. (S1)

c) Easy Access to the Tutor and Quick Feedback

The students also enjoyed having easy access to the tutor for feedback on activities and support for any difficulties they were experiencing:

- You have group discussions and online contact with your tutor that saves a lot on time and offers fast feedback. (S2)
- You have an open door to your tutor if and when something is not understandable for you. (S2)
- I also like the feedback from the lecturer as it helps me understand the topic better. (S5)

d) Paced Learning Format and flexibility

The eLearning courses use a paced learning format and students felt that it helped them learn better without reducing the flexibility they needed to complete the tasks:

- As I mentioned before I do online tasks every week and I have a better understanding of the subject content. (S5)
- I can decide on my own time within the timeframe of the tasks. The pace of the discussions helps as the parts that were discussed could be dealt with easily and what was left out was to be researched. (S1)
• Because you move topic by topic per week, you can pace your study during the week to still be able to meet the deadline. (S2)
• It allows a person to study and to submit assignments at one’s convenience (like at home). (S9)
• It is more flexible. There are no Saturday classes. (S3)

The responses from the students for this question show that the main elements of this mode of learning that are flexibility, collaborative learning, paced learning and tutor support benefited the learning process of the students. Sun et al. (2008) maintains that eLearning courses that focus on supporting students in their learning in a flexible manner are more likely to succeed.

e) Better than Traditional Print-based Distance Education Courses

When the students were asked if they would study through the eLearning mode again, they all agreed. It is also the experience at COLL that students who complete one eLearning course usually return to do other eLearning courses. They used their experience with the distance education mode as a point of comparison to explain their reasons for studying through the eLearning mode.

f) eLearning Encouraged Deep Learning and Improved Performance in Assessments

One student shared how the discussions helped with understanding the content better:

This mode encourages more student-student interaction in the learning process through discussion forums online. Through online discussion forum, students get an opportunity to see other students’ work and give one’s views on it. This always gives you a different viewpoint on the same topic which I believe helps you better understand the content. (S3)

The eLearning mode seemed to facilitate learning better than the distance education mode according to this student’s experience:

When I was doing English through distance mode I just did two assignments per semester and waited for the examination, with eLearning it’s different. We get activities to do every week and we interact with our classmates and comment on their tasks. I learn more from doing the tasks and interacting with my class. The lecturer is just an e-mail or a phone call away when you have a problem whereas with distance mode of study you normally do not know which specific lecturer is responsible for you. (S5)

It was acknowledged that, although eLearning required more discipline than the distance education mode, it was worthwhile because the weekly activities and group discussions facilitated learning:

With the eLearning mode, as opposed to distance mode, you get the feeling that you are actually learning something, because you are more involved in the course through weekly tasks and discussions with other students online. This mode of study demands a more disciplined way of studying than the distance mode of study. Hearing other people’s views on a topic really enlightens you and helps you to see and do things differently. (S3)

Performance by students in the assignments was perceived as being better in the eLearning mode:

When I do assignments for the distance mode subject I don’t understand certain sections of the assignments but via eLearning I do the tasks every week so I’m
familiar with the content of the subject whenever I do the assignments. (S5)

It should be noted here that improvement in performance is cited by the student and not verified by a comparison of marks between eLearning and traditional distance education students.

g) eLearning Created Motivation to Learn

An interest to learn the subject seemed to be created in the eLearning mode through the use of weekly tasks and group discussions:

- It gave me interest to do the subject. I eagerly await the tasks of the following weeks. (S5)
- Learning is more important so the group I have found is not only mature but curious about the subject. (S1)
- If nobody comments on your postings then you won’t be pushed to your limits. (S2)

h) eLearning Facilitated Better Communication and Interaction while Maintaining Flexibility

Interaction, communication and access to the tutor were found to be better in the eLearning mode:

- Easy communication with your tutor for any problem. (S12)
- Chats, because I felt like we had a better interaction with the tutor. (S15)

eLearning was found to be similar to full time whereas one student felt that the distance education mode encouraged surface learning. Furthermore it was seen to have the best of the full time and distance education modes i.e. the paced learning style, possibility for interaction and communication whilst getting the flexibility of distance education:

- ELearning is like full-time learning where you hear from the lecturer and classmate from time to time while, distance is rote learning where one only opens the book when doing assignments and studying for the exams. (S4)
- Again, this is much more convenient than the normal distance mode. You have control over your time, no need to attend classes but still in touch with your studies through the weekly tasks. (S2)
- The course is spread in the same way as a class method in terms of tasks and activities.(S1)

Challenges of Studying Through the eLearning Mode

a) Network Problems

The quality of Internet connectivity was considered to be a major drawback by many students:

- Sometimes I run out of airtime and go to the Polytechnic library to do my tasks but the Internet service there is terribly slow, I don’t get anything done when I go there. I would suggest that any institution that introduces eLearning as a mode of study should upgrade their Internet infrastructure (3G, 4G, etc.) first. (S5)
- The only challenge I experienced with eLearning is the network, the network is different every day. Also there was a point where I experienced a problem in uploading assignments online, above all very good. (S10)

This is a serious problem that needs addressing as a matter of urgency. It has been found
that technical difficulties such as poor network connectivity can discourage students from taking courses in the eLearning mode (Sun et al., 2008, Alexander, 2001). One of the recommendations made by the students was to improve the connectivity speed

- Please improve the internet infrastructure of the Polytechnic, sometimes we take our laptops to class in the afternoon and connect via the Polytechnic network, I tried it with my last assignment and it was not successful. (S5)
- Provide a lab for eLearning as some students experience challenges with the Internet and they miss out on some of the discussions. (S8)

b) Poor Levels of Participation

High levels of participation are valued by eLearning students (Alexander, 2001), however, one of the problems of asynchronous online discussions is the extended time lapse between the post and feedback. This can be discouraging and create feelings of isolation and loneliness among the participants (Nevgi, Virtanen and Niemi, 2006). Another challenge is the low levels of participation that can be experienced in online discussion forums (Rapaport in Tolmie & Boyle, 2000). These two problems were evident in the COLL eLearning courses:

- Sometimes some people would not take part in discussion forums and I just commented on discussions of the same people every week. (S5)
- The timeframe between interactions is a problem as not everyone is available at the same time. (S1)
- Delays! Some of the students are always late to respond to the discussions. (S11)

c) More demanding on Time and Study Methods than Traditional Print-based Distance Education Courses

Studying online can be very time demanding so when eLearning courses are designed, care should be taken to ensure that the learning activities do not overwhelm the students otherwise they will drop out (Alexander, 2001). One student who was enrolled for two eLearning courses at the same time, dropped out of one of the courses citing heavy workload as the reason:

The weekly activities at times become quite a lot since you have something to do every week. However, it is my opinion that the activities of Professional Communication are much less than Marketing Communication Strategy. (S2)

One student acknowledged that studying through this mode was difficult at first but that s/he eventually managed to adjust the learning this way:

It was difficult at first but as time went by you learn to pace yourself with the demands of the course and to plan your schedules around it. (S3)

Having adequate time to take part in the activities as much as they wanted to was a problem due to their various responsibilities:

Sometimes work and other commitments demanded more from us and little or no time was left to contribute as much as one would have liked to in the discussions. (S3)

d) Misunderstandings in Communication

The written form of communication used in the discussion forums can create misunderstanding and frustration due to the lack of visual cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice and body language (Nevgi et al., 2006). One of the students shared a situation
where misunderstanding resulted in the students not meeting the requirements of an activity:

*In task 2, the tutor mentioned that she was disappointed in our responses as she expected something slightly different. In my opinion the communication did not clearly stipulate it in order for us to satisfy the expectation. The entire group did not meet her expectations.* (S2)

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings of this study show that eLearning encourages interaction, communication and fosters support without compromising on the flexibility that ODL students need to successfully complete their studies. eLearning can also if properly designed cater to the individualised learning needs of the students.

Though the findings of this study cannot be generalised, such studies are crucial to ODL because:

1. ODL has a vital part to play in the development of African countries. To be competitive in the world today, Africa needs graduates with higher education qualifications. ODL is the only way many working professionals can continue to study further and improve their qualifications while managing their home and job-related responsibilities.

2. The traditional method of print based distance education has its limitations with regard to the isolation students feel when studying, staying far from regional centres and not always having easy access to the tutor. By using technologies like the VLE, interaction can be increased between the students and between the students and the tutor. Students can have regular access to the tutor thereby increasing the tutorial support for the students. By providing various learning activities, the tutor can regularly assess the students and provide interventions as needed. eLearning can provide the support and interaction that ODL students without posing additional constraints of time and place.

3. There is a need for eLearning models that takes cognisance of the unique context and challenges that Africa faces. This study evaluates an eLearning model developed in Africa suited for the needs of Africa. The lessons learned from this study can help other ODL institutions implement eLearning.

The findings of this study further lend to the following recommendations for ODL institutions embarking on eLearning:

1) Develop an institutional eLearning policy that guides the institutions use of eLearning.

2) Ensure that course developers and tutors are adequately trained to design and deliver online courses.

3) Adapt a team approach to develop online courses.

4) Follow instructional strategies that encourage collaboration amongst students. Motivation to learn and deeper approaches to learning can be encouraged through use of collaborative learning tools like discussions and chats.

5) Use an open source VLE like MOODLE. By using an open source VLE, the institutions can save on license fees. It is best to invest in an open source VLE that is widely used and easy to customise.

6) Ensure that the reliable network infrastructure is available for the students and staff to use.
7) Provide orientation and create support teams that can help the students successfully complete their online courses.

Though COLL has not made use of Open Education Resources (OERs), Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in their eLearning courses yet, they have tremendous potential in “offering cheaper access to high quality education and research materials” (Butcher, 2013). The landing of the West African Cable System (WACS) marks the beginning of cheaper and faster bandwidth for Africa (Angula, 2011).

The Internet has created a world without boundaries thereby allowing students to study anywhere in the world. To remain competitive in higher education (Collis and Moonen, 2001) and meet the development needs of African countries, it is vital for African Higher Educational institutions to provide quality education that serves the individualised learning needs of students in a flexible manner. Given developments of open source tools, OERs, MOOCs and findings of this study, it is argued that eLearning can positively impact and enhance ODL by offering quality education in a flexible manner.

References


NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

The DEASA/SADC-CDE international Journal of Open and Distance Learning (IJODL) is a refereed journal. The IJODL welcomes original articles which report on empirical and theoretical distance education and also accepts papers in other related areas as well as book reviews. All articles published by the IJODL are peer-reviewed anonymously by at least two referees.

Manuscript submission

Manuscript should be submitted in electronic form in MS word to ggatsha@bocodol.ac.bw

Format

Manuscript should be submitted between 3000 and 7000 words, including the list of references. The first page should contain the title page and the details of the author(s) i.e. name, affiliation, address, e-mail, phone and fax numbers.

The second page should contain the abstract of between 100 and 200 words maximum. The third page should be the first page of the manuscript. The font for the manuscript should be double spaced Times New Roman size 12. All pages should be numbered.

Tables

Authors should ensure that tables and captions to illustrations are typed out on separate sheets and not included as part of the text. However, it should be clearly indicated where these should be inserted.

Figures

These should be supplied as one complete set of artwork ready for reproduction.

References

The journal uses the American Psychological Association (APA) Manual writing style 5th Edition or as updated. All in-text reference should give the author’s name with the year of publication in brackets e.g. ‘Kuhn (1962) writes…’ or ‘statistics may be defined as study of ways of giving meaning to raw data (Burton, Carroll&Wall, 2001…’ Full references that conform to the APA style should be listed at the end of the manuscript.

Proofs

Authors shall normally receive edited proofs before publication to confirm and approve the final version of their manuscripts. However, this step may be omitted in case of delays in the processes.

ERRATUM

The article entitled “That’s life, wanting what you don’t have: ODL for the deaf in Botswana”, which appeared in IJDOL Volume 5 (1) under the sole authorship of Rebecca N. Lekoko, was written by three authors. The other two co-authors whose names did not appear with the article are Maitse M. M. Bolaane and Shanah Suping.