

Towards Bridging the Teaching and Learning Gap in Qualification Design and Development for Sustainable Development in Open Distance Learning (ODL)

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this study was to document students and academics' perceptions and experiences of learning and teaching in order to improve service delivery in Open Distance Learning (ODL). In this paper, I attempt to provide a richer picture of how to bridge the teaching and learning gap in qualification design and development. A combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods was used to bridge the teaching and learning gap in ODL and other African Universities. The qualitative part involved semi-structured interviews while a questionnaire provided quantitative data. Collected data was categorized into programme qualification mix (PQM), instructional design and the implementation of a framework for team approach (FTA). The key findings indicated that there were deficiencies in the PQM and the development of curricula. A survey to establish improved processes and procedures for the PQM in bridging the teaching and learning gap is recommended for quality facilitation of teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

The University of South Africa (UNISA) is known as a mega Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution which has expanded its doors for students from all walks of life furthering studies in order to upgrade their qualifications. This paper considers the connection between students and staff academic practices in qualification design and development for sustainable development at UNISA and other African Universities. Through the researcher's experience and understanding, there should be progression to all students in ODL and higher learning institutions. Students become more frustrated if they complete their qualifications and they end up stuck with pieces of papers in their hands. Academic staff departments are urged to think about how they design and develop their departmental teaching and learning PQM and align them with their universities ones. By so doing, they will be able to give students opportunities to further their studies by properly selecting relevant programmes leading to employability.

Programme Design and Development

The HEQSF Government Gazette No. 36721, 02 August 2013 maintains that it is necessary to know that Qualifications are the formal recognition and certification of learning achievement

awarded by an accredited institution. There is a huge teaching and learning gap that needs to be bridged by following proper processes and procedures of the university programme and development instructional design, and development of teaching and learning materials for the active facilitation of student learning. The impact of PQM and FTA procedures will assist in the progression of students and bridging the pedagogical gap because there are many issues for consideration in the changing context of flexible teaching and learning. A critical pedagogical perspective invites all stakeholders (Academic staff, Education Consultant, Department of Higher Education, and industry) to be seen as facilitators guiding students to become responsible for their own learning rather than to be imposers of curricular to passive recipients.

Issues for Consideration in Design and Development

This paper argues that even though there are issues for consideration in the design and development of teaching and learning materials at UNISA, other African Universities and Higher Education learning institutions, something can still be done to bridge the gap between categories of qualifications by aligning them with the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) and Classification of Educational Sub-

ject Matter (CESM). ODL academic staff should follow the viability of the PQM of an institution which lies at the heart of the core business of teaching and learning, and for many academics the passion for their discipline is apparent in the programmes and modules they teach. Throughout the ages, different stakeholders (such as religious organizations, governments, professional bodies, faculty and others) laid claim to determining the focus of higher education institutions (UNISA 2011: 1).

Higher learning institutions should be committed to provide an enabling environment through transformative teaching and learning, innovative design, research and development to allow articulation and progression. The FTA can facilitate ODL and other higher learning institutions to realise their vision and actualise potentials to become institutions where the intellectual life, research, teaching and learning would thrive. The mission of the Directorate Curriculum and Learning Development (DCLD) at UNISA is to serve, support and lead academic staff, students and other stakeholders in an accountable and transformative way by contributing to, influencing and implementing relevant policies in order to create a supportive culture of reflective practice and lifelong learning towards a better society. UNISA is guided by the principles of lifelong learning, student-centeredness, innovation and creativity. As an ODL institution, UNISA affords study opportunities to more than 400 000 students from across South Africa, Africa and other parts of the world. UNISA's student enrolment by gender is 62.3 percent females and 37.7 percent males.

Research Problem

The impact of bridging the teaching and learning gap between students and academic staff development practices for sustainable education through qualifications design and development for sustainable development in ODL.

Research Question

How qualifications design and development can be improved to bridge teaching and learning gap for articulation and progression in ODL?

Purpose

The purpose of this paper to determine whether qualification design and development

is effective to bridge the teaching and learning gap between academic staff development practices and students for sustainable education in ODL.

Rationale

Qualification design and development should be effective to bridge the teaching and learning gap between students and academic staff development practices for sustainable education, as articulation and progression are a response to fill the gap in the real teaching learning situation.

The Conceptualisation of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Development at UNISA

The DCLD at UNISA has been mandated by the Tuition Policy to facilitate transformative teaching and learning to facilitate student success. The role of the DCLD is to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning at UNISA is of a sufficiently high standard to facilitate deep learning and societal transformation. According to the UNISA Tuition Policy, the design and development of all materials should happen via course teams. The DCLD acts as a change agent among academic staff, colleges, schools, departments, professionals and student support functions throughout the university in order to ensure and foster quality teaching and learning. In the context of UNISA, an ODL institution, the DCLD has a unique opportunity to respond to the call for authentic, effective, high-quality teaching and learning. The services offered by the DCLD to academic departments' staff to bridge the gap relates to print-based learning materials development, online teaching and learning development, staff development, research and development, and project team management.

During learning material development, the DCLD brings in learners and critical readers to evaluate learning materials. In the light of the above, it is the aim of this paper to touch firstly on the complex nature of the impact on teaching and learning; secondly, to discuss the findings from students and academics; and lastly, to propose certain guidelines for a better understanding of bridging the teaching and learning gap in qualification design and development at UNISA.

Framework for the Implementation of a Team Approach to Curriculum and Learning Development

In a nutshell, the FTA (2013: 7-16) to curriculum and learning development at UNISA describes an agreed-upon process for curriculum and learning development. This framework refers to the definition of a curriculum framework provided by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (2014: 6) as “setting out the philosophical and organisational framework for a specific curriculum”. Comprehensive, well-designed materials stimulate self-directed learning and impact on the quality of ODL as a whole. The design, development and production of materials are therefore extremely important. The purpose of the framework is to provide a bridge between policies related to tuition and ODL practice at UNISA. The procedure for developing programmes takes account of the procedure for developing modules, and modules are introduced and developed taking into account the programme of which they form a part. The steps in the FTA (2013: 6-17) are:

- Step 1: Programme design
- Step 2: Curriculum planning of modules
- Step 3: Learning design
- Step 4: Learning development
- Step 5: Evaluation/review

In a well-organised ODL, the course, rather than an academic staff provides an appropriate learning environment for students. Rather than simply referring to a set of learning materials, the course is the structure of teaching and learning that is designed into the materials. According to the UNISA Open Distance Learning Policy (2008: 4), teaching and learning methods for a particular programme or course will be determined by the nature of the programme, the profile of the students, students’ access to resources and the HEQF level of the programme. This will include independent study of learning materials, completion of various activities, formative assessment tasks, tutorials, practical work and opportunities to interact with others, as well as research activities and work-integrated learning as a planned component of a curriculum when outcomes can only be achieved through work-based experience.

METHODOLOGY

An explanatory design was used to explore the experiences and practices of individuals and

groups in ODL and South African universities for sustainable development in education. The practical example of this design is to explore the effectiveness of PQM, FTA and Instructional Design and Development by obtaining some evidence of “*what works*”, “*how it works*” or “*how it can be made to work better*”. Data was collected by means of qualitative methods such as focus groups, which are “intended to provide researchers with means for collecting data that can be used to construct a descriptive account of the phenomena being investigated” (Dollar and Merrigan 2002: 6). The focus group discussions were conducted with students, and semi-structured interviews with academics, Education Consultants, industry and the Department of Higher Education. The focus group discussion was held with ODL and other African Universities’ students. The focus group method is a technique of group interviewing that generates data in the form of opinions expressed by participants. Focus groups have become an increasingly popular method of data collection in health care research. According to Wilkinson (2004: 271), a focus group is a research method involving more than one participant per data collection session. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2008: 375) define focus groups as collective conversations which can be small or large groups.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with academics from different academic staff departments, Education Consultants, industry and with officials from the Department of Higher Education. Based on the qualitative information, a structured questionnaire was developed and used as a measuring instrument to conduct a questionnaire survey among the research participants. A non-experimental design was used for this purpose. This helped to test the reliability and validity of the responses from the focus group discussions and the semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

A focus group discussion, semi-structured interviews and a self-administered questionnaire survey was used to collect data from students, academics, education consultants, industry and the officials from the Department of Higher Education. This helped to explore the impact of the PQM, FTA and instructional design in the development of qualifications in ODL and South African Universities. Approximately 50 students

in groups of ten who are studying through ODL were requested to participate in a focus group discussion. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews by using the non-probability purposive sampling technique until a saturation point was reached. Specific persons were interviewed because they could make a specific contribution to the study. The concept of '*sufficiency*' was used to determine the number of participants as sufficient number for the semi-structured interviews (Greef 2007: 294). The self-administered questionnaire was used to conduct a questionnaire survey with 100 students (43 were males and 57 were females) who completed their degrees but they are unemployed. The non-probability accidental sampling technique was used to conduct the questionnaire survey. The researcher used quantitative (descriptive and inferential numeric analysis) together with qualitative (descriptive, thematic text analysis) analysis to analyse the collected data (Creswell 2009: 218). In practice this involved creating codes and themes qualitatively, then counting the number of times they occurred in the text data. This quantification of qualitative data then enabled the researcher to compare quantitative results with qualitative data. Using this approach, the researcher codified and analyzed the data, identified general themes and developed findings which were used to come to a conclusion and make recommendations that proper processes and procedures of PQM, FTA and instructional design are a solution to bridge the teaching and learning gap in ODL and South African universities.

Focus Group Discussion

Questions to the group were directed to evaluate their experience of the teaching and learning gap in articulation, progression and qualification design and development in ODL and other African Universities.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students, academics from different departments at UNISA, officials from the department of higher education and industry representatives to evaluate how the PQM and FTA processes and procedures could assist in the progression of students in bridging the pedagogical

gap. The responses helped to determine how categories of qualifications are aligned with the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) in higher learning institutions.

Semi-structured Interviews Conducted

Semi-structured interviews conducted with academic staff, education consultants, industry and officials from the department of Higher Education revealed that the Policy for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) developed by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) somewhere is not considered when the universities' PQM and FTA processes and procedures are not followed when qualifications are designed and developed. It was also highlighted that there should be articulation – facilitating the progress mobility of students within and across each of the three Sub-Frameworks and to the world of work which is achieved by the international design of structure and content of qualifications and comparability. This means that the degree of similarity between two qualifications in terms of purpose, level, credits and learning outcomes and the matching of curricular properties should also be considered when comparability is determined.

Self-administered Questionnaire Survey

The self-administered Questionnaire Survey was conducted to collect data from the students on their experience in studying at UNISA, regarding qualifications they have, to ascertain articulation and comparability. The instrument consisted of closed and open-ended questions. The data was collected and administered in a consistent and objective fashion, without giving preference to any one type of experience. This type of bias was avoided by using the non-probability coincidental sampling technique, which allowed for the sharing of different experiences by different respondents. All the items in the questionnaire were tested (through piloting) to check whether they would yield similar results. All of the pilot respondents were satisfied with the design and development of the questionnaire. When the pilot questionnaires were assessed, they were found to yield similar results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals that the PQM and FTA processes and procedures could assist in bridging

ing the pedagogical gap towards the progression of students.

Programme Qualification Mix (PQM)

31 percent of the respondents who are unemployed students raised a concern to say, *“There is a problem in packaging qualifications which lead to my employability situation”*; *“I doubt if I will get employment because my cousin who studied the same degree as mine at another university has been employed and I am struggling with a piece of paper ever since”*. 26 percent of the respondents indicated that; *“I want to further my studies but I can’t get admission in some other fields, this means that my degree is wrong and I have registered another field and I am doing my final year with the hope of career path”*. 28 percent of the students are happy with their degrees and 15 percent are satisfied about what they have studied, presently that brings us to 45 percent of those who are satisfied with their qualifications. Respondents are of the opinions that this issue should be interrogated by the academic staff in order to bridge the teaching and learning gap.

Forty-three percent of academic staff raised a concern that they do not understand why qualifications they designed and developed were not approved and why they had to spend another 2 years without offering anything, while they worked so hard to put together all the application documents. Forty-seven percent were excited about what they had designed and developed to be offered. Forty-seven percent of the respondents from the Department of Higher Education officials were concerned about a large number of qualification documents completed without considering the National Qualifications Framework Act 67 of 2008 Revised Policy for Teacher Education Qualifications namely: Form 1, Module Form Registration, DHET Education Form 4.1, DHET Education Form 4.2, DHET Education Form 4.3. In addition, the DHET Application Form for New Qualifications Revised 2014 was not properly completed, ending up by not getting approved by external approving bodies. The majority 69 percent of the education consultants mentioned that some of the qualifications are submitted for approval without their involvement in the whole process. This resulted in the completion of the certificate of due diligence (CDD) to indicate that the FTA process

has been followed properly namely; name of project, scope of project (programme development, module development), responsible academic from college, Project authorisation (either Executive Dean or Deputy Executive Dean or School Director) and assigned project manager. All the parties are responsible to sign from the initiation stage until the project is signed off (UNISA FTA process monitoring report).

Thirty-five percent of the industry suggested that they should be consulted when the qualifications and programmes are designed and developed so that they can advise accordingly for the sake of students’ learning and how academic staff can consider WIL. They further indicated the danger of being excluded in the process; namely that the qualifying students in their area of specialization will be unable to integrate theory and practice in the real life situation. Most of them, 65 percent of the respondents, feel that they should be part of the design and development team of the new programmes and the ones which are due for revision, so that they can advise what is in the market in order to bridge the teaching and learning gap.

Instructional Design

All (100%) the education consultants in DCLD indicated that UNISA demands the inclusion of many more aspects into teaching and learning for sustainable development instructional design than just compiling a study guide containing factual information only. They further indicated that it warrants the involvement of all the different stakeholders and support departments in the university according to the FTA process monitoring report. This includes aspects such as learning development, planning and coordination, editorial, production, assignments, examinations, student support, graphic support, library services, dispatch etc. DCLD also encourages the academic staff to consider exit level competences of the HEQSF. In order to ensure that qualifications are in accordance with the NQF Level. The DCLD’s involvement in learning development is a negotiable process, which produces the best results if academics seek the EC’s support right from the start of planning new modules.

From the responses received, 17 percent of participants indicated that they were not aware of the PQM of the college, that it should be tak-

en into consideration when they design and develop their modules for sustainable development in their various curricula, while 60 percent lacked the know how because of fear of failure and 23 percentage were newly appointed. This is a clear indication that all new academic staff members should receive induction regarding instructional design. It is necessary to design qualifications that meet the requirements of the HEQSF and our social mandate. The DCLD is trying to assist the academic staff to understand programme design and development at UNISA by giving them information on how to approach and facilitate qualification design and development that will bridge the teaching and learning gap.

Further, 36 percent of the participants reported that they were never orientated along the lines of writing study materials for ODL; therefore they did not understand how the Module Registration Form works. Twenty-three percent were unable to align specific outcomes and assessment criteria in their module registration forms with the ones in their modules, while 59 percent were unable to differentiate between the purpose of the module and the rationale. This shows that there is a teaching and learning gap in qualification design and development for sustainable development that should be bridged.

Implementation of a Framework of Team Approach (FTA)

The three main barriers identified as hindering the implementation of the FTA approach in *Programme Design* of a whole programme in ensuring coherence of the learning programme and outcomes, progression in terms of level descriptors between different years of study, various modules within the programme planning, development and implementation were highlighted by academics are discussed. 18 percent of the participants indicated lack of proper training, while 23 percent, indicated lack of support of new academics and lack of awareness and 11 percent were concerned about lack of information about the FTA processes and procedures. The majority of the respondents, 58 percent, of the responding participants were satisfied with programme design, curriculum planning of modules, learning design and learning development until the completion of the Certificate of Due

Diligence for every Module for the whole qualification. Overall, there is a need for commitment from the academic staff in bridging the teaching and learning gap in qualification design and development for sustainable development in ODL.

General

Since only a small population of students, academics, industry and the Department of Higher education officials were sampled for interviews; the findings cannot be generalized throughout the institution. Whenever research is undertaken, the findings should not only be generalized to fit the specific individual or groups studied. It may be used to provide an understanding about similar individuals or groups. It is suggested that further research be conducted in the institution as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The university's PQM should be effectively and efficiently considered by the different Colleges and their respective departments to ensure that the needs of individual students are met in order to bridge the teaching and learning gap in designing and developing qualifications and programmes. A qualification therefore certifies that a planned and systematic programme of learning was followed and successfully completed through formal or informal learning and work experience. The volume of learning required for a particular qualification is measured in notional study hours, specified in terms of a number of credits. It is important to note that some programmes (such as the B.Ed. degree and some Advanced Diplomas in education) may require credit loads above the minimum. It is evident from the responses of students and academics during the focus group interviews that there are some concerns about the relevant programmes which students are not satisfied with and lack of training for the implementation of FTA raised by the academic staff. Sufficient attention should be devoted to the fact that we are facing a world in change, and this includes the view of developing qualifications and learning materials as such. The world of Higher Education has to be shaped and re-created to prepare students for a world of sustainable development in bridging the teaching and learning gap.

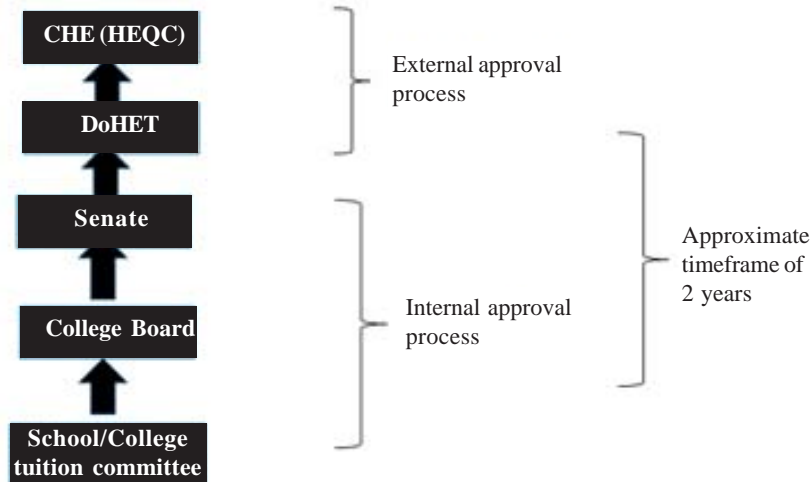


Fig. 1. Qualification application forms

RECOMMENDATIONS

For future studies, the researcher recommend that a survey be conducted on how to improve the PQM processes and procedures for quality teaching and learning facilitation and delivery. Most importantly, academic staff development practices for sustainable development in SA universities are urged to think about a variety of strategies in the design and development of different qualifications and programmes that allow progression and job opportunities. Quality programme facilitation should be considered in student learning for success. Quality teaching and learning materials design and development has a bearing on the provision of an improved learning experience. UNISA has demonstrated its commitment to the continual improvement of the quality of a diverse range of products and services to fully comprehend its vision and mission of delivering an exceptional and quality student learning experience. One of the ongoing projects in the academic portfolio is the renewal of teaching and learning by considering transformational issues. This requires the academic sector to take a critical look at the programme qualification mix (PQM) and to ensure that teaching and learning materials are of a high standard. All the Qualification Application Forms should be completed properly and submitted accordingly for qualifications to be approved and implemented (See Fig. 1).

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