

Towards Achieving Quality Distance Education, Challenges and Opportunities: The Case of the Zimbabwe Open University

George N. Shava* and Clever Ndebele**

*National University of Science and Technology, Department of Technical Teacher Education,
P. O. Box AC. 939 Ascot, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

**University of Venda, Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning,
Private Bag X5050, Thohoyandou, 0950 South Africa

KEYWORDS Assurance. Enhancement. Quality Development. Staff Training

ABSTRACT In the knowledge based global economy of coming decades, quality distance education will be a cornerstone of broad based economic growth and social empowerment. Without strategies to improve the quality of education, Zimbabwe may not be able to take advantage of the technological developments. High quality education is the most important investment for making progress towards achieving the country's Millennium Development Goals (MDG) for 2015. It is against this background that the current study set out to establish the major challenges faced by the Zimbabwe Open University in its effort to provide quality distance educational programmes to its learners. The qualitative study used employees of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) based at its ten regional centers and the National Center members of staff. Cases were chosen from the Zimbabwe Open University staff, former students, and students-representative committee members. A total of ninety-six respondents were selected for the study. The study established that the lack of resources and quality management mechanisms at regional centers were among the major factors affecting the provision of quality education. The study recommended that among other issues there is need to provide for well coordinated capacity-building programmes for both ZOU leadership and staff on quality assurance, development and enhancement.

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe which is one of the countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region has made phenomenal strides in increasing access to university education. From only one university at independence in 1980, this has increased to twelve. As Kariwo (2007) shows, up till 1989, there was only one university in Zimbabwe with only 2,000 students enrolled and this has since increased to 12 universities enrolling nearly 40,000 students out of which four are private institutions. The Zimbabwe Open University was established in 1993 (Kurasha and Gwarinda 2010) by the Government of Zimbabwe to create and widen access to University education through distance education and open learning. Through the 'Education for All' policy, the major thrust was to try and reverse the bottlenecks of the colonial education system that saw very few Africans access higher education. As the Southern African

Regional Universities Association (2013) avers, the impetus behind this development came from a national education department that realised there were increasing numbers of people across the country who were prevented from gaining tertiary qualifications by the barriers of geography as well as by the colonial legacy of under-development. The Zimbabwe Open University exists to empower people through life-long learning and has become the largest University in Zimbabwe in terms of enrolment figures (Kurasha and Gwarinda 2010). Open distance learning is a developing field in education in Zimbabwe and is emerging as a significant contributor to life-long learning. The emphasis in educational expansion in the country however, seems to have been on the quantitative delivery with little concern on the quality aspect.

Defining Quality and Quality Assurance

Quality

A survey of the literature on quality shows that quality is a relative term that can be contextually defined. South African University Vice Chancellors Association (SAUVCA)'s National Quality Assurance Forum (2002) defines quality

Address for correspondence:

Dr. George N Shava
National University of Science and Technology
P.O.Box AC.939.Ascot. Bulawayo, Zimbabwe
Phone: +263-282842 Ext 2336
E-mail: gnshava@gmail.com

as maintaining and applying academic and educational standards, both in the sense of minimum expectations and requirements that should be complied with, and in the sense of ideals of excellence that should be striven for. According to the Department of Education (1997) Education White Paper 3 cited in Council on Higher Education (2014) the pursuit of the principle of quality means maintaining and applying academic and educational standards, both in the sense of specific expectations and requirements that should be complied with, and in the sense of ideals of excellence that should be aimed at. Harvey and Green (1993) in their seminal work on quality, identify five conceptions of quality; quality as exceptional, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation.

According to Harvey and Green (1993) quality as exceptional denotes quality as special, distinctive, excellence, elite and unattainable by most. Parri (2006) argues that this definition sets a goal for universities and academic communities to be always the best; belong to the elite and achieve better outcomes than the others. This is corroborated by Reju and Olakulehin (2008) who observe that the term quality connotes a degree of excellence. It implies conformity to a given level of excellence which represents particular standards or specifications. Furthermore, as SAUVCA's National Quality Assurance Forum (2002) shows, this view sees quality as something very distinct in the sense that it is necessary to excel or exceed in order to achieve quality, and in order to exceed, there needs to be others who are exceeded.

The second notion is that of quality as perfection. In this notion, specifications are set to be met perfectly. Unlike quality as exceptional, according to Harvey and Green (1993), in quality as perfection, quality is seen as zero defects and the emphasis is on process and conformance to standards rather than exceeding high standards. In this notion of quality as Middlehurst and Campbell (2003) show, quality assurance arrangements are designed to ensure that provision and providers meet certain expectations often in the form of formal criteria and standards and that there are levels of comparability and degrees of consistency in educational processes.

At the heart of the value for money approach to quality, the third conception of quality is the notion of accountability. As Biggs (2001) shows,

a quality institution in this view is one that satisfies the demands of public accountability, providing an assurance that the university keeps its promises to its customers. The customers range from a government that calls for greater accountability of public expenditure, to employers who want to know what they are getting, to the students who, quite rightly, are increasingly more demanding of institutions (SAUVCA's National Quality Assurance Forum 2002). In this regard, Maila and Pitsoe (2012) note that not only are communities or governments concerned about higher education's quality, so are employers of graduate students and their parents, students, professors and managers in universities. This would be an institution that produces, for example, more graduates with less public funds, more peer-reviewed publications per capita of academic staff and a strategic plan that signals high levels of self-funded activities.

The focus in the value for money concept is on efficiency and effectiveness, measuring outputs against inputs. Kis (2005: 10) stresses that, "A central aspect of 'accountability' in any form is that of 'rendering an account' of what one is doing in relation to goals that have been set or legitimate expectations that others may have of one's products, services or processes, in terms that can be understood by those who have a need or right to understand 'the account'". Furthermore, SAUVCA's National Quality Assurance Forum (2002) sees value for money as a market view of quality and argues that with respect to goods and services the ultimate judge of quality is the customer whose levels of satisfaction can be regularly evaluated and used for feedback and improvement. Within the university context, customer satisfaction surveys – usually applied to students and graduates could be used as one measure of ascertaining value for money.

In the quality as fitness for purpose concept, according to Harvey and Green (1993), quality only has meaning in relation to the purpose of the product or service. Meanwhile, for Biggs (2001:222) the basic question in this notion of quality is, "Are our teaching programmes producing the results we say we want in terms of student learning?" Parri (2006) explains that such a definition enables the institutions to define goals in the mission statements – the quality is assessed and presented through mission statement and goal achievement. Thus when an

institution states objectives, it is implicitly claiming that this is what it will do.

SAUVCA's National Quality Assurance Forum (2002) argues that working with a fitness for purpose definition of quality does however raise the issue of 'fitness of purpose' and states that if the vision and mission of an institution were generally seen as inappropriate by wider society, or if an institution set its sights very low, then fitness for purpose has little value. The purpose has to be appropriate in order for fitness for purpose to become a valuable concept of quality for universities. The purpose must be to respond to societal needs. The Council on Higher Education (2004) stresses that the fitness of purpose of the mission, goals and objectives of an institution should be determined in relation to institutional responsiveness to the local, national and international contexts.

Another conception of quality by Harvey and Green (1993) is that of quality as transforming. This involves giving power to participants to influence their own transformation through the development of critical thinking. As Parri (2005:108), explains, "According to this point of view, the main customer of the higher education quality is a student whose understandings, attitudes and objectives change and evolve in the course of the study process. The better the graduate can manage in the future working life with the help of the knowledge, experience and skills acquired at the university, the more fully has the particular university met its goals." Quality teaching transforms students' perceptions of their world, and the way they go about applying their knowledge to real world problems; it also transforms teachers' conceptions of their role as teacher, and the culture of the institution itself. The concept of transformation in the Zimbabwean context can be linked to addressing the past inequitable education legacy. This transformation agenda has seen a proliferation of universities resulting in university enrolments increasing phenomenally since 1980 (Masuko 2003). Following the definitions of quality, the researchers now extend the definitions to quality assurance and enhancement.

Quality Assurance

Filippakou and Tapper (2008) see quality assurance as making judgments against defined criteria, while according to the University of

Aberdeen (2007:2), quality assurance refers to a range of review procedures designed to safeguard academic standards and promote learning opportunities for students of acceptable quality. For Kurasha and Gwarinda (2010:1) quality assurance, "is a process of ensuring that the students who enter a programme exit with the requisite standards of competence or set of outcomes through employing a combination of policies, structures, resources and procedures which are used to make educational activities meet specified performance levels and quality commitments." According to SAUVCA's National Quality Assurance Forum (2002) quality assurance should be understood as a measure of the value of what we do and the system of benchmarks that we use to make sure standards are maintained and improved where possible on a continual basis. It is about making certain there are systems in place so that the organisation continues to deliver the right things every time to meet customers' requirements (Harvey and Green 1993). For Woodhouse (2013) quality assurance denotes the policies, attitudes, actions, and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is maintained and enhanced. Similarly according to Kahsay (2012) a quality assurance system in higher education may be described as the totality of the policies, values/attitudes, procedures, structures, resources and actions devoted to ensure continuous improvement of the educational processes. The Council on Higher Education (2014) also reiterates that quality assurance processes are designed to ensure that specified standards are met and maintained through policies, procedures, monitoring and evaluation.

What can be inferred from the definitions in the preceding paragraph is that quality assurance is essentially a checking mechanism using predetermined criteria on the effectiveness of programmes or interventions. These definitions according to Ndebele (2014) imply that quality assurance might result in simple compliance (what is sometimes known as the 'tick box' phenomenon) where improvement of learning is no longer a priority but rather the priority is satisfying authorities. Filippakou and Tapper (2008) argue that viewed in this light quality assurance could be destructive should the quality goals be pursued through the imposition of a narrow evaluative framework.

In contrast to quality assurance, quality enhancement according to Filippakou and Tapper (2008) is about instilling in every member of staff the desire to improve quality and giving them the time, the incentive, the means, to actually improve quality that might or might not involve quality assurance. This is corroborated by Gvaramadze (2008: 445) who argues that “Quality as enhancement focuses on the continuous search for permanent improvement” and University of Aberdeen Quality Assurance Handbook (2007) which defines quality enhancement as taking deliberate steps to bring about continual improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students. QAA Scotland (2012) defines enhancement as taking deliberate steps to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experiences of students. As Parri (2006) argues, improvement is probably the most widely spread aim of quality enhancement. It enables the institution to get necessary input, refine the process and raise the standards of output in order to meet the goals set. The Council on Higher Education (2004) uses quality development and enhancement concurrently and states that these include the policies, systems, strategies and resources used by the institution to develop and enhance quality. Biggs (2001) underscores the importance of quality enhancement when he argues that an institution needs not only to design its teaching delivery system in accordance with its espoused theory, but also to establish built-in mechanisms that allow it, like the individual reflective teacher, to continually review and improve current practice.

Biggs (2001) further distinguishes between assuring quality either in prospect or in retrospect. He explains that retrospective quality assurance looks back to what has already been done and makes a summative judgment against external standards. “The agenda is managerial rather than academic, with accountability as a high priority; procedures are top-down, and bureaucratic..... the procedures adopted address “value for money”, and are frequently counter-productive for quality in the sense of providing rich teaching contexts and enhanced learning outcomes” (Biggs 2001: 222). Most indicators of performance in retrospective quality assurance tend to concentrate on administrative procedures and processes, rather than on the actual academic project.

Prospective Quality Assurance according to Biggs (2001) is concerned with assuring that teaching and learning does now, and in future will continue, to fit the purpose of the institution and encourages continuing upgrading and improvement of teaching through quality enhancement. Prospective QA is not concerned with quantifying aspects of the system, but with reviewing how well the whole institution works in achieving its mission, and how it may be improved (Biggs 2001: 223). This is corroborated by Kis (2005: 10) who writes that quality procedures for improvement purposes aim at promoting future performance rather than making judgments on past performance and that the criteria and procedures used are intended to strengthen the conditions, motivations, scope and level of information of higher education institutions towards quality improvement. In conclusion therefore, quality university education implies processes of ensuring that students who enter into specific programmes exit with the required and requisite standard of competencies expected of them at that level.

Quality Assurance in Distance Education

The concept of distance education might be construed in different ways depending on context. According to the National Commission on Higher Education, (1996) quoted in Middlehurst and Campbell (2003), in South Africa, distance learning describes educational programmes that provide interactive study materials and de-centralised learning facilities that students can access according to need. Sikwibele and Mungoo (2009: 3) see distance education as planned and regular educational provision where there is distance between the instructor and the learner and isolate five features of distance learning namely, “(a) absence of a teacher, (b) use of mixed media in teaching and learning, (c) correspondence, (d) independent learning, and (e) possibility of face-to-face meetings with tutors.”

The expansion of distance education as an alternative to the traditional face to face tuition mainly as a result of the increased demand for higher education and developments in technology has foregrounded the issue of the quality of these distance education programmes (Stella and Gnanam 2004; Belawati and Zuhairi 2007; Sikwibele and Mungoo 2009; Jung et al. 2011; Devedic et al. 2011). As Belawati and Zuhairi

(2007) show, quality has always been an issue in distance education and distance learning and over the past few years, there has been significant growth of quality assurance activities aimed towards improving higher education on institutional, national, regional, and global levels. They further add that public and institutional stakeholders seeking accountability in higher education have encouraged governments to establish national quality assurance structures. Devedic et al. (2011) add that despite a long and generally successful track record distance learning is still required to prove that the quality of student learning is at least equivalent to face-to-face teaching.

In Africa, open distance education has revolutionised higher education. According to Olorunbor and Ogonor (2008), from South Africa to the Sudan, Nigeria to Tanzania, Rwanda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, nations are experimenting with open distance education models in order to help meet growing demands for higher education places and meet the countries national development goals with diminishing resources and competing sectors of the economy. As this happens, eyebrows are raised in relation to the quality of distance education provision by academic communities and other stakeholders who have been accustomed to the traditional face to face tuition. Devedic et al. (2011) indicate that internally, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions are being challenged to undertake continuous improvement from within and externally, stakeholders such as users, consumers, educational funders persistently question the quality, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency of educational endeavours in which they have interest. Furthermore, they add that for many ODL institutions funding and student enrolment levels depend on the quality of their bottom line performance and the quality of the services they offer.

Several challenges to quality assuring distance education provision are cited in the literature on distance education. These include among others, lack of training in distance learning methodology, lack of standard criteria to measure quality for such services, inefficient administrative systems, poor organisational support and lack of motivation of the academics (Stella and Gnanam 2004; Belawati and Zuhairi 2007; Reju and Olakulehin 2008; Sikwibele and Mungoo 2009; Nyerere et al. 2012).

With regard to the issue of adequately trained human resources, Watkins (2000) notes that, improving education quality especially at university level has become a widespread priority and in this, the human element in universities is pivotal and that successful reform in education is realized through the potential of the human resources of the university. University lecturers among other members of staff continue to be fundamental to quality education delivery in universities and the quality of education will depend on largely the quality of delivery services among members of staff. Echoing the need for training, Belawati and Zuhairi (2007) argue that, "People in organizations undergoing change will talk about quality, but may not know exactly what 'quality' means, specifically how to initiate, provide, and improve upon quality processes, products, and services continuously."

Because one institution may offer distance learning across different context and geographical areas, the issue of standard benchmarks or criteria to measure the quality of services offered becomes problematic. In this regard, commenting in relation to centralized quality assurance mechanisms, Stella and Gnanam (2004:154) aver that, "The crux of the problem related to quality assurance of distance education lies in identifying suitable benchmarks which will make the assessment clear to both the quality assurance agency and the distance education institutions."

Another key challenge relates to the issue of poor organisational support to both the academics, tutors in the field and the students themselves. Citing Kember (1989), Sikwibele and Mungoo (2009) state that distance learners sometimes experience feelings of isolation and stress due to lack of organizational support, which may eventually lead to non-completion. With regards to staff in distance education, Reju and Olakulehin (2008) note that the process of quality assurance in open and distance learning should commence with academics who have passion for and commitment to distance education as a mode of learning, empathy with learners and skills to participate in a learning mode that demands just as much in terms of creativity and professional expertise from the academic as it does from the student. Such a commitment by academics does not seem to be reciprocated by the employers with the necessary incentives. A National Education Association (NEA) survey in the United States cited in Nyerere et al. (2012)

reported that teaching staff members' top concern about distance education was that they would do more work for the same amount of pay. The study found that most teaching staff members spent more time on their distance courses than they did on traditional courses, but received no extra compensation for their distance courses.

Zimbabwe, which is subject of this study, like any other country that has been striving to guarantee access to university education through distance learning, has made significant improvements in providing access to many. Table 1 gives statistics of the Zimbabwe Open University enrolment from 2004 to 2007.

Table 1: Student population at ZOU by Region from 2004 – 2007

<i>Region</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Bulawayo	953	552	1 505
Harare	3 794	2 143	5 937
Manicaland	1 405	585	1 990
Mashonaland Central	933	314	1 247
Mashonaland East	901	362	1 263
Mashonaland West	950	375	1 325
Masvingo	1 580	668	2 248
Matabeleland North	500	334	834
Matabeleland South	337	214	551
Midlands	1 183	618	1 801

Source: Zimbabwe Open University Statistical Records

It is however realized that the focus on access often overshadows the issue of quality, yet quality stands at the centre of every university education. In addition, in most of the research studies carried out in Zimbabwe, the focus on quantitative development, access to education and education for all has often overshadowed the issue of quality in education. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the knowledge gap in this field of quality in higher education in Zimbabwe.

Objectives of the Study

This study on quality distance education aimed to establish the major challenges affecting the provision of quality education with specific reference to the Zimbabwe Open University. The specific research questions addressed in this study are:

- ♦ What are the challenges facing the Zimbabwe Open University in its effort to provide for quality educational programmes to the students?

- ♦ What are the organizational mechanisms or policies put in place to provide for quality distance education to the students?
- ♦ Do regional centers have sufficient resources to provide for quality distance education?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design chosen for the current study is the qualitative research, which uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings such as the regional centers, resource centers and the national centre. The research design conceived, involves a clear focus on the research questions and what information most appropriately answer specific questions and which strategies are most appropriate for obtaining the required information. Qualitative research designs according to Patton (2001) are generic investigative methodologies described as ethnographic, naturalistic, anthropological, field or participant observation research. Qualitative research methods are used to better understand any phenomenon about which little is yet known because they use a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomenon in the context specific settings such as real world setting (Patton 2001).

Sampling Strategies

Sampling procedures in qualitative research are not so rigidly prescribed as in quantitative studies. In quantitative inquiry, the most dominant sampling strategy is probability sampling, and the major purpose of probability sampling is subsequent generalization of the research findings to the population. Contrarily, purposeful sampling is the dominant strategy in qualitative research. Patton (1990) notes that purposeful sampling seeks information-rich cases; which can be studied in depth. In this study the qualitative principle of appropriateness that requires purposeful sampling and a good informant-one who is articulate, reflective and willing to share with the interviewer was used. The sampled people were selected according to the aims of the study. Categories such as gender, status, role or function in the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) were also considered in the selection of respondents. The logic was in selecting information – rich cases from the Zimbabwe Open

University regional offices for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which the researcher could learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the study. The use of purposive sampling in the current study was appropriate in the sense that the researchers selected unique and appropriate cases that are especially informative due to their association with the day-to-day activities of the Zimbabwe Open University. More respondents were drawn from regions where the number of staff members is larger. Also more respondents were drawn from the national centre, which has the largest number of employees. The selected respondents were people seen to be linked with the day-to-day activities of ZOU. The total number of respondents was made up of 16 directors and their deputies, 14 administrators from regions and faculties, 28 lecturers from different faculties, 34 records clerks and stores clerks and 14 accounts clerks drawn from regions and the national centre.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the current study the interview formed an integral part of the investigation in the Zimbabwe Open University regional offices, the national centre and at the resource centers. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with regional office staff, national centre staff and cluster staff members in the respective work places. The management, analysis and interpretation of data from interviews involved the mastery of a special set of interpretive practices and narrative techniques. According to Creswell (2007) qualitative researchers use an emerging

qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns and themes. In this case inductive data analysis was used where critical themes emerged out of the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results section begins with data on the breakdown of the distribution of the respondents for the study by region as shown on Table 2. Data is then presented and discussed according to the following emerging themes; the impact of resources on the delivery of quality education; the economic impact on the delivery of quality distance education and the economic impact on the delivery of quality distance education.

Whilst the distance and open university education development record in Zimbabwe indicates significant progress, the reality is a university education system characterized by low quality and limited development of life long skills due to a number of operational and methodological problems. While improving the quality of university education has been a widespread priority, the in depth analysis established that there is need for more to be done in the quality assurance mechanisms at the Zimbabwe Open University. A significant quantitative improvement has been achieved, while more still needs to be done to improve on the quality of education provided. In this regard Devedic et al. (2011) advise open distance learning providers to pay close attention to quality in terms of products, processes, production, delivery systems, and philosophy.

Table 2: Respondents for the study

<i>Region</i>	<i>Regional directors</i>	<i>Administrators</i>	<i>Lecturers</i>	<i>Assistant administrative</i>		
				<i>Stores</i>	<i>Acc</i>	<i>Records</i>
Bulawayo	1	1	3	2	2	1
Midlands	2	1	2	1	1	1
Manicaland	1	1	2	1	1	1
Masvingo	2	1	3	2	2	1
Mash. Central	1	1	2	1	1	1
Mash. West	1	1	2	1	1	1
Mash. East	1	1	2	1	1	1
Mat. North	1	1	2	1	1	1
Mat. South	1	1	2	1	1	1
Harare	2	1	4	2	2	1
National Centre	3	Faculty Admin. 4	Deans of Faculties 4	4	4	4
Total	16	14	28	17	17	14

The Impact of Resources on the Delivery of Quality Education

Translating universal educational opportunities into meaningful educational developments depends on whether the necessary educational resources are available to provide for the acquisition of skills, knowledge and reasoning abilities, which is the focus of University education. On comparing the information from interviews conducted in the ten regional centers, there is a clear indication that effective distance learner-ship requires varied and adequate learning materials. This situation calls for urgent attention, including the re-thinking and restructuring of policies governing the procurement, production and distribution of instructional materials like tutorial letters, modules, and other related learning materials. Devedic et al. (2011) emphasise that learning resources and student support is important and institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered. On the issue of appropriateness of materials for the programmes on offer, commenting on the Virtual Open Distance Learning (VODL) curriculum at Bindura University of Science Education in Zimbabwe, Mpofo et al. (2012) are concerned that the curriculum offered was adopted from the conventional programmes and courses and was not adapted to the needs of distance learning. In the same vein, the European Students Union (2013) argues that quality assurance should have multiple purposes, primarily among them being the enhancement of quality in the learning-process, including study programmes, learning opportunities and facilities and resources available for students.

For the Zimbabwe Open University, a key player in university distance education, providing every student with a full learning kit comprising of enough modules, tutorial letters, assignment questions and other related materials for a semester is an ideal but difficult task. The lack of learning materials like modules in the regions and resource centers was the key issue raised in the interviews. Quality assurance, which according to Harvey and Green (1993) is about making certain that there are systems in place so that the organisation continues to deliver the right stuff every time to meet customers' requirements seems to be lacking. Commenting on the issue of resources at the Zimbabwe Open Uni-

versity, Kurasha and Gwarinda (2010) confirm that, "...while some members of the public were skeptical of, if not hostile to, degrees offered through distance education in general, the university itself found several challenges in terms of resources." A more recent survey, however conducted by the researchers just before the finalisation of the paper shows that significant progress has been made in the provision of resources since the establishment of the Quality Assurance Unit at the university. Students are now being provided with adequate modules, tutorial letters and assignment questions.

Table 3 shows that almost all the ten regional centers are not fully supplied with the prerequisite resources to provide for quality learning outcomes. The regional centers are the centers for programme implementation: all supervision, activities and assessment take place at the regional centers. In all the ten regional centers covered by the study, the material resources were in serious short supply. The study established that in all the ten regional centers there is a critical shortage of library facilities, and computers for both learners and lecturers. A recent snapshot survey however shows that all lecturers are now adequately provided with computers and that satisfactory quantities of computers are now available in computer laboratories that are connected to the internet in some regions. Out of the ten regions only three regions had sufficiently furnished libraries, the other seven regions are using small houses for their library, which is not conducive for effective distance learning. These findings agree with findings by Mhishi et al. (2012) on Bindura University's Virtual Open Distance Learning programme where the shortage of reading materials during their studies, notably of textbooks, modules, and other reference books, as well as the shortage of library facilities, was identified as the major handicap by 68.4% of the pre-service trainee teachers interviewed. Similar echoes are made by Mpofo et al. (2012) who found that at Bindura University in Zimbabwe, the problem of electricity created problems of integration of ICT tools (e-mail, fax, internet, television, radio) into the Virtual Open Distance Learning (VODL) programme. They also found that basic communication infrastructure to enable VODL to make use of these technologies was not in place at the centres and that the residential session centres lacked enough laboratory space to cope with the demand of practical subject training.

Table 3: Availability and non-availability of physical infrastructure, equipment and resource materials in regions

Region	Library	Modules	Comfortable tutorial rooms	Electricity		Computers		TV Sets	Furniture		Office space	Stationary	Transport
				For students	For tutors	For students	For tutors		For students	For tutors			
Bulawayo	Yes	Not enough	Yes	Yes	No	Yes but obsolete	No	No	Yes	No	Not enough	1 Pick-up	
Midlands	No	Not enough	No	Yes	No	Yes but old	No	Not enough	Not enough	No	Not enough	1 small car	
Manicaland	No	Not enough	No	Yes	No	Yes but old	Yes	Yes	Not enough	Yes	Yes not enough	1 Pick-up	
Masvingo	No	Not enough	Yes	Yes	No	Yes but old	Yes	Yes	Not enough	No	Not enough	1 pick up	
Mash. Central	No	Not enough	No	Use secondary schools	No	Yes but old	Not enough	Not enough	Not enough	No	Not enough	1 pick-up	
Mash. West	No	Not enough	No	Yes	No	Yes but old	Not enough	Not enough	Not enough	No	Not enough	1 pick-up	

On aggregating information from regional centers under-resourcing in some regions in terms of infrastructure, learning materials, emerged. A study by Nyerere et al. (2012) in Kenya also shows that some of the student respondents felt that their study centres were not adequately utilized in providing them with study materials as they had to travel to the main centres for the materials. While all the ten regional centres in this study had computer laboratories for students and lecturers, in some regions, for example Matabeleland North and South while lecturers were connected to the internet, internet facilities for students still needed to be installed. Four out of ten regional centers were operating from permanent premises. The other six regional centers are operating from temporary premises, signalling the need for permanent premises for all regions. A study by Nyerere et al. (2012) in Kenya also found that programme delivery was not consistent across all the geographical regions represented in the study and that infrastructure outside of major cities remained inadequate. Working with quality as perfection notion, in which according to Middlehurst and Campbell (2003) quality assurance arrangements are designed to ensure that provision and providers meet certain expectations often in the form of formal criteria and standards to ensure levels of comparability and degrees of consistency in educational processes, more still needs to be done to achieve comparability and consistency in educational processes in all the ten regional centres of the Zimbabwe Open University.

Good teaching and learning infrastructure such as well-ventilated classrooms, library facilities, and internet laboratories are important for effective tutoring and learning. One of the faculty deans noted that, achieving quality university education would require unprecedented development and refurbishment of infrastructures in most of the regional centers. One of the regional directors interviewed noted that proper physical structures are a key-enabling factor in improving the quality of university education. He noted that the quality of university education might not improve since demand and expanded access continue to exceed supply and resources for infrastructure and educational materials continue to diminish. This is in line with Watkins (2000) who notes that learning can be constrained by dilapidated infrastructure, in-

adequate facilities, and limited supply of learning materials and weak tutorial sessions, which inhibit rather than nourish the potential of students. Eight out of ten regional centres in this study reported that they were operating under critical shortages of printing ink, bond paper and the necessary equipment for research activities for lecturers. To make distance education work, Devedic et al. (2011) advised that a providing institution's plans for offering programmes of study by distance learning should be financially underwritten for the full period during which students will be studying the programmes.

While ODL is seen as an educational process in which tutors and learners are separated in space for some time of study and in which learning materials take over some of the traditional roles of the tutor, the students may fail to purchase the necessary materials to provide for quality learning outcomes. One of the directors from the national centre noted that, learning materials play a central role in open distance education, and provision is made in the university system for students to interact with tutors as a means of support. This basic requirement could however not be met due to inhibiting transport costs for students to travel to regional centres for tutorials. Equally the same regional staff cannot afford travelling costs to resource centres to interact and provide student-support services. In this regard, lessons can be learnt from the United Kingdom (UK) where according to Tait (2014) significant in the construction of the learner support system of the Open University in UK was the creation of a range of study centres where support was delivered on as local a basis as possible, together with a regional centre infrastructure to support them along with other devolved operational tasks. Similarly, respondents in a study by Nyerere et al. (2012) felt that they did not receive adequate student support services, and they did not receive feedback on their assignments and examinations on time. In the same vein, in a study by Sikwibele and Mungoo (2009) interviews with the teachers who were learning through distance education revealed that their greatest challenge was the minimal learner support from tutors and citing Kember (1989) explain that learners also experience feelings of isolation and stress due to lack of organizational support, which may eventually lead to non-completion.

The Economic Impact on the Delivery of Quality Distance Education

While high quality university education is the most important investment for making progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals adopted by the Zimbabwe Open University and other distance education associations, Zimbabwe was facing a period of time during which total output of the economy was declining and could not sustain quality educational programmes. A sustained input and growth in distance education to improve the service to students and enhance the effectiveness of the organizations itself has been greatly affected by economic downturn and inflation in Zimbabwe. Quality distance education entails that a student who enters an education programme exits with the required standard of competence and cognitive development as instituted by the university. This can prove difficult under deteriorating economic conditions. In this regard, Kurasha and Gwarinda (2010) commenting on quality assurance at the Zimbabwe Open University assert that financing quality assurance remains an uphill struggle at the university in the prevailing economic environment but efforts must be increased to sustain it. One of the regional directors indicated that the total direct costs of open distance learning in Zimbabwe have exceeded the levels of expenditure by central government. This has resulted in the excess being borne by the students through payments of fees but still this has not made a difference since the majority of students are failing to raise the required fees. One of the directors at the national centre noted that it was now recognized that university education institutions in Zimbabwe were severely under-funded in relation to what the universities were trying to achieve. On the issue of state underfunding of the Zimbabwe Open University and the limitation of the university's own resources Kurasha and Gwarinda (2010:5) note that, "With ten Regional Centres in addition to the National Centre, ZOU needs the requisite personnel to monitor and evaluate all operations to ensure uniformity and unity of purpose...the state, while appreciating the necessity of requisite human resources, is only able to meet the need at a very slow pace while the university itself is unable to do much."

Although some students may be able to meet the costs and find the necessary funds to fi-

nance their education the significant majority are failing due to the existing economic environment. A programme coordinator from one of the faculties noted that the high levels of course repetition and programme drop-out point to low levels of system inefficiency and ineffectiveness. He noted that in more than 60% of the regions more than 40% of the students repeat two or more courses due to pressure exerted by the economic environment. In addition, ZOU draws most of its students from adults in employment who raise their fees from that employment. Most students are making a sacrifice to continue with education, given the need to finance their household expenditures under a difficult economic environment. In this regard, citing Kember (1989), Sikwibele and Mungoo (2009) note that learners engaged in distance education are usually adults and isolates variables linked to attrition, such as income, the learners' ability to integrate the demands of off-campus study with family, work, and social commitments.

Staff Training and Development

The quality of distance education, like the quality of any product depends on the provider of the product. From a business analogy, the most fundamental requirement for good quality products is the presence of a well-motivated and skilled manpower. It is well known that universities, like any other educational institutions in Zimbabwe, have been hit by skills flight in the face of the melting economic environment. One of the programme leaders at the national centre noted that ZOU as institution has failed to attract highly qualified and experienced lecturers for most of the distance education programmes especially commerce and science where the university competes with industry and international non-governmental organizations. The Human Resources Director noted that many qualified and senior lecturers and data capture clerks left for more attractive packages with non-governmental organizations or for overseas to lecture in other universities. The need to train the newly recruited novice lecturers who might not have experience in distance education therefore becomes critical. Sixty percent of the lecturers interviewed noted that it was common knowledge that an improvement in the quality of university education depends on the quality of the lecturer who is at the heart of every university educa-

tion system. The study established that nothing was currently in place to motivate lecturers in form of development or staff orientation towards the new concept of distance open learning. It was surprising to note that seventy percent of the lecturers interviewed in this study were not computer literate yet as Stella and Gnanam (2004) show, Distance Education programs are increasingly delivered through satellites, computers or other technological means. Lecturers who are illiterate in the use of information communication technologies might result in one of the quality concerns in distance learning programs which according to Hope and Guiton (2006) is the limited use of technology and more dependence on traditional methods of instruction which might not be suitable distance education students. The study established that so far lecturers had marginally benefited from activities of the department of training and development. One of the lecturers noted that there were no Internally Driven Lecturer Development (IDLD) activities to promote effective learnership. Devedic et al. (2011) advise that institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved with the teaching of students is qualified and competent to do so. Similarly as Nyerere et al. (2012) show, having well-trained and competent staff is important in providing quality open distance learning, yet in the effort to get open distance learning programmes into operation in Kenya, insufficient preparation, time, and funding had been given to staff training. In the same vein, a study conducted in Zimbabwe by Mpofu et al. (2012) showed that a majority of the lecturers facilitating open distance learning had no experience in distance education methodology. As Reju and Olakulehin (2008) so cogently put it, it must be noted that the process of quality assurance in open and distance learning commences with the academics that should not only be qualified, but must also have passion for and commitment to distance education as a mode of learning. In this regard, Atenas et al. (2014) advise that engaging with open practices requires expertise, support, time and commitment and universities need to provide both the support for developing the expertise and the time for academics to explore this new world as in general academics are positive and committed to embracing new practices, but they are also scared and worried, as new technologies are not their natural environment.

In addition to appropriate training qualitative improvement in the form of teaching is also greatly affected by the motivation and commitment of lecturers. A survey of regional lecturers' responses indicated that most of the lecturers were not satisfied with their working conditions and this could be negatively affecting their delivery of instruction. One of the lecturers indicated that work overload on the part of lecturers was one of the factors which had negatively affected their participation in research and publication activities, which are core business for the lecturer. Echoing these findings, Nyerere et al. (2012) cite a National Education Association (NEA) survey in the United States which reported that teaching staff members' top concern about distance education was that they would do more work for the same amount of pay.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the Zimbabwe Open University has played a significant role in widening access to higher education for the previously marginalised population. While such a quantitative expansion is lauded the study concludes that in the domain of quality, more still needs to be done. Inadequate resources were identified as a major constraint to the university's quality assurance while the training and orientation of new staff and staff inherited from the University of Zimbabwe (a traditional face to face tuition institution), needs to be accelerated. Lecturer development through Internally Driven Lecturer Development (IDL) would be a good starting point. Resources permitting, the building of the university's own infrastructure in all the ten regions would go a long way in standardising services for its students.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Like any other study, this study was not without limitations. As the university under study had sites across the country, the major challenge was accessing all stakeholders who could have enriched the interview data. The sampling method used however ensured that views obtained were representative of the general university population. One other limitation was the fact that one of the authors was a staff member at the time of the study, bringing in the issue of objectivity versus subjectivity when research-

ing one's own context. The involvement of the second author served as a moderation for any bias that might have resulted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the discussion and conclusion, the following recommendations are advanced;

- ♦ Well-coordinated capacity-building programmes should be developed in order to provide Open Distance Learning institutions comprising top management, administrators and students representatives with skills and competencies to enhance the quality of Open Distance Learning. There is need to establish a Lecturer Development Centre (LDC) for open distance lecturers to assist in the delivery of development support programmes for lecturers. Such a centre could offer credit bearing qualifications in higher education studies in general and quality assurance in particular.
- ♦ Adequate physical resources, equipment, learning facilities and sound management practices are seen as preconditions for the provision of quality distance education. In the prevailing harsh economic environment, it is important that Open Distance Learning institutions seek co-operation from potential stakeholders like commerce and industry to assist in uplifting standards of education through financial sponsorship.

Resources being available, central government should establish a dedicated higher education quality assurance fund for the assurance, enhancement and development of quality teaching and learning. The Zimbabwe Council on Higher Education would be the appropriate body to administer such a fund.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Fertile ground exists for research in quality assurance distance education. Further research could be conducted on the impact of on-line tutoring in open and distance education. In addition further research can be conducted on how distance learning institutions could partner with face to face institutions in order to share infrastructure of these institutions. Finally research could be conducted on the benefits of open educational resources and the extent to which distance education students access and use these.

REFERENCES

- Atenas J, Havemann L, Priego E 2014. Opening teaching landscapes: The importance of quality assurance in the delivery of open educational resources. *Open Praxis*, 6(1): 29-43.
- Belawati T, Zuhairi A 2007. The practice of a quality assurance system in open and distance learning: A case study at Universitas Terbuka Indonesia. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 8(1): 1-15.
- Biggs J 2001. The reflective institution: Assuring and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. *Higher Education*, 41(3): 221-238.
- Council on Higher Education 2004. *Higher Education Quality Committee Criteria for Institutional Audits*. Pretoria: CHE.
- Council on Higher Education 2014. *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance*. Pretoria: CHE.
- Creswell JW (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions*. 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Devedzic V, Krstajic B, Radulovic A, Kraljevski I 2011. Analysis of Existing Practices for Quality Assurance in Distance Learning Report 1.1 Enhancing Quality Distance Learning at Western Balkan Higher Education Institutions. From <<http://www.dlweb.kg.ac.rs/files/DEV1.1%20EN.pdf>> (Retrieved on 31 May 2013).
- European Students Union 2013. Policy Paper on Quality of Higher Education. From <<http://www.esu-online.org/news/article/6064/2013-Policy-paper-on-quality-of-higher-education/>> (Retrieved on 6 May 2014.)
- Filippakou O, Tapper T 2008. Quality assurance and quality enhancement in higher education: Contested territories? *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62(1/2): 84-100.
- Gvaramadze I 2008. From quality assurance to quality enhancement in the European higher education area. *European Journal of Education*, 43(4): 443-445.
- Harvey L, Green D 1993. Defining quality. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 18(1): 9-34.
- Hope A, Guiton P 2006. *Strategies for Sustainable Open and Distance Learning*. London: Macmillan Publishers.
- Jung I, Wong TM, Li C, Baigaltugs S, Belawati T 2011. Quality assurance in Asian distance education: Diverse approaches and common culture. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 12(6): 63-83.
- Kis V 2005. Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education: Current Practices in OECD Countries and a Literature Review on Potential Effect. From <www.oecd.org/edu/tertiary/review> (Retrieved on 5 September 2012).
- Kurasha P, Gwarinda TC 2010. Financing a sustainable quality assurance model for national development through open and distance learning in higher education: The Zimbabwean experience. *International Journal of Open and Distance Learning*, 2(1): 1-9.
- Maila MW, Pitsoe VJ 2012. The praxis of quality assurance in open distance learning contexts. *International Journal of Educational Sciences*, 4(1): 7-14.
- Masuko L 2003. Current Performance of the Education Sector in Zimbabwe: Key Policy Challenges Facing the Sector. *Paper Presented at Workshop on Sectoral Economic Development, Policy Challenges and the Way Forward*, held at Harare International Conference Centre, Harare, Zimbabwe, June 2003.
- Middlehurst R, Campbell C 2003. *Quality Assurance and Borderless Higher Education: Finding Pathways through the Maze*. London: The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education.
- Kariwo MT 2007. Widening access in higher education in Zimbabwe. *Higher Education Policy*, 20: 45-59.
- Mishi, M, Bhukuvhani CE, Sana AF 2012. Science teacher training programme in rural schools: An ODL lesson from Zimbabwe. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13(1): 72-86.
- Mpofu V, Samukange T, Kusure LM, Zinyandu TM, Denhere C et al. 2012. Challenges of virtual and open distance science teacher education in Zimbabwe. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13(1): 207-219.
- Mulu Nega K 2012. *Quality and Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education: Critical Issues and Practical Implications*. PhD Thesis, Unpublished. The Netherlands, Enschede: University of Twente.
- Ndebele C 2014. Bridging the partition between quality assurance units and educational development centres at university: Leverage points for quality development and enhancement. *Journal of Social Sciences*, (In Press).
- Nyerere JKA, Gravenir FQ, Mse GS 2012. Delivery of open, distance, and e-learning in Kenya. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13(3): 185-205.
- Olubor RO, Ogonor BO 2008. Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning in National Open University of Nigeria: Concepts, Challenges, Prospects and Recommendations. *Paper Presented at the 2nd ACDE Conference and General Assembly* held at Eko Hotel and Suites, Lagos, Nigeria, July 8th to 11th, 2008.
- Parri J 2006. Quality in higher education. *Vadya Management*, 2(1): 107-111.
- Patton MQ 2001. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. London: Sage Publishers.
- Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland 2012. *Enhancement-led Institutional Review Handbook*. London: QAA.
- Reju SA, Olakulehin FK 2008. Re-thinking the Internal Quality Assurance Processes of Distance Learning Systems. From <<http://www.academia.edu/1402149/>> (Retrieved on 20 May 2013).
- Southern African Regional Universities Association 2013. Zimbabwe Open University. From <<http://www.sarua.org/>> (Retrieved on 8 June 2013).
- SAUVCA's National Quality Assurance Forum 2002. *Quality Assurance in South African Universities: Views from the SAUVCA's National Quality Assurance Forum*. Pretoria: SAUVCA.
- Sikwibele AL, Mungoo JK 2009. Distance learning and teacher education in Botswana: Opportunities and

- challenges. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 10(4): 1-16.
- Stella A, Gnanam A 2004. Quality assurance in distance education: The challenges to be addressed. *Higher Education*, 47: 143-160.
- Tait A 2014. From place to virtual space: Reconfiguring student support for distance and e-learning in the digital age. *Open Praxis*, 6(1): 5-16.
- University of Aberdeen 2007. The Quality Assurance Handbook. From <<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/quality/section2.shtml#ftn2>> (Retrieved on 20 May 2012).
- Watkins R 2000. How distance education is changing workforce development. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 1(3): 241-246.
- Woodhouse D 2013. Global trends in quality assurance. *Quality Approaches in Higher Education*, 5(1): 3-7.