Removing Stumps and Blocks for Students to Reach the Unreached Through Quality Assurance at the Zimbabwe Open University: A Case Study

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Abstract: *This study sought to determine students' perceptions of quality systems that enhance their achievement of high quality education through open and distance learning at the Zimbabwe Open University. The study employed the descriptive survey design and was both quantitative and qualitative. The questionnaire used as a data gathering instrument had both open and closed-ended sections. A sample of 76 students was extracted from a population of 250 students using the convenience sampling method. The study found out that students regard quality marking of assignments, quality tutorials, quality modules, efficient processing of examinations and results, competent tutors, well stocked library and research facilities as enhancing quality. They went on to say high quality programmes that are market driven, professional handling of learner challenges and customer care by frontline staff will propel them to greater heights. Among others, the study recommends regular monitoring and evaluation of all student services by the quality assurance unit to enable students to reach the unreached.*

Key words: quality assurance, module, open and distance learning,

INTRODUCTION

There has been an exponential expansion of open and distance learning (Gilroy, *et al* 2001). Human being is a positive asset and a precious national resource which needs to be cherished, nurtured and developed with tenderness and care, coupled with dynamism. Quality education can play this role (Pant, 1986). In a very real sense ODL provides opportunities for continuing lifelong education beyond rhetoric and into reality (Hedge, 1996). The need to provide high standard ODL courses cannot succeed without quality assurance. Quality assurance has become a buzz-word in higher education and with regard to open and distance learning (ODL) in particular (Thurab- Nkhosi and Marshall, 2009). Quality assurance for distance higher education is one of the main concerns among institutions and stakeholders today (Belawati and Zuhairi, 2007; Inglis, 2005). Daniel *et al.* (2007) point out that the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) developed 24 benchmarks covering areas such as course development, course structure, student support, institutional support, teaching and learning, assessment and evaluation. The categories covered in the guidelines are system design, programme design, management of programme delivery, student development and support, student communication and student assessment.

Higher education systems for many countries have been undergoing fundamental reforms, especially in recent years, to respond to the trend of globalization and to meet the ever-changing expectations of the respective communities in their development into knowledge-based societies (Law, 2010). Globalization has provided a rationale for restructuring the higher education systems worldwide, mainly to meet the need for a workforce that is equipped with not only the traditional discipline knowledge and skills, but also a broad range

of generic capabilities. The restructuring has in fact resulted in a shift that emphasizes the idea of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) that equips the students with "operational competence" for the world of work, and a trend that favours the discourses about privatization, marketization, commodification, managerialism and performativity (Blackmore, 2002; Peters, 2004). To many practitioners, the recent industrialization of the language for education, through which students become "customers" or "consumers", the curricula are not taught but "delivered", aims and objectives of courses are changed to "learning outcomes", and understanding and knowledge are replaced by "competence" and "information" respectively, has also risked the downgrading of certain key values within education (Coffield and Williamson, 1997), and the transforming of education into a market place where the model of transactional deals between traders may tend to overshadow the implicit moral obligation of educational practices that strive to enable individuals to realize their potentials (Gibbs, 2001). These changes result into a formidable external demands for quality assurance (QA), especially those from government agencies, that are considered by many as being ostensibly about the maintenance of excellence but fundamentally about accountability and control (Harker; Cartwright cited in Law, 2010: 65).

To contend with the rapid expansion in the number of higher education institutions, and in enrollment, it has become necessary to have in place mechanisms to assure that adequate resources are continually available and that the process of higher education provision is at least satisfactory and consistent with international norms. The international element of the demand on quality of resources and delivery is accentuated by the pervading influence of globalization, the contingent ascendancy of market forces in the world economy and the opening up of national, political and economic borders to free trade in services. These factors have had a great impact on the need for quality assurance in higher education in recent times. In Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) carries the mandate for quality assurance in higher education provision for both colleges and universities. In line with meeting the International Standards Organisation (ISO) the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) opened the Quality Assurance Unit with a full directorate and there is a Regional Quality Assurance Coordinator in each of the ten regional administrative centres.

Belawati and Zuhairi's (2007) outline the background to and the processes involved in developing a quality assurance system for institutions, including developing job manuals, raising awareness and commitment among staff, internal and external assessment and benchmarking. They emphasize that quality in ODL covers a number of aspects which include pedagogical processes, production and delivery systems and philosophy.

Robinson (1995) and Parker (2006) attempt to provide examples of what a quality assurance framework might look like based on existing frameworks throughout the world. Robinson's (1995) in particular provides a checklist, which attempts to map the areas that a quality assurance system would need to cover. These include a quality policy and plan, identifying critical functions, specification of standards, involvement of users, staff involvement, documentation, training and staff development, monitoring and costs. Robinson also highlights the fact that approaches used for managing quality in ODL reflect those developed for business and industry such as quality control, quality assurance and total quality management.

Parker's (2006) work looks at the commonalities between the frameworks for quality assurance and identifies these commonalities as providing clear statements on educational goals, sustaining the institutional commitment to support learners, engaging in a collaborative process of discovery, which contributes to improving the teaching/learning

environment. For the purposes of this paper however, the case of the ZOU will be reviewed in the context of the practical guidelines and processes for quality assurance in Open and Distance Learning (ODL).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Concept of Quality Education

Quality, as a concept, has received much attention in the world although no definitive general agreement on its meaning is known. Harvey and Green (1993) and Njoku (2006) after extensive reviews of the literature conceptualize quality as exceptional, degree of excellence, fitness for purpose, perfection or consistency, value for money. They asserted that quality is a relative concept, meaning different things to different people and that indeed the same person may adopt different conceptualizations at different moments. Also, different stakeholders have different perspective on quality depending on their objective but there is general agreement that the absence of quality will cast doubt on any higher educational endeavour.

The World Conference on Education conceives quality in higher education as: "A multidimensional concept, which should embrace all its functions, and activities: teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, facilities, equipments, services to the community and the academic environment. Stakeholders should be integral part of the institutional evaluating process (Article 11(a) of the World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty First Century: Vision and Action- UNESCO, Paris 1998, quoted in Van Ginkel and Dias, 2007).

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is conceptualized as "a continuous process of evaluating, assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving the quality of higher education system, institutions or programmes. As a regulatory mechanism, quality assurance focuses on both accountability and improvement, providing information and judgment (not ranking) through an agreed and consistent process and well established criteria" (IIEP, 2006). Martin and Stella (2007) have visualized quality assurance as "a generic term used as shorthand for all forms of external quality monitoring, evaluation or review and may be defined as a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (inputs, processes and outcomes) fulfills expectations or measures up to the minimum requirements." Quality assurance may be external or internal. External quality assurance refers to the actions of an external body which assesses the university operations or that of its programmes in order to determine whether it is meeting the standards that have been set, while internal quality assurance refers to the university's or programme's policies and mechanisms for ensuring that it is fulfilling its own purposes as well as the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular (IIEP, 2006).

Quality assurance has been defined as "systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by higher education institutions and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives, and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements" (Harman, 2000:1). Quality assurance facilitates recognition of the standards of awards, serves public accountability purposes, helps inform student choice, contributes to improved teaching learning and administrative processes, and helps disseminate best practices with the goal of leading to overall improvement of higher education systems.

The Need for Quality Assurance

Since the 1990s, quality assurance in distance and higher education has gained serious attention by institutions, stakeholders, and scholars. In response to QA line of inquiry,

institutions have begun to re-define and re-orient their institutional missions and strategic visions to incorporate and address quality issues. Stakeholders interested in ODL have become increasingly interested in quality assurance issues. Learners are demanding better quality educational services and provisions. This means ODL providers must pay close attention to quality in terms of products, processes, production, delivery systems, and philosophy (COL, 1997). ODL in higher education institutions is under increasing pressure to meet students' demand for flexibility, as students have increasingly diverse background and needs (COL, 1999). It is argued that quality assurance is needed for a number of reasons which include, among others:

- demand for efficiency and competitiveness
- increasing mobility, globalization and the cross-border recognition of qualifications
- increasing of private interests in higher education
- the challenge of the new modes of delivery
- expansion in enrollments
- market demand for quality and relevance of education
- the challenge of brain-drain

Common Approaches to Addressing Educational Quality Issues
Various approaches have been proposed for addressing the issues of quality in higher education. In this paper, the development and relevant issues of three commonly adopted approaches, namely total quality management, performance indicator and external quality monitoring are briefly reviewed.

Total Quality Management
Total quality management (TQM) is a product of the market ideologies of the 1980s and the managerialism that accompanied them (Williams, 1993). Its introduction into the educational context was an attempt to emulate the quality success found in some industrial and commercial settings (Harvey, 1995), to enable the institutions to cope with the increasing financial pressures and the fierce competition in the sector as a result of education reform.

Although there is no single authoritative definition of TQM, a number of relevant features can be found in most approaches inspired by it, including constant quality improvement as a never-ending goal, cultural change within the organization, customer-driven definitions of quality, the concept of quality chain for the production or service process where at each point there is a customer-supplier relationship, quality being built-in at each stage of the process (instead of being controlled at the final stage) and its improvement being assisted by statistical techniques, and the encouragement of organization-wide involvement in quality via team work, and management commitment to quality via appropriate organizational structure (Harvey, 1995). As pointed out by Harvey (1995), at the heart of TQM is a concept of customer receiving a product, where the quality of the product is defined by customers, and improved through reduction in variation. Its key ideas originated from management theories that are mainly applied in the industrial sector, TQM has its own embedded contradictions (e.g. collectivism versus individualism, manipulation versus empowerment, and standardization versus innovative learning) between which an appropriate balance is to be found (Harnesk and Abrahamsson, 2007). In fact, the concept of educational quality is not defined by a single group of customers, but is affected by the requirements of different stakeholders and the nature and purposes of the education concerned. TQM also fails to address the transformation and student-participative nature of education, its emphasis on reduction in variation (i.e. consistency) is desirable for mass-production of components or customer products, but does not fit the exploratory nature of student learning.

Performance Indicators

Amid the education reforms around the world, performance indicators have gradually become standard components of the language of educational quality. A number of researchers assert that quality cannot be improved unless measured (Deming, 1986; Dill, 1995). Fitz-Gibbon (1996) suggests that education is a highly complex system, and to get quality into it "the best strategy lies in improving the information in the system, particularly by defining and measuring the many outcomes that we care about and feeding back the measurements to the units of responsibility". In reality, the use of indicators has been fuelled by an increasing concern on accountability, mainly on the part of government agencies and ministerial officials who are responsible for ascertaining the appropriate delivery of educational service at an affordable cost. It is also affected by a concern on the transparency of institutional performance. Such a concern has motivated the formulation of quality policies to require an appropriate revelation of academic quality information to the public, and this requirement is expected to also motivate educational institutions to maintain and improve the quality of their provisions.

A performance indicator can generally be defined as "an item of information collected at regular intervals to track the performance of a system" (Fitz-Gibbon, 1996). For real-life implementation of the idea, it is worth noting that in a recent review in the UK higher education sector (HEFCE, 2007), indicators being used or proposed include those relating to widening participation (e.g. indicators of students' social class and parental education), student progression (e.g. indicators of students' non-continuation from first year and return after year out) and proxies of educational outcomes (e.g. indicators of graduates' employment and job quality). In the post-secondary education sector of Hong Kong, they provide relevant information for public consumption, such as their student-staff ratios and the percentage of their students being involved in employment and further studies immediately after graduation. Viewed from the input-process-output paradigm of an education system that is commonly used in school effectiveness research (Teddlie and Reynolds, 2001), the use of these indicators can be criticized for their lack of appropriate regard to the relevant aspects of the educational process or outcomes, especially those relating to student development which are arguably the most important measures of educational quality. Yorke (1998) analyses a number of indicators relating to student development, including students' entry and exit performances (and the associated concept of value-added), teaching quality, student retention and completion, as well as graduate placement in employment, and raises concern about the trustworthiness of these indicators from the perspectives of fitness for purpose, validity, reliability and possible side effect (i.e. concerns on an indicator's corruptibility and potential for leading to perverse behaviours). Also, as pointed out by Yorke (1998), due to the range of interests that are being brought to bear on the performance of the education system:

> *"...*performance indicators cannot be construed in value-neutral terms, or as mere management statistics...They exist in political arenas of varying levels of inclusivity... and may be used for purposes for which they were not designed... For this reason (among others), the interpretation of a performance indicator is very much open to contest."

The current focus in the development of performance indicators is in fact placed on accountability purposes; however some researchers argue that the indicators currently being employed are still too crude to serve as the primary vehicle for achieving accountability (Massy, 1997).

Despite the unavoidable inadequacies of performance indicators, it is believed that under suitable arrangements their employment in the quality endeavor can still be fruitful. An example of such an arrangement is proposed by Yorke (1996) which views an education system as a nested set of levels, with the higher levels being more responsible for the accountability aspect of educational quality, and the lower levels (e.g. the programme or the course) more responsible for the enhancement aspect. As suggested by Yorke (1998), when one moves from the higher levels towards the lower levels, the indicators that are of importance change and they also tend to get softer, i.e. they are much more subjective and are related to student experience such as the quality of teaching and learning and student satisfaction. Yorke (1995) also argues that to be effective in measuring and improving educational quality, "it is not the performance indicators that constitute the primary problem but the context in which they may be used".

External Quality Monitoring
With drastic changes currently taking place in higher education worldwide, external quality monitoring (EQM) has grown rapidly and has become a crucial part of the dominant model of delegated accountability through which quality is used to legitimise policy (Harvey and Knight, 1996). It also represents a shift from quantitative indicators to qualitative evaluations, in part reflecting a growing awareness of the need for placing a higher priority on quality enhancement. The relevant literature (Dill, 2000; Harvey and Newton, 2004, 2007) suggests that there are currently three major approaches to EQM, i.e. accreditation, assessment and audit (or quality-process review), which are usually conducted by QA agencies. From the principal-agent perspective (Dill, 1995; Hoecht, 2006; Kivisto¨, 2008), these agencies serve as agents that supposedly work on behalf of the public interest (i.e. the principals) to monitor the institutions and safeguard the quality of provisions in an education sector.

Accreditation determines whether an institution or a programme meets threshold quality criteria for the offering of a license to operate, and its focus is usually more comprehensive than the other two approaches, encompassing the mission, resources and relevant processes of the institution or programme. The major aim of assessment is to pass a graded judgment on academic quality levels and its focus is usually placed on delivered performance at the subject or programme level. The focus of audit is "the processes that are believed to produce quality and the methods by which institutions, faculties and departments assure themselves that quality has been attained" (Massy, 1997).

These processes and methods are later developed as the concept of education quality work that assumes a key role in the Teaching and Learning Quality Process Review of the universities (Massy, 1997; Massy and French, 2001; HKUGC, 2005). The three EQM approaches adopt common methodologies whose core elements include self-assessment by the institutions, followed by peer review in the form of panel visits, and supported by statistical or performance indicators.

A major purpose of EQM should be to act as catalysts for internal improvement within institutions; however, in the current implementation "compliance and accountability have been the dominant purposes and any improvement element has been secondary" (Harvey and Newton, 2004). In her impact study on student learning, Horsburgh (1999) identifies the elements contributing to quality as transformation and constructs a framework that structures her observations, interviews and document reviews. She finds that "quality monitoring processes had quite a narrow impact, and were not concerned with the complexity of a whole teaching programme, or issues such as leadership or the culture in which students learn", and

that "the greatest impact on student learning was the curriculum, factors that influence the curriculum, and the teachers", and "the most direct impact on student learning was from teacher practices, how they help students learn and the assessment practices they employed" (Horsburgh, 1999). However, in a discussion between representatives of QA agencies reported by Harvey (2006), the main impacts of EQM being identified include changes evident from one review to the next, improvements in performance indicators, and adoption of formal internal quality processes by institutions, student feedback indicating positive changes and employer perceptions about the improvement in graduate abilities.

In regard to the micro-politics of quality monitoring, the close-up studies of Newton (2000, 2002, 2003) based on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with both frontline staff and academic managers, a main theme of these studies is the implementation gap of quality policy resulting from the tension between quality at the level of management objectives and quality as manifested at the operational level through the activities of frontline staff. Newton identifies the factors influencing the implementation of quality strategies and argues that situational factors and context are crucial in quality development. To seek improvement in the practice from a more macroscopic perspective, Harvey and Newton (2004, 2007) suggest that for quality monitoring to be transformed to make it transforming, attention should be focused on internal processes and motivators, and instead of politically acceptable methods, appropriate research methodologies should be adopted. Jones and De Saram (2005) argue that useful changes can be introduced through focusing on a philosophy of a lean system, and developing a culture of trust between staff and management.

ZOU is an ODL university and has engaged the services of a quality assurance unit for continuous improvement of the services which is a prerequisite for ODL institutions. Students have great hope with this move and have expectations from the quality assurance unit on how it would assist them to reach the unreached. ZOU's vision is to become a 'World class open and distance learning university, this dream may not be a reality if quality assurance fails to click and fail to measure up to expectations, the vision will remain unfulfilled, and this becomes a problem that is investigated in this study.

RESEARCH QUESTION
The research question is: *What are the students' perceptions of quality systems that enhance their achievement of high quality education through open and distance learning in the Zimbabwe Open University?*

METHODOLOGY
Research Design
The research employed the descriptive survey design. Babbie (1997) notes that descriptive survey is a method of research that describes what we see over and beyond. Thus the researchers chose this method as it allowed students to say exactly what they felt about the factors they consider to bring about quality education for them to reach to greater heights. The study was both quantitative and qualitative because the two types of research can be used effectively in the same research project (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). For this reason, the questionnaire used had both closed and open-ended sections that yielded quantitative and qualitative data.

Data Collection Instrument
The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire with statements to which the respondents agreed or disagreed. Self-completion was selected as the most appropriate tool because it is an effective small-scale research tool and knowledge needed is controlled by the

questions, therefore it affords a great deal of precision and clarity (McDonough and McDonough, 1997). The chief shortcoming of closed-ended questions lies in the researchers' structuring of the questions (Babbie, 1997). Thus, respondents in this study were given an opportunity to elaborate on issues raised to minimise on this weakness by the use of both closed and open ended questions (Cohen and Manion, 1994).

RESULTS

Theme	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree
Quality tutorials improve student performance	76(100)	0	0
Tutorials clear hunches students have	60(79)	6(8)	10(13)
All exam processes must be monitored	68(90)	3(4)	5(6)
Students' information must be accurately processed	76(100)	0	0
Results should be accurately processed and published in time	70(92)	6(8)	0
Student queries should be attended to without delay	74(97)	2(3)	0
Well stocked library facilities improve student performance	57(75)	6(8)	13(17)
Internet facilities improve research output	70(92)	0	6(8)
Knowledgeable tutors are helpful to student learning	74(97)	0	2(3)
Distance teaching needs competent tutors	57(75)	6(8)	13(17)
Hiring people with positive attitude help to give quality service	75(98)	1(2)	0
Assignment marking has to be done in time	60(79)	2(3)	14(18)
Students' problems need to be attended to in time	68(90)	4(5)	4(5)
Results must be published in time	55(72)	5(7)	16(21)
Programmes of high quality make students marketable	76(100)	0	0
Programmes must be market driven	68(90)	3(4)	5(6)
Needs of target market should be determined by programmes	50(66)	6(8)	20(26)
Students need quality customer care practices	69(91)	7(9)	0
Customer care by front line staff retains students	76(100)	0	0
Quality assurance removes roadblocks in our learning	76(100)	0	0
Curriculum flexibility meets student needs	40(52)	1(2)	35(46)
Modules should be updated to meet knowledge changes	76(100)	0	0

Sample and Sampling Procedure

The population for this study was 250 students at the Masvingo Regional Campus of the ZOU who were attending weekend school tutorials. A sample of 76 students was conveniently sampled. This study focused on respondents who had the knowledge and experience in ODL, who had time to complete the questionnaire and were willing to take part

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in the investigation (Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke, 2004). All 76 students had completed at least two semesters in the university.

The questionnaires were administered to the students during weekend school sessions. Since different faculties had weekend schools on different dates and different venues, data were collected over three weekends. Permission to administer the questionnaires was sought from the regional director of the campus as well as the respective programme leaders of the departments.

Data Analysis
Data collected for this study were analysed thematically. The themes were derived from the key research questions and they were as follows: quality marking of assignments, quality tutorials, quality modules, efficient processing of examinations, competent tutors, well stocked library and research facilities, high quality programmes that are market driven, professional handling of learner challenges, and customer care by front line staff.

Most respondents seemed to indicate that quality assurance cleared stumps and blocks for them to reach greater heights. They agreed that quality assurance removes roadblocks along students' learning paths.

Quality Tutorials
Respondents were of the opinion that quality tutorials are a measure that can remove stumps and blocks for them to get to greater heights. The respondents had the following to say:
- We think that a system that has quality tutorials remove stumps along our way to reach high performance levels;
- Quality assurance can improve the quality of tutorials in all cases in order to enhance performance levels;
- Tutorials form the basic interaction pattern between the student and the tutor and the forum to clear hunches that students have so they should be monitored.

The sentiments seemed to indicate that if tutorials were monitored and quality services were offered by the tutors, then such competence enhance student performance.

Students come to distance education courses with variable expectations of the levels of service and support they will receive from their tutors (Stevensona, MacKeoghb and Sander, 2006). The student should be satisfied with the quality of the tutorial service provided. Thus, they do not promise what they cannot deliver and ensure that they do deliver what they promise (Boulding, *et al*., 1993). Stevenson *et al.* (1997) argue that trying to improve quality of provision by only using end-of-course feedback exercises is flawed and fails to address a fundamental issue about quality and quality assurance. We believe that quality in distance learning tutor support can be measured and improvements can be implemented by having tutors actively involved in collecting and responding to students' views.

Efficient Processing of Information
Respondents felt that quality assurance should monitor processing of students' information, examinations and results. The following sentiments were given:
- All examinations, if quality assured, will help to motivate students to work hard;
- Efficient processing of results would raise the standard of student performance;
- Students' information should be checked so that they are not demoralized when their details are mixed up;

- Processing of results queries has to be quality assured in order to give feedback in time for smooth continuity.

The feelings given by respondents indicate that quality assurance would improve and bring about efficient processing of examinations and results.

It is argued that a distance teaching system needs to have efficient technological infrastructure in data processing for academic and administrative management and internal circulation of information for assuring good communications with students (Trindade, 2000:11).

Well Stocked Library and Research Facilities

It was evident from the respondents that quality assurance is vital in checking the provision of quality library and research facilities. Students were of the feeling that the presence of quality assurance would help them to improve their research skills through quality library services. They had the following to say:

- Improved library services are a recipe towards good student performance
- Necessary technologies like Internet services would enhance our performance

Research argues that a way out of this dilemma is to put distance education into a small number of selected resource centres where a suitable concentration of the necessary technologies can be made locally available to users (Buitendach, 1997).

Competent Tutors

Respondents felt that quality assurance would help in the recruitment of competent tutors, both part time and full time. In the knowledge creation world, competent tutors can assist students in areas of difficulty and thus help them to reach the unreached. They had the following to say:

- We can get help from knowledgeable tutors
- Distance teaching needs competent tutors
- Effective tutors lift the standards of the students and that of the university
- Quality assurance can help to bring in staff with relevant qualifications

Trindade (2000) argues that it is important to make sure that a suitable number of competent tutors are available and that other student support mechanisms are satisfactory. In a course evaluation on quality issues, students highlighted that knowledgeable tutors bring about quality improvement (Thurab-Nkhosi and Marshall, 2009).

Quality Modules

Respondents were of the opinion that quality assurance brings about quality modules for use by students. This would imply that information in the modules would be of quality and thus meet international standards. The following sentiments were said:

- We can raise our standards with quality modules
- Modules are the key to student success
- Module contents need revisiting to keep with evolutionary changes
- Quality assurance should continuously evaluate modules to keep up the standards

It is argued that most ODL systems in Europe place a strong emphasis on the conception and production of high quality learning materials. Research further argues that knowledge is evolving quite rapidly and courses need to be updated more and more frequently (Trindade, 2000).

Quality Marking of Assignments

The students felt that Quality Assurance unit should monitor the processing of assignments. They raised the following sentiments;

- Quality Assurance should ensure that assignments are marked in time.
- Our assignments have to be moderated.
- Make sure there is proper recording of marks.
- We need to see the Quality Assurance checking the handing in and collection of assignments.

Students in this study felt that the Quality Assurance unit should check and monitor all the processes of assignment handling, marking and recording so that standards are continuously improved in ODL. Assignments form the core aspect of student progress and evaluation have to be monitored closely. Freeman (1999) is of the opinion that feedback is a critical component of open and distance learning systems. This feedback has to be prompt.

Professional Handling of Learner Challenges

Respondents were of the opinion that quality assurance should check to see that learner challenges are professionally handled at all points in the system. They had the following sentiments:

- Students' problems need to be attended to in time
- All student queries should be handled with care
- It is important for Quality assurance to monitor processing of results, ensuring that there are no missing results and that there are no legendary queries for students

This means ODL providers must pay close attention to quality in terms of processes, delivery systems, products and philosophy (COL, 1997).

Provision of High Quality Programmes that are Market Driven

Respondents held the view that quality assurance should ensure the provision of high quality programmes that are market driven. After completing their degrees, students want to be quickly absorbed by the world market. Some of their sentiments were as follows:

- We love to be quickly absorbed by the world market
- High quality programmes that are market driven are the key to our success

It is argued that the key to achieving the organisation's goals depends on determining the needs and wants of target markets and by delivering the desired services more effectively and efficiently than the competitors (Kotler, 2003).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Quality assurance support services must be effective in order to help students reach the un-reached. Therefore the following recommendations have been made for academic and non-academic staff. There is need to support both the academic and non-academic staff through holding regular workshops with them on various aspects of quality assurance in ODL systems. Such workshops would help them to understand the needs of students, as well as ways of motivating students individually or as a group. In addition, forums like workshops would afford the staff time to share their student experiences and, in the process, learn from one another on how best to deliver quality services.

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