



Open and Distance Learning Assessments Value Chain Challenges: An Explorative Study of BOCODOL School of Business and Management Studies

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Abstract

This empirical study has explored the role and importance of quality assurance through the open and distance assessments value chain systems. A value chain framework is an approach for breaking down the sequence (chain) of Open and Distance learning (ODL) systems into the strategically relevant activities through which efficacy is added to the learners' assignments and examinations systems. This paper has considered the relationship between quality assurance and open and distance education, and between quality assurance and learners' assignments and examinations systems. It is our conviction that quality assurance for distance higher education is a prerequisite that guarantees competitiveness of an institution's qualifications thereby instilling stakeholders' confidence. To instill and retain its desired credibility, an open and distance learning institution should be benchmarked on robust integrated quality assurance processes through the value chain systems. This study focused on assignments and examinations mode of assessment in Business and management studies. Constrained resources (financial, human, technological), outsourcing of the tutors, and lack of information and technology systems were found to be the main challenges against quality sustainable assessment systems. This study was done in Gaborone (Botswana) and Francistown through face to face interviews with eight (8) various stakeholders. While there are many quality drivers towards ODL products, this study found that the main determinants of effective quality assurance through the assessment value chain include effective corporate governance, efficient and effective human capital, modern information technology based systems supported by a sound funding foundation.

Key words: Value chain; Open and Distance learning; Quality assurance; Assessments

INTRODUCTION

ODL was pioneered by Moore in 1973, when he introduced theory of independent study, an important foundation of distance education, which suggests that successful teaching can take place even though teacher and learner are physically separated during the learning process (Galusha, 1998). Open and Distance Learning (ODL can be defined as "an educational model in which the learner is in a remote location from the instructor's and in which the interaction between them is achieved through communication environment" (Bozkaya, 2007). It is now viewed as the fastest growing sector in education worldwide (Simpson, 2006). ODL involves a student-centered approach in which the instructor takes the role of the facilitator and students engage in peer learning (Sahin & Shelley, 2008). Models for ODL as provided by Simpson (2006) are: simple model, catalytically assisted reaction model and production-customer care model. SADC recognize education's pivotal

role in improving economic growth and development in alleviating poverty and in enhancing the quality of life of people (Mukyanuzi, 2011). The potential of any economy (at macro level) and an institution (at micro level) to contribute to capacity building or human capital development is one of the main key performance indicators for developing economies. Knowledge sharing and distribution among the society stakeholders is viewed as a pivotal driving force of economic development. Economic growth and global competitiveness are increasingly driven by knowledge and ODL institutions have been proved to be significant players in providing knowledge sharing platforms (Yeravdeka & Tiwari, 2014). The form and content of programs offered in developing countries need to be understood in the context of contemporary developments which have applied pressure on institutions of higher learning (Naidoo, 2007). Generally there is a general assumption that there is a positive correlation between high standards of inputs and high



quality outputs. All stakeholders desire and expect quality results and value for money from ODL institutions (Latchem, 2012). Distance education uses mediated information and instructions, encompassing all available technologies and a variety of other forms of instruction at a distance to deliver knowledge and skills to the learner (Al-Fahad, 2009). SADC Secretariat noted that there were serious challenges at all levels of education as the region was struggling to achieve its Education for All (EFA) targets (SADC, 2008). As a strategy for ODL programs sustainability, differentiation can be achieved by creating a perception among targeted learners that the course, the program or the institution (e.g. BOCODOL) offerings as a whole are unique in some important way, usually by being of higher quality (Elloum, 2001). The appeal of differentiation is strong for higher education institutions for which image and the perception of quality are important (Elloum, 2001). Differentiation perception among stakeholders allows the institution to charge higher fees and out-compete rivals without compromising standards and revenue (Elloum, 2001). Most unfortunately neither Non-Formal Education (NFE) nor ODL are universally held in high regard (Latchem, 2012). It has been observed that in SADC countries, some higher education eligible people were not entering ODL higher education systems as some people view them as having lower quality education than those through the conventional mode (Mukyanuzi, 2011). There are diverse forms of doubts and suspicions in people's minds that ODL education is of lower status and is of second rate (Latchem, 2012).

Various views in the current ODL dialogue are provided, where some think that quality assurance practices for distance education are essentially the same as those used for traditional education, while others argue that distance education tests conventional assumptions and hence the present mechanisms of quality assurance are not adequate to ensure the quality of distance education (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). Performance of institutions of higher learning in developing countries is perceived to be central to economic success since it is expected that global competition will be enhanced by value-added goods, for example learners assessments (examinations and assignments) as well as complementary services offered to learners, that predominantly dependent on the technological knowledge and skills (Naidoo, 2007). Assessments have been found to shape the how (learners approach) and what (the content) students learn (Scouler, 2006). In enhancing quality of

ODL programs, there are a number of justifications why ODL learners should be given assignments and examinations: a) to evaluate and grade learners; b) to motivate learners to study; c) to add variety to learners learning environment; d) to identify weak areas and correct them; e) to facilitate learners' choices; f) to obtain feedback on their level of performance; g) to provide statistics for the module/course and h) to accredit qualified learners (Brown & Race, 1997). Assessments (for example assignments and examinations) can be thought of in three distinct stages: planning, implementation and reflection, as such these stages constitute the value chain rudiments.

This study was meant to assess the extent of BOCODOL quality mechanisms within the assignments and examinations offering value chain. The study objectives were:

To establish how BOCODOL assignments and examinations are processed.

To determine assignments and examinations related challenges at BOCODOL

To establish the extent of quality assurance systems at BOCODOL

To recommend possible solutions for enhanced examinations and assignments systems

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

This study has attempted to address the following questions:

- How BOCODOL assignments and examinations are processed?
- What are the assignments and examinations related challenges at BOCODOL?
- What is the effectiveness of the assignments and examinations value chain systems at BOCODOL?
- What are the quality assurance systems in place at BOCODOL?
- What are the possible solutions for enhanced examinations and assignments systems?



LITERATURE REVIEW

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Value chain

ODL education and work preparedness competency are the chief levers that propel economies to scale the value chain by optimizing the capacity building potential of their workforce (Yeravdeka & Tiwari, 2014). Value chain is increasingly popular approach to understanding complex policy challenges within the ODL platform (Lowit, Hickey, Gunpat & Phillip, 2015). Value chain is the range of actions required to bring a product/service from production through to final consumption (Lowit *et al.*, 2015). Quality assurance systems applied in educational contexts are generally concerned with inputs, money, staffing, resources and support provided (Latchem, 2012). Inputs for an ODL systems may include the learners, management and administration, staffing, technology and infrastructure, funding and budgeting, collaborative relationships, quality assurance, follow-through to the learning (Ferreira, 2010). In support of the mentioned challenges experienced by ODL institutions, Naidoo (2007) also mentioned that most developing countries poorly perform on the most important parameters that constitute the overall quality of higher education due to a number of constraints for example, resources are limited, there is insufficient infrastructure support, quality of academic staff is mostly at sub-par, pedagogical and andragogical practices are inferior and unproductive, there is inferior and/or non-existent research culture. Higher education institutions in developing countries have been experiencing diverse barriers to achieving intended mandates, and to becoming high performing institutions due to lack of resources and expertise (Naidoo, 2007). He further observed that there are numerous performance inhibitors hindering the development of internationally competitive and high quality systems of education in many developing countries (Naidoo, 2007). Also Yeravdeka & Tiwari (2014) mentioned that vast majority of developing countries are beset with higher education systems that are in gross disrepair (poor quality assurance systems) and the governments are ill-equipped to tackle the situations at hand. To survive in today's highly competitive business environment, any organisation must achieve some competitive advantage (Elloum, 2001). In order to gain competitive edge against its local, regional and international competitor, any Open and distance Learning (ODL) organisation should be seen to be unique and

offering value to its customers. Differentiation in terms of establishing a unique position in the market through quality offering and affordable service will entail value for its uniqueness or fit for the needs of a particular clientele (Dahlman & Utz, 2005).

It has been observed that in majority of cases, ODL encounters lack of physical resources, such as classrooms, few skilled and committed academic and administrative staff and the absence of academic resources such as journals and basic modern related technology (Naidoo, 2007). On another note scholars have observed that Poor performance in ODL is as a result of poor planning, management and monitoring systems (Latchem, 2012). Most developing countries Botswana included, have little educator infrastructure and most governments are unable to readily acquire resources to commit to ODL (Naidoo, 2007). One view suggests that to be competitive and efficient, higher education institutions should incorporate electronic assignments (handling, submission,, marking, return and monitoring) systems, electronic examinations, electronic tutorials (Scouller, 2006). Assessments are an opportunity to obtain feedback on the learners' understanding level, tutors teaching methods effectiveness, and the quality of the examination itself (Brown & Race, 1996). For developing nations, higher education institutions are expected to provide assessments that are relevant and consistent with the intended learning outcomes. To maximise on the benefits of learners, it has also been observed that assessments should be free from bias; they should not provide different playing ground for the candidates (Brown & Race, 1996). ODL learning environment should provide a variety of opportunities for learners to obtain marks like assignments, presentations,, examinations, projects, mid-semester presentations.

Assignments and Examinations Planning

First and foremost, ODL institutions tutors and administrators should communicate to learners about the course module, examination goals, important sections and references. The main objective of an assessment (for example an examination and assignments) is to assess learners' comprehension of material taught (Brown & Race, 1996). Similarly Piontek (2008) also observed that the main function of assessments (examinations, quizzes, assignments, presentations, research projects) is to enable tutors to make judgments about the quality of learning. In preparing assessments, the concept of alignment should be



the central focus or a prerequisite to creating effective assignments and examinations (Biggs, 2003). Alignment is when an examiner starts with the desired outcomes of the course and work backwards so that the assignments and examinations reflect and support the learning goals as they are the main determinants for successful open and distance learning (Biggs, 2003). To enhance the effectiveness of the assessments evaluations process, there is need to benchmark with other past examination papers, other institutions or colleagues experienced in the related field (Brown & Race, 1996). When constructing assessments (for example examinations and assignments) tutors are encouraged to create a table of specifications, content by process matrix (Tyler, 1950). A content-by-process matrix ensures that examinations/assignments include all vital module representatives questions (Skolnik, 2010). Higher education scholars have observed that in majority higher education programmes, examinations have traditionally dominated learners assessments, often combined with other forms (Scouller, 2006). Assignments are meant to cover up gaps left as tutors are constrained cover all course areas (Biggs, 2003). Examiners/tutors may wish to evaluate learners' communication skills, their ability to express themselves (presentation and convincing argument) (Brown & Race,

1997). During the assessment planning stage, the examiner/tutor should also prepare a corresponding marking guide (Brown & Race, 1996). The assessment marking guide should: a) be user friendly to other users other than the examiner himself, b) be made in such a way that the candidate is not penalized more than once in the same paper, c) review the marking guide after the examination (for example the examiner may realize that some candidates have interpreted the examination questions differently). For assignments and projects that are returned to learners after marking, examiners are encouraged to make helpful comprehensive comments to help the candidates (Brown & Race, 1996). Assignments could be given: a) to prepare learners for what will happen later in the studies, b) to reinforce what has just been taught during tutorials, c) before the tutorials such that they can serve to help them assimilate and better understand what they have begun to learn on their own (Biggs, 2003).

Assignments that are commonly used in ODL include readings, problem sets, written work, field trips, community service, apprenticeships, and research projects (Biggs, 2003) Table 1 provides some types of assessments with their advantages and disadvantages.

Table 1: Advantages and Disadvantages of Commonly Used Types of Achievement Test Items

Table with 3 columns: Type of Item, Advantages, Disadvantages. Rows include True-False, Multiple-Choice, Matching, Short Answer or Completion, and Essay.

Adapted from Table 10.1 of Worthen, et al., 1993, p. 261.



Assessments can directly test knowledge as questions could be geared towards testing learners' applications of materials taught, or they could also be towards testing process or product, in which the assessment test learners reasoning skills and evaluate the process by assessing learners' application skills (Brown & Race, 1997). To enhance efficiency and effectiveness in ODL, Information Technologies (IT) may involve the use wholly or part of the internet, intranet (LAN), and extranet (WAN) for course delivery and assessments (Latchem, 2012). The advantages of an IT based ODL are its convenience, flexibility, and ability to provide rapid and inexpensive access to high quality content and materials from anywhere in the world (Latchem, 2012).

ASSIGNMENTS AND EXAMINATIONS DEVELOPMENT

Undergraduate students normally focus their efforts towards the kinds of questions they expect to see on their examinations, as a result, tutors need to reinforce the aim of their course by taking care to construct examinations that call for the very kinds of thinking that they most want to encourage (Biggs, 2003). Some social studies confirmed that students prefer course work as opposed to examinations (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Assessments that have been found to yield the most representative measures of learners' ability is in majority cases written work, when it is learners own work (Biggs, 2003). Coursework performance has been found to have a positive correlation with learners long term learning potential (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Studies have confirmed that assignment-based courses showed higher quality of learning by ODL learners (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). For most ODL learners, examinations define the course outline and knowing what will be examined provides them with a key to what tutors deem worth studying (Biggs, 2003). Assessments (for example examinations and assignments) are not only prescriptions to students about what the tutor considers worth learning in a course, they also serve to offer feedback on how well learners are meeting course expectations (Biggs, 2003).

Several adult education studies have found that learners perform better with practice and the more practice they have, the better they perform (Biggs, 2003). In preparing ODL learners: a) courses should specify the desired outcomes, b) there should be an alignment between assignments/examinations and module desired outcomes c)

tutors should communicate with learners on the rationale of assessments, d) many short assignments spread throughout the module study time frame have been observed to enhance learners chances of producing better results than a once off long term examination (Biggs, 2003). Examiners can also test learners' ability to get to a single conclusion from different inputs (convergent orientation), or examiner may wish to come up with different possible answers (divergent orientation) (Brown & Race, 1997). In an effort to enhance quality in the whole assessments development, implementation and evaluation, a) examiners/tutors could base their examination/assignments items on the topics in the module, b) they could identify and prioritize main concepts of the course, c) categorise the items/examination questions based on the module subheadings, and d) a good assessment should have potential to give all the learners an equal opportunity to fully demonstrate their learning (Brown & Race, 1996).

Studies in higher education have established that ODL assessments should bear some characteristics which include: a) consistent- should produce similar/same results under similar circumstances), b) validity -assessment items should address what is being intended to be achieved), c) realistic expectations- ODL examinations should contain items/questions that match an average learner's ability, an average learner should be able to respond to all questions in the time allowed, d) valid-providing useful information about the concepts they are designed to test, e) reliable- allowing consistent measurement and discriminating between different levels of performance, f) recognizable study instructions should have prepared the learners well for the assessment (Brown & Race, 1996; Piontek, 2008; D'Mello & Graesser, 2012).

Examiners are encouraged to use an assortment of questions as different learners are better at different types of questions and should make an effort to offer multiple ways for a candidate to obtain full marks, for example where a question could be designed as 'Identify and explain any two of the traditional leadership styles' (Brown & Race, 1996).

Assignments and Examinations Feedback

Assessment feedback is in majority cases meant to: a) correct errors; b) develop understanding through feedback; c) generate more learning by suggesting further activities; d) motivate learners to proceed with studies, and e) develop generic skills (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Learners always



consider that the focus of examinations and assignments reflects the educational goals most valued by tutors hence they direct their effort accordingly (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2004). As such assessment should be pitched to the level of study; it should not be too easy or too hard for the learners, and they yield best possible outcome if they are logically distributed within the study timeframe, there should be a module material-assessment fit. Feedback on frequent assignments is the main interactive component of ODL instructions hence tutors should place great emphasis on frequent assignments, training and tutors are supposed to be accorded impressive remunerations for them to provide comprehensive feedback (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Most ODL institutions have now adopted computerized testing systems to provide some feedback on progress and with some assessments software it is possible to provide some comprehensive or remedial feedback (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Organisational or tutor's grading system approach has a bearing on learners motivational levels for example strict bell curve (norm referencing grading), reduces learners motivation and in-tutorial participation levels, while criterion referenced grading could enhance learners motivation levels (D'Mello & Graesser, 2012). Studies have concluded that most tutors often struggle to create, implement and score the high order questions (D'Mello & Graesser, 2012). Specific study objectives have potential to:

- increase motivation to study;
- assist learners to self monitor their progress;
- can reduce learners examination anxiety;
- serve to prioritize what is most important for learners to learn;
- tutors are assured that they test validity of their exams (Piontek, 2008).

Computer aided assessments can provide information feedback to enhance learners learning potential (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Forms of feedback that are effective vary according to discipline and in whichever discipline, feedback has to be specific (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004).

When learners feedback is delayed, they will have moved on to new content and the feedback will be irrelevant to their studies thereby becoming insignificant to their learning activities (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004)

Assignments and Examinations Reflection

ODL institutions are expected to review or analyse examination results, as this will help to identify concepts that learners understood well and those that are difficult for them (Brown & Race, 1996). Assessments outputs should

:a) reflect the expectations and requirements of the learners and other stakeholders, b) provide the means of assessing benefits, impacts and changes in learners, c) be stated as short term outputs, intermediate outcomes or long term impacts, and inform the decision makers about policies, procedures, resources and systems (Latchem, 2012). For them to be effective, ODL programs need to be tailor made and integrated into particular socio-cultural contexts within which they are meant to fill up observed gaps in the societal knowledge platform. Quality assurance of ODL assignments and examinations may best be evaluated through application of Deming (1986) "Plan, Do, Check and Act" cycle. Assessments quality assurance systems should be factored into the ODL systems from planning till product or services provision as regards timing, duration, study material and logistics. However assessment systems should not be over burdensome or over costly, institutions should analyse total quality systems including prevention costs, appraisal costs, failure costs and opportunity costs (Latchem, 2012). Well developed quality assessments systems ensure high quality outcome, they are quickly and effectively delivered, the result provides greater learners' satisfaction, yields greater stakeholder confidence in the programmes and services (Latchem, 2012). Successful planning and implementation of ODL quality assessments requires both vertical and horizontal integration of all organisational activities (Latchem, 2012). The output quality of ODL institutions has a bearing to a number of stakeholders, for example learners themselves, employers, the government, customers and funders. It is therefore paramount that ODL institutions are expected to address the outputs, outcomes and impacts of the ODL programs compared to what have been intended to be achieved. Latchem (2012:69) contributes that "outputs are the immediate effects of the programmes on individuals and groups, outcomes are the short to medium term effects of the outputs, the observable behavioral, institutional and social changes, while impacts are the longer term significant, structural, sustained and positive improvement in the lives of those who will have been engaged in the programmes"

Also ODL systems should provide learners opportunity to evaluate the tutors performance and competences (Brown & Race, 1996). In their study Gibbs & Simpson (2004) found that there is some correlation between learners' number of assignments marked and their final examination performance. Learners normally have preferred a approach to their studies, either as a deep approach (focusing on



meaning and/or understanding) or surface approach (focusing on recall/or reproduction) (Biggs, 1979). A learner who is deep approach oriented may integrate the theoretical and practical components of course material (deep strategy) with the aim to understand and derive meaningful/make sense of the material (deep motive), while those who favor surface approach may list and drill several discrete pieces of information (surface strategy) in order to reproduce them in the examination and pass the course (surface motive) (Scouler, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

In an effort to develop some optimum ODL assessments quality assurance systems, this study was guided by the pragmatism paradigm based on a qualitative approach, where interviews were held with purposively selected sample. The sample was comprised of two (2) ODL current students and six (6) qualified and experienced ODL academic staff with diverse backgrounds. Participants were drawn from Gaborone and Francistown being the main cities where there are significant distance learning. Data was collected through face to face interviews as shown on Table 1.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF SAMPLE GROUP ODL INTERVIEWS

Interview	Age and gender	Nationality	Date	Duration
Interview 1	25, Fe male	Motswana	8 July, 2015	40 mins
Interview 2	50, male	Zimbabwean	15 July, 2015	45 mins
Interview 3	32, male	Zimbabwean	28 July, 2015	41 mins
Interview 4	37, Fe male	Motswana	28 July, 2015	42 mins
Interview 5	35, male	Motswana	1 Sep, 2015	43 mins
Interview 6	40, male	Motswana	2 Sep, 2015	50 mins
Interview 7	50, male	Kenyan	2 Sep, 2015	38 mins
Interview 8	48, male	Motswana	3 Sep, 2015	42 mins

Collected Primary data was analyzed through content analysis in which recommendations to enhance systems effectiveness were developed. Once all the transcript data was categorized into minor and major categories/themes, we then reviewed in order to ensure that the information is categorized as it should be. Study findings mainly emanated from the main and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis.

Findings

Challenges encountered at BOCODOL

During the interviews, a number of challenges were mentioned by all stakeholders. While there is generally consensus on the effort in place at BOCODOL governance and visionary leadership style, a number of quality inhibitors were highlighted. Among the most commonly observed challenges are also confirmed by other scholars especially in the developing nations. All participants acknowledged that



BOCODOL most prevalent challenges include: a) high cases of plagiarism; b) meeting the standards expected by stakeholders; c) having reliable marking or reliable tutors and external examiners; and d) errors in assignments and examination papers (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Resources constraints were also identified to be the prime challenge encountered by the institution and this leads to a reduction in the frequency of assignments in the quantity, quality of feedback (for example most assignments and examination items pass through without passing through specialist content editors) (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Another performance constraint is evident on the number of full-time lectures engaged by BOCODOL, they are only five lecturers in the faculty. The five engaged lecturers are so stretched even into some areas they are not familiar with. Some modules have just one assignment with feedback provided very late in the course duration or after the examination. Depending on the discipline, one assignment per-semester contradicts assertions by various scholars for example Brown & Race (1996); Piontek (2008); D'Mello & Graesser (2012) found that the more the assignments (practice) done by learners, the better the final learners results. Diversity of students and tutors capabilities is another challenge faced by institutions like BOCODOL and this in synch with Gibbs & Simpson (2004) findings. Another dimension of this diversity which is prevalent at BOCODOL as stated by participants is the influx of expatriate tutors with qualifications that require verification before engagement. There are some nationalities that are internationally known to take advantage of any strict verification system; hence they may work with either fake or inferior qualifications. Regular assignments and comprehensive feedback has been found to be central to higher education institutions including BOCODOL (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Review and timely comprehensive feedback is the most powerful single influence on learners performance (Hattie *et al.*, 1996). ODL institution BOCODOL included encounter challenges regarding quantity and quality of feedback as feedback is given to learners very late hence it ceases to be helpful to learners (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Since tutors and content editors are engaged on part time bases, they may not have enough time to provide comprehensive and useful feedback or to prepare quality assignments and examinations items. Participants also observed that learners don't normally read the feedback, at times they don't understand the comments or they just ignore it. Most ODL learners in majority cases attend to assignments as a learning activity to maximise the marks as opposed to maximizing

the learning achieved through the assessment. ODL Learners have also been observed to "fake good", they pretend to be competent or knowledgeable, with a premeditated tactic to cover up misunderstanding and ignorance through providing a false claim by portraying a false picture to tutors rather than presenting their true position (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004).

ODL institutions are likely to engage unqualified employees, thereby compromising quality as well. Appointment of some external examiners or moderators is another approach that has potential to enhance quality systems. For examinations like research projects there could be need to introduce viva-voce, or any other form of oral presentations meant to defend one's work. If well resourced, Botswana ODL has potential to draw learners across the her boundaries, and this should be the thrust as we are now floating in the global village, characterized by boundary less/borderless markets. ODL plays a significant role in developing economies, like into knowledge economies. A knowledge economy is one characterized by creating, dissemination and uses knowledge to enhance its growth and development (Yeravdeka & Tiwari, 2014).

Implications for management

Just like other developing economies, Botswana ODL is characterized by resources constraints (physical, financial and human) in her quest to offer robust higher education systems. Botswana's ability to accommodate diverse nationalities and cultures is a testimony of her hospitality capacity and, this could be nurtured and developed towards enhancing ODL capabilities. Comparing with its neighbouring countries, Botswana has a competitive edge in terms of low corruption rates, transparent governance structures, rule of law and vibrant economic policies leading to a stable economy. Focus could also be directed towards regional groupings member countries like the SADC countries, where quality enhancement strategies could be benchmarked and learners could be drawn from. Botswana ODL institutions could be benchmarked on the neighbouring countries systems like South Africa (UNISA) and Zimbabwe (ZOU) in an effort to enhance quality systems. Interviewee 4 mentioned that "no development or quality assurance programs can be effectively instituted if the institution has no visionary strategic leadership no proper governance structure and if it operates in isolation, without some collaboration". "Quality assurance" should be part of



the core values of the strategic direction of an ODL institution. Organisational leaders are supposed to be appointed on merit and since ODL relies on the borderless market as it is available to regional and international students, then the recruitment, selection and promotion process should desist from discriminating employees on nationality, race, gender or any other likely “isms”. Interviewee 8 mentioned that “top management should strive to be comprised of PhD, and/or professors in an effort to instill and enhance high quality standards”.

Participants mentioned the need to continuously educate students and staff members on the ethical implications of cheating in assignments and examinations. Deterrent punishments for both lecturers and students if caught with some unethical practices should also be introduced and adhered to. Assignments and examinations questions should be mobilised from teams of experienced academics, and a data bank of examination questions, where questions will be retrieved when there is need. Suppliers of assignments and examination items should be well qualified; at higher level than the levels they offer tutorials. Tutors should be drawn from individuals who have made effort to research, publish and also those pursuing further studies to upgrade themselves. Tutors for example for degrees and masters degree programs should be well qualified with relevant both undergraduate and master’s qualifications as mentioned by interviewee 3 that “to enhance quality there is need to engage people with both relevant first and second qualifications for degrees and masters programs”. All assessments activities that include assignments and examinations are supposed to be of the level being studied for. As observed by interviewee 1 “some tutors just download assignments and examinations questions, that are at times too advanced for students” Interviewee 6 “some tutors have a tendency to pitch the level of assignments or examinations to their level of study, and this is mostly prevalent with those tutors currently pursuing studies, they normally pitch the assignments or examination questions higher than the candidates levels”.

There is need for some quality checks of the assignments and examinations questions through appointing some moderators or external examiners pre and post administration of students’ assessments. Institutions could move more to online submission of assignments as there could be facilities for plagiarism check (through facilities like turn-it-in). Online submissions are convenient for both

the learners and tutors. As confirmed by Selim (2005), information technology in teaching and learning has created a need to transform how ODL students learn by using more modern, efficient effective alternatives. The effective and efficient use of information technologies assist in attaining both institutional and learners’ objectives, and it is of critical importance to the success and learners’ acceptance of ODL. Interviewee 7 suggested that information technology tools that can be of use to ODL institutions include “network bandwidth, course management systems, network accessibility, internet availability, instructional multi-media, Exam venues cameras” In an effort to enhance quality systems, ODL institutions should be well funded to be able to acquire modern technologically oriented systems and technology infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

Findings and implications from the current study suggest that over and above all systems development and implementation for effective ODL, a strong funding foundation is the prerequisite. Use of modern IT and ideal ODL systems will definitely enhance ODL systems effectiveness. Distance education, should be considered as a driving force of economic development and for it to provide its requisite mandate, it has to maximise stakeholders satisfaction. Robust systems from classroom technology, online learning environments, and instructors’ effectiveness need to focus upon preparing students to use a variety of computer technologies and be aware of the benefits of ODL. Thus, there is a need for well-designed and carefully implemented ODL environments that meet the needs and expectations of learners and all other stakeholders. Technology based learning environments will enhance learner tutor relations, and learners communication platforms will be facilitated through activities that increase learners’ level of computer knowledge and emphasize the flexibility of ODL. The findings of this study suggest that to produce quality products (graduates), organisational governance, informed human capital, research and adequate funding impel all other value systems and subsystems. ODL institutions, strategic leadership and tutors should pay special attention to the aspects affecting student optimum output through ODL education programs. More collaborations in research, and staff exchange initiatives between ODL institutions are of paramount important. Collaborations with the industry and other regional and



international institutions of higher learning will assist in benchmarking the best practices expected in offering quality ODL programmes. Some exchange programs should be facilitated with other institutions especially the internationally or regionally acclaimed for possible benchmarking in quality enhancement efforts. The ODL institutions should have a significant budget to promote academic and administrative staff research and development. Research and publication should be seen as a necessity, a must for almost all academic staff members, hence staff members should be encouraged and sponsored to attend conferences, publish, research and have some collaborative work with staff members from other institutions.

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