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Full Length Research Paper

Quality assurance through student assessment in Open and Distance Learning (ODL): Case study of The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU).

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The assessment of students is one of the most important elements of any education system including higher education (HE). A well designed testing system can spearhead educational improvement, while a poor one can sabotage the most dedicated efforts to improve instructional quality. Testing can therefore be used as a powerful and cost effective tool to improve educational quality. However, there has been very little evaluation studies of the methods and effectiveness of the assessment methods used. Informal reports by students and staff alike appear to suggest that there are variations in both practices and principles on which assessments are based. They vary widely between faculties, departments, individual courses within the same departments, and between individual members of the academic staff within institutions. The report focuses on quality assurance through assessment. It covers quality assurance in the wider sense of the Criteria 10: Student Assessment; and Area: 2.4 Student assessment practices framework as outlined by Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE). The study identified key issues for quality assurance through assessment such as comparability, consistency and accountability, the importance of transparency and the need to properly involve staff and students in the assessment process. The study managed to come up with generic assessment principles that might underpin quality assurance and different practices. In addition quality assurance of credit transfer between institutions and even faculties, assessment of problem-based and work-based learning and accreditation of prior learning also emerged. The report concluded that quality assurance of assessment in HE and ODL in particular, was a critical issue that required close monitoring and evaluation in order to continue to improve and ensure credibility of qualifications, transparency and comparability and that regular monitoring should include all the stages of the assessment process and involve students in order to take cognizance of their experience of learning and assessment. It is hoped that the paper would stimulate debate on practical issues of assessment and the ushering in of continuous improvement of both assessment and learning for quality products. Future studies could focus on comparability of assessment practices between institutions to determine and to share information and experiences on good practices for the benefit of both students and staff.

Keywords: assessment, accreditation, comparability, education, consistency, qualifications, quality assurance, reliability.

INTRODUCTION

The assessment of students is one of the most important elements of any education system including higher

education (HE). A well designed testing system can spearhead educational improvement, while a poor one can sabotage the most dedicated efforts to improve instructional quality. Testing can therefore be used as a powerful and cost effective tool to improve educational quality. However, there has been very little evaluation studies of the methods and effectiveness of the assessment methods used. Informal reports by students and staff alike appear to suggest that there are variations in both practices and principles on which assessments are based. They vary widely between faculties, departments, individual courses within the same departments, and between individual members of the academic staff within institutions. The report focuses on quality assurance through assessment. It covers quality assurance in the wider sense of the Criteria 10: Student Assessment; and Area: 2.4 Student assessment practices framework as outlined by Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE). The study identified key issues for quality assurance through assessment such as comparability, consistency and accountability, the importance of transparency and the need to properly involve staff and students in the assessment process. The study managed to come up with generic assessment principles that might underpin quality assurance and different practices. In addition quality assurance of credit transfer between institutions and even faculties, assessment of problem-based and work-based learning and accreditation of prior learning also emerged. The report concluded that quality assurance of assessment in HE and ODL in particular, was a critical issue that required close monitoring and evaluation in order to continue to improve and ensure credibility of qualifications, transparency and comparability, transfer for which regular monitoring should include all the stages of the assessment process and involve students in order to take cognizance of their experience of learning and assessment. It is hoped that the paper will stimulate debate on practical issues of assessment and the ushering in of continuous improvement of both assessment, learning for quality products and the possibility of evolving a Framework for Qualifications of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) area. Future studies could focus on comparability of assessment practices between institutions to determine, and to share information and experiences on good practices for the benefit of both students and staff. Universities in developing countries have followed their counterparts in the developed world by adopting quality assurance to improve quality of their activities. Though conditions of its success are not present, it is nevertheless important to pursue quality assurance because it demonstrates how different activities are related to one another to achieve the same

goal and how quality can be improved using an integrated approach. Quality assurance provides direction to the work of the traditional university committee system. There is however the need to modify it to suit local conditions. (Lim, 201). Mincer cited by Lim (2001) argues that quality assurance as implemented in the developed countries has not yielded the desired results because of its concentration on processes than results among other things. This has tended to divert institutions from their core activities. In view of the importance of assessment, ZIMCHE has provided comprehensive guidelines for institutions to ensure comparable standards in students' assessment. The beneficiaries of the guidelines are the students whose qualifications would be recognized throughout the country and the world as well. The guidelines cover the following:

- Institutional capacity: Accreditation and registration with ZIMCHE; appropriately qualified staff; learning materials appropriate for the needs, knowledge and experience of the students.
- Programme provisions: Sufficient copies of modules that cover the content of each course available at the beginning of the semester.
- Student assessment practices: internal and external assessment complemented with internal and external moderation. (ZIMCHE, 2009)

Literature Review

According to ZIMCHE (2009) assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process and is used to provide feedback to inform tutoring and learning and to improve the curriculum. Learning achievements of students are internally assessed and moderated by staffs who supervise the programme and students are given feedback. Procedures are in place and are strictly followed to receive record, process and turn around assignments within the time frame that allows students to benefit from feedback before submitting further assignments. Assessment can make or break all that goes on in learning and teaching. The validity and reliability of assessment are vital qualities that should be fulfilled by any assessment process. Assessment is a system hence no part should be faulty for effectiveness and efficiency of the process. Assessment should be designed to suit different programmes and countries as well. It is however, important that principles under which specific practices are designed, should be shared, fair and that principles and practices are open to scrutiny (transparent). These include externality in assessment, frequency of students' assessment, plagiarism, student evaluation and feedback, distinguishing the roles between supervisor (in research project) and assessors,

complaints handling, independent committees for reviewing appeal cases against a mark and regular feedback from employers. (Crozier and Vries, 2008). Different institutions would have different arrangements and so are departments. These may need to be brought into line within the same institution. Ehlers (2009) in a study focusing on understanding quality culture in education argued that quality was about accreditation and the process which enabled individuals to continuously improve their educational practice. Atkins (1993) in a study of assessment issues in HE pointed out that any attempt to improve assessment involved focus on individual lecturers, departments and institutional managers. He went on to point out that separating assessment of theory from assessment of competence, capability and performance was a big challenge for all those involved in assessment.

Crozier and Vries (2008) reported on 'the quality assurance of student assessment' in higher education at the conclusion of an international working group conference. They identified key priorities for quality assurance of student assessment as follows:

- Balance between comparability, consistency and accountability.
- Importance of transparency
- Proper involvement of staff and students.

In addition principles underpinning quality assurance evolved from the discussion. These included:

- Quality assurance of credit transfer between institutions
- Assessment of problem-based and work-based learning.

The views were echoed by Frantz (2010) in her 'Outcomes Assessment Model' when she said that assessment policies needed to be faculty driven, meaningful and an integral part of teaching and learning which involved peer reviews.

The paper is a preliminary contribution to more widespread discussion across the country (ZIMBABWE) and SADC Region. It is hoped that the paper will stimulate debate on the fundamentals and its quality assurance, adding to greater confidence in a system of comparable degrees in the country in line with ZIMCHE aims and objectives and the SADC Qualifications Framework.

Law (2010) in a study of quality assurance in post secondary education which focused on 'student experience' based on literature review reported that a study such as this shed light on how quality assurance practices can be improved. Law used methodology which reviewed some of the approaches to addressing quality issue from students' evaluations of teaching effectiveness, students' performance experiences and total experiences, students' satisfaction and service

quality. The results revealed that 'students' surveys that used self-reports inventories/questionnaires with established reliabilities, validity and diagnostic power had the potential to transform the external and internal quality-monitoring mechanisms currently practised in post secondary education thereby shift the focus of QA to enhancement led view. It was therefore vital to examine quality assurance strategies for students' assessment employed by the ZOU.

Purpose of the Study

Owing to the complexity of education and demands for quality, comparability and accountability, customer and stakeholder satisfaction, the paper sought to examine assessment practices in the ZOU and how far they complied with ZIMCHE specifications or guidelines as quality benchmarks. It was hoped that such knowledge would help promote quality in student assessment.

OBJECTIVES

To find out how ZOU as an ODL institution implemented quality assurance through student assessment.

To identify how assessment quality can be upheld through students' assessment.

To demonstrate how the CIPP model can help understanding of the concept of assessment as a process.

Significance of the study

The outcome of the study would help improve data collection instruments in order to tap into students' experiences for more valid and reliable assessment practices. This would also make quality assurance activities of educational institutions research informed, and evidence based and enhancement led. (Law, 2010). Results would also reveal the gap between expectations and current practices thereby inform intervention measures for improvement by individuals, departments and faculties. Results would also indicate the extent to which qualifications can be made comparable in the country and initiate debate on a regional Qualifications framework.

The drive towards quality assessment in ODL: ZIMCHE ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK: Area 2.4 of the Criteria for Accreditation of Open and Distance Learning, ZIMCHE outlines specifications for student assessment practices. These were meant to ensure that every programme was using effective internal and external

assessment practices that included internal and external moderation. These are summarised below.

- Assessment to be integrated with teaching and learning.
- Used to provide feedback to inform tutoring and learning to improve the curriculum.
- Internal assessment of students' learning moderated by staff supervising the programme.
- Students to be given feedback.
- Procedures put in place and strictly adhered to receive, record, process and return assignments in order for students to benefit students before they submit the next assignment.
- Inclusion of internal/external assessment.

The final assessment should be assessed externally by an appointed, qualified and experienced academic in the area before the award is made. Qualifications of external examiner should be at least at par with those being examined e.g. External examiner for a Masters Degree programme must have at least a Masters Degree. External examiners must be approved by the Senate, and changed regularly. (ZIMCHE, 2009).

External Moderation

Give external examiners enough information about their work.

For final examination, external examiner should mark fully 10% of the scripts and do random checks of at least 20%.

External examiner's reports should be given to the programme coordinator and department chairperson.

Problems should be discussed with lecturer(s).

Programme coordinator to monitor implementation of agreed improvements. External examiner approves the final mark lists.

Reliability of assessment

External examiner should make comments on validity of assessment instruments, quality of students' performance and standards of students' attainment, reliability of marking process and compliance with institutional arrangements.

Consistency between internal and external assessors is always desirable.

One integrated assessment procedure for each qualification or programme that is fit for purpose.

Recognition of prior learning following a reliable and consistent procedure should be the norm.

Rigour and security

Regulations for dealing with breaches are in place. Such information should be given to all students in full emphasising rights and responsibilities.

Appeals procedures

Guidelines for marking, grading results, progression, credit allocation should be very clear.

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study in which document analysis was the method. The following documents were analysed: ZIMCHE CR1/3(Guidelines for Student Assessment for Higher Education), Examiners' reports for may/June 2012 examinations for ZOU students in the Department of Education Studies, Quality Assurance Regional Reports and Faculty Procedures (faculty of Arts and Education). Documents were analysed to obtain information on procedures, assessment practices, quality assurance observations practices and expectations and students' experiences of learning and assessment. Key issues were identified and documented. Process diagrams were drawn to demonstrate the detailed nature of assessment procedures and their intricacies. Results were presented to show what ZOU was doing and the extent to which they complied with the regulatory authority's requirements. Examples of students' experiences of assessment from examiners' reports were highlighted to show the link between learning, teaching and assessment. Key findings are presented in the following paragraphs.

RESULTS

What is ZOU doing currently?

At the ZOU, student assessment assumes the Context Input Process and Product Model (CIPP), (Stufflebeam, 1985). (See [figure 1](#)).

The systems approach enables interaction and avoids implementation of activities individually, and improves monitoring, measurement, control and greater transparency. (Gabi, 2012).



Figure 1 the Assessment Process at ZOU
(Source: Ignatius Isaac Dambudzo, 2012)

IMPROVING QUALITY THROUGH ASSESSMENT (1)

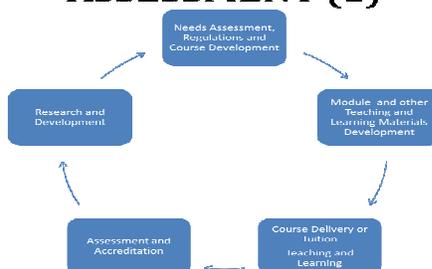


Figure 2 (Source: Ignatius Isaac Dambudzo, 2012)

Inputs

- Quality Modules learning materials and sources of data for item (questions) development.
 - Highly qualified and experienced academic staff involved in the item development process.
 - Item developers are trained in setting, moderation, marking, standardisation, grading and accrediting of scripts, marking guides and results.
 - Students admitted following a well documented admissions procedure ensuring appropriately qualified students find their way into the university and appropriate programme.
 - Tutorials managed by a team of dedicated and trained tutors but results of student surveys on tutors' performance have not been circulated early enough to determine their possible influence on students' performance in examinations.
 - Secure and quality printing press.
 - Strong room for storage
 - Invigilators who are well trained. Reports from quality assurance confirm good practice.
 - Quality assured (internally and externally moderated) examination question papers. This is being done but reports lack in detail to provide guidance on improvement on different aspects of assessment
 - Dedicated support staff

- ICT services that process registration and results
- Knowledgeable and experienced management
- Evaluation reports prepared for every course and programme at the end of every exam session. These are not always distributed to the tutors as feedback for their interaction with students.

Processes

Assessment involves several processes which translate inputs into products for our customers. The processes include (See **Figure 2**):

- Curriculum Development: needs assessment is carried out before introducing a programme to ensure programmes offered met felt needs of the prospective customers (students);
- Development of Regulations to guide implementation of the all programmes;
- Identification and Recruitment of well qualified module writers (knowledgeable and experienced in the field) for each course;
- Accreditation of programme regulations after thorough scrutiny by Departmental and Faculty, Senate Board meetings and ZIMCHE.
- Development of Learning Materials (Modules) in accordance with the Faculty Regulations.

QUALITY ASSURANCE OF STUDENT ASSESSMENT PROCESSES (2)



Figure 3 (Source: Ignatius Isaac Dambudzo, 2012)

- Quality Assurance of modules through content reviewing, editing, and quality assurance by Quality Assurance Unit and ZIMCHE.

- Printing and Distribution of modules to all regions for students.

- Tutorials and Support of students by qualified tutors. Their monitoring needed to be thorough for the benefit of students.

- Continuous Assessment (assignments, seminar presentations and discussions) to prepare students for summative assessment. Moderation of these varied from Department to Department though faculty procedures were quite explicit.

- Student Advisory Services and monitoring of progress to enhance success rate.

The above arrangements ensure that activities prior to writing the examinations complied with ZIMCHE requirements and promoted quality learning and assessment. (ZIMCHE, 2009).

Examination Processes (See Figure 3)

- Question Paper Development by experienced and qualified personnel for every course/subject (Item development, moderation, proof reading).

- Storage and then Printing under security

- Writing of Examinations under the supervision of experienced and qualified invigilators.

- Preparation of Marking Guides for every course (assignments and examinations) for more objective marking.

- Moderation of marked scripts and scaling.

- Grading of marks using a pre-determined scale for comparability from year to year.

- Quality Assurance (QA) of marks by Departmental and Faculty Boards of Examiners.

- Final Quality Assurance by the Senate and QA, and ratification of results.

- Publication and Distribution of results by Academic Registry. This is an area that causes challenges especially late publication and the lack of a system that ensures distribution of results to individual students.

- Appeals: After publication of results students not satisfied with their results can appeal and this would be considered.

- Re-marking after appeals.

- Consideration by Departmental, Faculty and Senate Boards before Grading. (ZOU, 2012).

- Certification, graduation and accreditation of graduates for employment were the final processes.

DISCUSSION

Output

Feedback from students' scripts: Performance, question by question and overall reports provide evidence about quality of question, popularity, relevance of topics and how well a topic was taught or how well a module articulated the concept apart from students' preparation. On the other hand above average performance could reflect the opposite. Such information was vital in preparing future candidates, modules and questions. This is evidence from students' feedback without resorting to self-reports in the form of students' surveys. In this study students' surveys could not be taken because it was vacation time. It is however, important that students' surveys be conducted to supplement evidence from scripts. Such evidence provided detailed information about students' learning, teaching and assessment experiences. This would help future practices to improve the quality of the assessment process, were consistent with those of Crozier and de Vries (2008) and Frantz (2010) on quality assurance and outcomes assessment respectively. Examples from examiners about students'

experience of the assessment process are cited below:

Popular Question: 'A very popular question attempted by all except one candidate. It was the highest scoring question with marks ranging from 53% to 87%,' one examiner remarked in a report on one of the questions.

Unpopular Question: 'Very few candidates answered the question. Those who did, scored low marks because the module was unavailable, a few got the module at the eleventh hour,' an examiner commented citing possible reason why the question was unpopular and performance very low. The reason cited shows the link between availability of learning materials and students' performance in this instance. Results agreed with Atkins (1993); (ZOU, 2012) and ZIMCHE (2012) on the link between teaching and learning in assessment.

Alternatively failure to answer questions could have been due to poor tutorial experience or unclear modules or the lack of modules in agreement with ZIMCHE (2009) and Lim (2001). For example, an examiner cited students' failure to explain the role of water and roughage in the body. The examiner expected this to be common knowledge but it did not appear to be. Later poor performance was attributed to the unavailability of the relevant course module. 'Module 320 was not available leading students using knowledge from life experience rather than learning materials. This is an example where the lack of learning resources can affect students' outcomes negatively hence the link between learning materials and assessment affecting students' performance and quality of learning experience. Alternatively, the question can just be difficult. For example, '... a rather difficult question, most candidates avoided the question.' (ZOU, 2012).

Not only was question development and module availability important for valid and reliable assessment but quality of marking as well. While one marker marked well, poor addition of marks cost students valuable marks. Comments such as '... marked well but poor addition marred the good work,' were made (ZOU, 2012).

Thus, the way students experienced the examination could be a vital source of feedback on the quality of assessment even without carrying out student surveys as reported by Ehlers (2009) and Croziers and de Vries (2008). Such information can help improve assessment for future tests. However, students' surveys still need to be conducted to obtain first hand information on students' experience of learning and assessment for more customer focused interventions for improvement

CONCLUSION

From the above presentation it was clear that ZOU followed a rigorous process of quality assurance for

students' assessment. This begins with needs assessment for proposed programmes, formulation of regulations to guide assessment and the award of qualifications, training of module writers and test developers, use of internal and external moderators for both question papers and scripts, accreditation of results by various committees which ensures accountability and comparability of qualifications. However, more needs to be done to see if the programmes and qualifications were comparable with those of conventional institutions to enable free movement of students between institutions in the country.

The processes followed by the ZOU were rigorous enough to ensure quality assessment for credible results and qualifications. Consequently ODL can boast quality through assessment of its students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The ZOU was following a rigorous procedure to ensure quality assessment. There is need to monitor the implementation of the laid down procedures for quality assessment. Thorough planning is needed to ensure the design of assessment instruments suited the purpose.

Role clarification for supervisors of projects though implementation may not follow the laid down guidelines all the time especially for small programmes with only one tutor.

Committees considering appeal cases cannot always be regarded as independent since they were the same that considered the original results. Internal audit and quality assurance assessors checked on these but sadly they were not academic members hence their work may not be very effective. Examiners' reports could provide useful feedback for future improvement of teaching, learning and assessment hence they must be prepared seriously and in detail.

Procedures for examinations were available. However, it was not clear whether these were communicated to the students all the time. Future studies can look at how best to monitor implementation of the procedures for effectiveness.

Further studies can focus on comparability of qualifications between institutions in the country and ODL in the SADC Region.

In addition it may be important to survey practices in the SADC Region in order to learn from others and share information. From such surveys it may be important to consider a Regional Qualifications Framework to enhance the concepts of comparability and credit transfer. This would further enhance decisions on free movement of students and personnel in the region to support economic activities.

On the whole attention should be paid to the following during any assessment exercise:

- Assessment instruments are fit for purpose. What assessment activities did the department/faculty undertake? (Identify students' outcomes addressed by questions asked).
- What did you discover about the quality of learning and teaching and assessment in the programme?
- From the discoveries you made in the assessment, what changes did you implement to enhance the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the programme and course concerned?
- Go through the rigorous cycle whenever developing regulations, learning materials, assessment instruments, marking and grading.
- Reporting on the assessment that has just passed and find out lessons to be learned for quality and continuous improvement.
- Ensure that qualifications were comparable and transferable between institutions within the country and the region.
- Always remember that teaching and learning were integrated in assessment.

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