INTERROGATING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING MODES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF QUALITY EDUCATION:

A Case Study of the Zimbabwe Open University; Department of Education

Wellington SAMKANGE
Augustine Zano MURANDA
Zimbabwe Open University
Faculty of Arts and Education
Mount Pleasant, Harare, ZIMBABWE

ABSTRACT

There have been concerns about the teaching and learning modes in both conventional and Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions globally. Such concerns emanate from issues of quality and standards in education. In view of such concerns, the study examined the teaching and learning modes in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). These were examined in relation to how they contribute to quality and standards within the the context of ODL.

The study focused on the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), an ODL university in Zimbabwe. It used the qualitative methodology and the case study design. A purposively selected sample of twenty students on the Bachelor of Education in Educational Management (BEDM) programme, another twenty on the Masters of Education in Educational Management (MEDM) programme and and thirty students on the teacher development programmes were selected from a population of one hundred and sixty two students in the Department of Education in Harare region. In total, the sample was made up of seventy students and fifteen tutors who were observed teaching. Data was collected through the use of interviews, open-ended questionnaires and analysis of documents. Data was collected from current students in the Faculty of Arts and Education in the Departments of Educational Studies and Teacher Development. Data was also collected through the evaluation instruments and other related documents used at ZOU. Furthermore, students evaluated the different teaching and learning modes used in the university. These included reading material, modules, tutors and tutorials. The study concluded that whilst students expressed satisfaction in areas such as the work and efforts of their tutors and the relevance of the courses to their jobs and promotion prospects, they were concerns about the non-availability of learning materials in some cases, the coverage of some topics in some modules and the language of instruction used by the tutors. The cases observed indicated that the institution was lagging behind in modern technology. These are concerns that could compromise quality if not addressed.

Keywords: Teaching and learning modes; quality education; open and distance learning; quality assurance.

INTRODUCTION

The demand for education globally has necessitated the rise in the number of higher institutions that provide education. There have been innovative ways of providing service in these institutions. A number of issues have been raised in relation to the desire to satisfy the high demand for education.

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Such expansion has not been experienced with Open & Distance Learning (ODL) institutions alone, as it has also been experienced in conventional institutions. This has given rise to concern about quality and standards of education. On the other hand perceptions about ODL remain negative in some countries. Such negative perceptions emanate from a number of problems. These include the caliber of student that we attract in these institution, the caliber of teachers that we are able to employ and the resources that we allocate to achieve our mission and the teaching and learning modes prevalent in higher institutions of learning. In line with this is the question of how institutions of higher learning, let alone distance education institutions have adjusted to the new demands of modern technology in instruction.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Concerns for quality and standards in education have generated interest to the extent that the different facets of the teaching and learning have come under close scrutiny. Quality in education has been viewed as constituting different tenets. Among these are the inputs, processes, output and outcome. These encompass content, methods of teaching, management of the education system, and adapting to changing processes through innovation (Coombs and Hallak, 1987). The challenges faced by institutions of higher learning are varied. Some of these have to do with the relevance of the curriculum the institution is providing. Further to that, quality is concerned with the extent to which the institutions meet their stated mission and goals. As such, quality can be measured within the context of meeting the stated goals. In that respect, there are aspects of internal efficiency to be addressed. Secondly, there is the issue of the extent to which an institution meets the expectations of its clientele. These could include the different stakeholders within the system. Such stakeholders could be the students, the state, employers and the society at large. However, the difficult question is whether the different stakeholders have the same goals and expectations. If we were to establish quality in education, the major question to be addressed, perhaps is whether the differences between stakeholders on quality and their expectations can be reconciled.

Given the divergence of the views and expectations of the different stakeholders and the variance in opinion can we have common ground to assess or establish the existence of quality or its lack? Issues of culture also come into play. In one culture quality is the extent to which one is able to acquire skills that will enable the possessor to function within his/her locality. These may be skills acquired through socialization. On the other hand some of the skills are learnt and acquired through attending school.

There are at least two approaches that have been found relevant in the delivery of ODL. These are the synchronous communication and asynchronous communication. The former focuses on learning through different forms of media through which students participate at the same time. This could be through tutorial groups. Another of the strategies is quite the opposite. In the latter, learning is organized in such a way that students participate at different times. These approaches have been challenged in many different facets. One of the major criticisms is that there appears to be no difference in the process they are executed in comparison with conventional institutions.

In addition to that, there is the problem of the applicability of modern technology in dispersed populations such as rural communities such as those found in most developing countries. With the development of technology, the delivery of ODL has been supplemented by the use of multimedia approaches that encompass text, audio, internet based learning, and e-learning among other approaches. Such developments allow for different forms of interaction between students and teachers.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Concerns about quality as noted above have become topical in the provision of quality education. Apart from the problem of defining quality, there has been the on going discourse on how best we can account for it and ensure that there is quality in institutions of higher learning. Attempts have been made to create quality assurance agencies in different countries to demonstrate concern for quality. Agencies that come to mind are the South African Council for Higher Education (SACHE) which advises the Minister of Higher Education on quality assurance issues in South Africa, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) of the UK, Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) among others. These are all concerned with ensuring quality in both learning and teaching in their respective countries. They have been tasked with the responsibility of monitoring and ensuring education standards. Despite these efforts, concerns for quality of education in both developed and developing countries remain high. Such concerns affect people's perceptions not only about education but ODL in particular, thus the need to constantly interrogate and review the teaching and learning modes in higher education. Such concerns lead to such questions as: How are the teaching and learning modes at one of the biggest ODL institutions in Southern Africa?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the teaching and learning modes at one of the biggest ODL institutions in Zimbabwe in relation to issues of quality.

THEORETICAL   PERSPECTIVES

Quality in higher education has become a pertinent issue in both the developing and the developed countries. The major debate has focused on what really constitutes quality in higher education. There are divergent views expressed on what really constitutes quality in higher education as noted earlier. However, there appears to be convergence of some ideas on the same subject. The major convergence though, is that quality is necessary and important if institutions are to be of relevance to society. In that respect, different institutions and countries have come up with different quality assurance measures. Within the context of the theoretical perspectives this paper focuses on the concepts quality, quality assurance and education in ODL institutions.

Defining Quality in Higher Education

The term quality tends to be allusive, the moment we make an attempt to define it we run into problems of failing to come up with a common definition. What stand out though in most of the definitions are the issues of standards, efficiency and effectiveness among other tenets. We can therefore define quality by examining its constituencies. These include the product, the processes involved in coming up with the product, the inputs and the outcomes. The different stages as noted above give us a measure and guide as to what we mean when we talk about quality.

This is where issues such as the teaching and learning modes used in institutions become a prerequisite for academic quality within institutions of higher learning. In higher education, quality entails institutions of higher learning producing graduates who meet the different needs of the country and the promotion of knowledge development through research (Green, 1994). In education, we are concerned with how students are achieving their set goals and how their expectations are being met. Quality in education focuses on how well learning opportunities provided to students are helping them to attain their desired qualifications, by ensuring that "appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided" (Wikipedia, free encyclopedia).

Quality Assurance

Institutions of higher learning set their own standards against which performance and quality can be measured. When we monitor performance against the same standards that we have set ourselves to achieve, we are now focusing on quality assurance. Quality assurance focuses on at least two principles. These are "Fit for purpose" and "Right first time" *(http://www.wisegeek.com/what is quality assurance?* Accessed 17 January 2012). In that respect, quality assurance is concerned with the products and expectations of the customer. Within institutions of higher learning, the students are the customers and the teaching and learning modes are the process of providing the the products that have to satisfy the expectations of the customers. On the other hand, the students when they leave the school system are products that have to be consumed by different stakeholders who include companies and service industries that employ them.

A number of models have been used to determine quality. These include the Shewhart Cycle. The Shewhart Cycle involves four quality assurance steps, which are Plan, Do, Check, and Act (PDCA) (ibid). The model shows us what should be done in the quality assurance process. In order to ensure quality according to the model, we should set clear objectives and the processes to be used (Plan), implement the process (Do), monitoring and evaluation of the processes (Check), and working on improvements (Act) (http://www.wisegeek.com/what is quality assurance? Accessed 17 January 2012). In relation to academic quality, the planning stage would involve setting objectives that assess the skills to be acquired, coming up with implementation modalities e.g these can include the teaching and learning modes used at the institutions, providing checks and balances in the system and a clear feedback system.

At higher institutions of learning quality assurance should involve the monitoring and assessment of the factors that contribute to a product and output of high quality. Factors that need interrogation in our endeavor to enhance quality assurance can be summarized into at least three categories.

These factors include; the teaching component, the learning aspect and management practices at institutions. In the same vain, if we are to assure for quality these key areas need constant evaluation. Before we even bring in the quality assurance aspect there is need to ensure that there is quality control and quality management within the institution. Within the context of the teaching aspect there is need to examine the recruitment procedures within institutions.

There should be agreed standards within institutions that should be benchmarks for recruitment. Such standards and benchmarks should serve a common interest for the benefit of the nation. In this regard, there have been complaints about the performance of teachers and university graduates from different colleges and universities.

Such complaints have been related to lack of requisite skills in these graduates. Whilst this lack of requisite skills can be attributed to a number of factors, it is safe to say that recruitment procedures have also played a prominent part. It is not uncommon to find at teachers' colleges and universities for example, lecturers who never trained as teachers teaching trainee teachers.

They might have been recruited on the basis of their academic qualifications, rather than a combination of both academic qualifications and professional qualifications. For instance, we might have a Bachelor of Arts degree holder who did not train as a teacher involved in the training of teachers.

One would expect such a lecturer to have a teaching background and a teaching qualification before he/she can be involved in the teaching of trainee teachers.

The second factor that needs constant evaluation and assessment is the learner and the learning process. There is need to be clear as to who our prospective students are and establish the extent to which they are trainable. It is a fallacy to assume that anyone can acquire university qualifications. There should be interventions to prepare students who come to our institutions of higher learning. The third aspect is management practices at our higher institutions of learning. There is need to examine the management practices at our institutions of learning. What is expected of each faculty and department? What policies are in place? What are our assessment procedures? Once these questions are raised and answers to these questions provided we will have set benchmarks for quality control.

Teaching and Learning in ODL Institutions

ODL has been found convenient in many respects. Students in ODL institutions are to work and learn concurrently. It has been found to be cheaper and as such ODL institutions have been able to attract students across the board, regardless of the age. It has been observed that ODL institutions attract mature adults who have work and life experiences than conventional institutions. Such heterogeneous composition calls for best practice in the teaching and learning approaches at institutions of higher learning. There are questions as to what constitutes best practice in ODL. Ansari (2002) examining the constituents of best practice in ODL noted at least three areas that are important. These include the use of multi-media approaches, teaching methods and research and development. Multi-media approaches have done at least two things in ODL:

> ➢ They have transformed the culture of teaching and learning in ODL institutions.
> ➢ They have not replaced face-to-face teaching/learning in most of the cases, but converged to enhance teaching and learning (ibid).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study used the qualitative research methodology. Data was collected through the use of interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and document analysis. The study used purposive sampling.

A sample of fifty students in their third and forth years of their study was selected. These were purposively selected as they were considered to have been exposed to the different modes of teaching and learning employed by ZOU.

The study focused on the department of Education in the Faculty of Arts and Education, Harare Region.The study used the case study design, in which the Department of Education became the case to be studied. Within the department the study focused on the following programmes:

Master of Education in Educational Management, Bachelor of Education in Educational Management, Bachelor of Education (Secondary), Diploma in Education (Primary), Diploma in Education (Secondary),Bachelor of Education (Curriculum Studies), Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Development), Bachelor of Education (Youth Development) and the Post-Graduate Diploma in Education.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

First, students were asked to evaluate their tutors in relation to punctuality, preparation for each session, clarity of communication and organization, feedback on assignments, knowledge of subject matter, grading, and sensitivity to learners' academic needs and approachability of tutor.

The second part of the interview focused on the modules the students used. It focused on comments on the presentation of facts, language used, the extent to which the modules assisted in the answering of assignment and examination questions, course coverage and course outline.

The third section focused on course evaluation. This was meant to assess the relevance of the courses offered to the students in relation to their job advancement prospects.
In response to the questions on tutor evaluation for the Bachelor of Education degree, all twenty students agreed that their tutors were punctual for tutorials. They also agreed that their tutors were well prepared for their sessions. On communication, they also agreed that their tutors communicated ideas clearly and in an organized manner and they demonstrated knowledge of the subject matter.

All respondents found their tutors sensitive to their learning needs. On feedback on assignments, sixty five percent of the students indicated that feedback on assignments was valuable to their learning; five percent were not sure of the value of feedback on assignments on their learning and thirty percent noted that feedback on assignments was not valuable to their learning. They attributed this to their failure to get marked assignments on time. For instance, some noted that despite being the last tutorial of the semester their assignments had not been marked. It was noted that this affected courses whose marking guides had not been submitted on time and thereby delaying the whole process of marking and giving feedback to the students.

All the respondents in the different courses on the BEDM degree programme noted that their tutors showed thorough knowledge of the subject they taught, that their tutors finished tutorial sessions in the prescribed time, that grading of written papers and oral presentations was fair and impartial. Furthermore, all respondents indicated that their tutors were approachable; they gave them helpful directions in writing assignments and were able to keep discussions focused on the subject. Another twenty students in the MEDM degree programme responded to similar questions as those answered by the BEDM students. Their responses were generally similar to those of the BEDM students in many respects.

However, some respondents raised concerns about feedback on assignments (five percent), grading of oral presentations (five percent), assistance on answering questions (twenty percent) and twenty five percent noted that they were not given helpful direction in writing their assignments.The differences in the responses in the two different programmes tended to suggest different approaches in the department as students advanced to higher degrees. The responses appeared to suggest that the assistance that students got as they came for higher degrees decreased as they came for MEDM. Generally, most of the respondents in both programmes were satisfied with the help they got from their tutors.

The second section of the questionnaire focused on module evaluation. For the BEDM degree, four modules were evaluated. These are: Communication skills; The Role of the Instructional leader; Introduction to Educational Research and Change Processes and Techniques in Education. All the twenty respondents described these modules as core to their studies and noted that facts were logically presented. However, five percent of the respondents described the language used in the module; Communication Skills as difficult and another five percent described the language as ambiguous. When it came to how the module assisted students in answering questions, the responses were varied. The modules Communication Skills and Change Processes and Techniques in Education were said to be providing guide lines only for answering assignments and examinations questions by sixty percent and forty percent respectively. The same modules were said to have few errors and some topics were not sufficiently discussed.

As for the MEDM degree programme four modules were evaluated based on the same criteria as above. These were Economics of Education, Measurement and Evaluation, Policy Analysis, Implementation and Evaluation, and Supervision of Educational Personnel modules. All the twenty respondents described the module type as core. For the Economics of Education module twenty three percent of the respondents noted that the facts were not logically presented and seventy seven noted that they were logically presented in the same module. In the other three modules all the respondents agreed that the facts in the modules were logically presented. On the language used in the modules, twenty three percent of the respondents found the language used difficult to follow and seventy seven found it easy to follow. The rest of the modules were described as easy to follow by all the respondents. On answering assignment and examination questions, forty two percent indicated that the modules assisted them in answering assignment and examination questions and fifty eight percent indicated that they provided guides only.

This raises a number of questions about the role of the module as a teaching and learning mode in distance education. First, are modules expected to act as substitutes for textbooks? Secondly, are modules expected to provide all information or have to provide guidelines to the student? In that case should there be a distinction between modules prepared for conventional students and ODL students? If we were to consider the first question, it should be noted that students have to function beyond the information given in the modules. In that respect, the guidance role of the module becomes paramount. In an attempt to address the second question, it is pertinent to note that there should be no difference in terms of the information that students have to acquire despite the mode of instruction at their institutions. However, the different questions raised above should not be perceived as means of disregarding some of the issues raised by students about the quality of modules used at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Students were also asked to comment on factual errors in the modules. All the modules evaluated were said to have few factual and typographical errors.

This says a lot about the production of modules at the university. There is need to focus on the facts and their presentation before the modules can be distributed to students. The fact that students described the errors as few can not be defended. In relation to the same question, students were asked to comment on whether the modules they reviewed addressed the course outlines. Whilst all the respondents agreed that the modules in Measurement and Evaluation, Policy Analysis, Implementation and Evaluation and Supervision of Educational Personnel addressed the course outlines of the respective courses, the same could not be said about the Economics of Education module. When it came to this module, six (thirty percent) of the respondents indicated that the module did not adequately address the course outline. Still on the same module, eight (forty percent) of the respondents noted that the module did not sufficiently discuss some topics.

The third section concentrated on the evaluation of courses offered in the department of education. The courses evaluated are those referred to above. The evaluation of courses focused on orientation of students to the learning material, rationale for the learning material, coverage of objectives, practice activities, relevance to the degree programme, statement of course requirements, and its contribution to increasing knowledge. All the respondents agreed that the different facets noted above contributed significantly to their degree programme. However, ten percent indicated that they were not sure about the orientation, rationale and the coverage of the objectives in the Economics of Education course. Whilst in most of the courses evaluated respondents tended to agree that their courses were of value to them, major concerns have been raised about the course Economics of Education. This appears to emanate from how the module is written as noted by some of the respondents doing the course.

The fourth and final section focused on the teaching methods of the tutors and their qualifications. As an ODL institution, the Zimbabwe Open University makes use of programme co-ordinators and part-time tutors. Programme co-ordinators operate at the eleven regional centres of the university. They are responsible for different programmes dependent on qualification and area of specialization. At the Harare Region, there are two regional co-ordinators in the Department of Education. One is responsible for Educational Studies and the other is responsible for Teacher Education. An assessment of their qualifications indicates that co-ordinators in the Department of Education held Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Management degree and a Masters in Educational Management degree respectively. The co-ordinator at the region is pursuing doctoral studies. Among other functions, the duties of the programme co-ordinators is to supervise tutors, assign tutors courses for tutoring, conduct induction sessions for new students, supervise students,develop programmes, produce Distance Teaching and Open Learning (DTOL) materials, research and teaching and tutoring. A close scrutiny of the highest qualifications of the tutors showed that they all had Master of Education in Educational Management degrees. This is the minimum qualification acceptable at university level in Zimbabwe. The researcher managed to observe fifteen of the twenty tutors teaching. The focus of the observation was on whether there were tutoring or lecturing. Whilst the distinction between the two concepts might be thin, the approaches as teaching and learning modes are different. The focus of ODL should be on tutoring. There are many benefits that accrue to the student through tutoring. Tutoring has to focus on promoting independence in learning, sharing experiences, offering individualized learning experience, thus helping students to help themselves (accessed 23 July 2012) http://www.studygs.net/tutoring.htm.

From the above explanation of the concept tutoring it could be noted that ten of the tutors were doing work that could qualify as tutoring and the other five tended to do lecturing. This constituted sixty seven percent and twenty three percent respectively.

On a related note, it was observed that almost all the fifteen tutors observed switched language from English to Shona when tutoring or lecturing. In some instances it was observed that some tutors tended to use Shona language throughout their sessions. This researcher noted this to have a number of disadvantages on students. This practice is most likely to negatively affect the students' performance in their examination as it compromises their understanding of concepts through the relevant register that is used in the examinations. The language of record used in public examinations in Zimbabwe is English.

The two programmes BEDM and MEDM referred to above fall under Educational Studies. There are also some programmes within the faculty that fall under Teacher Development. The courses under Teacher Development include Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Development (BECD), Diploma of Education in Primary (DEP) and Diploma of Education in Secondary (DES). These responded to similar questions as alluded to above. They comprised of thirty students. Eighty percent of them noted that they had been oriented on the learning materials, thirteen percent were not sure and seven percent indicated that had not been oriented. On the rationale for learning material, seventy percent indicated that they were provided with the rationale for learning materials and relations to other courses, seventeen percent were not sure and thirteen percent noted that they had not been provided with the rationale.

On whether objectives adequately covered course content, ninety percent of the respondents noted that they agreed that the objectives adequately covered the course content, and ten percent were not sure. On the relevance of the degree programme ninety seven percent found them relevant and three percent were not sure.

The same number of respondents agreed that the course had increased the students' knowledge and appreciation of the subject matter and three percent were not sure on the same. The responses were the same on the extent to which the course had increased their knowledge and appreciation. On module evaluation, seventy percent noted that the facts were logically presented; thirteen percent noted that the facts were not logical and seventeen percent indicated that they did not have modules in their respective courses. On the language used in the modules, sixty percent indicated that the language was easy to follow, twenty percent noted that the language used was difficult to follow, seven percent noted that the language used was ambiguous and thirteen percent had no module. On how the modules assisted the students, twenty seven percent noted that the modules provided all the information, forty seven percent indicated that they provided guidelines only, ten percent noted that their modules did not help at all and sixteen percent noted that they had no modules in some of the courses.

Students were also asked to comment on how the modules assisted them in answering examination questions.

Thirty percent of the respondents said that their modules provided all information, forty percent provided guides only, ten percent indicated they were not sure and twenty percent had no modules in some courses. On comments on errors in the modules, six percent indicated that they were plenty; twenty seven percent indicated that there were no errors, fifty percent said there were few errors in some of the modules and seventeen percent had no modules. When it came to whether the modules addressed the course outline, fifty seven percent indicated that they addressed the course outline; thirteen said they did not and thirty percent indicated that they had no modules. On a similar note, seventy percent noted that topics in the modules were sufficiently discussed; ten percent noted that some topics in some modules were not sufficiently discussed and twenty percent did not have modules.

As for the performance of their tutors all the respondents were generally satisfied with the performance of their tutors. Such comments focused on tutors punctuality, preparation, communication skills, and time consciousness, feedback on assignments, approachability and sensitivity to learner needs. All the thirty respondents indicated that they were happy with the tutors' efforts in the different areas.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study made the following conclusions and recommendations about the teaching and learning modes at the Zimbabwe Open University, Faculty of Arts & Education, Department of Education. It was observed that students were generally satisfied with the performance of their tutors. On a similar note, all tutors had the minimum qualifications of a Masters degree in their related areas. Whilst this is still acceptable, the university should attract tutors that have higher qualifications than was the case at the time of the study. This can only be possible if the university can provide attractive packages and resources to employ new and modern technology in teaching and learning.

On the different modules offered by the university there were instances some students felt that some of them did not cover their courses adequately. Such concerns were raised in such modules as Economics of Education and Measurement and Evaluation at Masters of Education degree level. Similarly, there were concerns of non-availability of some modules on some courses in both the Educational Studies courses and Teacher Development courses. Such a scenario compromises quality if left unabated. The writing and reviewing of modules should be an on-going exercise. It is recommended that there be a module review department within the university, so that modules are produced regularly and expeditiously.

All the tutors used the traditional face-to-face lesson delivery mode. In some instances, the tutors did not distinguish between tutoring and lecturing. A significant number of them ended up lecturing instead of tutoring. There was no use of modern technology in all the cases observed, thus suggesting a lag behind technology wise, a factor that is most likely to compromise quality of education. If we are to improve on the quality of education that is delivered it is important that the university exposes students to modern education technology.

The media of instruction has to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The use of Shona as a medium of instruction as noted in cases observed tended to compromise quality as the examinations are in English. The university needs to come up with a clear policy on this matter and if the policy is in place it needs implementation and monitoring.

On courses on offer, for their respective programmes, students were generally satisfied with the relevance of the courses to their jobs.

This is important because most of the students who study with the faculty are gainfully employed and are therefore advancing themselves whilst on the job. This is most likely to benefit them when it comes to promotion. It is important for the department and the university to address some of the concerns noted, for it to remain the University of Choice.

BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of AUTHORS

Wellington SAMKANGE (Dr) is a senior lecturer at the Zimbabwe Open University, in the Faculty of Arts and Education, Department of Educational Studies. He holds a PhD in Education. He has published four journal articles. His research interests include education policy issues, quality issues, administration and management of primary and secondary schools, quality in education, assessment and evaluation in education.

Wellington SAMKANGE
Zimbabwe Open University, Faculty of Arts and Education
P. O Box MP 1119, Mount Pleasan, Harare, ZIMBABWE
Phone: +2634764595
Cell: +263773231755
E-mail(s): wshereni@gmail.com or samkwell@yahoo.com

Augustine Zano MURANDA (Mr) is a lecturer at the Zimbabwe Open University in the Faculty of Arts and Education. He holds a Masters Degree in Educational Management and is currently studying for a PhD in Education. He has written and published a module on "Education and Development". His research interests include education supervision issues, equality and quality in education and development issues.

Augustine Zano MURANDA
Zimbabwe Open University, Faculty of Arts and Education
P. O Box MP 1119, Mount Pleasant, Harare, ZIMBABWE
Phone: +263250157/8
Cell: +263773754555
E-mail: murandaa@gmail.com

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