EXAMINATION MANAGEMENT AS A WAY OF ACHIEVING QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ODL INSTITUTIONS: The Case of Zimbabwe Open University

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ABSTRACT

An examination is an important component of any institution that educates people. It is a form of assessment used to measure the students' understanding of the concepts and principles they would have learnt. Zimbabwe Open University, an Open and Distance Learning institution has been setting its own examinations for the academic programmes offered. Through examinations, ZOU students are encouraged to take an active role in analysing and questioning the things they would have learnt.

This paper discusses the examinations management at ZOU with a special focus on the setting, administering, marking right up to the publication of results. It will also discuss the challenges that ZOU is facing in conducting examinations. It will finally emerge with some valuable practical suggestions on how ZOU can improve on its examination management and thereby achieve quality assurance in all its programmes. The investigation adopted the qualitative methodology and a case study design to generate data to address the questions which guided the study.

The purposively sampled sample was drawn from ZOU's National Centre, Bulawayo and Matabeleland North Regions. The sample consisted of manager -examinations, manager- quality control, chairpersons of departments from different faculties, programme leaders, programme coordinators, regional quality coordinators, regional administrators, and students who were in their second year of study. Face-to-face interviews were used to generate data from manager -examinations, manager- quality control, regional quality coordinators and regional administrators.

Data from chairpersons of departments from different faculties, programme leaders, programme coordinators, second year students were generated through focus group discussions. Major findings were the management of examinations at ZOU enhances quality assurance, cited activities which contributed to quality assurance included setting of examination items for the item banks, tight security in the transporting of examination items to and from the regions, residential marking, active invigilation.

Participants were aware of activities that compromised quality assurance such as uncommitted invigilators, incomplete examination, lack of clarity on instructions, lack of security and non-confidentiality of examination items, timetable alterations. Some of the challenges that were mentioned by participants were unrealistic deadlines set by academic registry regarding marking, delays in dispatching of Personal Identification Numbers to newly admitted students, welfare of invigilators during invigilation, and the need for communication between invigilators and other relevant authorities if the need arise when the examination is in progress.

Some of the recommendations arrived at were that faculties should hold periodic workshops on examination management, induction of new staff members who deal with examination management, adopting ICT in the dispatch of examinations to regional centres and networking of the National Centre and the regional centres to facilitate communication and generation of student Personal Identification Numbers.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution that was approved by the Government of Zimbabwe through an Act of Parliament. The University started as a University College of Distance Education (UCDE) of the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) (Government of Zimbabwe, 1999). In March 1999 it attained University status and it now operates separately from UZ (Pfukwa and Matipano, 2006; Nyaruwata, 2010). ZOU currently has four faculties namely, Commerce and Law, Arts and Humanities, Social Science and Science and Technology. The University has a main central campus in Harare. In addition to this, "there are 10 regional centres conveniently established in each province in order for it to be accessible to every potential student throughout the country" (Benza 2001: 18). In addition the university has added an 11th region; the Virtual Region which services students who are abroad. These regions have enabled the University to decentralise and to go beyond the traditional boundaries of tertiary education.

LITERATURE REVIEW: The Importance Of Examinations In Quality Assurance

Examinations are crucial since university study ends up with an output – the credential. It is imperative that this credential be a result of evaluative mechanisms that are worth their salt, that seek to objectively establish whether or not a student has obtained the necessary knowledge and/or skill in a subject to warrant certification and graduation (Ramsden, 1992). Functions of assessment are varied and include: that it is a mandatory requirement of universities; to provide feedback to both students and teachers; as motivation to students; and preparation for life (Exam Quality Accessed on 8 August, 2011). Grading of students based on examinations results, has implications for their future, and students view grades as determinants of extrinsic rewards, e.g., future employment or post graduate selection (Rowntree, 1977). The argument transcending this paper is that since examinations fulfill such important requirements, it is imperative that they be managed efficiently if quality assurance of credentials (the end product of university study) is to be realized. The paper also acknowledges that examination management is one of the many university activities which culminate into quality assurance. The university should jealously guard its brand since quality ensures that graduates meet the standards and expectations of the industry, professional bodies and the society in general (Midlands State University, undated). To this end, ZOU has a fully fledged quality assurance set-up, staffed by a director, quality manager and regional quality coordinators in each of its regional centers.

MANAGEMENT OF EXAMINATIONS IN ODL

ODL is credited with bringing education to people's doorsteps, thereby availing university education to populations who find it difficult and impossible to attend conventional universities due to a number of limitations (UNESCO, 2002). However, if the institute offering ODL programmes is decentralised, as is the case at ZOU, the distance between the National Centres and Regional and District Centres may be a source of problems in the management of examinations.

In our view, problems associated with management of examinations in ODL are threefold:

> ➢ Expenses in delivering examinations to regional centers, collecting answered scripts from regional centers, accommodation expense for markers based in the regions when they come for marking and processing of results, delivery of results to regional centers;
> ➢ Variations in regional centers in terms of suitability and accessibility of examinations venues, where regions depend on rented accommodation; and
> ➢ Heterogeneity of personnel tasked with the management of examination in the regional centers.

Fortunately at ZOU, concerns two and three are not an issue, since the regions make use of government complexes that are suitable and easily accessible. In addition, prior to each examination session, all personnel responsible for examination management are trained and reminded of the vigilance, efficiency, diligence, required in the management of examinations so that quality is not compromised.

MANAGEMENT OF EXAMINATION AT ZOU

Setting of Examination Items
Examinations are not set by an individual at ZOU but by a team of experts in a particular subject area. This enables the production of high quality questions, which will in turn produce better-informed students. The experts meet at a workshop where they set questions together. There is a lot of brainstorming and rigorous questioning until the team agrees that a question is suitable to be included in a particular exam. Items set will be deposited in examinations' item bank. Hence high quality and concise questions are set in the end. Once the examinations are set they are then sent to the chairpersons of the respective departments for final selection and printing. After printing, chairpersons and programme leaders at the National Centre proof read the papers. After effecting any noted errors, the examinations are printed, treated as highly confidential and security material and kept in sealed envelopes at the National Centre, until examination period. The academic registrar is solely responsible for the safe keeping of all examination material.

Writing of Examinations
Examination writing has been decentralised to the regions. The University conducts examinations twice a year; that is June-July and November-December. All the programmes offered are symmetrised. Examination timetables are dispatched to regional centres at the beginning of each semester. Programme leaders and Programme coordinators are encouraged to scrutinise the timetables to ensure that all their courses are well timetabled. If there are any anomalies, they are brought to the attention of regional and faculty administrators who in turn liase with the academic registry for corrections to be effected. Early publication of timetables facilitates application for leave by students since most of ZOU students hold fulltime employment.

Dispatching and Administration of Examinations
When examinations are due to be written, the examination papers are dispatched to the various regions by ZOU vehicles a day before their commencement. At the Regional Centres the examinations are kept under lock and key to avoid leakages. Their custodians are Regional Directors and Regional Administrators. On examination days, particular examinations are taken to the examination venues where students write under close supervision by invigilators.

The fulltime academic staff members at Regional Centres perform the role of invigilators, with the assistance of part-time invigilators as the need arises. When the students finish writing, the invigilators collect the scripts and take them back to the Regional Centres. The scripts are also treated as highly confidential material. After cross-checking (scripts against examination registers), the scripts are tied neatly and placed in canvas bags, which are padlocked. The keys to the padlocks are with the academic registry. This is to ensure that, answer scripts are not tempered with in transit. The scripts are then transported to the National Centre by vehicles. When these scripts get to Harare they are taken to their respective departments for marking by both full time and part time academic staff.

Standardization, Marking and Publication Of Results

The different academic departments meet at a central venue for the marking exercise. Examination scripts are also taken to that particular venue. Before the actual process of marking starts, the markers standardise the examinations. They also produce marking guides at the same time. Once the process of standardisation is over, each marker is given his/her scripts for marking. Apart from marking, the full time academic staff members also moderate the scripts that are marked by part-time academic staff. Once the marking exercise is over, external examiners also mark the scripts to ensure the credibility of ZOU examinations. The results are then presented to the Departmental Boards, Faculty Boards and then the senate. After this presentation they are then published. The academic registry department is responsible for the publication of results. Upon publication, examinations are dispatched to regional centres for collection by students. In the event that a student is not satisfied with the result, he/she is allowed to appeal for a remark of his/her script. The appeal should be lodged within a period of 14 days after the receipt of results by the student. The student's script will then be retrieved from the academic registry and sent to his/her department to be remarked. The result of the remark rarely changes from the original; this underscores the thoroughness of the marking and the markers' abilities in interpreting the marking guides. The study sought to find out whether the management of examinations at ZOU enhances or compromises quality assurance.

Purpose of the Study

The study aimed to interrogate ZOU's examination management approach and establish its contribution to the quality assurance of the qualifications offered by the University. This was to be achieved by generating data from key personnel involved in examination management and the University's students.

Research Questions

> Does the management of examinations at ZOU enhance or compromise quality assurance of degrees offered by the University?
> Which are the aspects of examination management that are likely to compromise quality assurance?
> What are the challenges being experienced by the University in the management of examinations?
> How can the challenges be addressed so that the quality assurance is achieved?

Objectives of the Study

> To establish whether the University's examination management approach enhances or compromises quality assurance.
> To ascertain the aspects of examination management that are likely to compromise quality assurance.

> ➢ **To illuminate the challenges being experienced by the University in the management of its examinations.**
> ➢ **To explore strategies that the University can adopt in the management of its examination so that quality assurance.**

Significance of the Investigation

The significance of this study lies in that if challenges are established, and strategies identified, the University could improve its examination management approach so that quality assurance is achieved.

Limitations of the Investigation

The study was limited by the use of a single data collection approach (interviews). To circumvent this limitation, sources of data were triangulated. This was achieved by generating data from a wide spectrum of individuals involved in examination management as well as from ZOU students.

Delimitations of the Investigation

The investigation was delimited to personnel at ZOU's National Centre (manager – examinations, departmental chairpersons, and programme leaders); quality assurance co-ordinators, programme coordinators, regional administrators and students drawn from Zimbabwe Open University's Bulawayo and Matabeleland North Regions.

The investigation limited itself to ferreting participants' views on examination management at ZOU, factors that are likely to compromise quality, challenges being experienced and strategies the University can adopt in its examination management so that quality is not compromised.

Conceptualisation of Terms
Management of Examinations

Refers to the following examination related activities:- setting of examination bank items, selection of examination items from the item bank to come up with examination question papers for a given semester, timetabling of examinations, conducting of examinations at the regional centers, marking, processing and publication of results.

Quality Assurance

Is a planned and systematic review process of an institution's activities to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education and scholarship are being met, maintained and enhanced (Midlands State University, undated). Processes put in place by the university to achieve quality.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The investigation assumed a qualitative methodology. The need to probe and get answers to *why* and *how* questions prompted us to adopt a case study research design. The population consisted of manager (examinations), manager (quality), departmental chairpersons, programme leaders, programme co-ordinators, regional quality co-ordinators, regional administrators and students at ZOU. The sample was composed of one manager (examinations), one manager (quality), five departmental chairpersons, seven programme leaders (these were based at ZOU's National Centre). Five programme co-ordinators, one quality coordinator, one regional administrator, and seven second year students per region, were purposively sampled from ZOU's Bulawayo and Matabeleland North Regions. The two investigators were the main researchers, since they were actively involved in interviews and focus group discussions. Interview guides were also used.

Data Collection Techniques

Interviews were conducted with managers (examinations and quality), regional quality co-ordinators and regional administrators. Focus group discussions were conducted with departmental chairpersons, programme leaders, programme coordinators and students. The focus groups were conducted separately for the different groups. Proceedings were recorded verbatim using a Dictaphone, transcribed and sent back to the participants for verification before analysis. Field notes were also kept during interviews and focus group discussions. Grounded theory was used for data analysis. This entailed segmenting, coding, enumeration and placing data into themes, sub-themes and broad categories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Does the Management of Examinations at ZOU Enhance
or Compromise Quality Assurance of Degrees Offered By The University?

Most programme coordinators were quite happy with the way in which examination items were set. In their view, the approach did not compromise quality. Some of the comments from programme coordinators are captured below:

> *Programme coordinators in the regions are asked by respective chairpersons to write a number of questions that are kept in the item bank. The final selection of the examination question items to form the examination paper is the responsibility of the person appointed by the chairperson. The strategy of selection of exam items is quite transparent as long as the responsibility is not given to the same person always.*

> *Generally, the management of examinations is above board, and does not in any way compromise the quality of the degrees offered.*

> *The management of examinations at ZOU to a large extent maintains the quality of degrees offered by the University.*

Programme co-ordinators were also satisfied with the writing of the examinations in their regions. Most reiterated that, the examination process at the regions did not encourage unbecoming behavior by students, such as cheating. One supervisor, even referred to an incident of cheating that was reported at one of the universities, ". . . unlike at this other university where rampant cheating was reported in the press, in our region, there is active invigilation, such that during the duration of the paper, students are continuously under the microscopic eyes of the invigilators".

Other sentiments attesting the faith in which programme co-ordinators had in the way they ran examinations in their regions are encapsulated in the following quotations:

> *The conduct of the examinations in the region falls under the responsibility of the Regional Director who in turn works with the regional examination committee. The committee is responsible for the drafting of the examination invigilation timetable. A week prior to the examination, we run workshops; remind each other of our mandate during examinations. We also go through rules and regulations governing the conduct of examinations. On examination days, we report at the examination venue, an hour to the starting time for the distribution of examination material. When students have taken their seats, the chief invigilator makes announcements and reminds students the rules and regulations governing the conduct of the examinations.*

The number of invigilators in each session ensures that students are given no room to cheat. We even tell students not to bring cell phones into the examination room. When they want to respond to the call of nature, they are accompanied by invigilators. In addition, because of active invigilation, students who require attention are properly attended to.

Invigilation is done by officers who have been inducted into the ZOU expectations on management of examinations and are contracted to the University

The running of examinations at regional centres received thumbs up from students, who were quite happy with the accessibility and suitability of venues, and the deportment of invigilators during invigilation. Some of the students' comments were ' the venue is just ok, even for some of us who use public transport', 'the sitting arrangement discourages those who may want to copy', 'we are shown sealed examination envelopes prior to their distribution an indication that, they were not tempered with', 'the invigilation is more like policing, I think it's good'.

The above sentiments were corroborated by regional quality coordinators who also expressed satisfaction with the way examinations were run at regional centres ranging from accessibility and suitability of venues, sitting arrangements (student floor space), time management, and vigilance during invigilation.

Programme co-ordinators were of the idea that centralized marking was the way to go. One programme coordinator commented: '. . . it is fine to mark at a central point, one can always get advice from colleagues, when in doubt'. Yet another one reiterated 'centralised marking can go a long way towards some of the marker factors that may contaminate the results'. 'When marking is done at a central point, issues like scripts getting astray or marker failing to meet the deadline are eliminated. If you see that you cannot meet the deadline, you can always approach your programme leader, so that some of the papers are redistributed to your colleagues', quipped the other. 'Discussion of marking guides and standardization ensures that we won't only be singing from the same hymnbook, but singing the same hymn, using the same tune. In my view, this reduces inter-marker variance'. Programme leaders and chairpersons, examination managers and manager (quality control) concurred with regional programme co-ordinators, regional quality co-ordinators and students that generally the management of examinations at ZOU did not compromise quality. On setting of examination items the general sentiment among participants drawn from the National Centre was that the approach guarded against leaking. Below are some of their comments:

After setting the items, programme leaders go back without the knowledge of items that will be selected for the examination. As a result, problems of examination leaking are eliminated. In this way, the mark obtained by students is not contaminated, contrary to what obtains in conventional universities where one drafts the course outline, teaches the course, sets the examinations and marks them in the end. I am not saying much, but you can't rule out unscrupulous examination practices, where some students may have access to the examinations or the lecturer teaching to the examination. Residential marking makes it easy to monitor the process, identify problems early in the marking if there are any. It also serves us from following up markers, where marking is done in the region. For those in love with waters of wisdom, residential marking ensures that they mark without being under the influence of such waters.

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Setting of examination item banks and selection of exam items maintains the quality of the degrees offered. Marking, moderation and processing of results at a central place, with all regional programme coordinators and programme leaders being present, assures quality in all processes.

Which Are the Aspects of Examination Management That Are Likely To Compromise Quality Assurance?

The responses of manager-quality control, manager-examinations, chairpersons, programme leaders, programme co-ordinators, regional quality co-ordinators and regional administrators included the following: Lack of security and confidentiality in handling examination materials, continuous alterations of the timetable, incomplete examination questions, typographical errors and lack of clarity on instructions, incomplete registers, uncommitted invigilators and marker related factors. The sentiments raised by participants are captured under each aspect.

Continuous Alterations of the Timetable

Timetables assist students in preparation for examinations. Ideally, the examination timetable should be published at the beginning of the semester. This will curb the need to quarantine students in the event of clashes on the timetable. While quarantine is an effective way of solving clashes, it does not do justice to quarantined students, who are expected to write two examinations on the same day.

Incomplete Examination Questions

It is not uncommon to come across examination papers that are incomplete in universities where the responsible parties lack efficiency and seriousness required in managing examinations. In decentralized institutions, if there are incomplete examination questions, the way forward has to be sought from the National Centre, delaying the examination. A solution could be faxing the missing pages, from the National Centre. Where this is the solution, the fax printout could be very faint. The fact that one came prepared for the examination and is told that there has been a problem, delaying the starting of the examination may put some of the students off their stride. Even if they end up writing, they may not perform as they would have, under normal circumstances.

Typographical Errors and Lack of Clarity In Some Examinations Papers

When this happens, students fail to get the correct gist of the questions. Also there may be no clear instructions. In decentralized ODL, contact has to be made with the chairperson of the examination in question, causing anxiety and melancholy.

Incomplete Registers

When registers are incomplete, the notion of active invigilation is compromised, since one or two of invigilators will have to sit and compile the registers. Registers are important, in that they are used for cross-checking students who sat for the examinations. When other supervisors are now committed to writing of registers, students may not promptly get attention when they need it, others may be tempted to collude.

Uncommitted Invigilators

Invigilators are an important cog in the gear of examination management. Invigilators who go to the examination rooms with newspapers, novels, knitting, their own work to mark, e.g., assignments and research projects, compromise the examination process. Instead of moving around the room checking on students, they would be reading newspapers, novels, knitting or marking. This leaves students unsupervised and thereby giving them a chance to cheat.

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Even if the students do not cheat, lack of active invigilation means that students may not get assistance they may need promptly, e.g., they could be in need of continuation answer papers.

**What Are the Challenges Being Experienced By
The University in the Management Of Examinations?**

Most of our examinations have duration of three hours. The practice is if one is penciled to invigilate on a particular day, he/she has about seven hours of constant moving up and down, punctuated by a lunch break of about thirty minutes. Programme co-ordinators; felt the University should consider their welfare, by providing teas and lunch. Delay in dispatching PINS (student numbers) to new students. The general view was that if PINS are dispatched towards the examination dates, students may not be able to remember them at examination time, yet these PINS are their candidate numbers.

The problem may spill over to marking where a number of scripts surface without PIN numbers. The problem of delays in releasing PINS to regional centres resonated in most interviews and focus group discussions.Unrealistic deadlines set by academic registry for the marking to be completed. This concern was raised by programme leaders and chairpersons of various departments. The consensus was that unrealistic deadlines, when certain activities related to examinations should have been accomplished may exert a lot pressure on markers, who may end up making costly mistakes, thereby impinging on quality.Lack of power backup in the event of power cuts due to load shedding was another challenge. While this problem has not been encountered, programme co-ordinators and regional quality coordinators lamented the lack of power backup facilities in the event of power cuts due to electricity load shedding. In our view, this concern is not misplaced since verification of examinations written during the afternoon sessions usually goes beyond 5.30 PM, necessitating the need for adequate lighting.

**How Can the Challenges Being Experienced By the University
In the Management of Examinations Be Addressed So That the Quality
Assurance of Its Degrees Is Not Compromised?**

Participants proffered the following suggestions:

> ➢ *Considering the invigilators' welfare:* Invigilators concurred that invigilating is quiet taxing, therefore the University should show appreciation by providing teas and lunch, so that invigilators would not be tempted to snick out in turns to look for food; outside the .
> ➢ *Dispatching PINs numbers of newly admitted students early*: In this age of ICT, the National Centre and Regional Centres should be networked so that allocation of PINs could be done expeditiously. The suggestion reverberated during interviews and focus group discussions with regional programme co-ordinators, regional administrators, programme leaders, as well as chairpersons of departments.
> ➢ *Setting of realistic examination-related deadlines:* The chairpersons and programme leaders were of the view that the academic registry should take the lead from faculties regarding marking and examination processing deadlines.

CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the views of the personnel charged with the management of examinations, and the views of students, the management of examinations at ZOU does not compromise the quality of the credentials, despite challenges that are generic to decentralization of ODL.

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Secondly, the participants' knowledge of aspects of examination management that are likely to compromise quality of credentials augurs well for quality assurance, since participants are likely to guard against such in the discharge of their examination management activities. Getting to the top is easy; the challenge is to remain there. True to this adage, the challenge faced by ZOU is to ensure that the management of its examination does not drop below its present benchmark. Therefore we recommend that:

> ➢ Faculties should run periodical workshops on the setting of examination items for the item banks.
> ➢ There is need to produce an examination manual, having rules, regulations and sanctions to be met on those caught transgressing.
> ➢ Availing Personal Identification Numbers (PINs) to new students early in the semester, so that they can internalize them before the examinations. Coupled to this, PINs of new students should also be displayed at the examination venue. Expeditious allocation of PIN numbers can also be achieved by networking the National Centre and the Regional Centres.
> ➢ The present approach where programme coordinators set examination items should be maintained and strengthened.
> ➢ The study needs to be replicated, triangulating methodologies, using representative samples of all personnel involved in management of examinations from the National Centre and ZOU's 11 regional centres. Findings can then be used to inform policy formulation on examination management in the University.

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