ASSESSMENT IN EDUCATION:
A CASE FOR QUALITY AND STANDARDS
WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF OPEN AND DISTANCE
EDUCATION:
A Case Study of One Zimbabwean University

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ABSTRACT

A study was carried out to assess the assessment procedures used at one Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Zimbabwe. The study focused on the views and perceptions of current and former students of the university. The study also analyzed some documents on assessment procedures at the university. The study used the qualitative methodology and data was qualitatively analyzed. The focus was on fifty current and former students in the Bachelor of Education in Educational Management (BEDM) and Master of Education in Educational Management (MEDM) programmes. Results indicated that both current and former students were generally satisfied with the assessment methods used in their programmes.

These included assignments, examinations and research projects/dissertations. It was noted that examinations had the highest weighting in both programmes. However, the study also noted that there were some practices that compromised quality if not carefully handled. These included the supervision of research projects and dissertations by only one supervisor per student. There were fears of bias in that regard. The study came up with a number of recommendations.

These included the need to reconcile and align regulations in Tutorial Letters with General Information and Regulations currently in use. Other recommendations included the need to review the study period without compromising the quality of education for BEDM, and the need to deal with issues of plagiarism of assignments. It should also be mandatory for Masters' students to attend a viva voce to defend their dissertations. Finally, ODL demands innovative assessment methods which should be clearly distinct from conventional modes of assessment.

Keywords: Quality; Assessment; standards; open and distance learning.

INTRODUCTION

The debate on assessment in education has dominated the discourse in education since the 1930s.This was so as a result of the initiative by W. Tyler to link assessment in education with the need to set objectives against which an assessment could be measured.

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Apart from how best to do the assessment, debate has also focused on the form it should take and the purpose it served. There appears to be no agreement on the two. Firstly, the study intends to cover the different forms of assessment that have been used in education over the years.

Secondly, it sets to examine the different procedures that have been used in one tertiary institution in Zimbabwe. Thirdly, the study focuses on the purposes that assessment in education serves in relation to issues of quality and standards in education.

Background to the study

Assessment in education has become an accepted measure of student performance. However, there are on-going debates about what constitutes proper assessment and whether assessment really measures what it is supposed to measure. The arguments and disagreements tend to centre on the concept assessment on one hand and the purpose assessment serves on the other.Harlen (2007) in her attempt to explain assessment as a concept compares it with evaluation. For Harlen (2007) assessment and evaluation involve the process of collecting, interpreting evidence, in order to produce judgements.Within this context Harlen views the terms assessment and evaluation as denoting the same meanings. On the other hand, Satterly (1989) uses the term assessment to include all the processes and products which describe the nature and extent of children's learning, its degree of correspondence with the aims and objectives of teaching and its relationship with the environments which are designed to facilitate learning. In his description of assessment, Satterly further notes the purpose that it serves in education. According to him the purpose of assessment is to provide information which is to be used for decision making purposes.

Apart from the purpose of decision making, assessment has been used to measure teacher performance. This is performance in terms of learning and teaching outcomes. This is a position that supports Harlen (2007)'s argument that assessment serves accountability purposes, which provides for the evaluation of teachers and schools. It has become a culture that parents choose schools basing on the performance of schools in public examinations. As suggested by Gardner (1999) in Murphy (1999) we have developed and moved towards an assessing society. Within this context Gardner (1999) advocates for a movement from the formal assessment to some kind of informal assessment in education.

According to Gardner (1999) it would be more helpful to create an enabling environment that could allow for assessment to occur within natural settings through the use of such entities as domain-projects and process-folios.

In arguing for these, Gardner takes note of the concerns for reliability often raised in connection with the informal assessment as he advocated. He further argues that any degree of skewness that such informal assessment is often associated with is prevalent in all instruments, including formal instruments. Desforges (1989) also gives a variety of purposes that assessment in education serves.

He concurs with Satterly (1989) that assessment serves the purpose of providing information in order to make informed decisions and judgements. He further notes that assessment enables the students to know their strengths and weaknesses.

In that respect, assessment becomes diagnostic. Apart from the diagnostic function that assessment serves, it also serves the formative and summative functions (Desforges 1989). This has made it necessary to define the functions and purpose of assessment in terms of the stage at which the assessment is done. The discourse has also been focused not only on the assessment tools that are used, but the purpose in terms of the stage at which the assessment occurs. There have been arguments for and against formative and summative assessment in education. Despite the different purposes that assessment serves in education, there have been divergent views about its form and its role in modern society. It has been argued that the tools that are used to condemn students may not be valid after all.

Secondly, in the case of summative assessment students are judged at the very end which might not reflect their true performance throughout the course. Further to that, there have been arguments that assessment instruments such as examinations tend to promote bias towards certain behaviours, without recognizing the other strengths of the individual. They do not focus on the total development of the individual.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There have been concerns about open and distance learning in Zimbabwe. Some people have negative perceptions about open and distance education at university level. There is need to interrogate the different facets of procedures of open and distance education to establish the extent to which they meet the fitness of purpose mission. The study identified the following research problems:

> - What assessment procedures are used at the Zimbabwe Open University?
> - To what extent do the assessment procedures contribute to the development and measurement of the students' skills and abilities?

Rationale and Purpose of the Study

There have been expressions of dissatisfaction with the products of the schooling system from some quarters. These have included concerns about the products of tertiary institutions, such as universities. Whilst there have been other factors attributed to it, assessment procedures have also come under scrutiny, thus contributing to the perception that there is something lacking in today's university products. It has been argued that assessment procedures that we use reflect our areas of emphasis in our teaching.

In view of this, the study seeks to examine assessment procedures used in one of the universities in Zimbabwe. The study seeks to investigate assessment procedures used at the university in the Faculty of Arts and Education, Physical Sciences, the Faculty of Commerce and Law, and the faculty of Social Sciences.

Assessment: The Concept and Discourse/Theoretical Perspectives

Assessment in education tends to take the form of tests and examinations. As noted by Goodwin (1997:7) testing, like most modern technologies "involves specialized arcane knowledge, hidden algorithms, and technical art, and like many current technologies is a complex of standardized means for attaining a predetermined end in social, economic, administrative, and educational institutions". The view expressed by Goodwin treats testing as a technology.

According to Madaus, Raczek and Clarke (1997) in Goodwin (1997), the technology of testing is premised on three fundamental ideas. These according to them are firstly that a test focuses on a particular domain of interest. Secondly, a test is a sample of behaviour, products, answers, or performance from the larger field of interest and lastly a test allows the user to make inferences about the larger domain of interest in order to make decisions about the student, the whole group and the institution (Madaus et.al 1997).

Madaus et. al (1997)'s conceptualization of testing as an assessment tool contains in it the purposes for assessment.

These among others as noted earlier include the function of making important decisions. However, there appears to be a problem with the emphasis on tests focusing on a particular domain of interest. These include as noted by Madaus et. al firstly is the problem of the name given to the domain and secondly is the relevance of the domain itself. Madaus et. al (1997:9) further posit that "too often people fail to question whether the domain is the correct one, given the uses the test will be put". Madaus et. al's argument brings in issues of validity and reliability of assessment tools such as tests.

Within the same context Gardner (1999) in Murphy (1999) whilst recognizing the role of the "formal testing" model also advances the "apprenticeship" model of assessment. The formal testing model is akin to the testing as a technology concept advanced by Madaus et. al above. Gardner (1999:90) goes further to say that "the formal testing model is conceived of as an objective, decontextualized form of assessment which can be adopted and implemented widely, with some assurance that similar results will be obtained". The second model as advocated by Gardner (1999) appears to support the idea of conducting assessment within a natural set-up, as it is 'based on a prior analysis of the skills involved in a particular craft". (ibid. p. 91).

Race, Brown and Smith (2005) came up with the constructive alignment model. According to them constructive alignment "is about ensuring that assessment, teaching, learning and feedback are all in harmony with each other, and that feedback links well to students' evidence demonstrating their achievement of the intended learning outcomes" (p12).

In the same vein they advocate for making students aware of the intended learning outcomes, which should serve as a guide to teaching and assessment. However, there appeared to be limitations to what the model advocates. For instance, in day to day teaching and learning situations it is the teacher who is aware of the intended learning and teaching outcomes. These are usually stated in the teaching plans as objectives.

These are not shared with the learners in most of the cases. Such a position tends to weaken the position of the constructive alignment approach to assessment. Another area of emphasis is the aspect of feedback.

They emphasize feedback to students, which again can be quite relevant in formative assessment and less relevant in summative assessment as often demonstrated by the use of terminal examinations. These have been criticized for condemning students to failure rather than giving them any helpful feedback.

In view of the above arguments, Genishi (1997) came up with an alternative view to assessment. Genishi draws parallels between the traditional objective oriented mode of assessment and alternatives to assessment within postmodernism. In her argument Genishi advocates for a movement from the traditional objective based assessment model to an intersubjective model. She further argues that "the societal context in which we live is post-modern, that is, eclectic, without fixed standards, and full of shifting, multiple perspectives" (p35).She also supports her argument that in such fields as education and other related spheres there is skepticism about standards and their canons as they can no longer be accepted without question. We live in a world where the status quo is open to scrutiny. Within that context, assessment in education should be no exception. This is a position also advanced by Race et al. (2005) who suggest that assessment should follow a variety of assessment formats. This in a way helps in ameliorating the conditions created by the skepticism towards the traditional assessment standards. For instance, they suggest such assessment formats as reviews, reports, practical work, portfolios, presentations, assessment of performances, student projects and work based learning.

The suggestions by Race et al. appear to support Genishi (1997)'s advocacy for an alternative form to the traditional objective oriented approach to assessment. This appears to be contained in the suggestions for such assessment formats as the use of assessment portfolios, student projects and assessing performance.

Rationale for Assessment in Education

In their attempt to provide a conceptual framework for assessment, different scholars and researchers have also explained assessment in terms of why there is need for assessment in education. This has been an attempt to justify its use and, indeed, give the whole rationale for assessment. In their contribution to the discourse Posavac and Carey (2007) point to the issue of quality. They argue that the assessment of a programme or course contributes to quality services by providing feedback on programme activities and outcomes, to those responsible for the programme. For them, feedback is important in any human activity as it promotes effectiveness. Levin and McEwan (2007) contend that assessment provides for programme improvement, and enables decision makers to make better choices among possible programmes. It would then appear that assessment, whether it is in the classroom or is in whole programme, serves the purpose of providing feedback. Thus, Posavac and Carey (2007) agree with Yoshino (2002) who also justify assessment in terms of providing feedback. Nevertheless, what distinguishes Posavac and Carey from the rest is their emphasis on quality. This comes about through communication of both the processes and the results.

For them, schools and colleges do not only assess the quality of education provided to students, but also assess special services such as enrichment, remedial programmes and other education related activities. Such an assessment is able to verify a number of activities within the institution.

For Posavac and Carey (2007), at whatever level, assessment should be able to verify the allocation of resources and their use, and that the programmes are providing the expected services. Furthermore, they note that assessment allows us to examine and compare outcomes in addition to providing information to improve the quality of the product.

The outline by Posavac and Carey appears to provide us with a summary of the rationale for doing an assessment. They seem to emphasize the need to verify actions taken in comparison with needs and outcomes. For them, an assessment offers the basis for comparison. They are concerned with assessment as a performance indicator. For them, information from an assessment contributes to quality in two ways; the information from an assessment tells us if standards are being met and maintained; and that if there is any discrepancy, there should be need for improvement. For instance, they further point out that if an assessment of implementation shows that a programme has been implemented well, and that people seek its services, an assessment of the programme's outcome may become a focus of an evaluation on which decisions are based. This may benefit other programmes.

In trying to explain the rationale for assessment in education, Wholey (2007) takes a similar position as that expressed by Posavac and Carey. Wholey argues that assessment serves to provide information from which to develop programme improvement. He emphasizes on formative assessment. Similarly, Scriven (1997) argues that assessment serves to provide feedback and that feedback serves to strengthen the plans for services and their delivery, in order to improve the outcome of programmes, or to increase their efficiency.

By concentrating on assessment for feedback and improvement purposes, Scriven is reminding us of the formative function of assessment. For Scriven (1997), assessment serves both formative and summative functions, since he further argues that assessment contributes to decisions on whether to continue or terminate a programme.

Approaching the rationale for assessment from a classroom perspective, Rassi (1999) points out a number of issues that justify assessment. She notes that, in its different forms, assessment should be able to measure outcomes. This, in a way, contributes to behaviour change in terms of expected standards. It is able to inform whether teaching and learning are taking place. If they are, an assessment should establish the extent to which they are taking place. This, points to the need for information on what is happening on the ground. Rassi, therefore, notes that assessment can inform teaching and learning. She further stresses the frequency and appropriateness of an assessment, arguing that if assessment is administered regularly and appropriately, it can facilitate the integration of a programme's curriculum across different areas, thus providing a link between theory learnt and practice.

However, she notes that much depends on the questions being asked, that these should be relevant, valid and reliable. For her, appropriate questions should be able to provide checks and balances for different components of the programme. Black and Wiliam (1998) posit that in the classroom situation, feedback is associated with formative assessment and which improves standards of learning. Looking at formative assessment, the rationale is for identifying intentions or outcomes, and criteria for achieving these, in order to provide effective and timely feedback.

Chelmsky (1997) adds another dimension to the discussion. He says that assessment can also be done for the purpose of gaining knowledge about the programme.

FORMS OF ASSESSMENT

In an attempt to provide a conceptual framework for the concept, different scholars have also concentrated on the different stages at which assessment can take place. This has contributed to the development of different forms of assessment. These, are determined by the stage at which assessment takes place in the implementation cycle. They are also determined by what one intends to assess, the stage and purpose.

Formative Assessment

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/assessment* gives forms of assessment. It identifies formative assessment which is carried out in the early stages of the implementation process. Wikipedia, free encyclopedia, posits that formative assessment is generally carried out throughout a course or project.

This is done for development purposes. In that respect, it is argued that it is diagnostic. The diagnostic nature of formative assessment is also noted by Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshal and William (2003), who note that, within a classroom situation, formative assessment becomes part of the instructional process as it provides information to both the teacher and the learner at the right time. As a form of assessment, formative assessment is therefore, concerned with practice, assessment at regular intervals, and ensuring that the changes and interventions remain relevant to social reality (Bless and Higson-Smith, 1995).It also provides for the collection of evidence about programme performance, without necessarily having to wait for the end product.

Through formative assessment evidence is gathered about ongoing learning activities for decision making; the evidence is judged in terms of progress towards the detailed lesson goals; pupils become aware of their lesson goals; the process is cyclical and ongoing contributing to teaching, learning and helping the student (Harlen, 2005).However, whilst it is noted that with formative assessment, assessment is regular and ongoing, its relevance does not only lie in these, but the use to which the results of the assessment are put.

The function of formative assessment is to collect data about educational programmes as they are still being developed (Borg and Gall, 1991). This data can then be used by the developers to modify the programme. They note that, this helps in making decisions expediently, so that resources are not wasted. They also add another dimension about formative assessment that it is often carried out by an internal assessor, who has the responsibility to help the developers.Formative assessment involves the gathering of evidence during learning activities and interpreted in terms of learning goals (Harlen 2007). It is on-going and as such is able to provide feedback so as to improve and modify activities in line with intended goals. It is seen as contributing to adjustments to the teaching and learning activities. This is a point emphasized by Harlen that because of this purpose formative assessment is also called 'assessment for learning'. It contains with it the purpose and functions of assessment. In addition to that, both formative and summative assessments are processes (Taras 2009).Taken within this context they both have to go through stages. The choice of functions is therefore able to influence both the goals and the standards (Taras, 2009).

Whilst it has been found plausible to credit formative assessment with providing instant feedback not all activities in the process contribute to this function. These activities involve questioning, teacher activities such as marking, peer assessment and use of tests (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Williams 2003).There have been questions about the type of feedback provided by tests because of the domain such tests focus on and secondly there are issues of validity and reliability as these may be affected by the teacher bias. This might be so in cases where the teacher becomes the chief assessor who has the final say in the decisions that have to be made to determine the future of the student under assessment. Apart from the activities noted above as commensurate with formative assessment, Black and William (2009) were concerned with the activities that occurred in the classroom and thereby proposed a theoretical frame for the study of such activities. They further note that formative assessment may be effective as the "quality of interactive feedback is a critical feature in determining the quality of learning activity, and is therefore a central feature of pedagogy" (p6).

Summative Assessment

Another form of assessment is summative assessment. This is, in a way, the contrast of formative assessment in a number of respects. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia notes that summative assessment refers to the assessment of learning and summarizes the development of learners at a particular time. This could be after any given period, for example, a year or when a programme has run its full course. Wikipedia, free encyclopedia, also notes that summative assessment provides information on the product's efficacy, since it concentrates on how the learners performed. Alternatively, it concentrates on how a programme performed in relation to set goals and objectives. It therefore, gives a kind of summary of achievements at a given time.

In education, summative assessment has been used to mark the end of an education span. For instance, students may write public examinations at grade seven, to determine who proceeds to secondary school, and which type of secondary school. Bless and Higson-Smith (1995) point out that summative assessment aims at determining to what extent programmes meet their specified aims and objectives. In this regard, they explain summative assessment in terms of the function of establishing the extent to which aims and objectives are met. For them, summative assessment has to satisfy at least five steps. These include identifying aims and objectives, their formulation, coming up with instruments to measure behaviour or outcomes, data collection and report back (ibid). They see the above five steps as prerequisites. These, in a way, highlight the major characteristics of summative assessment.

They also raise the importance of keeping the aims and objectives in mind as the assessment is conducted. They further take note of the need for the researcher to translate the aims and objectives into observable changes that are measurable.

According to them, this should be accompanied by the use of valid instruments and designs for assessing the phenomenon.

Lastly, they stress that the findings should be presented in an objective manner easy to follow.

Illuminative Assessment

Draper (1996), notes that there is a tendency of concentrating on summative and formative assessment at the expense of illuminative assessment. Draper (1996) views illuminative assessment within the same context as ethnography. For him, the investigator hangs out with the sole purpose of picking up how participants feel and think about a situation. Within the same context, Murphy and Torrance (1987) stress that illuminative processes are primarily concerned with description and interpretation rather than measurement and prediction, and therefore, seek to illuminate a complex array of questions. In this case, assessment is meant to portray the whole picture of the situation under study. This, therefore, means that the illuminative function is served by how assessment gives an impression of the programme as a whole. In this sense, assessment focuses on what is going on so as to get the picture of this whole scenario.

This is based on the work of Parlett and Hamilton (1976) who argue that there is need for an approach that involves the intensive study of the whole educational programme. For them, this involves the study of the rationale, evolution, operations, achievements and difficulties in the school context. Their emphasis is on studying the school context, because, for them, there is a variety of factors that influence programme performance. If one is to conduct illuminative assessment, one has to take cognizance of these factors. Parlett and Hamilton observe that, these factors include operating assumptions, educators' individual characteristics and the students' perspectives and preoccupations.

They further observe that, with illuminative assessment, the assessor does not pass judgments, as its purpose is not decision making, but information gathering. They propose basic stages for illuminative assessment, which include observation, further inquiry; and explanation.For Parlett and Hamilton (1976), the purpose of observation is to explore and familiarize with the setting being studied, further inquiry is necessary to focus the study on selected issues, and lastly, there is need to seek to explain the observed patterns and the cause-effect relationships.

They observe that illuminative assessment emphasizes on classroom processes, subjective information, and naturalistic inquiry. That because of these areas of emphasis, illuminative assessment relies on observations, interviews, questionnaires, tests, and documents for data collection.

THE ROLE OF THE ASSESSOR

However, most discussions tend to ignore the role of the assessor. Points have been raised on how assessment can provide a check on programme utility, accountability and desirability. Implicit in these, is the role of the assessor in assessment. This role, to a large extent, determines the form that the assessment is most likely to take. Posavac and Carey (2007), for instance, observe that the assessor has a role to play on the purpose and outcome of the assessment. They argue for internal assessors for formative assessment, in that internal assessors have an advantage in performing formative assessment.

This advantage appears to lie in the internal assessor's understanding of the operations of the organization that is being assessed. They further posit that internal assessors are also appropriate for quality assurance assessments.

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The idea of an internal assessor is further supported by the argument that such an assessor is well versed with the internal politics and dynamics of the organization or programme under assessment. Besides, an internal assessor is more trusted by programme participants than an outsider. However, there have been arguments to the contrary. It has been argued that internal assessors may be co-opted into the system of the organization which makes their assessment biased. In that regard there is need for external assessors.

Assessment, Quality and Accountability in Education

Most debates on assessment in education appear to credit assessment with working towards or contributing to quality and accountability. The quality of an education system, or part of it, is often described in terms of the inputs into the teaching-learning process (Grisay and Mahlck,1990). Coombs and Hallak (1987) add that quality should also include content, methods of teaching, management of the education process and adapting education to changing needs through innovations. Hallak (1996) further identifies the determinants of quality in education as inputs, the process, the outcome and the fitness of the education produced. There is need to concentrate on the resources and the related mechanism to mobilize the same resources if we are to account for quality in education. When it comes to the processes Hallak (1996) argues for   the need for integration of the content, methods and organization of educational management. In that respect, outcomes and fitness for purpose are used to measure quality in education (ibid).

Whilst there is no consensus on what really constitutes quality in education, there are basic tenets which appear to converge on the dimensions of quality of education. Such dimensions include: the health of the learners and the participation of the families, a conducive environment to support learning, the relevance of the curricula to meet the learner's needs and those of the stakeholders, assessment that promotes learning and acquisition of skills (UNESCO, 2000).

In addition to these, there should be a match between outcomes and national goals (ibid). Within the same context Coombs and Hallak (1987), and Hallak (1996) provide us with key elements that need assessment in education to determine quality. This position is also supported by Fuller (1986) who observed that the quality of an educational enterprise is the function of inputs and their efficient management in relation to observed targets. These arguments tended to support Stufflebeam's Context, Input, Process and Product (CIPP) model in that the model identifies the same areas as requiring assessment, if we were to assess for quality in education.

It may be easy to say that assessment contributes to quality, but the major problem is to try to show how it does so, and secondly, to establish what quality in education constitutes. In trying to enhance our understanding of this dichotomous situation, Stanton (1995) makes observations about assessment and quality that are worth considering. His assertions support the point raised by Coombs and Hallak (1987) that postulates that an organization, such as a school or university is a system and as such, is comprised of subunits; that if we assess for quality, we have to consider all these subunits. In a similar view, Santon posits that to assess the quality of public institutions requires analysis of the legal framework that influences the performance, capacity, accountability and life cycle of government agencies and private instrumentalities (World Bank, 1995).

Santon raises pertinent issues. The concern for a legal framework is useful as it guides operations at institutional level. Santon's argument shows that establishing the extent of quality in institutions such as schools or colleges is not the same as in other economic activities. For Santon, assessing the quality of public institutions can be problematic in that these institutions are more than merely economic rules of the game. They are the way that a society chooses to organize itself to carry out public and private activities (World Bank, 1995).This argument presents us with a problem because, at times, we are attracted to assessing quality, using economic indicators such as how much is being spent per student, or trying to establish the ratio of resources in relation to the number of students. This can merely tell us what is going on within an institution and not necessarily the quality of the product produced. Despite this problem Coombs and Hallak (1987) still argue that if we are to assess for quality purposes there is need to consider the inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes as noted earlier.

Materu (2007) argues that assessment in education serves a quality assurance purpose. For him, quality is fitness for purpose. It allows us to measure the extent to which the programme is serving its purpose. Implicit in the argument is the issue of standards. Quality in education has to do with satisfying the client's expectations. In that respect, Materu (2007) supports Hallak (1996)'s argument on quality as fitness for purpose. However, in a business organization, it may be easy to identify the clients. In a school set up, the clients are wide and, at times, with different expectations. In education, the clients could be students, teachers, parents, education officers, and other users of the products of the education system. Harvey (2004) accepts Materu's concept of quality as fitness for purpose. Harvey (2004) further informs us that fitness for purpose equates quality with the fulfillment of a specification or stated outcome. For Harvey, quality has to deal with standards as well. It provides a measure of what ought to be.

Critiquing the quality as fitness for purpose concept, Campbell and Rozsnyni (2002) argue that the concept concentrates on the purpose at the expense of the process. Their argument is that if we are to concentrate on the purpose, this may be misleading and ignoring reality. In- a way, it would suggest that as long as students are passing examinations, it would not matter much how they are being taught and how they are learning. Teachers may teach for examination purposes, ignoring the pedagogical needs of the students. Similarly, as long as a programme is achieving its goals, it would not matter by how much.

For Campbell and Rozsnyni, the process is just as important as the purpose served by that process. This means, therefore, that if we are to establish quality, and at the same time assess for it, we also have to have provisions for monitoring the processes and the system as a whole. The means should, therefore, justify the end and equally so, the end should also justify the means.

Psacharopoulos (World Bank, 1995) maintains that we can use quality indicators to track the performance of education programmes. Having said that, Psacharopoulos (World Bank, 1995) raises the issue of lead time as a result of the gap between the inception of an institution and the time it produces its first graduates. Secondly, it can be a paradox to compare different institutions in different circumstances. Thirdly, there is the problem of quantifying and summarizing benefits in education programmes.

Psacharopoulos, however, raises problems that we are most likely to encounter in our effort to assess for quality in education. He raises the point of time and the timing of the assessment in relation to measuring the quality of the school or college, given that it takes time for a school to have products after construction. If we are to concentrate on the product, it would be very difficult to assess for quality at primary school level as these rarely go to other markets except perhaps to proceed to secondary school. And, in arguing for the use of products, the major problem we face is how to get the products, and who assesses the quality of the product. On the other hand, schools are in different situations and circumstances. Any assessment for quality, based on the same criteria, may be misleading and unfair to the disadvantaged institutions. Indeed, in trying to employ experimental methods for measuring quality, we run into ethical problems as we try to experiment with different groups.

In discussing quality in education, related terms such as accountability and efficiency are often mentioned as noted earlier. Assessment in education is attributed to have contributed to their improvement. Very often the discussions seem to fall short of demonstrating how accountability is improved in an education system. The question who is accountable to who is often raised when discussing issues of accountability. Harlen (2007) provides us with a definition that may provide answers to the questions raised.

According to Harlen (2007), accountability has to do with being responsible for one's actions, and being able to explain to stakeholders why and how things were done or why they were not done. The problem is that as noted earlier, education is a system and, as such, there are different stakeholders involved, who have divergent views about how education programmes should run. For instance, students, teachers, school heads, the community, parents, education officials and the nation at large have different perceptions about what constitutes sound education. What is important to note, however, is that any form of assessment should be able to provide some information to different stakeholders.

Harlen (2007) further maintains that the effect of accountability at any of the levels referred above depends on a number of variables. These variables include information and its relevance, how to judge effectiveness and the action taken. Harlen reminds us of what accountability constitutes. For her, it is not enough for stakeholders to get information about a programme or course. What is important is what they do with the information. For her, it is not just the information that matters, but a clearly defined way of getting information, and clear corresponding criteria for judging standards.

This pauses a dilemma in the assessment for quality and accountability discourse. Firstly, there is the dilemma of providing relevant information, secondly, the problem of trying to establish whose standards the judgment is going to be based on; and thirdly, the need to come up with a mechanism that ensures that the information is used.

Approaching the debate from a similar angle, Bush and Burnham (1994) make an attempt to explain accountability and its relevance within the school system. According to them, accountability means being required to give an account of events or behaviour in a school, to those who have a legitimate right to know.

For Bush and Burnham, assessment, in this respect, assumes the responsibility of balancing and convincing different views on performance. However, it should be noted that any assessment of the activities in the school should be an information base for both insiders and outsiders.

It might be necessary to take note of a number of issues raised by Mahoso (The Sunday Mail, January 1-7, 2012). His argument is that we cannot assess quality without first clearly defining the processes and procedures of assessment. In this regard Mahoso raises at least eight pertinent issues about quality. These include the procedures to be followed, the sequential steps in the procedures, the assessor, qualification of the assessor, purpose of the procedure, how it is to be performed and the need for bench-marks on which investors and clients determine success or failure of a programme (ibid). Further to that Mahoso (The Sunday Mail, December 18-24, 2012) in response to the suspension of some degree programmes offered by ZOU by the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) challenged the position taken by ZIMCHE on suspending some degree programmes. He argues that the new " bench marks" for quality assurance were defective and tended to border on perceived threats from Open and Distance Learning institutions such as ZOU and UNISA among others to conventional institutions of higher learning. Whilst the issues that he raised remain contentiously debatable, it might be necessary to note that there is growing competition among institutions in terms of the caliber of students and the different degree programmes they offer. This has indeed widened the prospective students' choice of institutions of learning between conventional and ODL universities in Zimbabwe.

ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES IN EDUCATION

The discussion on assessment in education has highlighted differences in theories and models of assessment. However, another area of contention in the assessment discourse is the techniques that are employed in different assessment genres. Rossi and Freeman (1993), in their argument for efficiency assessment, propose the use of classic experimental designs in which control and experimental groups are constructed randomly, and receive different treatments. For the researcher to conduct an assessment, he/she has to measure the dependent variable 01 before the event and then administer the treatment X and then measure the same group 02 after the event (Bless and Higson-Smith 1995).In the classroom situation that would mean measuring the performance of students before a new teaching programme, and then expose the group to the new programme and measure performance after this. Any changes are then attributable to the intervention. If this can be done without doubt, then the design is said to have internal validity. For Rossi and Freeman, concern is to establish a course and affect relationship. The use of experimental techniques in assessing programme implementation seems to be characterized by a number of problems. The major problem is that it is difficult to establish how things were before the intervention.

This is not easy, especially where we are not only assessing the project, but people in it as well. As a result, other assessment techniques that are non-experimental are preferred. Rossi and Freeman (1993) further suggest non-randomized quasi-experiments and non-experimental techniques which are commonly employed in impact assessment.

They argue that with proper safeguards, such non-experimental designs can provide reasonably firm estimates of effects. This position is supported by scholars such as Nachmias and Nachmias. In support of the use of non-experimental techniques, Nachmias and Nachmias (1989) further posit that they can use different methods of data collection. For them, such designs can be drawn from observations, documents, questionnaires and interviews. However, it is important to note that different assessment techniques that have been alluded to can only be selectively used when it comes to dealing with people. This is premised on that people are not objects, they have feelings and we cannot often use the same techniques that we use on objects for ethical reasons. Furthermore, it is important to note differences in application. For instance, the techniques used to assess student performance may be at variance with those used to assess adults participating in a government programme or policy implementation process. This has led scholars and researchers to question some assessment procedures, signifying a movement from the traditional methods of assessment.

Genishi (1997) informs us that in the United States for example, traditional measurement, including standardized testing, have been a persistent feature of the school experience. She points out that this has been the case because, for quite some time, such measurement has been seen as objective, reliable and valid. According to her, in such an assessment, the relationship between the assessor and the assessed is of little importance, as it is assumed that objectivity is within the instrument used. This view of assessment procedures as postulated by Geshini has been criticized for being too traditional and out-dated. Much of the criticism appears to emanate from the attempt to extend the use of such standardized tests to measure intelligence. It is also criticized for being aloof as it observes performance from a distance.

Besides, much of the criticism has been based on the ideas of cognitive theorists such as Piaget and Bruner. This has witnessed a shift from the traditional techniques of measuring performance. Bruner (1996) has argued for intersubjectivity which supports the human ability to understand the minds of others; that allows one to negotiate meanings more than words can say.

This has been a contribution to measurement in many ways. Firstly, it has widened the net when it comes to the variety of techniques that can be employed today.

Secondly, it has to be widened in scope and does not only confine itself to assessing students in the classroom.

Thirdly, it has moved away from the traditional emphasis on viewing people as objects that can be controlled for observation purposes. Lastly, there has been an inherent feature within it that recognizes ethics when studying people.

Writing about tests, Ogunniyi (1984) argues for both essay and objective tests. Ogunniyi (1984) maintains that essay tests provide opportunities for students to demonstrate the degree to which they can analyze a problem; creatively select information; present evidence of substantial understanding of the subject in question, and are able to demonstrate as much as they can what they know, since there is no absolute wrong or right answer. Ogunniyi provides us with a summary of the advantages of the essay test.

Chief among these is that it allows students to express themselves and in turn allowing students to demonstrate their skills. But he notes limitations of the essay test, such as subjectivity and promotion of information recall. He, therefore, proposes that the essay type be mixed with the objective test type which allows the student to make a choice about what he/she learnt.

Whilst concurring with Ogunniyi as regards the role of tests in assessment, Cohen et al (2000) further remind us that tests have formative, diagnostic and summative roles in assessment. For Cohen et al (2000) formative testing is undertaken during a programme, and is designed to monitor progress during that programme, as well as to measure achievement of sections of the programme. They distinguish it from summative testing and diagnostic testing. For them, diagnostic testing is concerned with identifying strengths and weaknesses that the student may be experiencing in their learning. In explaining the role of testing in assessment, Cohen et al (2000) further argue that summative testing is given at the end of the programme, and is designed to measure achievement, outcomes, or 'mastery.' They note that different testing approaches are important in assessment as they come at different stages in the implementation of a course or programme, besides, these different purposes.

However, tests in general and objective tests in particular, have received criticism in education. For instance, Thorndike and Hagen (1977), writing from a cognitive theorists point of view, remind us that tests can be dysfunctional in a number of ways. These include attempts to measure intelligence by judging performance. For them, tests are used to measure intelligence which in itself is difficult to conceptualize; tests tend to label and compare children; the decisions taken on the basis of test outcome can condemn children for life despite their lacking in validity and reliability. This may end up having adverse effects on the students and the programme as a whole. As a result, assessment through the use of tests, has continued to receive criticism. For instance, The Assessment Reform Group booklet (ARG) (2006:10) argues thus:

> *Assessing pupils frequently in terms of levels or grades means that the feedback that they get is predominantly judgmental encouraging them to compare themselves with others. In such circumstances there is little attention by teachers or pupils to the formative use of assessment.*

Approaching the issue of assessment procedures in education from a programme implementation perspective, Posavac and Carey (2007) argue that tests have limited use when assessing programme performance. They argue that whilst it is normal to test students, the same cannot be said about adults involved in implementing policies or projects that have no direct teaching and learning components. This will mean that testing as an assessment technique appears to be relevant in cases where learning and teaching are emphasized. In assessing policy or programmes we are interested in performance in terms of what has been done or not done, not intelligence as portrayed in classroom assessment. Posavac and Carey (2007) argue that educational programme assessors should avoid choosing measures of aptitude or intelligence when looking for a measure of achievement. For programme assessment they suggest interviews, questionnaires, written surveys, and agency records. These according to them could be used in either quantitative or qualitative assessment.

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In a similar vein, Chase (1978) criticizes the use of tests. He proposes the use of observational techniques. According to him, these include measuring outcomes such as attitudes, skill, experiences and interests. This position is also supported by Sax (1980) who does not only provide the characteristics that can be measured through observation but also specifies the types of techniques that can be used in observations. These include for example, anecdotal records, rating scales and checklists. For Sax (1980) anecdotal records are continuous, objective descriptions of behaviour as it occurs at a given time, place and circumstances. They allow the observer to describe meaningful incidents and events observed (Gronlund 1985).

Chakanyuka (2000) also argues for the use of anecdotal records in educational assessment. Chakanyuka points out a number of advantages for using them, which include the following: that they describe actual behaviours which tell more about what participants believe in than any written tests; they enable assessors to collect important, exceptional information on participants; and on the other hand they do not require much in terms of communication skills on the part of the participants. However Chakanyuka (2000) also gives word of caution here that the technique tends to over-rely on the assessor. This might increase bias. He also notes that they are time consuming. For Chakanyuka (2000) anecdotal records require much time to gather data and to maintain it. He also raises the problem of obtaining an adequate sample of behaviour for the assessor to be able to pass judgment. Sax (1980) gives insight into the use of rating scales as an assessment technique. He posits that rating scales are observations that have been categorized or organized to provide summary information about the behaviour of individuals or groups. They consist of a set of characteristics or qualities to be judged and some type of scale for indicating the degree to which each attribute is present (Gronlund 1985).

From the different characteristics of rating scales, it appears that rating scales seem to work well when assessing individuals such as students in a class situation and it also allows us to judge performance against a given criteria which could be numerical or graphic. Another technique for assessing behaviour and performance is the checklist. Its contribution as an assessment technique shares a number of similarities with the other observational techniques. However, what stands out about checklists is that they provide lists of behaviours, traits, or characteristics that are either present or absent (Sax 1980).They assist in assessment as they enable the assessor to record whether a characteristic is present or absent or whether action was taken or was not taken (Gronlund, 1985).

A number of salient points are worth noting about checklists as assessment techniques in education. Checklists are useful in measuring complex behaviour, involve thorough analysis of behaviours required to perform tasks satisfactorily, and are useful in describing performances which can be divided into clearly defined steps, parts or components (Chakanyuka, 2000). However, it is worth noting that some of the attributes that are assessed in human performance are intrinsic and an impression can only be created by what the affected individuals say in addition to what may be observed.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study was a case study of a university which offers Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Open University.

The university was purposively selected as it is the largest ODL University in Zimbabwe and the second largest in the Southern Africa region. The study adopted the qualitative research methodology, which differs from quantitative research in many respects. Qualitative research methodology encompasses different approaches or paradigms. Among these is the interpretivist paradigm which is adopted in this study. Flick, Von Kardorff and Steinke (2004) observe that qualitative research is premised on a number of assumptions. They note that in order for us to understand social reality, there is need to study the meanings and contexts that are created in social interaction. Another assumption, as noted by Flick et. al. (2004) is that qualitative research relies on the use of subjective meanings, and as such, reality is created interactively and becomes meaningful subjectively. This was found relevant to this study as it sought to assess assessment procedures of one ODL university, the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The study used the case study design focusing on fifty students (present and former) selected from one region of the university in the Faculty of Arts and Education, Department of Educational Studies. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews, open-ended questionnaires and university documents such as tutorial letters and rules and regulations guiding the award of the selected degree programmes.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

From the different tutorial letters and programme regulations I was able to come up with a number of observations about assessment procedures at the university. For example, Regulations for the Master of Education in Educational Management (MEDM) covered the expected learning outcomes, duration of the MEDM programme, exemption of qualifications, programme structure, courses on offer, mode of delivery, and syllabi, and scheme of assessment (ZOU). It also included other aspects such as admission to examinations and notification of results. An analysis of regulations for other degree programmes contained similar headings for the regulations. Of interest were the stated learning outcomes and the scheme of assessment to achieve the set goals. There should be a link between the intended outcomes, the processes and the assessment procedures to achieve these outcomes. The ZOU Regulations for the MEDM state that " the student is expected to accumulate a minimum of 70 credit points to be considered to have met the requirements of the Master of Education Degree in Educational Management". These tutorial letters and regulations are expected to be handed to students upon registration. Thus making the student aware of the university expectations and the standards the student has to meet to qualify for the degree studied. The weighting of the MEDM as stated in the regulations was that Coursework comprised 30 percent and examinations comprised 70 percent. The regulations further stated that assessment was by Coursework, Written Examinations and Dissertation.

The inclusion of Coursework and Dissertation in the assessment procedures appeared to indicate that the university was employing both formative and summative assessment in determining students' performance. Further analysis of MEDM Tutorial Letter 1 of 2012 indicated that Examinations weighed 80 percent and assignments 20 percent. Whilst there may be variations in terms of the actual percentage weighing of the assignments and examinations, what stands out though is that there are attempts to recognize the importance of both continuous assessment and summative assessment as noted earlier.

An analysis of Tutorial Letter 1 of 2012 for the Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) BEDM appeared to support the assessment procedures as presented in the MEDM programme. Thus both showed the formative and summative nature of assessment procedures at the university. From these analyses it was observed that more weight was put on the examinations in both degree courses. Whilst MEDM students are expected to write one assignment per course BEDM students had to write two assignments per course. Furthermore, a student was not allowed to sit for examinations if he/she had not submitted coursework. As for the MEDM the student had to make presentations and write a term paper.

Data was collected from university documents for analysis, former and current students of ZOU. To examine the assessment criteria used at the Zimbabwe Open University I focused on the most recent general regulations and procedures on assessment. I found these in the Zimbabwe Open University General Information and Regulations of 2007. As noted above, I focused on the Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) and Master of Education (Educational Management). The Zimbabwe Open University General Information and Regulations (2007) provide the programme structures and regulations on assessment. These include that the MEDM programme is divided into three parts, with a total of 75 credits. The scheme of assessment included course work, written examinations and dissertation. Among other things the candidates may be required to orally defend their dissertations through a viva and the weighing of the coursework was 20 percent assignments and 80 percent examinations. Further to that the students had to accumulate a total of 75 credits distributed as core courses 64 credits, dissertation 8 and 3 electives. The little variations in the percent weighing between the tutorial letters and the General Information and Regulations indicate a revision of the regulations. However, what stands out in both cases is that assessment is skewed in favour of examinations.

For the Master of Education (Educational Management) degree responses indicated that the commonly used assessment methods were assignments, examinations and the dissertation. This equally applied to the Bachelor of Education (Educational Management). Both programmes did not have practices and tests. An examination of the entry requirements for both programmes indicated that the students had a teaching background. They had trained as teachers and were practicing teachers. Most students at the MEDM level found the use of assignments and examinations to be very effective in assessment. Such assessment provided continuous assessment during the semester. In that regard assessment procedures at ZOU met customer satisfaction and expectations.

However, a number of issues also emerged. These included concerns of plagiarism of assignments. As such a number of students and former students indicated that there was need to introduce tests and limit the percentage contribution of assignments. Another problem that was noted by students and former students had to do with supervision of research projects. In all the cases the respondents worked with one supervisor. The supervisor approved the research topic and supervised the student and then submitted the final research project for assessment. On that note it was suggested that there was need to create a department responsible for research at faculty level. Such a department would have the responsibility of approving research topics and assigning supervisors especially at Masters level.

Furthermore, the research committee would be able to guide students as they carry out research. For instance, one respondent noted that students should receive thorough orientation on research project writing before they start working on their topics. Some students suggested that theoretical courses were too many and the thrust should be on technical subjects and courses. On assignments there were different views expressed by respondents, although the majority of respondents found the use of assignments, examinations and research projects relevant to their studies.

One concern was that assignments were not a true reflection of the students' ability as there was a tendency to seek help form other sources, including copying other students' work. This could compromise standards and the quality of the products of the university. Some also noted that whilst they found the assessment methods satisfactory, standards were at times compromised by some lecturers who came to tutorials unprepared. There were concerns on the number of courses and the study period for the Bachelor of Education (Educational Management). Some respondents indicated that the number of courses was too many and that the study period was too long for students who had already spent three to four years training as teachers. Such initial training enabled them to acquire a Diploma in Education which then qualified them for the BEDM degree programme. As noted by one respondent theoretical courses are too many. The rules and regulations for the same programme stipulate that at the time of the study students were supposed to do twenty three courses including the research project in the BEDM degree programme (Zimbabwe OU, General Information and Regulations, 2007).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study came up with a number of conclusions and recommendations about assessment models used at the Zimbabwe Open University. Assessment at the Zimbabwe Open University as an Open & Distance Learning (ODL) institution is characterized by both summative and formative assessment. The major assessment methods in the Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) and Masters of Education (Educational Management) were assignments, examinations and research projects. Such assessment methods were found relevant as demonstrated by the responses by current students and former students. They catered for continuous assessment, and thereby provided for feedback and feed forward. The majority of the respondents noted that they were satisfied that the assessment methods contributed to the development and measurement of their skills as teachers and school heads. However, there were areas that required improvement. The use of one supervisor when supervising research projects and dissertations tended to compromise standards and quality. In view of the different issues raised by respondents I make the following recommendations:

> There is needed to come up with innovative models of assessment that distinguish an ODL institution from a conventional institution. There may be need to consider other assessment techniques such as tests, rating scales, portfolios and practical observation techniques.
> The creation of Research Committees at Faculty level should enhance quality in research, so as to move away from the reliance on one supervisor.

- The university has to address the issues of plagiarism as raised by some of the students in their responses. This should address concerns raised about some students submitting work that they will have copied or paid others to write on their behalf.
- The idea of reducing the number of years to possibly three years and reducing the number courses offered or possibly increasing the courses that can be taken by student in any one semester for the BEDM degree is worth considering.
- Whilst the regulations (2007) stipulate that at Masters level candidates may be asked to defend their dissertations in a viva. However, from the respondents I did not come across any current and former students who had defended their dissertations at a viva. It should be made mandatory that candidates at Masters level defend their dissertations at a viva. This will improve the quality of research at the university.

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