

An Assessment of the Role of Regional Members of Staff in the ZOU National Strategic Plan as a Tool for Quality Assurance at the Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract

The study sought to assess the quality systems in higher education through evaluating the role played by regional staff members in the ZOU national strategic plan. The main purpose of the study is to establish how best regional staff members could contribute to the ZOU national strategic plan with an emphasis on quality and to establish whether ZOU mission statement, objectives and goals are linked in the production of good quality of education. The study was carried out in Bulawayo. The population comprised of forty six academic and non academic staff from Bulawayo region and nine hundred and twenty five students as at June 2011 of which a ten percent sample was conveniently selected from the population. Document analysis, interviews and questionnaires were used to collect data under the themes, strategic management as a tool for quality assurance at ZOU.

The study revealed that whilst staff members had an input in the strategy formulation, there was concern on the strategic monitoring which members felt lacked progress feedback; timeous communication and environment strategic fit in order ensure that there is continuous improvement in the quality of education. (Kaizen) The study recommended that regional staff members be educated on the agreed targets for precision in strategic execution and on quality assurance in higher education. The study also recommended that there be continuous two way feedback between the regions and the national centre on the progress and challenges encountered for the purposes of re-strategizing if need be. Finally it was recommended that resources be availed in order to continuously encourage quality awareness to all staff.

Keywords: Stakeholders, strategic plan and quality assurance.

1.1 Background of the Study.

In 2005 the Zimbabwe Open University launched Zimbabwe Open University 2005-2009 strategic plan. The vision is to become a world class open and distance learning institution by 2009 through the implementation of Total Quality Management. The main objective of the Strategic Plan was to create the direction for University's management and staff in order to remain result oriented and to establish that ZOU strategic plan which incorporates ZOU services, process and activities is all linked to quality. The core values as stated in the 2005-2009 Strategic Plans are dedication to the highest level of excellence, promotion of integrity, creation of an innovative culture, adherence to highest levels of ethical standards and delighting the stakeholders and being able to identify their needs.

In order to achieve the objectives of the university and operate within the stated values, the university identified nine institutional strategic elements and these are growth focusing on enrolment growth, strategic partnership, research and development among other important values (Strategic Plan 2005-2009:11)

The national achievement of these strategic elements was anchored on the participation of all the ten regions. Each region, thus submits to the national centre, a monthly report showing what has been achieved in the eight strategic elements. For each region to effectively compile a monthly report each member of staff should fully participate by writing a monthly report on their specific area of operation. This effective participation can only be achieved if members of staff understand their role in the national strategic plan as a tool for quality assurance. Quarterly meetings were thus held at national centre for all departments to present their reports. Stakeholders on the other side continuously evaluate the quality of services offered to them by the institution and the achievement of the national strategic plan can thus be measured by the level of stakeholder satisfaction displayed.

In 2010, on the 3rd to 7th of May, all ZOU stakeholders met to review the 2005-2009 strategic plan and to make a future focus on the quality of higher education delivery systems. This strategic meeting occurred after ZOU, like all organisations in Zimbabwe had suffered an economic downturn due to high inflation in the country which eventually led to the collapse of the Zimbabwean dollar. It should therefore have been difficult to measure the success of the 2005-2009 strategic plan as a tool for quality assurance but it was prudent for the organisation to organise such a meeting as the country was awakening from that slumber. The meeting was organised at a time when the country had adopted the use of multi currency system in its monetary policy. Although the country had suffered that economic down turn, it should be mentioned that ZOU was one of those organisations that never closed its doors. Regions remained operational during the difficult time pursuing the organisation's mission. Hence in 2010, when the strategic plan meeting was organised, regions were asked to present their views on the above mentioned institutional strategic elements. The purpose of the workshop as written in the workshop report was to develop a strategic plan for 2010-2014 and to 'come up with regional strategies to implement the strategic plan' (Strategic Planning Workshop report 2010-2011). This was in realization of the fact that the institutional strategic plan would only succeed if the regions understood their role in the strategic planning and implementation process as a tool for quality assurance hence the assessment of Bulawayo region's role in the strategic process.

1.2 Problem statement

Strategic planning in many organisations has remained an activity for top management in the organisation. Junior workers are rarely involved in the formulation of strategies. However in the contemporary management styles of organisation, there has been a greater call for participative decision making of which the junior workers are involved in the strategic decision making processes. In this study we explore whether the regional members of staff are effectively implementing the ZOU Strategic plan with the view of maintaining quality and to what level of appreciation of the concept of TQM at ZOU.

1.3 Research questions

The study is guided by the following research questions

- Do regional members of staff in ZOU participate in the formulation of strategies at the institution?
- How effective does management at ZOU satisfy the Total Quality Management in Strategic Planning.

1.4 Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study is to assess the quality systems in higher education through evaluating the role played by regional staff members in the ZOU national strategic plan.

1.5 Objectives

The main objectives of the study include the following:

- To explore whether the regional members of staff are involved in the formulation of strategies at ZOU.
- Examine the effectiveness of TQM in strategic planning at the ZOU.

1.6 Conceptual Framework: Strategy formulation and implementation in Open and Distance Learning institution.

Strategy formulation and implementation are the core management functions of the managerial game plan. Thompson and Strickland (1989) and Mattacks (2004) denote that an organisation's strategy consists of the pattern of moves and approaches devised by management to produce successful organisation performance. Education institutions like all organisations exist in an ever changing environment thus have to set long term goals that would make them achieve an advantage through continuously relating the set objectives with the resources available in the ever changing environment. A strategy is thus a long term scope or direction the organisation chooses to take in order to achieve its objectives. Through a strategy an organisation is able to position itself in its market arena. ZOU in this case is able to position itself within the existing market of universities creating its uniqueness through that chosen strategy. Furthermore Thompson and Strickland (1989; 4) observe that "a good strategy and good implementation and execution are the most trustworthy proof of good management and hence have a bearing on an organisation's performance." Thompson and Strickland (1989; 4) thus define a strategy formulation as "the entire management function of establishing organisation direction, setting objectives, and devising a managerial game plan for the organisation to pursue". The idea is to ensure that the organisation maintains a fresh strategy since it is operating in a dynamic environment. The organisation should create a strategic fit within the turbulent environment in which it is operating from. This suggests that management should keep on re-strategizing in order to maintain a good organisational performance.

Thompson and Strickland (1989; 4) further define strategy implementation as, “acting on what has to be done internally to put the chosen strategy into place and to actually achieve the targeted results.” Furthermore Gareth (2010) Thompson and Strickland observe that strategy implementation is an administrative issue or task and management should come up with approaches to executing the strategy on their daily operations, ensuring that all employees accomplish their jobs in a strategy-supportive and result oriented manner.

Strategic planning is an on-going and disciplined effort to guide an organisation into the future. Smith and Cronje [1997; 140] define strategic planning as ‘the process of reconciling the organisation’s resources [internal environment] with the threats and opportunities in the external environment.’ As organisations do not exist in a vacuum it is therefore important for the organisation to understand the surrounding environment and how that environment would change. This would enable the organisation to make decisions that are responsive to both the existing and the anticipated changes.

In a nutshell, strategic planning is therefore done to ensure that the organisation focuses its energy towards productivity. All members are directed towards the same goals and the organisation in a disciplined way assesses and adjusts its moves in response to the new environment. The best way to respond to the prevailing circumstances is followed. It is essential for the organisation to remain clear about the available resources so that a productive strategic fit is reached. Future projections are made, whilst in the present, and a pattern and orderly approach to solve challenges is designed for. It should be noted that at times the plan would not flow as smoothly as planned. This, therefore, calls for creativity in the strategic planning so that fresh insights are introduced as soon as they are needed so that value is achieved.

This can be observed in the ZOU 2005-2009 Strategic Plan (2005; 17) where in the Logical Framework the assumptions are stated against each goal. This is done with the aim of creating the strategic fit where resources for each goal are envisaged. Furthermore, the 2010-2014 Strategic plans have an institutional balance score card indicating each strategic element against the target. However, these could be difficult to attain especially with the unstable Zimbabwean economy hence the university has identified the possible risks, their causes and impact into all its activities (Strategic plan 2010-2014).

Thompson and Strickland (1989) conclude by pointing out that a company that does not have a clear cut direction or vague objectives or flawed strategy is likely to under- perform and be out competed in the market. It is in this light that ZOU, as an organisation has implemented a strategic plan. With some of the above achievements having been attained by the institute, it is imperative for ZOU to move in this line and perhaps engage on faster pace in order to meet the needs of the dynamic environment, thereby remaining competitive. It is thus hoped that the actionable first steps, identified as ‘quick wins for 2010 ‘ were auctioned on time seeing that the research was done in 2011 (Draft Strategic Plan 2010-2014;23). One therefore wonders whether all regional staff members have the same understanding and appreciation on the purpose and the benefits of the whole strategy formulation, implementation and execution.

1.7 Research Methodology

The study sought to elicit views and perceptions of both the members of staff and students and therefore a descriptive survey was found to be appropriate to the study. This is because a descriptive surveys ‘provides an accurate portrayal or account of characteristics of a particular individual, situation or group’ (Burns and Grove, 1993; 29). Hence Thomas and Nelson (2001) view descriptive survey to be concerned with status. In this study status will thus be concerned with the role played by regions in the national strategic plan.

1.7.1 Population

The total population of the study was nine hundred and twenty five students (925) as at June 2011 and forty six members of staff. These were from the four faculties of the university which are Faculty of Commerce and Law, Education and Humanities, Applied Social Sciences and Science and Technology.

1.7.2 Sample and sampling procedure

A sample of 92 students which formed 10% of the total sample was used as a student sample and Best and Kahn [1993] consider 10% of the sample to be representative enough. Convenience sampling was used from the current students from all the faculties seeing ZOU is an Open and Distant Learning institution where students are physically distanced. These students and staff were given the questionnaire as they visited the regional library for their study and research until the desired sample size was reached. Burns and Grove [1993] however, note that convenience sampling has been discredited for failure to control biases but in this study researchers considered the fact that all respondents would be students at ZOU and as such would offer their views from that view point. The questionnaires used open ended questions to elicit a variety of opinions and perceptions from students. The questionnaires were preferred as a main source of collecting data for their economical nature in terms of time and financial resources. More so questionnaires elicit views and perceptions from a wide range of respondents

within a short space of time. 84 questionnaires, out of the distributed 92, were collected giving a return rate of 91%.

1.8 Data analysis

1.8.1 Members of staff's views and perceptions.

Table 1; Submission of monthly reports

Response	frequency	percentage
Every month	32	84
Every other month	02	05
Only when reminded to do so	04	11
Total	38	100

84% of the staff confirmed that they submitted their monthly reports on a monthly basis and 5% pointed out that they submitted every other month while 11% confirmed that they only did so when reminded. It would be interesting to know the reasons given by each group especially the group that submitted only when reminded to do so. This was perhaps partly revealed in the next table when respondents were asked how informative their reports were. This analysis is in line with Thompson and Strickland (1989) and Alkhafaji (2003)'s analysis whereby they affirm that the outcomes of strategy formulation and implementation are a basic aspect of managing, not just something for top level managers to deal with. This suggests that monthly reports submitted by members of staff to the regional directors for analysis are essential as they contribute to the real formulation, implementation and review of strategy. Therefore, it is that regional director who gets informative reports from staff who contributes effectively during national quarterly meetings.

Table 2; How informative is your monthly report?

Response	frequency	percentage
Irrelevant	02	05
Not very informative	10	26
Not sure	02	05
Adequately Informative	20	53
Very informative	04	11
Total	38	100

53% of the members confirmed that their reports were adequately informative. 11% said their reports were very informative. This gave a total of 64% of the members who were positive about their reports. Those were members of staff who confirmed that they submit informative reports which focus on activities that transpired during the month, challenges faced and recommendations concerning the running of their respective departments. It was, however, noted that practically not all the eight goals would be covered every single month leaving some members wondering what to do with items not covered in that month. Hence 5% of the staff was not sure whether or not their reports were informative. 26% pointed out that the monthly reports were not informative and 5% revealed that the reports were irrelevant. Reasons given were that the report was rigid and monotonous because its outlay was not in line with current attainable and achievable goals. They also wondered how realistic the regional initiative was towards influencing the national goals. Muttacks (2003-2004) and Thompson and Strickland (1989) also point out that the directors have line authority for the operations of their regions and therefore should be given informative reports that will assist them in the formation of strategy to achieve their objectives. Furthermore, this is in line with their observation that evaluating performance, reviewing the situation, initiating corrective adjustments of the mission, objectives and strategy implementation in light of actual experience. Changing conditions, new ideas and new opportunities are essential at regional level for better performance of strategy.

Table 3; Frequency of staff assessment

Response	frequency	percentage
Not at all	00	00
Daily	01	02.6
Fortnightly	01	02.6
Monthly	02	05
After every semester	09	24
Once a year	06	15.8
Twice a year	18	47
When necessary	01	02.6
Total	38	100

Quite a number of responses were given ranging from daily to twice a year. 2% of the members felt that the assessment should be done daily and another 2% suggested fortnightly. 5% suggested monthly and 24% suggested assessment should be done after each semester. The reason given was to facilitate immediate analysis and reflection of semester events. 47% of the staff pointed out that staff assessment should be conducted twice a year in order to monitor and assess performance. However, 16% felt that assessment should be conducted once a year. All teams, however, felt that even if the staff assessment was conducted, no feedback was provided on the evaluation of staff performance and therefore, that defeated the whole purpose of conducting staff assessment. Jeff (2008) reaffirms that strategy formulation is a continuous process and strategic planners should keep on re-strategizing since the companies operate in a dynamic environment.

Dumbu and Chadamoyo (2012) also concur that as a result of business environmental changes, a company competes on quality and it is likely to be the most important aspect of a strategic plan. Obviously this calls for staff members to be regularly assessed to create a strategic fit between the strategy, the budget and the staff size. Furthermore, in the foreword of the 2005-2009 Strategic plan, His Excellency the President and Chancellor, commenting on the strategic plan stated that, 'This is a process that would not be complete without periodic performance appraisals whose outcome should be linked to human development and/ or rewards and sanctions.' The issue of rewards and sanctions gets to be a new issue at ZOU as an organisation and the possibility of its implementation may be yet to be explored. This is in line with Dumbu and Musingafi (2012) analysis whereby they articulate that total involvement of all employees in the strategic plan as a tool for quality assurance makes employees responsible for quality and encourages managers and employees to discuss about quality issues and also reward employees for quality improvement.

Table 4; Value of input at Regional level.

Response	frequency	Percentage
All the time	06	16
At times	26	68
Not sure	04	11
Not at all	02	05
Total	38	100

16% of the staff indicated that their input and recommendations were valued both at regional level all the time and 68% felt that their input was at times valued. 'Sometimes my contribution is appreciated' said one member of staff. This adds to a total of 84% of the members of staff who felt that their views were recognized in the organisation. This is a pleasing percentage because it is when employees feel valued that they expend more energy in the organisation. This results in both personal and organisational growth and the creation of a sense of belonging. However 11% indicated that they were not sure and 5% pointed out that they felt that their input and recommendations were ignored at regional level since their views were never implemented. This analysis is in line with what Alkhafaji [2003] and Thompson Strickland [1989] observe that every manager is a strategy maker and a strategy implementer in their area of supervision and therefore should value staff contributions. Furthermore, Stark (1998) reaffirms that all employees are responsible for continuous quality improvement and that top management must provide leadership for quality.

Table 5; Value of inputs at National level

Response	Frequency	Percentage
All the time	0	0
At times	16	42
Not sure	10	26
Not at all	12	32

The story was different at national level. No one felt that their input was valued at all times and 42% felt that their input was at times valued at national level. 26% were not sure and 32% indicated that their input was not valued at all.

1.8.2 Challenges faced when participating in the strategic plan and implementation.

Staff members indicated the following challenges faced in the implementation and execution of strategic plan:

- Lack of resources such as office space, furniture, stationery.
- Communication breakdown.
- No forum to discuss departmental issues at national level.
- The hierarchical structure is less accommodative to the lower levels of the organisation during the formulation stage only to co-opt them for implementation. ‘Very little accommodation is given to those at the bottom of the hierarchical position’ another member said.
- Members of staff felt that they were left out in strategic planning and they may have meaningful contributions and they also felt that if involved some challenges identified could be captured and discussed regionally towards possible solutions.

1.8.3 Recommendations on effective implementation of strategic plan by staff members.

Members of staff pointed out that there was need to have total involvement of all staff members on issues that affect students. This, they felt should be done right from needs assessment level, through planning into implementation. After providing input, the members felt that they needed to see both the draft and the final plan. There was also need to educate staff through staff development programmes. Hence Thompson and Strickland (1989) and Alkhafaji (2003) observe that strategy implementation as a tool for quality assurance is defeated if the ingrained attitudes and habits of managers and employees are at cross purposes with the needs of the strategy.

1.8.4 Students’ views and perceptions on the quality of service delivery.

Table 6; Marketing of ZOU products

Responses	frequency	percentage
Yes	66	79
No	18	21
Total	84	100

79% of the students indicated that most Bulawayo staff market ZOU products and this had contributed to their joining the institute. They appreciated service offered by staff. However, some felt that Bulawayo ZOU Staff did not market their products and the reasons suggested by students were lack of adequate knowledge, lack of public relations and unwillingness to help if approached. Hence the attitude of members of staff towards their work remains key to organisational performance.

Table 7; Product knowledge by members of staff.

Responses	frequency	percentages
Yes	47	56
No	37	44
Total	84	100

56% of the students confirmed that staff members were always willing to give necessary information at any given time and they confirmed that the members of staff knew the product they were selling clearly. However, 44% of the students highlighted that staff members especially clerical were not able to produce/ give information in the area of their operations and reasons being that they did not have adequate knowledge or were reluctant to

provide information. Students, therefore, recommended that staff members should attend staff development workshops that would equip members of staff with adequate knowledge in their area of operation. Strategy implementation should, therefore, instil a strong organisation wide commitment both to organisational objectives and to the chosen strategy. Demming et al also makes an emphasis on employee training, ensuring that employees have access to quality tools and techniques in order to portray their skills to students.

Table 9; Do members of staff go out of their way to assist students?

Responses	frequency	Percentage
Yes	63	75
No	21	25
Total	84	100

75% of the students confirmed that Bulawayo staff went out of their way to assist them and emphatically mentioned that credit would go to senior members of staff. They also alluded that they had been referred to knowledgeable staff members by those who seemed not to have adequate knowledge and they got satisfactory help. However, 25% of the students pointed out that staff did not go out of their way to assist them all the time. In some cases the reasons given were that what would be needed would be beyond their means in the region. An example given was that of results where regional members of staff would fail to give any assistance because the answer would be beyond their access. This is in line with Demming's analysis where he articulates that the customer defines quality and the customer's needs are a top priority.

Table 9; Clarity of information

Responses	frequency	percentage
Information given is clear	57	67.9
Information given is not clear	27	32.1
	84	100

67.9% of the students pointed out that the information that the customer service office provided them with was clear and straight forward. However, 33% of the students refuted on clarity of information pointing out that there was a lot of confusion going on at customer service desk especially at Accounts department. This had resulted in long queues inconveniencing those who were at work. They also pointed out that they got inadequate information from the customer service staff concerning the availability of modules.

Table 10; Does staff respect adult learners?

Responses	frequency	percentage
Yes	76	90.5
No	8	9.5
Total	84	100

90.5% of the sample confirmed that Bulawayo staff had respect for adult learners, reasons being that they understood the challenges associated with adult learning and therefore did not undermine them when they sought help. Only 8% of the students indicated that some members of staff at times showed lack of respect when consulted.

1.9. Conclusions.

From the discussions above flow the following conclusions;

- Some staff members did not have adequate knowledge of what strategic plan was and therefore failed to portray the role they were supposed to play in the national strategic plan.
- It was also noted that there was lack of adequate feedback from both the region and the National centre based on the received reports. As a result members of staff attached limited value to their monthly reports.
- There was limited communication between administrators and the old students, hence one student felt that all credit of service delivery should go to the teaching staff.
- In cases where feedback was communicated to the regions, the responses would delay and be overtaken by events or they would be imposed implementations.
- However, despite the challenges encountered in the regions the students rated the delivery of service to be satisfactory yet the university's vision was to become a 'World class Open and Distance Learning University by 2009'.

1.10. Recommendations

The researchers therefore make the following recommendations;

- There should be continuous learning and improvement at all levels through seminars and staff development mainly on the core values of the ZOU strategic plan as a tool for quality assurance.
- Currently the only communication with old students is through tutorial sessions and tutorial letters. The university administrators also need to communicate with old students through circulars and meetings so that the quality of service delivery in the regions is nursed, polished and maintained.
- Quarterly reviews remain a noble cause and the reports both regional and national should be made available to all members of staff. This would enable regions to make home grown solutions to their problems and thereby produce 'performers who are solution providers to the problem of value -creation.'
- The researchers note that currently the assessment is done twice which translates to an assessment at the end of each semester. The researchers commend the University for its Efforts towards ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of strategic performance.

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