

Delivering quality in the Zimbabwe Open University: A paradigm shift on the role of the programme co-ordinator

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Abstract

This study sought to find out the role of the programme co-ordinators in the Zimbabwe Open University in delivering quality service to students. A case study (Flick 2004) of a purposive sample of 50 students and 12 programme coordinators participated in this research. Data was obtained from students and programme coordinators' essays evaluated with Qualitative content analysis. Respondents were of the view that there is need for a paradigm shift in the way in which programme co-ordinators work and pay critical attention to developing trust in students, empowering students, and work as knowledge creators and knowledge retrievers. They suggested that the programme co-ordinators must run parallel leadership centres and be visible in the community. The study recommended a paradigm shift in the work of the programme co-ordinators. Programme coordinators need to work as managers of their programmes, incorporating students in planning, instructional design and course development. Quality decision making by the programme coordinators in their endeavours to provide quality serviced to the students need not to be emphasised in the contemporary higher education programme management. Further studies need to be done on supporting the programme co-ordinators in the regions.

Key Words: Quality; open and distance learning; programme co-ordinator; paradigm shift.

1. Background to the study

At independence Zimbabwe adopted a deliberate policy of education for all. This policy option was meant to meet and address manpower challenges bedevilling the country by that time and also addressing the issue of equality of educational opportunities which the black majority were starved of by the colonial master. Several conferences were held by politicians, academics and civil servants to address this issue. Enrolment rose in leaps and bounds, (Zvobgo 1986) in both primary schools and secondary schools and the desire for tertiary education increased at an alarming rate. This prompted the government to satisfy the increased need for higher education. In July 1994 a committee was set up to investigate the modalities of developing a university distance education. This idea led to the birth of Zimbabwe Open University and the establishment of the regional centres manned by regional programme coordinators for the various faculties in the university. The purpose of the regional programme coordinators is to facilitate the quality delivery of the university's programmes in the regions.

Col (2009) purports that, assuring quality distance education is a fundamental aspect of maintaining credibility for programmes and institutions in higher education. The role of programme co-ordinator in the Zimbabwe Open University is to see to it that all the students get the highest degree of satisfaction and value for money service, (Benza 2004). The student is the major stakeholder of the university such that quality service by the university through the regional programme coordinator becomes vital, (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2007). Therefore the programme coordinator is the cog of the university that turns the service to the special stakeholders including the student. Quality service delivery to the student by regional programme coordinators helps to establish an institutional reputation and image that builds greater student confidence, (Majoni 2004).

Where quality service is provided by regional programme coordinators, students are likely to experience better quality instruction, learn more, interact with the institution and staff, leading to them obtaining optimum satisfaction (Col, 2009). Quality has become a matter of major importance for all higher education institutions generally, but particularly so for institutions involved in open and distance learning (Higher education council, 1997; Twigg, 2000;

Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 2003). To successfully respond to the myriad of changes of the tastes and preferences of the consumer that shake the world today, (Dumbu and Musingafi, 2010), transformation into new style of programme management is the order of the day. The route to this is what is called the profound knowledge for leadership of transformation. Management of degree programmes at regional level require such dynamic programme coordinators who are ready to move from their shells and become visible in the communities they are serving. This creates an image for the university at large.

Total quality management is the premises of degree programme management in the contemporary higher education systems in the world. Many students who are the clients are satisfied only if quality product is offered for their consumption. In no way can the Zimbabwe Open University be left out of the race as the competition for the satisfaction of the consumers is stiffening from every corner and every minute of its service to the clients. New challenges are surfacing that are requiring the programme coordinators to act proactively in order to satisfy quality to the university's clients.

In the past, when goods and services, (Dumbu and Musingafi, 2010), were simpler, measurement of quality was self-evident, (Mauch, 2009). As higher education business became more complicated, so too did the implementation of quality management and our ability to measure it. According to Mauch, (2009), quality management system is a performance measure for the degree programme managers. This will measure their capacity to return the students in the various faculties' programmes. Therefore this implies that management of the programmes requires degree programme coordinators that are flexible enough to respond to the needs and customers, (Hoey, 2009). Management of the degree programmes in the Open and Distance Learning scenarios requires dynamic programme coordinators who are proactive to the ever changing higher education environment. This is necessitated by the diversity of the student populations at the disposal of the Open and Distance Learning institutions such as the Zimbabwe Open University. Here programme are managed by what are called programme coordinators who are at the regional centres and these are the images of the university to the university' clients and prospective students. In no way can the programme coordinator remain only to coordinator but has to find him or her in a situation that requires some management. This view has prompted the researchers to desire to find out a paradigm shift in the management of the university' various degree programmes in order to enhance quality services to the clientele. This view has prompted the researchers to explore ways the Zimbabwe Open University can deliver quality through a paradigm shift. However, little research has been conducted on delivering quality in the Open and Distance Learning University: A paradigm shift in the role of the programme co-ordinator. Therefore the researchers attempt to fill that gap.

2. Objectives of the study

The study sought to determine the role of the programme coordinator in delivering quality service in the Zimbabwe Open University from the perceptions of the very people with that mandate and those who are receiving the service.

3. Statement of the problem

The establishment in 1999 of the Zimbabwe Open University marked a turning point in the provision of distance education at tertiary level in Zimbabwe. An Open and distance learning university was established to provide university service to students wherever they are. Programmes are managed at regional campuses to reach these students. If the students do not get the service they require they are disillusioned, dissatisfied. Such dissatisfactions can threaten the existence of the university through dropouts and withdrawals. Programme management is a critical way of reaching up to the students. Its management holds the key to success. Thus this research focuses on the students and lecturers' views on the appropriate paradigm delivering quality in the Zimbabwe Open University.

4. Research questions

The study was directed by the following research questions:

- What do you see as qualities of a good programme coordinator?
- What do you expect your programme coordinator to do for you?

- What are, in your opinion, important roles of an Open and Distance Learning programme coordinator in delivering quality service?

5. Theoretical framework

Quality management is a recent phenomenon, (Cronje et al, 1997) that requires the regional programme coordinators of the Open and Distance Learning institutions to wither out so as to provide quality service to the clientele. Advanced civilisation in education allows clients to choose goods meeting higher quality standards, (Dumbu and Musingafi, 2010). Quality management is premised in the service quality planning, control, quality assurance and quality improvement. Hackman and Wageman, (1995) say that quality management is also focused not only on service quality, but also on the means to achieve it. Quality management uses quality assurance and control of processes as well as services to achieve more consistent quality. This is the major expectation of the offering of degree programmes in the Open and Distance Learning institutions such as the Zimbabwe Open University.

In this rapid changing higher education environment, managers of the degree programmes need to be flexible enough to respond to the needs of the diverse student population in terms of social, economic, (Dumbu and Musingafi, 2010) political, ethnic, regional and even religion. Several higher education institutions are undergoing corporate reengineering efforts that will undoubtedly affect the way the degree programmes are managed, hence requiring a paradigm shift from the traditional way of programme management, which will in turn have a significant effects on the manner in which the service provision in the institution can provide a competitive position, (Hackman and Wageman, 1995). The student population, over the years have become increasingly more sophisticated that there is need for the programme coordinators to be proactive. In the bid for the university to attract more returning students and a chunk of the prospective students the university in the Open and Distance Learning scenario should manage their degree programmes through the provision of a satisfactory quality service.

Theory of quality management that form the basis of the research is the Total Quality Management. Total Quality Management is a customer- based and service orient management philosophy that involves bringing together the combined talents and capacities of employees and managers in a systematic manner, (Hoey, 2010). This method of management stimulates creativity and problem-solving activities, promoting teamwork and coherence between the coordinators and the students. This leads directly to improved quality, effective communication, higher productivity, (Dumbu and Musingafi, 2010), reduced costs or expenses and increased customer satisfaction. Mullins, (1999) confirms that quality management programmes emphasises the importance of clients as the key to quality. Client's management and the management of programmes in Open and Distance Learning institutions are converging to give total quality which is the leading issue in contemporary degree programme management.

Changes in the traditional organisation structure and the increasing importance of effective student or clientele leadership in Open and Distance Learning emphasise team- based management as an essential element of the Total Quality Management. Total Quality Management, results in the creation of a corporate identity and supportive environment, (Mullins, 1999). In the management of degree programmes in Open and Distance Learning institutions, there is need for setting the highest standards for quality as a way of reducing costs and creating goodwill on the organisation.

Proper attention to the needs of the clientele is the most important issue in the modern management of degree programmes in the Open and Distance Learning institutions like the Zimbabwe Open University as a means to implement quality service to the students. The standards have to be set that are supposed to be met for the successful implementation of the quality programme management, (Smit and Cronje, 1992). According to Mullins, (1999) quality should represent customer satisfaction and continuous improvement. Students demand satisfaction and expect more whenever they visit the regional centre. it is no longer sufficient to merely satisfy students in Open and Distance Learning but the students need to be delighted with the service that the university offers them internally and externally. Today's competitive higher education environment requires the setting of clear missions and objectives and measurement to deliver these levels of customer satisfaction. The way forward is for the Open and Distance Learning institution to achieve a performance linkage of critical issues that are of importance to the diverse student population. It is prerogative for the successful quality service delivery in higher education for management of the

programmes to break down barriers between themselves and the diverse student population and management should learn their responsibilities, thus have information about their programmes at their finger tips and take on leadership, improve constantly and institute programmes of education and self-improvement, (Hoey, 2009).

The foregoing discussion on delivering quality in Open and Distance Learning scenario, a paradigm shift in the role of the programme coordinator, in the light of the total quality management theory, provided the conceptual framework for a qualitative research which explored whether a paradigm shift in the management of degree programmes in the Zimbabwe Open University leads to an increased quality delivery to the satisfaction of the diverse student population. Therefore, the research seeks to explore a paradigm shift in the management of the degree programmes in the Zimbabwe Open University' Masvingo regional campus.

6. Research methodology

The study used a descriptive qualitative design. The questionnaire used had both closed and open-ended sections that yielded qualitative data. Babbie (1997) says, "Descriptive survey is a method of research that describes what we see over and beyond". Thus the researchers chose this method as it allowed students to say exactly what they felt about the services offered by the Zimbabwe Open University in programme management. Borg and Gall (1989) say descriptive surveys are excellent vehicles for the measurement of attitudes and orientations prevalent in a large population as was the case in this study. One of the characteristics of the descriptive survey method is to investigate the present status of the phenomenon. This was the primary goal in this study.

6.1 Population of the study

The target population for this study was all the 800 returning students for Masvingo regional campus of the Zimbabwe Open University in 2010 second semester (August to December semester) and 12 programme coordinators.

6.2 Sample

A sample of 50 returning students, 15 females and 35 males and 12 programme coordinators, participated in this study. Convenient sampling technique was used to draw the 50 participants from the four faculties of the university namely, Arts and Education, Commerce and Law, Social Sciences and Sciences.

The selected subjects were believed to be knowledgeable about the services offered by the Zimbabwe Open University because they had gone through at least one semester. Each individual who took part in this research was consulted and agreement was reached on what data to be collected and included in the research. The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of respondents was upheld and guaranteed in this research.

6.3 Data gathering instrument

The study used the questionnaire as the data gathering instrument. The questionnaire was administered to students as they came for registration and other consultations at the regional centre during the period of the start of the second semester of the 2010 academic year.

6.4 Data gathering procedures

Respondents were asked to fill in the questionnaire on the spot (Bell, 1993). This method was preferred because it ensured a 100 percent return of the completed questionnaire and it was cheaper and easier to administer, while the processing of data was less complex that could be the case if, say observations were used (Babbie, 1997) and (Dumbu and Matanda, 2010).

6.5 Data analysis

Data was organised and qualitatively analysed according to issues or themes as raised by the respondents.

7. Results and discussion

Issues pertaining to students and lecturers' perceptions of the expected qualities of a good regional programme coordinator, students' expectations from the regional coordinator and students' opinions on the important roles of the regional programme coordinator and others characterised the responses.

7.1 Characteristics of the respondents

Fifty students (n=35 males; n=15 females) and 12 programme coordinators completed the questionnaire on the role of programme coordinator in the Zimbabwe Open University, an Open and Distance Learning institution. These respondents are the people with the mandate of seeing to it that quality service is delivered in the Zimbabwe Open University.

7.2 In the eyes of the students and lecturers: Qualities of a programme coordinator

An important issue that was raised in this study is the issue of qualities of programme coordinators that can help foster quality service delivery. The respondents, particularly students listed as many qualities of a good programme coordinator as possible. The respondents enlisted the following qualities of programme coordinator.

- Humble, knowledgeable, approachable and attentive to students.
- A communicator, resourceful, innovative, cooperative and supportive.

Leithwood, (2006) argues that programmes in education should be manned by people of the right calibre. The argument in this case is that the regional programme coordinator is the quality assurer in the distance and open learning environs. For quality service to be delivered in institutions of higher learning, especially those using the distance education mode, the regional programme coordinator should be one who has high degree of integrity and honest. For students in distance education to be prepared for the rigor of distance education they should have a programme coordinator who is humble and knowledgeable of the challenges of distance learning environs. The regional programme coordinator should be approachable so that students do not go back into their shells. Eminovic, et. al. (2009) state that in distance education, leadership should use the open door policy as much as possible to allow the distance learner to access the programme coordinator without fear or victimisation hence the need for programme coordinators to be approachable.

On the issue of qualities of a programme coordinator, the respondents pointed out that the programme coordinator should be a good communicator. Dissemination of information is of paramount importance in the distance learning environment. Clear instructions and messages have to be disseminated well by the programme coordinator. Bouchard, et. al. (2002) has the view that contemporary situations in distance education demand programme coordinators to facilitate the communication process between the university and the distant student. In order for quality to be enhanced in the Open and Distance Learning, the programme coordinator should be resourceful innovative and cooperative highly with the distance learner. One of the respondents has this to say on innovativeness and cooperation of the programme coordinators:

I expect that the regional programme coordinator to be characterised by the communication skills and should be crafty in dealing with our challenges at the regional centre. A good programme coordinator should be cooperative and very supportive to students.

Gamuseli, (2009) appear to be in line with the above notion of the respondent in this study, arguing that quality running of distance education centres requires a programme coordinator who can communicate at all levels, prompt crafting strategies to circumvent student challenges and supportive to the students.

7.3 Students and lecturers' expectations of the programme coordinator

It was the contention of the respondents in this study that the regional programme coordinator is involved on daily

basis in issues related to facilitation and organisation of the learning sessions. Respondent in this study indicated that the regional programme coordinator should do the following to the students for quality service delivery in an Open and Distance Learning institution:

- Have information of the programme on the finger tips, keep up to date records and assist students fully.
- Be on guard 24 hours for the distance learner, facilitate and organise learning sessions.

Benza, (2004) argues that for the Zimbabwe Open University to be able to extend its frontiers of tertiary education beyond the traditional boundaries in Zimbabwe, the management of such particular activities must have information of the programmes at their finger tips. We cannot talk of quality service delivery in distance university institution if the programme coordinators are lacking the information about their programmes. The following excerpts bear testimony to this:

Programme coordinators should not stammer when it comes to issues related to their programmes whenever asked to provide such information to students at any given time. Proper record keeping is a prerequisite for the programme coordinators so that they can assist the student fullest and expeditiously.

Pryor, (2008) seems to concur with the respondents in this study stating that educational leaders should have adequate information and supply it to the consumer in right doses at the right juncture. There is no way the running of the programmes can be done without hitches if records are not properly maintained by the regional programme coordinator. Fitzgerald, (2009) and Bouchard, et. al. (2002), share the same sentiments with the respondents that records for students' progress in bio-data should be known by the regional programme coordinator. Such information assists programme coordinators to know their students physically and academically thereby allowing them to device means to solve the students' challenges in the academic and social aspects.

7.4 Critical roles of programme coordinator

The respondents in this study were of the view that the programme coordinators play a pivotal role in the running of the programme for Open and Distance Learning institution for the enhancement of quality service to the clientele. Respondents in this study outlined a number of roles that the regional programme coordinator should perform in the management of the distance education degree programmes. The following were the issues raised by the respondents to this effect and the responses of the respondents were all grouped into three categories as shown below:

- leader
- coach
- facilitator

Mullins, (1999) argues that the contemporary manager of the Open and Distance Learning programmes should have to master the above three specific roles for survival in the turbulent educational environment. The above roles are sometimes regarded as the survival skills for the management of programmes in distanced education set ups (Cronje, et. al. 1997).

7.5 Academic leadership knowledge

The respondents in this study were of the view that apart from subject knowledge expertise, programme coordinators have no basic training for leadership. One such respondent made this point clear:

Basic leadership knowledge is now a must as programme co-ordinators are academic leaders in their own right. A programme coordinator concurred:

It is extremely difficult for us to operate without basic knowledge and skills in management and academic leadership. We are appointed on the basis of our excellent teaching skills and subject expertise.

Gumuseli, (2009) appear to concur with the respondents in this study arguing that leadership knowledge is needed to achieve effective management in academic programmes. The importance of leadership is widely documented in academic leadership literature (Moos, 2008; Pegg 2008; Leithwood, 2006)). The argument is that there is need to provide academic leadership so that distance education students are prepared for the rigors of open and distance learning. This can reduce to a large extent student burnout and stress and at the same time promote student retention.

7.6 Capacity to manage diversified student population

It was the contention of respondents in this study that the role of the programme coordinator is evolving every day.

One respondent put forth the following argument:

Every day the programme coordinator is faced with a plethora of responsibilities concerning programme management, student challenges, diversity in students' demands and personalities. There are also calls for positive learning environment; innovation, collaborative climate, shared and monitored mission and quality outcomes that continue to intensify.

In terms of the ability to manage more student diverse populations, of particular importance are students with disabilities at a time when calls for inclusive education are becoming louder by the day (Eminovic, et. al. 2009). Bouchard, et. al. (2002) confirm that the normal demands faced by programme coordinators in recent years have become more and more complex as the populations they serve grow diverse. Nowadays, the programme coordinator, as the determining force behind the degree to which students may or may not be deemed successful, is faced with a dilemma created by the emerging and expanding role of educational demands, the dilemma that significantly challenges the future of programme leadership (Pryor, 2008; Fitzgerald, 2009 and Bouchard, et. al. 2002).

7.8 Promoting collaborative productivity

The area of collaboration was cited as indispensable. In this respect, teamwork was seen as a catalyst. These statements bear testimony to this:

'Collaborative productivity can make the job of programme coordination easier; These days, individualistic orientations no longer have a place but fuller recognition of collective and collaborative action. The programme coordinator must be able to work in teams and networks that benefit the programme he or she is managing.

7.9 Develop self-managing learners

It was the contention of the respondents in this study that programme coordinators must have the capacity to produce students who can manage their affairs. They preferred programme coordinators who can develop learners who are self managing: The following excerpts bear testimony to this:

Independence must be the guiding principle in an open and distance teaching arena.' Remarked one respondent while the other one went on to say: *'the dependency syndrome must be done away with. Independence and creativity is the in thing in an open and distance teaching context. I expect programme coordinators to take a leading role in that direction.'*

Distance learners should be guided by the principle of self motivation and self starter in their period of learning. This is a critical role for the programme coordinator to make sure that the students are geared up for the rigor of self acquisition of knowledge. Learners should shun the dependency syndrome and be ready to survive on their own with the guidance of their programme coordinators.

7.10 Knowledge Creators

The area of creating knowledge was also a prominent finding in this study. The role of research in achieving this knowledge creation was evident from the open ended questions as evidenced by the following excerpts:

"Research especially action research must guide a programme leader because involvement in research promotes the teachers' standing and enhances the university's reputation.

In the case of research, respondents felt that distance education should instil a research culture, encourage research by training programme coordinators in that respect and using research to create new knowledge. Knowledge creation is seen as crucial in a university because in addition to enhancing the professional development of programme coordinators, it also helps to find solutions to day-to-day problems in the university.

8. Conclusions

It was the contention of the respondents in this study that the regional programme coordinator is involved on daily basis in issues related to facilitation and organisation of the learning sessions. It cropped up in this study that the regional programme coordinator should have information of the programmes on the finger tips and keep records up to date. Programme coordinators play a pivotal role in enhancement of quality service to the clientele. The regional programme coordinators are a leader, coach and facilitator in Open and Distance Learning and always engage in

managing diversified student population. There is need for basic training for leadership in Open and Distance Learning so that the Regional Programme Coordinator fit squarely in the contemporary academic leadership. Promotion of collaborative productivity was cited as indispensable in this study. Regional programme coordinators should be academic leaders in their own right as they are explained as knowledge creators.

9. Recommendations

The results obtained in this research confirm that there is need of a paradigm shift in the way programme are managed in the Zimbabwe Open University, an Open and Distance Learning institution. Zimbabwe Open University has to adopt a paradigm shift in the way the programmes are managed in the regional centres. Among a plethora of roles of the regional programme coordinator topping the range is that the regional programme coordinators should be regarded as the regional programme managers because their day to day work involves critical activities performed by a manager in the corporate world.

The study recommends that the Zimbabwe Open University should organise workshops to empower the regional programme coordinators with skills to keep and maintain records for the students so that quality service is delivered to the client. Such workshops will lead regional programme coordinators to be on guard all the time of the day to attend to challenges faced by the distant learner. Also the university should organise workshops to equip the regional programme coordinator with specific skills such as leadership, coaching and facilitation skills which are of paramount importance in delivering quality service in the Open and Distance Learning environment.

It also recommended that the regional programme coordinator should be kept abreast with the skills of managing diversified student population. The university should avail to the programme coordinators all the resources they might require in their endeavor to assist students with diverse challenges and situations.

Quality circles should be encouraged by the university in order to promote collaborative productivity. Team work is the pillar of quality assurance in distance education institutions. Contemporary education circles do not promote individualistic tendencies. Regional programme coordinators should develop networks in the society in which they operate so that they are not discarded by the community.

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