

Quality Assurance Effectiveness: Perceptions of Lecturers on the Quality Assurance Mechanisms Employed in the BECD Programme at Zimbabwe Open University

Rosemary Ngara¹ and Simuforosa Magwa²

¹Zimbabwe Open University, P.O. BOX 1810, GWERU, ZIMBABWE
rosemaryngara@gmail.com

²Great Zimbabwe University
Magwasf@gmail.com

Abstract

In Open and Distance Education there is great desire to provide quality of the whole educational context and quality of individual educational programmes. In an effort to offer responsive market driven programmes, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) continuously introduces new educational curricula and the Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Development (BECD) is one such programme which was introduced in September 2010. While it is in its initial cycle there seem to be some problems, such as the untimely provision of resources, which can easily compromise on the quality of the programme and its products. A case study which was qualitative in nature was conducted to determine lecturers' opinions on the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms that are being used to quality assure the BECD programme in terms of its fitness, relevance and efficiency or effectiveness. Open-ended questionnaire and focus group discussions were the instruments by which research data were gathered. Participants were of the mind that some appropriate methods and processes were being used and followed in an effort to quality assure the BECD programme. The accreditation of the BECD programme prior its installation, conducting of researches on the lecturer and student perceptions on all aspects of the implementation of the BECD programme, assessment of students each semester and continuous auditing of the BECD programme through institutional reports were some of the mechanisms the participants opined as being used to quality assure the BECD programme. Nonetheless some loopholes in the QA processes were opined by the participants. Among these were untimely provision of curriculum materials, failure to act on research recommendations/findings by the institution, and the tendency to hide weaknesses in institutional reporting. The researchers recommend practical use of research findings and honest reporting about implementation of BECD and timely provision of BECD curriculum materials.

Keywords: BECD programme quality assurance mechanism

Introduction

Some teachers are trained through distance and open learning (ODL). Zimbabwe Open University trains teachers through ODL and one programme at ZOU, which trains and develops teachers, is the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education Degree (BECD). A study was carried out to determine views of lecturers on the mechanisms that are used to quality assure the BECD.

Background

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is state-sponsored and has the mandate to advance, transform and transmit knowledge through a distance and open education system. There are several objectives of the ZOU quality management system among which are to “provide quality” teaching, learning and novel learner centered ODL teaching approaches and to “design market driven programmes” (ZOU Quality Manual 2013:16). The Bachelor of Education Early Childhood degree (BECD) was introduced for study at ZOU in September 2010 since there was felt need for more Early Childhood caregivers for Zimbabwe considers Early Childhood education as a right of every child. The introduction of the BECD degree programme at ZOU was also influenced by recommendations of the Nziramasanga Commission in 1999, which among other things recommended the formalisation of Early Childhood Education in Zimbabwe. At ZOU the BECD degree programme is offered to both teaching diploma holders and non-holders of teaching diplomas. Printed modules, face to face tutorials and use of the internet are the main delivery strategies employed in helping BECD students to learn through Open and Distance Learning. The BECD programme is designed to capacity-develop students to become effective teachers of young children through distance and open learning. BECD is a four year programme. On average four courses/subjects are studied per semester. The subjects include foundational courses in ECD education, Teaching Practice, among others. While it is in its initial cycle, there seem to be some problems presenting themselves in the implementation of the BECD programme, among which, is the delay in the provision of some modules for some of the courses. At the time the study was conducted, the BECD programme had run for seven semesters. It was against this background that research was carried out.

Statement of the problem

In trying to offer market driven programmes such as the BECD programme, there seem to be some challenges that can affect negatively the quality of the whole curriculum implementation and quality of the programme. The study sought to determine BECD lecturers’ opinions on the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms which are done collaboratively to quality assure the BECD programme.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to establish the views of lecturers on the quality assurance mechanisms employed in the running of the BECD programme offered at Zimbabwe Open University, in the initial stages of the programme, for the purpose of informing practice in Higher Education and to provide suggestions in the areas of weakness established by the study.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

- Which quality assurance mechanisms are employed collaboratively in trying to quality assure the BECD programme?
- How effective are the quality assurance mechanisms?
- In what ways are the quality assurance mechanisms ineffective?
- What impediments are there in trying to enhance quality assurance in the BECD programme.
- What can be done to further enhance the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms in BECD programme?

Significance of the study

It was hoped that the study would be instrumental in information sharing on Quality Assurance practices of the BECD programme not only among stakeholders in the Department of Teacher Education at ZOU but practitioners in ODL elsewhere. The study would be useful in reporting quality assurance practices and issues in the BECD programme and the results would expose the gap between current quality assurance practices in the BECD programme and actual expectations. The study would inform intervention measures for improvement by

stakeholders in the BECD programme. The researchers also hoped that insights gained through this study could stimulate further study.

Research methodology

Research design

The qualitative design was used to carry out the study. According to Walcott (1990) most qualitative research deals with people's individual and collective thoughts and perceptions. In this study focus was on how BECD lecturers viewed the effectiveness of quality mechanisms employed to quality assure the BECD programme. One of the characteristics of qualitative study method is to investigate the current status of phenomena. It was the primary goal of this study to investigate the quality assurance mechanisms employed in quality assuring the BECD programme at ZOU. In addition the study was a case study since it involved lecturers at the ZOU Midlands regional campus only.

Population of the study

The target population for this study was all the full time lecturers in the department of Education at the Midlands Regional Campus and all part-time tutors in the BECD programme.

The Sample

Three full time lecturers in the department of education were purposively sampled to take part in the study since the researchers believed that the full time lecturers in the education department had knowledge of understanding about the BECD programme and particularly knowledge about quality assurance mechanisms that were being used to quality assure the BECD programme. The part-time lecturers in the BECD were also involved in the study since they had knowledge and understanding about the phenomenon being studied. Seven part-time lecturers were sampled through convenience sampling. As part-time tutors returned student marked assignments they were requested to complete an open questionnaire.

Data gathering instruments

The instruments for data collection were an open-ended questionnaire and focus group interview. The full time lecturers were each requested to complete the open ended questionnaire first, after which a focus group discussion was conducted with them. The part-time lecturers completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire was preferred because it is fairly easy to construct, easy to administer and relatively economical. Financially there is a marked reduction in costs and time (White , 2002). The use of the focus group enhanced some triangulation which contributed to the trustworthiness of the study and enabled the researcher to probe participants' responses to obtain greater clarity (Borg and Gall, 1989).

Conceptual Framework

The concepts of quality and quality assurance

Quality

Quality is verified achievement of objectives and is perfection as fitness for purpose or conformance to requirements (<http://www.finhle.com>). Accordingly quality is seen as everyone's business and it is a journey not a destination.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance is an all embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating, maintaining and improving the quality of education systems, institutions or programmes (FINHEEC) and [www.tempu-lb](http://www.tempu-lb.com) . It is the means by which an institution can guarantee with confidence and certainty that standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and enhanced. Thus quality assurance is process orientated and involves taking measures to correct mistakes and makes sure people are doing right things the right way. (www.authorsteen.com). Ideally, quality assurance is threefold. There is internal quality assurance which is pointed at preservation and improvement of quality within a given institution itself. External quality assurance is another aspect, which is based on the visitation system and involves retaining of experts and external people in the quality assurance process. The third aspect of quality assurance is meta-evaluation usually by the government to control quality and the way how these institutions assimilate the results of the quality review. Meta evaluation plays a watchdog role as it watches over the workings of internal and external quality assurance and sees to it that

institutions follow upon the results of quality assessment in their policies. (www.aic.lv/bolana/bologna/contib/ESIB/QAhandbook.pdf).

Benefits and Purposes of Quality Assurance

According to European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and European University association there are several reasons to worry about quality assurance. Among them are:

- Reputation of the institution/programme
- Client satisfaction
- Maintaining standards
- Credibility
- Accountability
- Continual improvement
- Ability by leadership and management to cultivate and conduct evidence-based decision.

Principles or guidelines for Quality Assurance

According to European association for Quality assurance in Higher education (<http://www.equa.eu>) there are principles that should be followed in quality assurance in higher education and among them are the following:

- Be critical sure that processes are fit for purposes of Quality Assurance
- Reporting of findings of Quality Assurance reviews
- Following up on results of quality assessments
- Periodic reviews of programmes and any other operations of institutions of higher education

Some challenges of quality assurance

According to www.mqa.gov.my/AQAAIW, some of the hindrances of quality assurance are:

- Limited resources
- Lack of efficient internal structures of Quality Assurance
- Neglect of quality assurance review output
- Lack of external evaluation of institutions and their programmes.

This conceptual framework assisted the researchers in framing some of the research questions in this study and in giving them a better understanding of Quality Assurance, a phenomenon which was central to their study.

Literature Review

Smith (2004) conducted a study titled, 'Off campus support in distance learning - how do our students define quality?' The study examined the nature of quality in terms of the provision of off campus support to students in a particular postgraduate distance education campus context. A questionnaire using structured and unstructured elements was posted to participants to investigate student perceptions and expectations regarding off campus support. The research showed that students placed particular emphasis on lecturers' ability to provide constructively critical feedback and to respond to their concerns and queries with enthusiasm. Good teaching in distance education is not the mere provision of distance learning packages and other support materials but that it is tied closely to individual needs and influence in terms of quality by individual lecturers' skills and ability in delivering it. Thus according to the study what students need is a readily accessible and highly individualized off campus support. This study recommends a re-think of the types of feedback supplied to students and time management priorities in terms of how speedily it is supplied. Smith's study relates to the current study as both are investigating quality issues in distance education. Nonetheless, the current study focuses on the provision of only one programme while Smith's based on several programmes offered in distance education.

Marzo- Navarro, Pedraja-Iglesion and Rivera-Torres (2005) carried out a study titled, 'Measuring customer satisfaction in summer courses.' The purpose of the study was to determine the satisfaction of the people who attended the summer courses offered by a Spanish public university as there was growing competition from other

universities. The results were based on a self administered survey. Results of the survey showed that the teaching staff, enrolment and course organization are elements that impacted on student satisfaction. To also increase the satisfaction levels of students, it is necessary to know the objectives that the students have.

Powell and McCauley (2004) carried out a study titled, 'Research degree examining: Quality issues of principle and practice. 'A survey was conducted of the opinions of individual academics in relation to issues of regarding research degree examiners namely the use of examiners' reports, the scope of criteria they are to make judgments with, the assessments remit given to them, their training and criteria used for their appointment. Questionnaire was pilot tested and circulated after some revisions to examiners and candidates. The study was guided by three questions: Should examiners' preliminary reports on the thesis be made available to candidate and supervisor before oral examination? Should examiners take into account the quality of research training and research environment when reaching a judgment and be asked to make written comment on the research environment in the department? Should examiners have to undergo formal training? What criteria if any should be used as a basis for appointing of examiners and the criteria that might reasonably used. In response to the first question, there were varied opinions to the given options 'before', 'after' and 'never'. Responses to questions two and three were also mixed. In response to question four, subject expertise, examining experience. Supervising experience and possession of own PhD were given as the criteria to be used for appointing examiners in viva. The relevance of RAE rating as a possible criterion was viewed as not applying in appointing supervisors has since this rating was levied at institutions and not individuals. In this study, lack of consensus on all points to each question suggested differences of views and understandings on the viva process and roles of examiners in the assessment process.

Dambudzo (2012) carried out a study titled "Quality assurance through student assessment in ODL: Case Study of the Zimbabwe Open University". The research sought to find out how ZOU as an ODL institution implemented quality assurance through student assessment and to determine how far they complied with ZIMCHE (Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education) guidelines as quality benchmarks. The study was done through document analysis among which were ZIMCHECR13(Guidelines for Student assessment for H.E), examiners reports in the Department of Education Studies complied for the May –June 2012 session and Quality Assurance regional reports and assessment reports from the Faculty of Arts and Education. The study established that student assessment assumed the CIPP model and used the systems approach to enable inspection and to promote greater transparency. ZOU followed a rigorous Quality Assurance for students assessment beginning with needs assessment for purposes of programmes, formulation of regulations to guide assessment and the award of qualification, training of module writers and test developers and use of external and internal moderation for question papers and scripts. The study recommended that more needed to be done to see if the programmes and qualifications were comparable with those in conventional institutions to enable free movement of students between institutions in the country.

Chikoko and Chiome (2013) in a study titled "Quality tutorials in ODL: Exploring experiences of ZOU students" found out that the organisation of tutorials was considered of high quality by students but the absence of some tutors compromised on the quality of tutorials and that the economic hardships affected the quality of tutorials negatively. The study also found out that lecturers used the tutorial method when their students preferred the exposition method.

Ngara and Ngwarai (2013) in a study titled "An assessment of the BECD programme in its initial stages at ZOU" established that in the first three semesters that the BECD programme had been running, some modules and tutorial letters had been adequately provided to the students but probably due to economic hardships some modules were not availed to students at the time of registration.

Modules that were available and tutorials were regarded of high quality. However, lack of use of teaching media in tutorials was the key criticism raised. Tutors' marking was regarded by students as communicative but feedback as not timeous.

While these studies by Powell and Green (2003), Smith (2004) , Marzo- Navarro, et al (2005), Ngara and Ngwarai (2013) ,Chikoko and Chiome (2013)and Dambudzo (2012) cover issues of quality, they do not cover mechanisms of quality assurance wholesome, in relation to the BECD programme, which the current study endeavored to do. Powell and McCauley focused on viva in PhD studies. Dambudzo's study focused on the quality of student

assessment per se while Chikoko and Chiome focused on the quality of tutorials per se. In this study focus is on quality assurance mechanisms and their effectiveness in the BECD programme.

Data Presentation

Questionnaire and Focus group Data

Three full time lecturers and seven part-time tutors completed the open ended questionnaire and the three full time lecturers participated in the focus group.

Question: Which quality assurances mechanisms are employed collaboratively in trying to quality assure the BECD programme?

Responses to this question in the questionnaire showed that several quality assurance mechanisms are employed collaboratively in an effort to quality assure the BECD as is shown in Table I below.

Table I: Mechanisms employed collaboratively in trying to quality assure the BECD programme

Stated quality assurance mechanism which is employed collaboratively in an attempt to quality the BECD Programme	No. of Responses
Accreditation of the BECD programme prior its installation	5
Provision of 6- hour conduct sessions per semester	6
Conducting of researches on the lecturer and student perceptions on all aspects of the implementation of the BECD programme	6
Assessment of students through coursework and exams each semester	10
Writing of monthly reports on activities done and challenges faced etc.	6
Supervision of tutorials and Teaching Practice	7
Cross marking of assignments and exams	5
Availing of modules	6
Availing of library and internet facilities for research	6
Hiring services of BECD specialists	7
Orientation of new BECD students	3

All the ten participants considered assessment of students via assignments and exams as a mechanism in quality assuring the BECD programme. Seven lecturers viewed the monthly reporting of BECD curriculum implementation activities and hiring of services of BECD specialists, and supervision of tutorials and T.P. as ways by which ZOU was quality assuring the BECD programme. The carrying out of surveys on BECD implementation activities, provision of 6-hour contacts between tutors and students, availing of curriculum materials such as modules, textbooks and the internet facility were viewed as mechanisms by which ZOU was trying to quality assure the BECD degree programme by six lecturers. Five times, it was considered by the participants that the accreditation of the BECD programme before its implementation and cross marking of assignments and exams were some of the actions by which ZOU was making an effort to quality assure the BECD programme. Only three participants were of the thinking that the orientation of new BECD students at ZOU was a method of quality assuring the programme. In the focus group all these mechanisms were stated. In addition the use of marking guides, availing of course outlines and the carrying out of internal quality audits whose purpose is evaluate conformity to ZOU requirements were further stated as means and ways by which ZOU was quality assuring the BECD programme.

Question: In what ways are the quality assurance mechanisms employed effective?

Responses to this question through the open ended questionnaire and the focus group were as is presented in Table 2.

Table II: Ways in which the mechanisms were viewed as effective by lecturers

Stated Quality Assurance Mechanism	Ways in which the mechanism is viewed as effective by lecturers
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Accreditation of BECD degree programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages fulfilment of certain standards of quality • Provides students with a programme which is clearly defined and appropriate
Engagement of specialist services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students bound to receive specialist help and quality assistance • Correct treatment of content relevant to ECD
Conducting of researches on the lecturer and student perceptions on all aspects of the implementation of the BECD programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical tool in checking fitness ,relevance and efficiency of BECD activities, curriculum materials ,tutors etc
Contact Tutorials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures adequate course coverage • Promotes programme understanding by students • Assists students in ironing out issues on problem topics • Helps students in tackling assignments and exams
Supervision of tutorials and T.P.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increases tutor and student awareness of BECD programme requirements • Narrows gaps between reality and intended • Adds to the quality of tutorials and T.P.
Provision of modules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides focused reading • Promotes further research
Internet and Library provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes student access to young sources of data • Promotes wide reading and better grasp of ECD issues
Exams and Assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yardsticks in measuring student levels of grasp of ECD concepts, skills, attitudes and issues and effectiveness of tutoring
Monthly institutional reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights areas needing improving
Orientation of new BECD students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduces students to distance learning as a practice in the BECD programme

In support of all the ways in which each mechanism was viewed as effective, in the focus group, it was opined that the various mechanisms were when put together effective in being instrumental to the improvement of relevance and efficiency of the BECD programme at ZOU. In the words of one participant, “The quality assurance mechanisms such as assessment of students, monitoring and conducting of surveys on the BECD programme and its implementation were all effective as quality guardians of the programme, tools of improvement and in establishing accountability, all of which are objectives of quality assurance.”

Question: State some ways in which the quality assurance mechanisms that are used to ensure quality of the BECD programme are ineffective

Participants were of the opinion that contact hours (6 per course ,per semester) were not quite adequate to some students. Sometimes students did not attend some of the tutorials thereby rendering the idea of contact tutorials ineffective. Module provision was ideal but its effectiveness was limited by shortage of modules as at times only some students would get the modules and in some instances modules are not made available until exam time. One participant pointed out that when modules were not adequate the institution preferred to give modules to students only and not their lecturers or part-time tutors. T.P. supervision and assessment were done by ZOU and host schools. BECD student T.P. was not done by any another external institution of higher learning. Participants were of the mind that the writing of institutional reports and surveys on the BECD programme were ineffective since it took too long to take on board suggestions made in the reports and the surveys. In some cases reporting and researches were said not be truthful especially on negative aspects pertaining to the implementation.

Question: What impediments are there in trying to quality assure the BECD programme?
 Responses to this question via the questionnaire were as presented in Table 3 and Fig. 1 .

Table III: Impediments in trying to quality assure the BECD programme

Stated impediment	Frequency
Inaccessibility of internet and libraries in districts	7
Non-conformities caused by lack of funds	3
Limited contact hours for students	6
Tendency to hide weaknesses in reporting	4
Failure to act promptly on research findings and suggestions	5
Untimely provision of curriculum materials	7

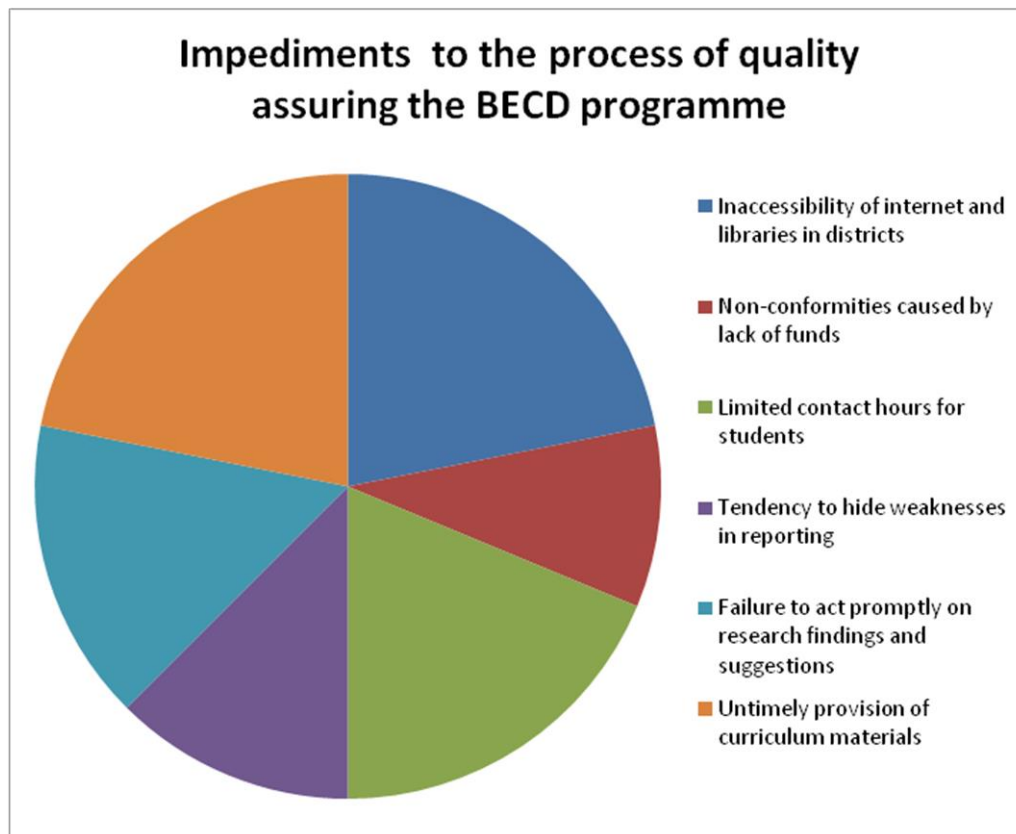


Fig.I: Perceived impediments by lecturers to the process of quality assuring the BECD programme

As depicted in Table 3 and Figure1, inaccessibility of internet and libraries in districts and untimely provision of curriculum materials were each viewed seven times as challenges to the process of quality assuring the BECD programme. These two impediments were also opined in the focus group. Limited contact hours for students, failure

to act promptly on research findings and suggestions, tendency to hide weaknesses in reporting and non-conformities caused by lack of funds were also stated as hindrances in an effort to quality assure the BECD programme.

Question: What can be done to further enhance the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures in the BECD programme

The following were suggestions made by participants:

- Contact hours need to be increased and students be convinced to attend them all
- There is need to avail modules to students and tutors in good time
- Study facilities such as libraries and facilities need to be decentralized to district centres
- Institutionalisation of external assessment of T.P. by some other higher institutions of learning
- Taking heed of quality assurance review and survey out put

DISCUSSION

Which quality assurance mechanisms are employed collaboratively in trying to quality assure the BECD programme?

Trying to quality assure any educational programme requires several activities to be done cooperatively. According to the participants several activities were being done at Zimbabwe Open University in an endeavor to quality assure the BECD programme. The activities and processes opined by participants included; assessment of students via assignments and exams, monthly reporting and hiring of services of BECD specialists, supervision of tutorials and T.P., the carrying out of surveys on BECD implementation activities, provision of 6-hour contacts between tutors and students, and availing of curriculum materials such as modules, textbooks and the internet facility. In addition, the accreditation of the BECD programme before its implementation and cross marking of assignments and exams and the orientation of new BECD students at ZOU, use of marking guides, availing of course outlines and the carrying out of internal quality audits whose purpose is to evaluate conformity to ZOU requirements were also viewed as means and ways by which ZOU was quality assuring the BECD programme. Quality assurance activities as stated by the participants seem to be many and ongoing and their essence is determined by the stage at which the programme will be operating. Since quality assurance hinges on fitness, relevance and efficiency, ways by which quality assurance can be enhanced are bound to be many and varied. The quality assurance mechanisms being employed in the BECD programme at ZOU are quite in line with the principles of internal quality assurance suggested by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and European University Association (<http://www.enqa.eu> and <http://www.eua.be>). Some of the principles of quality assurance suggested by these two institutions are accreditation/approval of a programme, monitoring and periodic reviews of programme and assessment of students (<http://www.enqa.eu> and <http://www.eua.be>)

In what ways are the quality assurance processes employed effective?

Participants explained the different ways in which the quality assurance mechanisms were each effective in trying to quality assure the BECD programme at ZOU. The accreditation of the BECD prior to its implementation was regarded as effective as the exercise helped BECD in meeting certain required standards from the word go. This opinion is supported by (www.aic.v/bologna/Bologna/contribu/ESIB/QAhandbook.pdf) which says accreditation is instrumental in giving public confirmation that certain standards of quality are being met. Engagement of specialist services, conducting of researches on the lecturer and student perceptions on all aspects of the implementation of the BECD programme, contact tutorials, supervision of tutorials and T.P., provision of modules, internet and library provision, writing of exams and assignments, monthly institutional reporting, orientation of new BECD students, use of marking guides, availing of course outlines and the carrying out of internal quality audits were all viewed effective in one way or another (see Table 2). The various mechanisms were considered by participants as effective as quality guardians, and as tools in quality improvement. They were also regarded effective in guaranteeing continual improvement and in enabling ZOU leadership in conducting evidence based decision making.

State some ways in which the quality assurance mechanisms that are used to ensure quality of the BECD programme are ineffective

In an effort to quality assure educational programme in some ways mechanisms being put in place may in some respects be ineffective and some mechanisms may be rendered ineffective by some factors. Participants were of the opinion that tutorials were made ineffective as the contact hours (6 per course ,per semester) were not quite adequate to some students and sometimes students did not attend some of the tutorials thereby defeating the whole purpose of contact hours. Module provision was ideal but its effectiveness was limited by shortage of modules as at times only some students would get the modules and in some instances modules are not made available until exam time. Relevant resources necessary for successful implementation need to be provided (Mapolisa, Matsinde, Mawere, & Zivanayi, 2006). While T.P. supervision and assessment were done by ZOU and host schools the BECD student T.P was not done by any another external institution of higher learning yet an external eye in T.P. is quite necessary as it can help in the eye opening of the training institution. According to the European University Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education one of the principles for internal quality assurance is external assessment by a group of experts. Participants were of the mind that the writing of institutional reports and surveys on the BECD programme were ineffective in some way since it took too long to take on board suggestions made in the reports and the surveys. Monitoring and survey findings only become useful if and when findings are taken on board to influence quality improvement.

What impediments are there in trying to quality assure the BECD programme?

Participants were of the mind that in trying to quality assure the BECD programme, there were some impediments. The stated challenges included; inaccessibility of internet and libraries in districts, non-conformities caused by lack of funds, limited contact hours for students, tendency to hide weaknesses in reporting, failure to act promptly on research findings and suggestions, and untimely provision of curriculum materials. Participants' views support www.mqa.gov.my/AQAAIW which also states limited resources, neglect of quality assurance review out put as hindrances of quality assurance.

What can be done to further enhance the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms in BECD programme?

Several proposals were made by the participants regarding what could be done to further enhance the effectiveness of quality activities and processes done and followed in quality assuring the BECD programme. Increasing contact hours, convincing students to attend them all, availing modules to students and tutors in good time, decentralising study facilities such as libraries and facilities needed to district centres, institutionalisation of external assessment of T.P. by some other higher institutions of learning and taking heed of quality assurance review and survey out put were all thought as necessary to further increase the effectiveness of attempts to quality assure the BECD programme. Such suggestions are quite in line with guidelines for quality assurance.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants viewed mechanisms that are in place in trying to quality assure the BECD programme as many and varied. Specific types of quality assurance mechanisms are employed at specific and apt stages from the period prior the implementation of the programme right through its implementation. Some of the quality assurance mechanisms used at ZOU to quality assure the BECD programme are accreditation of the BECD programme, assessment of students, monitoring, periodic reviews and conducting of surveys inter alia. In many ways the mechanisms were regarded as effective as each mechanism in one way or another contributed to the attaining of objectives of quality assurance of the BECD programme, such as quality improvement and being a quality guardian. In some ways the effectiveness of the quality mechanisms was affected negatively by some variables such as limited resources, neglect of quality assurance review out put and survey findings and lack of external assessment in the T.P. component of the BECD programme.

The researchers recommend the following:

- availing modules to BECD students and tutors in good time by the Zimbabwe Open University
- institutionalization of external assessment of T.P. by some other higher institutions of learning

- practical use of research findings and quality assurance reviews of BECD by Zimbabwe Open University leadership operating at various levels from the regional campuses upwards
- honest reporting about implementation of the BECD programme.

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