



**THE QUALITY OF TEACHING-LEARNING INPUTS
AVAILED TO TUTORS: A CASE OF THE EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT AT THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY (ZOU)
BULAWAYO REGIONAL CAMPUS**

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Abstract:

Globally, business organizations are striving to at least meet customers' expectations or go beyond in their business transactions. This is made necessary by the fact that the quality of any organization's products or services is predicated on the extent to which they meet or surpass customers' expectations. This premise resulted in the crafting of quality standards that are legally enforced at government and corporate levels world over. Internationally, the ISO 21000 quality standards are observed by many countries including Zimbabwe. The corporate Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is on record for its enduring efforts towards quality service delivery. Quality Assurance and Control are an integral part of the University's Cooperate Strategy. The University seeks to achieve world class university standards in all of its sub-processes with the prime aim of delighting its stakeholders (ZOU, Quality Policy Procedure Manual, 2013). Several researches were carried on ZOU sub-processes like the quality of tutorials and student services. Little research was carried out on the quality of the teaching-learning inputs the University avails to its tutors. This gap gave birth to this study. The study established that the ZOU Bulawayo Education Department was generally doing well in the orientation sub-process, distribution of modules, and the dissemination of information to tutors. Nevertheless, weaknesses were noted in the following sub-processes; the provision of instructional media and technology, orientation of tutors in on-line assignment marking and orientation in the use of Library and Information Services.

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1. Major Research Question

To what extent is ZOU providing the relevant teaching-learning inputs to part-time tutors?

1.1 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent is ZOU availing the relevant information inputs to part-time tutors?
- How adequate are the reading material inputs that are availed to tutors by the University?
- How adequate are the instructional media and technology inputs that are availed to tutors by the University?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teaching-Learning Inputs Availed to Tutors an ODL Context

The teaching-learning inputs availed to tutors in an ODL context constitute the bulk of the support a university offers to them. Tutors need the commensurate teaching-learning inputs in appropriate quantities and qualities. An ODL university should support tutors by availing to them the relevant information, reading materials, instructional media and technology inputs. ZOU promises to avail to its tutors' quality teaching-learning inputs that are in conformity with set ODL standards (ZOU, Quality Policy Manual, 2013).

2.1 Information Inputs

Information is the "lifeblood of an organisation" (Stoner 1992: 531). Inasmuch as a biological body needs blood to coordinate the functions of its body parts, a corporate like ZOU needs information to coordinate the efforts of individuals and departments towards the realisation of its goals. Relevant information empowers tutors to plan, organise, deliver and provide feedback to students. In an ODL set up, tutor information needs are high because the university, the tutor and the student are geographically separated (Bufford, 2005).

Tutors need information on the university's brand. The word brand refers to a university's philosophy, vision, mission, core values and the service delivery methodologies (Common Wealth of Learning, 2013). They shoulder the responsibility of delighting and retaining the current students. They should also attract prospective students. Tutors can only implement, promote and defend a brand they are aware of. It is therefore obligatory to avail information that develops in them an awareness of the university brand they are expected to operationalize (Doyran, 2012). Nevertheless, in an

ODL context their exposure to the brand is very minimal because they are hired on a part-time basis. In a majority of cases ZOU part-time tutors are employed on a full time bases outside the university. Information dissemination to tutors therefore deserves special attention.

Tutors need information on their roles in black and white to guard against omissions, confusion and role conflicts. They need information on schedules and venues. They need information on the sub-processes they participate in like; setting assignment and examination items, marking, conducting tutorials and research project supervision. They as well need information on offices to contact for specified services like; program coordination, student counselling services, Library and Information services and faculty clerks.

In their third tutorial per semester per course, tutors at ZOU are expected to give students examination orientation (Kangai, 2010). This implies tutors should be exposed to the university examination standards. Tutors also need to be familiarised with the physical infrastructures that are relevant to them like; tutorial rooms, and the Library (Common Wealth of Learning, 2013).

The information may be disseminated through; institutional tutor guides, tutor orientation, meetings, tutorial letters, course specific tutor guides and workshops (Common Wealth of Learning, 2013). Information dissemination may be done through social platforms like Whatsapp, and the university website.

2.2 Reading Materials Inputs

The relevant reading materials constitute the subject matter content tutors should teach according to the university curriculum. Subject matter content is a central component of what tutors should know for them to be effective in their service delivery (Hawes: 1979). According to Chivore (1994) and Hawes (1979), there is a positive co-relationship between a tutor's mastery of the subject content and students' learning gains. A tutor who lacks subject content mastery can do much harm to the learners and the institution's image (Hawes: 1979). In ZOU tutors need the hard or soft copy modules. Tutors should read beyond the module, they need access to library hardcopy and e-resources. To get access to these resources they should register with the library.

There are times when courses are revised and new content is added to the curriculum. In such cases, content mastery gaps should be identified and get corrected through interventions like staff development (Common Wealth of Learning, 2013).

2.3 Instructional Media and Technology Inputs

The university should avail the relevant instructional media and technology to tutors across the curriculum. The term instructional media and technology herein loosely refers to the equipment a tutor may make use of during a tutorial to enhance comprehension. This includes equipment like the white boards, white screens, white board markers, erasers and the flip charts. This also includes IT equipment like computers, video tapes, slides, projectors, tablets, flashes, memory cards etc

(Shumbayaonda and Maringe, 2000). The term also refers to the regalia used in the teaching and learning of practical courses in the Diploma in Education Primary. Regalia like music instruments, cooking utensils and Fashion and Fabrics equipment are used. These teaching-learning inputs deserve special attention because they constitute the environment students and tutors interact with thereby concretizing the University's abstract brand and the taught content (Dewey: 1959). Instructional media and technology according to (Dewey, 1979), (Rousseau, 1974), (Rwambiwa, 2001), makes learning multi-sensory, participative and interesting.

2.4 Technological Skills Inputs

Tutors should be given the technological skills needed to operate the technological sub-systems that are relevant to them (Common Wealth of Learning, 2013). They should have the skills needed to operate the teaching-learning inputs like projectors. They need the commensurate skills required to effectively use the Electronic Library resources. Without the commensurate technical skills needed to use the input resources, the permission granted to them to access the resources will be nominal. Tutors should therefore receive orientation in the technological inputs. In this day and age, most of the teaching-learning inputs are mounted on the internet. Therefore tutors should have access to the university web with a bandwidth big enough to carry all users on board.

3. Research Methodologies

Central to the study were the what, how and why questions. The questions yielded both quantitative and qualitative data. The study therefore mixed the quantitative and qualitative paradigms to comprehensively answer the research major question.

3.1 Design and Instruments

The study used a case study design. The design enabled the researchers to single out for thorough, intense, detailed an in-depth study (Merriam, 1988) the teaching-learning inputs sub-process within the Education Department in a real life context of a single university site, the ZOU Bulawayo Regional Campus. The other advantage found in the use of a case study design was its compatibility with the use of instruments like interviews and observation to generate data (Chikoto et al, 1995). The design was very appropriate because the researchers were after the how and why explanations to the obtaining status-quo. The design was also found to be cost effective since it restricted the study to a single geographical area ZOU Bulawayo Regional Campus (Chikoto et al, 1995).

3.2 Target Population and Sampling

The grant total for the population of interest was 37. The population was made up of the 2 Regional Program Coordinators in charge of the education programs and the 35 active part-time tutors in the department. To draw participants into the sample,

purposeful sampling was used. The objective was to draw into the sample only the “information rich” (Patton, 1990) or “data rich” (Creswell, 2012) participants. The data rich participants were defined as those members of the population who were in the ZOU Bulawayo Regional Campus Education Department for at least a full semester cycle and had a chance to be exposed to all the activities under university’s teaching-learning inputs sub-process. The resultant sample had 35 participants made of the 2 Regional Program Coordinators and 33 part-time tutors.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

The permission to conduct the study was secured from the ZOU Bulawayo Regional Campus Director. Data were generated through face-to-face interviews and overt observations. Interview proceedings were recorded verbatim. After the interviews, the researchers transcribed the data and took them to the respondents for validation. Quantitative data was analyzed in frequency tables. Respondents’ qualitative responses were coded into categories and results were listed according to the responses given.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The researchers had a moral and a professional obligation to be ethically vigilant even in contexts where respondents were unaware or unconcerned about research ethical norms and standards (Neuman, 2003). The respondents’ right to an explanation of aims, procedures, purposes, and consequences of the research was respected by explicitly telling them these aspects of the study. Respondents’ identities were kept private and their responses were kept confidential. Respondents’ rights to voluntarily participate or not participate or to withdraw participation were respected. The Regional Program Coordinators and the part-time tutors voluntarily participated in the study because they foresaw the findings of the study as an alternative voice to the teaching-learning input challenges they face.

4. Findings and Discussions

A. Distribution of Respondents According to Receiving Orientation in the Teaching-learning sub-processes.

Table 1

N = 33

Did you receive orientation into the following sub-processes?	Yes		No	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
ZOU ODL Philosophy	33	100	0	0
Conducting Tutorials	33	100	0	0
Hard copy Assignment Marking	33	100	0	0
Examination Standards	33	100	0	0
Research Projects Supervision	33	100	0	0
On-line Assignment Marking	8	24.2	25	75.8
Library and Information Services	10	30.3	23	69.7

B. Distribution of Respondents According to their Views on the effectiveness of orientation sub-processes, information dissemination, issuing of modules and internet connectivity.

Table 2

N = 35

How effective was the orientation you received in the following?	Very Effective		Effective		Un Decided		Ineffective		V. Ineffective	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1. ZOU ODL Philosophy	30	85.7	5	14.3	0	0	0	0	0	0
2. Conducting Tutorials	27	77.1	8	22.9	0	0	0	0	0	0
3. Hard copy Assignment marking	24	68.6	11	31.4	0	0	0	0	0	0
4. Examination Standards	22	62.9	13	37.1	0	0	0	0	0	0
5. Research Projects Supervision	23	65.7	10	28.6	2	5.7	0	0	0	0
6. On-line Assignment Marking	0	0	8	22.9	3	8.6	68.6	0	0	0
7. Library and Information Services	0	0	8	22.9	0	0	27	77.1	0	0
8. Effectiveness of Information Dissemination	27	77.1	8	22.9	0	0	0	0	0	0
9. Provision of modules	31	88.6	4	11.4	0	0	0	0	0	0
10. Internet connectivity	4	11.4	21	71.4	0	0	0	0	0	0

4.1 Effective Orientation

Orientation into the following sub-processes was qualified as effective; ODL Philosophy, hard copy assignment marking, examination standards and research projects supervision. In their qualitative responses, respondents attributed this effectiveness to the following;

- The afore mentioned sub-processes are thoroughly covered in the ZOU Tutors' Handbook,
- The 2 Regional Program Coordinators hasten to issue the handbook (soft or hard copy) as soon as a tutor accepts a vacancy offer,
- The availability of course specific tutor guides in every course module and
- The convening of workshops for tutors.

Internet connectivity, the issuing of modules and information dissemination were also viewed as effective. The effectiveness was explained as follows:

- Distance is no longer a burrier in ZOU because the institution harnessed IT technology,
- All tutors have access to IT hard wares at work and home,
- All tutors are connected to the internet at work and at home,
- Modules are distributed in soft copy form which is cheaper than the hard copy form and
- Tutors are linked to university members of staff who are relevant to their service delivery on social platforms.

4.2 Weak Orientation

Tutor orientation in Library and Information Services and on-line marking of assignments was perceived as weak. The weaknesses were explained as follows;

- The staff development of tutors in on-line marking was work in progress,
- The Library and Information Services sub-process is not thoroughly covered in the ZOU Tutors' Handbook,
- Some tutors were not aware that they are entitled to library services and
- Orientation in library services is done by support staff and some tutors do not avail themselves even if they are aware.

C. The Adequacy of Instructional Media and Technology Inputs.

Table 3

The ideal user ratio; 1 item is to 1 tutor

Instructional Media and Technology Inputs	Quantities		Acceptable	Unacceptable
	Number / Item	Tutors sharing		
Projectors	1	35		Unacceptable
White boards	0	35		Unacceptable

D. Availing of the relevant equipment to the practical subjects in the Diploma in Education Primary.

In adequate funding was given as an explanation for the shortfall in the supply of instructional media and technology.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study established that the ZOU Bulawayo Education Department was generally doing well in the orientation sub-process, distribution of modules, and the dissemination of information to tutors. Nevertheless, weaknesses were noted in the following sub-processes; the provision of instructional media and technology, orientation of tutors in on-line assignment marking and orientation in the use of Library and Information Services. The study forwarded the following recommendations:

- The ZOU Bulawayo Education Department should staff develop tutors in on-line marking.
- The Education Department Regional Program Coordinators should ensure that their tutors register with the Library and receive staff development on how to access the ZOU Library and Information services.
- The above mentioned sub-processes should be incorporated in the ZOU Tutors' Handbook.
- The ZOU Bulawayo Regional Campus should migrate from the use of green boards and chalks to the use of white boards and dustless markers.

- The ZOU Bulawayo Regional Campus should outsource tutorial venues for Home Economics and Music from tertiary institutions with the requisite equipment.

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