
The Imperatives for Integrity in Open and Distance Learning Examinations Management, Some Observations from the Zimbabwe Open University

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ABSTRACT

Examinations administration is an important tool in the process of evaluating student learning and requires proper planning to meet high standards. This is particularly important for open and distance learning (ODL) institutions given the long standing negative attitudes towards qualifications obtained through the ODL mode of learning. This paper explores the processes leading to administration of face-to-face examinations in a distance education context. It highlighted some procedures such as examination development, examination administration, post examination administration and award procedures. The study explored the quality assurance practices adopted in administering examinations at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The qualitative research methodology was employed. Data were gathered through document survey, interviews and observation. The study found that there was integrity in the ZOU examinations management system; the University instituted the necessary measures to deter and counter all manner of examinations malpractice. The study concluded that the ZOU examinations management system satisfied international best practice and was a model which could be recommended for adoption by other ODL institutions. The study recommended that ZOU should adopt the philosophy of continuous improvement to counter the threats of examinations malpractice posed by technological advances.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Zimbabwe Open University administers a single mode learner education system which is open and flexible. Since the learning mode is through self instructional study materials such as modules, CDs and interactive sessions during weekend tutorials and on internet, a lot of emphasis is placed on an intricate mix of formative and summative evaluation techniques which include, self study assessment assignments, tutor marked assignments, field trips, practicum, internship, presentations and end of semester face to-face final examinations. Nevertheless, in managing open and distance education, some functions such as course development, course presentations, teacher-student contact, use of communication media, student motivation and student evaluation for learning outcomes have to be planned (Fagbamiye,2000). These functions, to a large extent, determine the structure of administration in open and distance learning institutions. Thus, the task of administering examinations in open and distance learning programmes is unique in several respects due to many Regional Centres that are centrally controlled, and which serve as examination centres. For instance, the Zimbabwe Open University has ten (10) Regional Centres in Zimbabwe and the eleventh region which serves international and foreign students. Therefore, with many

students and Regional centres to contend with, the effective administration of examinations which are held simultaneously across the Regional Centres is usually a cumbersome exercise.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Examinations management is an integral process determining the credibility of qualifications awarded by any higher education institution. Literature on examinations management has been predominantly from the context of conventional institutions. Today the increased demand for education has outstripped supply by conventional institutions and ODL has been a viable alternative. There is therefore need for targeted research on ODL experiences in examinations management so as to sustain the relevance and growth of the ODL sector.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the level of integrity in examinations management process at the Zimbabwe Open University. This information is critically important for ODL as it would influence the manner examinations are administered in other ODL institutions given the leadership role that ZOU is playing in ODL in SADC.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following objectives;

- 1) To assess the extent to which benchmarks identified in ODL literature are valid for the Zimbabwe Open University.
- 2) To explore the critical activities of the examinations management process in open and distance learning.

1.4 Research Questions

The paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) Are the examination management benchmarks identified in literature valid for the Zimbabwe Open University?
- 2) What are the critical activities of the examinations management process in an open and distance learning sector?

1.5 Justification of the Study

The Open and Distance Learning sector has been experiencing growth in student numbers as well as preference by governments due to its cost effectiveness in delivering education to a large number of people as well as in remote areas. The biggest challenge to the growth and relevance of ODL has been its ability to manage a credible examinations management system. Examinations are the most important part of the student administration process hence the study will add information that will help enhance the credibility of the open and distance learning sector. The study explores the Zimbabwe Open University examinations process to establish whether it satisfies the criteria for international best practice. The information is important in the continued development of the ODL University towards its vision of being a world class open and distance learning university.

1.6 Delimitations of the Study

The study focused on the examinations management process in the open and distance learning sector only. The geographical spread of the research was limited to the National Centre and Regional Centres of the Zimbabwe Open University.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

The study was focused on one ODL institution only but the results are supposed to be applicable for many ODL institutions. The credibility of the study, however, was high regardless of the limitations. Rigor was enhanced in the study through the use of multiple sources of data.

2.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

According to the American association of Higher education, (AAHE, 2014), assessment through examinations is a systematic process to gauge achievement of specified set goals in a program or a course. Key processes in the management of examinations include planning, organisation and administration of the examinations. A lot of research on examination management, points to unacceptable proportions of unethical examination practices (Igwe 1990). With technology the level of sophistication, is continuously upgraded with the intention to give undue advantage to oneself or another before, during and after the examination (Igwe 1990). Breaches may occur at any stage, hence the need for rigorous systems to prevent infringement at test construction, custodianship of question papers, administration of examinations, marking, results processing up to publication of results and post publication. Umaru (2005) also noted that examination marking malpractices may adversely affect the process of learner assessment. Ogunji's conceptual Model shows the candid link between Unethical Examination Management Practices (UMEP) and examination malpractice. The model aptly sums up the perpetrators and the methods used to destroy the integrity of examinations. Literature on examinations malpractice as reviewed above shows the major sources and forms of examinations malpractice. An examinations administration system should therefore be tailored to minimize the prevalence of all the forms of examinations malpractice through learning, adaptation and continuous improvement as the challenges to examinations management change.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative research methodology. A case study research design was used with the Zimbabwe Open University examinations management process being the case under study. Data were gathered through document analysis, interviews and observation. The main document used in the data generation process was the Academic Registry Procedure manual. The researcher also analysed Quality Assurance Department reports on the conduct of examinations and the Examinations Management Committee meeting minutes at National and Regional level. The researcher also reviewed reports generated during examinations at the various examination centres used by the University. The sample for the interviews was made up of five employees of the University who participated in the examinations management process. Data presentation and analysis was done through a narrative. Credibility of the study was enhanced through triangulation of methods.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 Management of Examinations

The administration of examinations at the Zimbabwe Open University is a lengthy process in terms of logistics, personnel and financial outlay. Critical activities include question paper development; printing and packaging; distribution of examination papers to Regional Centres; storage of examination papers in the Regional Centres; writing examinations; collection of examination scripts from the regional centres, sorting and creating examiner packages, delivery of examination scripts to Faculties; administration of the marking exercise; Capturing of assignment and examination marks; processing of semester examination results, publication of examination results, and finally the despatch of examination results to the Regional Centres and also availing them on line.

4.2 Question Paper Development

The study revealed that the examination development process was initiated at Faculty level where course experts set enough examination items to compile three question papers in any one setting session. An item bank is also developed in the setting sessions. The rationale of the team approach is to promote capacity building through the sharing of expertise and on the bigger picture to ensure that the qualifications obtained through distance education carries the same credibility as the one attained through the conventional universities. The questions are brainstormed and submitted to the Academic Registry Department in draft form. The typing is done centrally in a high security office managed by the Academic Registry Department. The proof reading and editing of question papers is done by course teams in a secure and conducive environment until the papers are certified camera ready. The question paper proof reading tracking form is completed at all times Faculty personnel interacts with question papers. This is done to guard against leakages at institutional level and also encourage the production of report attesting content and construct validity of the question papers. The study revealed that the vetting of the question papers is done by external examiners who further validate the accuracy of the questions, ensure that that the final papers meet the specification content and assessment objectives and confirm that there is a good balance of questions. In question papers where students have to choose between questions, the ZOU system is designed to ensure that the permitted combinations provide for coverage of a similar balance of content and assessment criteria. The process includes peer review by course experts from other higher education institutions (external examiners) to ensure comparability, validity and reliability of the assessment instruments. In all the processes, quality assurance reports are generated. After receiving the papers from the External Examiners, the Academic Registry department invites the Chief Examiners to review and incorporate External Examiners' suggestions and then certifies the papers ready for mass production by an external high security printer.

4.3 Printing and Packaging of Question Papers

The study revealed that the process of printing and packaging question papers was guided by registration statistics; question papers were mass produced and packaged by a high security printer. Tamper evident plastic bags with a transparent window showing the programme, course code and narration were used to package question papers. Using internal security, the

question papers are collected from the printer and stored in a Chubb strong room which was used strictly for examinations material storage. The Academic Registry distributes examination question papers to the Regional Centres with the assistance of the internal security department.

4.5 Storage of Examination papers in Regional Centres

The study revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University adopted the Cambridge International Examination Syndicate question paper custody requirements at Examination Centres to benchmark question paper storage facilities. The ZOU National Centre and all Regional Centres have secure storage facilities for examination materials which are either Chubb Safe or secure rooms solely reserved for examination question paper storage. The storage facilities have solid reinforced doors with strong secure or heavy duty hinges or security lock coded keypad locks or electronic security locks or two course brick cabinets with reinforced concrete roofs. The University policy requires that two or three different key holders should be present in order to access the room. No question papers are stored in a portable safe or a room with windows which are easily accessible from outside. Access to these materials is in accordance with the Zimbabwe Open University examination conduct specific instructions.

4.6 Conduct of Examinations at Regional Centres

The study revealed that the Academic Registry department was responsible for assessing Examination Centres in the Regional centres to ensure that examinations at all the regional centres are conducted in secure and conducive environments as suggested by Nwana (1999). Regional Centre inspection reports are generated before and during examinations in line with best practices in the management of examinations. The reports are used to review the process and make improvements. As part of security mechanisms, the study revealed that Regional Centres were not allowed to photocopy question papers. The adequacy of question papers was therefore the responsibility of the Regional Director, the Centre Supervisor, in writing on the Question Paper Despatch and Receipt Form. No student is allowed to take examinations in courses not registered for. The study revealed that examinations system at the University was also localized at Regional Centres though it was coordinated from the National Centre. Each Regional centre has an Examinations Management Committee chaired by the Regional Director which manages the conduct of examinations. The “Examinations Management Procedure Booklet” clearly enunciates the rules and regulations governing the conduct of examinations and the role of the Regional Centres in terms of administrative demands and levels of confidentiality expected, before during and after examinations. The committee also draws up an invigilation time table to monitor absenteeism, lateness. The Chief Invigilator is expected to induct other invigilators and monitor all examinations from start to finish. The Zimbabwe Open university staff and students share information on examination ethics all the time, an approach Onyechere (1996), referred to as the virtuous approach as stated by Hinman (2000). In this approach codes of practice are availed to students and staff. This is augmented by the creation of environments where cheating does not take place which is the preventive approach, Hinman (2000).

In the event of the detection of malpractice in the process, the study revealed that the University used that police approach (Hinman, 2000) where sanctions are applied depending on the magnitude of the infringement. Sanctions include nullification of results, suspension

for two years and even dismissal. The “Student Disciplinary Procedures” succinctly detailed in the Zimbabwe Open university Act show the steps to be followed. To eliminate impersonation or “towing contractor” as put by Alape and Okoya (2005), registered students only are allowed into the examination room upon production of a “Confirmation of Registration” showing the student’s photograph, student bio-data, course(s) registered for, course examination dates, examination session and a current student identity card , passport or national identity card which has a photograph. Every student has to complete an examination attendance slip with provision to enter the serial number of the answer script stationery used, every time they take examinations. According to Anan (2005), examination scripts may be switched or substituted or torn only to complain of lost scripts. To counter this, all answer script stationery is serialised and no student is allowed to take anything out of the examination room. Substituted scripts will definitely be out of synch with the marked attendance register and attendance slip serial number entry and the issued answer script stationery serial range at the beginning of the examination.

4.7 Invigilation

The Examination Management Procedure Booklet clearly expounds the role of the invigilator and the rules and regulations governing invigilator conduct. Course Invigilators complete Course Attendance Registers in duplicate thirty minutes into the examination. Each invigilator is in charge of thirty students. The Chief invigilator ensures that no invigilator engages in activities that interfere with examination vigil. For candidature less than thirty, there should be a minimum of two invigilators, for candidature in excess of thirty; a ratio of 1:30 is applied. No tutor is allowed to invigilate their course.

A register of supervised visits to the convenience rooms is kept and submitted together with the examination scripts at the end of the examination. At the end of the examination, examination answer scripts are collected while students are seated. Candidate’s names and signatures should not appear on the answer scripts. The scripts submitted should tally with the number marked present on the attendance register. The study revealed that students at ZOU sat according to preprinted examination attendance registers. Students were made to sit on pre arranged seats to prevent collusion aided by sitting in strategic positions leading to the creation of “power houses” meant to facilitate the exchange of information. A distance of 1.5m was also allowed around every student in the examination room. No student is allowed to bring unauthorised material into the examination room as they may smuggle notes in the form of what they call “cribs, Compact Disks or Micro chips”. No technological gadgets are allowed into the examination room at ZOU as these enable the discreet importation of information into the examination room.

4.8 Collection of Examination Scripts and Creation of Examiner Packages

At the end of the examination, the invigilators collect answer scripts by course. The scripts are arranged in the numerical order in sync with the attendance register. The invigilator ensures that all scripts are identifiable by accurate Personal Identification Numbers. All the examination materials are submitted to the Regional Director by the invigilator and signed for by both parties. The Regional Director submits everything to the Faculty and also submits one copy of attendance register to Academic Registry. Academic Registry collects scripts from the Regional centres.

4.9 Sorting of Scripts into National Order

The sorting of scripts into national order is done by Examination Clerks under the supervision of the Manager examinations. This entails arranging scripts in national order by course using a computer generated, Course Attendance Register and the Attendance Slips. The availability of a script is confirmed by placing a tick on a corresponding Personal Identification Number on the computer generated score sheet. Examiner packages are created guided by the Marker Apportionment drawn up by the Faculty using course registration statistics. The total number of Personal Identification Numbers with ticks on the score sheet represents the number of scripts. The ticks help to minimize mark transcription errors from the script to the score sheet. Errors in Personal Identification Numbers as captured by the students are corrected using the attendance slip. Where challenges are encountered scripts with issues are batched together and entered on the problem scripts schedule since some students may deliberately capture wrong details on their scripts. The apportioned scripts are dispatched to the Faculty in anticipation of marking together with schedules detailing what constitutes the Examiner Packages. These schedules are used by the Programme Leaders and the Faculty Administrators to account for the scripts at the end of the marking exercise. The candidature determines the number of days required for completing the marking exercise for a particular course.

4.10 Administration of the marking exercise

The coordination of marking is purely an academic function managed by the faculties of the University. For consistency in marking, standardised marking guides which outline the scoring system or rubric for grading students' responses are used. The standardization is done during the marking coordination meeting. This helps to set objective, explicit and consistent criteria for rating student performance. The examination scripts, together with marking guides or solutions are distributed to the markers by the Programme Leader in liaison with the Chairperson. The name of the marker, number of scripts allocated to the marker and the score sheet is recorded in writing by the team leader.

The Chairperson in consultation with the Programme Leader appoints a moderator or team leader for each group of markers. The moderator is an expert or authority in the course or subject area. At least ten percent (10%) of the scripts marked by each marker is moderated and all scripts with marks below the grade threshold are remarked to confirm the mark. Moderation is meant to enhance the dependability of results. At the end of the marking exercise, the team leader submits his or her report to the Chairperson. The report covers the quality of marking and of the examination paper, compliance of the examination paper with the module or syllabus, quality of response by the candidates and any recommendations deemed necessary.

4.11 Processing of Results

Coursework and examination scores data are uploaded onto the database at the National Centre. Checklists are printed for data validation using computer generated Regional Coursework Score Sheets, individual Assignment Submission Forms and Examination Score sheets. The Departmental Chairperson further validates the data leading to the printing of boards. The Chairperson convenes a Departmental Board Meeting, attended by all lecturers in

the department, to discuss the results of the students and pass any relevant resolutions guided by the programme and University regulations. The Chairperson ensures that any anomalies identified during the deliberations of the results are promptly corrected. Using the Departmental Board minutes, the Faculty Dean convenes a Faculty board meeting. A copy of the minutes and results signed by the Dean is forwarded to the Director, Academic Registry, for the convening of the Senate Sub-Committee meeting on semester results. The Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic Affairs) convenes the Senate Committee on the ratification of results which is attended by Deans and Chairpersons. Once ratified the Director Academic Registry has the responsibility to facilitate the publication of the results, printing and despatch of individual result slips to the Regional Centres. Results are also availed on line.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The paper highlighted some procedures that are followed in managing examination at the Zimbabwe Open University. The exercise starts with examination development, printing and packaging, distribution of examination papers to Regional Centres, writing of the examinations, delivery of the examination scripts to Faculties, sorting of scripts into national order, administration of the marking exercise, capturing of examination marks, processing of semester examinations and the publication of results. The study concludes that the Zimbabwe Open University examinations management system satisfied the requirements for international best practice in examinations management. There were therefore no major reports on examinations malpractice that threatened the integrity of the institution. The study however noted that examination malpractice evolved with changes in technology, the ODL institution therefore should adopt continuous improvement as a philosophy so as to maintain the higher standards it had managed to attain. The study also concludes that the University has not been able to be fully competitive on international markets because of the inadequacy of the University's ICT competencies in administering assignments and examinations online.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the aforementioned findings and conclusions, the study makes the following recommendations;

6.1 The University should invest modern technology to detect microchips and other electronic devices that could be used to smuggle illegal material into the examination room. The University should develop capabilities to scan students as they enter and leave the examination room.

6.2 The University should develop competencies to administer the submission and marking of assignments and examinations online in order to effectively serve international markets.

6.3 The University should collaborate more with students and other stakeholders, communicating more frequently to conscientise them of the expectations of the University and how they can also improve compliance to the expectations of the University and maintain the credibility of the University.

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