

Quality tutorials in open and distance learning: Exploring experiences of Zimbabwe Open University students

Vitalis Chikoko¹ and Chrispen Chiome^{2*}

¹Kwa-Zulu Natal University, South Africa.

²Office of the Vice Chancellor, Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe.

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ABSTRACT

Quality in distance higher education is one of the main concerns among institutions today. This study sought to explore students' experiences with quality tutorials in ZOU an open and distance education institution. The study employed the descriptive survey design and generated both quantitative and qualitative data using a questionnaire with both open-ended and closed items. A sample of 189 students was selected from a population of 1500 returning students using the purposive sampling technique. Data was presented in simple frequency tables and analysed thematically. The study found out that generally students were satisfied with the arrangements for tutorials as communication came on time and tutorial rooms used were seen as conducive. Students expressed dissatisfaction with the ability of their tutors to promote active adult students' participation, inconsistency in lecturer attendance, poor quality tutorial package, waning commitment, economic hardships and the failure to use modern technologies in tutorials. The study recommended the taking of urgent, bold and decisive steps to train tutors on adult and distance education methodologies and the use of modern technology in teaching. Further research need to be done on the quality of a tutorial package for distance learners and motivating adult learners.

Keywords: Quality, tutorials, students, open and distance learning.

*Corresponding author. E-mail: chrischiom@yahoo.ca.

INTRODUCTION

Since independence in 1980, higher education has grown at a spectacular rate in Zimbabwe. One of the greatest achievements is the establishment of the first premier distance teaching and learning university, the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). ZOU revolved from the University of Zimbabwe's College of Distance Education that was established in 1993. It was established through an act of parliament (Zimbabwe Open University act 1999). ZOU was tasked to ensure that tertiary education is accessible, affordable and relevant to the needs and aspirations of industry and society as a whole (ZOU 2001). Thus, the Zimbabwe Open University is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution whose mandate is to provide education to everyone who is keen to learn. It operates in a flexible manner. It is less restrictive and less prohibitive as compared to conventional institutions.

In its 2005 to 2009 strategic plan, ZOU has resolved to establish itself as a 'world class open and distance education university by 2009'. This vision is underpinned by a deliberate strategy to unlock value by pursuing quality educational provision. To achieve this vision and mission it means that the Zimbabwe Open University modes of service delivery must move towards World Class standards as well. In this case, quality processes appear to be the answer.

One core business of the Zimbabwe Open University is to provide face-to-face tutorials that compliment the modules that are provided to students on registration. Tutorials appear useful and indispensable to students. Tutorials facilitate the exchange of ideas and promote interpersonal relationships (Makoni, 2000). These tutorials therefore must be guided by the need to satisfy

and motivate clients so that they yearn for more and better quality education that makes them worthwhile stakeholders and collaborative partners in both public and private sectors of the economy (Tierney, 1998). To this effect ZOU's vision and mission are achieved if the clients it serves are satisfied and motivated to participate in the tutorials being dispensed. The extent of students' satisfaction will then act as a barometer, a yardstick and a benchmark against which world class can be measured.

The importance of tutorials in Open and distance Learning (ODL) has been further confirmed by a study by Chidakwa and Majoni (2005) who revealed that tutorials in the Zimbabwe Open University were very useful in assisting distance education students to interact with their peers and their course tutors. The study also recommended that the tutorials must continue.

Given this premise the million-dollar question is therefore, "are tutorials offered in Masvingo Region meeting the quality aspect expected of them by the students?"

This question is critical because quality service is what the customer says it is (Davies and West-Burnham, 1997). Students being the University's customers should be given an opportunity to relate their experiences with tutorials in the Zimbabwe Open University and demonstrate to what extent this critical service meet quality criteria.

There is a formidable body of research that denigrate students that come out of institutions that offer substandard service (Lillis, 2001; Annie, 2001; Burn and Finnigan, 2003). Thus, the tutorials offered by the Zimbabwe Open University must of necessity meet students' quality expectations. This is so to guard against the dangers of negative stereotypes from the wider society in the event that their expectations are not satisfied (Burns and Sinfield, 2004). Given this premise, it is critical to ensure quality in tutorials and this research is one small way of trying to fill that void.

Studies undertaken in the Zimbabwe Open University appear to point to the direction of quality tutorials as well. For instance, Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2007) found out that ZOU was growing at a tremendous pace. However, there were no matching resources to cater for the growing student population. The answer in such a case is to focus on quality. Another study was by Majoni and Chidakwa (2004) who found out that students were not completing their research projects on time due to a number of factors all of which are related to the issue of quality. Nyota (2004) found out that ZOU students are mature, some of them parents who are already in employment. Some of these students hold senior positions at their workplaces. Thus, these students expect nothing short of quality services. Further, Nyota (2004) pointed out that ZOU students come from a variety of professions and backgrounds. In this respect, they are well positioned to assess the quality of tutorials

offered by the Zimbabwe Open University.

Given this premise, it is clearly imperative that educational institutions continuously focus on quality processes and chief among the processes are tutorials. It is critical to ensure quality in tutorials and this research is one small way of trying to fill this void.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Here, we will look at the various factors that affect quality in tutorials. The University derives its mandate and legitimacy from the society through the provision of services and support that satisfy stakeholders (Kurasha, 2005). For this reason, stakeholder satisfaction is one of the strategic elements enshrined in the Strategic Plan 2005 to 2009, and the main focus is to delight all the stakeholders, students being in the forefront. This means if students are satisfied with their studies, they are likely to stay on and complete their degree programmes, and if they are not, they are likely to drop out and this negatively impacts on the University's goals and existence. As Tierney (1998) suggests, universities must therefore focus on students, listen to their needs and desires, and serve them in appropriate ways. One way to ensure students' satisfaction is to provide quality tutorials.

Tutoring policy in Zimbabwe Open University

The university has a tutoring policy enunciated in the New Students' Orientation Handbook (2005). With regards to weekend school tutorials, Chimedza in the New Student's Orientation Handbook (2005) challenges students to remember that when they come for the face-to-face sessions, they should not expect to be lectured but to be tutored. This is perhaps an area where students used to conventional systems may get lost, and misconstrue the whole purpose of tutorials. Thus, students may expect their tutors to dish out information especially in a third world country where reading materials are scarce. The dishing out of information may contravene the university policy, which discourage the jug and mug principle.

In trying to clarify the position of tutorials in ODL, Makoni (2000) says a tutorial refers to a small group-learning context that supports and extends learning offered through distance learning modules. As such, tutorials differ from lectures in that they provide opportunities for students to construct and refine their own knowledge by means of feedback from peers and more knowledgeable tutors. Thus, a quality tutorial in this case has a potential to involve students in the active process of constructing their own understanding, as opposed to regurgitating notes dictated in a lecture. This brings us to the next section on quality tutorials in an ODL context.

Quality tutorials in ODL

The main aim of tutoring is to provide the learner with effective academic support (Ndeya-Ndereya et al., 2003). Tutoring creates an opportunity for the learner to interact with the tutor and also with other fellow learners. The teaching and learning process at university is designed to be a dialectical engagement between tutor and student that involves talking, listening and speaking (Burns and Sinfield, 2004).

Orientation to tutorials is also a critical aspect of demystifying university education. Many universities have modules that are designed to introduce students to the forms, practices and processes of the institution as a whole and tutorials are no exception (Burns and Sinfield, 2004). With these listed elements in mind, the need for quality tutoring service at institutions such as ZOU Regional Centres becomes critical.

Quality tutorials have a number of benefits to students. Brown et al. (1997) describe these benefits as:

1. Making mature students feel welcome; and
2. Treating mature students appropriately.

In other words, service delivery especially in a university, as Davies and West-Burnham (1997) observe, is about doing things differently and trying to use the power of ideas to change the ways service is provided. In fact, as Davies and West-Burnham assert, the argument is to move away from the mass market of the 1990's and move towards a quality product approach aimed at student satisfaction as defined through the student perspective rather than from what Regional centres think they give. In other words, tutorial service delivery should be driven by what students judge to be of value to them. If this is not the case, students may be dissatisfied.

The quality of tutorials also arises from some of the factors that affect the staff that teach them. Brown et al. (1997) suggest such factors as:

1. Growing student numbers without commensurate growth of staffing.
2. An increasingly diverse student population.
3. The demand to be seen as cost-effective within frameworks more properly applied to commercial business than to educational institutions.
4. Increasing control by the funding authorities.
5. Staff who are often demoralised, stressed and overworked as they try to maintain the quality of what they do, while the circumstances in which they work are not all that conducive.

If such a situation exists in the Zimbabwe Open University, then tutoring services are also affected.

The vicious and virtuous circle

The virtuous or the vicious circle affects students'

progress and the quality of tutorials. Petty (2004) says success breeds success, through a virtuous circle. In this case once the learner experiences success, reinforcement occurs through praise, self-praise and peer approval. This will lead to self-belief and self-motivation and possibly more success. Vicious circle occurs when the learner experiences failure. The resultant self-criticism, lack of personal satisfaction lack of self-confidence and failure of self-esteem will lead the deterioration of work. If this is the case with students in the Zimbabwe Open University, this will affect the quality of tutorials.

Library services

An equally important service related to tutorials is library service. Library services are critical in distance education as they support tutorials. However, Maenzanise (2005), in the New Orientation Handbook citing Perraton and Creed argues that it is a tall order for the library service to try and satisfy such varying needs of a diversified clientele of mature people who know what they want, where to go, how to look for it and when to look for it. With a weak library service, quality tutoring is then indispensable.

Some related studies undertaken in the Zimbabwe Open University

A number of studies related to tutorials have been undertaken in the Zimbabwe Open University. Some of these are discussed subsequently.

One related study was on assignment management. Chiome and Mukeredzi (2006) found out that there was a marked drop in tutorial attendance by students of the Zimbabwe Open University. This shows that more attention should be paid to the quality of tutorials to enable an improvement in attendance.

Another study was by Chidakwa and Majoni (2005) on the role of tutorials in distance education. This study revealed that tutorials are indispensable. The content of tutorials helps to guide isolated students. This further reinforces the view that the tutorials must be of high quality if they are to serve this purpose.

Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2007) further studied on quality assurance in service delivery in the Zimbabwe Open University. Their findings were that resources do not match the growing student population. In this case, the quality of tutorials is affected. It must be borne in mind that these tutorials have been found to be useful. McIlroy (2003) says it is important to attend lecturers because the received information can be reinforced from other sources such as reading and seminars.

In view of the literature reviewed above, it should be realised that regional centres now experience growing numbers in many courses coupled with greater diversity

among the student population and their expectations (Nyota 2004). It therefore calls for more attention in transforming the way students are being tutored in a bid to satisfy student needs and demands. Failure to do that would result in student dissatisfaction and discontentment that would impact negatively on the overall attainment of the University vision of becoming a world-class institution.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives of the study

The study sought to explore the experiences of students in the Zimbabwe Open University's Masvingo regional campus on the quality of tutorials offered to them.

Statement of the problem

Quality tutorial is the cornerstone of university business. Students who come for weekend schools have only one need, the need to be tutored. Considering the distances they travel to attend the tutorial sessions the service, they get must meet their expectations. If they do not get this service they are disillusioned, dissatisfied and disturbed. Such dissatisfactions can threaten the existence of the university through dropouts and withdrawals. Students' dissatisfaction with substandard tutorials becomes a problem if it is there, hence the need for the university to investigate and interrogate its face-to-face tutorial service by asking the very customers to relate their experiences.

Research questions

The study generated the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of distance education students on the quality of tutorials offered in the Zimbabwe Open University?
2. Are there areas that need to be improved to ensure quality of the face-to-face tutorials?

Research design

The study was both quantitative and qualitative. The study was underpinned by a philosophical assumption embracing a post positivist belief (O'Leary, 2004; Denzin, 1997; Keller, 2001), underlining the need to view knowledge and reality as both subjective and objective and thus obtainable through multiple methodological approaches based on the concept of triangulation. The need for methodological integration was achieved through a self-administered questionnaire answered voluntarily by 189 students and the use of focused and narrative interviews (Flick, 2002). The interviews in this study were given prominence because they unite a high degree of openness and non-directivity with high level of concreteness. Thus, they appear superior to other interview variants (Hopf, 2004).

The research employed the descriptive survey design. 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.

Population of the study

The target population for this study was all the 1500 returning students for Masvingo Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University for semester one of 2007.

The sample

A sample of 189 returning students was extracted using the purposive sampling technique. Babbie (1993) point out that purposive sampling involves a conscious selection of typical subjects with particular characteristics and knowledge and understanding about the phenomenon being studied. The 189 selected subjects were believed to be knowledgeable and experienced in tutorials, as they had gone at least one semester. Consent was sought. Each individual who took part in this research was consulted and agreed on what data was to be collected and included in the research. The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of respondents was upheld and guaranteed in this research.

Data gathering

The instruments for data collection were the questionnaire and the interview. The questionnaire was preferred because it is cheaper to construct and administer, while the processing and analysis of data is less complex than in the case of observations (Hopkins, 1989). The interview was also used because it promoted a two-way communication. It also allowed the researchers freedom and flexibility to probe deeper into students' experiences with tutorials. This was possible because the content, sequence and wording were under the control of the interviewers (Cohen and Manion, 1994). The 189 students were given the questionnaire to complete and return. Twenty of these students were probed through interviews to clarify some interesting ideas generated or missing in the questionnaire. 200 questionnaires were administered. Eleven questionnaires were declared defunct after they were not returned on time.

RESULTS

Quantitative results

Bio data

Table 1 summarises the bio data of student respondents. One hundred and eighty nine returning students responded to the questionnaire on quality assurance in tutorials offered by the Zimbabwe Open University's Masvingo Regional Campus. The majority of these were from the education 100 (53%). There were also more male students than females 150 (79%). These results appear in line with the overall picture in the university, which has more male students than females.

In terms of the distance travelled, the majority of the students travel well in excess of 100 km 83 (44%) to come to the regional campus for tutorials. In terms of the distances travelled by students to attend tutorials, the study found out that the majority of the students encountered travel challenges considering the fact that they travelled distances well in excess of a hundred

Table 1. Biodata of respondents. N = 189.

| Attribute | Frequency | % |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|----------|
| Programme | | |
| Education | 100 | 53 |
| Natural sciences | 12 | 6 |
| Commerce | 54 | 29 |
| Social science | 20 | 11 |
| Arts | 3 | 1 |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 150 | 79 |
| Female | 39 | 21 |
| Total | 189 | 100 |
| Distance from the regional centre | | |
| Up to 10 km | 27 | 14 |
| 11-30 km | 18 | 10 |
| 31-100 km | 61 | 32 |
| 100+ km | 83 | 44 |

Table 2. Responses on distance education background of students. N = 189.

| Issue raised | Yes | | No | |
|--|------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| | F | % | F | % |
| Did you have any distance education background before coming to Zimbabwe Open University | 60 | 32 | 129 | 68 |

Table 3. Responses on costs incurred. N = 189.

| Responsibility area in which students incurred additional costs | High | | Low | | Nil | |
|--|-------------|----------|------------|----------|------------|----------|
| | F | % | F | % | F | % |
| Dependence at school | 126 | 67 | 48 | 25 | 15 | 8 |
| Dependence in institutions of higher learning | 90 | 48 | 21 | 11 | 78 | 41 |
| Travelling to tutorials | 150 | 79 | 33 | 18 | 6 | 3 |
| Accommodation costs when attending tutorials | 117 | 62 | 27 | 14 | 45 | 24 |
| Food costs when attending tutorials | 135 | 71 | 33 | 18 | 21 | 11 |
| Any other costs related to tutorials | 111 | 59 | 45 | 24 | 33 | 18 |

kilometres. This means the quality issue becomes an important agenda in the Zimbabwe Open University considering that students will expect value for their money after travelling all the way to attend tutorials.

Students' responses on distance education background

Table 2 presents data on the distance education background of the student respondents in this study. It is clear in Table 2 that the majority of the students in this study had no distance education background 129 (68%).

This scenario may mean that the students may struggle with the distance education mode of delivery. It also follows that the tutors must be well trained for them to motivate these students. It means that quality tutorials are important.

Responses on costs incurred

Table 3 presents data on costs incurred by students over and above the tutorial costs. The information contained in Table 3 clearly shows that ZOU students incur various costs related to and unrelated to tutorials. Chief among

Table 4. Responses on the experiences of students on the quality of tutorials in the Zimbabwe Open University. N = 189.

| Tutorial issue experienced | Agree | | Disagree | | Not Sure | |
|---|-------|----|----------|------|----------|-----|
| | F | % | F | % | F | % |
| Arrangements for tutorials are done on time | 135 | 71 | 39 | 21 | 15 | 8 |
| Communication on tutorials come on time | 117 | 62 | 45 | 24 | 27 | 14 |
| Transport to tutorial venue is available | 60 | 32 | 105 | 56 | 24 | 12 |
| Accommodation is readily available | 54 | 29 | 120 | 63 | 15 | 8 |
| There is easy access to ablution facilities during tutorials | 126 | 67 | 42 | 22 | 21 | 11 |
| The environment for tutorials is conducive | 135 | 71 | 48 | 25 | 6 | 3 |
| I attend all tutorials | 108 | 57 | 69 | 37 | 12 | 6 |
| I am punctual for tutorials | 102 | 54 | 75 | 40 | 12 | 6 |
| I actively participate in tutorials | 120 | 63 | 60 | 32 | 9 | 5 |
| I see the tutorials as helpful | 120 | 63 | 60 | 32 | 21 | 11 |
| The six hours a semester for tutorials is adequate | 78 | 41 | 108 | 57 | 3 | 2 |
| The timing for tutorials is satisfactory | 120 | 63 | 60 | 32 | 9 | 5 |
| Tutors are punctual for tutorials | 90 | 48 | 90 | 48 | 9 | 5 |
| Tutors are knowledgeable | 105 | 56 | 66 | 35 | 18 | 10 |
| Tutors come prepared for tutorials | 135 | 71 | 42 | 22 | 12 | 6 |
| The tutorials broaden my understanding | 105 | 56 | 78 | 41 | 6 | 3 |
| There is sufficient time to interact with tutors during tutorials | 120 | 63 | 51 | 27 | 18 | 9 |
| Tutors give adequate course overview | 141 | 75 | 57 | 30 | 6 | 3 |
| Tutors promote active student participation | 60 | 32 | 123 | 65 | 6 | 3 |
| The quality of tutorials is good | 72 | 38 | 114 | 60 | 3 | 1 |
| I endorse the face to face tutorials | 87 | 46 | 84 | 44 | 18 | 8 |
| Tutors sometimes use power point for tutorials | 23 | 12 | 166 | 88.9 | 0 | 0 |
| Tutors sometimes use flip charts for tutorials | 20 | 11 | 168 | 88.9 | 1 | 0.1 |
| Tutors sometimes use overhead projector | 10 | 5 | 179 | 95 | 0 | 0 |
| Tutors sometimes play video tapes in face to face tutorials | 5 | 3 | 180 | 95 | 4 | 2 |

these are transport costs affecting 79% (159) of the students in the sample and food costs accounting for 71% (135) of the students in the sample.

Responses on student's experiences with tutorials

Table 4 presents data on the experiences of students on the quality of tutorials offered by the Zimbabwe Open University. From the information in Table 4 a number of issues appear to emerge and these are discussed as follows:

Arrangements for tutorials: The students in this study were pleased by the arrangements for tutorials with 135 (71%) agreeing that arrangements for tutorials are done on time and 117 (62%) agreeing that communication for tutorials come on time.

Hardships associated with attendance: One major finding was that the students faced hardships associated with tutorial attendance. They cited availability of transport to tutorial venues 105 (56%) and they also disagreed that accommodation was readily available 120 (63%). This can be compounded by the fact that the

students who face these hardships have travelled in excess of a hundred kilometres to attend these tutorials.

The quality of the tutorial package: The students in the study scrutinised the quality of their tutorial package. They agreed that they were given an adequate course overview 141 (75%); interaction time is appropriate 120 (63%) and the timing for tutorial is good 120 (63%). In the same vein, they disagreed that six hours is sufficient 108 (57%) and that the quality of tutorials was good 114 (60%). Kelly 1991 is of the opinion that that an incentive system that rewards productive innovations and quickly eliminates bad ideas. If these ideas are put into practice, they might improve the quality of tutorials in the Zimbabwe Open University. Kelly 1991 went further to say that following the shift from industrial based to technological based economies, those who can access information, transform information and create information are substantially advantaged.

Tutor related challenges

There were also tutor related challenges that the students in this study cited. Some of these are that tutors are

knowledgeable 105 (56%) and they come prepared for tutorials 135 (71%). However, they were not happy with their tutors' punctuality 90 (48%) and that these tutors fail to promote active student participation 123 (65%). The distance education tutor must be on top of his job. The personal qualities identified in effective teachers are:

- a) A willingness to be flexible;
- b) Empathetic ability;
- c) Ability to personalise teaching;
- d) Cheerful and optimistic; and
- e) Emotionally mature. (Lawrence 1999: 30)

Distance education lecturers need to parade these characteristics in tutorials otherwise it would appear as if a bridge has been built between the tutor and the student.

Media for presentation

The media for presentation was also cited as an issue that affected the quality of tutorials in the Zimbabwe Open University. The students in this study disagreed that their tutors used gadgets to enhance the quality of their presentation. The following were the results of the disagreements: Use of power point 166 (88%); use of flipcharts 168 (88.9%); use of overhead projector 179 (95%) and use of video tapes 180 (95%).

Resources are critical in policy implementation. Successful leaders are effective in putting resources where they can make a difference (Louis and Miles, 1990). In the same vein, Fullan (1991) says it is not only material resources that are important, but also time and energy for lecturers to plan, share and act.

Handling adult learners

One major issue that came out of this study is the issue of handling adult learners. The students in this study disagreed that tutors promote active student participation 123 (65%) and they fell short of endorsing the face-to-face tutorial with 87 (46%) endorsing them. A number of skills and personal qualities that are of great value in working life can be developed through self-reliance and independence, self-awareness and self-management (BTBC, 1995). These cannot be developed by methods that encourage passivity and acceptance of passed-down knowledge, as was the case in this study.

Qualitative results

Further details were sought from interviews and open-ended questions in questionnaires where several issues to do with the students, experiences with quality tutorials

were raised. Some of the pertinent issues are discussed as follows:

Settling pressing academic issues

It emerged that students want pressing academic issues to be addressed in tutorials, which was not the case at the moment. Some supporting statements were:

'I want enlightenment on burning issues.'

'I have pressing academic issues I want addressed in tutorial sessions yet tutors come to tutorials just to show off.'

'I come for tutorials in order to get guidance but at times it is not forthcoming.'

'I want an in-depth understanding of courses.'

The pressing academic issues raised in this study may be a result of the way students are tutored. Schneider (2000) says more individualised attention is needed because students have individual not group problems.

Economic hardships as a constraint to attendance

A major impediment to tutorial attendance was cited as economic hardships. This is so as this research was contacted at a time when the country was reeling from economic hardship, hyperinflation, and shortages of basic commodities and shortages of both local and foreign currency. To make matters worse, the majority of these affected students live in excess of 100 kilometres from the regional campus.

'I miss some tutorials because I can not afford to attend.'

'I simply have no bus fare.'

'I would rather chase for scarce commodities when I come into town than attend tutorials.'

'I have cash problems. More so, it is now too expensive to travel.'

'The monster called inflation is breathing hard in my heels.'

The situation obtaining in this research is such that it can threaten self-esteem in tutors. Lawrence (1999) cites main threats to teacher self-esteem. These range from possible feelings of inadequacy stemming from poor job satisfaction, doubts about the career chosen and problems encountered in the system.

Lecturer absence as a factor affecting quality

The absence of some lecturers for tutorials was cited as a factor that compromised quality in the tutorials offered by the Zimbabwe Open University. Some substantiating

statements are:

'Sometimes I find tutors missing when I travel all the way for tutorials.'

'Some tutors do their part only if they are there.'

'Sometimes I benefit that is if I am lucky to find my course tutor there.'

Waning commitment

This research was conducted when the country was facing severe economic challenges. These had seriously impacted on the commitment of some of the otherwise trusted academics. Some substantiating statements were:

'The zeal and enthusiasm in our lecturers is dying out.'

'Some lecturers who used to give us notes are no longer doing that.'

'These days, it is difficult to get adequate attention from our poorly paid lecturers.'

'We see some of our lecturers coming for tutorials on foot.'

Tied to lecturer absence was the case of waning commitment from some of the most committed and faithful lecturers whose commitment was now negligible. This happened at a time when the rate per hour for lecturing was pegged at Z\$100 000-00 which was US\$0.008, a fraction of a cent in US\$ terms.

Preference for lecture method ahead of tutoring

The students in this study want their lecturers to lecture them and not to tutor them. These statements from the interviews appear to support this stance:

'We want our tutors to deliver information for use when I am on my own.'

'I want enrichment over and above what I get from the module.'

'I just come to get more information on the courses I do.'

The need for lecturers ahead of tutorials appears to defeat the philosophy underpinning distance education in which independence of the learner is emphasised (Annie 2001).

Areas needing urgent improvement

Students, through open-ended questions, were also asked to suggest any area they strongly felt needed urgent improvement. They had this to say:

'Improve library facilities so that we get the necessary supporting literature'

'Tutors must seriously consider students with problems and teach beyond timetabled sessions.'

'We need permanent classrooms where we can discuss freely beyond the lectures.'

'Fix weekend schools on month end.'

'Staff must be courteous and respect us as professionals.'

'University transport for both tutors and students to week-end tutorials must be availed.'

'Improve on course delivery techniques in tutorials.'

CONCLUSIONS

Basing on the findings discussed above, this research reached the following conclusions:

The organisation of tutorials that received overwhelming thumbs up from the students will go a long way towards ensuring quality of the Zimbabwe Open University tutorials.

The research also concluded that, irked by the absence of lecturers, some impatient students might elect to opt out of the system.

The study found out that students in the Zimbabwe Open University are happy with the arrangements for their tutorials but they face hardships associated with attendance.

Economic hardships have affected the quality of tutorials in the Zimbabwe Open University as tutor get negligible salaries and the students fail to get money to travel in order to attend the tutorials

The tutorial package has been seen as of low quality as tutors are sometimes absent from tutorials or they come late in the case that they attend. Teaching resources are core to the work of distance education lecturers but these were not availed to tutors. Another important finding was that media for presentation of tutorials should be integral to the work of distance education lecturers.

There was waning commitment from the underpaid lecturers who were victims of the economic melt down.

Lecturers used the tutorial method when their students preferred the lecture method.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having made these conclusions, this research put forth the following recommendations from the findings of this study:

1. There is need for a well-structured tutorial policy that is supported by a package that ensures quality in open and distance learning.
2. The university must benefit from the rapid technological developments. More funds should be made available to provide tutorial gadgets such as projectors and video tapes so that lectures are more interesting and meaningful. This will ensure that as the university adopts

advanced technology for pedagogical purposes, lecturers are up to date with such developments.

3. Library resources should be adequate for students and lecturers in each region to ensure adequate availability of resources required for preparation for tutorials and lecturers' research activity.

4. There must be put in place systems for continuous improvement of the competencies of lecturers. Some universities have established learning centres where lecturers continuously receive training to keep them abreast with developments in technology and the skills required to manage the open and distance learning multimedia delivery modes.

5. Lecturing staff must display the image of the university and as such need training in handling adult learners. Weekend tutorials must take cognisance of the fact that adult learners possess a body of knowledge, experience and expertise that they bring into the university. Hence, they need better treatment and that tutorials must meet their expectations.

6. Weekend schools must be pencilled for month-end to increase working students' convenience.

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