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RESEARCH ARTICLE

GETTING IT RIGHT IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Most lecturers and other staff members, whose training and experiences are anchored in the conventional system of education, are often employed in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions. The employees are expected to deliver quality goods at all levels. Questions may be raised as to what ODL expertise these practitioners rely on to accomplish their daily activities in an ODL institution, and to what extent the ODL system is credible under such operations? A cross sectional survey was carried out in this study. The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding from employees, on how they manage to achieve effectiveness and efficiency in their current jobs as they endeavour to enhance ODL quality and credibility. A purposive sample was drawn from a population of senior employees who have been working in the institution for five years and below. Data was analysed manually and results presented in frequency tables and descriptive statistics.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

The concept of distance education is a growing phenomenon in developing countries. Most lecturers and other staff members, whose training and experiences are anchored in the conventional system of education, are often employed in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions. The employees are expected to deliver quality services at all levels. One wonders as to what ODL expertise these practitioners rely on in order to efficiently and effectively accomplish their daily activities in an ODL institution. Whilst distance education has varying features of historical background from country to country, the basic concepts remain the same and are comparable. In general, and practically in every aspect, institutions are faced with challenges that are unique to their own settings. It is commonplace knowledge that distance education is not readily appreciated by many including those who teach on distance education programs. Staff development has been instrumental in bringing about change of view. The questions commonly raised about the credibility of distance education are variable. These could be categorized into those questions pertaining to administrative issues, questions related to the processes or

ways the distance education programs are delivered and then, questions related to the credibility of the product, that is, the graduates. From the administrative aspect, learners would want to know why they should embark on distance education as opposed to conventional type of education. There is an array of activities and processes a practitioner in an ODL institution needs to be trained on in order to fulfil the needs of the learner. This can only be achieved if ODL institutions consider the seriousness of staff development in ODL issues. The Distance Education Association in Southern Africa (DEASA) can be singled out as a vehicle that facilitates staff development in Distance Education issues through research, conferences and networking. Staff development for distance education practitioners enhances the tutor skills in producing learning materials that are interactive and are of high quality. In most instances, materials are developed from scratch and this takes time. Practitioners need to be trained on how to write relevant learning materials. The modules written need to be periodically reviewed and revised, in order to update and include latest and relevant information to the various courses.

Literature Review

Currently, there has been a shift to engage in virtual tutoring which is a learner support system that offers guidance and assistance to learner through Information Communication Technologies (Ndereya *et al.*, 2003). All this calls for staff development in the use of the technologies. As practitioners

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from conventional institutions come together to share their 'ignorance' as they plod in Distance Education (DE), most of them need to learn new issues such as learner support, the role of assignments in distance learning, guiding students to search for information for research as well as the importance of student and peer evaluation. Staff development is critical to distance education practitioners as it gives knowledge on the basic issues related to DE. Knowledge of what technology can do to influence distance education is vital. The availability of trained personnel in distance education compliant communication technology cannot be ignored. The use of technology requires that the tutor and the learner be trained, if effective communication and learning activities are to effectively and efficiently take place. In an example of a computer or video conferencing, the student and tutor are networked. The learner can hear as well as see and talk to the tutor. Learners develop communication skills and, play more active roles in guided construction of knowledge. Modesto and Tau (2009). It is only through training that tutors can appreciate what technology can do to improve the scenario in distance education. Modesto and Tau (2009) cited that, a fulfilling tomorrow can be achieved by creating an ideal today. Distance education setting is a challenge to many developing countries. Before becoming a success story, distance education institutions are faced with an uphill struggle, in terms of fighting stigma and discrimination. The transition from known to the unknown is not easy. Members of communities who trained and are used to the conventional type of education, fail to appreciate distance education, and are likely to ask questions regarding credibility of distance education. The researchers set out to understand the best ways an ideal situation could be created towards the attainment of distance education credibility. An important aspect to bear in mind is on the qualifications of the drivers of distance education programmes. Stakeholders may want to know who the staff members are, what qualifications they hold and where they received their training in ODL.

Currently there is some considerable evidence that ODL practitioners are themselves not ODL experts. All these aspects are considered in order to assess credibility of the administrative aspect of the distance education system. ODL drivers need to be conversant with issues related to acceptability of qualifications, programme sustainability as well as programme evaluation in order to enhance good project management (Thorpe, 1993). Questions related to the delivery process revolve around duration of the programs. Perceptions might be that students on a distance education program should take longer to train than those in conventional institutions because of the limited contact time they have with the tutor. What quality product do modules and face-to-face tutorials bring? The issue of whether there is Adequate interactivity between the learner and the tutor in distance education is also raised. It has however emerged that most of these fears are a result of lack of information about distance education. Questions are also asked on whether 'schools without walls' can really produce quality products. Again on the delivery processes, questions may be asked on whether there have been any success stories on distance education. Questions related to the ability of distance education institutions to address national challenges, are also raised. Doubts on the ability of DE

management to plan for successful future for the institutions and programmes is always of great concern. Whether the institutions have the capacity to address their challenges is a critical question that may also be asked. To develop a DE system is to start or cause it to exist and make it grow. Developing something involves planning for it (Modesto and Tau, 2009) Again questions are asked on the capacity of implementers to effect institutional growth and development. In this case, project evaluation, is important at whatever stage. Questions related to whether product offered is of quality can best be addressed through evaluation as it will reveal the effects of our own actions so as to judge their value, Thorpe (1993).

In terms of the products, questions are asked on comparability of graduates from distance education to those from the conventional institutions. Questions raised seek to know whether distance education graduates can perform to the same level or better. There are programs that train on practical skills competencies. Questions raised for such programs relate to whether graduates receive adequate exposure, mentoring and hands on experiences in their subject area. There has always been a challenge in trying to satisfy the requirements for practicals in distance. Education especially for such programmes as the Nursing Sciences, Agriculture and Geography. Questions on whether the graduates are equally comparable on the job market are often raised. Whilst distance education has achieved to reach out to many people who might have missed the opportunity of going through tertiary education, a lot more needs to be done to educate practitioners and stakeholders. An awareness campaign might assist to reduce or remove stigma and discrimination against distance education graduates. The quality of distance education product is questioned by those who are not familiar with distance education. In an unpublished report where the B.Sc., Nursing Science Programme was evaluated from the employer's perspective, ODL trained nurses were reported to be excelling at work (Chitura, Mutowo and Mzengi 2013). More common questions come on the potential for research in distance education, and whether the findings can reliably be utilized for future planning purposes. However, no matter the number of questions people may ask about the credibility of DE, the onus is upon DE practitioners and the graduates to prove their worth.

Problem Statement

Most Open and Distance Learning Practitioners are not experts in ODL issues. The need for staff development in ODL cannot be over-emphasised if institutions are to improve on quality issues as well as enhance ODL credibility.

Aim

To establish how ODL Practitioners are equipped to effectively and efficiently manage their duties

Objectives

- Do ODL practitioners have any training in ODL
- What have the institutions put in place to enhance quality delivery in ODL
- How do institutions address issues of ODL Credibility?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cross sectional survey was carried out in this research to gain an understanding from employees on how they managed to achieve effectiveness and efficiency in their current jobs as they endeavour to enhance ODL quality and credibility. A purposive sample was drawn from a population of all employees who have been working in the institution from five years and under. The purpose of this research was to identify gaps so as to improve quality in ODL operations. A questionnaire was used to collect data. Consent was obtained from those who participated in the research. All information obtained was kept in strict confidence. Data was analyzed manually and results presented using descriptive statistics and frequency tables.

RESULTS

Twenty senior members participated in the research. Return rate was 100%. Age range of respondents was 30 to 60 years with 15 (75%) falling in the 50 to 59 age category. Some members who were involved in this study joined the institution as far back as 2010 and some as late as 2014

Table 1. Respondents with ODL training

Category	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
ODL trained	4	20
Not trained	16	80
Total	20	100

Table 2. Orientation to the job

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
On job experience	2	10
Reading about ODL	8	40
Attending ODL workshops	4	20
Shown around then 'thrown' into an office to do the job	1	5
Vicarious learning	1	5
Studying literature on ODL	7	35
'I learnt the tricks on the job'	1	5
Went through a formal orientation workshops shown around before getting down with business	10	50
The Dean and chairperson took me through some tour of what was expected of me in an ODL set-up	1	5

Table 3. Strategies used to meet job demands

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Planning, consulting, meetings & workshops	4	20
Make reference to job expectations	1	5
Conducting well planned tutorials and review modules	3	15
Reading and researching	6	30
Understanding team members and working with teams	2	10
Developing personal plans	4	20
Use of internet	1	5

Table 4. Challenges that hinder job performance

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of resources	20	100
Failure to meet deadlines	3	15
Failure to understand what ODL is all about	2	10
Role overload	1	5
Lack of exposure to ODL	5	25
Lack of support in terms of finances	1	10
Failure to meet client expectations	1	10

Table 5. Processes put in place to enhance ODL operations

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Use of the internet	11	55
Student orientation day	10	10
Face to face tutorials	15	75
Draft exam questions preview and moderation	1	5
Quality assurance of the module writing process	3	15
Training of module writers	4	20
Use of committees to execute tasks	1	5
Giving students feedback on assignments	4	20
Having regional libraries	12	60

Table 6. Suggestions to improve performance

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Tutor training in ODL	17	85
Internet use	20	100
Use of e learning	18	90
Reward for good performance	2	10
Have clearly defined roles	1	5
Hold ODL workshops to expose staff to ODL issues	7	35
Avail resources	13	65
Good orientation for staff and students	8	40

Only four of the respondents had received some ODL training (Table 1). From the responses above, it appears a variety of approaches were used for orientation. However the majority 10 (50 per cent) seem to have gone through the formal orientation programme (Table 2). The varied strategies used appear to indicate that workers are resorting to what they know best as individuals. There is need to standardize strategies (Table 3). The major challenge cited by 100 percent of the respondents was lack of resources (Table 4). From the above information, use of the internet and availability of regional libraries appear to be useful in enhancing ODL (Table 5). More than 80 percent are advocating for the use of e-learning, internet use and tutor training in ODL issues (Table 6).

DISCUSSION

From the above findings, ODL institutions seem to be faced with an array of issues that need attention. These include training of tutors in ODL issues, availing of resources and servicing the student. Keegan (1996) cited that, institutions joining ODL systems need to be able to define the field of this new system and distinguish between the various components which include identification of the critical elements of teaching and learning, and building a theoretical framework which will embrace the area of Distance Education. This makes the need for ODL training critical as institutions cannot continue to be serviced by people who do not possess the requisite qualifications and may not be conversant with the ODL systems.

Recommendation

- All new recruits (lecturers) to the ODL system need to receive some form of training.

- Practitioners need to be exposed to other ODL institutions.
- Computer training and e-learning needs to be prioritised for both the learner and the lecturer
- ODL institutions need to be equipped with well stocked libraries in order that students and tutors enjoy searching for information.
- There is need to carry-out further research in the area of ODL with a larger sample size.

Conclusion

Open and distance learning has made a positive impact to the lives of people. Many people who did not make it to higher education have benefited. The gaps identified need to be addressed in a holistic manner if quality and ODL credibility are to be achieved.

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