Towards Achieving Quality in Distance Higher Education Teaching and Learning: Experiences from Zimbabwe

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Abstract: **Zimbabwe has managed to respond to the movement in support of UNESCO's lifelong learning concept and strategy that seeks to widen and deepen access to higher education through distance education initiatives. Despite the significant increase in students enrolling in distance education institutions, the gold standard of excellence that is sought by many nations has gradually been compromised. There are symptoms of a downward trend in terms of quality in open distance learning institutions. The qualitative study analysed major factors affecting the provision of quality distance higher education with specific reference to the Zimbabwe Open University, the sole provider of university distance education in Zimbabwe. The study focused on three Zimbabwe Open University regional centres in Zimbabwe. The paper seeks to identify major factors contributing to the declining quality of distance education and discusses measures that distance education providers in Zimbabwe can undertake in order to promote excellence for effective learning in the 21st century. The study established that several factors are affecting the quality of distance education in Zimbabwe. The lack of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) facilities at regional and district centres was a major hindrance to effective teaching and learning.**

Key words: **distance education, higher education, quality education, teaching and learning; Zimbabwe Open University**

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of the study was to examine major challenges facing distance education institutions in Zimbabwe in their effort to provide quality education. The philosophy of distance education is based on learner's independence theory, with the least necessary face-to-face interaction with the teacher, and the largest possible amount of individual learning materials, specially produced to simplify learning without contact with the teacher. These include a high degree of quality that is sent using media which permits both individual and group learning with as many learners as possible (Lassoued, Alhendawi & Bashitialshaaer 2020).

Zimbabwe like many other developing countries was affected by (Rikers 2006) the movement in support of UNESCO's lifelong learning concept and this resulted in the establishment of the Zimbabwe Open University (Corry 2008). Distance education is defined by Holmberg (1977 in Lassoued, Alhendawi & Bashitialshaaer 2020) as "a term that includes all methods of study and all levels of education that do not enjoy direct and continuous supervision by teachers attend with their students in traditional classrooms, but the education process is subject to planning, organization, and directed by an educational institution and teachers". Thus, the learner and the teacher are separated, but feedback occurs periodically. It is a system of teaching and learning which complements, where the conventional teaching and learning in which the teacher and the learner are mostly physically separated while communicating through printed materials, is replaced or supplemented. Distance education offers opportunities for those whose circumstances do not enable them to join formal university education, as teachers and learners are physically separated and interact through modern means of communication (Lassoued, Alhendawi & Bashitialshaaer 2020). The teaching approaches include "video or audio conferencing, electronic mail, radio, television, Internet, cable, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, wireless communications devices; or video cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, " (Malik, 2015). Mahlangu (2018) says in the twenty-first century, technological learning is expected to include digital literacies, collaboration, complex communication, and systems-thinking skills, among others. In order to be in line with online learning, higher education institutions are expected to offer courses and platforms that support the use of multidimensional abilities and skills and the use of media and technology as supportive systems in higher education. In general, there are three formats that ought to be followed in delivering courses, namely distance learning (DL), face-to-face (F2F), and hybrid (H) learning. There are seven principles for good practice that can be used in distance learning for higher education. These principles for good practice can be divided into the following, namely: encourages student-faculty contact; encourages cooperation among students; encourages active learning; gives prompt feedback; emphasizes time on task; communicates high expectations; and respects diverse talents and ways of learning. These guidelines represent a philosophy of quality distance-learning education that can be widely used for both face-to-face courses and online learning.

Distance education, like any other education system is required to effectively respond to the challenges of providing high quality and relevant education to the learners. Education of high quality is the most important investment for making progress towards the international social goals adopted by the world's governments. The policy on Education for All and education being considered a fundamental human right has been extended to higher education through distance education initiatives. In this paper we argue that the current focus of widening and deepening access to higher education is meaningless and insufficient for the higher education sector to contribute to the development of the individual and society. Quality distance education is a prerequisite condition for achieving the fundamental goal of universal education. Zimbabwe has managed to achieve significant quantitative developments in higher education through distance education programmes offered by the Zimbabwe Open University. However, little has been done to provide quality distance education. At the Zimbabwe Open University the process of teaching and learning involves the preparation of learning materials with clear instructions and varied, well-defined tasks that are dispatched to the students who work through the assignments over a given period. Feedback is in the form of assessed work and is sometimes supplemented by face-to-face tutorials at regional centres.

Quality Distance Education: An Overview

The idea of quality in higher education is relative and when interpreting the term on its own, it is devoid of meaning since there are multiple criteria of quality. It is impossible to assess the quality of an education system without first knowing what its goals are. An examination of the literature on quality *in* higher education shows that quality in higher education is a relative term where "educational institutions and students may hold different conceptions of quality. Quality is in the eye of the beholder (Harvey & Green, 1993; Brockerhoff et al, 2015), and it will remain an important challenge for higher education…Van Kemenade et al, (2008) define quality in terms of value systems and suggest four value systems on quality and quality management for analysis, namely: process control, continuous improvement, commitment and breakthrough" (Zuhairi, Raymundo & Mir 2020). They further state that quality may be culture context as there is no universal definition, model and practices of quality assurance in higher education. Each institution may have their own definitions, models, and practices that suit to their respective cultures and stakeholders' requirements. Zuhairi et al. (2020) argue that "Achieving quality teaching and learning is a complex endeavour involving multiple dimensions, including design of curriculum and course content, learning contexts, use of feedback, assessment of learning outcomes, learning environments and student support services (Henard & Roseveare, 2012). They further argue that a comprehensive and an integrated online student support system in mandatory to maintain the quality of open and distance learning. Elken

and Stensaker (2018 in Zuhairi et al, 2020) have conceived the idea of "quality work" in higher education and suggested multiple approaches to quality in higher education embracing the dimensions of management, work and quality.

That being the case, quality distance education needs quality course tutors who are adequately trained to teach at a distance. While tutors provide an important and necessary role in enhancing the quality of distance education by engaging students and providing important interactive learning experiences, their specific roles in distance learning are rather ambiguous and often ill-defined. Research in quality distance education has revealed that institutions providing distance education fail to provide adequate support or training for faculty. Rogers (2009) explains that "institutions failing to develop an adequate faculty and student support infrastructure will eventually encounter significant problems". The lack of pre-service training on distance learning platforms and instructional design can result in fragmentation of delivery and instructional strategies and expectations of the institution.

Overcoming Barriers to Offering Quality Distance Education

Mahlangu (2018) states that in order to "offer relevant learning experiences in distance learning, lecturers need to develop new skills and knowledge about technologies. Importantly, they should rethink their pedagogies and move beyond using technology as a 'fancy typewriter' and a presentation tool. It can be a challenge for lecturers and they may need appropriate professional training". Further, students' ICT competencies can be improved and their attitude to online learning influenced to be more positive. Mahlangu (2018) further argues that technology can have challenges with connectivity and the use of ICT can be a challenge for some distance-learning students. This is particularly true in developing countries like Zimbabwe where connectivity is a challenge especially in rural areas. This is a challenge telecommunications service providers need to work on to assist distance education institutions deal with the problem effectively.

Mahlangu (2018) identifies three major challenges that are experienced by distance-learning higher education institutions, namely:

1. The lack of appropriate business models and educational models, making the study material or open contents developed difficult to follow, and as a result, reducing the enthusiasm of learners in their respective studies;
2. The lack of any clear quality assurance mechanism, which may result in unclear standards and by consequence, poor quality of distance education; and
3. The lack of support from the relevant governing bodies, which may be exhibiting poor participation, brought about by a lack of appropriate human and infrastructure capacity.

Higher education institutions need to overcome these barriers to enable quality distance education. Also technology is rapidly changing, making it difficult for distance-learning institutions and students to keep pace.

Key Features of Quality Distance Education

Distance education is a planned learning activity involving the use of technology, and its design should provide the learners with interaction. Distance education has become a valid concept in which students could have access to education that they would not otherwise have available to them. Lassoued and others (2020) state that distance learning was historically largely organized to address the needs of adult learners who could not take years away from their professional lives for full time studies at a university. The cost of education was significant for such learners with families, moving to another town were not always an option. Other reasons for distance education were the need to serve distant rural locations. The first distance education institutions were established in the mid-nineteenth century. The University of London in 1858 granted degrees to students without the need to attend, followed by other universities. St. Andrews University in Scotland had a hundred centres around the world in 1877 – 1931, such as China and Kenya. The University of South Africa was the first university to introduce an entire distance education in 1946.

Lassoued and others (2020) further state that forms of distance education have become more varied with modern-day technological developments, starting with education by correspondence; then education on radio and television; the use of audio and audio-visual media; the use of the education phone, interactive video, and the educational computer; to the internet and the progress achieved in the field of education from a distance. The introduction of digital libraries and information systems helped the development of education from its collective form (within the classroom) to the individualization of education and has highlighted the importance of distance learning.

According to Jawada et al. (in Lassoued et al, 2020) distance learning is considered as new method of education for so many people, as it adopts methods that are different from those used in the traditional education system. There are many methods used to convey information to learners, instead of relying on one source, as is the case in traditional education e.g. flexibility in acceptance and learning, as the learner can receive his education at anytime, anywhere and expenditure savings, as this type of education is less expensive than other education systems. However, ICT-mediated distance learning lacks direct interaction and communication between the teacher and the learner, which is currently deficient in providing humanitarian and social expression, and it is unable to provide real expression. The system also accepts low grades compared to traditional education (Lassoued et al, 2020). This is a weak point. Other weaknesses include staffing

shortages and the need for training in the use of the internet by teachers and students and lack of technological infrastructure at universities. Students also need safe internet and high-quality speed internet and specifications, which leads to quickly access data and information. Hence, this leads to secure exchange between the network user and internet service provider specifically during electronic exams (Lasseoued et al 2020).

Learning at a distance is more of an individual phenomenon, more or less a private activity. In distance education, the quality of education depends on the quality of learning materials and instructional design or approach employed by the course designers. The materials according to Corry (2008) should arouse and sustain motivation in learners. Distance learning materials make learning more attractive by exploiting psychological characteristics of the learners such as individualizing instruction, providing clear explanations, comprehensive and continuous testing mechanisms, diagnosing learning difficulties, and providing constructive feedback (Bates, 1995). Another important characteristic of distance education systems is to utilize a quality management system which ensures continuous improvement of the process, product and learner satisfaction. Quality control systems suggest appropriate tools and models for effective distance teaching and helps effectively design and implement the learning materials. Quality management helps identify system flaws through systematic evaluation, both formative and summative (Bates, 1995). Process and summative evaluation can ensure the quality of distance education and evaluation of teaching can improve both the process and the outcomes of teaching and learning. Chickering and Gamson (1987) identify seven principles for good practice in distance education and these include the following: (1) Encouraging and maximizing contact between learners and teachers. Communication between learners and tutors is important to enhance motivation and involvement which facilitates learning. (2) Developing relationships and promoting collaboration among learners. Learners need to share ideas, resources and problems which promote effective higher learning. Quality distance education should promote collaborative learning. (3) Incorporating active learning. This involves application and problem-solving, research and simulation. (4) Giving rich and rapid feedback to learners. Learners should be able to assess their own learning and also get feedback from others about their strengths and weaknesses. (5) Time-on-task should be emphasised. The learning environment should be rich with reading, activities and interactions. (6) Setting high standards for learners' performance. Materials for distance learners should be challenging. Objectives should be clearly set for the learners to achieve. (7) Paying attention to individual differences and allowing opportunities for learning that acknowledges those differences. Distance learning materials should be organized in such a way that based on their experience learners find their own ways for approaching problems, completing tasks and

using learning materials. Learner characteristics, learning styles and learner challenges (Simonson, 2012) in distance education should be considered while designing learning materials.

Distance learning materials should help learners in the way they find most natural and effective. To a great extent the quality of distance learning depends on the united efforts and efficiency of all sub-systems, such as course development, learner support, management, learning processes, delivery mechanisms, evaluation and ICT sub-systems. Thus, high quality distance education systems ensure the integrity of learners' work and the credibility of certificates learners receive after successful completion of their programmes.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURE, STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

The theoretical viewpoint of this study resonates with the thoughts of Margaret Archer's (1995) Social Realist Theory of Structure, Culture and Agency to analyze how higher education in Zimbabwe integrates principles of quality, sustainability and development in teaching and learning. Critical realist theory according to Archer (1995) accepts that there exists a reality independent of our representation of it but acknowledges that our knowledge of reality is subject to all kinds of historical and other influences. The Social realist theory according to Archer (1995) comprises of three milieus of structure, culture and agency which are superimposed on each other. The structural milieu (Archer 1995) comprises of roles, organizations, institutional structures, systems, policies, committees, substructures and positional levels within the organization. Structure also includes the material conditions which would motivate action (Archer 1995, 1996, 2003). These structures constrain or enable the actions of the agent. Culture mainly focuses on the way of life of a specific group of people which encompasses behavior, beliefs, values, customs, relationships and special symbols. Agency refers to the personal and psychological makeup of individuals, their social roles and relates to the capacity people have to act in a voluntary way (Boughey 2012; Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1984; Boeren, 2019). In any setting Archer (2003) argues, there are structural, cultural and agential properties which play a role of enablers or containers. Specifically the concept of structure and agency according to (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1984; Boeren, 2019) is interested in the structure of social reality and the extent to which individuals are free to act within the structure. The figure below provides a general picture of the interplay of structure, culture and agency towards quality, sustainability and development in higher education.

Figure 1: A general picture of the interplay of structure, culture and agency towards providing for quality in higher education teaching and learning.
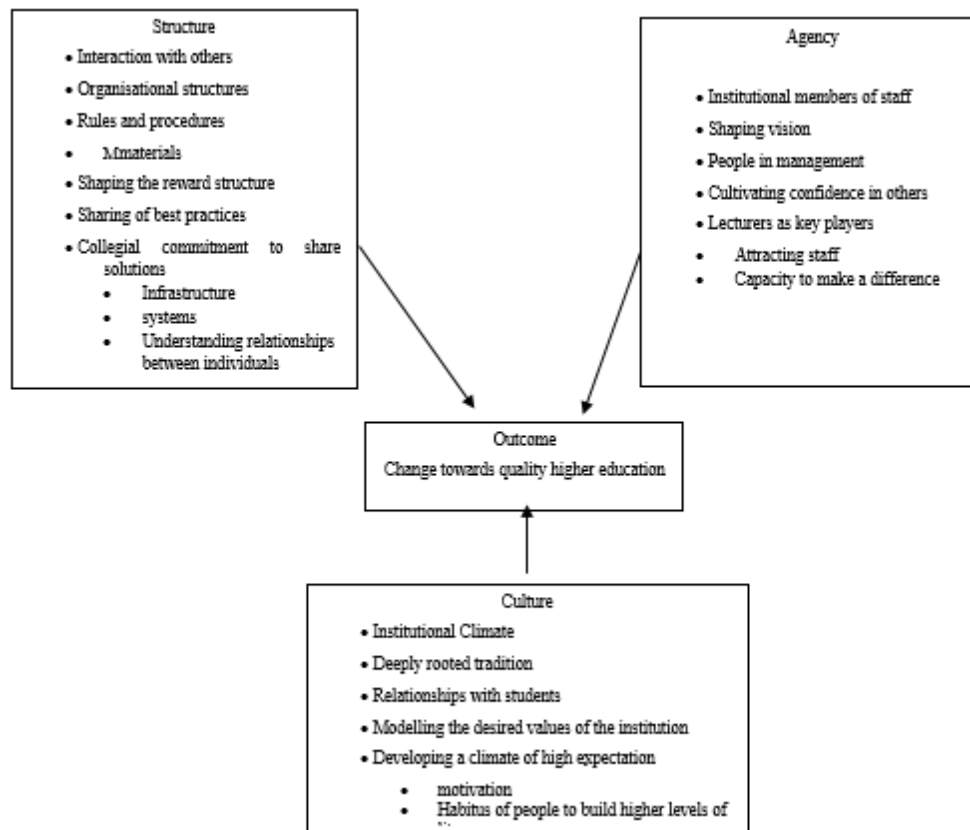
III. METHODOLOGY

The research design chosen for the study was the qualitative research which uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings such as the three regional centres of the Zimbabwe Open University. The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm that uses a qualitative approach as it was mainly concerned with exposing underlying casual mechanisms that are responsible for what happens and what is experienced at the three Zimbabwe Open University regional centres with specific reference to quality distance education. The research design involves a clear focus on the research questions and the information that most appropriately answers specific questions. Qualitative research methods are used to better understand any phenomenon about which little is known yet because they use a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings such as the real-world setting (Creswell 2007; 2009; 2014; Patton 2001; Silverman 2014). The qualitative research design allows for an intensive investigation and a deeper understanding that leads to rich interpretations (Pereira, 2012).

Sampling procedures for qualitative research are not rigidly prescribed (Silverman 2014) as in quantitative studies, thus purposive sampling strategies were used to identify participants for the study. As Patton (2001) shows, purposeful sampling seeks information-rich cases which can be studied in depth. The sampled participants were selected according to the aims and objectives of the study. In the selection process categories such as gender, status and role at the regional office were also considered. The total number of participants consisted of; three regional directors, three regional administrators, four lecturers of which one was from each faculty and three students selected from each region.

In this study, the interview technique formed an integral part of the investigation. The researcher's involvement and immersion into the sample discussing and recording information was a crucial activity for the qualitative study which yielded first-hand information from information-rich cases drawn from the three regional centres. To acquire trustworthiness and credibility in this study, diverse realities, such as multiple methods of searching and gathering data were used. Engaging multiple data sources of directors, lecturers and students strengthened the study findings. The researcher's prolonged engagement with participants and member checking led to diverse construction of realities. Creswell (2014) shows that qualitative researchers; use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry and the collection of data in a natural setting is crucial. Participants responded to nine research questions that are used as a basis for the presentation of findings. The study responded to the following broad questions:

- In what ways if at all is equitable use of content made available to distance learners?
- What are the major barriers to quality distance education?
- How does the infrastructure for distance education look?

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The qualitative analysis of data was based on the interview questions that were responded to by participants from the three regional centres. Interview data were transcribed and key themes from each transcript were captured through intensive reading of each transcript which is consistent with a grounded theory and qualitative content analysis (Charmaz 2006; Bryant and Charmaz 2007; Holton 2010; Creswell 2014). The process of transcribing involved intensive reading of transcripts and identification of key themes that connected the participants' account of their experiences. Evidence from the interview data indicated that the Zimbabwe Open University regional centres have the potential to offer quality education to the learners given the entry qualifications of students. The university has recorded significant progress in increasing access to higher education. Improving widespread quality distance education has been the priority of the Zimbabwe Open University. In-depth analysis of responses from participants established that the university is affected by low quality due to operational and methodological challenges.

4.1 How regional cntre ensure equitable use of content made available to all learners?

Most of the participants noted that they receive most of the materials required for their study during the beginning of each semester upon registration. It emerged that the three regional centres have district resource centres where students can access some of the materials they need for their distance learning. Data from all participants conclusively reveal that there is equitable distribution of learning materials from regional centres. Most of the materials are in the form of print media. One of the participants drawn from students had this to say about equitable distribution of learning materials, "We receive all modules, assignments and related course materials at the beginning of each semester, in some cases there are shortages of modules but not always, some modules have missing pages and objectives are not clear". While students receive learning materials in time, in some cases these are of poor quality with missing pages.

4.2 Regional centres receive training to teach at a distance?

All participants from the three regional centres indicated that since they joined the organization they have never received any training on distance learning and teaching strategies and the majority of tutors have not received pre-service training. A key feature of distance education is that tutors should receive continuous training on the changing context of distance education. It was established that tutors do not receive training and this to a great extent has compromised the delivery of

quality distance learning. Training sessions would improve student supervision at a distance.

4.3 Regional centres and ICT resources for teaching and learning?

In response to this question, all the regional centres had ICT resources. However, the district resource centres in two districts did not have internet connectivity. There is no ICT equipment in the two district centres. Distance education centres should be equipped with a variety of means and methods of accessing information to make the education resources accessible per their needs and convenience. While distance education is meant to democratize education as a resource and provide every citizen, district centres of the two Zimbabwe Open University regional centres were critically constrained by lack of ICTs. Some students were in remote rural districts where they could not receive information, not even on their mobile phones. A student in one of the rural districts who was enrolled for a Bachelor of Education Degree wrote, "my school is about one hundred kilometres from the district resource centre and we have completely no internet access in the school. To make matters worse even the cell phone communication network is not there, I leave my cell phone in town because this place is just too remote. I only access information relating to my studies when I go to town during month ends". It also emerged that rural schools do not have telephones, internet facilities and other related current communication technologies due to lack of connectivity. The study established that while there are adequate computers at the regional centres, there is a critical shortage of library facilities and computers for the distance learners at the district centres which are closer to the students. In one regional centre, a snapshot survey revealed that the region does not have internet access for lecturers and students despite a computer lab in that area. Basic communication infrastructure to make use of technologies is not in place in the district centres for the two regions.

4.5 Adequate interactivity provided between the tutors and the learners?

Responses to this question were varied, from an urban region which has district centres also located in the city centre; participants noted that they regularly interact with their tutors during weekends. This was directly the opposite from two regional centres where participants indicated that face-to-face tutorials with their tutors were a challenge. A participant who was far from one of the regions posited, "while weekend schools are scheduled for us. I have travelled to the regional centre which is one hundred kilometres for more than three times and I have failed to meet my tutors, I have decided to do it on my own". A senior student from another district centre indicated that tutors are not paid their allowances and that being the case they have withdrawn their services and students are encouraged to work on their own in groups. Elias (2012) suggests that instructors should make regular contact with

distance learners and they should stay involved. There is a need to put regular reminders and questions to students and pull in learner-generated content and contact. One thread that runs consistently through the study was that interaction is a vital element in a quality distance education instructional process. There is need to engage students in a meaningful way using multiple methods of communication and engagement. This element of tutor-learner engagement proved to be completely unfeasible in two regional centres due to both student and tutor absenteeism and the total lack of communication technology.

4.7 Apply the required knowledge, skills and techniques for teaching and learning?

Most participants indicated that they can hardly apply the acquired knowledge, skills and techniques since most participants were in schools with the majority teaching in primary schools where their knowledge in accounting and human resources management cannot be applied. A participant from one region who was referred to me through snowballing had responded as follows, "I completed a degree in counselling but at the moment I teach grade two and that being the case the knowledge I acquired cannot be applied and my ministry does not recognize this qualification for promotion or salary upgrading". Thus quality education should aim at empowering learners of all ages and levels to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future. Distance learning in Zimbabwe has failed to provide this.

4.8 Collaborative learning activities to engage in teaching?

Only students from an urban region indicated that they can afford to engage in collaborative learning, especially during weekends and this was by means of their own arrangements with some lecturers from other universities. Students from rural areas indicated that they cannot afford collaborative learning given the fact that they are separated by long distances from each other and their learning content cannot be provided in multiple or different formats using ICTs due to poor network connectivity in rural areas. "We only meet our colleagues during examination time and we take this opportunity to interact during our examination preparation and giving each other hints", argued one of the participants.

4.9 Use of multiple methods for communication?

Most participants indicated that only full-time tutors based at regional centres communicate with students through text messages, but this was very rare. Students based in urban centres indicated that they often receive text messages on their cell phones that only inform them of tutorial dates, assignments' due dates or examination dates, otherwise no communication on instructional materials is provided through means other than face-to-face tutorials organized at regional centres which in most cases do not materialize due to tutor absenteeism. In most cases only two or three full-time tutors

will be available at the tutorial venues and this has discouraged most students.

4.10 Computer literate skills to enable coping with technological changes

Responding to this question, the majority of respondents from rural areas indicated that they were not at all that computer literate. One of the participants indicated that she was first introduced to a computer on the day she attended her first semester course on communication. Moreover, knowledge of computers and other related ICTs can empower students to effectively learn at a distance this can also increase access of learners to quality educational resources. This can also bring about a qualitative change in teaching and learning at a distance. In the course of this study it was established that utilization of ICTs either by the learners or the tutors for delivery was not satisfactory. It was established that in one of the regional centres, even some of the directors and tutors were not computer literate, as they had new computers in their offices which they could not operate. The Zimbabwe Open University online facility available to all regional centres has tremendous potential to impart quality distance education and training, but it is not utilized due to lack of computer literacy among learners and some tutors in the regions. Use of ICTs can create a facilitative learning environment and sustain motivation of the learners but this has not been applicable in rural regional centres due to lack of computer literacy among both learners and tutors.

4.11 Major barriers to offering quality distance education in regions?

This question was asked to both students and regional staff members and the following responses were received:

From students

- Lack of interaction between tutors and students or minimum contact between tutors and students
- Lack of competent and committed tutors at the regional centres
- The majority of tutors are part-time tutors who are never available for tutorials
- Difficulty keeping up with technological changes due to lack of computer literacy among tutors and students
- Lack of collaborative learning and developing relationships among learners
- The lack of rich and rapid feedback from tutors, as assignments are seldom marked timeously or not at all
- Lack of learning materials which can assist learners to study in the way they find most natural and effective
- Total lack of high quality interactions among learners

Responses from regional staff members

- Lack of funds to implement distance learning programmes. Regions have budgetary constraints
- Learners have no access to sharing ideas, resources, problems and experiences that could promote high-level learning among them
- Lack of efficient sub-systems such as course development, learner support and ICTs
- Lack of competent support staff to help develop learning materials
- Slow pace in the implementation of change especially technological changes, for example e-learning is a challenge to implement
- Lack of infrastructure to support distance learning
- Rapid increase in student enrolments with limited teaching and learning infrastructure
- Poor standards of academic and research infrastructure, including libraries and laboratories
- Inadequate pedagogical training of academic staff
- Total absence of quality assurance agencies in the regions to create and enforce mechanisms for ensuring quality

4.12 Options to take another distance education course

The majority of participants indicated that they would not want to take another course. One of the participants opined, learning at a distance is really stressful. I will never in future wish to learn at a distance, I devoted most of my time and resources on distance learning and this even affected my family.

Finally, the study established that the Zimbabwe Open University operates from Primary and Secondary schools for their tutorials. Some of the schools do not have proper infrastructure for higher education teaching. Good teaching and learning infrastructure such as well-ventilated classrooms, library facilities, and internet facilities and laboratories are important for effective learning. The two rural regional offices would require unprecedented development and refurbishment of infrastructure if quality learning outcomes are to be generated. Physical structures are an enabling factor in improving the quality of university education. A rapid increase in the number of students in higher education, especially distance education will necessarily erode the minimum quality standards of teaching and learning unless such increases are accompanied by planned and purposeful strategies or measures to avoid or prevent such deterioration. While policies of education for all and education are a fundamental right, these policies were silently extended to higher education through distance education initiatives and these initiatives are facing challenges in an effort to provide quality distance higher education. Ironically, however, despite the massive growth in the number of students in distance higher education the teaching learning environments in the regions covered by this study are not conducive to quality learning outcomes.

V. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the Zimbabwe Open University which is the only open distance learning institution offering higher education has played a significant role in widening and deepening access to higher education for the previously marginalized population. While such quantitative developments and expansions in the provision of higher education are lauded, the study concludes that the Zimbabwe Open University should seek to overcome major barriers to offering quality distance education. Members of staff involved in distance education require regular training and development for them to cope with the current changes in technology and the changes that take place in higher education landscape. To ensure the quality of teaching and learning the inputs such as students, lecturers, non-teaching staff, administrators, curriculum, facilities, finance and instructional materials should be provided to enhance the quality of the product and processes. The quality of higher education at the Zimbabwe Open University is negatively affected by the inadequate preparation and academic skills of both lecturers and students. In addition to lecturer shortage, learning at the Zimbabwe Open University takes place in small crowded classrooms meant for primary school learners. However, to a great extent the Zimbabwe Open University has made a significant contribution to the major recommendations of the 1998 World Conference on Higher Education that was reaffirmed at the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education which was to pursue the expansion of access to higher education.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings from the study and the issues established from the study the following recommendations are advanced:

- Continuing professional development for regional staff including part-time and full-time tutors as well as other functionaries is a key element in ensuring quality in distance education systems. Training, retention and continuing professional development are a pre-requisite to enhance quality distance education.
- Management should be committed and should ensure that the day-to-day work of the institution meets the quality standards and the use of ICTs that can make the management process more effective in managing all the processes of distance learning.
- Provision must be made for the management of distance education to ensure effective, mutual communication involving all parties.
- Besides high quality of learning materials, distance education institutions are required to facilitate learners' study by providing much-needed support, infrastructure, and counselling. Regional staff should resolve queries related to student learning and also extending library facilities, making ICTs accessible to all learners.
- Institutional capacity in teaching and learning in higher education needs to improve in general and the Zimbabwe Open University in particular, using, for example, the 2013 Guide to Effective Teaching and Learning in Higher Education developed by UNESCO.
- Distance education learners need to work out appropriate teaching and learning strategies to ensure success that would afford learners the feeling of success. Quality distance education is expected to fulfil the basic requirement of lifelong learning.

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