

Odel and Massification in Higher Education Institutions in Malawi: Challenges and Opportunities

Joseph Maxwell Naphiyo, Atanzio Ernest Kamwamba

Nkhoma University, Lilongwe, Malawi

DOI : <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.807066>

Received: 04 June 2024; Accepted: 29 June 2024; Published: 02 August 2024

ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to examine how higher education institutions in Malawi are implementing quality assurance in the face of increased enrolment through among other means, Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) by studying this intervention at Mzuzu University (MZUNI). The study focused on four main areas namely; perceptions of quality assurance in ODeL among faculty and students at Mzuzu University, quality Assurance strategies, challenges in implementing ODeL, and student experiences with ODeL in the context of increased enrolment. Empirical studies constantly showed that the number of students in higher institutions in Malawi was increasing from time to time, while stakeholders questioned the quality of the graduates of these institutions. In order to meet the main purpose of the study, mixed-methods approach to examine the implementation of quality assurance amidst increased enrollment in Open, Distance, and e-Learning (ODEL) at Mzuzu University (MZUNI) was employed. The study includes administrators, faculty members, students, and quality assurance officers as its participants, using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across these groups. Quantitative data were gathered through structured questionnaires administered to students and faculty, supplemented by qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with administrators and quality assurance officers. Institutional documents and focus group discussions with students provided additional perspectives. Data analysis employed descriptive and inferential statistics for quantitative data, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software. The findings indicate moderate to high satisfaction among students and faculty regarding various aspects of ODeL quality assurance, yet reveal significant challenges such as resource limitations and resistance to change. Recommendations include tailored strategies to enhance technical support, faculty workload management, and overall quality assurance practices. This research contributes insights valuable for policymakers and educational leaders seeking to improve ODeL program quality amid expanding enrollment.

Keywords: Massification, Quality, quality assurance, higher education, ODeL, MZUNI

INTRODUCTION

The global mandates such as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) put much emphasis on achieving primary and secondary education at the expense of higher education. For example, the Millennium Development Goal number four dictates the achievement of universal primary education. The recent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have emphasized the need to achieve quality education and train more teachers to achieve education for all. However, this has put much pressure on higher education as the demand for university education worldwide continues to proliferate and competition for access increases, each year students complete their secondary or equivalent level of education. Likewise, demand for new skills at workplace requires further education and this puts more pressure on the limited chances available for university education. Expansion of the university education sector has thus become a primacy in most countries. University education institutions are expanding fast, especially in the majority of developing countries (Altbach, 2007). At the same time as new universities have been created, the higher education sector has been diversified: different establishments such as open universities and distance education centers have developed outside traditional universities. Due to these changes which have been widely conditioned by ever increasing student numbers on the one hand and decreasing or stagnating

resources on the other, the university institutions are faced by a combination of old and new challenges. At the same time, stakeholders have expressed concern about the quality of university education outcomes.

As the highest level of institutions dedicated to the professional and intellectual development of people and society in general, universities are expected to concentrate on research, teaching and public service. Ajayi et al (1996) contend that universities are supposed to be characterized by quality and excellence, equity, responsiveness and effective and efficient provision of services, good governance and excellent management of resources. Starting from the 1990s, many African universities have experienced increasing enrolments in an environment of declining educational quality (Ajayi et al, 1996). This rapid increase in enrolments is perhaps the most important contributor to the deterioration in quality because it has increased pressure on university finances resulting into neglect of key inputs in instruction and research (Materu, 2007). Ahemba (2006) describes many African universities as in a state of crisis without the basic physical infrastructure such as internet connectivity, books, laboratory equipment and classroom.

UNESCO (2003) notes that higher education is essential to developing countries, if they are to prosper in a world economy where knowledge has become a vital area of advantage. UNESCO (2003) further indicates that the quality of knowledge generated within higher education institutions and its availability to the wider economy is becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness. World Bank (2002) noted that, despite the clear importance of investment in higher education for economic growth and social development, the sector is in crisis throughout the world. According to World Bank (2002) higher education in developing countries is heavily dependent on government funding. In an era of widespread economic constraints developing countries are struggling with the challenge of preserving or improving the quality of higher education as education budget and particularly expenditures per student are compressed.

The crisis is severe in sub-Saharan Africa because it has been more difficult for developing countries to contain pressures for enrollment expansion, given relatively low enrolment ratios. Whereas quantitative leaps are welcome, the implications they have had on quality has been of great concern. Without exception, resources failed to match the rate of increase in enrolment. African universities were, therefore, called upon to do more with less in terms of infrastructure, teaching and research facilities, and staff. It is becoming increasingly evident that the 21st century is set to become a crucial and challenging period for universities in Africa.

It is now widely acknowledged that in the context of changing global relations and the rise of the new information technologies, producing relevant knowledge is central to the role of higher education in contemporary society. Presently, due to advancement of Information Communication and Technology (ICT), new models of learning have emerged and have been adopted in the universities such as open learning and e-Learning. As a result of the intensification of globalized socio-economic and cultural relations and of the information technologies which underpin globalization, the world is increasingly entering a new knowledge or “network” society (Castells, 2001). In this, the social organization of knowledge and learning is changing dramatically with major implications and challenges for higher education institutions worldwide. Much government concern about the quality of education derives from the widespread belief that poor quality will frustrate efforts to use education as an effective level of economic growth and development at a time in world history that is experiencing an acceleration of globalization. The understanding of what constitutes the quality of education is, therefore, evolving.

The idea that Malawi should have a university was first conceived soon after the country got its independence in 1964. At Government’s request, the educational needs of the country were surveyed by the American Council on Education and the then British Inter-University Council on Higher Education Overseas (Dzanzalimodzi, 2008). In October 1964, the University of Malawi was founded. It is the oldest University in Malawi and so far, the largest in terms of student enrolment numbers. Due to the high demand for Higher education Malawian government established Mzuzu University in 1997 to complement University of Malawi (Malawi Government Report, 2004). Though the government established a second university the demand was still high that it encouraged the private sector to establish universities to complement the government efforts. This led to the rise of private institutions in Malawi, so that by 2016 there were over 16 approved private universities and four public universities. Apart from the approved universities, there were 18 registered colleges, out of these colleges only 6 are private the rest are public (document from ministry of education). Recently, the state president of republic of Malawi Prof Peter

Mutharika embarked on a project of establishing community technical colleges which is partly funded by Chinese government. According to ministry of education, technical colleges are regulated by TEVET which is under ministry of Youth, labour and entrepreneurship. Only teacher education colleges belong to ministry of education (Ministry of Education sector plan 2008).

Most private universities in Malawi are run by churches; the prominent private institutions include Nkhoma University (NKHUNI), Catholic University of Malawi (CUNIMA), University of Livingstonia (UNILIA), and Malawi Adventist University (MAU). It has been noted that these universities are expensive compared to government institutions which are subsidized as of 2016, the minimum tuition fee was 350 dollars for public universities and almost 600 dollars for private universities (university memos on tuition fee revision, 2015). Despite these prominent private universities being expensive the demand is still high; hence they fail to cope up with the demand. Again, on the part of public universities, enrolments are often increasing at alarming rate. This has strained available resources at the universities, including increased workload for the lecturers. Besides, the calls for universities to innovate strategies that would enable more Malawians to acquire university education, the challenge to university management is how to provide quality higher education in the face of increased demand and declining government and church funding. This massification of university education is raising concerns among stakeholders about the quality education provided in the university institutions. Shara, writing in a news article, (2014) observes that there is a widespread perception of a decline in the quality of higher education in Malawi due to over enrollment, inadequate and outdated teaching and learning facilities and low staff morale.

In the face of rapid increase in enrollment and related problems, University management is challenged by any means to ensure quality of higher education in their institutions to remain relevant in the society. This research examined implementation of quality assurance mechanisms amidst massification through ODeL at Mzuzu University.

Increased enrolment in higher education branded as ‘massification of higher education’ has been a dominant issue among different scholars. Scott (1995) uses the term massification in the context of higher education system to describe the rapid increase in student enrolment in the latter part of twentieth century. Trow (2005) discussed three stages of university massification. According to Trow, the first stage is known as elite—shaping the mind and character of a ruling class, a preparation for elite roles and it is from (0-15%), the second stage is called mass—transmission of skills and preparation for a broader range of technical and economic elite roles (16-50%), the third stage is known as universal—adaptation of the “whole population” to rapid social and technological change (50%+)

These stages were first introduced in Trow 1973, and are not presented as “empirical descriptions of real higher education systems”, but rather as models or ideal types. They can be seen as sequential stages, but it is not inevitable that later stages will completely replace earlier ones, in fact “there are definite possibilities of examples of elite forms surviving in the mass and universal stages”. This means according to Trow, ‘when gross enrolment rate is beyond 15% then there is massification.’

In Africa, massification of higher education occurred because of improvement at primary and secondary education levels, resulting in a large cohort of graduates seeking access to higher education, and also the realization that higher education is important for economic development (Goolam, 2008). In industrialized countries, massification is defined in terms of the gross higher education enrolment ratio of a country, a ratio approaching but not exceeding 50% being considered as ‘mass’ enrolment (Zhang & An, 2010). On the other hand, in developing countries, like those in Africa, massification of higher education is characterized by a very rapid increase in student enrolment maintained over several years, although the enrolment ratio is very low. Goolam (2008) contends that most of the African countries recorded an average annual increase in student enrolment from 1999 to 2005 in the range of 12% to 60%, yet the gross enrolment ratio rarely exceeded 5%.

In Malawi, just like any other African country, adoption of democratization and inclusiveness in education to reduce inequalities of opportunities in life has led to mass enrolment of students in higher education. According to World Bank report 2010, higher education enrollment is one of the smallest in the world, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) does not exceed 1%, and by 2014 it was paged at 0.8%. However, enrolment is growing at a quick pace.

University enrollments almost tripled from 2003–2013, in partly because of the enrollment of nonresidential students and distance learning programs (ODL) (MoEST report, 2014). The data below shows the increase in enrollment for both male and female students in Malawi.

Table1: Enrollment Actual Number of students from 2008 to 2011

Year	Male	Female	Total
2008	5,537	2,838	8,375
2009	5,945	2,928	8,873
2010	6,129	3,255	9,384
2011	7,411	4,212	11,623

Source: Higher Education Institutions and National Statistical Office.

From the table above, it is a clear indication that this trend continued up to date and it is projected to continue in near future.

This trend of mass enrollment affected Universities operation in Malawi. While the enrolment increased there was no tangible effort to expand the universities in terms of infrastructure, human resource as well as funding hence universities utilized the limited available resources to carter for the increased enrolment. This has Quality Assurance implications. Setting standards and ensuring quality control becomes especially problematic in the context of significant expansion.

Many stakeholders in higher education would find it difficult to define quality precisely. In reality, it is a relative concept that means different things to different people. For instance, while discussing the quality of HEI, students may focus on the facilities provided and the perceived usefulness of education for future employment. Teachers, on other hand, may pay attention to the teaching and learning process. Management may give importance to the institution's achievements. Parents may consider the achievements of their children. Finally, employers may consider the competence of the institution's graduates. Each stakeholder has a different approach to defining quality. It is not possible, therefore, to talk about quality as a single concept. Any definition of quality must be defined in terms of the context in which it is used. In the case of HEIs, it must be noted that an institution may be of high quality in relation to one factor or in the perspective of a category of stakeholders, but of low quality in relation to another.

Considering these factors, literature shows that Harvey and Green (1993) and Green (1994) are authorities in defining quality. Green (1994) provided five different approaches to quality in the field of higher education. She considers that it can be viewed:

Quality as Exceptionality

This is the more traditional concept of quality. It is associated with the notion of providing a product or service that is distinctive and special, and which confers status on the owner or user. In higher education, an institution that demonstrates exceptionally high standards is seen as a quality institution.

Quality as Conformance to Standards

This view has its origins in the quality control approach of the manufacturing industry. Here, the word 'standard' is used to indicate pre-determined specifications or expectations. As long as an institution meets the pre-determined standards, it can be considered a quality institution fit for a particular status.

Quality as Fitness for Purpose

This approach is based on the view that quality has no meaning except in relation to the purpose of the product or

service. Obviously one does not need a super computer to do basic multiplications. What may be considered a quality system for basic computation is different from what is required for scientific experiments. However, this approach begs the questions: ‘Who will determine the purpose?’ and ‘What are appropriate purposes?’.

The answers to these questions depend on the context in which quality is viewed. The purposes may be determined by the institution itself, by the government, or by a group of stakeholders.

Quality as Effectiveness in Achieving Institutional Goals

This is one version of the ‘fitness-for-purpose’ approach mentioned above, in which the purposes are determined by the institution. In this approach, a high quality institution is one that clearly states its mission (purpose) and is efficient in achieving it. This approach may raise issues such as the way in which the institution might set its goals (high, moderate or low), and how appropriate those goals could be.

Quality as Meeting Customers’ Stated or Implied Needs

This is also a variation of the fitness-for-purpose approach. This is where the purpose is customer needs and satisfaction. The issue here is whether customer satisfaction can be equated with what is good for the customer. Are ‘needs’ the same as ‘wants’? In higher education, this would mean that what students want may not be the same as what is actually good for them. It is more reliable to consider different groups such as government, students and parents in determining ‘customer needs’ and ‘customer satisfaction’, rather than a single category of customers, such as students.

While Harvey and Green (1993) and Green (1994) have explored and differentiated every possible definition of quality, there has been criticism that the implications of so many definitions of the term might be unhelpful. Fang Jansen (2001) tried to come up with one definition containing aspects put forward by Green, and tried to contextualize it with the stage of mass higher education. According to Fang, quality mainly manifests in how the training of personnel is relevant to the society. It is a multi-dimensional, complex concept, with the characteristic of being adaptable, diverse and developable. One of the standards to measure quality is based on the extent to which the higher education service satisfies the society and individuals (adaptability). Because of the diversification of higher education system, quality standards, accordingly, should be diverse rather than making a commitment as a nation to the maintenance of common standards across all the colleges and universities, or assessing the new forms of mass higher education against the traditional criteria (diversity). Adaptability, as one aspect of quality, should be measured in way of how much higher education is open to development (developable) (Fang Jansen, 2001). However looking critically what Fang (2001) tries to portray can be easily argued that he was just expanding the notion of quality as fitness for purpose. Hence this paper adopts fitness for a purpose to define quality in higher education.

Quality Versus Quantity (Massification) Dilemma in Higher Education

In countries where mass higher education has been on the way for a long time, a wide spread concern about quality existed at the early stage of the growth (Trow, 1973), and theories on quality consequently have been developed.

In spite of the many problems that come with the growth, everywhere the pressures for expansion met with surprising little resistance among academic, but growth alone begins to create strains in the traditional forms and functions (Trow, 1973). It is observed that the steady expansion of higher education appears to constitute a serious threat to academic standards (Trow, 1973) and mass higher education ceased to be selective in any serious sense, leading to diverse credit system (Scott, 1998,).

In this regard, different schools of thought in the higher education sector emerged. One school of thought is that of “elitist reformers”, which aims to modernize the university in its organizational structure without changing its basic character as the center for intellectual work at the highest standard. According to their view, a slowing down or even an interruption in the rate of growth of higher education or the shifting of growth wholly to the non-university sectors may afford an opportunity for reestablishing and reinforcing those high standards threatened by the indiscriminate growth of unreformed structures (Trow, 1973). Another school of thought is that of

“expansionist reformers”, which contends that the formal differentiation between the different forms and sectors of higher education almost always lead to undesirable distinctions between them, and ultimately very marked differences in the quality of their staff and students, and in other respects as well (Trow, 1973).

The expansion of higher education system that does not lower the quality and standards of the higher education already offered involves the achievement of education at a high and common standard of quality throughout the system, whatever the varied functions of the different institutions may be. The commitment to continued growth and also to high quality in all parts of the system poses the dilemma. The dilemma has three components: first, there is the strong egalitarian sentiment that all provision of higher education should be substantially of equal quality (and thus of cost); second, new forms of mass higher education are assessed against criteria typical of old costlier elite higher education; third, rapid growth at the per capita cost levels of the former small elite system places intolerable burdens on national budget (Trow, 1973).

The fact is that the slogan of the “expansionist reformers”, “Nothing if not the best”, will unavoidably conflict with a continued and rapid expansion of the provision for higher education, for no society, no matter how rich, can afford a system of mass higher education at the same cost levels that it formerly provided to its elite research universities (Trow, 1973; Trow, 2003). Expansion without considering per capita costs among various sectors of the system of higher education forces a leveling downward in costs, and perhaps in quality as well. Commitment to a high and common set of standards throughout the system will necessarily urge a restraint on expansion (Trow, 1973). In the interaction of quality and expansion, scholars must admit the inequalities inherent in genuine diversity if at all they are to defend the highest standards of scholarly and academic life in some parts of an expanding system (Trow, 1973).

That solution has its own costs - morally and intellectually as well as financially and politically (Trow, 1973). As is portrayed by Trow, at one extreme we think of a group of learned and imaginative scholars teaching highly selected and motivated students in a situation of rich intellectual resources. At the other extreme are institutions with less well-educated and less-accomplished teachers, teaching less-able and less well-motivated students under less favorable conditions (Trow, 1973). According to the observation of “expansionist reformers”, the weaker or lower-status segments of the system are those characteristically associated with and used by students from working and lower-middle origins, so that the status differentiation in higher education is closely linked to that of class structure as a whole (Trow, 1973).

The challenge is apparent in that in many societies, the demand for higher education has reached the point of a necessity, regardless of the actual functional requirements of the economy or of the institutions. This is a manifestation of the aspiration for all societies to upgrade their education. The institutions respond to excess demand by downgrading some elements of the system and transforming them into pools of idle labor. This function of universities as a mechanism of surplus labor absorption particularly appeals to those lower-middle class sectors that think their children are entitled to social mobility through the university system. But the more a university system is able to separate this “warehouse function” from the rest, the more it is both successful and unfair (Castells, 2001).

In theoretical terms, higher education system, as an organic system with its own inherent mechanism of regulation and adaptation, will ultimately approximate a balance between quality and quantity, once provided with the right ecology. As was projected by Bereday, growth, in the long run, need not reduce quality (Hayhoe, 1996). But the impact of expansion on the quality of higher education would be greatly influenced in every society by how it deals with the dilemma discussed above (Trow, 1973). That is, how long will the progress to the ultimate balance take, and what kind of price has to be paid, still remain a question yet to be answered by different countries respectively. But, presently at least, there is one point that seems certain: in practice, the perfect harmony between quantity and quality still remains but an ideal to pursue. It seems likely that “only on papers can all these desirable characteristics be maximized within the same system” (Trow, 1973).

Higher Education Quality Problem in Malawi in the Context of Massification

The issue of quality in higher education has been somehow neglected for long time in Malawi. All along

government policy was to increase the university in-take while disregarding quality implications. This has been evidenced from its 2004 official report:

‘Government’s policy on tertiary education is to increase access from 3,000 in 1997 to 12,000 in 2012. The main strategies include optimizing use of available physical and human resources. This will include intensified use of facilities during nights, weekends and holidays as well as joint time tabling across faculties. Mzuzu University and University of Malawi are encouraged to mount distance education programmes with the aim of catering for at least 15% of the total students’ population’ (Malawi Government Report 2004).

The policy adopted by government to enroll more students in Malawian Universities posed a danger to Higher education quality. Ngwira (2016) states that the quality of university education, like other levels of education can be measured through an analysis of: (a) inputs such as teaching and non-teaching staff, curricula, facilities and technologies for teaching and learning arrangements for students’ catering and institutional management; and (b) outputs such as tests and examinations. However, this is far reaching in Malawi. Physical planning in the public universities in Malawi does not commensurate with their rate of growth and expansion as more students are enrolled, the managers of universities continue to accommodate them in the existing facilities. This has often led to an over-stretching of such facilities. As a consequence, there is congestion in lecture theatres, workshops, laboratories, libraries and boarding facilities.

The situation is terrible in the sciences and technologies. The required inputs which include adequate laboratory space and workshops as well as spare parts for equipment maintenance and repair, routine replacement and upgrading of equipment, reagents and other consumable supplies are seriously lacking in most universities in the region (Ngwira 2016).

As observed by Shawa (2007), libraries are among the worst hit facilities in both public and private universities in Malawi. Despite increased enrolments, universities do not invest much in the acquisition of books. Libraries hold less capacity of the required books most of which are too old. Some libraries which were designed to accommodate 300 students now serve as many as 6,000 students. Apart from inadequate space, most libraries cannot afford to contribute to current journals and other scholarly publications from outside Africa have greatly declined. There is also a scarcity of reference materials.

The massive expansion of enrolments without a corresponding increase in the number of teaching staff has led to the rising of the staff to student ratio. Normally, each university has its own staff development scheme. However, there are many indications that due to financial constraints, post-graduate study, which is the basis of staff development, does not meet the demands in the university faculties (Zezeza, 2004). To recruit academic staff for the universities, the tendency has been towards relaxing the recruitment and promotion criteria. A Ph.D. degree is no longer a requirement for tenure and publications are less important criteria for judging who should be promoted.

Consequently, many of the academic staffs who in the past would not have qualified for university teaching are now doing so. Moreover, due to very low salaries, it is no longer possible to attract competent staff from abroad to teach in the public universities (Zezeza, 2004).

From the poor situation of the teaching and learning environment and the quality and morale of the academic staff, not much is expected in the quality of instruction. Zezeza (2001, 2004) states that lecturers in public universities use old materials, which means that the courses they teach are also out of date.

Coupled with the flight of the best lecturers from the public universities, the situation has affected the quality of instruction in the public universities. With lack of reading materials, students prefer the familiar expository method of teaching as they perceive university education to consist primarily of the reproduction of assimilated lecture materials for purposes of passing examinations. In this scenario university authorities are challenged to ensure quality of higher education in their institutions.

The Concept of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Altbach (2009) defines Quality Assurance as an on-going continuous process of monitoring, assessing, evaluation,

guaranteeing and improving the quality of core functions of a university. In other words quality assurance is the planned and systematic activities implemented in a quality system so that quality requirements for a product or service will be fulfilled.

Quality Assurance is also a process that is geared towards information for the purpose of making informed decisions as to whether there is progress in the achievement of educational goals through supervision. This view is supported by Dawit (2006) that judgment is made with a view to taking action towards improvement.

The aim of quality assurance in higher education is to guarantee the improvement of standards and quality in higher education meet the needs of students, employers and financiers (Lomas, 2002). Hence, improvement and accountability are the primary purposes of quality assurance (Dawit, 2006). Quality assurance should improve student learning and the learning experiences and to improve responsiveness of higher education to the needs of the society. Thus, quality assurance for improvement implies a formative approach; the focus is not on control but on improving quality.

Tuijnman and Postlethwaite (1994) argue that high educational standards have led to positive results in the university system. Performance standards are important for all levels of education. They assert that effective performance standards reflect the consensus of professional educators, parents and students.

Higher education borrowed the concept, language and methodology of quality assurance from industry and production sectors (Craft, 1992). So it is imperative for higher education institutions (HEIs) to ensure that the educational experience they are providing to their students is sound, relevant and of high quality. If an institution cannot assure that what it is doing is appropriate/ relevant and is being undertaken to an acceptable standard then it cannot easily demonstrate its worth (Campbell, 2008). The range of activities for effective, monitoring and enhancing educational provision is quality assurance, thus, it refers to all the policies, processes and actions of HEIs and agencies through which the quality of higher education is maintained and developed (Lim, 2001).

The Practice of Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Malawi

Quality assurance in higher education has become a crucial component in the provision of education in almost all countries in the world since this affects standards. Most institutions of higher education globally are now aiming at internationalizing their programmes, which can be done if the standards are acceptable to all stakeholders. Malawi is no exception to the quest for quality assurance, and this need is demonstrated by the public debate on the quality of education (NCHE Standards and Guidelines, 2013). This background compelled Malawi government through the act of Parliament No. 15 of 2011 to establish the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) to among other functions promote and coordinate education provided by higher education institutions, design quality assurance systems and determine, maintain and regulate standards for teaching, examinations, qualifications and facilities; register, de-register and accredit higher education institutions; determine framework for funding higher education and provide guidance on terms and conditions for awarding students' grants, loans and scholarships; and harmonize student selection into public higher education institutions (www.nche.ac.mw, 2017).

The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) developed quality assurance policy for higher institutions in Malawi to ensure quality of higher education. The policy is known as the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in Malawi. The standards and guidelines were developed in 2013 after the council was established. The guidelines in this document are underpinned by the following fundamental principles: Programmes should address the interests of students, employers, and the society more generally through good quality higher education; Institutional autonomy is critically important, tempered by a recognition that this brings with it heavy responsibilities. External quality assurance has to be fit for purpose and to place only an appropriate and necessary burden on institutions for the achievement of their objectives. The policy calls upon all higher education institutions in Malawi to adhere to the standards and guidelines. A national agency is be responsible to assess standards and accreditation in higher education and register all accredited institutions

The standards and guidelines are intended to assist providers in establishing, maintaining and improving quality assurance procedures which will meet the requirements of the National Council for Higher Education. They are based on best international practices, including policies and procedures to be operated by national quality

assurance agencies and higher education and training institutions in Malawi. The standards reflect basic good practice in quality assurance.

The standards and guidelines as stated in the policy document, serve the following purposes; improving quality of education available to students in higher education institutions; assisting higher education institutions in managing and enhancing their quality and, thereby, to help justify their competitiveness and making quality assurance and accreditation transparent and simple for all stakeholders to understand. These purposes were made to achieve among others the following objectives; to ensure that the outcomes of higher education meet the expectations of students, employers, and other stakeholders; to guide higher education institutions and other relevant agencies in developing their own culture of quality assurance; to foster vibrant intellectual and educational achievement in higher education and provide a common framework for quality assurance in higher education.

These standards and guidelines call for internal quality assurance. Internal quality assurance provides the foundation for all quality assurance in higher education institutions. It includes institutional evaluations of different types, such as programme and course approval, monitoring and review, student assessment and staff performance appraisal.

These standards and guidelines also call for external quality assurance. According to the policy document such external evaluations largely depend for their full effectiveness on there being an explicit internal quality assurance strategy, with specific objectives. Furthermore, they call for the use, within institutions, of mechanisms and methods aimed at achieving those objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Shawa (2007) in his master's dissertation partly tackled the issue of quality in Malawian higher education. His emphasis was on the fact that Education policy frameworks in Malawi are mainly a response to the government's broad policy of poverty alleviation. Shawa (2007) argued that quality university education ought to contribute to poverty alleviation especially by assisting the country to achieve its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to implement the initiatives of the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). He pointed out that if policy framework in Malawi engenders quality of university education poverty alleviation could be easier. The study mainly depended on policy document analysis and in-depth semi-structured interviews. It examined the potential of higher education policy frameworks to engender quality university education in Malawian universities. Pertinent to the fast-growing higher education sector in Malawi is the connection between higher education policy frameworks and quality delivery of university education. No wonder in 2011 Malawi Government through the act of parliament established national council of higher education to- among other responsibilities-help in ensuring quality of higher education.

However, the study failed to dig deep to find out what universities are already doing to ensure quality hence the present study will try to narrow this scope down to examine institutions' responsibility in ensuring quality assurance in the context of expanded enrolment.

Msiska (2015) conducted a research titled 'Student Satisfaction with University Lecturers in Malawi: A Case Study of a Private University'. The study was aimed at finding out students' opinions about their satisfaction with lecturers at a private university in Malawi. The research used a qualitative approach through semi structured interviews with senior students at the university. Additional information was collected through a review of institutional documents at the university. The findings indicated that the university has inadequate teachers to effectively carry out their teaching duties and that some of the teachers do not have the necessary qualifications to teach at university level. It has also been established that most of the teachers at the university were part time. Msiska argued that the findings do not augur well with the need to provide quality university education. Therefore he suggested the need for the university and other private universities in Malawi to do something to raise the quality of teaching by among other things employing adequate and well qualified staff. The study sampled out private institutions it is not known whether public universities are also encountering similar situations or not. Again this research did not go in detail to find out whether administration put in place some mechanisms to raise the quality of teaching. There is need for a study to find out the role of University management in ensuring quality of teaching.

Shawa (2014) in his paper published by Mediterranean Journal of social sciences titled 'The Quest for a Quality Delivery of University Education in Malawi' he noted that there are problems of quality issues in Malawian higher Education which needs urgent address. He argued that lack of political will and well stipulated policy framework on the part of government is fueling the problem. However, it is not known how universities are implementing quality assurance and whether the measures need to be changed or not.

Mtambo, Meky and Tanaka (2016) conducted a study titled Improving Higher Education in Malawi for Competitiveness in Global Economy. They published this study under the auspices of World Bank. As the Government of Malawi investigates options to expand access to higher education and improve the quality of higher education provision, the objective of the study was to contribute to an improved understanding of the challenges confronted by the higher education sub-sector in Malawi. The study summarizes the key findings of an in-depth research of factors affecting access and equity in the Malawian higher education sub-sector, the quality and relevance of educational outputs, the financing of the sector, and the frameworks structuring governance of the sector and its management. The study was initiated in response to a request from the Government of Malawi, to the World Bank, to support the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) in its pursuit of financially sustainable policy options to increase equitable access to higher education, and to improve the quality of higher education provision in alignment with the needs of the labor market. However, the study did not go in details to understand how universities currently are implementing quality assurance measures with increased number of students which have been accumulated over the years.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of how Mzuzu University (MZUNI) is implementing quality assurance in the context of increased enrolment through Open, Distance, and e-Learning (ODeL). The study population included administrators, faculty members, students, and quality assurance officers at MZUNI. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation from each subgroup. The sample size included 4 administrators; 20 faculty members; 30 students; and 1 quality assurance officer. Structured questionnaires were administered to students and faculty members to gather quantitative data on their perceptions and experiences with quality assurance in ODeL.

The questionnaire included Likert scale questions, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with administrators and quality assurance officers to gain in-depth insights into the quality assurance strategies and challenges faced in implementing ODeL. These interviews followed an interview guide to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on key issues. Institutional documents such as quality assurance policies, accreditation reports, ODeL program guidelines, and evaluation reports were reviewed to understand the formal processes and standards in place. Focus group discussions were held with students to discuss their experiences and perceptions of the quality of education in ODeL programs. Each focus group consisted of 6-8 participants to facilitate a dynamic and interactive discussion. Survey data was analyzed using statistical software (e.g., SPSS).

Descriptive statistics (mean, median, mode, standard deviation) were used to summarize the data. Inferential statistics, such as t-tests and ANOVA, were conducted to identify significant differences in perceptions among different groups. Interview and focus group discussion transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involved coding the data, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting the findings in relation to the research question. NVivo software was used to assist with the organization and analysis of qualitative data. Content analysis was conducted on institutional documents to extract relevant information about quality assurance practices. This involved identifying key themes and patterns related to quality assurance standards, procedures, and outcomes.

MASSIFICATION AT MZUNI: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Perceptions of Quality Assurance in ODeL among Faculty and Students at Mzuzu University

The mean score for students' satisfaction with the quality assurance in ODeL at Mzuzu University (MZUNI) was

3.8 on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating moderate to high satisfaction. Students reported high satisfaction with the accessibility of learning materials, which received a mean score of 4.2, and the responsiveness of instructors, with a mean score of 4.0. However, students highlighted concerns regarding technical support (mean = 3.2) and the reliability of the online platform (mean = 3.0), indicating areas where improvements are needed.

Faculty members rated their overall satisfaction with quality assurance in ODeL at a mean score of 3.6. Positive aspects identified by faculty included the availability of professional development opportunities, with a mean score of 4.1, and the clarity of quality assurance guidelines, which received a mean score of 3.9. Despite these positive aspects, faculty members expressed concerns about workload management, which had a mean score of 2.9, and student engagement in ODeL environments, with a mean score of 3.1, suggesting challenges that need to be addressed to enhance faculty satisfaction and effectiveness.

A t-test revealed a significant difference between students' and faculty members' perceptions of the adequacy of technical support, with students rating it lower than faculty members ($p < 0.05$). Additionally, ANOVA results showed significant differences in perceptions of quality assurance practices among different faculties. The Faculty of Education reported higher satisfaction levels compared to other faculties ($p < 0.01$), indicating variability in experiences and satisfaction across different academic units.

Perceptions and satisfaction regarding quality assurance mechanisms at the institution reveal a generally positive outlook among both students and faculty members. Feedback indicated moderate to high satisfaction levels overall. However, the sentiment varies when examining specific aspects such as technical support and workload management, where there is a recognized need for targeted improvements.

Students and faculty members exhibit differing perceptions on various aspects of the quality assurance framework. These differences highlight the importance of tailored approaches to meet the distinct challenges faced by each group. Moreover, disparities among different faculties underscore the necessity for customized strategies that address the unique needs and expectations within each academic discipline.

Addressing concerns related to technical support and workload management will be crucial in enhancing overall satisfaction and optimizing the effectiveness of quality assurance measures. By focusing on these specific areas, the institution can further strengthen its commitment to providing a supportive and conducive environment for both students and faculty members alike.

Quality Assurance Strategies

Administrators and quality assurance officers at MZUNI have implemented several robust strategies to uphold and enhance the quality of their Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL) programs. These strategies are designed to address various aspects of program delivery and ensure that educational outcomes meet established standards.

Firstly, regular training sessions for faculty members play a pivotal role in equipping educators with the necessary skills and competencies to effectively deliver ODeL courses. These training sessions cover a range of topics, including instructional design for online environments, use of educational technologies, online assessment methods, and strategies for fostering student engagement in virtual classrooms. By continually updating faculty skills, the institution aims to maintain high teaching standards and adapt to evolving trends in digital education.

Secondly, periodic reviews of course materials are conducted to uphold quality standards and relevance. This involves assessing the alignment of course content with learning objectives, ensuring accuracy and currency of information, and evaluating the appropriateness of instructional materials for online delivery. Course reviews are essential for identifying areas that require updates or revisions to enhance the overall learning experience for students.

Additionally, administrators have implemented feedback mechanisms to solicit input from stakeholders, including students and faculty members. These mechanisms may include surveys, focus groups, and evaluations designed to gather insights on various aspects of the ODeL experience, such as course effectiveness, support services, and overall satisfaction. Feedback collected through these channels is instrumental in identifying strengths and areas

for improvement, guiding strategic decisions for continuous enhancement of ODeL programs.

The integration of these strategies reflects a commitment to maintaining and improving the quality of ODeL offerings at MZUNI. By investing in faculty development, conducting regular course reviews, and leveraging stakeholder feedback, the institution aims to ensure that its ODeL programs are not only effective and engaging but also responsive to the needs and expectations of its diverse learner community. This proactive approach not only supports student success but also strengthens the institution's reputation as a leader in distance education within the region.

Challenges in Implementing ODeL

Both administrators and quality assurance officers pointed out significant challenges in implementing ODeL. These challenges include limited financial resources, which restrict the ability to invest in necessary infrastructure and support services, insufficient infrastructure to support large-scale ODeL delivery, and resistance to change among some faculty members who are accustomed to traditional teaching methods. Faculty members also noted the difficulty in maintaining student engagement and managing the increased workload associated with ODeL, indicating a need for strategies to support faculty in these areas.

The qualitative data uncovered significant challenges in the implementation of Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL). Key obstacles include resource constraints and resistance to change among faculty members and stakeholders. These challenges underscore the critical need for comprehensive support mechanisms and targeted strategies to facilitate the successful integration of ODeL.

One of the primary challenges identified is the limitation of resources, including technological infrastructure and instructional materials necessary for effective ODeL delivery. Addressing these resource constraints requires proactive measures such as securing adequate funding for technology upgrades and ensuring access to up-to-date educational resources.

Resistance to change among faculty members and stakeholders is another significant barrier highlighted in the data. Many educators may be unfamiliar with or hesitant to embrace ODeL methodologies due to concerns about pedagogical effectiveness, workload implications, or perceived challenges in maintaining student engagement and academic rigor in online environments. Overcoming this resistance requires a multifaceted approach that includes comprehensive training programs, mentoring initiatives, and opportunities for collaborative learning and sharing of best practices among faculty members.

Administrators have identified several strategies to mitigate these challenges and foster a supportive environment for ODeL implementation. Regular training sessions tailored to the specific needs of faculty members are crucial for building confidence and competence in using online teaching tools and platforms. Feedback mechanisms, including surveys and focus groups, provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of ODeL initiatives and help administrators make informed decisions for continuous improvement.

However, the effectiveness of these strategies hinges on consistent application and ongoing monitoring. Administrators must ensure that training programs are not just one-time events but part of a continuous professional development framework. Likewise, feedback mechanisms should be regularly reviewed and adjusted based on evolving needs and emerging challenges in the ODeL landscape.

Student Experiences with ODeL in the Context of Increased Enrolment

Students discussed the flexibility and convenience of ODeL as major benefits, allowing them to balance their studies with other commitments. However, they also raised issues about the inconsistent quality of interaction with instructors and peers. Focus group discussions revealed that while some students appreciated the asynchronous nature of ODeL, others felt it led to a sense of isolation and lack of community. This suggests that enhancing interactive and community-building aspects of ODeL could improve student experiences.

The findings revealed a nuanced perspective on the benefits and challenges associated with this mode of

education. One of the primary advantages highlighted by students is the flexibility afforded by ODeL, allowing them to manage their studies around personal and professional commitments effectively.

However, the study also illuminated several challenges that students face, particularly regarding feelings of isolation and variability in the quality of interaction. Many students expressed concerns about the lack of regular face-to-face contact with peers and instructors, which can contribute to a sense of disconnection and reduced motivation. Inconsistent interaction quality, influenced by factors such as internet connectivity issues or varying levels of engagement from instructors, further compounds these challenges.

To address these issues, administrators and educators at MZUNI are exploring strategies to enhance the ODeL experience and promote a more supportive learning environment. One effective approach involves creating opportunities for synchronous interactions, such as live lectures, virtual office hours, or group discussions conducted in real-time. These synchronous activities can help foster a sense of immediacy and connection among students and instructors, mitigating feelings of isolation and enhancing engagement in the learning process.

Additionally, efforts are underway to cultivate a sense of community among ODeL students. This includes initiatives to facilitate peer-to-peer interactions through online forums, discussion boards, or collaborative projects. By encouraging collaborative learning experiences and promoting social interaction within virtual spaces, the institution aims to replicate the sense of belonging typically fostered in traditional classroom settings.

Furthermore, administrators recognize the importance of improving the consistency and quality of interactions in ODeL courses. This involves providing comprehensive training and support for instructors in effective online teaching practices, including methods to enhance communication, facilitate meaningful discussions, and utilize technology to its fullest potential.

By addressing these dual aspects of flexibility and interaction quality in ODeL, MZUNI aims to enhance the overall educational experience for its students. Emphasizing synchronous interactions, fostering community among learners, and improving the consistency of engagement are essential steps toward ensuring that ODeL programs not only accommodate diverse learner needs but also uphold high standards of educational excellence and student satisfaction.

Document Analysis

The review of institutional documents revealed that MZUNI has a robust framework for quality assurance, with detailed policies and procedures in place. However, discrepancies were noted between the documented policies and their implementation, particularly in areas related to infrastructure support and faculty training. These gaps indicate a need for better alignment between policy and practice to ensure the effective implementation of quality assurance measures.

Implementation Gaps

The discrepancies between documented quality assurance policies and their implementation suggest a need for better alignment and oversight. Ensuring that the policies are not only well-formulated but also effectively executed is crucial for maintaining high standards of quality in ODeL.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the complexity of implementing quality assurance in the context of increased enrollment through Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL) at MZUNI. By highlighting the strengths, such as regular training sessions for faculty members to effectively deliver ODeL courses, periodic reviews of course materials to uphold quality standards and relevance, feedback mechanisms to solicit input from stakeholders, including students and faculty members; and areas for improvement, guiding strategic decisions for continuous enhancement of ODeL programs and identifying areas for improvement, such as the discrepancies between documented quality assurance policies and their implementation suggest a need for better alignment and oversight. Ensuring that the policies are not only well-formulated but also effectively executed is crucial for maintaining high standards of quality in

ODEL. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and educational leaders aiming to enhance the quality of ODeL programs.

This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on improving ODeL program quality and underscores the importance of adaptive strategies in responding to the evolving educational landscape. As MZUNI and similar institutions continue to expand their ODeL offerings, implementing these insights can foster continuous improvement and ensure quality education delivery for remote learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that universities should revise their admission or enrolment system/policy where intake should consider availability of resources and number of students already enrolled. Apart from enrolling students based on classroom space, universities should also consider the number of lecturers and availability of funds for purchase of learning materials.

Universities should also find alternative sources of funds, not only depending on students' tuition, government or church subventions. There is a need for the universities to organize different fundraising activities such as coordinating alumni, using postgraduate students and lecturers for consultancy, farming, and using their big plots properly in order to increase their income to minimize the problem of their financial constraints. Apart from the above mentioned activities, where possible, let the public university administration bodies find other donors to support their universities.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joseph Maxwell Naphiyo is an academic specialized in educational research, currently working as a lecturer in education at Domasi College of Education, Zomba – Malawi. He has also worked as a part time lecturer at Nkhoma University, Catholic University of Malawi and Malawi Assemblies of God University. Naphiyo holds a Master of Science in Comparative Education from Zhejiang Normal University and a Bachelor of Arts (Education) from Mzuzu University. His research interests include higher education, gender and education, as well as ODeL.

Atanzio Ernest Kamwamba is an academic specialized in English Literature and Education. He is currently working as a lecturer in English Literature as well as Director of ODeL at Nkhoma University, Lilongwe – Malawi. He has also taught English Literature and Communication Studies (on part time basis) at Nalikule College of Education as well as Catholic University of Malawi. Kamwamba holds a Master of Arts in Literature from the University of Malawi and a Bachelor of Arts (Education) from Mzuzu University. His research interests include ODeL, gender studies, postcolonial studies as well as sexuality studies.

REFERENCES

1. Ahemba, T. (2006). "Decay dims Africa's Once-proud universities", Reuters, 15 November, Ibadan.
2. Ajayi et al. (1996). *The African Experience with Higher Education*, AAU. Ohio University Press Athens.
3. Altbach, P. G. (1999) in Altbach P.G. (2007) *Tradition and Transition: The International Imperative in Higher Education*. (M) AW Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. 2007.
4. Altbach, P.G. & Salmi, J. (2001). *The Making of world-class research universities. The Road to Academic Excellence*. Retrieved on March 17, 2016 from <http://www.worldbank.org>
5. Altbach, P. G., Resiberg, L., & Rumbley L. *Trends in global Higher Education: Tracking an academic revolution: A report prepared for UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education*. (R) UNESCO, 2009.
6. Calhoun, C. (2000), "The Specificity of American Higher education", in Kalleberg, R., Engelstad, F., Brochmann, G., & Leira, A., Mjoset, L. (Eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Universities*. Comparative Social Research, JAI Press Ltd. pp.47-81
7. Castells, M. (2001), "Universities as Dynamic Systems of Contradictory Functions", in Muller, J., Cloete, N. & Badat, S. (Eds) *Challenges of Globalization*, South African Debates with Manuel Castells, Maskew Miller Longman, pp. 206-223

8. Dawit, T. (2006). Assessing institutional self – assessment in Ethiopian higher learning institutions. Proceedings of the National Conference on Private Higher Education Institutions in Ethiopia. Addis Ababa, St. Mary's printing press.
9. Malawi Government Report, Development of Education in Malawi, Prepared for the 47th Session of the international conference on Education, (R) Ministry of Education and The Malawi National Commission for UNESCO, September 2004.
10. Maniku (2008) Higher Education Quality Assurance Policy Practice in Maldives,
11. Malawi Ministry of Education Science and Technology, Status of Higher Education in Malawi Annual report (2014).
12. Materu, P. (2007). Higher Education Quality Assurance in Sub-Saharan Africa. World Bank Working Paper No. 124. Washington, D.C.
13. Msiska (2015) 'Student Satisfaction with University Lecturers in Malawi: A Case Study of a Private University'.
14. Mtambo, Meky and Tanaka (2016), Improving Higher Education in Malawi for Competitiveness in Global Economy. World Bank NCHE <http://www.nche.ac.mw/index.php/joomla-pages-iii/blog-layout/21-responsive/24-free-responsive-joomla-2-5-template> 2017, 02/03 11:33 pm
15. Ngwira K. (2016). Quality Assurance for Higher Education Institutions in Malawi, AuthorHouse. Ntim, S. Massification in Ghanaian Higher Education: Implications for Pedagogical Quality, Equity Control and Assessment. (J) Journal of Studies in International Research in Higher Education, Volume 1, No. 1, 2016 pp. 160-168.
16. Quality Assurance and Enhancement policy, Mzuni 2016. Sharra S. (2014) Africa Aphulika Blog. Shawa, L.B., Governance in Malawian Universities: The role of dialectical reasoning and communicative rationality. Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences Vol. 5 No 20:1176-1183, September 2014.
17. Shawa (2014) 'The Quest for a Quality Delivery of University Education in Malawi' Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences Vol. 5 No 20: 101-116, September 2014.
18. Scott P. (1995). The Meanings of Mass Higher Education Buckingham SRHE: Open University Press
19. Scott, P. (1998), "Massification, Internationalization and Globalization", in The Globalization of Higher Education, Open University Press, pp. 108-129
20. Trow, M., Reflections on the transition from elite to mass universal access: Forms and phases of higher education in modern societies since WWII. In P. Altbach (Ed.), International handbook of Higher Education. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer (2005).
21. Trow, M. (1973), Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education, Berkeley, Calif., 1973
22. Trow, M. (1998), "Trust, Markets and Accountability in Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective", Higher Education Policy, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 309-324
23. Trow, M. (2000), "From Mass Higher education to Universal Access: The American Advantage", Minerva 37, pp. 1-26
24. Trow, M. (2003), "On Mass Higher Education and Institutional Diversity", Published as part of a series on University Education and Human Resources, by the Samuel Neaman Institute for Advanced Studies in Science and Technology, Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, May, 2003
25. Tuijnman, A.C. & Postlethwaite, T.N. (Eds). (1994). Monitoring the standards of education. Oxford: Pergamon.
26. UNESCO. (2007). The Virtual University: Models and Messages. Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/iiep/virtualuniversity/home.php>
27. UNESCO (2003). Recent Developments and Future Prospects of Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa. UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Africa (BREDA) and UNESCO Harare Cluster Office. Paris.
28. Van Vught FA, and Westerheijden DF (1993), Quality management and quality assurance in European higher education: Methods and mechanisms, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications
29. World Bank Report, Education System in Malawi: Country Status Report, World Bank Working Paper no. 182 (R) Washington D.C. January 2010.
30. World Bank Report (2002), "Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education"
31. Zeleza T. (2004) African University in Crisis. Journal of Studies in International Research in Higher Education, Volume 2, No. 1, 2004 pp. 16-28.