

The Role of Programme Leaders in the Management of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Programmes in the Department of Education of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)

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Abstract

The qualitative case study investigated the Regional Programme Coordinators' (RPCs') perceptions of the role of Programme Leaders on the management of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Programmes in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Quicker-views with open-ended questions were responded to by 20 out of 30 RPCs who were conveniently sampled. The study found out that Programme Leaders initiate, develop and design new programmes. They also review and evaluate existing programmes. RPCs indicated that the creation of teamwork, provision of expertise and direction, convincing students that ODL programmes are credible and representing RPCs at National level as some of the strengths that Programme Leaders offer in ODL programme management. RPCs cited lack of resources, delayed distribution of tutorial packages and missing results as challenges of great concern in ODL programme management by Programme Leaders. The study concluded that teamwork among Programme Leaders, RPCs, Dean and support Unit Heads was a pre-requisite for efficient and effective management of ODL Programmes. The study recommended that Programme Leaders need to work to the best of their ability. Programme Leaders need to effectively communicate their vision and mission all the time if ever their programmes are to bear a competitive cutting edge domestically and internationally.

Key terms

The ensuing terms are defined in the manner they are used in this study.

The term **role** refers to the duties of Programme Leaders in the managing of ODL Programmes.

ODL Programmes are the degrees that the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) offers in the Department of Education.

Programme Leaders are academics or in the field of Education Specialist lecturers who are entrusted with capacity to manage ODL Programmes by designing, implementing, evaluating new degrees and revising existing degrees.

Regional Programme Coordinators (RPCs) are academics or course specialist lectures in the field of Education who are based at the ZOU's 10 Regional Centres.

Management of ODL Programmes is a process whereby degrees in Education are designed implemented, evaluated and revised through regional Programme Coordinators (RPCs) and other stakeholders such as the Public Service Commission (PSC) and Professional bodies such as the Zimbabwe Teachers' Association (ZIMTA) and the Zimbabwe Progressive Teachers' Union (ZPTU)

1. Introduction

Successful ODL institutions count on the symbiotic role of Programme Leaders, Deans, Tutors and Support Unit Heads in managing ODL programmes. These mutually support each other in a bid to help the university to realise its goals and objectives. The present study investigates Regional Programme Coordinators' perceptions of the role of Programme Leaders in the management of ODL programmes. It begins by defining key terms of the study. Key terms are followed by the background to the study that

tries to situate the problem under study into its proper context. Statement of the problem, research questions and significance to the study support the background to the study in attempt to justify the need for carrying out this study. Literature review and research methodology form the second and third parts of the study. The fourth and fifth parts of the study constitute findings and their discussion. Conclusions are drawn from the findings. Finally, recommendations based on the study's findings are made.

Background to the Study

It is common course that innovative management to a large measure determines not only the efficient and effectiveness of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Universities, but their survival, growth and development as well (Nhundu, 1995). The management of ODL Programmes is by no means a small task for both ODL managers and academics. The Deans of faculties in ODL institutions provide academic guidance. Programme Leaders provide expertise for their particular programmes at the national level as they work hand in hand with the Deans to steer the ship (Grote, 2000). The programme expertise by course(s) is not confined to the Programme Leaders. It cascades to the RPCs. It is through Programme Leaders and able support of the RPCs that the management of ODL programmes can be run only efficiently as effectively, but, innovatively as well (Otago, 2006; Lockwood, 1995). The foregoing observations managed to proffer how Programme Leaders could manage ODL Programmes in ODL institutions. They however lacked ZOU's context specificity since they were carried outside Zimbabwe. Furthermore, they did not specify the origins of such perceptions. The current study explores RPC's perceptions of how Programme Leaders of the Department of Education at the ZOU can manage blended learning programmes; provide relevant leadership skills in changing ODL programmes and current trends in professional development for planning and management in the knowledge society world.

Statement of the Problem

Efficient, effective and innovative management of ODL programmes is far from being the preserve of Programme Leaders alone. The present co-researchers sought to interrogate the following question:

- How do Regional Programme Coordinators of the Department of Education at the ZOU perceive the Programme Leaders role in the management of ODL programmes?

Research Questions

The following research questions tried to provoke answers for the main research problem:

- How do RPCs perceive the Programme Leaders role in the management of ODL programmes in the Department of Education at the ZOU?
- How do RPCs perceive as strengths of having Programme Leaders in the management of ODL programmes?
- How do RPCs perceive as challenges to the Programme Leaders role in the, management in the Department of Education at the ZOU of ODL programmes?
- To what extent do RPCs envisage the Programme Leaders role could be put to best use in the management of ODL programmes in the Department of Education at the ZOU?

Significance of the Study

The study was significant in the sense that it was hoped it would contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding the Programme Leaders' role in the efficient and effective management of ODL programmes. It also intended to underscore the fact that excelling ODL Universities are a result of international best management practices by providing worthwhile information for use by both ODL managers and academics. Furthermore, it looked forward integrate the efforts of Programme Leaders, Deans, RPCs and others stake holders in the pursuit of efficient and effective management of ODL Programmes at the ZOU's Department of Education. It also intended to underline the extent to which ZOU's Department of Education was able to meet its customers' needs and expectations. Above all, it would suggest some management practices that would put ZOU in the best light among competing universities.

2. Literature Review

Serving the interest of the client provide the basis for effective and efficient management of progressive organizations (Roberts, 2004). By the same token, Kotler (2001) explains that organizations can achieve success by:

1. Creating a sense of urgency to improve their service.
2. Putting together a strong team to direct the process.
3. Creating appropriate vision.
4. Communicating new visions broadly.
5. Empowering employees to act on that vision.
6. Producing short-term result to create credibility and counter cynicism.
7. Building momentum and using that to tackle service provision.
8. Anchoring new behaviors in organisational culture.

The above findings seem to be cornerstones of effective management in general. They are not zeroing in on how ODL programmes run. It was against such observations that this study intended to ascertain the degree to which such findings could be applicable to the RPCs perceptions of the management of ODL Programmes in the ZOU's Department of Education.

3. Research Methodology

The research adopted a single case study of the Department of Education in the Faculty of Arts and Education of the ZOU. It was rooted in qualitative research. The greatest advantage of a case study is that it enables researchers to explore phenomenon of interest in very great depth (Thomas and Nelson, 2001). Cresswell (2003) points out that a qualitative case study seeks narrative, descriptive and informing responses about phenomena from the research participants. As the study sought to explore the RPCs perceptions of the role of the Programme Leaders in the management of ODL programmes at the ZOU's Department of Education, the current researchers felt that this design would be appropriate.

A convenient sample of 20 out of a possible 30 RPCs was drawn from the 10 Regional Centres of the ZOU with intent to solicit their opinions regarding the role of the Programme Leaders in the management of ODL programmes in the Department of Education. The convenience sampled enabled the researches to tap data from research participants present at the research sites (Silverman, 2006).

The participants (RPCs) responded to the quester- view with open ended questions on the internet. This instrument was preferred because it permitted the research participants to answer questions freely without fear of any reprisals (Punch, 2004). This method did not yield desired results in some cases as some sections of the quester-view were unanswered. To go round this challenge, RPCs were interviewed by means of a telephone in order gather much more comprehensive data. Telephone interviews enable researcher to gather more meaningful data than a mere questionnaire does because the researcher has an opportunity to probe further questions in order to seek clarity on unclear issues about phenomenon under study (Seale, 2006; Thomas and Nelson, 2001). By so doing, RPCs were able to give their opinions regarding the role of Programme Leaders in the management of ODL programmes at the ZOU. Data were coded and content analyzed using themes that emerged from the research date itself. The data presentation and analysis was two -fold: brief demographic data and actual research data.

4. Findings

Demographic Data of the Research Participants

A total of 20 RPCs from the 10 Regions of the ZOU's Department of Education participated in the study. The average age of the RPCs was 40, 2 years .Seventy-percent (70%) of the RPCs were male and 30% female. All the RPCs had a family of their own such that they undertook some family responsibilities. Eighty five percent of them specialise in Educational Management because they are holders of either a Master of Education in Educational Administration, Planning and Policy Studies or a Master of Education in Educational Management. Ten percent specialise in Curriculum Development since they hold a Master of Education in Curriculum Studies. Five percent of them are holders of a Master of Science Degree in Psychology. In terms of professional experience, 65% of the research participants had a working experience ranging from zero to five years, while the rest had served at least six years. All of them were employed by the ZOU on a full time basis.

The responses of the research participants were placed into four categories which are:

1. RPCs' perceptions of the role of Programme Leaders in the management of ODL programmes.
2. The strengths of having programme Leaders in the management of ODL programmes as perceived by RPCs.
3. Challenges to Programme Leaders' role in the management of ODL programmes as perceived by RPCs.
4. How the University and RPCs could put Programme Leaders to best use in the management of ODL Programmes.

RPCs Perceptions of the Role of Programme Leaders in the Management of ODL Programmes

In the open ended response RPCs put forward a plethora role of Programme Leaders in the management of ODL programmes. First, they indicated that a programme Leader is appointed for the sole purpose of initiating and developing new ODL programmes. Second, they mentioned that Programme Leaders are there to provide direction to RPCs in the coordination of ODL Programmes in the Regional Centres. They also pointed out that Programme Leaders develop ODL Programme regulations in consultation with the Dean and RPCs. Programme Leaders were also found to be responsible for carrying out needs assessment of new programmes to ensure widespread acceptance of new programmes by stakeholders, otherwise their credibility would be questionable if some key stakeholders do not approve them. RPCs appeared to be conscious of the role of Programme Leaders in the management of ODL Programmes when they penned the following statements:

- Programme Leaders revise existing programmes together with RPCs.
- They are members of the Faculty Planning Committee which comprises the Dean, Chair Persons and Programme Leaders of the various Departments.
- Programme Leaders evaluate existing programmes with the assistance of RPCs.
- They coordinate the production of tutorial packages
- They attend high profile meetings meant to improve operations in the Department
- They attend senate meetings and facilitate presentations of examination results to the senate.
- They spearhead the setting of assignment and examination question items, as well as the preparation of relevant marking guides.
- They prepare tutorial letters for particular intakes every year and every semester
- They work with the Dean through their Chairpersons to provide direction to new members in the Department.
- They coordinate the preparations of course outlines for various courses.
- They lead from the front in terms of module writing and reviewing.
- They recommend suitable module writers to the faculty after collecting copies of their curriculum vitae.

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- With the assistance of RPCs, they proof read examination items that will have printed by the academic Registry.
- They prepare and provide all Regions and other relevant units of the University with courses on offer well in advance to pave for forward planning.

The Strengths of RPCs in the Management of ODL Programmes

Successful ODL Programmes count on the expertise of Programme Leaders. RPCs expressed a great deal of satisfaction regarding the role of Programme leaders in the management of ODL Programmes. Critical strengths of having Programme Leaders in the management of ODL Programmes they cited in the open-ended responses include:

- Forging team work among RPCs
- Providing expertise in the programme course design, programme course/ review and programme course evaluation.
- Convincing students through the tutorial letter that studying through ODL is a worthwhile academic experience.
- Representing RPCs concerns in the Department, Faculty and other support units of the ODL University.
- Providing direction in the research supervision.
- Identifying relevant expertise in the RPCs and part time tutors in connection with programme development and material production.
- Quality assurance of programmes' regulations, assignment and examination question items and marking guides, and module course outlines and finished modules before they reach their intended destinations.
- Setting standards for suitable student selection criteria, error free modules pitched at appropriate level and recommending the selection of qualified tutors.

Challenges to Programme Leaders in the Management of ODL Programmes

While Programme Leaders present some strength in the management of ODL Programmes, challenges are not an exception. RPCs expressed their displeasure with the missing examination results, missing modules, and late receipt of tutorial packages during registration period. The following statements bear testimony:

- 'Academic Registry are elbowing the Programme Leaders out of the examination processing system, thereby, resulting in missing results'
- Support Units such as the Materials Production, Corporate Services and Procurement Departments do not inform Programme Leaders of the modules that are in stock and those sent to the Regions.'
- 'Programme Leaders in their Faculties sometimes delay in sending tutorial packages due to lack of resources.'
- Programme Leaders are not senators. Therefore, they there to implement super ordinate decisions passed on to them as a dosage by the Dean and Chairperson.
- Programme Leaders are detached from Regions because they do not visit Regions at all.
- Programme Leaders are not effectively assessing quality of their programmes at implementation sites.

How the University and RPCs could put Programme Leaders to Best use in the Management of ODL Programmes

In their free responses the research participants had this to say;
'Support Programme Leaders with adequate resources,'
'Improve library facilities'

‘Provide Programme Leaders with regular workshops to improve their rolls’
‘Encourage programme Leaders to develop and adopt a culture of research’
‘Programme leaders need to visit Regional Centres during tutorials’
‘Create opportunities for collaborative research with RPCs and students’

‘Provide on-line services’

‘Offer them short courses on management issues such as human resources and time management’

‘Offer them funds to visit Regions during orientation and the conduct of weekend tutorials twice a year that is, once every semester’

5. Discussion of Findings

RPCs of the ZOU expressed various perceptions of the role of Programme Leaders in the management of ODL Programmes. These concerned the way RPCs perceived the role of Programme Leaders, strengths of having Programmes Leaders, Challenges to Programme Leaders and how the RPCs and the university can put Programme leaders to best use in the management of ODL Programmes.

The Role of Programme Leaders in the Management of ODL Programmes

With regards to the role of Programme Leaders in the management of ODL Programmes RPCs were particularly aware of the job description of the Programme Leaders. Programme Leaders were tasked with the responsibility to develop, design, implement and evaluate new and existing programmes. According to Nhundu (1995), Programme Leaders are the foundation on which ODL Programmes are built. Because of the observation, RPCS seem to perceive that Programme Leaders are critical in the efficient and effective management of ODL Programmes RPCs and expert Programme Leaders have to be fully aware of their role if ever confusion is to be avoided in the Department because confusion damages the image of the University quite a great deal.

Strengths of Programme Leaders in the Management of ODL Programmes

In connection with the strengths of Programme Leaders in the management of ODL programmes, RPCs were conscious of some of the strengths that Programme Leaders offered to the management of ODL Programmes. This was against the background which the University of Otago (2006) (as indicated in their website) provides a wide range of academic, electronic, recreational and welfare services in their bid to satisfy their stakeholders. If resources permit, this therefore should be the case with the service delivery institution, Programme Leaders included. Apparently, findings in this study seem to suggest that the greatest strength of involving Programme Leaders in the management of ODL Programmes lies in the collective planning, shared decision making, collaborative, commitment and shared evaluation regarding the running of the programmes with the Dean and RPCs. The programmes become communally owned by the university’s employees. They are all praised in good times and take the blame during the bad times.

Challenges to Programme Leaders in the Management of ODL Programmes

In regard to the challenges associated with having Leaders in the management of ODL programmes, RPCs were particularly dissatisfied with missing results, missing modules and delayed tutorial packages. The issues of missing results, missing modules and delayed tutorial packages appeared to go against Lovelock (2001) who notes that customers looking for services may be anticipating services from any of the three different service levels, desired service, wished for service and predicted service. Desired service is that service which a client hopes to receive. Wished for service is a combination of what clients believe can be and should be delivered in the context of their needs, while predicted service is the service that the client anticipated receiving. These three levels directly affect how the ZOU clients define quality service offered to them. In fact, students come to ZOU with predetermined service expectations, and once those are not met they speak ill of the management of ODL programmes. The foregoing discussion

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underlines Roberts' (2004) observation that serving the interests of the clients provide the basis for effective and efficient management of progressive organisations. It is common knowledge that ODL institutions like the ZOU are part and parcel of progressive organisations. Therefore, they cannot afford to run the risk of failing to meet the students' needs and expectations in an extremely competitive environment, otherwise they may lose students.

Strategies to put Programme Leaders to Best use in the Management of ODL Programmes

In line with what the RPCs and the university need to do in order to put the Programme Leaders into best use in the management of ODL programmes, RPCs frankly suggested the need for the University to support programme Leaders with resources, improve library facilities, provide programme Leaders with regular workshops, create on-line services and having Programme Leaders visiting Regional Centres during tutorial weekends. The preceding sentiments are consistent with Nhundu (1995) , Benza (1997) and Roberts' (2004) observations who concur that ODL Programmes can be effectively and efficiently managed if client needs are met with a great deal of satisfaction. The implication of these findings is that Programme Leaders need not work in isolation of RPCs and Unit Managers in order to provide a first class service to the student. Therefore, quality assurance of the programmes at all levels of ODL institutions is not an option.

6. Conclusions

Programme Leaders had a clear job description which when clearly adhered to could enable efficient and effective management of ODL Programmes. Notable RPCs perceptions of the role of Programme Leaders in the management of ODL Programmes revolved around developing new programmes, evaluating and reviewing existing programmes, providing directions to RPCs and guiding the student. A clear implementation of such roles breeds effective and efficient management of ODL Programmes as ZOU will be meeting the needs of the client.

Regarding strengths of Programme Leaders in the management of ODL Programmes, it can be concluded that team work among Programme Leaders, RPCs, Dean and Support Unit leaders is a pre-condition to efficient and effective management of ODL Programmes. Team work conceives shared vision, collective planning, shared decision making, collaboration commitment and shared evaluation by all ODL workers with regards to the management of ODL Programmes.

Programme Leaders are sometimes not well supported with adequate resources. This tends to have a telling effect on their performance. Material, human (secretarial) and technological (computers with appropriate hard and software, and internet facilities) resources are sometimes in short supply. Support units tend to isolate Programme Leaders in the distribution of modules to the Regions, processing of examination queries and attending research workshops. Programme Leaders are often taken by surprise when RPCs report of missing results and research workshops attended. This usually negatively impacts on the quality of management of ODL Programmes.

Programme Leaders have the capacity of quality assuring their programmes, although they are let down by lack of resources, lack of Regional visits during orientation and tutorial conduction periods and lack of recognition by Support Units of the university. Therefore, quality is not simply desirable, but essential for survival. ZOU's success depends on how well its products compete on the domestic and international markets probably because of what Programme Leaders with the support other workers do.

Effective communication is the nerve centre for the development of ODL programmes. Possession of effective verbal and written communication skills by Programme Leaders is an asset for successful ODL institutions.

7. Recommendations

In view of the preceding findings and conclusions, the study recommends that:

- Programme Leaders need to perform their roles to the best of their ability if ever they are to display the image of the University into the best light among competing Universities.
- Programme Leaders need to work together with Deans, RPCs and support unit heads in order to efficiently and effectively manage ODL Programmes.
- The University and RPCs need to provide Programme Leaders with all the necessary support so that they will be able to execute their duties diligently, efficiently and effectively in the search for effective and efficient management of ODL programmes.
- Provision of research opportunities in terms of programme development, design, review, implementation and evaluation are necessary so as to promote proper management of ODL programmes by Programme Leaders.
- Programme Leaders need to visit Regions at least twice a year during tutorial weekends so that they can have a feel of how their programmes are actually running on the ground.
- Quality assurance of ODL programmes by Programmes and other interested parties on a continuous basis will be a baseline for ODL universities like ZOU who want to survive and be successful in an extremely competitive environment.
- Programme Leaders need to effectively communicate their vision and mission all the time if ever their programmes are to bear a competitive cutting edge domestically and internationally.
- Further studies need to be carried out at a macro-level using all Departments in the Faculty of Arts and Education.

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