Zimbabwe Open University Examination as an Assessment tool: Opportunities and Challenges in Languages and Media Studies

By

[1]Mhute Isaac, [2]Rosemary Ngara & [3]Richard Ngwarai

[1]Lecturer & Programme Coordinator,Department of Arts, Zimbabwe Open University,
Box 1210, Masvingo, Zimbabwe
[2]Lecturer & Programme Coordinator, Department of Education, Zimbabwe Open University,
Masvingo Region, Zimbabwe
[3]Lecturer &Programme Coordinator,Department of Disability Studies & Special Needs
Education, Zimbabwe Open University,Masvingo Region

Abstract

Assessment is one of the most important aspects in the learning process of every programme. It entails the critical tools that lecturers employ to evaluate the degree of effective learning within the student. It makes the learner stay focussed throughout the learning period at the same time assisting the lecturer with the much needed feedback and direction. The paper focuses on examination as an assessment tool. It demonstrates that an examination is a major part of every academic learning process as success and failure of learners is judged by one's performance in it. This places the assessment tool at the centre of the whole learning process as both lecturers and students perform their duties throughout the academic year with the ultimate examination in mind. This paper also delves into the opportunities and challenges associated with the effectiveness of this assessment tool in open and distance learning. It relies upon some qualitative analysis of data attained through administering questionnaires amongst Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) Masvingo region's languages and media studies lecturers and students. Findings from the study indicate that there are both opportunities and challenges that are associated with this tool of assessment in open and distance learning (ODL). Challenges include the unavailability of the necessary resources.Among other things, the study recommends that ZOU avails exam tables to individual candidates as hard copies or electronically.

Keywords: Assessment, languages, examination, coursework, open and distance learning (ODL)

1. Introduction

Assessment is a process that involves defining expected outcomes; creating opportunities for all students to achieve those outcomes; gathering, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting evidence so that we may understand and improve student learning (Suskie, 2004). Marzano (1993) regards assessment as the only way in which growth in understanding of the learned information and the ability to apply it can be measured. Assessment of learning is only valid when it promotes competence to perform work of a high quality. Effective assessment also plays a vital role in diagnosing learning progress and problems. When developing tools for assessment or evaluation, lecturers should be aware of what they are trying to assess or evaluate, as well as how the particular tools connect to the instruction students have received. Therefore, lecturers should ask themselves, "What do students need to know and be able to do in order to succeed?"; "Do they have the tools to succeed?"; When developing tools for assessment, lecturers might also ask themselves, "What activities do I need in order to inform my teaching?" and "What activities will help students understand what they can do and what they need to learn to do next?" (Field 2006). Assessment and evaluation should be flexible and determined by what the students need. Tinto (2005) notes that standardized tests should be used thoughtfully and viewed as one part of the assessment/evaluation puzzle and used in conjunction with other assessment/evaluation tools. Students who learn to be good, thoughtful, critical readers do well on standardized tests and have abilities that will serve them well throughout their lives.

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Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) languages programme offers students formative coursework, that is, work meant to influence development within students ahead of the final examination session. The coursework's main purpose is to provide the students with some feedback from lecturers, which helps them, develop their analytical and writing skills ahead of the final examination session. This coursework thus basically prepares one for the written examination, which in turn is designed to evaluate the overall level of academic achievement. It also yields 20% or a fifth of the final examination mark. The final examination session contributes the other 80% of the final mark. The students also do a research project that focuses on the actual application of the knowledge and skills attained from the courses in the programme. The research constitutes a full course on its own. All these three parts constitute the overall examination. This makes the examination a considerable process that takes place throughout the entire learning period and one that both lecturers and students need to take up seriously in order to be assured of a good level of academic achievement. Lecturers are there basically to evaluate students in tutorials to see the degree of effective learning as they interact with their modules, do their course work, research and finally sit for their examination sessions. This places the ODL lecturer in a position where assessment of student learning becomes the most vital key result area.

 ZOU as an institution and BAECS department in particular focuses upon enhancing effective student learning, that is, what students take away from their university experience. Student learning is hereby understood to include more than just the knowledge and skills in a major course or discipline. Instead it also includes other skills required for success in our modern technological society and to be broadly educated citizens with written and oral communication skills, critical thinking, quantitative and scientific reasoning, as well as technological literacy (Field, 2006). Student learning also includes cognitive and personal development as well as career development. Measuring student learning thus requires immense expertise .Knowledge and skills in a major course may be relatively easy to measure directly while measuring critical thinking or even written and oral communication skills requires specific assessment expertise (Kuh et al, 2005). Assessment professionals understand which areas are best measured by tests and which ones are best measured by presentations, researches etc. In total, using many different assessment tools provides a rich picture of students' capabilities as well as a composite picture of what students are learning. Measuring student learning thus requires resources as well as the development of good instruments by skilled academics. This background indicates that achievement of our goal as an institution hinges upon the commitment of the expert lecturers and the institution itself towards ensuring the effective examination of our student learning process through well planned coursework, properly supervised researches and properly planned examination sessions. All these would, above all, need to be complemented by critical marking by experts in the respective fields. Whilst the institution needs to avail the necessary resources, lecturers need to graduate from being mere experts in the delivery of information into assessment professionals if effective learning is to be ensured amongst the products.

Coursework in the languages section at ZOU is made up of two assignment questions set for all the ten regions that students attempt and are marked by their regional lecturers. The final examination takes the form of a three hour test in which students have to attempt three of the six questions presented in their question paper. The same paper is again written throughout all the regions and nobody within the ten regions knows the actual set of questions contained in the paper as questions are just drawn from the item banks by staff at the national centre, a position meant to ensure thorough studying in preparation for the examination rather than plotting. The item bank questions are derived by subject experts from the modules which, apart from summing up all that is covered in the course in question, act as the primary lecturers for the respective courses. Students would be expected to demonstrate understanding of the various concepts at the same time demonstrating maturity through availing evidence of further research. The marking is centralised and done by experts in the respective areas. The processing of the results is also done at the national centre in Harare for all the ten regions. This processing involves, amongst other things, joining up coursework and examination session marks. The overall results for paid up students are then released in the shortest possible time periods. These determine whether one has to graduate, proceed to the next level, repeat certain courses whilst proceeding to the next level or repeat the entire level. In the

case of final students who graduate, the degree class is also determined by the performance in the examination and this in turn determines the student's opportunities for further studies. For instance, in the department, progressing to the Honours level requires an upper second class or better in the first degree. In the job markets the better degree class holders have higher opportunities and their performance is usually better.

Statement of the Problem

There seems to be a continuous increase in complaints by ZOU languages and media studies students on the quality of their examination results. This triggered the study which sought to investigate students' views on opportunities and challenges associated with the opportunities and challenges associated with the examination process in languages and media studies.

Research questions

The study was guided by the following questions:
- What opportunities are associated with the use of assignments as a formative assessment tool in ZOU languages and media studies?
- What are the perceived challenges associated with the tool?

2. Research methodology

The study was based upon qualitative analysis of data gathered through administering a questionnaire amongst ZOU Masvingo's part-time lecturerers and students in the languages and media studies section. The questionnaire focused on the opportunities and challenges associated with the languages and media studies examination process. In total four lecturers and 15 students participated in the exercise.

Conceptual framework

Examination

According to Curzon (1997), the word examination comes from the Latin word 'examinare' which means to weigh accurately.An examination is the methodological testing of attainment relating to knowledge capabilities by making reference to agreed standards.Examinations are a form of summative assessment.Summative assessment is terminal as it comes at the end of a learning experience, or the educational training.It usually comes at the end of a semester as is the case in ODL universities and so summative assessment takes the form of exams in most institutions. Its results inform the learner ,tutor, and ODL institution of learner and programme achievement at the end of a prescribed period of instruction(Souza :1996) Thus in ODL ,summative assessment can be a tool for grading and making judgment about learners' and programmes achievement.

Purposes of Examinations

Examinations serve several purposes (Curzon, 1997).They enable teachers at various levels to explore the extent to which knowledge and skills would have been acquired and understood.Examinations are instrumental in providing planners of curricula at different levels to determine the appropriateness of methods of teaching as recommended in subject courses.In educational systems examinations are used in maintaining high standards.

A case against examinations

Poor performance in examinations may cause some students to lose self esteem, even if they are adults.Exams especially those involving essay writing may be marked subjectively and so they may not provide a true reflection of what an individual is worth.

Administration of examinations

It is crucial for educational institutions to train students to develop skills in taking examinations such as question interpretation,time management and skills of essay writing (McKeachie, 1998).Students need to know about the formats of their exams and whether the exams will cover the entire course of just part of it (Brewer, 2006).Each student should be availed with an individual exam timetable be it a hard or soft copy. Conditions in which examinations are taken should be ideal , being well ventilated , accident free and well lighted , for example.

Challenges in managing examinations

Teacher training and orientation in the area of exams is important yet is requires much time.The issue of selling the idea of effective and reliable marking to every teacher is crucial. It requires institutional resouces such as time and even appropriate technology to support marker training. Production of good quality items is another problem educational institutions face in managing exams. Availing results promptly is also problematic for many educational institutions (Giles, 2011).

3. Findings of the study

Lecturers' Assessment of ZOU examination process

¾ of the lecturers viewed the ZOU library as too shallow in as far as material for the language related courses are concerned. They viewed this as a situation affecting effective learning and consequently performance in examinations by hindering academic research especially at this time when the internet facility is still expensive and not open to most of our students. They also cited instances when students ended up duplicating material in their modules as a direct consequence of this problem. 2/4 highlighted the incorporation of assignment and examination questions that do not fall into the respective courses or modules as an area of concern. They emphasized that this disadvantaged the students by narrowing the pool of questions from which they can make choices. They also noted instances when project supervision becomes so difficult due to distance. 4/4 of the lecturers said the teaching of computer courses and the degree of student achievement itself has been challenged in a university without a computer laboratory. On a positive note, however, ¾ of them have praised the centralised assignment and examination questions saying this ensures limited degrees of fraud unlike in most of the Zimbabwean conventional universities where the lecturer who designs the course outline, teaches, sets the assignment and examination questions and marks all of them. Motivation of part timers has also been highlighted as one area that would ensure thoroughness in the preparation, supervision and marking of exams in ZOU. 4/4 of the lecturers noted that ZOU modules are written by experts who know how to take students step by step until they attain a deep understanding of the concepts. They have commented them as worth being the primary teachers for the different courses.

Students' Assessment of ZOU examinations

12/15 of the students were worried with the missing results saying at times they do not know what to register for since they would not be sure whether they were proceeding or not. They indicated that at times one would find oneself having to pay for a confirmation of results request. 7/10 highlighted that problems of delayed results at times were as a result of changing pin numbers especially when the actual pin is availed in the examination room and the student entered it wrongly. 9/10 of the students expressed their concern over the university's failure to avail student identity cards with the pin numbers well on time. These students highlighted instances when courses one would not have done appeared on the result slip or some courses done in the previous semester reappeared on the current semester's slip. They also noted poor performance in exams, in some instances, as a result of the unavailability of modules. 8/15 opined that the announcement of examination dates has been noted as done too late and making some students miss the examinations. They added that clashing examinations have also been noted as a good recipe for poor performance as one may be forced to sit for three examinations in one day. 7/15 of the students noted the unavailability of set books in the bookshops as affecting performance in literature

courses and examinations. 12/15, however, praised the thoroughness of the marking , projects and examinations.

4. Discussion

The examination process is meant to evaluate the degree of effective learning within students. Centralization of assignment and examination questions in ZOU provides an opportunity for effective learning and good performance in the examinations. There is an opportunity for effective learning as even their regional lecturers would not know what the examination paper would be holding. The commendable quality of ZOU modules also ensures effective learning and good performance in examinations. The nature of open and distance learning ensures maturity on the side of students as they would be taking part in the learning process.Students are taught to be independent of the lecturer and be resourceful. These are qualities that make them fit well into the real world and are valued so much by different employers throughout the world.

The poor ZOU library facility and the unavailability of a computer laboratory compromises performance in exams. At this point in time open and distance learning would not succeed in the absence of a rich library and internet facility. Students in this type of set up rely more on research than on what lecturers give them. The whole process would, therefore, be a flawed process. This would mean poor performance as well in the examinations which in turn means lower degree classes and, therefore, limited post graduate opportunities. The computer laboratory is long overdue in a university that offers a number of computer courses. The problem of missing and false results as well as the delayed release of results reduces the importance of examinations. Lecturers and students would not get the much desired feedback on time. Employers may end up questioning the credibility of ZOU graduates. Some students may miss post university employment opportunities with some ending up making late registration. Low morale on part-time lecturers' part certainly compromises the whole learning and examination process. The majority of ZOU lecturers are part-timers and their motivation would go a long way in raising the entire university's learning and examination standards.

The position of the paper is that examinations are there to evaluate the degree of effective learning taking place within the student. Conditions such as centralised examination marking ensure no possibilities of cheating in the examinations enhances learning as students would know that this is the only way to succeed. Aspects such as good quality modules also enable the students to learn effectively, perform well in examinations and attain excellent degree classes. These in turn open up more opportunities for further learning as well as in the job markets where those with better degree class are most preferred by employers and usually have more chances of performing better in the jobs. Anything that acts as an obstacle to one's performance in examinations is a challenge to effective learning and thus a threat to student opportunities in life.

5. Recommendations

Lecturers need to graduate into assessment professionals as they are the ones who set assignment and examination questions, they are markers as well as supervisors of researches. The primary teaching in ODL has to be left to the modules with their task beginning with tutorial tasks that effectively examine the degree of student learning going forward. The paper recommends beefing up of the library if the goal of the university in general and the department in particular is to be achieved. Prescribed set books must have copies in the local library or at least be available in the book shops across the country. The computer laboratory must be put in place to ensure enough research as required in open and distance learning. Student identity cards and examination dates and individual timetables need to be availed on time. This would ensure the elimination of clashes as well as enough preparations ahead of the respective examination sessions. The national centre needs to develop into a world class centre by labouring to

eliminate the different causes for missing, delayed and false results. Incentives for part-timers would ensure quality learning as well as good performance in examinations.

Summary

The paper has managed to provide some background information on what is expected in an open and distance learning institution. It has highlighted the importance of examinations as an assessment tool indicating how this may be effectively done in an institution. It also makes an effort to avail information pertaining to the goal of the Zimbabwe Open University's languages department. It has presented and discussed some of the opportunities and challenges being faced by both ZOU students and lecturers in their efforts to benefit from and help the institution attain its goals. It has also made several recommendations that can make the examination process at ZOU develop into one of a world class open and distance university.

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