

Financing A Sustainable Quality Assurance Model For National Development Through Open And Distance Learning In Higher Education: The Zimbabwean Experience

by

Dr Primrose Kurasha

and

Prof Takawira C. Gwarinda

Zimbabwe Open University

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Introduction

The financing of public or state universities has been problematic since the rise of neo-liberalism in the late 1970s as some developed countries began to scale down expenditure for social services as a new drive in their social policies. They chose to advance the ideology of maximising profits for private business by advocating the withdrawal of the state from social policy and the economic sector, giving free reign to private capital. The main trigger for this was the oil crisis of 1973-4 when Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) took measures to receive more just returns on their resource. In Africa, neo-liberal ideology was driven by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund which gave various conditionalities for state loans and what has often been called development aid.

Higher education, which had heavily relied on state funding, went into dire straits as the state faltered in sustaining university expenditure. New means of procuring resources had to be devised, a theme with which African academics have tried to grapple with, for example, Chacha looking at the private funding of universities in East Africa, Nafukho looking at the market model of financing state universities in Kenya and Obasi and Eboh looking at the cost-sharing dilemma in Nigerian universities (see Zeleza and Olukoshi, 2004). The thread that comes through the various analyses is that the neo-liberal ideology of providing higher education in Africa has been detrimental to the

smooth financing of higher education on the continent. A concomitant challenge has been the question of quality assurance in higher education. While conventional universities have heavily relied on the state in a system where distance education institutions have tended to be funded by students from the world of work, the financial dilemma has generally hit both types of higher education provisioning and quality assurance has been equally affected.

In this context, *quality assurance* is taken to mean more than Freeman's conception of an "essentially preventive process against error" (Freeman, 1993:18). Rather, it is a process of ensuring that the students who enter a programme exit with the requisite standards of competence or set of outcomes through employing a combination of policies, structures, resources and procedures which are used to make educational activities meet specified performance levels and quality commitments. In open and distance learning (ODL), such an approach is hoped to promote life-long learning.

National development is conceived as a process of transformation in which there are both quantitative and qualitative changes in those things that constitute the day-to-day lives of the people. These include, on one hand, material phenomena such as more and better housing, food, clothing, means of transport, communication, schools and hospitals and, on the other hand, non-material phenomena such as better education, health,

leisure and recreation, freedom and inclusion and all those things that constitute what is taken to be a *better life*. In this regard, a *developmental state* is, therefore, an organ of societal organisation which consciously and purposively guides socio-economic activity for the creation of a better society rather than leaving things to chance or what has been termed the invisible hand of *market forces*. The developmental state, accordingly, guides society in its educational enterprise.

Statement of the problem

Quality assurance requires considerable resources if it is to achieve its intended goal of constantly promoting quality in higher education. This is even more pertinent in distance education or ODL which has tended to be regarded in some circles as inferior to conventional face-to-face education in terms of quality (Garrison in Keegan, 1993). This paper examines the problem of financing quality assurance operations in a sustainable manner to ensure that ODL in higher education can play its rightful role in national development in Zimbabwe. In doing so, the paper poses more questions than answers but hopes to benefit from the ensuing debate.

Methodology

The paper employs the case study method, which falls within the qualitative research paradigm, with the intention of providing a relatively complete understanding of the quality assurance challenges posed by the financial constraints of ZOU in its natural setting as it strives to improve quality in Zimbabwe's ODL in higher education. The major techniques used are documentary analysis, direct observation and participant observation by the presenters who are steeped in the operations of the university. While bias has long been a criticism of both kinds of observation, it has also been noted that great insights into the complexity of a social unit are drawn through the case study method of qualitative research.

The Institutional Context of the Zimbabwe Open University

To talk of *the Zimbabwean experience* in the provisioning of higher education in the national context is to talk of the Zimbabwe Open University in that it is the only national institution that is mandated by the state in the country to

provide higher education by ODL. This does not ignore the fact that such institutions as the University of London and the University of South Africa have provided university distance education *in Zimbabwe* for over fifty years. It merely stresses that such provisioning is not *Zimbabwean*.

From the Centre for Distance Education, a nucleic distance education unit set up at the University of Zimbabwe in 1993, The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) was established in 1999 as a result of an Act of Parliament which had set the envisaged institution's mandate as:

To provide for research and courses of instruction, suitable to the needs of learners through a distance education system, and to take such other steps as may appear necessary and desirable for the advancement and dissemination of knowledge... (Government of Zimbabwe, 1998:245).

The Act is accordingly explicit about ZOU having to operate as a distance education or open and distance learning institution, catering for the specific or characteristic needs of distance learners rather than conventional students while at the same time ensuring quality education since one cannot *advance* knowledge following methods that do not promote quality. The stress on research, along with instruction, implied a university which would be innovative as research leads to the discovery of new technologies or ways of doing things. This means that ZOU was not envisaged to be a conventional institution which would continue to slavishly follow methods that were traditional to most institutions of higher learning.

It is crucial to note that ZOU was founded in defiance of the World Bank's calls for Zimbabwe to curtail the provisioning of higher education in the country as a developmental strategy during the implementation of the International Monetary Fund-crafted Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) of the 1990s. In fact, 1991 saw the drive for the creation of *more* universities in the country from one state university to nine such universities and three private ones by 2010. ZOU was the third state university and the first national ODL higher education institution. The state understood the crucial role of higher education in development, a position which has recently been confirmed by Mintz and Smart who have argued that:

Although education is in part consumption, such services are largely human capital investments that

yield returns in the future through higher incomes paid to those who became educated (Mintz and Smart in Perry et al, 2008:238).

Ironically, the World Bank has itself recently sponsored a book by some twenty-four scholars, mainly from developing countries, arguing how universities promote economic development (Yusuf and Nabeshima, 2007).

It is also crucial to note that ZOU was founded at the point of political-economic upheavals which militated against sustainable development and smooth educational provisioning. Educational resources were very difficult to mobilise during the ensuing decade. Any successes were scored *in spite of* rather than *because of* the political-economic environment.

Nevertheless, the operationalisation of ZOU went ahead resulting in the setting up of ten Regional Centres, following Zimbabwe's ten provinces, co-ordinated from the National Centre in the national capital, Harare. Each Regional Centre based in the provincial capital, is run by a Regional Director, a team of academics known as Regional Programme Co-ordinators, according to each Faculty's requirements, and requisite administrative, that is, non-academic or support staff. The National Centre is run by the Vice-Chancellor and her team of senior managers, deans of faculties, directors and managers of various units and central administrative staff. As with all public universities in the country, the state President is the Chancellor of the university, a ceremonial position meant to unite the nation by giving unquestionable legitimacy and accreditation to all Zimbabwean public universities since all graduates are capped by one Chancellor, an accomplished academic in his own right, holding seven earned and over fifteen honorary doctorates from across the world. The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education (MOHTE) pays the public university staff.

Over the years, the university offered an ever-increasing number of degree and diploma programmes in four Faculties until they had reached 37 by 2010. The number is still rising with new ones having come on board as recently as August 2010. More will be on offer in January 2011. Today, ZOU is the largest university in Zimbabwe both by spread and student enrolment peaking at some 22 000 students in 2007.

The major methods of delivery are:

- Self-contained print modules distributed to students. These generally give the student all the basic content for a course and are intended, as it were, to replace the lecturer;
- Periodic face-to-face contact with part-time tutors for ironing out matters not understood from the module, add other content, share experiences and build esprit-de-corps;
- Tutorial letters;
- Radio lessons;
- Newsletters.
- CDs and DVDs;
- ZOU-on-line.

The major challenge for the university right from its establishment has been that of quality assurance in both subjective and objective terms. While some members of the public were skeptical of, if not hostile to, degrees offered through distance education in general, the university itself found several challenges in terms of resources.

Trends in the last five years

By the year 2005, the demand for university distance education was still rising at an unrelenting pace across the country. It appears that, as the economic situation was deteriorating, many people in employment, constituting the major ZOU pool of clients, found it necessary to acquire higher qualifications to stay in their jobs or to secure promotion or, indeed, to join the brain-drain with internationally accredited qualifications! The university began to set up District Centres in an effort to bring services as close to the student as possible, although this has been slowed down by financial constraints in a country which eventually broke records of sorts in hyperinflation by 2008! The rising enrolment trend increased the quality assurance pressures on the institution. The university decided to take a bold step. In 2007, the university, with the approval of the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, established the Quality Assurance Unit at directorate level.

The Quality Assurance Unit is structured to be headed at the National Centre by a director, manager-academic and manager-administration who guide ten Regional Quality Assurance Co-ordinators based in the provincial capitals. However, some of these posts have not yet been filled owing to financial constraints facing MOHTE.

Two national trends have influenced ZOU to promote the enhancement of quality assurance in the university. The first is that some public universities, though not mandated to offer distance education, have found ways of offering ODL through what has been termed “block release” or “parallel programmes” which actually mimic the ZOU delivery mode of spaced week-end schools and distance tuition. These are not the traditional *part-time* programmes characteristic of conventional universities. In an unintended vote of confidence in the quality of ZOU materials, these universities even use ZOU’s print modules in those programmes that are similar to those of the ODL institution. It has to be acknowledged that some of their academics serve as part-time tutors and module writers for ZOU. This means that potential ZOU clients now have choices in national distance educational provisioning, if we set aside the activities of external ODL service providers like the University of South Africa and new players from Britain, Australia and elsewhere. Thus it has become imperative for ZOU to have a meticulous quality assurance system to retain its market and expand its services.

The second influence was the establishment of the Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education, a statutory body set up in 2009, to monitor the *quality of education* in all higher education institutions in Zimbabwe, public and private. This has made the university even more determined to support quality assurance operations in the institution by providing both human and material resources. An interesting development is that ZIMCHE appears to recognise ZOU as the leader in Zimbabwe’s ODL and is in constant touch with the university in matters pertaining to quality assurance in distance education (ZIMCHE, undated). This makes it imperative for ZOU to justify this perception. As all universities are now required to have quality assurance units, ZOU, the first university to have such a unit in the country, will have to share its experience with other institutions.

The third influence is the SADC protocol on education. What is now generally called The SADC Protocol on Education is an agreement signed in 1997 in Blantyre by the Governments of Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The protocol

covers many plausible principles, objectives and strategies but those that are directly relevant to this paper cover:

- Guaranteeing academic freedom as the *sine qua non* for *quality education*, training and research;
 - Establishing mechanisms to pool resources to effectively and efficiently produce the required professional, technical, research and managerial personnel;
 - Widening provision and access to education and training as well as addressing gender equality;
 - Increasing equitable access, *improving quality* and ensuring the relevance of education and training;
 - Rationalising admission requirements to education and training institutions and *accreditation of qualifications*; and
 - Achieving comparability, equivalence and *standardisation* of education and training systems.
- (http://www.sadc.int/english/protocol/p_education_and_training.html).

The theme of quality is evident in the protocol and there are moves to set up a regional quality assurance body. ZOU is trying to play its part in pursuit of the provisioning of quality higher education...

The university’s general objectives

In its effort to provide quality distance education, ZOU developed a strategic plan which set its vision as follows:

Zimbabwe Open University’s vision is to become a World Class Open and Distance Learning University by 2009 (Zimbabwe Open University, 2005:9).

This ambitious vision was buttressed by the university’s institutional ideology which stated that:

The ZOU ideology, therefore, is to develop a best practice-enterprise-culture-based open and distance learning university focused on influencing development and change (p9).

Implicit in this ideology is the pursuit of a relevant, high quality and development-oriented distance education system focused on excellence and innovation and other objectives.

The mission statement of the university is thus explicit in stating that:

The Zimbabwe Open University exists to empower people through life-long learning thereby enabling them to realise their potential in an affordable and flexible manner while executing their endeavours (p12).

Empowering people through life-long learning implies that there are no barriers in terms of time or age in the pursuit of relevant education; affordability implies that all means must be designed to ensure that student costs are met even for those of little means; flexibility implies that there be no undue rigidity in entry requirements and time-frames for the completion of programmes; and “while executing their endeavours” implies that the university was intended for working people, although school-leavers are enrolling in increasing numbers.

The overall objectives of ZOU are noble in that they seek to encompass everyone possible in the quality higher education project in Zimbabwe. This appears to be highly achievable in an environment of *abundant resources and economic stability* but problematic in the current environment which makes affordability rather elusive.

Quality assurance operations in the financial context of ZOU

The Quality Assurance Unit's key performance areas include, among others:

- Planning and designing quality management systems in line with the policies and best practices that meet the vision, mission and core values of the university;
- Development, promotion and management of quality within the institution;
- Monitoring the implementation of quality improvement plans;
- Reviewing reports on the internal and external analyses and evaluations of institutional performance; and
- Providing research information to support the self-auditing, policy formulation, decision-making, planning and development of the institution to give ZOU a strategic advantage in higher education.

In pursuit of its mandate, the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) has set into motion various operations that are intended to promote quality assurance.

In terms of university governance, ZOU has the usual designated posts of any university in the country, the University Council, Senate and over twenty committees in its structures. Each committee is function-specific, for example:

- Examinations Management Committee;
- Higher Degrees Committee;
- Associate-ship Committee;
- Committee On Academic Awards and Ceremonies etc.

The Quality Assurance Director sits in most of the committees to take care of quality-related matters which are bound to arise in university operations. In its governance approach, ZOU has developed an ethos that promotes collaboration in a collegial setting. This seems to be helping the institution to hold together in the harsh socio-economic environment which saw most public universities temporarily closing or suspending operations at one time or another in 2008-9, except ZOU.

The quarterly strategic planning retreats, coming between the major 5-year retreats, help to iron out the quality assurance, governance and leadership issues of the university as all heads of units, including Regional Directors, gather for consultations. This way, the institution is able to *maintain quality operations through hard times*. However, such retreats are costly.

Aspects of the QAU operations, based on the university's quality assurance blue-print, that have a direct bearing on finance may be briefly recounted here.

The recruitment of human resources for quality assurance. With ten Regional Centres in addition to the National Centre, ZOU needs the requisite personnel to monitor and evaluate all operations to ensure uniformity and unity of purpose. While devolution is a positive aspect of the university in general, it is important to ensure that the institution does not virtually split into ten universities, each with its own quality assurance parameters. However, the state, while appreciating the necessity of requisite human resources, is only able to meet the need at a very slow pace while the university itself is unable to do much. With the issue of salaries and allowances still evolving in the country, it is not possible to quantify how much money would be needed per year to pay the human resources indicated for the Unit.

On-site visits to the Regions for monitoring and evaluation.

While each Region should have an RQAC to monitor and evaluate operations on the spot, it is essential for the National Centre to make on-site visits to all the Regions for the same purpose for comparison and remediation and adoption of positive initiatives that may emanate from given Regions. On-site visits include the evaluation of the recruitment and registration processes of students in the ZOU Regions, the conducting of tutorials, the general administrative processes, the examination processes and administration of results. Such field-work at the beginning and end of each semester is estimated to absorb US\$6 000 in travel, subsistence and accommodation costs.

On-site visits to associate and affiliate institutions for monitoring and evaluation

Through associateships and affiliateships, the university continues to sign memoranda of agreements with higher education institutions in the country and the SADC who are satisfied with the university's status and reputation and, therefore, seek to be accredited to the institution. Examples are the Christian College of Southern Africa (CCOSA), Institute of Certified Public Accountants in Zimbabwe (CPA), and Elephant College of early childhood education locally and the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL), the Namibia College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) and the Zambian Open University (ZAOU) regionally. Associateships are based on the concept of pooling resources in the production of quality professionals. They also indicate confidence in the quality of the university's programmes.

Equipment

A properly resourced QAU needs its own equipment ranging from vehicles for on-site visits to office equipment including information and communication technology both at the national and regional levels. With the steady establishment of District Centres, the RQAC needs to go further into the community to help realize the vision of bringing the university to the learner's doorstep. In the current economic environment in the country where a suitable vehicle may cost US\$20 000 and a laptop US\$1 000, this may be difficult to attain. However, quality assurance operations need good equipment.

Workshops at the National Centre and the ten Regional Centres.

For quality operations to be implemented smoothly and harmoniously, it is important for the Unit to conduct periodic workshops both at the National Centre to create a common understanding and approach to quality assurance and to iron out relevant challenges collaboratively. Quality assurance needs all concerned to develop the unity of purpose that is brought about through constant dialogue. It is estimated that workshops, seminars, conferences and meetings four times per year would absorb US\$6 000 for hiring venues, food and honoraria for facilitators.

Staff development

While workshops are also a form of staff development, the QAU needs to conduct some formal short courses on quality assurance to produce suitably qualified human resources in a relatively new field of endeavour. This should help to improve professionalism in operations. However, such staff would not be expected to pay for themselves. Instead they would feel motivated to learn if such courses were conducted as a staff benefit. Thus the Unit would foot the bill. It is estimated that a short course for 100 staff members including their subsistence, materials-writers and the production of learning material could absorb US\$10 000.

Research, development and diffusion

As per its mandate, the QAU researches on the operations that have a bearing on quality assurance and plays its role in influencing the university's policy and practice. While some research can be carried out while on routine operations, funding is need for specific research operations. This may take an annual amount of US\$2 000 per researcher.

Avenues for financing quality assurance operations

Given the above but hardly complete quality assurance scenario, it goes without saying that a focused quality assurance enterprise is both expensive and necessary. In the Zimbabwean context, this is even more pertinent. What follows is an exploration of possible ways of financing quality assurance.

Direct state-funding for quality assurance

This would entail grants by the state. At present, this is unlikely to go beyond what the government is already struggling to maintain by paying university staff salaries and other critical payments. However, the fact that the government set up ZIMCHE through an act of parliament to assure quality in all Zimbabwean universities is indicative of the possible positive disposition to fund quality assurance operations of the ODL university.

Student quality assurance levy

The university could charge a quality assurance levy in the students overall fees. The first problem with this avenue is that Zimbabwean students have been facing a very difficult time in raising money to pay fees of any kind due to poor earnings or the dwindling value of their incomes in the last decade. Realising the encroaching trend at the turn of the century, ZOU made arrangements with at least three banks to provide students with loans to pay fees to the university through those loan accounts. The banks would then recover their money at interest from the students' deposited monthly salaries. This scheme collapsed with hyper-inflation but has a great chance of revival as soon as the students begin to receive good salaries in a stable environment, a target which still has to be realised.

The second problem with a student levy is that, as a developmental state, the Zimbabwean government is unlikely to sanction moves that would raise charges for students. Only recently, the government advised all state universities to stop increasing fees and even ordered *private* universities, which are allowed to set their own, that:

No student, whether he made partial payment or is on the Government Cadetship Scheme, should be barred from writing end of semester examinations (*The Herald*, 02 August, 2010: 2).

So determined is the state to ensure the success of higher education provisioning that, while a clear avenue in an educational system which has allowed school levies from the advent of independence, a quality assurance levy would probably not be approved at present. After all, ZOU has always been envisaged as the one university whose fees were meant to be *affordable* to students!

There is the government cadetship scheme under which the Government provides full payment for

students as a long-term loan. The problem with the scheme is that it is targeted at the youth and the majority of ZOU students are automatically disqualified by their mature-adult status. The university thus cannot capitalise on the scheme in terms of the student levy although it has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Youth Development to enrol youths for relevant courses.

ZIMDEF quality assurance levy

The Zimbabwe Manpower Development Fund was set up in the first decade of independence to levy industry in order to train the skills needed in the sector. While its initial focus was on technical education, it has also generally benefited all areas of higher education in relevant areas. It is considered feasible to extend the levying of both industry and commerce for their human resources enrolled in ZOU programmes as the enterprises benefit from the value-addition that is made to their current employees. A quality assurance levy would appear to be logical in this respect.

Associate college levy for quality assurance

Associate colleges are attracted by their perception of quality at the university and, indeed, mention their relationship with ZOU in their advertisements. To facilitate the monitoring and evaluation of the colleges' operations for constant improvement, a levy could be charged.

Donor funding for quality assurance

The decade during which ZOU was set up has not been of great benefit to the university in terms of donor-funding, which is not to say that no assistance has been received from sympathetic quarters. The advent of land reform in Zimbabwe saw many donors hostile to the policy withdrawing their humanitarian support and others actually fighting the state in various ways. While some donor agencies remained resolute executing their mandates, it is unlikely that, until the political environment stabilises to the satisfaction of some donors, the university would secure donor funding for quality assurance although the need might be recognised.

Fund-raising through short courses

The provision of short courses targeted mainly at working people is a new wave which has captured many universities in Southern Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular.

Conducting quality assurance short courses for both the public and private sectors for a fee would enable the QAU to help finance its operations. The Unit is in the process of embarking on this eventuality without losing sight of its target of improving its ODL institution.

Fund-raising through consultancies

Associated with the provision of short courses is the avenue of consultancies which can attract much-needed income for the Unit. Indications already exist that this would be a feasible avenue but the Unit does not have enough human resources to extend itself adequately.

The way forward in financing quality assurance

Given the current environment in Zimbabwe, the options for financing quality assurance in distance education are limited and a feasible strategy is to develop *partnership* in financing quality assurance. The state is a crucial partner in quality assuring higher education and sustained lobbying of the Ministry and other relevant bureaucrats and politicians is required to capture attention and support as the economic environment improves. Lobbying is also needed to fund quality assurance through ZIMDEF which, in the final analysis, is a state concern and indirect beneficiary of ODL through the industrial and commercial personnel trained by ZOU. This could be facilitated by winning the support of the ZIMCHE whose business it is to ensure quality in higher education.

Associate colleges are the third relevant partners with a direct interest in ensuring that ZOU remains an accredited institution whose quality should continue to rise and be widely acclaimed. Convincing the colleges on the need for a quality assurance levy should be possible.

Donor funding is always a possibility particularly in times of mutual good-will. As the political environment thaws, the university will find sympathetic reception for sustaining quality assurance provided it keeps soliciting funds and proclaiming its mission.

Finally, short courses at a cost for the public and consultancies for organisations in quality assurance are highly feasible but sight towards improving the university's operations must not be lost in the quest for dollars.

Conclusion

The Zimbabwe Open University is evidently fulfilling its national objectives and those of the SADC protocol as cited above. The university has academic freedom resulting in quality education, training and research. ZOU graduates are accepted in all sectors of the Zimbabwean economy and many are employed in all the universities in the country and the SADC region.

Many of the institution's graduates are accepted for post-graduate studies in the region, an indication of their quality and comparability and equivalence. Many ZOU staff continue to be published and to participate in international fora, indicating their quality research output.

ZOU has, from its inception, widened accessibility to higher education across national and gender barriers becoming the largest university in Zimbabwe within a few years. Admission requirements are the most user-friendly in the country and they continue to improve with the inception of Appropriate/Accredited Prior Learning (APL) in recent years. It is headed by a woman and many of the academic and administrative personnel are women, for example, half of the deans are female.

It would appear evident, therefore, that the university is showing the requisite sign of the quality attainment of the millennium development goals (MDGs).

From the advent of independence in 1980, Zimbabwe's focal strategy has been to attain self-sufficiency in skilled human resources and this objective has been reconfirmed from time to time (Ministry of Higher Education and Technology, 2002). In the event, the country has been so successful that it has become a major exporter of *quality human resources*, although it must be admitted that the major stimulus for this trend has been the economic melt-down that has been phenomenal in the last decade. Central to the strategy has been the objective of improving access and the quality of tertiary education and training in Zimbabwe. *The Zimbabwe Open University, by establishing its Quality Assurance Unit to steer the institution towards the realisation of that objective, is playing a significant role.*

Financing quality assurance remains an uphill struggle in the current environment but efforts must be increased to sustain it.

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Dr Primrose Kurasha is the Vice-Chancellor of the Zimbabwe Open University.

Prof Takawira C. Gwarinda is the Director of Quality Assurance at the Zimbabwe Open University.