

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND SELF-ASSESSMENT: APPROACH METHODS BY SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

The resources required for open distance learning (ODL) are human, physical, financial, and technological supported by cross cutting issues. This paper focuses on quality assurance and self-assessment as part of the cross cutting functional areas at Southern University.

The Southern University (SU) envisions being a World Class University for the advancement of humanity, serving as a cradle of knowledge and excellence. To achieve this, the University will endeavour to generate and disseminate significant quality knowledge backed by its core values, upholding unbendable and uncompromising standards that contribute to national and global development. The university's vision is **“To be an icon of academic excellence in all disciplines and natural resource based professions in sub-Saharan Africa”**.

With the onset of peace in many African countries after many years of instability and insecurity, with the democratization of many African states following decades of totalitarian rule, and following years of corrupt and inept administrations, there is now an acute consciousness of the wasted years of African prosperity. One of the highest casualties of misrule has been education. Education became one of the lowest priorities. Investment in education across the sector diminished.

SU like any other Open Distance Learning(ODL) Universities has observed that with peace and democratization in Zambia, there is population growth, rising prosperity, a thirst for knowledge, and a need to bridge the skills gap, all in the context of rising expectations and diminishing resources. For many, however, for whom life circumstances have rendered university attendance a distant dream, have yet another opportunity and this is the reason SU has come into being.

CHALLENGES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR ODL AS ALTERNATIVE

Increasing access to ODL and consequent rapid expansion of open distance education in Zambia as a viable alternative ODL poses a tremendous challenge to ensuring quality to develop public confidence. Given these challenges of low level of observed quality culture in some of the existing ODL Institutions in Zambia, SU at its early embryonic stage of development has planned to adopt an evolutionary approach to integrate accepted Ministry of Education (MOE) elements of quality assurance and standards along with the development systems, process and procedures. SU has introduced a prescriptive quality assurance policy as the main focus for running its education programs through having a strategic plan and a concept paper and following all laid down procedures and standards by MOE without compromise.

The University has embarked on recruiting well qualified seasoned Professors, Doctors, Scientists and Academicians with vast experience from UNZA, CBU, Mulungushi, and Rusangu University and from the private sector. The University's main focus has been on capacity building in respect of institutional organization and staff development, administration course design with the guidance of DODE under MOE and materials development, support functional services, self assessments, student performance assessments and feedback etc.

The University's implementation of the quality Assurance is successfully gradually growing through its staff and through active participation in its process of development. The new members of the University are to be inducted in Quality Assurance concepts that are not based on perceptions but evolutionary based on learner experience.

A specific quality assurance strategy is usually not universally adoptable (Olojede, 2008) because distance education "Outfit" varies widely from institution to institution and country to another. Hopkins (2003) suggests that the revolution of quality assurance is at three different stages of ODL institutional development; embryonic, evolving and matured stages. The intention of the SU is to always meet the requirements of the accreditation body with transparency and free of corrupt practices to maintain its integrity with wider public confidence.

Quality assurance at SU has been ongoing and incremental along with the implementation of various functions. Lessons learnt are recorded in readiness to developing a quality assurance policy, based on the learner's and institutional experience. The quality concept of best practice is kept in every one's mind while developing and implementing the systems, processes and procedures (trust but verify concept).

CONTEXT ABOUT SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

Southern University was founded after studying existing institutions of higher learning and identifying gaps in the current set-up. Programmes were developed through consultation with experienced academicians, employment market and extensive bench-marking with highly rated

universities in the sub-region. The principle is to bring a new product and service in the Zambian tertiary education. SU is a private institution of higher learning established under cap of the laws of Zambia. Proprietors are mostly Zambians with a few foreigners. Its overall objective is to contribute to national development through training of human resource, technology generation and employment creation.

The SU will contribute and supplement the efforts of other scholarly institutions in Zambia, the sub-region, Africa and the global community. The Board of Directors is not only determined to lead the institution to become one of the best universities in the world but also to distinguish the University from other universities through practical, research and skills based training. The board brings with it a new vision for Zambia by conducting university business differently.

Our university is an English medium institution, combining the history of Southern Province and Zambia and, to a growing extent, the sub-region, Africa and the rest of the world. A full range of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and diplomas will be offered in six schools to students. Top on our priority is recruitment of highly qualified, experienced, credible and motivated work force to run the different departments of the university.

Location The University grounds are located at farm No 79a that measures 1,852.911 acres (750hactres) two kilometers from Choma town. Construction of the required infrastructure is expected to commence soon. This will be an on-going process till the university attains excellent infrastructure. While construction is in progress the university has sourced facilities within Choma and Livingstone to run part-time programmes.

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

1. School of Education
2. School of Humanities and Social Sciences
3. School of Business
4. School of Agriculture Sciences
5. School of Natural Sciences

POLITICAL COMMITMENT

The establishment of SU and development of the ODL programs form part of explicit strategy (Strategic Plan) and commitment of the institution to MOE and government policy on higher learning institutions for Zambia. The academic programs were developed under open and distance learning model and articulated by the internal stakeholders and various specialists and approved by the Board of Directors demonstrating a political commitment. The local Deputy Minister under the Office of the vice-president for Southern Province was also briefed and

endorsed his positive views for the University to proceed with its programs.

The MOE also approved the SU model of ODL. A team of professionals headed by specialists based on both local and international standards was developed. The main features of the model are:

1. Southern University will retain its academic responsibility for developing and delivering course programs to international and Zambian population.
2. The University will facilitate and provide technical and logistical support learning.
3. Currently two Regional Centers exists and were approved by DODE and by the Association for Private Schools of Learning (APSL).
4. The University will provide instructional support services for developing course materials.
5. Delivery of learning materials will be in print, online and later in advanced stage the university will adopt web-based learning. In the quest to maintain quality and standards, the development of high quality course materials will be SU commitment to make sure the materials are user friendly, culturally sensitive and the institution will facilitate deep learning impact. The University strategic plan and the concept paper are charting the direction of SU and guide the Authority or leaders, managers and University staff at large towards the institutional common goals.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The Organizational structure for SU like any other university is governed by the Board of Directors and Board of Trustees drawn from a diversity of professions, mostly existing University lecturers. The university is run, focusing on integrating the study of natural laws, social and environmental dynamics with translation of the same addressing country problems.

Three functional divisions will absorb several key sub-systems such as planning policy and administration program development, course design and materials development, student support services, infrastructure and management of study centers.

SELF-ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

An operational manual recorded system, process and procedures of operation and management of the University is already in place. The manual includes clearly defined processes, tasks and roles of administrative units, groups and individuals and their easy connectivity.

CAPACITY BUILDING

The staff capacity will continue to be strengthened in developing quality course materials and providing support services through recruiting well qualified potential and committed staff,

training of instructional designers and course writers, desk top publishers, managers and support services staff. SU will ensure its staff changes their mindset from traditional learning to ODL to forge a partnership University for benchmarking to provide support for course materials development.

MANUALS

SU has developed instructional design manual (style manual) and a course writers` manual to guide the course materials development. The materials developed are subject to a third party review before finalizing. The course materials production are closely monitored for ensuring flawless timely delivery of materials to its students. The system at SU will ensure programs of study component modules and course materials are monitored, reviewed and subject to re-approval periodically. The university review system will ensure that the content of learning materials remain current, relevant, user-friendly and promote form of assessment in light of students feedback.

ADMISSION, ASSESSMENT AND EXAMINATIONS

The dissemination of adequate information on admission, administration, course support services, examination, and assessment etc, the University will ensure that potential students make well informed decisions. The final examination will be conducted along with the on campus students using common examination papers and same lecturers mark the examination papers for on and off-campus students. The University envisages expanding its services by widening opportunities for students both internal and international and will make use of the emerging technology.

COURSE EVALUATION

Quizzes and assignments	10%
Term paper	10%
Mid-semester examination	30%
Final examination	50%
Total	100%

GRADING SYSTEM

Score (%)	Letter Grade
90-100	A
80-89	A-
75-79	B+
70-74	B
65-69	B-
60-64	C+
50-59	C
45-49	D
0-44	F

SU tutoring groups will be kept small 20-30 learners per group to ensure quality learning takes place. The demanded ratio of tutors to learners will be 1:16.

ACCREDITATION STANDARDS

The University will observe at least 14 Accreditation Standards such as:

S1- Eligibility, integrity, vision, missions, goals and objectives

S2- Students

S3- Human resources

S4- Curriculum

S5- Infrastructure and facilities

S6- Funding/Finances

S7- Governance

S8- Management System

S9- Learning process

S10- Academic Climates

S11-Information System

S12-Quality Assurance System

S13-Research, public community service

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL EVALUATION (QUALITY PROMOTION)

SU is open to major evaluation in curricular aspects, teaching, learning and evaluation, research, consulting and extension, infrastructure and learning resources, student support services and healthy practices

QUALITY ASSURANCE CRITERIA (CONTINUOUS & PERIODIC)

The SU will develop quality assurance criteria for off shore courses:

1. Details of partners structure
2. Content and delivery of course materials
3. Admission requirements for students
4. Human resources to support the courses
5. Teaching approaches and assessments
6. Course management and evaluation
7. Marking the examinations
8. Financial resources and contracting

INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE FUNCTIONAL AREAS

- a. Quality of programs & courses
- b. Quality of academic staff
- c. Quality of teaching and learning experience
- d. Quality of student assessments: internal moderation
- e. Quality of support services
- f. Quality of resources and facilities
- g. Quality of research

- h. Quality of review process

EXTERNAL ACADEMIC REVIEW

Quality assurance of educational programs at SU shall be assured through external review by:

- i. External examiners
- ii. External professional bodies
- iii. External Accreditation agencies (for professional programs that have credible, recognized professional accreditation agencies/bodies)
- iv. Employers
- v. Former students (at advanced stage of SU)
- vi. Other Universities of SU choice.

QUALITY COMPREHENSIVE POLICY MANUAL

In the bid to boost quality for SU, a comprehensive policy manual will be developed to include:

1. Academic
2. Administration
3. Archives
4. Centre for excellence and learning accreditation
5. Communications
6. Computing services
7. Course material production
8. Facilities and services
9. Financial services
10. Freedom of information and protection of privacy
11. Human resources, library services and record management
12. Office of Registrar, Research and student services
13. Vice Chancellor-Finance and Administration

14. Web sites

OTHER POLICY AREAS

- a. Organization , Governance and general management
- b. Academic Regulations, student affairs, teaching, research and scholarships
- c. Exchange agreement
- d. Information technology, record and archives

QUALITY MOVEMENT AT SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

The University has two established centers with infrastructure facilities such as computer laboratories that will be provided by net work, study carols and tutorial rooms, manuals. The intention of SU is to employ a Director for Support Services for students. All study programs will undergo periodical review to assure quality for their relevance and standard.

It is very critical that distance education should overcome the stigma of inferiority that often attaches to qualifications from such institutions. Quality therefore should in the first instance be a self-serving imperative for Southern University. The University has assured integrity of its qualifications in order to gain the confidence of the general public, government and prospective students. It must earn the respect of its peers as a centre of excellence in research and teaching. The University plans to submit itself to stringent scrutiny and regular internal and external quality assessments.

The process of quality by SU begins with the quality of academics, a distance education institution attracts. Its academics are no less qualified than academics in residential Universities in Zambia. The University has a passion for and commitment to distance education as a mode of learning delivery, empathy with its learners and skills to participate in a learning mode that demands just as much in terms of creativity and professional expertise from the academics as it does from the student. The University will engage in research and constantly researching for effective educational delivery models for its learners.

At SU, quality emphasis is on the basis of many factors: the qualifications of its academic staff, the facilities especially laboratories, library and general administrative facilities, curriculum and the design of the course study materials, whether electronic or in print, the integrity of the examinations. This process will be evaluated by assessing the impact or reception of the graduates of SU in the workplace, perceptions by industry as well as the progress of the University's Alumni.

Assessing the curriculum, for example may not be so easy. It often implies understanding and acceptance of the underlying ideology or understanding the audience or clients it is directed to.

External quality assurance and assessment is assured for the success of ODL at Southern University. SU external quality assurance began with its accreditation as a service provider for ODL programs by the government through registration by the Zambian Ministry of Education.

The University further sought even more independent bodies such as DODE and the Private Schools Association for its approval to carry out the ODL programs. The University is to practice a voluntary system that invites peers and experts in various fields, benchmarking standards of programs offered against other institutions in the country and region. The proposed external quality model is simple in its approach and will strictly be adhered to, across the University; generate confidence and a sense of achievement. It also seeks to achieve international best practice.

The University will continue evaluating itself by use of its strategic plan and concept paper by/with all the internal stakeholders who have a clear Vision and Mission, and clear goals and time frames. SU academic programs seek to advance the same mission and procedures.

Judged against the mission Statement, the institution assessment seeks to answer the following three questions:

- Are we doing the *right* thing?
- Are we doing the right things in the *right* way?
- Do we achieve what we are *claiming* to achieve?

Ton Vroeijenstijn, a Dutch quality assurance expert goes on to say that “... every quality assessment and self-analysis has to start looking at the formulated mission statement, the formulated goals and aims and the formulated outcomes... Without a clear picture about what one is doing, any assessment of quality is impossible. Is the mission clearly formulated and well-known to everybody internally and externally? Is the mission statement operationalised in clear goals and aims?” The benefit of subjecting the University to a quality assurance regime is that the institutional standards can be judged to have a level of excellence that is widely accepted. If the Quality Assurance Protocol and Plans are benchmarked against international standards, the qualifications of the institution will also enjoy international recognition.

The SU is committed to becoming a world-class, engaged University of excellence and innovation and place of scholarship for Zambia and Africa with an equitable, diverse, non-tribal, multicultural university where everyone will experience a sense of belonging and achievement. It is a learning institution where institutional culture, structures and processes are continuously scrutinized and redesigned to remain optimally fit for purpose; an institution that treasures diversity as a source of strength and quality through technology generation directed at reducing poverty, ignorance, social injustice, corruption, climate change and environmental degradation.

To be relevant to the Zambian community the SU will place original research top on its agenda

will engage in collaborative research and maintain close ties with a number of universities in Africa and elsewhere in the world. This will provide the SU with an opportunity to share information with other institutions of higher learning as well as private sector partners who will support the University's core business and in this way achieve scholarly excellence. Quality and type of research shall be based on relevance to the Zambian community and shall take a community participation approach. This is because the quality of education should be viewed in terms of its usefulness to society. To live up to this vision the SU among others will establish the Southern Research Institute (SORI) to manage research matters.

CONCLUSION

Southern University embraces the idea that education is best experienced within a community of learning where quality, competent professionals are actively and cooperatively involved with creating, providing, and improving the instructional program; that learning is dynamic and interactive, regardless of the setting in which it occurs; that instructional programs leading to degrees having integrity and are organized around substantive and coherent quality curricula that defines expected learning quality outcomes. Southern University accepts the obligation to address student needs related to, and to provide the resources necessary for, their academic success and that it is responsible for the education provided in its name.

The institution is ready to undertake the quality and self- assessment and continuous quality improvement (KAIZEN) of their quality assurance, giving particular emphasis to student learning; and that the University mandatorily will subject its self to peer review for maintenance of quality and better public image upholding unbendable and uncompromising high academic standards to protect the academic integrity of the nation. It will be about quality and not quantity of graduates.

Choma, 13th October, 2014

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