

Implementation of Quality Management principles at Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)'s selected regional centre: Quest for Quality.

¹Lazarus S.T. Nyuke, ²Douglas Gasva

¹*Quality Assurance Manager: Zimbabwe Open University: Quality Assurance Directorate, Harare, Zimbabwe,*

²*Quality Assurance Coordinator/Senior Lecturer: Matabeleland North Regional Centre: Zimbabwe Open University.*

Abstract : *This study sought to establish whether or not quality management and its principles are implemented in one selected regional centre of the Zimbabwe Open University, namely, Matabeleland North Region. The qualitative research methodology was adopted and the case study method was utilised. A population of 30 regional staff members was considered, from which a sample of 10 (N=10) participants was selected. Convenient sampling technique was used to come up with the elements of the study. The study used the interview guide as the primary research instrument, hence, interviews were utilised to solicit data from participants as their views were noted to be useful in gaining insight into whether or not quality management was being implemented at the selected regional centre. Data collected from the study was analysed using thematic content analysis approach. The major findings were that customer focus was one of the Regional Centre's major priorities and the centre endeavoured to attain maximum customer focus. Results also showed that there was considerable staff involvement in regional activities which enabled the abilities and capabilities of most staff members to be used for the benefit of the region and the entire university. The study further revealed that regional decisions were based on objective information and data analysis and there is mutual beneficial relationship between the Regional Centre and its key stakeholders. The study concluded that the Regional Centre implemented a quality management system which was mainly informed by the institution's regional centre procedure and quality policy documents. The study mainly recommended that Regional staff complement be consistent with the number of Regional Centre posts to avoid a situation where some staff members are made to fill the gaps of vacant posts as this tended to compromise the quality of their performance. The study further recommended that maximum resource support be provided to the Regional Centre as shortage of items such as stationery adversely affects the smooth functioning and efficiency of the Regional Centre.*

Key Terms : *Quality in education, quality management, quality assurance, open and distance learning.*

I. Introduction

Organisations world-wide, large and small, generally strive to manage their operations and systems with the ultimate goal of attaining excellence. For example, most organisations essentially emphasise the production of quality products as well as satisfying or delighting their customers or clients. The effectiveness of many, if not all organisations, is therefore, largely measured by the nature and extent of how they implement their quality management systems. Many institutions of different sizes and lines of production, generally have a quality management system (QMS) in place which helps them to assure the excellence of all its work (activities and procedures), and to help the institution meet its own set benchmarks as well as those of external regulatory bodies (International Standards Organisation, 2008).

Background to the Study

With reference to Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), quality management (QM) is generally implemented through the support of the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) which supports different Units, Departments and Faculties at national and regional centre levels. The ZOU is a multi-disciplinary and inter-faculty institution of higher learning offering Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes. It is a distance teaching and learning institution that was created by an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20) on March 1999 and operates through a National centre and Regional Centres dotted across the country in all the 10 provinces of the country (Benza, 2004). The virtual region is the institution's 11th regional centre and caters for students in different parts of Southern Africa. According to Kurasha (2010), the ZOU provides knowledge, competencies, values and dispositions necessary for the development of competitive human resources; using well developed distance teaching and open learning methodologies.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) (2004) identifies QM as one criterion and condition for quality and critical success factor in ODL in Sub-Saharan Africa. The same source highlights that in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, the purpose of ODL is mainly to create wider access to educational opportunities. However, access alone is not sufficient; hence, ODL needs to be augmented with QM in order to satisfy client (student) and stakeholder (e.g. industry) needs. In the same vein, the researchers' broad work experience in QM in the context of university ODL informs them that quality is the pivot of organisational effectiveness and that *it is everybody's business*. Thus, "the adoption and implementation of a QMS should be a strategic decision of any organisation" (Standards Association of Zimbabwe, 2008: v). It is against this backdrop that the current study sought to explore whether or not QM and its principles are implemented at ZOU's selected Regional Centre, which happens to be one of ZOU's 11 Regional Centres including the Virtual Region. This paper acknowledges that ZOU is the leading ODL tertiary institution in Zimbabwe and second largest in Southern Africa after University of South Africa (UNISA) (ZOU Annual Report, 2012).

The foregoing brings out the fact that the importance of QM in any organisation cannot be overemphasized; hence the critical need to find out if it is being implemented in line with its principles at ZOU with special reference to Matabeleland North Regional Centre.

Statement of the Problem

QM is one of the most important features of ensuring that ODL is effectively implemented which is particularly so with ODL at university level where the quality of what an institution offers is of great concern to its customers and key stakeholders. With reference to ZOU Matabeleland North Regional Centre, the problem is whether or not QM is being implemented at all and whether this implementation is consistent with prescribed quality management principles (QMPs).

Research Purpose and Questions

This study was aimed at exploring whether or not QM and its principles were being implemented at ZOU's Matabeleland North regional centre; in a quest for quality. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- i. What is 'quality management' in the context of ODL?
- ii. What informs quality management at ZOU's selected Regional Centre?
- iii. How is ZOU's quality assurance scheme enhancing its QM endeavour?
- iv. Are quality management principles being implemented at ZOU's selected Regional Centre?
- v. What are the major challenges of quality management at the selected Regional Centre of ZOU and in what ways may regional QM be enhanced at ZOU?

II. Review of Related Literature

The concept of 'quality' is quite fluid in definition, and its meaning is more relevant when used in a specific context. Basically, the computer synonyms of the term 'quality' include 'worth', 'value', 'excellence', 'superiority', 'eminence' and so on. There are many concepts related to 'quality', such as 'quality control', 'quality assurance', 'quality management', 'total quality management' and so on. This paper largely focuses on reviewing literature related to quality in education, open and distance learning, quality management and its principles as well as quality assurance; which happens to be one of the key features of quality management.

Conceptualizing 'Quality in Education' and 'Open and Distance Learning'

Generally, 'quality' is related more to the relevance and value of each institution's mission, purpose, goals and objectives, as well as the achievement of identified outcomes (Liston, 2009). For Goddard and Leask (2002:20) "quality is simply executing organisational tasks in an excellent way that meets the requirement of customers". In the same vein, Grisay and Mahlck (2001:78) note that "quality refers to those measurable and felt attributes of a product or service that enhance customer satisfaction".

'Quality in education' is defined by different authors, as for instance; as expression of significant range of educational effectiveness and reflection of a new approach in which need of systematic evaluation of undertaken activities is taking essential meaning including improvement and making endeavours towards accreditation with the aim of confirming that all the standards of educational effectiveness are provided (Dobrzanski and Roszak, 2007). For them, the idea of quality in education is relatively youthful and it replaced the concept of effectiveness of education which was used until recently.

Broadly, 'quality in education' is considered to be an evaluation of the process of educating which enhances the need to achieve and develop the talents of learners, and at the same time, meets the accountability standards set by the clients who pay for the process or the outputs from the process of educating" (Hoy et al,

2000:10). Grisay and Mahlck (2001) clarify that evaluating the quality of any education system mostly entails examining the following:

- the extent to which the products or the results of the education provided (the knowledge, competencies, skills and values acquired by the learners) meet the standards stipulated in the system's educational aims and objectives;
- the extent to which the knowledge, competencies, skills and values acquired are relevant to human and environmental needs;
- extent to which the acquired education is generally utilised by individuals and groups to solve micro and macro problems in life.

ODL is essentially an approach to teaching and learning that focuses on freeing learners (who are described as open and distance learners) from constraints of time and place while offering flexible learning opportunities (ZOU Magazine, 2012). The same source further notes that "ODL is an educational process where all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone geographically removed from the learner, with all or most of the communication between tutors and learners being conducted through print or electronic media" (p2). It has also been defined as an approach to teaching and learning that gives students flexibility and choice over what, when, at what pace, where, and how they learn or simply a field of educational expertise exploring situations in which the learner and the teacher or tutor are separated in time, space or both (<http://www.webopedia.odl.com>).

The current study considers quality in education in the context of QM in ODL with special reference to its implementation at ZOU Matabeleland North Regional Centre.

'Quality Management' and its Principles

Generally, 'Quality management' (QM) entails coordinated activities and processes meant to direct and control an organisation with regards to quality (Gabi, 2011). It is fundamentally a management strategy that ensures that an organisation, its product or service is consistent and meets the expectations of the customer or client. Essentially, QM is focused not only on product and service quality, but also the means to achieve it; and according to Kenneth (2005), it has four main components, namely: planning, control, assurance and improvement (PCAI). QM therefore, mainly uses a quality assurance system (QAS) and control of processes and procedures as well as products to achieve more consistent quality.

In essence, the effective implementation of any QMS is premised on specific QMPs. Gabi (2011) defines QMPs as 'comprehensive and fundamental rules or beliefs for leading and operating an organisation aimed at continually improving performance over the long term and focusing on customers while addressing the needs of all other stakeholders'. The International Standard for Quality management (ISO 9001:2008) adopts a number of QMPs that can be used by management to guide their organisations towards improved performance and satisfaction of customers or clients). Briefly, these are:

- **Customer focus:** Since organizations depend on their customers, they should understand current and future customer needs, meet customer requirements and should strive to exceed the expectations of customers;
- **Impartial Leadership:** Leaders of an organisation should establish unity of purpose and direction while treating subordinates fairly. They should go for creation and maintenance of such an internal environment, in which people can become fully involved in achieving the organization's quality aims and objectives;
- **Involvement of people:** Staff at all levels of an organization is the essence of it. Their complete involvement enables their abilities and potentials to be used for the benefit of the organization and its clientele;
- **Process approach:** The desired results can be achieved when activities and related resources are managed in an organisation as a process;
- **System approach:** An organisation's effectiveness and efficiency in achieving its quality aims and objectives are contributed by identifying, understanding and managing all interrelated processes as a system;
- **Continual improvement:** One of the permanent quality objectives of an organisation should be the continual improvement of its overall performance, leveraging clear and concise process performance measures (PPMs);
- **Factual approach to decision making:** Effective decisions within the organisation are always based on objective information and evidence from data analysis;
- **Mutually beneficial supplier relationships:** Since an organisation and its suppliers are interdependent, therefore, a mutually beneficial relationship between them increases the ability of both to add value.

(International ISO 9001: 2008 Conference, 2010).

Thus, the eight QMPs on which the QMS standards of the ISO 9000 series are based can be used by management in any organisation as a framework to guide their organisations towards improved performance and customer satisfaction. The principles are derived from the collective experience and knowledge of the international experts who participated in the ISO Technical Committee ISO/TC 176, Quality management and quality assurance; which is responsible for developing and maintaining the ISO 9000 and 9001:2008 QM standards. Thus, the QMPs are also prescribed in ISO 9000:2005: Quality management systems- Fundamentals and Vocabulary, and in ISO 9001:2008: Managing for the sustained success of an organisation- A quality management approach (Thareja, 2008).

Westcott (2003) clarified the possible application of some of the major principles of QM to different organisations as follows:

- **Customer focus:** An organisation attains customer focus when all people in the organisation know both the internal and external customers and also what customer requirements must be met to ensure that both the internal and external customers are satisfied. There is increased effectiveness in the use of the organisation's resources to enhance customer satisfaction. However, there is need to research and understand customer needs and expectations, ensuring that the objectives of the organisation are linked to customer needs and expectations. In addition, communicating customer needs and expectations throughout the organisation and measuring customer satisfaction and acting on the results are crucial ingredients for organisational effectiveness. There is also need to systematically manage customer relationships and ensuring a balanced approach between satisfying customers and other interested parties (such as employees, industry, local communities and society as a whole).
- **Professional Leadership:** Applying the principle of leadership typically leads to a situation where people will understand and be motivated towards the organisation's main goals and objectives. Activities are evaluated, aligned and implemented in a unified way and miscommunications between levels of an organisation are minimized. It considers the needs of all interested parties including customers, employees, industry, local communities and society at large, establishing a clear vision of the organisation's future and setting challenging goals and targets. It creates and sustains shared values, fairness and ethical role models at all levels of the organisation. It also provides staff with the required resources to effectively execute their duties, training and freedom to act with responsibility and accountability as well as inspiring, encouraging and recognising individual staff's contributions to organisational functioning.
- **Involvement of people:** Applying this principle typically leads to motivated, committed and involved staff within the organisation, innovation and creativity in furthering the organisation's goals and objectives, staff being accountable for their own performance, eager to participate in and contribute to continual organisational improvement. Staff understands the importance of their contribution and role in the organisation and identifies constraints to their performance, accepting ownership of organisational challenges and personal problems and their responsibility for solving them. Staff evaluates their performance against their personal goals and objectives and actively seeks opportunities to enhance their competences, knowledge and experience. In addition, staff freely shares knowledge and experience for the benefit of the organisation, openly discussing organisational challenges and issues as well as coming up with possible solutions.
- **Process approach:** Applying this principle typically leads to lower costs and shorter cycle times for organisational processes through effective use of appropriate resources, improved, consistent and predictable results as well as focused and prioritised improvement opportunities. There is systematic definition of the activities necessary to obtain desired organisational results, establishing clear responsibility and accountability for managing key activities as well as analysing and measuring of the capability of key activities. There is identification of the interfaces of key activities within and between the functions of the organisation, focusing on the factors; such as resources, methods, and materials that will improve key activities of the organisation. In addition, there is evaluation of risks, consequences and impacts of activities on customers, key stakeholders and other interested parties.
- **System approach:** Identifying, understanding and managing interrelated processes as a system contributes to the organisation's effectiveness and efficiency in achieving its objectives. Key benefits include the fact that there is integration and alignment of the processes that will best achieve the desired results. There is deliberate desire to focus effort on the key organisational processes and procedures, providing confidence to customers and other interested parties as to the consistency, effectiveness and efficiency of the organisation. There is improved structuring of the organisation's systems in order to achieve the organisation's goals and objectives in the most effective and efficient way, understanding the interdependencies between the processes of the system as well as structured approaches that harmonize and integrate processes. There is provision of a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities

necessary for achieving common organisational objectives and, thereby, reducing cross-functional barriers. In addition, there is clear understanding of organisational potentials and establishing resource constraints prior to action, targeting and defining how specific activities within a system should operate in order to realise utmost organisational results.

As noted by Roberts (2009), these principles provide a general perspective on the QMPs underlying the ISO 9000 and ISO 9001: 2008 series. An overview of these principles show how, collectively, they can form a basis for performance improvement and organisational excellence. There are many different ways of applying these QMPs, for example, the nature of the organisation and the specific challenges it faces will determine how to implement them (www.iso.org/iso/iso-focus-plus: ISO Central Secretariat, 2009). The International Standard for Quality management (ISO 9001:2008), also notes that these principles form the basis for the QMS standard ISO 9001:2008. However, it is important to note that these principles are not exhaustive, as other principles may still be discerned depending on the magnitude of a specific organisation's QMS.

SAZ (2008:v) stipulates that "the design and implementation of an organisation's QMS is influenced by:

- a) Organisational environment, changes in that environment, and the risks associated with that environment
- b) Its varying needs
- c) Its particular objectives
- d) The products it provides
- e) The processes it employs
- f) Its size and organisational structure

However, SAZ (ibid) notes that there is no rigid uniformity in the structure and documentation of QMSs, as it all depends on organisational preferences.

'Quality Assurance' as a key feature of 'quality management' in Open and Distance Learning

'Quality assurance' (QA) is one of the most critical features or rudiments of QM (ISO 9001: QMS Certification, 2014). It is a system of measures and controls established within an organisation to try and manage (hence assure) the quality of the goods or services being provided (http://www.independentqualityservice.com/?page_what_is_quality_assurance?). Gabi (2011) notes that QA is part of QM focused on providing confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled. Historically, QA is a natural evolution of the more traditional 'quality control' (QC) which relied almost totally on end of line inspection to weed out and identify failures. However, QA takes a more holistic approach, based on the idea that identifying and removing the causes of defects is a more pragmatic and cost effective solution (Rose, 2005).

Paul (2008) disputes that although it would be unfair to say that western companies have not historically been interested in QA, (i.e. providing good quality products and services), as a defined methodology, it came out of the far eastern quality improvement thinking of the 60's and 70's. For Paul (ibid), this in turn can be argued to have originated with American academics charged with rebuilding Japan after World War 2. People like Deming, Juran and Crosby initialised product and service quality improvement methodologies which later moulded together and became accepted as standard QA (<http://www.independentqualityservice.com>).

In the United Kingdom, QA was largely introduced through the development of the ISO 9001 Standard and its approval scheme. ISO 9001 became mandated on many government contracts in the early 1990's, and, hence, many companies and institutions had to introduce quality assurance schemes (QAS) into their broad business ventures and day to day operations (http://www.independentqualityservice.com/what_is_quality_assurance?). According to the same source, QAS should encompass all of an organisation's activities and operations. An accepted foundation of QA thinking is that the root cause of defects should be sought in order to prevent recurrence. Hence, a defect identified by an end customer could originate with a poorly understood order or enquiry. QAS, therefore, define an organisation's methods of working, or processes and procedures, then attempt to use various measures and controls to continually improve them. Most QAS introduce 'quality assurance audits' (QAA); a review of activities against descriptions of how the processes should operate in attempts to identify where the opportunity for improvement exists (ISO 9001:2008 Working Group, 2009).

Irrespective of the tools used, effective QAS depend on being able to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of a process or series of activities or processes mostly within an organisation, then the implementation of improvements in a controlled or systematic manner. In this way, the value, efficiency as well as the effectiveness of the QAS itself can be reliably established

(http://www.independentqualityservice.com/what_is_quality_assurance?) According to the same source, an effective QAS should ensure that a consistent and acceptable level of quality is being achieved in goods or services delivered to customers or clients.

In the same vein, COL (2004) notes that QA is a key component of QM and is a critical success factor in ODL. Some of the major characteristics of QA in ODL include the fact that:

- i. learning materials are standardised and moderated to suit the academic level of learners;
- ii. learner performance is monitored and learners at risk identified. Timely educational intervention is provided for learners in need;
- iii. performance of tutors and attendance of both tutors and learners at contact sessions is monitored and evaluated regularly. The work of mentors in supporting and assessing learners is also monitored by the provider;
- iv. registration of students and examinations are administered with the highest level of conscientiousness and professionalism;
- v. monitoring and evaluation of both academic and administrative data is analysed and acted upon;
- vi. feedback is sought from tutors/mentors as well as from learners for the review of courses, programmes and learning materials;
- vii. learner structures such as student representative councils (SRC), Alumni and faculty associations are established, recognised and empowered to represent learners, staff and the institution at large on structures of institutional governance;
- viii. knowledge, skills, competencies and values acquired are consistent with the expectations of the industrial market (COL, 2004).

This paper recognises that within the management framework of the ZOU; lies a distinct Unit for QA which is a strategic aspect of the broad concept of QM and that the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) is established at National level as a directorate as well as at the institution's Regional Centres (ZOU 2012 *Annual Report*). Gwarinda (2010:1) in a Quality Assurance Structure presentation paper, noted that:

The Directorate of Quality Assurance was established in 2007 with the express goal of helping to improve operations in the Zimbabwe Open University whose Vision is to become a world class open and distance learning University.

For Gwarinda (ibid: p1), the major roles of the Quality Assurance Unit are:

- a) to lead the organisation in the development and upholding of a common understanding of quality assurance in university open and distance learning;
- b) to identify aspects of best practices already achieved by the University and ensure that they continue to be promoted;
- c) to identify aspects of practice that need improvement and suggest in consultation with relevant stakeholders how this could be achieved, that is, to assist in achieving quality assurance mechanisms;
- d) to facilitate in the processes of service provision and student and staff performance
- e) to research and provide the institution with information that focuses on quality improvement, change and best practice in university open and distance learning;
- f) to share knowledge and experience with other institutions that promote distance teaching and open learning.

In a study of QM in United States of America university education, Dobrzanski and Roszak (2007) found out that the advantages of introducing and maintaining QA in the context of a QMS in a university setting including an ODL university include:

- achievement of organisational goals and objectives
- improvement of quality of the realised didactic process
- improvement of work organisation
- transparency and readability of responsibilities and entitlements
- supplying documentary evidence of organisational processes and activities
- increase of awareness of quality issues among the employees
- fulfilment of requirements of the customers
- professional management and leadership
- improvement of reputation

Thus, from the foregoing, the importance of QA as an aspect of QM in ODL at university level cannot be overemphasized. It is in this light that the current study sought to establish whether or not a QMS and its key principles highlighted in this paper are implemented at the selected Regional Centre of the ZOU, namely, Matabeleland North Regional Centre.

III. Research Methodology

The current study adopted the qualitative research methodology, which the researchers found to be more consistent with soliciting people's ideas. Within this research framework, the case study design research method was utilised. Barker et al (2005) say that a case study is useful in a research study of this nature as it describes and interprets what exists at present and also helps the researchers to obtain empirical evidence about specific variables of interest. As the study was conducted at one selected Regional Centre of the ZOU, a population of 30 Regional staff members comprising both academic staff and support staff was used. The population according to Patton (2000) is the totality of all subjects that conform to a set of specifications, comprising the entire group of persons that is of interest to the researchers and to whom the research results can be generalised. This is echoed by Babbie (2008) who says that all members of a real or hypothetical set of people, events or objects to which we wish to generalise results of the study are the target population.

From the target population, a sample of 10 staff members, 5 of whom were academic while 5 were support staff was used. Schumacher and Kuhn (2006) describe a sample as part of a larger population which is representative of the original population. The convenient sampling technique which allowed researchers to identify data rich sources was utilised (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Johnson and Christenson, 2014).

The study used the interview guide as the primary research instrument for collecting research data. Patton (2000) and Kuhn (2006) say that interviews involve the development of an interview guide, which is used in the collection of data from direct verbal interaction between the researchers and the respondents. Barker, Pistrang and Elliot (2005) note that interviews have the major advantage that questions can be clarified to respondents whenever respondents indicate that they are not clear, and the researcher is able to probe further to get as much insight as possible into the subject under study. In the current study, the interviews were used to solicit research data from staff members at Matabeleland North Regional Centre of the ZOU. Data that the study sought to unveil related to whether or not a QMS was being implemented at the area under study.

The interview guide was tested for validity and reliability through a pilot study which was conducted with 2 staff members at the Regional Centre, a process which was done before the research sample was selected. Testing for validity and reliability in the current study was done against the understanding that validity implies the extent to which a test or instrument measures what the researchers expect it to measure and get the desired results while reliability implies that the questions in the research instruments must be understood by the respondents in the way intended by the researchers (Cooper and Schindler, 2006). The interviews were conducted with selected staff during lunchtime while some were conducted during weekend which was done to avoid disturbance of normal work operations.

Data was analysed using the thematic content approach, as the main interest of the study was to unveil themes on whether or not QM and its principles were being implemented at the selected regional centre of the ZOU.

Research Findings

The findings of the current study were that:

- Quality management at ZOU Matabeleland North Regional Centre is generally informed by the ZOU Regional Procedure Manual (effective date: 2012-05-08) and the ZOU Quality Policy Manual (Revision No.1) which set fundamental benchmarks for regional procedures and processes;
- Academic and administrative work is based on a clear QMS which staff members adhere to; with clearly defined aims and objectives. The region is guided by the 12 point ZOU Quality Aims and Objectives (2014, 2015), which are to:
 - i. Attain efficiency and effectiveness in all Units
 - ii. Provide quality teaching, learning and novel centred ODL teaching approaches
 - iii. Design and offer market driven programmes
 - iv. Recruit, retain and retrain suitably qualified and experienced staff
 - v. Promote and foster a culture of research, publications and trust among staff and students
 - vi. Actively participate in community service programmes
 - vii. Continuously monitor and evaluate the quality management system and the resulting delivery
 - viii. Foster effective communication processes within the University
 - ix. Produce and acquire quality learning materials in conformity with set ODL standards
 - x. Provide and utilise up-to-date Information and Communication Technology in all ZOU operations
 - xi. Provide adequate infrastructure and resources in conformity with set standards
 - xii. Provide adequate facilities for staff and students with disabilities and special needs

- The principles of QM are applied at the Regional Centre, and specifically:
 - i. The Regional Centre understands current and future customer needs, strives to meet customer requirements as well as to exceed the expectations of customers, with the overriding objective of attaining customer satisfaction and focus;
 - ii. The Regional Director and other senior Regional staff have established unity of purpose and direction. Their leadership and management styles create and maintain an internal environment in which staff have become highly involved in achieving the organisation's quality aims and objectives;
 - iii. The involvement of staff enables their abilities and potentials to be used for the benefit of the region and entire University. All staff follow the ZOU Regional Procedure Manual although the ultimate key decisions are generally made by the Regional Director as he is in charge of the Regional activities and management;
 - iv. The region's effectiveness and efficiency in achieving its quality aims and objectives are informed by identifying, understanding, implementing and managing all interrelated regional activities and procedures both as a process and a system;
 - v. One of the key quality objectives of the region is the continual improvement of its overall performance; including how it conducts orientation of new students, registration of students, conducts tutorials, handle students in the library and computer laboratory as well as conduct sessional examinations;
 - vi. The Regional Quality Assurance Coordinator frequently conducts 'Internal Quality Audits' which are also complemented by 'Internal Quality Audit Verification' exercises conducted by ZOU National Centre;
 - vii. Regional Centre decisions are based on objective information and evidence from data analysis. This includes regional decisions to engage part-time tutors for specific classes, time to keep the library open and accessible to students, number of invigilators to be engaged during specific sessional examinations and so on;
 - viii. There is mutual beneficial relationship between the Regional centre and its stakeholders as well as other interested parties. This in turn increases the ability of the Regional Centre as well as the interrelated parties to add both value and synergy to their existence.

The researchers note that most of the above findings are consistent with findings revealed by Dobrzanski and Roszak's (2007) study on QM in university education.

- There are some common pertinent challenges which have a direct or indirect impact on the implementation of the QMS at the selected Regional centre. These challenges include shortage of staff in some Units and departments, a gap in some staff skills and expertise mainly caused by some staff filling gaps of roles for which they were not engaged, shortage of stationery for use by staff, unsuitable infrastructural arrangements, limited financial resources for regional activities including marketing of ZOU programmes.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the current study concluded that ZOU Matabeleland North Regional Centre is implementing a QMS with most of its fundamental principles. The regional centre's best practices are generally based on the institution's use of the ZOU Regional Centre Procedure Manual and the ZOU Quality Policy Manual Revision No.1 which have become central to the implementation of the region's QMS. This is complemented by the Regional Centre's day-to-day efforts to fulfill the ZOU Quality Aims and Objectives (2014, 2015).

In the light of the findings and conclusion of the study, and in order to enhance the implementation of the QMS at Matabeleland North Regional Centre and ZOU's Regional Centres in general, the study makes the following recommendations, among others:

- The regional staff establishment should be consistent with regional posts so that no staff members fill the gaps of vacant posts as this compromises the quality of the work of those who fill in other posts for which they were not engaged and inducted;
- There is need for the region to attain maximum customer focus where staff would know both the internal and external customers as well as meeting their requirements to ensure that they are well satisfied;
- More frequent 'internal quality audits' and 'verification exercises' should be conducted at the selected Regional Centre and rest of ZOU's Regional centres in order to improve the region and institution's effectiveness and efficiency. This will enhance the institution's chances of acquiring the International Standards Organisation (ISO) certification;
- There is need to maximally support regional activities with resources as their shortage particularly stationery affects efficiency and effectiveness. However, the Regional Centre needs to come out of the

comfort zone of being supported financially by the institution's National Centre and fundraise as well as mobilize financial resources particularly from the ZOU Alumni in the province; which will enhance effective quality management at the regional centre, hence, becoming a model for other regions.

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