The Utility Of Course Team Approach in the Setting of Assignment and Examinations Items in Search of Quality Assessment at the Zimbabwe Open University

By

Tichaona Mapolisa
Thembinkosi Tshabalala (Dr)
Research Article

The Utility of Course Team Approach in the Setting of Assignment and Examination Items in Search of Quality Assessment at the Zimbabwe Open University

*1Prof. Tichaona Mapolisa and 2Dr. Thembinkosi Tshabalala

1Acting Chairperson for the Department of Educational Studies and National Programme Leader for the Bachelor of Education in Educational Management in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University.
2Senior Lecturer and National Programme Leader for the Master of Education in Educational Management in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Email: 2tshabalalathembinkosi@yahoo.com, Phone: +263 776 425 222

*Corresponding Author’s Email: tichmap@gmail.com / tichmapolisa@yahoo.co.uk, Phone: +263 733 608 577 or +263 775 987 351

ABSTRACT

The focus of the paper is on the utility of the course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items at the Zimbabwe Open University’s (ZOU’s) Department of Education during the year 2011. It conveniently sampled 28 tutors, that is, seven Programme Leaders and one Chairperson based at the National Centre and 20 Regional Programme Co-ordinators. An open-ended questionnaire was the research instrument. The study found out that course team approach could be responsible enough for the development and assignment items that are valid, reliable and able to stand against test of time. It enables tutors to set quality assured assignment and examination items. It concluded that course team approach is the bedrock on which quality assessment procedures and practices could be banked on. It recommended for the need of the ZOU to regularly train members of the Department of Education in the standard practices of assignment and examination item setting through the use of course teams.

Keywords: Utility, course team, course team approach, assignment items, examination items and quality.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items has assumed a high profile position in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) settings. Quality assessment could be compromised; external efficiency could be stalled as a result of non-compliance with course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items.

Sparkes (1998) observes that no matter how well an educational institution’s assessment practice be run, course team approach is unavoidable. This is echoed by Lockwood (1998) who epitomizes that course team approach is an inevitable organisational assessment process. If course team approach is an unavoidable and inherent organisational assessment practice, there is need for ODL academics to have the relevant skills to implement it.

Course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items could be destructive or constructive depending on how it is employed and managed. Pfukwa (2001) notes that as long as course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items seems to trigger constructive course team approach, if it is permitted to continue, but once signs of destructive course team approach appear, measures should be taken to do away with the destructive course team approach trigger. This appears to suggest the need for pertinent skills and expertise to predict with maximum precision the possible outcome of the course team approach triggers since any misjudgment is likely to lead to serious unpalatable results. But human beings by their very nature, are very unpredictable and this complicates the idea of predicting the outcome of a course team trigger with a high degree of certainty.

This background seems to indicate that course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items is topical in contemporary higher education institutions. The present paper seeks to investigate the utility of employing the course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items at the Zimbabwe Open University’s (ZOU’s) Department of Education.
Statement of the Problem

Innovations by their nature are unpredictable and this complicates the idea of predicting the outcome of a course team approach trigger with a high degree of certainty. Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has to a large measure, been implementing the course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items. In the interests of this paper, we intended to explore the question:

What is the utility of the course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items in the Zimbabwe Open University’s (ZOU’s) Department of Education?

Research Questions

The background and the statement of the problem seem to raise a number of questions like:

1. What are the duties of the course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items?
2. What are the strengths of the course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items?
3. What are the weaknesses of the course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items?
4. How can the weaknesses of the course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items?

Literature Review

There seems to be scarce literature review related to course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items. An attempt to review the utility of course team approach in the setting of assessment items has been made by scholars such as Harrel (1998), Kuruba (1999), Lockwood (1995) and Lockwood (1998). They concur that course team approach in assessment is associated with some of the following issues:

- Grouping course expertise together in order to set assignment and examination items.
- Promoting shared responsibility in assignment and examination items.
- Evaluating assessment practices.
- Improving assessment practices.
- Evaluating instructional practices.

This literature review seems to raise a number of gaps that motivate us carry out this study. The forgone authors’ observations are of foreign origin as they lack context specificity in regard to Open Distance Learning (ODL) settings at the ZOU. The same authors did not specify programmes for which course team approach would be employed to set assignment and examination items. It was against the backdrop of such literature findings that prompted us to carry out this study with the intent to ascertain the degree to which course team approach obtains at the ZOU’s Department of Education in regard to the setting of examination and assignment items.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Twenty eight (28) members of the ZOU’s Department of Education were conveniently sampled. Seven (7) of them were Programme Leaders who are based at the National Centre, while the rest were Regional Programme Co-ordinators. The Regional Programme Co-ordinators were based at the ten (10) ZOUs regional Centre.

We gathered data using open-ended questionnaire. Open-ended questionnaire enables researchers to collect diverse descriptive opinions from the research participants (Kumar 2008; Flick 2008; Gray 2009). The open-ended questionnaire had two categories of questions. The first set of questions had the demographic characteristics of the research participants. The second set of questions had four areas namely, duties of the course team approach, strengths of the course team approach, weaknesses of the course team approach and ways of overcoming course team approach in the setting of examination and assignment items.

The research data were qualitatively analysed using content analysis. Content analysis enables researchers to draw themes from the research data (Silverman, 2006). We were able to draw themes from the research data using the four research questions indicated earlier in this paper.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

We presented, analysed and discussed the research data in two phases. First, we dealt with demographic characteristics of the research participants. Second, we forged ahead by working on the actual research data—drawing on the study’s four main research questions which gave us the sub-headings.
Demographic Characteristics of the Research Participants

We presented the demographic characteristics (gender, age and highest professional qualification, highest academic qualification, length of teaching experience and area of expertise) of the research participants using tables.

Distribution of Research Participants by Gender

Table 1 shows the distribution of the research participants by gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the distribution of research participants by gender. Sixty per cent (60%) of the research participants were males; while the rest were females. The results show some representation of the study’s findings in spite of their marked differences in number.

Distribution of Research Participants by Age

Table 2 below presents the distribution of research participants by age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable (Age in years)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40-49 years</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results in Table 2 shows that 61 percent of the research participants were aged between 50 and 59, 21 percent of the research participants was aged between 40 and 49, while 18 percent of the research participants were aged at least 60. The results appear to indicate that the research participants were relatively mature enough.

Distribution of Research Participants by Highest Academic Qualification

Table 3 below shows the distribution of research participants by highest academic qualification.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable (Highest Academic Qualification)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Level Certificate (‘A’ Level)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary Level Certificate (‘O’ Level)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The presentation in Table 3 indicates that the majority of the research participants hold an Ordinary Level (‘O’ Level) Certificate as their highest academic qualification. Forty-two percent (42%) of them are holders of an Advanced Level (‘A’ Level) Certificate, while one percent (1 %) of them are holders of an Undergraduate Degree and the other one percent (1%) are holders of a Postgraduate Degree. The results show that the research participants were literate enough to be able to interpret issues in connection with the use of the course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items in search of quality assessment with particular reference to the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU).
Distribution of Research Participants by Highest Professional Qualification

Table 4 below shows the distribution of research participants by highest academic qualification.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable (Highest Professional Qualification)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PhD/DE</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.Ed</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results in Table 4 show a distribution of research participants by their highest professional qualification. The majority (89%) of the research participants are holders of the Master of Education (MEd) qualification. Seven percent of the research participants were holders of either a Doctor of Philosophy Degree (PhD) or a Doctor of Education (DE) Degree. The other one percent (1%) were holders of any other qualification, that is, a Master of Science in Philosophy. These results seem to indicate that all the research participants were holders of a Postgraduate qualification and they were in a position to make a cost—benefit analysis of the utility of the course team approach to set assignment and examination items for the ZOU’s Department of Education.

Length of Teaching Experience

Table 5 shows the distribution of research participants by their length of teaching experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable (Length of Teaching Experience in Years)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16+</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The scenario in Table 5 portrays a distribution of the research participants by the length of teaching experience. More than half of the participants (54 %) had a teaching experience of less than five years. Eighteen percent of the research participants had teaching experience ranging from six to ten years. Only four percent of the research participants had a teaching experience ranging between 11 and 15 years, while another four percent of the research participants had a teaching experience of at least 16 years. The results appear to reflect that the research participants were experienced enough to be able to appreciate the utility of the course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items for the ZOU’s Department of Education.

Areas of Expertise

Research participants’ areas of expertise are presented in Table 6 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable (Areas of Expertise)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational Management</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didactics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The scenario in Table 6 depicts that the majority (71%) of the research participants indicated Educational Management as their area of expertise. Eleven percent pointed out Curriculum Studies as their area of expertise. Seven percent revealed that Teacher Education was their area of expertise. Four percent indicated Adult Education as their area of expertise, four percent (4%) indicated Didactics as their area of expertise and the other four percent (4%) pointed out other (Psychology) as their area of expertise. The results tend to show that the Department of Education members have different areas of expertise which call for the need for them to exercise interdependence in all academic issues including the setting of assignment and examination items. This interdependence is what Haldar (2010) and Bhattacharyya (2009) concur when by referring to its practice as the hallmarks of team building and team leadership.

DISCUSSION OF ACTUAL RESEARCH DATA

We discussed the actual research findings derived from the open-ended questionnaires. The findings were discussed in sync with the research questions alluded to in the earlier part of this paper.

Research Participants’ Perceptions of the Duties of the Course Team Approach in the Setting of Assignment and Examination Items

In their response to the open-ended questionnaire, research participants proffered the following as some of the duties of the course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items.

- Course team evaluates course outlines and modules in order to find out whether courses are still able to stand against the test of time.
- Course teams develop examination and assignment items that are tailored to the concerns of the ODL learners.
- Course teams set assignment and examination items that cover the course content in the course outlines and modules.
- Course teams ensure that ZOU’s Department of Education collaboratively sets quality assured assignment and examination items. These ensure that none of the students is neither disadvantaged nor given an unfair advantage over others.

The preceding duties of the course team approach seem to be consistent into Pfukwa’s (2001) who described that a course team is composed of experts in the subject when he/she was making reference to a course team approach in module writing. In the context of this paper, we view a course team as consisting of a team of experts in the subject areas in the fields of Educational Management Youth in Development Studies, Diploma in Education (Primary), Bachelor of Education (Secondary) Curriculum Studies and Early Childhood Development programmes that the ZOU’s Department of Education offers. The duties are achievable subject to the availability of finance resources because the ZOU’s Department of Education academics are not based at one campus. They are found at the National Centre and the ten Regional Centres located in the country’s political and administrative provincial centres.

Perceived Strengths of the Course Team Approach in the Setting of Assignment and Examination Items

Research participants also came up with a number of strengths they associated with the use of course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items. In their free responses, they indicated that course team approach enabled them to:

- Quality assure their assignment and examination items. The course teams mutually develop assignment and examination items right from the start of the assessment process until the end when students write their assignments and end of semester examinations.
- Collaboratively evaluate, monitor and implement formative and assessment practices in search of quality learning.
- Pool their expertise, skills, interests and experiences as they set assignment and examination items they feel proud of.
- Set assignment and examination items that are valid and reliable, let alone confidential.
- Set assignment and examination items that involve all members of the Department in a bid to benefit the most important key holder; the student. The quality of assignment and examination items largely markets the Department of Education’s name and let alone the ZOU’s brand and image.
- Ensure that all areas of the course content covered in the course outlines and modules are adequately covered such that the assignments and examinations achieve content validity.
• Make sure that assignment and examination items cover current theories, themes, trends, practices and innovation in the field of education.
• Continuously learn towards the best practices in assessment procedures that are meant to make ODL learners comparable to if not better than conventional students.

The above findings tend to be comparable with previous findings by Kuruba (1999) and Jegede (1999) who established that course teams are quality assurance drives in a number of ways. First, course teams encourage team spirit among examiners (possibly internal and external). Second, they promote shared ownership of programme. Third, they generate a spirit of continuous staff development among tutors. Kuruba (1999), Jegede (1999) and the present study’s findings are echoed by Bhattacharyya (2009) Haldar (2010) and Pareak (2010) who hail course teams for their ability to engender in organisational members team effectiveness, group creativity, outstanding group performance and organisational commitment. These strengths of course team approach are situation specific. They are largely dependent on sound macro-economic environment which is usually inevitably supported by political stability.

**Perceived Weaknesses of Course Team Approach in the Setting of Assignment and Examination Items**

While course team has a member of a afore-mentioned strengths in the setting of assignment and examination items, it also has some loopholes. The course teams are effective subject to the availability of funds. In connection with how lack of funds, derail course teams’ project work, and one research participant had this to say:

Course teams are supposed to meet regularly, but financial limitations tend to stall total promotion of course teams at the ZOU such that assignment and examination items are sometimes set by individual tutors.

The afore-tasted observation seems to be in tandem with Pfukwa’s (2001) observation that it is very expensive to bring the team together and given the limited financial resources, the teams do not meet as often as they would wish. It is common cause that once assignment and examination items are set by individual we will be throwing the caution to the wind in terms of pursuing and ensuring quality assessment practices. Allied to lack of funds, are the limited training opportunities for staff developing and in-servicing tutors in proper assessment procedures. One research participant indicated that:

Course teams are usually composed of team members who are not all well versed with quality assessment issues and practice in ODL settings. In the light of this problem outlined above, the members of the Department of Education tend to count on the knowledge they obtain from the Module EA3PD304 Measurement and Evaluation in Education. While the content of this module gives them some functional knowledge in assessment practices, the tutors still remain adequate in terms of quality assessment practices.

As researchers, we feel that provision of training opportunities would go a long way in capacitating ZOU tutors in the field of quality assessment. Exposure of tutors to varied theories in quality assessment would make them (tutors) share experiences, skills and expertise and upgrade themselves by learning how assessment is carried out in other parts of the globe.

**Ways to Overcome Weaknesses of the Course Team Approach in the Setting of Assignment and Examination Items**

In the light of the preceding weaknesses of the course team approach, the research participants appear to suggest the ensuing solutions. First, training of the tutors in proper assessment procedures and practices is necessary. Training empowers organisational employees who deliberately pursue organisational effectiveness and efficiency (Pareek, 2010). Training also builds confidence in the employees so that they will be able to reach optimal performance (Hadlar, 2010). Furthermore, training capacitates workers who are always consciously searching for excellence in doing all kinds of work (Bhattacharyya, 2009). We are content that training motivates course teams to work to the best of their ability in the setting of assignment and examination items.

A second way to overcome the course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items is the provision of adequate financial resources. Financial resources ensure that all other resources are available because financial resources alone cannot help course teams achieve their goals.

**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**
Our study came up with these findings. In terms of duties of course teams in the setting of assignment and examination items, course teams are responsible for:

- developing examination and assignment items that are valid, reliable and able to stand against the test of time,
- setting assignment and examination items that adequately cover course content in the course outlines and modules, and
- setting quality assured assignment and examination items.

In connection with the strengths of course team approach in the setting of assignment and examination items, course teams:

- promote shared ownership of programmes by Programme Leaders and Regional Programme Coordinators,
- ensure that valid and reliable assignment items are set on time,
- encourage collaborative commitment in regard to the setting of assignment and examination items, and
- advance the spirit of quality assurance of assignment and examination practices by all members of the Department.

In regard to the weaknesses of the course team approach, we found out that:

- lack of funds inhibit the holding of regular course teams, and
- lack of training opportunities in assessment practices let down effectiveness of course team approach.

With regards to the ways to overcome weaknesses of the course team approach, we highlight that:

- training alleviates ineffective course teams in the setting of assignment and examination items, and
- provision of adequate funds is necessary.

CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the above findings we conclude that:

- course team approach is a bedrock on which quality assessment procedures and practices could be anchored on,
- course team approach values team work, team spirit, overall team performance, team creativity and team effectiveness more than individual glory in the setting of valid and reliable assignment and examination items, and
- lack of funds and training opportunities are a deterrent to effective course team approach in the field of setting quality assured assignment and examination items.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the foregoing findings and conclusions, we recommend:

- the need for the ZOU to regularly train member of the Department of Education in the Standard practices of assignment and examination item setting through course teams,
- the need to involve all stakeholders of the ZOU to source and provide adequate funds and other resources to enable course teams to regularly train and meet to set valid, reliable and confidential quality assured assignment and examination items in search of quality especially in a competitive university environment, and
- that the study is carried out across Faculties at the ZOU with intent to mount comparative studies with other ODL universities in the region.

REFERENCES


Jegede, O (1999). The potential of research to enhance quality in open and distance learning. Plenary Address at the Hong Kong Conference on ODL