ODL Tutors’ Experiences in Curriculum Implementation in Search of Quality

By

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

Open and distance learning (ODL) tutors have varied backgrounds, expertise and experiences regarding curriculum implementation. Also ODL tutors are usually not housed at one place, but they are scattered country wide and beyond. In regard to the search of quality, ODL tutors are expected to operate on the same wavelength. The study deliberately sought to unravel the degree to which ODL tutors’ experiences in curriculum implementation could pursue quality. The purposively sampled research participants provided data by responding to an open ended questionnaire. Eighteen Regional Programme Co-coordinators (RPCs) from Zimbabwe Open University’s two regions of Mashonaland West and Mashonaland East constituted the study sample. The data gathered were sorted and coded thematically to pave way for interpretation. From the findings it was concluded that tutors’ different backgrounds, expertise and experiences have bearing on curriculum implementation. The study’s findings also led to the conclusion that staff development programmes contribute to the enhancement of effective curriculum implementation. The study’s major recommendation is that when recruiting tutors, the tutor’s background should be relevant to issues of quality curriculum implementation in ODL. The study also recommended that staff development should be seen as playing a critical role in enhancing effective curriculum implementation in ODL.

Keywords: Open and distance learning, curriculum implementation, quality, Open and distance learning (ODL) tutors.

INTRODUCTION

ODL tutors have varied backgrounds, expertise and experiences regarding curriculum implementation. Given the structure of ODL programmes, tutors are usually not housed at one place, but they are scattered country wide and beyond. When implementing curriculum, tutors are affected by different backgrounds, including having gone through different universities. This results in them having different orientations and approaches when implementing curriculum in an ODL set up. When it comes to the search for quality, ODL tutors are expected to operate uniformly. Given these situations standardization of curriculum implementation becomes problematic. In a number of cases, tutors end up implementing ODL curriculum as if they are in a conventional set up. This current study focuses on finding out the extent to which ODL tutors’ different backgrounds, expertise and experiences in curriculum implementation impact on quality.

Background of the Study

Given the varied backgrounds, expertise and experiences there are bound to be uniformity challenges when implementing curriculum. This is so because curriculum implementation becomes problematic as tutors are influenced by their previous modes of training. As a result there is need to put mechanisms of quality assurance to ensure uniformity. This study deliberately seeks to unravel the extent to which ODL tutors’ experiences in curriculum implementation affect quality.
Statement of the Problem

Tutors' different backgrounds, expertise and experiences result in different ways of curriculum implementation, hence problems of quality arise. The main question to be answered is:

To what extent do ODL tutors’ different backgrounds, expertise and experiences in curriculum implementation impact on quality?

Research Questions

In an effort to answer the main research question, the following sub-problems which stand as research sub-questions suffice:

- How does a tutor's background affect curriculum implementation?
- How can tutors with different backgrounds enhance quality in curriculum implementation?
- How can tutors with different expertise be used to improve on quality in curriculum implementation?
- To what extent can tutors with different experiences be used to enhance quality in curriculum implementation?

Significance of the Study

This study is important in many ways, including informing ODL practitioners on how to effectively make use of tutors' varied backgrounds, expertise and experiences in enhancing quality in curriculum implementation. It is also important in that it contributes to the literature base on curriculum implementation in ODL. In addition, the study is important in that it is likely to assist ODL management and policy makers to consider different tutor characteristics and their impact on quality in curriculum implementation in ODL.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Tutors’ background and curriculum implementation

Tutors' previous training influences their current styles of teaching and management (Feiman-Nemser, 1986). Practicing tutors when they trained as teachers, the dominant mode of delivery was the lecture method which entails the lecturer as the producer of knowledge which he directly imparted on students. However, this mode had its own advantages. Equally, it had its own disadvantages. In an ODL set up, the use of tutor centred methods like the lecture method need to be critically examined. In the ODL context the tutor is more of a guide and facilitator, and indeed, a true partner in learning (Erwin,1991).

Different backgrounds’ effects on quality in curriculum implementation

The effects of tutors' different background are dependent on the features and characteristics of the methods of delivery experienced by the tutors. It is important to also note that advantages bring about positive effects on quality in curriculum implementation. Likewise, disadvantages bring negative effects on quality in curriculum implementation. Tutors' varied experiences, if coordinated appropriately, can add value in curriculum implementation in ODL. However, if not coordinated appropriately, may not add value in curriculum implementation in ODL.

Use of tutors with different expertise on improving quality in curriculum implementation.

Tutors with identified areas of expertise can help improve quality in curriculum implementation. In ODL it becomes necessary to work out how best tutors' synchronised areas of expertise can be used to improve quality in curriculum implementation. For example, tutors could be assigned tasks on preparation of marking guides according to their areas of expertise.

The extent to which tutors with different expertise enhance quality in curriculum implementation

It is important to synchronise the identified areas of expertise in order to standardise them so as to bring about uniformity in curriculum implementation. Once the areas of expertise are identified the curriculum implementation
must be continuously monitored so as to establish permanent and appropriate uniformity. This therefore brings about meaningful quality assurance.

**The importance of staff development in curriculum implementation**

Given the above discussion, the ever changing curriculum implementation strategies calls for staff development specifically in an ODL set up. An ODL set up has its unique demands in which the tutor is expected to play mainly a facilitating role (Erwin, 1991).

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study is rooted in the qualitative research paradigm which employed a descriptive survey design. Qualitative study is essential for the conduct of this study as it analyzes information conveyed through language and behavior in natural settings (Kumar, 2008; Gray, 2009). A purposive sample was used in this study to sample Regional Programme Coordinators (RPCs) who are full time tutors. A purposive sample was used because it is a qualitative non-probability sample which is usually consistent with the needs of research studies on beliefs, values, feelings and motivations that underlie behaviors. Eighteen RPCs from ZOU's two regions of Mashonaland West and Mashonaland East responded to an open ended questionnaire. The respondents responded to an open ended questionnaire to gather thick descriptions of data (Silverman, 2006). Open ended questionnaires have the ability to gather dense data from respondents. Seale and Charteris-Black (2006) confirms this when they point out that the questionnaire has the capacity to gather lots of rich research data from research participants because of its open ended nature. All research participants answered the same questions so as to obtain consistent data on issues of curriculum implementation by tutors with different backgrounds, experiences and expertise in curriculum implementation. Apparently these are the issues this study is focusing on. The gathered data are qualitative, thereby, enabling the researchers to rely on words for their presentation. From the open ended questionnaire, the respondents had the latitude to describe in their own words the issues being investigated in this study. For demographic data of the participants, tables were used to present them, thus, giving way to data analysis and discussion. Use of tables enabled quantification of the personal characteristics of participants. Data were analysed using textual analysis that enabled researchers to come up with themes which pave way to data analysis and discussion.

**Research Findings**

**Tutors’ background and curriculum implementation:**

Responding to the question on how tutors conduct week-end school tutorials, responses clearly showed that one’s background has direct influence on the way in which one administers and manages the teaching - learning processes. They lecture instead of tutoring. When asked on how they deliver content during tutorials, one tutor responded “the time allocated per semester forces me to use the lecture method”. This results in the acute shortage of time resulting in frustration on the part of the tutor who now fails to complete the content prescribed in the module. In this regard, the student feels more frustrated and cheated as they fail to achieve the set learning outcomes. The end result is that quality is compromised.

Analysis of responses of tutors with different backgrounds reveals that they can be assigned different tasks taking into account their areas of specialization to enhance quality in curriculum implementation. For example, tutors are assigned courses to tutor and mark on the basis of their area of subject specialization. They use their areas of specialization to effectively implement the assigned tasks and act as resource persons for the curriculum implementation team. One tutor said she has been “setting assignment items for the course since she joined the university and is now an experienced expert”. This, therefore, enhances quality in that the tutors are competent in handling the subject matter in their areas of specialization as they have a deep understanding of issues in these areas.

On the question of specialization, responses revealed that tutors with different areas of specialization are able to complement each other in enhancing quality curriculum implementation. A clear example is the situation where a marking guide for a course assignment is prepared by a specialist in that course and is used by all the ZOU regions to assess students’ work. This brings about uniformity in assessment and enhances quality in that a nationally standardized instrument is used for all students. In a way areas of expertise would have been used harmoniously to come up with strategies that enhance quality in curriculum implementation in an ODL set up.
On the issue of the extent to which tutors with different experiences can be used to enhance quality in curriculum implementation, an analysis of the responses shows that tutors can share experiences and craft strategies for effectively implementing curriculum at various levels. These tutors would be resource persons during staff development workshops, tutorials, marking sessions, programme evaluation, module review sessions, Departmental Board meetings, Faculty Board meetings and Senate meetings. All this ensures common understanding of curriculum implementation issues hence enhancing quality in ODL. This also consolidates teamwork thereby bringing about effective curriculum implementation.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the discussion above the following conclusions were drawn:

- One’s background has direct effect on the manner in which curriculum implementation is effected.
- Tutors with different backgrounds can enhance quality curriculum implementation.
- On the basis of shared experiences tutors can craft appropriate strategies to effectively implement curriculum at various levels.
- Quality curriculum implementation at various levels can be done through staff development workshops, tutorials, marking sessions, programme evaluation, module review sessions, Departmental Board meetings, Faculty Board meetings and Senate meetings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above conclusions the following recommendations were made:

- When recruiting tutors, the tutor’s background should be relevant to issues of curriculum implementation in ODL.
- For the purpose of enhancing quality curriculum implementation tutors should be tasked to perform different activities which complement each other on the basis of their areas of specialization.
- Staff development programmes should be designed to enable tutors craft appropriate strategies to effectively implement curriculum at various levels.
- Quality curriculum implementation at various levels should be done through staff development workshops, tutorials, marking sessions, programme evaluation, module review sessions, Departmental Board meetings, Faculty Board meetings and Senate meetings.

REFERENCES