Can we maintain quality while managing quantity? An Analysis of Distance Education Students' Perspective on quality Education being offered at one University in Central Province of Zambia.

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Abstract

This study investigated Distance Education (DE) students' perspectives on the quality of education offered at one university in Central Province of Zambia. Guided by constructs of curriculum relevance, learner support, staff qualifications, instructional delivery, assessment credibility, and learning environment, the study adopts a qualitative descriptive design rooted in interpretivism paradigm. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis and Focus Group Discussions with 20 students, complemented by insights from four lecturers overseeing DE programmes. Findings revealed that students perceived DE as of high-quality, citing strong curriculum alignment with school practice, dedicated lecturers, effective learner support systems, and credible assessment procedures. However, challenges—including ICT inefficiencies, inadequate infrastructure, lack of modules, poor communication, and academic dishonesty compromised quality. The study was informed by Transactional Distance and Constructivism theories as lens for measuring quality education being offered in the University of Study. It was concluded that while the DE programme largely meets national and global benchmarks, institutional improvements were needed to sustain excellence in line with Higher Education Authority standards.

Key words: Accreditation, Benchmark, Compromise, Distance Education, Quality

1. Introduction:
1.1 Introduction

Open and Distance Education is one of the modes of education systems that has been adopted in many Higher Institutions of learning especially in developing countries. This is the type of education where teaching and learning is done through various methods where the learner and the educator are at physical distance from each other (Singh &Mishra, 2016). The adoption of this mode of learning, it has been observed, has increased access to many prospecting clients who might not have had the chance to

receive higher education (Suleiman, 2023). Open and Distance learning as observed (Simui et al, 2021) has emerged as an irreplaceable alternative strategy for extending access to higher education.

Distance Education (DE) in Zambia has a long history going as far back as 1940's when many Zambians who could not receive higher education through conventional method opted to study for post primary education through commercial colleges in South Africa and Britain. This type of education had similar features to today's Distance Education (DE). At the time of independence, the newly independent Zambia experienced critical shortage of viable personnel with only 112 University graduates to carter for all the ministries in the country (Carmody, 2004, and Kelly, 1999). This scenario compelled the Zambian Government to adopt Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a viable strategy to enhance access to higher education. A number of programmes and institutions offering De such as National Correspondence College, University of Zambia, Central Africa Correspondence College and Rapid Results College that existed took it upon themselves to offer both face-to-face and DE to prospecting candidates. It was hoped students who underwent training in these institutions would upon graduation help to take up responsible jobs both in public and private sector and thus cushion the critical shortage of human resource needed at the time.

The university investigated in this study adopted DE as far back as 2000 when it opened the doors to mainly primary school teachers' certificate holders who wanted to cross over to secondary section by getting a Diploma in secondary teaching. This step attracted teachers across the country to upgrade their certificates and change their status from being primary school teachers to secondary school teachers. With the overwhelming response the college extended the programmes in 2015 when it became a university to degree level. Many prospecting candidates favored this mode of learning because of its flexibility to allow working teachers to attend residential schools during their school holidays while attending to their work during school term (Simui et al, 2021). Besides this mode of learning was considered to be cost effective and affordable as most of the students were already working and on salary and thus could manage to pay their tuition fees (Mahmord, Buth and Manzoor, 2022). Because of this arrangement a lot of teachers and now non-teachers have accessed this form of education. But the question many education stakeholders ask is the quality of this type of education. Can we maintain quality while managing quantity? (https://distancelearning.institute/growth-philosophy) This is the question the study tried to explore.

1.2 QUALITY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

As observed and stated by many researchers, quality is a relative term that cannot be attributed to one definition but will depend on the context in which it is applied (Shava &Ndebele, 2014). It is not one-size fits all. Singh &Mishra (2016) have observed that quality may take different and sometimes conflicting meaning depending on the understanding of various interests of different stakeholders of education. Miyazoe (2008) has described quality as the standard of something when it is compared to other things of the same kind. This is in line with Reju & Ojakulehin (2010) understanding of quality which they have equated to excellence that they observed presents particular standard or specification. Shava& Ndebele (2014) have described quality in line with perfection which is anchored on conformity to standards. Bwalya (2023) has also define quality as the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics of an object fulfill requirement. The various definitions given justifies the notion that quality cannot be restricted to one definition but that it means different to various contexts. However, in

this study quality was considered in terms of standards, excellent and perfection when compared with other institutions.

From the Distance Education perspective quality encompasses everything from curriculum design and delivery methods to students' support services and learning outcomes (https://distancelearning.institute-growth-philosophy). This entails that the items mentioned work as benchmarks for evaluating quality. When they are well coordinated and effectively designed they contribute to making DE programmes exceptional, excellent and perfect thereby leading to quality education. Eze (2017) included other elements such as health environment, content and outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes that are linked to national goals for education and positive involvement in society. These elements mentioned give a good direction on what quality from the education perspective is premised on and the expected standards to be met.

The issue of quality in education cannot be compromised or negotiated as it is one of the five key goals of the Vision 2030 and has been enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal no four (4) established by the UN in 2015 (Suleiman, 2023). Thus whether DE or Conventional system quality is expected to be upheld.

Having a well-designed curriculum is the basis for quality education. The curriculum especially for DE should have content which is not only academic but which is age appropriate, practical and easy to follow. Singh &Mishra (2016) posit that the quality of learning is determined by the type of curriculum put in place. The curriculum which is aligned with what students are doing in schools encourages many students to upgrade as one way of boosting their good performance and enhancing their professionalism. Having content which is well designed and contextualized in the curricular increases the desire for learning. Students would appreciate such content as it tallies with what they are doing in schools and fits in society's expectations. Thungu et al., (2008) intimated that having a well-designed curriculum facilitates identification of knowledge, skills and attitudes which are significant for the development of students in general and society in particular.

 The other benchmark is learner support. Learner support refers to all services and resources provided by the institution to learners to make life easy as they study and to help them succeed in their educational journey. The support as it has been observed and stated extends beyond academic tutoring to include technical assistance, career and personal Counselling, library services, Information and communication Technology (ICT) services and orientation of new students among others (https://distance learning. institute/growth-philosophy). Coupled with what has been outlined is putting in place policies and procedures that provide frameworks within which quality is provided and maintained as well as procedures for doing certain things in an institution. The policies and procedures include admission criteria, well stipulated assessment policies and procedures, regular curriculum updates and systematic monitoring processes. Institutions are expected to put in place all that has been mentioned and avail the information to students to make their life and study easy. By doing so quality is being maintained.

The other benchmark is highly trained staff. Every education system is expected to have and maintain highly qualified staff. The staff of this caliber contribute to providing quality education and are essential to the success of every educational institution (Mahmood et al, 2022). For DE to be of good quality, lecturers who teach and other supportive staff need to be highly trained for their positions as the training

equip them with knowledge needed and determine the quality of education given (MoE, 1996, Ajan, 2018). Highly trained staff in DE make this mode of learning successful. They help to bridge the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge and provide direct connection between students and themselves and permit students to feel more engaged and connected to the institution despite the intermittent physical meeting. Besides, highly qualified staff are a linchpin on which quality achievement of an education system anchors (Singh& Mishra, 2016).

The highly qualified staff know which knowledge, skills and attitudes are needed in their students, which form of assessment is required. They know how to evaluate their students and provide them with the needed clarifications, feedback and appropriate exams based on what has been taught and what is in the course outline. Moreover, well trained staff use teaching methods that captivate their students and enable them to understand the content well. Suleiman (2023) elucidate that teaching methods play a crucial role in achieving quality education. He further intimated that effective teaching methods when used have the potential to influence students' grasp and retaining of knowledge which lead to development of critical thinking skills and successful academic accomplishment. Hence, higher institutions of learning when using DE mode must ensure that they hire and deploy highly qualified staff who will add value to their institution and bring excellence, standards and perfection to the programmes. Osamwonyi (2016) alluded that the higher the level of educational attainment of educators, the higher the level of educational standards which imply quality.

Notwithstanding what has been said, quality in DE is benchmarked with conducive learning environment. This entails that the institution conducting De must have enough infrastructure, clean and comfortable surroundings, enough resource rooms, well stocked and ventilated libraries and study spaces. Eze (2017) recommends health environment which implies environment that is safe, protective, and gender sensitive and one that provides adequate resources and facilities for the students, to be a yardstick for quality education. A conducive and health environment with the necessary infrastructure, resources and facilities enhance students focus, concentration and engagement (Suleiman, 2023) and thus contribute to quality education.

Correspondingly, quality in DE is measured by looking at the outcomes of those trained at that institution. As Eze (2017) exemplified quality outcome as the end product that determines whether those who underwent training are appropriate for the job taken or need more improvement and training to fit into the job one is doing. Outcome in this case is analysed by looking at the knowledge, skills and attitudes students portray when they complete the training and how they fit in to the national goals of education and their positive participation in society needs. Quality in DE is measured by the performance of students who have completed their studies in their various places of work. Their performance is an indicator of what type of education they received and how effective it is in changing the performance of their schools.

Suffice to say quality in DE is benchmarked by the availability of learning materials. As stated that one of the foundational pillars of high quality Distance Education is the provision of well-crafted learning materials (https://distancelearning.institute/growth-philosophy). Instructional materials such as textbooks, videos, lecture notes, quizzes and interactive modules facilitate learning to DE students and hence provide quality needed in this mode of learning. When these instructional materials are not provided, then quality is compromised.

The understanding and analysis of quality education offered to DE students in the university of study will be based on the curriculum offered in this institution, content, learning environment, instructional materials, status of staff and outcome of trained students among others.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF QUALITY IN DE EDUCATION

Quality is a very important pillar in any education system. In DE maintaining quality has significant benefits to the institution and student at large. Bwalya (2023) elucidated that quality education raises the institution's name, status and reputation. Individuals and parents want their children to learn at an institution that has a good name, status and reputation based on their academic performance which is a product of quality education offered at that institution. Institutions with these features attract a lot of prospecting students and enroll best students and are encouraged to offer programmes on the market that meet people's demands. This situation increase accessibility to higher education. This is only possible where institutions make it mandatory for every member of the institution to maintain, enhance and own all systems that promote quality. However, it is imperative to note that quality is not a one time show but a continuous process that demands institutions to put systems in place which facilitate improvement of whatever is taking place in the institution. Wilger (1992) emphasized that for quality to prevail institutions need to provide environment within which quality is everyone's responsibility and within which a self-critical commitment to its maintenance and enhancement is part of the professionalism of all.

1.4 CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY HIGHER INSTITUTIONS TO PROVIDE QUALITY DE

Quality in DE is compromised by institutions due to various challenges they experience. One such challenge is lack of standard criteria for benchmarking quality (Shava & Ndebele, 2014). Many institutions do not put in place criteria for quality while others ignore what has been put in place by authorities mandated to control quality in higher institutions of learning. In Zambia the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has been established and mandated to provide standard guidelines to higher institutions on how these institutions should operate and to monitor and enhance quality (Simui et al, 2021). Lack of adherence to the guidelines provided pose a challenge to provision of quality education.

Secondly, failure to provide learning materials such as modules that students can access when away from the institution negatively affect quality education. Learning materials play a critical role in DE and when not available education is adversely affected. Furthermore, limited face-to-face interaction between lecturers and students create a situation where students feel isolated and not benefiting from the learner support those in conventional programmes enjoy. This is enhanced by far away distances some students find themselves in. The situation affects them negatively academically, emotionally and personally as they have no chances of consulting lecturers anytime they are in need. Moreover the distance also compromise on assessment especially when take away assignments and projects are given it becomes difficult to ascertain if what has been submitted was done by the student him/herself (https://distancelearning.institute/growth-philosophy). It is undisputable that some students hire other people to write assignments for them. This compromises on quality expected to be seen in what they write and sometimes the hired people are not qualified to produce excellent work expected from the students.

In addition, having staff who are not well vest in distance learning methodologies is another challenge which affect quality in distance education (Mpofu et al, 2012). In institutions where every member of staff participates in teaching DE classes, chances of finding some who are not trained and have no experience in teaching Distance Education classes are high and these compromise on quality.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Building on the preceding discussion of quality in Distance Education, this study is theoretically anchored in Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) of Moore (1993) and Constructivist Learning Theory (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). The integration of these complementary perspectives provides an analytical lens for interpreting Distance Education (DE) students' perceptions of quality, learning processes, and outcomes at the institution under study. These theories are particularly appropriate because they foreground interaction, learner engagement, and autonomy, and contextualized learning which are core dimensions of quality assurance in distance education.

i) TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE THEORY

This theory was advanced by Moore (1993) in which he conceptualised distance education as a pedagogical and psychological space rather than a geographical separation. The theory was developed to understand ways to reduce the distance between learners and their educators for maximum effectiveness of distance learning (Achuthan et al., 2024). It anchors on three variables namely dialogue, structure and learner autonomy. Dialogue refers to the interaction between students, peers and lecturers. This is done during residential school through lectures, tutorials, peer teaching, consultations and assessment feedback. These activities reduce transactional distance and contribute to high quality education.

Structure as the second variable refers to the rigidity or flexibility of the course design. It refers to the way DE learning programmes are designed, content organised, objectives defined and assessment conducted. When flexibility is exercised it creates learning environment that satisfy students' expectations while rigidity widens the distance between students and their lecturers and hence compromise on quality. Learning autonomy refers to the degree to which students control their own learning goals and experiences (https://distancelearning.institute/growth-philosophy/michaelmoore-independent-study-distance-learning. It refers to how students take responsibility for their learning which entails making proper utilisation of time and application of acquired knowledge and skills in their work place. The proper integration of the three variables act as a bridge across transactional distance between lecturers and students.

ii) CONSTRUCTIVISM THEORY

Constructivism theory is an approach to teaching and learning which is based on the premise that cognition (learning) is the result of mental construction. It states that students learn by fitting new information together with what they already know (Bada &Olusegun, 2015). The theory posit that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. In this context students construct knowledge through interaction with the content during residential school, through peer interaction as well as social cultural environment rather than receiving information passively (Piaget, 1972, Vygotsky, 1978). To promote student learning, it is imperative to create learning environment that directly expose the students to the material

being studied (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). This is done by providing students with course outlines right from the start and modules to guide them. This makes learning meaningful, experiential, contextual, collaborative and reflective. The two theories were found to be suitable to inform the study.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study employed qualitative approach and its features in trying to understand students' perspective of quality in DE. This approach was favored as the study sought to generate in-depth views of participants regarding their lived experiences while studying at the university. Data were collected from students who have gone through various programmes from 2015 when degree programmes were introduced to date. 20 students were engaged in semi-structured interviews and focus Group Discussion (FGD). Face-to-face, WhatsApp and phone calls were used to collect data. Students' responses were corroborated by four (4) lecturers who held key positions in DE. The research design was descriptive and located in interpretivism paradigm. Data were analysed using content and deductive thematic analysis.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Quality Education

The key factor in this study was to find out the perspective of DE students on quality of the education they received. The question received overwhelming responses that the education they received in this institution was of quality. It was unanimously echoed that the education they received could not be compared with what was being offered in other institutions running same programmes. One participant pointed out that:

> *The training we receive here is of quality compared with what is happening in other universities. Here there is proper teaching and learning that is why even after finishing one programme people are coming back for other programmes.*

These responses were corroborated by two lecturers who indicated that the training yes was of quality in that all programmes being offered were accredited to Higher Education Authority (HEA) a body mandated to provide standards and guidelines on how Higher Education Institutions (HEI) should be run. They mentioned that HEA monitoring reports and ratings for quality education for this institutions have always been very high, meaning the institution provided quality education.

4.1.2 Curriculum

Students were asked to evaluate the curriculum. Their responses on the understanding and rating of the curriculum also produced responses in the affirmative. One participant during FGD pointed out that:

> *The curriculum is very good because it is aligned with what is being taught in schools. When we go back we fit in very well with what is taking place in our places of work."* Another participant added her voice as follows*: "We find the content of our programmes very good. At every stage and level, we are given course outlines that guide us. We are able to study on our own even without lecturers and the content in the course outlines is always aligned with what is being taught in schools.*

These responses indicated that DE students were satisfied with the curriculum being offered to them and considered it to be of quality because it made them to fit into society. Students highlighted that because of the packed curriculum they followed it had helped them to know how to manage time effectively and handle difficult situations when they go back to their destinations without waiting on the school administrators to tell them what to do. This they said differentiated them from their colleagues from other universities. These responses fit in the two theories that is in Transactional Distance theory and constructivism theory which guided the study. The learner autonomy of the transactional Distance theory aligns very well with students' responses as well as the constructivism where students construct their knowledge of problem solving based on their experiences.

4.1.3 Teaching Staff

The investigations on quality of teaching staff and their performance was also positive. Participants were generally very happy with the caliber of teaching staff found in the institution and how they performed their duties. It was glaringly indicated that lecturers were highly educated and very committed to their duties. They appreciated the spirit of sacrifice exhibited by majority of lecturers who often extended their time of teaching to working over the weekends just to finish what they had planned to cover. It was pointed out that most lecturers worked beyond stipulated time whenever students were doing peer teaching or tutorial presentations just to give each student time to practice teaching or make presentation especially for non-teaching students. This spirit was well appreciated by all participants and served as a good example to the students when they went back to their schools. This gesture fit in the theory of constructivism where students interacted well with lecturers and constructed knowledge through peer teaching and presentation. It also supported element of dialogue found in Transactional theory which fosters connection and reduces isolation

The performance was buttressed by the qualifications obtained by lecturers. The document analysis on the qualifications revealed that all lecturers had attained the minimum of a master's degree as the benchmark for teaching in the university while a lot had obtained doctorates in their areas of specialisation and others were in the process of getting them. Besides, even schools using part time lecturers it was stated recruited those with requisite qualifications and who are able to provide quality through their teaching. This strengthened the good performance in teaching and general conduct which attracted students to study in this institution. Students further applauded the teaching methods lecturers used which they said were very encouraging and they were also using them when they go back. The discussions, group work, presentations, quizzes, research among others, used made learning interesting and prepared them for the work they were doing in schools. This is supported by Suleiman (2023) who posed that effective teaching methods have the capacity to influence how well students grasped and retained knowledge, develop critical thinking skills and succeed in their academic accomplishments. This too is part of constructivism theory.

4.1.4 Quality of Assessment

The other element investigated was the quality of assessment. The responses from lecturers and DE students was also optimistic. Students pointed out that assessment was based on the course outline given and according to what was laid down in the academic policy. They indicated quality assignments were given which prepared them for the final examination. One participant highlighted that *"assignments*

given were of quality, they required application and critical thinking which is needed at the university level." However, it was stated and observed that due to pressure of work some students engaged other people to write assignments for them. But lecturers were on the lookout of such practices and when established that a student had hired somebody to write for her/him serious penalties were meted out for such students. Lecturers also felt as an institution they needed to do better by moderating assignments and aligning them with higher level competencies. It was pointed out some assignment did not make students think but memorise. This issue it was seen also compromised on quality and worked against the two theories used in this study and undermined quality education.

On examinations, lecturers indicated that the exercise was taken seriously and all loopholes of leakages sealed. Cases of malpractice were also taken seriously and culprits dealt with according to academic policy regulations which required such students to forfeit all papers written and sometimes to be suspended for one full year. Students also asserted that exams they wrote where of quality as usually they were based on the course outline and what they had covered. The marking of both assignments, tests and exams were fairly done to the satisfaction of students, though marked exam scripts were not availed to students. These expressions were conspicuously indicative that quality was being maintained in many areas though slightly being compromised by some student's habit of engaging other people to write assignments for them. Nonetheless, this habit was being counteracted by allowing students to write two tests which carries 30 % or 40% of Continuous Assessment (CA) against assignment which carries 20%. The exam too balanced up as students were expected to write individually and could not engage other people to write for them. This is informed by constructivism theory where students were expected to demonstrate knowledge acquired by writing, thinking critically and solving exam problems on their own. This heightened credibility to the type of assessment conducted in this institution and contributed to quality education being offered to DE students.

4.1.5 Learning Environment

The study also considered the learning environment as one benchmark for quality. The participants in both FGD and individual interviews recommended the environment to be conducive for them. But were quick to lament on the insufficient infrastructure and facilities in some cases. It was reported and observed that reasonable class sizes, facilities and resources were adequate for teaching courses as these maintained a small number of students which was manageable. But with education courses which were often compulsory containing 500-750 students, the lecture rooms were often not enough as well as desks and chairs despite having big rooms for such courses. These courses often had large number of students than the facilities forcing students to stand while attending lectures in such courses. Concentration was also problematic where lecturers taught without microphones. This scenario limited students' capacity to fully exercise autonomy and thus negatively affected quality learning.

 Rooms like computer rooms and libraries while well stocked where also too small for the big number of enrolled students. Nonetheless, it was observed and mentioned by lecturers that the institution had taken measures which included putting up internet ports where students with own laptops and smart phones could access internet within the institution. The insufficient boarding spaces also had been solved by using various boarding houses around the university which students were able to occupy during their residential schools. These served as alternative hostels for those who could not find space in the university. While the learning took place in a conducive environment some students during FGD

lamented the poor conditions of rest rooms which they said were always in a deplorable state and not always clean, prompted by the huge number of students. This situation also compromised on quality and worked against both transactional and constructivism theories.

4.1.6 Learner Support

The investigation on learner support services being rendered by the university received responses in the affirmative. Students were overwhelmingly satisfied with this element and said it played a key role towards quality education they were receiving. Most of the participants commended the University for the Good Services they were receiving in this area. Firstly, it was mentioned that the putting in place of the academic policy which is availed to all students on their first reporting was one area they commended as the policy explained everything about the university programmes and what was expected of them during the period of study. As students reported at the university they were usually received by various personnel who provided academic and personal support. These staff assisted them on what courses to choose, how to register for courses, information on how to secure rooms or boarding houses, and payments among others. Orientation programmes were offered by various organs of the university. The orientation it was said aided them to learn about the life of the university and who to approach when in any need. The university it was said and observed had put in place structures that facilitated the running of DE programmes which among other included the Directorate for Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Dean of students' affairs Department, Counselling centre where students received academic, emotional and personal counselling, Schools and their HOD who provide academic support, ICT and Accounts. During FGD students applauded the support they were receiving from the institution. One participant stated:

> *Our university had friendly lecturers who were approachable and whenever approached were ready to help. When students had not done well in the assignments they were available to give students make up assignments just to make them pass. Our lecturers' support went beyond academic; we were able to approach them even on personal problems.*

Such comments showed that the institution had put in place learner-support systems that provided various support to students and thus contributed to quality education being provided. This can be supported by Ouma and Nkuyabwatsi (2019) who observed that providing learner support in De can be pivotal in meeting the various professional needs of distance learners. This system reduces transactional distances and support Moore's' dialogue and learner autonomy and allow students to construct their new knowledge based on experiences. This fits the item in both theories positively

4.1.7 Outcome of Students

The study of outcome of students trained in this institution was also in the affirmative. All students applauded the institution and indicated that the students from this institution were on high demand in both public and private schools. This has been prompted by the good performance and hardworking culture exhibited by students from this institution. One participant boastfully alluded that:

> *Even when it comes for promotions, teachers trained from our institution are considered first. Iam here as Deputy Head because of the training I got. I have managed to run the school very*

well because of the skills I acquired in Educational Management course I took during my period of study."

Another participant intimated that:

"Through the training we received we are able to solve challenges that come in our work without depending on the school managers to tell us what to do."

These assertions tally with (Simui, 2021) findings. It was also echoed that the training students got from this university had helped them to grow in all areas as professionals. They recommended the teaching styles which they mentioned were unique from their colleagues trained in other institutions. One indicated that even pupils are able to see the difference between teachers from this institution and those from other institutions. She pointed out that when pupils were assigned to one teacher from our institution they were happy and normally performed well. This corresponds with Burn (2023) who postulated that

De is teacher Professional Development which should foster growth in teachers' knowledge, instructional practices and student achievement. It should address the most critical aspect of effective teaching such as content knowledge, instructional pedagogical content, knowledge learning and development.

The above discussion depicted how students perceived the training they went through at this institution that it was of quality and that this quality was reflected in the performance of those who had gone through the institution which had gained a good reputation for the institution. These responses fit in the theory of constructivism.

4.2. CHALLENGES STUDENTS WERE EXPERIENCING

4.2.1 Information Communication Technology Deficiencies

The findings on the challenges student were facing which sometimes compromised on quality included ICT systems which they said failed the institution in many ways. It was highlighted that not much had been put in this area. Students complained of the section failing to put in place systems where students can register on their own without queuing for long hours to be attended to. They complained of missing results, missing courses in the system just because the department had done very little to solve these challenges. This situation they said frustrated them and conceded on quality. Their responses were corroborated by lecturers who also consolidated these assertions by pointing out how results got missing after being well uploaded, and course missing after being approved a situation that also frustrated lecturers. This scenario had affected the use of blended learning which is a common feature of DE and affected students' autonomy thereby widening the distance and working against Transactional Distance Theory.

4.2.2 Limited time for Residential School

Students also complained of not having enough time for residential school in order to cover much work. The two-three weeks period every holiday spent on campus, it was said was not enough. Though they were performing well in examinations and CAs, one participant stated it was through marathon. His

assertions were supported by one lecturer who conceded to short period of residential school which he said did not give students enough time to learn and often ended up just preparing for exams. However, another participant during FGD counteracted by saying that the short period of residential school helped them to remain focused on their studies and minimised wasting time on what did not pertain to their studies. These assertions implied that students had mixed feelings on the duration of residential school with some satisfied and others not.

4.2.3 Poor Communication by the University

More cardinal on the challenges students were facing was poor communication which students felt the university needed to improve on. It was unanimously pointed out that the university had failed them on day to day communication despite putting in place structurers to look into their affairs. Students during individual interviews and FGD echoed that often important issues and changes being introduced were not officially communicated to them by concerned staff. One participant highlighted the increase on university fees and adjustment of teaching practice fees not to have been officially communicated to them but just found that their bills had gone up without official notification. Another mentioned of increase of residential duration from two weeks to three weeks for students taking science courses without officially telling them. Such kind of practices affected students psychologically as they needed to prepare adequately for more funds to pay and their upkeep. Besides the scenario affected their planning and getting permission from their places of work. The situation worked against Transactional theory as it affected student' autonomy to plan effectively and compromised on quality education. On the contrary lecturers counteracted on increase of duration that they missed it because majority did not read the memos sent to them by the Directorate. The poor reading culture contributed to their missing important information that was sent through student platforms. Ouma & Nkuyabwatsi (2019) pointed out that poor reading culture limits the effectiveness of learner support. Observations however, showed that there were often lapses in communication which bordered on quality which was acknowledged by lecturer participants and worked against Transactional variable of dialogue.

4.2.4 Student Isolation

Furthermore, the issue of isolation by those working in far flung areas of the country was noted to be a challenge. Students in far away schools felt isolated and disconnected from the institution immediately after residential school and only realised they were students when it was time for residential school. These students complained of the university not putting in place anything in form of learner support to enable them be connected to the university even when it was not time for residential school. One student alleged that they were only students during residential after the residential they had no connection with their lecturers or other university staff. This corresponded with (Shava & Ndebele's 2014) findings who observed and intimated that DE students suffer from isolation and stress due to lack of institutional support. This isolation it has been observed and stated negatively affected student's performance and sometimes finishing their course. In the process it adversely influenced the quality education expected to be provided. This worked against Transactional element of dialogue and compromised knowledge construction thereby working against both theories.

4.2.5 Lack of Learning Materials (Modules)

Lack of Modules was another serious challenge raised by students. It was stated that they were not provided with modules to enable them to continue learning even when not in campus. While they appreciated lecturers' commitment to giving them handouts and notes during residential school, but they condemned the inability of the university to provide interactive modules so that they continued learning throughout their period of study. The lapse of the university on this area had affected continuous learning which should be a good feature of quality in DE and this negatively affected the level of quality learning at the institution and worked against Transactional Distance element of student's autonomy

4.2.6 Banning Students from Writing Exams

Above all the banning of students from writing exams who owed the institution while helpful to the institution to raise revenue for the smooth running of the institution, was seen to be a disadvantage to students with genuine reasons. It was observed that a good number of students went through the university programmes without fulfilling their obligation of paying university fees as required and stipulated in the University academic policy. This practice affected the operations of the university and hence contributing to its failure to improve on ICT and module production. The banning of such students helped the institution to recover money as when such step was taken a good number of students cleared their debts. But to those who failed to do so, they were banned from writing exams, a situation that affected their period of finishing their programmes. This worked against quality as quality is also benchmarked by the completion rate of those who start the programmes in the institution and worked against Transactional elements of structure and autonomy. It also affected constructivism theory where students failed to apply knowledge and skills they have acquired by failing to write exams.

4.2.7 Limited Funds

Lack of funds to improve on a lot of services offered in the institution has compromised on quality. One lecturer argued that if we have to offer quality education, the institution needs to be ready to spend funds on many services. He mentioned lack of modules, enough computers, improvement of ICT department, lack of enough chairs and desks among others to have been fueled by management not being ready to spend on academic issues. This he said has affected provision of quality. His ideas tally with Ouma & Nkuyabwatsi (2019) who also alluded that insufficient funds limit institutional capacity to effectively plan, organise and support students by providing adequate course materials, infrastructure and facilities. This scenario has affected the level of quality being provided in the institution.

The two theories used in this study provides a comprehensive framework for interpreting quality in Distance Education within the institution. Transactional Distance Theory elucidates how variations in dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy shape students' perceptions of quality, while Constructivist Learning Theory explains how pedagogical practices, assessment strategies, learner support, and workplace application contribute to meaningful learning outcomes.

4.3 MEASURES

DE in institutions of learning has come to stay and has transformed institutions and increased access to higher education to many candidates. As it has been observed and stated each institution should therefore work towards providing quality in the programmes they are offering. Institutions should define

their quality and put in place implementation strategies and measures aimed at achieving quality (Burn, 2023). Besides, providing quality education should be the mandate of every individual found in the institution, every faculty member and management at large. This is due to the fact that quality is not a one goal thing but a continuous exercise that needs consented efforts of every member of the institution.

4.3.1 Innovation of ICT Systems

It was proposed the institution needed to put in a lot of efforts and funds to improve the operations of the ICT department to overcome the challenges students were facing in this area and allow lecturers to be conducting blended learning which was not taking place in the institution due to poor services the ICT department was offering. Blended learning, balance online and offline components to maximise learning effectiveness (https://distancelearning.institute/growth-philosophy).

4.3.2 Improvement of University Communication

Besides, improvement on communication was highlighted to be an important element in maintaining quality. It was suggested this improvement would become more feasible with the institution expedite the formulation of the guild for students and making the group more effective. The lapses on this element had made certain elements of quality to be compromised. The group once in place acts as a link between university management and the students hence help to resolve a lot of challenges. Moreover, it was suggested students also needed to awaken the culture of reading to avoid missing whatever changes were posted on their student portals and various forums for their consumption and notification.

4.3.3 Provision of Modules

On lack of modules, those in-charge pointed out that the exercise of writing, reviewing old ones and updating the same old ones was going on but were quick to mention that the exercise was taking shape at a slow pace due to busy schedules of lecturers in the institution. Shava & Ndebele (2014) emphasised that learning materials like modules play a central role in ODL. Students therefore suggested the exercise be expedited as a lot were being missed in the absence of modules and made continuous learning difficult. On the other hand students were urged to be making use of the computer lab, smart phones and library which had e-resources that they could use to get necessary information to supplement what they received from lecturers.

4.3.4 Provision of Funds

The institution also needed to be ready to spend more funds on academic affairs which is the core business of the institution. It was realised most of the things compromising quality were due to lack of funds. The institution it was stated must put in place measures to allow students who dodged paying tuition fees to be sorted out by the system so that it would be able to collect money due to it and use most of it to improve on the academic welfare of not only DE students but all students in the institution. This would help to solve most issues working against provision of quality.

4.3.5 Strengthen the work of the Directorate of Quality Assurance

To strengthen the work of the Directorate of Quality Assurance which is just in its infancy stage and have good coordination among key stakeholders which includes management, accounts, Dean of

Students, Dean of schools and there members, ICT among others. If all do their work expeditiously and with integrity quality can be well maintained,

5. CONCLUSION

The study conducted on one of the higher institution of learning in Zambia, focused on establishing students' perspective on the quality of DE being received in the institution. Students perceived the DE being offered to be of quality and were able to boast that this education was of Excellency when compared with what was taking place in their sister institutions. From what has been discussed and observed, 75% of what was being done was of quality when benchmarked with the global standards and Higher Education Authority (HEA) standards. However, the quality to some extent was being compromised by some institutional factors prevailing in the university such as ineffective electronic learner system due to poor ICT infrastructure and systems, poor communication, slow updating, reviewing and development of modules among others. These work against the expected quality and compromised the good practices the university had adopted to enhance DE. It was therefore recommended that the university do more in the areas where it was failing to maintain quality which resonated with the University's motto which is **"Teaching for Excellency."** While the products of the institution carried this motto and reflected it in their performance but more was needed to be done to make their training excellent and to maintain the status and reputation of the institution.

The study affirms that quality DE is achievable through well-structured curricular, qualified staff, effective support systems, and continuous improvement. Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance and the Theory of Constructivism provides the useful lens to understand and address the complexities of DE. Institutions must priorities quality to ensure DE remains a viable and respected mode of education.

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