Strategy and Quality Assurance at the Zimbabwe Open University

by

Dr Primrose Kurasha
Vice Chancellor, Zimbabwe Open University

and

Prof Takawira C. Gwarinda
Acting Pro-Vice Chancellor-Academic Affairs
Zimbabwe Open University

Introduction

Strategy is originally a military term denoting competitive advantage over an adversary (Krajewski and Ritzman, 1993). It is about winning over other players in a given field of operation. This means that a strategic plan is not merely a detailed plan or blue-print but a programme that unifies the efforts of an organisation or individual towards winning over other competitors.

Grant (1995) suggests the following features of a successful strategy:

- Goals that are simple, consistent and long term;
- Profound understanding of the competitive environment;
- Objective appraisal of resources, that is, knowing oneself well and the available resources; and
- Effective implementation characterised by commitment, consistency and determination.

Grant’s conception of a successful strategy is highly applicable to higher education, especially in an era when higher education is regarded as a major ingredient in general socio-economic development.

A strategy succeeds when it is characterised by quality assurance which, for the purposes of this paper, can be regarded as a process of ensuring that students who enter a programme exit with the requisite standard of competence or set of outcomes envisaged by the university (Gwarinda, 2006). In this regard, quality assurance has been perceived as inclusive of all those attitudes, objects, actions and procedures which ensure that appropriate academic standards are being maintained and enhanced in each programme (UNESCO, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a strategy for quality assurance at the Zimbabwe Open University in the context of the surge in distance education or open and distance learning (ODL) in Zimbabwe and, indeed, the SADC region.

Institutional context

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) was established in 1999 through an Act of Parliament which had set the envisaged institution’s mandate as:

- To provide for research and courses of instruction, suitable to the needs of learners through a distance education system, and to take such other steps as may appear necessary and desirable for the advancement and dissemination of knowledge... (Government of Zimbabwe, 1998:245).

The Act is accordingly explicit about ZOU having to operate as a distance education or Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution, catering for the specific or characteristic needs of distance rather than conventional students while at the same time ensuring quality education since one cannot advance knowledge following methods that do not promote quality. As is common knowledge now, distance education is an approach of delivery where the learners is separated from the instructional base or teacher in space and time for a significant portion of their learning. While the terms distance education and open and distance learning are generally used interchangeably in the literature today, ODL tends to be based on flexibility and multi-modal approaches to educational delivery while distance education per se can be quite closed in entry and restricted in delivery.

In the ZOU Act, the stress on research, along with instruction, implied a university which would be innovative in distance education as research is bound to lead to the discovery of new technologies or ways of doing things. This means that ZOU was not envisaged to be a conventional institution which would continue to follow methods that were traditional to most institutions of higher learning. It was expected that the university would take the lead in researching new and better ways of ODL delivery catering for the characteristic needs of distance students while at the same time ensuring quality education.

The operationalisation of ZOU (which was originally created as the Centre to Distance Education of the University of Zimbabwe) was based on the setting up of ten Regional Centres co-ordinated from the National Centre in the national capital, Harare. Each Regional Centre is run by a Regional Director, a team of academics known as Regional Programme Co-ordinators according to each Faculty’s requirements and requisite administrative, that is, non-academic or support staff. Part-time academic members constitute a crucial component of the staff. The National Centre is run by the Vice Chancellor and her senior management: Pro-Vice Chancellor- Corporate Planning and Business Development, Pro-Vice Chancellor-Academic affairs, Registrar, Finance Director, Director-Library and Information Systems and Director-Information and Communication Technology, Deans of faculties, directors and managers of various units and central administrative staff. As with all state universities in the country, the state President is the Chancellor of the university, a ceremonial position meant to unite the nation by giving unquestionable legitimacy and accreditation to all Zimbabwean public universities. The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education (MOHET) pays salaries and implements other statutory obligations of the public university staff in Zimbabwe.
Over the years, the university offered an ever increasing number of degree and diploma programmes in four Faculties until they had reached 37 by 2010 and the number is still rising with new ones coming on board in August 2010 and January 2011 reaching 48 in total. Today, ZOU is the largest university in Zimbabwe both by spread and student enrolment peaking at some 22 000 students in 2007. The major methods of delivery are:

- Self-contained print modules distributed to students. These generally give the student all the basic content for a course and are intended, as it were, to replace the lecturer;
- Face-to-face contact with both full-time and part-time tutors for ironing out matters not understood from the module, adding other content, sharing experiences and building spirit-de-corps;
- Tutorial letters;
- Radio lessons;
- Newsletters.
- CDs and DVDs;
- An E-learning platform, branded as ZOU-on-line.

The major challenge for the university right from its establishment has been that of quality assurance in both subjective and objective terms. While some members of the public were skeptical of, if not hostile to, degrees offered through distance education, the university itself found several challenges in terms of resources, for example:

- Failure to recruit requisite numbers of academic resulting in over-dependence on part-time staff some of whose commitment to distance education was questionable. This was exacerbated by the phenomenon of the brain-drain in the country from about the year 2000 to 2010 during the period of the economic downturn exacerbated by sanctions imposed by the United States of America and European Union as a backlash of the land reform programme of that decade;
- Inadequate and, indeed, ever-dwindling financial and material resources in the hostile socio-economic environment in the decade following the establishment of the university. The period included the post-ESAP era, a series of drought and negative reactions to the land reform programme. This curtailed the optimum implementation of quality assurance activities of monitoring and evaluating the institution’s operations.

In spite of these impediments, the institution still had enough sustaining power to continue operating and meeting graduation requirements year after year when some conventional universities were closing temporarily.

Trends in the period 2005-2010

By the year 2005, the demand for university distance education was rising at a rapid pace with the university hitting the enrolment figure of 20 000 students around that period. It appears that, as the economic situation was deteriorating, many people in employment, constituting the ZOU pool of clients, found it necessary to acquire higher qualifications to stay in their jobs or to secure promotion or, indeed, to join the brain-drain with internationally accredited qualifications! The university began to set up District Centres as a market outreach programme in an effort to bring services as close to the student as possible, although this has been slowed down by financial constraints. The increasing enrolment trend raised the quality assurance pressures on the institution, especially when public accountability increased and student queries were also on the rise. The university recognised the negative trend that was emerging and decided to take a bold step. In 2007, the senior management, the university senate and council, with the approval of the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, established the Quality Assurance Unit at directorate level. ZOU was the first university in Zimbabwe to create such a Unit thus establishing a clear competitive advantage in higher education through that innovation.

The Quality Assurance Unit is headed by a director who is assisted by two managers(manager-academic and manager-administration) and who guides ten Regional Quality Assurance Co-ordinators based in the provincial capitals. However, some of these posts were not filled for some three years owing to financial constraints facing the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education.

Regional Quality Assurance Co-ordinators focus on two national trends have influenced ZOU to promote the enhancement of quality assurance in the university. The first is that some public conventional universities, though not explicitly mandated to offer distance education, have found ways of offering ODL through what has been termed “block release” or “parallel programmes” or “visiting schools” which actually mimick the ZOU delivery mode of week-end schools and distance tuition. These are not the traditional part-time programmes of reduced awareness for the same programmes characteristic of conventional universities.

The second influence was the establishment of the Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE), a statutory body set up in 2009, to monitor the quality of education in all higher education institutions in Zimbabwe, public and private. ZIMCHE has the mandate to register, accredit and quality assure universities and their programmes. This has made ZOU even more determined to support quality assurance operations in the institution by providing both human and material resources aimed at quality assurance. In fact, the University has gone further to sponsor managerial personnel to attend various courses focusing on governance of ODL and QA. An interesting development is that ZIMCHE recognises ZOU as the leader in ODL and is in constant touch with the university in matters pertaining to quality assurance in distance education (ZMCHE, undated). This makes it imperative for ZOU to justify this perception. As all universities are now required to have quality assurance units, ZOU will be able to share its experience with other institutions thereby benefiting from any collaborative activities that may follow. Participation in local workshops and forums of the Distance Education...
Association of Southern Africa (DEASA), SADC-ODL and the African Council for Distance Education have resulted in the university’s ability to focus on quality assurance.

The above trends in the light of the university’s objectives

The university’s vision and mission statements set out its aims for providing a high quality student learning experience. The learning and teaching strategy sets out the objectives for the development and enhancement of the curriculum and the student-learning experience. The university’s quality assurance framework supports these aims and objectives by specifying the responsibilities and procedures by which the standards of the academic programmes and the quality of student-learning experience are managed, assured and enhanced.

In its effort to provide quality distance education, ZOU developed a strategic plan which set its vision as follows:

Zimbabwe Open University’s vision is to become a World Class Open and Distance Learning University by 2009 (Zimbabwe Open University, 2005:9).

This ambitious vision was buttressed by the university’s institutional ideology which stated that:

The ZOU ideology, therefore, is to develop a best practice-enterprise-culture-based open and distance learning university focused on influencing development and change (ibid p9).

Implicit in this ideology is the pursuit of a relevant, high quality and development-oriented distance education system focused on excellence and innovation and other objectives. The mission statement of the university is thus explicit in stating that:

The Zimbabwe Open University exists to empower people through life-long learning thereby enabling them to realize their potential in an affordable and flexible manner while executing their endeavours (ibid p12).

Empowering people through life-long learning implies that there are no barriers in terms of time or age in the pursuit of relevant education; affordability implies that all means must be designed to ensure that student costs are within reach even for those of little means; flexibility implies that there be no undue rigidity in entry requirements and time-frames for the completion of programmes; and “while executing their endeavours” implies that the university was mainly intended for working people.

The overall objectives of ZOU are noble in that they seek to encompass everyone possible in the quality higher education project in Zimbabwe. This appears to be highly achievable in an environment of abundant human capital resources, mineral wealth and potential economic stability. However, as already indicated, the emergence of the university coincided with what can be termed the worst economic decade in as many as fifty years! The number of registered students began to decline dramatically from 2008 as hyper-inflation hit the country and the Zimbabwe Dollar collapsed only to be replaced by the scarce American and South African currency. Affordability thus became difficult to attain. The university tried to introduce various schemes to enable students to afford their fees, for example:

Paying by installment. The problem with this scheme was that by the time the students could complete their debt, the value of the money would have eroded by inflation;

Students proceeding with their studies and examinations, after the introduction of the foreign currency system, but paying in full on collecting examination results. The problem with the scheme was that, once the students had paid their debt, they could not pay the next semester fees because of the poor salary structure persisting in the country.

The government cadetship scheme under which the Government would provide full payment for students as a long-term loan. The problem with the scheme was that it was targeted at the youth and ZOU candidates were automatically disqualified by their working status. The university could thus not capitalize on the scheme.

Bank loans. The university has resuscitated the bank loan scheme whereby bona-fide ZOU students have their fees paid by designated banks while the students will pay back in installments to the banks. This scheme, which came into existence in the 1990s but collapsed with inflation, has a great chance of success as soon as the students begin to receive good salaries.

Government funding. This would entail grants by the state. At present, this is unlikely to go beyond what the government is already struggling to maintain by paying university staff salaries and other critical payments.

Donor funding. This has taken a great knock under the economic sanctions and political isolation that Zimbabwe has experienced since 2001.

Since quality assurance requires considerable funding if it is to achieve its intended goals, the university can be seen to be struggling under difficult conditions which require strategic thinking.

The context of the SADC Protocol on Education

What is now generally called The SADC Protocol on Education is an agreement signed in 1997 in Blantyre by the Governments of Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The protocol covers many plausible principles, objectives and strategies but those that are directly relevant to this paper cover:

- Guaranteeing academic freedom as the sine qua non for quality education, training and research;
- Establishing mechanisms to pool resources to effectively and efficiently produce the required professional, technical, research and managerial personnel;
- Widening provision and access to education and training as well as addressing gender equality; increasing equitable access, improving quality and ensuring the relevance of education and training;
- Rationalising admission requirements to education.
and training institutions and accreditation of qualifications; and
• Achieving comparability, equivalence and standardisation of education and training systems (http://www.sadc.int/english/protocol/p_education_and_training.html).

The Zimbabwe Open University has evidently fulfilled the objectives of this protocol as cited above. The university has academic freedom resulting in quality education, training and research. ZOU graduates are accepted in all sectors of the Zimbabwean economy and many are employed in all the universities in the country and the SADC region. Many of the institution’s graduates are accepted for post-graduate studies in the region, an indication of their quality and comparability and equivalence. Many ZOU staff continue to be published and to participate in international fora, indicating their quality research output. This provides the university with considerable competitive advantage.

Through associateships and affiliateships, the university continues to sign memoranda of agreements with higher education institutions in the region (and internationally) such as the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL), the Namibia College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) and the Zambian Open University (ZAOU). This indicates the pooling of resources in the production of quality professionals. The CUM is affiliated to ZOU’s Doctoral programme, SAAA etc (ind and Com).

ZOU has from its inception widened accessibility to higher education across national and gender barriers becoming the largest university in Zimbabwe within a few years. Admission requirements are the most user-friendly in the country and they continue to improve with the inception of Appropriate/Accredited Prior Learning (APL) in recent years. It is headed by a woman and many of the academic and administrative personnel are women, for example half of the deans are female. Both these factors are of importance in a developing university.

It would appear evident; therefore, that in terms of the SADC objectives cited above, the university is fulfilling the major provisions of the SADC Protocol on Education and Training.

From the advent of independence in 1980, Zimbabwe’s focal strategy has been to attain self-sufficiency in skilled human resources and this objective has been reconfirmed from time to time (Ministry of Higher Education and Technology, 2002). In the event, the country has been so successful that it has become a major exporter of quality human resources, although it must be admitted that the major stimulus for this trend has been the economic meltdown of the last decade. Central to the strategy has been the objective of improving access and the quality of tertiary education and training in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwe Open University, by establishing its Quality Assurance Unit to steer the institution towards the realisation of that objective, is playing a significant role.

**Governance and Quality Assurance**

The Zimbabwe Open University, like all universities in Zimbabwe public or private, is run on the basis of its Act of Parliament. Like all public universities in the country it is headed by the Vice-Chancellor as the chief executive officer while the state President is the Chancellor. Contrary to some perceptions, the chancellor does not have executive powers but serves as the symbol of unity in the post-colonial efforts to create one nation.

In addition to the University Council as the employer, chaired by a non-employee of the university itself, and the Senate, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, ZOU has over twenty committees in its governance structure. Each committee is function-specific, for example:
• Examinations Management Committee;
• Higher Degrees Committee;
• Associate-ship Committee;
• Committee On Academic Awards and Ceremonies
• Etc

Experience with the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) shoes that the key elements of the Quality Assurance Framework include the following:
• External reference points with the Regulatory Authority;
• Programme regulations and academic policies;
• Examination boards and external examiners;
• Senate programme-approval processes;
• Programme and module-review processes;
• Collaborative programmes with associate and affiliate institutions and other partners;
• Student-involvement in quality assurance and learner support; and
• Enhancement of the Quality Assurance Framework to ensure fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose.

The various committees in the university are chaired mostly by elected people but there are those chaired by pro-vice-chancellors as designated officers. The Quality Assurance Director sits in most of the committees, some of which he/she chairs, to take care of quality-related matters which are bound to arise in university operations. In its governance approach, ZOU has developed an ethos focusing on what is termed “the ZOU Family” intended to promote a collaborative, communal culture. This inclusive approach seems to be helping the institution to hold together in the harsh socio-economic environment which has seen most public universities temporarily closing or suspending operations at one time or another in 2008-9 except ZOU.

The quarterly strategic planning retreats, coming between the major 5-year retreats, help to iron out the governance issues of the university as all heads of units, including Regional Directors, gather for consultations. This way, the institution is able to maintain quality operations through hard times.
Areas for priority action and positing of the Quality Assurance Unit

In assessing the environment, the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) has noted the rise of ZIMCHE and the demand for similar units in Zimbabwe is a major challenge (n.b. not a euphemism for problem) requiring strategic thinking. It has also noted that by establishing a QAU in 2007, ZOU has a head-start which it can use to advantage in this field. In fact, ZOU already has a board member on the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (QAAA) of the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE).

The QAU of the institution also notes that there are still significant quality assurance problems that continue to plague the university in spite of the introduction of relevant measures. However, there has been significant acceptance (buy-in) of the Unit by stakeholders as it helps to spruce the image and popularity of the organisation. The significant strategic gap of the Unit is: The weak capacity of the university to provide adequate financial and material resources required in monitoring and evaluating the processes of a university spread across the country.

In spite of this, the QAU can take approaches that ensure the promotion of quality education in the university by:

Holding stakeholder workshops on ODL and QA with all Unit Heads such Deans, Regional Director, relevant National Centre Director and Managers and SRC leaders. This promotes unity and collaborative efforts for self-auditing approaches to quality assurance, avoiding the inspection style. This means using the collegial approach and following “above-board” methods based on trust and professionalism;

Conducting short courses for university personnel at no charge and similar courses for other university staff and education managers from various sectors at an affordable fee. This would raise some funds for the Unit and help popularize quality assurance as a professional enterprise in all education sectors;

Launching long-term courses in Quality Assurance at Masters' and Doctoral levels;

Participation in national and international fora to promote QA and try to solicit funding from relevant sources including donors;

Research and publication in the field for similar reasons;

Meticulous recruitment of staff dedicated to ODL and quality assurance rather than careerists looking for greener pastures;

Procuring requisite equipment for quality assurance operations whenever possible; and

Managing the mission of the university and the unit to facilitate staff mobility, research and publications in quality assurance.

Keeping the QAU at ZOU in the limelight nationally and internationally, developing close links with ZIMCHE rather than dreading it and helping other universities in the country to establish their own QAUs. This has already started to take place with the ZOU-QAU facilitating various quality assurance workshops.

Conclusion

Quality assurance in ODL has been a difficult task for decades. However, at university level, distance education actually catered for a minority. In the last two decades, this mode of higher educational provisioning has mushroomed all over the world, not to mention Zimbabwe. It is in this light that quality assurance has emerged as a daunting task which has to be seriously addressed to ensure that quality education is promoted. Accordingly, appropriate strategies have to be continuously devised to ensure the ZOU remains competitive in an enterprise (ODL) which is steadily becoming the mainstay of higher education across the world.

References


Protocol on Education and Training (SADC), http://www.sadc.int/english/protocols/p_education_and_training.html


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