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# EXPLORING MECHANISMS FOR ASSURING THE QUALITY OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN NAMIBIA

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ABSTRACT

Using the social realism theory of Margret Archer as an analytical tool, this article presents the findings of a research study which was conducted to explore mechanisms for assuring the quality of open and distance learning (ODL) that are implemented in higher education (HE) in Namibia. The study employed a case study research design, taking a pragmatic paradigm whereby three programmes offered through ODL modes of delivery were selected from each of the participating institutions and investigated in terms of the various mechanisms used to assure their quality. Three methods of data collection were used, namely interviews with academics and administrators involved in ODL, document analysis and a questionnaire administered to ODL students. Data were analysed and interpreted using qualitative and quantitative methods. The study found that both higher education institutions (HEIs) and National Quality Assurance Agencies (NQAAs) have in place overarching policies and procedures for quality assurance (QA). However, the QA mechanisms adopted by HEIs and NQAAs comprised a single set of 'one-size-fits-all' criteria covering all types of modes of delivery. It was, therefore, found that the ODL criteria were not sufficiently and explicitly covered and that the systems were biased towards the conventional, face-to-face modes of delivery. Based on these findings, the study recommended that both HEIs and NQAAs should have in place clearly and explicitly defined QA criteria and procedures for ODL in order to adequately address the unique quality challenges faced by ODL.

## 1. Introduction

It is undoubtedly so that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) removes barriers in access to higher education. Until recently, many universities have place emphasis on widening access rather than assuring quality. But now recently they have recognized quality assurance as key issue that need to be addressed especially in ODL (Jung, 2005). However, on the other hand, quality assurance practices must be tied to various mechanism that stipulate "how" and "by who" quality assurance in ODL should be conducted. Although considerable studies on QA have been conducted, there is little agreement on the types on mechanism, principles and procedures in QA that should be follow in ODL (Latchem & Ali, 2012).

However, most of the studies agrees that QA activities should assure students, employers, faculties and staff, regulators and government that the learning experience in ODL is of high standards (Parker, 2004; Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU), 2010; Commonwealth of Learning (COL, 2009). QA is often defined as policies, procedures, systems and practices that are internal and external to an institution, meant to serve a purpose of maintaining and enhancing quality of learning (Williams, 2016).

This includes mechanisms used in the various areas of ODL such as the types of material developed; teaching and learning; administrative support; the use of technology; assessment activities, and other support services. QA is especially important in ODL where stakeholder trust and confidence in qualifications acquired through the ODL mode needs to be built and safeguarded.

However, due to a lack of empirical evidence in the Namibian context, it has not been yet clear as to what kinds of mechanism both Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and National Quality Assurance Agencies (NQAAs) are using to improve and enhance the quality of the learning experiences of students studying through an open and distance mode. It is against this background that this study was conducted to explore the internal mechanisms for assuring the quality of ODL that are in place in Namibia using two dual mode public HEIs as case studies, as well as NQAAs; and determine the effectiveness of these various mechanisms. Particularly, this study aimed to:

- explore the various internal mechanisms used to assure quality in the ODL courses offered by public HEIs in Namibia;
- explore the external mechanisms for assuring the quality of ODL that are employed by the NQAAs in Namibia; and
- determine the effectiveness of the various QA mechanisms implemented by the Namibian HEIs offering programmes via dual modes of study with a special focus on ODL, as well as NQAAs.

In terms of the scope, this study confined itself to just two dual-mode public HEIs with university status, namely, the University of Namibia (UNAM) and the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST). National quality assurance agencies, i.e. NQA and NCHE were also included because they have an oversight responsibility for QA in HE. The findings from this study may not be generalisable to all HEIs offering ODL, whether dual or single mode due to limited scope. To increase generalisability, this study recommends that future similar studies be conducted in the rest of institutions in Namibia offering ODL programmes.

**2. Background**

In the 21st century, expanding access to Higher Education (HE) has become a priority for many countries, Namibia included. ODL has thus become a necessity in aiding the cause of HE expansion. However, for open and distance education to make meaningful contribution to the national transformation agenda and economic development, quality HE provision becomes paramount. ODL today is analternative avenue for delivering education in the midst of diminishing financial support for public institutions. Traditionally, ODL was primarily meant for adult learners but now cuts across all age groups of the study body. According to Ogunleye (2013), distance education includes all those teaching and learning methods, both interactive and the print-based self-instructional materials, aimed at increasing access to higher education.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL, 1999, 2016) defines ODL as a system of teaching and learning characterised by the separation of teacher and learner in time and/or place, which uses multiple media for the delivery of instruction including print and electronic and involves two-way communication, occasional face-to-face meetings for tutorials and learner–learner interaction. Three major elements emanate from ODL definition, namely

- separation of teacher and learner during the learning process
- use of learning technologies to determine content and connect teacher and learner
- provision of two-way interaction between teacher and learner (Ogunleye, 2013, 55).

What stands out is that ODL is a planned teaching and learning experience, which uses a wide spectrum of emerging technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction. Thus, ODL enables students who are distant from their teachers in time and space to complete their studies in a more efficient yet productive way. In view of this, QA has become a matter of importance for HEIs and other stakeholders involved in ODL.

One aspect that is significantly affected by these new modes of delivery is the institutional processes and mechanisms set up to maintain and enhance the quality of study programmes. HE provision therefore calls for ongoing planning and the implementation of robust Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) systems to achieve better results and desired outcomes (COL, 2016). This is especially important where stakeholder trust and confidence in qualifications acquired through the ODL mode needs to be built and safeguarded. On the basis of 248 research study findings compiled by Russell (2000), it was found that there was no significant difference in competency between distance learning and traditional classroom learning. In other words, distance learning can be considered as effective as face-to-face learning. In the Namibian context, public HEIs are offering dual modes of study, the assumption being that the various mechanisms used for QA are adequate to ensure quality in both the traditional mode of delivery and in ODL. Accordingly, the Namibian government, through its national quality assurance agencies (NQAAs), calls for more accountable institutions through the implementation of a set of IQA measures.

IQA encompasses all the activities that a HE institution must carry out internally in order to maintain and improve their quality. It refers to the internal policies and mechanisms of a HE institution intended to ensure that it is fulfilling its purposes as well as meeting the standards that apply to HE in general, or to the profession or discipline. IQA mechanisms may include external moderation and examination systems, self-assessment (usually followed by external peer assessment for validation), benchmarking and stakeholder feedback (Martin & Stella, 2007).

On the other hand, external quality assurance (EQA) refers to a range of quality monitoring and procedures that are undertaken by bodies outside higher education institutions (professional bodies or quality assurance agencies) in order to determine whether the institution meets the agreed or predetermined quality standards (Pitsoe & Maila, 2017). EQA denotes the actions of an external body, which may be a QA agency or anybody other than the HEI that assesses its operation or that of its programmes in order to determine whether it is meeting the agreed or predetermined standards (Martin & Stella, 2007). In the Namibian context, EQA involves the registration of HEIs, accreditation by professional bodies and/or QA agencies, and institutional audits. This study sought to establish how the selected HEIs in Namibia as well as NQAAs assure quality ODL provision.

## 3. Analytical framework

The theoretical perspective underpinned this study was Margaret Archer's theory of Social Realism (Archer, 1995); which was used as an analytical tool to help the researchers to understand the QA mechanisms employed by HEIs and NQAAs to ensure quality in ODL provision in Namibia. Archer (1995) makes a distinction between the three interrelated dimensions that co-exist and interplay in any social context, namely, structure, agent and culture. Although these dimensions may be separated for analytical purposes, in reality they are intertwined, and it is difficult to separate them. According to Archer (1995), the study of structure, culture and agency is key to understanding of how the social world functions. Archer (1995, p. 323) "defines structure as relating to material interests, to recurring patterns of social behaviour or to the interrelationship between different elements of society". Structure would thus relate to concepts such as social class, gender, race, marriage, education, etc. (Archer, 1995, p. 323). Culture, on the other hand, is understood to encompass ideas, beliefs, values and ideologies.

Both structure and culture are important aspects of social life (Ndebele, 2014). Although each is autonomous of the other yet they both exist in parallel. Agency refers to the psychological and social psychological make-up of individuals and relate to the capacity of people to act in a voluntary way (Boughey, 2005; Ndebele, 2014).At the heart of Archer's (1995) theory is the concept of morphogenesis (and its inverse, morphostasis) (Case, 2015; Boughey & McKanna, 2017). According to Case (2015); and Boughey & McKanna (2017), the term porphogenesis refers to change (-genesis) in the shape of things (morpho-), a change in agency, or culture or structure.

Archer's (1995) understanding of reproduction or change as a resulting from an endless series of 'morphogenetic cycles' in which all social and cultural interaction is conditioned by history (Boughey & McKanna, 2017), allowed the researchers to conceptualize the structure, culture and agency dimensions in Namibian HE context with particular reference to quality of ODL provision. The term morphogenetic cycle is an analytical framework which follows the course of changes in higher education space. Since higher education (HE) is dynamic as it changes over time, i.e. introduction of new modes of delivery such as ODL and online learning, a change (morphogenesis) is expected in internal and external QA systems in terms of agency, culture and/or structure to adapt to changes in higher education and address the current needs.

If HE space keeps changing in terms of introducing new forms of delivery but the structures and culture such as QA systems, policies and practices remain static (morphostasis), these systems will not live to their purpose and become obsolete. It is in this view that the study used Margaret Archer's theory of social realism as an analytical tool to enable the researchers to conceptualise an understanding of various dynamics of QA mechanisms employed by HEIs and NQAAs in Namibia, and suggest areas for further development to improve the practice.

## 4.Methodology

### 4.1. Research Design

The research design deemed most appropriate and which was employed for this study is a case study.

This took a pragmatic paradigm approach using an exploratory sequential mixed methods design whereby three programmes offered through ODL modes of delivery were selected from each of the participating institutions and investigated in terms of the various mechanisms used to ensure their quality. An inductive approach was also used to explore the current QA mechanism that ODL institutions are using from the perspective of students, academics, institutions and set QA standards.

### 4.2. Population and Sample

The study was conducted at two dual-mode public HEIs in Namibia, namely, the University of Namibia (UNAM) and the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) as well as NQAAs, namely NQA and NCHE. The population was confined to the two participating HEIs and their various branches/centres across the country as well as NQAAs. It included three case studies of programmes from each of the participating institutions offered through ODL mode, or both distance and face-to-face. The population included all lecturers and academic administrators involved in ODL, students studying through the distance mode, as well as quality assurance practitioners at the NQAAs that participated in the study. Participants in interviews and questionnaires were academic staff and tutors teaching on the selected ODL programmes; administrators such as support staff and material developers; developers/designers responsible for ODL; students learning through the open and distance mode at the two participating HEIs; and QA practitioners selected from the NQAAs that participated in the study.

Two sampling techniques were used, namely, purposive and random sampling techniques (Creswell, 2003 study, that is, ODL.

Participants in interviews were purposively selected based on the roles they played in ODL within the participating HEIs as they have a'experience' of the phenomenon being studied. The selection of the interviewees done based on the participants' ODL roles within those institutions. The roles covered were those of academic staff (n = 3 per programme) and tutors teaching on the selected ODL programmes (n = 3 per programme); administrators such as support staff and material developers (n = 4 per programme); developers/designers responsible for ODL (n = 4 per programme); and students learning through open and distance mode (n = 15 per programme).

**4.3. Research Instruments**

The idea was to understand the various mechanisms based on the data obtained from close-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and to make a comparable analysis on the different approaches to QA practice adopted by different institutions. A mixed-methods approach was employed where qualitative and quantitative approaches were combined. Creswell (2014) points out that mixed-methods research is an approach to enquiry involving collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two forms of data, and using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks. Quantitative data were collected from ODL students through questionnaires while qualitative data were collected through interviews.

Online questionnaires were used to collect data from the students and they were encouraged to participate in the study through phone calls for interviews?

Respondents to questionnaires were randomly selected using lists of ODL students enrolled in three programmes each from the two participating institutions. These lists were supplied by the ODL centres of the participating institutions. A total of 84 completed questionnaires was submitted, with 42 being received from each institution.

Quantitative data collected through document analysis and questionnaires were automatically analysed using the Google software called Google Form. These data were categorised and presented using tables and pie charts, and data were represented with descriptive statistics such as percentages. Qualitative data collected from the interviews and the document analyses were recorded using a digital voice recorder and then manually transcribed. Subsequently, these data were analysed, discussed and interpreted in line with qualitative research method conventions. During data presentation and discussion, qualitative and quantitative data were merged and interpreted to give meaning to the research findings.

**5. Results and discussion**

The purpose of this study was two folds, namely to 1) explore the various internal mechanisms used to assure quality in the ODL courses offered by public HEIs in Namibia; and 2) explore the external mechanisms for assuring the quality of ODL that are employed by the NQAAs in Namibia. Therefore, the results and discussion are divided into two themes accordingly, namely external- and internal quality assurance.

**Theme 1: Internal quality assurance**

Using Archer's (1995) theory of Social Realism, the researchers' analysis pointed to that there were many structural and cultural challenges that constrain effective ODL provision. Some of these challenges were structural or cultural in nature. Some of these challenges were within institutional control (student, staff and institution-related) while others (social and economic) were outside the control of institutions, including internet connectivity, network coverage and low bandwidth. Part of the quality concerns identified were to do with structures put in place with regard to programme management and coordination, particularly in terms of delays in dispatching learning material to ODL students and in providing feedback on student assessment. There was a general concern about the quality of academics involved in the teaching of ODL students.

It appeared that teaching staff are appointed on the basis of being lecturers but do not necessarily need to have formal qualifications or experience in ODL. This compromised the quality of learning facilitation. 'Some of the tutors are from industry and they do not necessarily have lecturing experience, let alone ODL lecturing, for as long as they are disciplinary experts. This situation compromises the quality of teaching especially where we have part-timers from industry who tend to prioritise their full-time job and not honour contractual obligations in terms of delivering quality education' (ODL staff, March 2018).

Participants indicated that the facilitation of learning in ODL required special skills that need to be learnt through capacity building programmes rather than expecting miracles to happen.

An example was given of the current scenario where 'lecturers tend to turn to conventional methods of facilitation because they cannot cope with ODL facilitation. They end up sharing lecture notes and slides from their face-to-face lessons although these are not designed in a fashion that will help a faceless, isolated, remote distance learner' (ODL staff, March 2018). Efforts were being made to remedy this through the provision of short learning programmes, but this need to be reinforced with formal academic qualifications in ODL. Furthermore, the quality of learning materials and student support services was identified as being at the heart of ODL and should ensure the success of ODL students.

However, these two areas have been identified as the weakest links with regard to poor quality. Since ODL students are physically separated from their lecturers and fellow students, they tend to feel isolated, get frustrated and may even eventually drop out. Quality and timely feedback have been identified as crucial for future student learning in ODL (assessment for learning versus assessment of learning). However, turnaround time for feedback on assignments is a grave concern. IT infrastructure has also been identified as an important tool to enable learning in ODL. Most of the students are provided with internet devices. However, there were still some remote rural areas where there is no internet connectivity of cell phone coverage. Some ODL students had to travel long distances to reach ODL regional centres. In addition, some of the academic staff and students alike were not technology literate, which hindered them from using technology to study or access the subject content.

One of the objectives of the study was to establish the structures (QA policies, processes and mechanisms in ODL) that have been implemented by the HEIs that participated in the study. Respondents from both institutions who participated in the study mentioned that there was an overarching university-wide QA policy in place. However, a concern was raised that ODL seems to be the stepbrother of the conventional face-to-face mode of delivery, as ODL has not been explicitly endorsed. Most respondents indicated that there are procedures for ensuring quality in ODL provision such as in material development, student support and ODL administration, but these were usually not documented.

It was also indicated that ODL units used quality criteria derived from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in all their systems. One example that was given is that everybody knows what the criteria for a good online course are or what constitutes good learning material for a distance student, but these are not clearly documented. There is therefore a need for these structures undergo what Archer (1995) termed a morphogenesis process to have explicit criteria for ensuring quality in ODL, whether embedded in overarching institutional QA policies or separate because of the unique nature of ODL. These may include guidelines for material development, ODL facilitation, student support, assessment, QA and the like. There is also a need for QA units to become actively involved in ODL activities. A participant from one of the HEIs observed that efforts are currently underway to develop such criteria with the assistance of the COL. This practice needs to be strengthened and extended to include more institutions.

Data collected through interviews indicated that there were formal mechanisms for collecting feedback such as the evaluation of the ODL learning experience through surveys. However, there was no evidence on the way the outcome of data collected through feedback is used to improve or enhance quality. There is also little or no evidence to show how improvements resulting from feedback collected from the students are communicated to them – fed forward. Neither is there any evidence of action taken to assist a lecturer or a course that is evaluated as poor. Students were also asked to give their side of the story in terms of participation in QA activities; and their responses are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1**: Student responses on participation in QA activities (n = 84 expressed in %)

| | Scale (%) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Response** | **Strongly Disagree** | **Disagree** | **Neutral** | **Agree** | **Strongly agree** |
| I often participate in the QA activities of my programme | 8.3 | 9.5 | 40.5 | 34.5 | 7.1 |
| I often evaluate my lecturers and course materials, and submit my input for consideration | 8.2 | 16.5 | 31.8 | 34.1 | 9.4 |
| I am satisfied with the quality of ODL experience in my institution | 12.2 | 19.5 | 22.0 | 36.6 | 9.8 |

Table 2 indicates that 7.1% and 34.5% strongly agreed and agreed, respectively (about 40% in total) that they took part in QA activities, and 40.5% of the students were neutral on this issue. Furthermore, 9.4% and 43.1% indicated that they engage in regular evaluation of their lecturers and learning materials, while the rest were either neutral or did not participate. On the question of the quality of ODL in their institution, 9.8% and 36.6% of the students strongly agreed and agreed that they were satisfied with the quality of ODL provision.

There is a need to encourage the promotion of a quality culture coupled with clearly documented and widely disseminated guidelines for QA in all the aspects mentioned above, which should then be regularly reviewed to ensure continuous improvement and closure of the quality loop. There is also a need for improvement in the use of feedback collected from students on the quality of ODL programmes and their delivery

Feedback may include student evaluation of learning experience; and tracer studies and employer satisfaction surveys geared towards improving the quality of ODL graduates. There is also a need for a mechanism to communicate to students how the outcome of their feedback was used to improve.

Furthermore, both interview participants and respondents to the questionnaires were asked to outline the achievements, challenges and areas needing improvement in ODL provision. A number of achievements were enumerated. One of the achievements that stood out is the fact that ODL has managed to remove barriers in access to higher education. Access to HE has expanded as more people are able to study without physically being on-campus due to job and family commitments. This was enabled through the creation of regional centres with student support services decentralised and brought closer to the student.

There has been also an improvement in IT infrastructure and the use of technology to facilitate learning, which has enabled the introduction of online learning programmes and electronic handling of assignments. One of the institutions also identified the introduction of an online ticketing system to handle student queries as one of its greatest achievements. However, success does not come without challenges. When asked to enumerate their challenges, a number of issues emerged. One of the interview respondents indicated that: 'Since academics in dual mode institutions are primarily appointed as lecturers for full-time, ODL is always regarded as add on activity. You hear comments like "let me first attend to my students – full-time before I start with distance students' (ODL student, March 2018).

This is not surprising because institutions were initially meant for face-to-face with ODL coming as afterthought. Lack of knowhow on the use of technology by both staff and students was also identified as one of the main challenges. Staff may find it difficult to upload learning material online and students may struggle to access material or upload assignments. Other staff indicated that there are still too many queries and student complaints. As one student put it: 'Sometimes when you need help phones are not answered and I personally struggle to get access to my material' (ODL student, March 2018). Table 2 categorises and summarises the most prominent challenges that stood out from both a student and a staff perspective.

Table 2: Challenges for open and distance learning provision

| **Student related** | **Staff related** | **Institution related** | **Social/economic related** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lack of knowhow in the use of technology<br>High dropout and failure rates in ODL<br>Some courses have had no tutors for a long time<br>Students study in isolation yet write same exam as face-to-face<br>Not enough prescribed textbooks at regional centre libraries<br>Students face financial challenges when paying for their studies | Dual mode institutions are predominantly face-to-face, academics are primarily appointed as lecturers for full-time, thus ODL is always regarded as an add-on activity<br>Costly to invest in technology<br>Lack of knowhow in the use of technology<br>Poor lecturer response to student queries | Heavy workloads<br>Lack of validity and authenticity of assessment<br>Lack of qualified staff in material development and teaching through ODL<br>Materials not loaded on portal on time<br>Study materials not arriving on time<br>Library hours do not suit ODL students<br>Lack of face-to-face sessions | Lack of internet facilities in some remote rural areas<br>ODL is underrated as a second option over face-to-face<br>Lack of trust and low confidence in ODL among stakeholders such as employers<br>Lack of financial support to expand ODL facilities |

As can be seen in Table 2, challenges may be either student related, staff related, institution related, or related to economics. There challenges require combined effort of all stakeholders involved such as government, HEIs, and industry.

**Theme 2: External quality assurance**

One of the purposes of this study was to explore the external mechanisms for assuring the quality of ODL that are implemented by the NQAAs in Namibia. This section presents the findings and discussion from EQA. Participants from the NQAAs were asked to indicate whether the criteria for assuring the quality of ODL institutions and programmes implemented were the same or different from those used in face-to-face modes of delivery. When asked to mention structures that are in place to guide their practice, participants revealed the existence of policies, regulations and procedures for quality assurance.

An analysis of these regulatory frameworks discovered that there are generic criteria that are used to accredit both face-to-face and ODL institutions and/or their programmes of study. This implies that there are no tailor-made criteria for ODL. However, there was general consensus that this state of affairs is problematic as criteria are bias towards face-to-face delivery. For example, criteria will ask for facilities such as classrooms and libraries even if physical walls may not be necessary owing to the mode of delivery. There is recognition that the higher education landscape is changing as new modes of delivery such as ODL, blended learning, and online learning emerge.

When asked whether they think quality assurance mechanisms in ODL should be different from those in full-time/face-to-face education, or whether a single set of criteria covering all types of delivery modes suffices, opinions were divided. Some respondents said they should be similar because at the end of the day students write the same question paper as face-to-face students. 'What is taught in face-to-face should also be taught in ODL and the materials should be of similar quality' (NQAA staff, April 2018). Others thought they should be different because the ODL students do not have the privilege of sitting in front of tutors and asking questions if they do not understand, while face-to-face students have that privilege. Similar sentiment was echoed by respondents from HEIs that participated in the study. A common question that always arises in HE circles is whether quality assurance in ODL needs to be different from that of a face-to-face mode.

As the World Bank (2002, p. 7) puts it, "it is doubtful that the philosophy, principles and standards customarily applied in evaluating and accrediting campus-based programmes can be used without major adjustments for assessing the quality and effectiveness of on-line courses and other modalities of distance education". Therefore, appropriate and reliable quality assurance processes are needed to assure the public that programmes offered by means of a distance mode meet acceptable academic and professional standards equivalent to those offered by face-to-face. This will help to build trust and confidence among stakeholder about the quality of the programmes obtained through ODL, which is currently not there.

This study looked at whether the NQAAs in Namibia have adopted a 'one-size-fits-all' model rather than a 'tailor-made' model, meaning that the quality assurance mechanisms used in ODL are different from those used in a face-to-face mode given ODL's unique nature. Judging from this understanding, one can conclude that, to be appropriate and reliable, criteria for quality assurance in ODL need to be different and explicitly defined from the ones for face-to-face given the unique nature and challenges of ODL provision.

In terms of Archer's (1995) social realist theory, the structural dimension comprises elements in the Namibian context institutions such as NQAAs, and policies, procedures and guidelines that have been put in place to assure quality in ODL. It is only through the actions of agents (i.e. the people, for example, quality assurance practitioners) that structures may be produced, reproduced and transformed – morphogenesis, or remain static - morphostasis. In terms of structure, the study found out that structures were in place as evident in the establishment of NQAAs which have also developed the policy framework to guide the practice. However, these structures have not been transformed to respond to the current need for quality assurance in higher education. For example, when they were introduced, these tools for quality assurance were meant for face-to-face mode of delivery as this was the practice that time. New changes have now taken place which triggered the introduction of new modes of HE provision such as ODL, online, and blended learning. However, it seems that the practice of quality assurance did not transform to catch up with the latest development in higher education provision in Namibia.

The study also discovered that agents were in place as there were quality assurance practitioners at various levels. Agents may engage in concerted action either to re-shape or retain the structural or cultural features they inherit. In the NQAAs context agents, for example, quality assurance practitioners may influence the quality assurance structures or culture within the quality assurance discourse. In terms of agency, the study discovered that there are quality assurance practitioners in place as agents of change who are responsible for implementing quality assurance policies and practices in Namibia. However, when asked to mention the challenges that they face when executing their mandate, the study found out that the NQAAs are faced with challenges associated with working with personnel who are not trained quality assurance specialists; therefore, they approach quality assurance from a common-sense perspective. Therefore, despite these structures and agency being in place, there is room for improvement in terms of capacity development for quality assurance practitioners to be able to influence structural changes and cultural shift to ensure effective and efficient quality assurance practices in higher education with specific reference to ODL provision in Namibia.

**6. Conclusion**

This paper presented the findings of a research study which was conducted to investigate how the two public HEIs in Namibia implement internal mechanisms in their ODL provision in order to allow them to assure and enhance their quality; as well as how NQAAs assure the quality of ODL provision. The study deduced that ODL provision in Namibia has managed to remove barriers in access to higher education.

Accordingly, access to HE has expanded as more people can study, despite having job and family commitments, without physically being on campus. However, the study established that QA in ODL was not given priority at both national and institutional levels. In terms of structures, both NQAAs and HEIs had in place overarching policies and procedures for QA with a single set of one-size-fits-all criteria covering all types of modes of delivery. However, ODL criteria were not sufficiently and explicitly covered; and the systems were biased towards conventional, face-to-face modes of delivery.

Based on these findings, there is a need for QA in Namibia to undergo metamorphosis whereby NQAAs must be proactive than being reactive by devising explicit criteria for assessing institutions offering programmes through ODL modes of delivery, including online, e-learning and blended learning covering all areas of QA in ODL provision. Such criteria may either be a split set or an addendum to existing criteria for conventional modes of delivery. This is in line with the World Bank's (2002) view that since the philosophy, nature and context of ODL provision is different from face-to-face provision, criteria used in evaluating and accrediting face-to-face institutions and programmes cannot be used in ODL without major adjustments. Therefore, appropriate and reliable QA processes are needed to assure the public that programmes offered by means of a distance mode meet acceptable academic and professional standards equivalent to those offered by face-to-face.

To realise this metamorphosis, QA practitioners have a role to play in influencing structural change and cultural shift; and for these to happen, quality assurance practitioners need to be provided with interventions that will build their capacity to enable them to develop an in-depth knowledge of the conceptual domain of quality assurance. Conceptual knowledge and understanding in quality assurance will equip quality assurance practitioners with theoretical tools as new agency to enable them to function effectively.

The study identified many challenges that constrain effective ODL provision. Some of these challenges were within institutional control (student, staff and institution-related) while others (social and economic) were not, including internet connectivity, network coverage and low bandwidth. The study also concluded that there was a general concern about the quality of academics involved in the teaching of ODL students. It appeared that teaching staff are appointed on the basis of being lecturers but do not necessarily need to have formal qualifications or experience in ODL. This compromises the quality of learning facilitation. Efforts are being made to remedy this through the provision of short learning programmes but this need to be reinforced with formal academic qualifications in ODL. It was also found out that HEIs have formal mechanisms for collecting feedback such as the evaluation of the ODL learning experience through surveys, student tutor evaluation and student programme evaluation. However, there was no evidence to show how the data collected through feedback is used to improve or enhance quality.

QA at institutional level also needs to undergo metamorphosis whereby HEIs need to develop and implement explicit guidelines for quality assurance in various aspects of ODL provision, such as material development and distribution, facilitation of learning, student support, assessment, and the like. Quality policies and objectives should be well defined, and ODL quality criteria should be adequately and explicitly stated. The quality management system should be regularly monitored and the performance reported as a basis for improvement. Responsibility for quality assurance in ODL should be clearly assigned to each of the people whose activities affect quality. There is a need for improvement in the use of feedback collected from students on the quality of ODL programmes and their delivery to improve, and the outcome of how their feedback was used to improve should be communicated to students. There is a need for both academic and administrative staff to take up formal programmes in ODL to improve both their academic and administrative ODL skills; this requires commitment from the institution to ensure that this happens through staff development programmes.

## 7. Practical implications

The findings of this study may be used to inform policy formulation and review regarding quality in ODL provision in Namibia. Therefore, a policy brief will be developed to inform the practice. Furthermore, the findings will be disseminated through institutional libraries and published in journals to contribute to the body of knowledge and stimulate debate and further research on this topic. Implementation of these recommendations may bring about improvement in the current practice.

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