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Students' Ratings of Internal Quality Assurance in Universities: Open and Distance Learning Perspective

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ABSTRACT: In the context of higher education, the importance of internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanisms has gained increasing recognition, particularly within Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions. This study explores the quantitative ratings of students regarding the effectiveness of IQA in universities, focusing on ODL environments. Utilizing a comprehensive survey methodology, data were collected from diverse cohort of students enrolled in different bachelor of education/science degree with education programmes under ODL. The analysis examines key dimensions of IQA, including curriculum quality, competence and qualifications of academic staff, assessment activities, availability of teaching and learning resources and administrative support. The findings reveal significant variations in students' perceptions, highlighting areas of strength and identifying critical gaps needing improvement. The results underscore the need for universities offering ODL to continually enhance and improve their IQA systems and processes to meet stakeholders (students) and ensure quality provision of education in this delivery mode. This study is expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence into student perspective on IQA, offering actionable recommendations for policymakers and educators in the sector.

KEYWORDS: Quality Assurance. Internal Quality Assurance. Open and Distance Learning.

INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, the landscape of University educations has evolved dramatically, with particular shift on ODL. This transformation has been driven by a number of factors that include, technology, increased demand for flexible learning options and the global need for higher education accessibility. Ultimately, this has resulted in the need to maintain quality in ODL which is a critical focus among higher educational institutions. Internal Quality Assurance systems are essential in sustaining the educational standards and ensuring continuous improvement within University institutions (Espinoza and González, 2013; Yuzkiv et al., 2022). These systems encompass a range of processes and activities as well as student support services and this has direct impact on the overall well-being, educational experiences and outcomes. In other words, IQA aims to apply agreed procedures to achieve defined standards as a matter of routine (Medvid et al., 2023).

In an effort to standardize and maintain quality in both public and private higher education institutions, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Zambia plays a significant role in the regulation, accreditation as well as policy formulation and implementation in the country (HEA, 2015). HEAs' other responsibilities include; promotion of research and innovation, capacity building, ensuring relevance and responsiveness, student welfare and support as well international collaboration and benchmarking (HEA, 2015). The ODL delivery model presents specific unique points that are different from the traditional face-to-face education model and must be assured differently. In this case, ODL requires robust support systems and innovative teaching strategies. Therefore, understanding students' quantitative ratings in the context of ODL is likely to provide valuable insights into the IQA systems and how they are working as well as areas of improvement in institutions studied (Makoe and Nsamba, 2019).

The study also focuses on challenges of institutions of higher learning in the provision of IQA including the practical steps that have been undertaken to obviate these challenges and ensure quality. Although the establishment of the HEA in Zambia was a useful idea, education providers in both the state and private sectors may have heard this development with incredulity. The reason is that higher education institutions were accustomed to traditional way of education delivery. This in a way has made it difficult to embrace the HEA as well as its mission. From the year 1964 up to 2016, the quality assurance of university programmes gave the public universities the mandate to self-regulate. At the beginning, the Higher Education Act or other regulations did not state how the QA of ODL would be carried out, yet this was clearer for conventional mode. However, HEA has now put in place regulations and guidelines of assuring quality in ODL. Earlier, the draft higher education framework was clear that all higher education institutions would be required to obtain accreditation with a lot of information missing for ODL (HEA, 2015).

This paper is structured as follows: Introduction, a literature review provides an overview of existing research on IQA in ODL. The methods section will outline, validity and reliability of the instruments. This is followed by the results, implications for practice and conclusion.

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2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Development of Quality Assurance Provision in Zambia

The practice of QA has been around in European countries and their universities and colleges for over four decades and recently in few Asian countries (Jung and Latchem, 2012; Shah and Jarzabkowski, 2013; Zuhairi et al., 2020). QA has not left out developing countries in Africa as universities also have begun to develop their own internal QA mechanisms. African countries have responded by incorporating quality focus areas and processes in the provision of their higher education (Mohamedbhai, 2015). The Zambian Government has put a premium on raising quality standards in higher education institutions by establishing the Higher Education Authority (HEA) through the Higher Education Act number 4 of 2013, based on the country's and global needs (GRZ, 2013). The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is a grant aided institution whose mandate is to ensure quality of delivery of services by higher education Institutions (HEIs). 'To coordinate, regulate, supervise and monitor standards of higher education in Zambia'. In practice the formal QA provision at national and institutional level is still new in Zambia and dates back to 2016. The Zambian government plays a crucial role in QA through policy formulation and implementation. The idea is to steer QA from a distance without direct intervention. Since the liberalization of the higher education sector by the Zambian Government in the early 1990s, Zambia has witnessed unprecedented growth in higher education in both private and public sector. While the increase in the number of HEIs has played a critical role in increasing access to higher education, it has had its own challenges.

African countries have witnessed a growing demand for higher education, or massification. This has caused concern at the quality of the delivery of programmes in this area. Related to this trend are student mobility, inequalities in access to higher education, increased autonomy, demands for accountability by stakeholders and the financing of this sector. In other words, higher education in Africa has undergone complex challenges and changes that have resulted in various modes of higher-level programmes. It is a common element in many African higher education providers in that they have been recording an increase in enrolment yet lack adequate planning and financial, human and physical resources (Misaro et al., 2013). From the observation by Misaro et al. (2013), it could be clear that some educational institutions in Africa are still struggling to provide quality education. As mentioned earlier worldwide massification of higher education has created new challenges in dealing with an increasingly heterogeneous student population (Teichler, 1998; Altbach et al., 2009). Moreover, massification has given rise to competition between higher education institutions and resulted in the mass recruitment of students (Altbach et al., 2009). This is of serious concern regarding quality education provision to large numbers of students. One could argue that this has culminated in challenges in addressing QA in higher education institutions, together with inadequate infrastructure and learning and teaching materials and contributed to the difficulties that universities are facing to maintain and improve quality standards. Moreover, current trends the world over indicate that the diversification of higher education in various forms has had an effect on the quality of programme delivery in general (Martin and Stella, 2007).

2.1.0 Zambia's Challenges for Quality Provision of Higher Education

As in most of the countries in Africa and beyond, one of the major challenges for Zambia has been how to strike a balance between growth and achieving quality education that meet the needs of the learners and society at large. For example, how to define, measure and monitor quality in the absence of enforceable national standards and guidelines for higher education. To address this gap, and fulfil its mandate of setting standards for QA in HE in Zambia, the HEA has developed the Zambia Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ZSG-QA). The Standards and Guidelines represents the first ever national standards for the higher education sector and have been developed in line with the requirements of the Higher Education Act number 4 of 2013. ZSG-QA have been benchmarked against international best practices, including the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA), provide a shared understanding of quality in higher education and allow for monitoring and evaluation of HEIs based on a common set of parameters.

2.1.1 Areas that Require Attention in the Zambian QA System

i. The ZSG-QA should be made flexible to give higher education institutions leverage to be innovative in establishing their IQA systems.
ii. The ZSG-QA does not give clear guidelines on how ODL or indeed ODeL should be quality assured. More emphasis is on conventional mode yet ODL in its own right must be quality assured differently because this mode delivery provides specific unique points.
iii. In terms of capacity building, there is need for robust trainings of officers at national level (HEA) as well as academic staff at institutional level. This will help in developing people with good leadership and professional competence in QA. Universities should be given time to institutionalise the Higher Education Act number 4 of 2013 and the Higher Education (Amendment) number 23 of 2021. The HEA should provide the necessary information on all the universities to the public so that members of the public can make correct choices.
iv. The fact that QA provision of higher education is still in its infancy stages in Zambia, there is need for serious stakeholder engagement which will help to legitimize the QA processes at all levels.
v. QA should not be performed selectively to achieve its main objectives. There is need to develop a workable, relevant, contextual regulatory framework, transparent to all the stakeholders, to promote the successes of higher education provision.

2.1.2 Institutionalisation of The Higher Education Act by Universities

In line with the Higher Education Act number 4 of 2013 read together the amended Act of 2021 all public and private universities are required to establish their internal quality units.

2.1.2.1 Internal quality assurance for universities

Although setting up a quality assurance unit (QA) is a legal requirement, some of the universities have not yet established these units. The major aims of these internal units are to monitor, regulate and evaluate internal quality assurance processes that are in line with the external quality assurance provisions and guidelines as prescribed by HEA. Moreover, quality assurance units should be guided by institutional quality assurance and enhancing policies that act as guides to institutional QA frameworks and activities. In other words, the essential role of these units are to determine whether or not quality standards set internally for measuring performance in all core operational areas of the university are constantly met and updated and that they measure up to the national, regional and international benchmarks. This means that any quality assurance (QA) unit should be linked in working relations to top University Management as well as Departments and Schools that are responsible in implementing the QA activities and programmes with a view to:

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a. Constantly supply them with updated evaluation schedules and instruments
b. Facilitate departments and programme evaluations
c. Provide departmental heads with feedback on internal (self) and external evaluation results
d. Advise departments, units and schools on proper implementation of improvements which have been recommended by review teams and
e. Ensure that departments, units and schools adhere to the established quality assurance (QA) procedures.

2.1.2.2 Internal quality monitoring and review mechanisms

As earlier stated IQA units of public and private universities are expected to put in place monitoring and review mechanisms. The following is a depiction of the expected QA structure at university level.

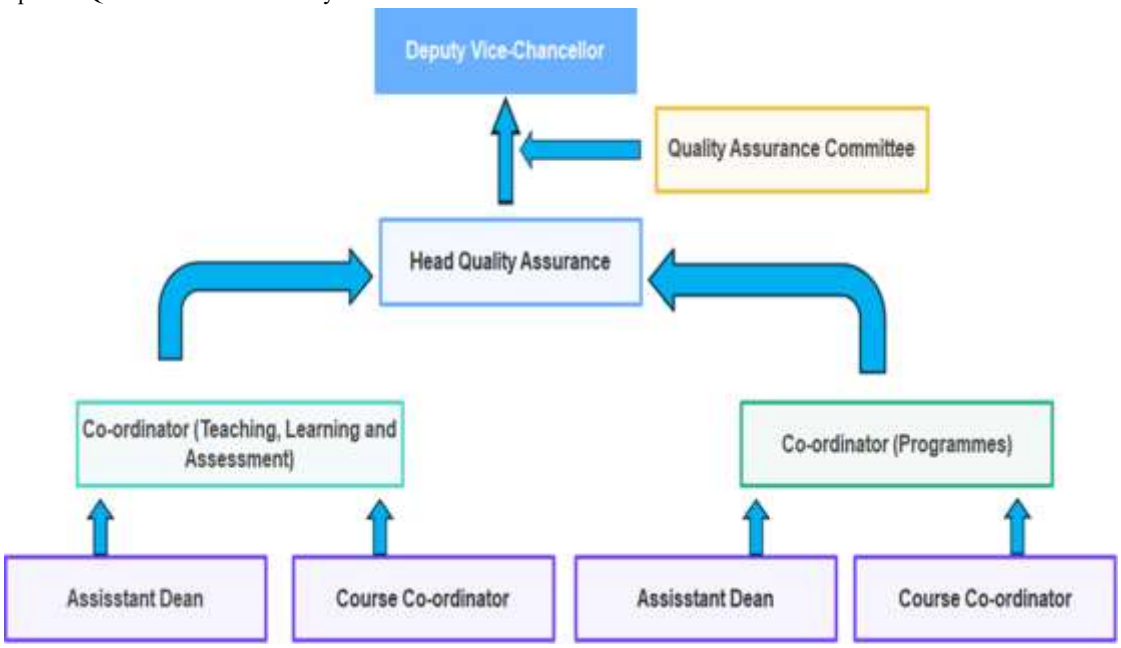


Figure 1: Depiction of the expected internal quality assurance unit structure for universities

As earlier stated, universities' IQA units have been guided by HEA regulations to provide periodic reviews to ensure maintenance and continuous improvement through benchmarking and self- assessment. These activities could be based on:

a. Outcomes of external Institutional Reviews
b. Outcomes of other external reviews by professional and statutory bodies
c. Feedback from external examiners
d. Closing the student feedback loop through 'The Student Voice' initiatives
e. Key performance indicators agreed with the HEA.

3. METHODS

This study employed descriptive quantitative methods in data collection, presentation and integration of the research findings. Although this paper reports the descriptive quantitative findings, reference is made at a few points to interview data drawn from the wider study on which it is based. For instance, the study was able to obtain a greater understanding from the quantitative results on the research questions whose focus was on the 'steps that universities involved in the provision of programmes through ODL have taken to ensure students' contribution to QA systems'. Four universities took part in this study anonymously. University A and University B were randomly picked from a total of 35 registered universities in Zambia in 2016. Although the population was relatively small, the use of simple random sampling in a way legitimised the research process of this study. The names of these two universities were drawn from a container at random. University C was purposively included in the sample because it was among the three newly transformed universities that were gazetted in 2013 by the Government of Zambia. The researcher termed them Universities A, B and C, as pseudonyms and University D was the fourth for piloting the instruments. Students under ODL were selected in this sample using multi-stage, purposive and random sampling at various stages. Creswell (2014) describes multi-stage sampling as a procedure that requires the researcher first to identify clusters before obtaining the names of individuals within the identified clusters.

For example, University A and University B had clear and well-defined student registers, together with students' geographical locations, to act as clusters for this study. These two universities were supported by provincial offices across the country. Of the 10 provinces in Zambia, Lusaka and the Copperbelt Provinces indicated that they had ODL students with a mixture of characteristics that were representative of the rest of the ODL students at Universities A and B. Based on the information in the registers from Universities A and B, university officials from these two institutions advised the researcher to pick Lusaka Province, with eight districts, and the Copperbelt Province, with 10 districts. Moreover, it would have been costly and time consuming to go to all the districts. For these reasons, districts were purposively picked for their ease of access (Lusaka - 3 districts; Copperbelt- 4 districts; and Luapula - 4 districts).

It is true that, by purposively selecting the districts, some potential participants could have been systematically excluded. Therefore, the districts acted as sampling frames from which my sample was drawn (Kothari, 2004; Groves et al., 2009). The students in these districts were picked at random from various primary and secondary schools. The selected ODL students were at various levels of their Bachelor of Education programmes,

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and the aim was to obtain a clear picture from students regarding the quality provision of programmes of ODL. Students at University C were randomly selected during their April to May 2016 campus residential schools.

According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970) and Chuan and Penyelidikan (2006), if the population is in the range of 7,500 to 25,000, to make inference to the larger population a sample size of 378 is statistically significant. In this study, the total number of all the ODL students from Universities A, B, and C did not exceed 25,000. Therefore, only 378 questionnaires were required to arrive at 95 per cent confidence interval, with a margin of error of 5 per cent. The intention of this study was not to generalise the findings to all universities that provide Bachelor of Education/Science degree programmes through ODL. However, the findings of this study maybe transferable to institutions with characteristics similar to this original context (David, 2013). The idea was to collect data to bring out the most critical issues of QA, its practice and applicability at national and institution level in Zambia.

3.1 Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Research survey questionnaires were distributed to ODL students as this was the only feasible method of data collection from ODL students in the many and varied parts of the country. Validity determines whether research truly measures that which it is intended to measure and the truthfulness of the results (Golafshani, 2003; Morse et al., 2008). Validity is concerned with the researcher proving beyond doubt that the study being conducted may be accepted as evaluating what it is stated to evaluate (Kothari, 2004; Muijs, 2010). In order to refine and improve on the coherence of the questionnaires, PhD students at University of Southampton helped to review them. Reliability is one of the key requirements of any research process and therefore, the rigorous process of the instrument construction explained earlier in this section is likely to give confidence to readers that the results of this study are reliable (Zohrabi, 2013). Quantitative data from questionnaires were coded and reduced to descriptive statistics, such as percentages and frequencies (Muijs, 2010; Cohen et al., 2013). The reason for using descriptive statistics was to compare the QA activities that universities had in place in the provision of quality programmes through ODL using survey questionnaires for the students. This process was made possible by using a statistical tool, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

4.0 RESULTS / FINDINGS

4.1 ODL students' responses from the questionnaire

The response rate for the students was calculated from the expected number of 378. The study utilised 300 ODL students' questionnaires from 310, as 10 were treated as outliers. Table 1 shows that the highest number of ODL students that participated in this study was drawn from university A (125), followed by University C (114) and University B (61).

Table 1: Number of ODL student participants

	ODL Students	
University	**Distributed**	**Returned**
University A	185	125
University B	81	61
University C	136	114

n= 300

4.2 Students' satisfaction with ODL leadership and management to quality provision

Table 2 below presents data on students' satisfaction on ODL leadership and management in Universities A, B and C. Overall, out of 299 ODL students that were sampled from the three universities, 202 (67.6 %), ODL students were satisfied with leadership and management in quality provision across all three universities.

Table 2: Satisfaction of ODL students regarding leadership and management for quality provision

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Very dissatisfied	9	7.3	2	3.3	4	3.5
Dissatisfied	15	12.1	6	9.8	18	15.8
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	15	12.1	7	11.5	21	18.4
Satisfied	76	61.2	39	63.9	65	57.0
Very satisfied	9	7.3	7	11.5	6	5.3
Total	124	100%	61	100%	114	100%

n= 299

The results show that University A had more students who indicated satisfaction with ODL leadership (85; 68.5%) than those who were dissatisfied (24; 19.4%). The table indicates that University B had more students (46; 75.4%) who were satisfied than those who were dissatisfied (8; 12.6%). As for University C, more (71; 62.3%) ODL students seemed to appreciate their university's leadership than those who were dissatisfied (22;

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19.3%). The reported satisfaction could be consistent with the establishment of QA units in Universities A and B, with University C yet to conceive of a QA unit due to its infancy. It makes sense that students have mixed feelings about the leadership and management of QA, because they could be unclear about QA expectations or may lack familiarity with QA. It is not surprising that students from University B report being satisfied with ODL leadership and management of QA. Similarly, the literature reviewed indicate that Higher Education Act number 4 of 2021 provides for establishment of internal QA units in all universities. It should be expected that the university B would do much better than others whose QA units are either still developing or are yet to be established.

4.3 Students' response to communication for quality ODL programmes

Table 3 below shows that of 299 ODL students from Universities A, B and C, 165 (55.2%) students showed a level of satisfaction, as opposed to 134 (44.8%) who showed a level of dissatisfaction with available communication in their respective universities. The table indicates that University B recorded 44 (72.2%) of the students indicating that communication was satisfactory (or very satisfactory), while 10 (16.4%) students indicated dissatisfaction at the same university. Further, the results show that Universities A and C recorded 63 (50.4%) and 58 (50.9%) scores for satisfaction, respectively.

Table 3: Response to communication for quality ODL programmes

	University A		**University B**		**University C**	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Very dissatisfied	8	7.2	4	6.6	14	12.3
Dissatisfied	26	20.8	6	9.8	34	29.8
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	27	21.6	7	11.5	8	7.0
Satisfied	52	41.6	40	65.6	53	46.5
Very satisfied	11	8.8	4	6.6	5	4.4
Total	**124**	**100%**	**61**	**100%**	**114**	**100%**

n= 299

Table 3 shows that of 299 ODL students from Universities A, B and C, 165 (55.2%) students showed a level of satisfaction, as opposed to 134 (44.8%) who showed a level of dissatisfaction with available communication in their respective. The table indicates that University B recorded 44 (72.2%) of the students indicating that communication was satisfactory (or very satisfactory), while 10 (16.4%) students indicated dissatisfaction at the same university. Further, the results show that Universities A and C recorded 63 (50.4%) and 58 (50.9%) scores for satisfaction, respectively. The table also shows that 7 (11.5%) students were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied at University B. It appears that all the three universities have taken certain measures to make sure that ODL students know of the latest developments in good time, although this requires improvement. Poor internet connectivity and, in some cases, its complete absence across some parts of Zambia may explain the low level of communication between universities and their ODL students. University A is one of the pioneers in the provision of higher education; hence, one would expect the institution to have strong communications with its ODL students. Moreover, University A has been offering Bachelor of Education programmes through ODL for a longer time.

4.4 Students' response to enquiry and pre-study advisory services

Table 4 indicates the response of students on whether they were satisfied or not with the enquiry and pre-study advisory services in Universities A, B and C. The table reports the results and compares the number of students who were satisfied (or very satisfied) with pre-study advisory services in Universities A and C (57; 46.3% and 39; 41.3% respectively) with those who were dissatisfied (or very dissatisfied) in University A (41; 33%) and University C (41; 37.1%). University B reported that 41 (67.2%) students were happy with the services, whereas 9 (14.8%) were not. The table also indicates that 25 (20.3%) students were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied at University A. While, 11 (18.3%) and 38 (33.9%) were recorded for University B and C were recorded for students who were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. The findings in this table may reflect the status and level of organisation of ODL QA units in these universities.

Table 4: Response on enquiry and pre-study advisory services

	University A		**University B**		**University C**	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Very dissatisfied	11	8.9	2	3.3	13	11.6
Dissatisfied	30	24.4	7	11.5	28	25.5
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	25	20.3	11	18.0	38	33.9
Satisfied	46	37.4	31	50.8	38	33.9
Very satisfied	11	8.9	10	16.4	1	7.4
Total	123	100%	61	100%	112	100%

n= 296

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University B, which has already established a QA unit, is reported to be doing slightly better. The responses from this table confirm that students may identify with the issues that the universities were going through. Overall, it should be noted that the number of students who were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied was above 10 at each university. This could suggest that students did not understand the question.

4.5 Students' response to institutional commitment in meeting their requirements

Table 5 reports the results to a question that asked students to indicate the extent to which they were satisfied with the universities' commitment to meeting their requirements. The findings show that more students were satisfied (or very satisfied) in Universities A and B (65; 52.5% and 30; 50% respectively). Universities A and B recorded 37 (29.9%) and 19 (31.6%) respectively for dissatisfied (and very dissatisfied) ODL students.

Table 5: Response to institutional commitment in meeting their requirements

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Very dissatisfied	9	7.3	2	3.3	10	7.1
Dissatisfied	28	22.6	17	28.3	30	26.8
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	22	17.7	11	18.3	29	25.9
Satisfied	57	46.0	23	38.3	32	28.6
Very satisfied	8	6.5	7	11.7	11	9.8
Total	124	100%	60	100%	112	100%

n= 296

The table shows that 43 (38.4%) students at University C were happy regarding institutional commitment to meeting their needs, and 40 (33.9%) who were not. The percentage of students who were happy regarding this question, in a way, suggests that far more should be done to improve institutions' commitment to meeting students' requirements. For instance, institutions could introduce suggestion boxes or conduct student surveys on how the students' requirements could be met. This is a plausible finding, considering that University C is still new and thus has limited structures to support quality delivery of ODL programmes, unlike Universities A and C. The findings also indicate that out of 296 students from all the three universities, 62 (20.9%) were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

4.6 Students' response to commitment of individual academics to quality of ODL

Table 6 below shows students' responses to individual academics' commitment to quality provision of ODL. Students were asked to indicate whether they were satisfied with the commitment of individual universities' academics to ensuring the quality of their ODL programmes. University B reported more students (49; 83%) who were happy than those that were not (4; 6.8%). The table shows that University A had 73 (58.4%) students who were happy and 27 (21.6%) unhappy at the quality.

Table 6: Commitment of academic staff to quality ODL

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Very dissatisfied	10	8.0	0	0.0	7	6.1
Dissatisfied	17	13.6	4	6.8	6	5.3
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	25	20.0	6	10.2	19	16.7
Satisfied	54	43.2	38	64.4	65	57.0
Very satisfied	19	15.2	11	18.6	17	14.9
Total	125	100%	59	100%	114	100%

n= 298

University C recorded students' responses who were satisfied at 82 (71.9%), yet it is still in the process of transformation to full university status. At University C, students appeared to appreciate the efforts being made by university academic staff. The evidence presented in the table above seems to suggest that Universities A, B and C have put in place some QA activities in the provision of their ODL programmes. The variation in percentages in the tables could be an indication that the activities are implemented differently and that ODL students equally have different understanding and perceptions on QA activities.

4.6 Students' specific avenues for quality provision of ODL

It could be argued that students' involvement in higher education institutions demonstrates how institutional leadership appreciates the governance and democratic rights of the students. In the analysis of the available means of student engagement, students saw no limit to the number of avenues in their respective institutions, as presented in table 7, that presents the level of student engagement in quality provision of ODL. The findings from this table show a relatively high number of responses compared to the tables presented earlier. This is attributed to students who gave more than one response to the question. The table shows that more students at Universities A and B (72; 36.7% and 44; 35.2% respectively) indicated 'student union' as a common avenue through which they channel ideas regarding quality provision of programmes at these two institutions. Likewise, 14 (15.2%) students at University C indicated the same.

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Table 7: Available avenues for student engagement in quality provision of ODL

	University A		University B		University C	
Methods of engagement	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Through their student union	72	36.7	44	35.2	14	15.2
Through a suggestion box	51	26.0	32	25.6	21	22.8
By filling in questionnaires	41	20.9	22	17.6	31	33.6
Via lecturers' evaluation reports	16	8.1	15	12.0	9	9.7
At departmental level in matters of assessment	16	8.1	12	9.6	17	18.4
Total	196	100%	125	100%	92	100%

n= 300

The table shows that students at Universities A, B and C recorded 51 (26.0%), 32 (25.6%) and 21 (22.8%), respectively, for a suggestion box. The findings from the table show that more students (31; 33.6%) indicated filling in questionnaires at University C than at Universities A and B (41; 20.9%; and 22; 17.6%, respectively). In terms of the percentages for 'via lecturers' evaluation reports' and 'at departmental level in matters of assessment', the three universities indicated low levels of student participation in the provision of quality ODL. Overall, the three universities recorded very low levels in all the five categories through which students participate in internal QA systems.

4.7 Infrastructure for universities

The issue of physical infrastructure and other facilities is one of the elements that help to provide quality ODL programmes. It is important that every university offering ODL in Zambia has the necessary physical infrastructure and facilities to conduct lessons and other academic activities. ODL students were asked to rate the same infrastructure and facilities in their respective universities. Table 8 reports on students' ratings of their classrooms at their universities. The results show that more students (59, 47.9%) rated classrooms as good or very good than those who did not (31; 25.2%) at University A, while some indicated that the classrooms were adequate (33; 28.8%). Based on the number of students who rated the classrooms highly, together with those who indicated 'adequate', it can be said that the classrooms at this institution are conducive to learning. Although this is not an impressive indication for the institution, the rating was higher than Universities B and C: 22 (39.3%) and 23 (20.6%), respectively.

4.7.1 Students' rating of classrooms

Universities B and C also recorded 17 (30.3%) and 46 (41.1%), respectively, for students who did not find the status of their classrooms to be at least adequate. In fact, the results show that more students rated the classrooms as poor (or very poor) at University C than those who rated them good (or very good). The number of students who indicated 'adequate' across all the three universities cannot be ignored. For instance, Universities A, B and C had 33 (28.8%), 17 (30.4%) and 43 (38.4%) students who indicated 'adequate'.

Table 8: Rating of classroom

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Very poor	8	6.5	6	10.7	17	15.2
Poor	23	18.7	11	19.6	29	25.9
Adequate	33	28.8	17	30.4	43	38.4
Good	49	39.8	15	26.8	20	17.9
Very good	10	8.1	7	12.5	3	2.7
Total	123	100%	56	100%	112	100%

n= 291

Therefore, the results suggest that the classrooms meet the aspirations of most ODL students. University A is the oldest of the three institutions and, although the buildings are still intact and in good shape, there is need for improvement. But due to financial constraints, the university is facing challenges in upgrading classrooms with modern facilities such as computers, projectors, loudspeakers and good furniture. In the same vein, University C has old structures that do not meet modern university standards. These structures were initially meant for a college with a small number of students. University B hires buildings, mostly from state-owned secondary schools, for their residential schools in the country's provincial centres. Most of these schools are not in good condition. However, University B also has a few structures in some provinces where lectures and practical lessons take place.

4.7.2 Students' rating of library resources

Table 9 below presents students' ratings of library resources. Students were asked to indicate how they rated the library resources offered by their universities. The results indicate that more students (73; 58.9%) at University A gave a rating of good or very good for the library resources than those who rated them poor or very poor (22; 17.7%).

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Table 9: Rating of library resources

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Very poor	3	2.4	6	10.3	0	0.0
Poor	19	15.3	13	22.4	17	15.0
Adequate	29	23.4	16	27.6	44	38.9
Good	48	38.7	18	31.0	43	38.1
Very good	25	20.2	5	8.6	9	8.0
Total	124	100%	58	100%	113	100%

n= 295

Although 29 (23.4%) of the students indicated 'adequate', there is need for improvement regarding library resources at University A, as the percentage of ODL students who were dissatisfied in this area should not be overlooked. The table shows that 19 (32.7%) students indicated poor/very poor at University B while, 23 (39.6%) indicated either 'good' or 'very good. In this case, it is interesting to note that 52 (46.1%) of students rated the facilities as good or very good, at University C. Besides, universities should come up with innovative ideas to generate income for infrastructure development, apart from Government grants.

4.7.3 Students' rating of laboratories

Table 10 reports findings on ODL students' rating of their laboratories at their respective universities. The table presents how University A had 50 students (58.9%) who agreed that the laboratories were good or very good, while 13 (15.3%) did not. The laboratories at University A are old, and new ones have not been built since the institution became operational 53 years ago. As indicated earlier, University B rents state-owned buildings to conduct practical lessons for science-based courses. The students stated that infrastructure in these rented schools was run down and not conducive to practical lessons. Therefore, the presentation of the results for University B is based on the rented laboratories as ranked by 19 students as good or very good (43.2%).

Table 10: Rating of laboratories

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Very poor	2	2.4	12	27.3	5	4.9
Poor	11	12.9	5	11.4	22	21.6
Adequate	22	25.9	8	18.2	33	32.4
Good	31	36.5	15	34.1	40	39.2
Very good	19	22.4	4	9.1	2	2.0
Total	85	100%	44	100%	102	100%

n= 231

The table also shows that 42 (41.2%) of the students at University C agreed that the laboratories were in good or very good condition, whereas 27 (26.5%) students felt they were poor or very poor. Here, the situation is very similar to that of University A, as the infrastructure is old and was meant as a secondary school. The percentage of students who indicated 'adequate' at University A 22 (25.9%), University B 8 (18.2%) and University C 33 (32.4%) in a way suggests that these students may have been unsure what to indicate. These findings address Research Question 2 on the QA measures that the three universities have put in place in the provision of quality ODL programmes. Moreover, these findings confirm literature review, on Government's commitment to improving and maintaining existing infrastructure in state-owned universities. Regarding the private universities, the Higher Education Act number 4 of 2013 clearly states that all higher education institutions must ensure that they have the necessary infrastructure before they embark on any programme. Any institution that fails to adhere to the prescribed guidelines risks being de-registered or not to be registered (GRZ, 2013).

4.7.4 Students' rating of the internet

Table 11 reports on the results from the question that asked ODL students to rate the internet provision by their universities. The table shows that 86 (69.4%) students at University A considered the internet availability at the institution to be good (or very good), while 21 (16.5%) students rated it poor (or very poor). The table presents the results that University A had 17 (13.7%) students who indicated 'adequate' regarding the same question. Overall, a substantial majority of ODL students considered internet provision at University A to be adequate or better. The table shows that 15 (27.8%) students at University B considered its internet provision to be good or better, while 30 (55.5%) rated it as poor or worse, and only 9 (16.7%) students indicated that it was merely adequate. The table also indicates that University C had 38 (34.2%) students who rated its internet provision good or better, against 41 (31.8%) who rated it as poor or worse.

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Table 11: Rating of the internet

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Very poor	3	2.4	16	29.6	7	9.0
Poor	18	14.5	14	25.9	34	22.8
Adequate	17	13.7	9	16.7	32	28.8
Good	46	37.1	8	14.8	24	21.6
Very good	40	32.3	7	13.0	14	12.6
Total	124	100%	54	100%	111	100%

n=289

It should be noted that University A offers several courses in computing at various levels, so strong internet on the campus is essential. The university also operates a Computer Centre that links all the vital activities of the institution. The internet connections at University A allow students to research and pay tuition fees online, as well as registering their courses and programmes, but this is not the case at Universities B and C. The low rating for internet availability by students at Universities B and C could be linked to comparisons that students make to other universities in their exchange of knowledge and ideas through various media, social and academic groupings. Most importantly, University B and C do not have optic fibre connectivity, which helps to enhance broadband speed.

4.7.5 Students' rating of university furniture

Table 12 presents ODL students' rating of the quality of university furniture. ODL students were asked to rate the furniture at their institution (see Appendix I question item 12). The table reports that 54 students (47.8%) at University C rated the state of the furniture at their institution as good or better, and those who rated it poor or worse numbered 26 (23%). Universities A and B recorded 46 (37.1%) and 24 (43.7), respectively for those students who indicated 'good' and 'very good'. The findings show that at Universities A and B some ODL students did not find the available furniture to be at least good (39, 31.5% and 14, 25.4%). In terms of percentages of students who indicated 'adequate', the difference is insignificant across the three universities. From these findings, it is clear that the state of furniture in these three universities was not considered good enough by the ODL students and improvement is clearly required. The findings indicate that University C is better off in terms of furniture than the well-established universities with the capacity to raise more local resources.

Table 12: Rating of university furniture

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Very poor	8	6.5	8	14.5	7	6.2
Poor	31	25.0	6	10.9	19	16.8
Adequate	39	31.5	17	30.9	33	29.2
Good	36	29.0	20	36.4	42	37.2
Very good	10	8.1	4	7.3	12	10.6
Total	124	100%	55	100%	113	100%

n= 292

This could relate to some of the practical measures that the institution has put in place to buy more furniture by using its own locally generated resources. The other two universities could be complacent, because they are popular and still attract many ODL students. This could be an indication that universities are not prioritising procurement of student furniture in both private and state-owned universities.

In view of what has been discussed from the tables above, it is evident that all the institutions may require improvement to their facilities to provide quality ODL programmes. Nonetheless, there were differences in the way that students responded to the available infrastructure and facilities in the provision of ODL and can be attributed to a number of reasons as already mentioned in this sub-section.

4.7.6 Students' expectations of teaching at university are met

Table 13 reports findings for ODL students' level of agreement on teaching at their respective universities. The results show that University C had more students (87; 79.6%) whose expectations were met by the teaching than those whose were not met (13; 11.9%).

Table 13: Expectations of teaching at university met

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Strongly disagree	4	3.2	2	3.3	2	1.8
Disagree	20	16.1	16	26.2	11	10.1
Neither agree nor disagree	18	14.5	0	0.0	9	8.3
Agree	68	54.8	34	55.7	73	67.0
Strongly agree	14	11.3	9	14.8	14	12.6
Total	124	100%	61	100%	109	100%

n= 294

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In Universities A and B, 82 (66.1%) and 43 (70.5%) students respectively indicated that their expectations were met regarding teaching, whereas those who neither agreed nor disagreed were 18 (14.5%) for University A and 0 (0.0%) for University B. The results, therefore, indicate that generally a high standard of teaching takes place in these three universities as the percentages for the group of students who responded positively on this subject were consistently higher.

4.8 Students' satisfaction with the time given to them by lecturers and tutors

Table 14 presents the results on students' satisfaction with the time allowed for them to interact with their lecturers and tutors during residential schools and outside this arrangement.

Table 14: Satisfaction with the time given to them by lecturers and tutors

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Strongly disagree	7	5.6	4	6.6	7	6.3
Disagree	31	25.0	9	14.8	16	14.3
Neither agree nor disagree	22	17.7	6	9.8	12	10.7
Agree	50	40.3	31	50.8	58	51.8
Strongly agree	14	11.3	11	18.0	19	17.0
Total	124	100%	61	100%	112	100%

n= 297

The findings indicate that many more students at University C interact well 77 (68.8%) with their lecturers and tutors than those who do not (23; 20.6%). Students who agreed or strongly agreed totalled 64 (51.6%) at University A and 42 (68.8%) at University B. In terms of percentages, the results for students who least agreed by the time given at Universities B and C were similar. The results for students who did not agree that the time given to them by their lecturers was satisfactory were 38 (30.6%) for University A and 13 (21.4%) for University B. The table shows that the number of students who indicated 'neither agree nor disagree' was small, across the three institutions, with Universities A, B and C recording 22 (17.7%), 6 (9.8%) and 12 (10.7%) respectively. It is not surprising that University C has a higher rate of interaction (time) between lecturers/tutors and students, because the number of all ODL students at this institution is lower and the lecturer–student ratio is high. Based on these results, students at University C tend to have more time with their lecturers/tutors than at the other two universities.

4.9 Students' evaluation of assessment for ODL in line with the modules

Table 15 presents students' evaluation of the assessment for ODL modules. Students were asked whether they agreed that the assessments (formative and summative) given are in line with the module contents.

Table 15: Evaluation of assessment for ODL in line with the modules

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Strongly disagree	2	1.6	1	1.7	1	1.3
Disagree	6	4.8	4	6.7	9	8.0
Neither agree nor disagree	8	6.4	3	5.0	10	8.9
Agree	73	58.4	30	50.0	59	52.2
Strongly agree	36	28.8	22	36.7	34	30.1
Total	125	100%	60	100%	113	100%

n= 298

The findings indicate that students gave varying responses, although the strongest (109; 87.2%) was recorded at University A. Universities B and C recorded 52 (86.7%) and 93 (82.3%), respectively. For those who disagreed (or strongly disagreed) totalled 8 (6.4%) for University A, 5 (8.4%) University B and 10 (9.3%) for University C. These results are broadly consistent across the universities, with minor variations. The table shows that the students who neither agreed nor disagreed were small, across the three universities. This could mean that the students' perceptions of assessment activities were based on their study material and that they appreciated this kind of arrangement. These generally positive findings could mean that these universities understand the challenges that most of their students go through in doing their research, particularly those who reside in rural areas, where there are no libraries or internet connectivity.

4.10 Feedback from lecturers and tutors effective and timely

Table 16 presents the findings on whether students agreed that feedback from their lecturers was effective and provided in a timely manner. The table reports that at Universities B and C 32 (53.4%) and 59 (52.2%) students indicated, respectively, their satisfaction with feedback from their lecturers and tutors, compared with their 58 peers in University A (46.8%) who reported slightly lower satisfaction.

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Table 16: Is feedback from lecturers and tutors effective and timely?

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Strongly disagree	13	10.5	3	5.0	2	1.8
Disagree	40	32.3	15	25.0	26	23.0
Neither agree nor disagree	13	10.5	10	16.7	26	23.0
Agree	50	40.3	25	41.7	51	45.1
Strongly agree	8	6.5	7	11.7	8	7.1
Total	124	100%	60	100%	113	100%

n=297

The three Universities A, B and C recorded 53 (42.8%), 18 (30.0%) and 28 (24.8%), respectively for students who were not satisfied with the feedback. The percentage of students who neither agreed nor disagreed at Universities A, B and C were (13) 10.5%, 10 (16.7%) and 26 (23.0%) respectively. Overall, the perceptions of the students as presented in this table suggest that there is need for improvement in the area of feedback. The level of satisfaction by the students is quite low. Interestingly, the results in this table contrast with those in Table 6-10 that report a high level of students' satisfaction with assessments. This could mean that there are areas that universities are doing well, but also there are areas that require improvement, such as giving feedback (Devedzic et al., 2011).

4.11 Availability of ODL tutorials for students

Table 17 presents ODL students' responses on the availability of tutorials in Universities A, B and C. The table shows that 33 (27.3%) students agreed or strongly agreed on the availability of tutorials at University A, compared to 22 (36.1%) of the students at University B. The results at University C were similar to the other two universities, with 38 (34.2%) students agreeing or strongly agreeing. Across all three universities there was less than 50 per cent agreement that the availability of tutorials was satisfactory.

Table 17: Are ODL tutorials available?

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Strongly disagree	37	30.6	10	16.4	32	28.8
Disagree	36	29.8	13	21.3	23	20.7
Neither agree nor disagree	15	12.4	16	26.2	18	16.7
Agree	29	24.0	15	24.6	34	30.6
Strongly agree	4	3.3	7	11.5	4	3.6
Total	121	100%	61	100%	111	100%

n= 293

Less than 50 per cent agreement among the students in the three universities suggests a need for improvement in making sure that tutorials are available to all the students. These results for University C contradict the interviews conducted with one of the participants from the same university, who indicated that tutorials at the institution were available, as highlighted earlier in this sub-section. Indeed, it is easier to implement certain QA practices in a university when there is co-ordination at departmental level. These results appear to suggest that universities should recognise the importance of tutorials, particularly in a higher education set-up. It is also possible that some students had difficulty in understanding the real meaning of 'tutorial', especially in their first year.

4.12 Quality of modules/ study materials

Table 18 presents findings for students' level of agreement on whether the study materials given to them by their universities are of good quality. The results indicate that students at University C agreed 87 (76.3%) while 11 (9.6%) did not. The students who agreed with modules being of good quality from Universities A and B totalled 83 (66.4%) and 43 (70.5%), respectively. The table shows that students who disagreed across the universities were below 50 per cent of the total number. These findings complement the qualitative interviews in sub-section 6.2.3.3 with participants at all the universities, which made it clear that they have put in place rigorous QA procedures in producing quality study material for their ODL students.

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Table 18: Are the modules/ study materials good quality

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Strongly disagree	7	5.6	2	3.3	3	2.6
Disagree	20	16.0	7	11.5	8	7.0
Neither agree nor disagree	15	12.0	9	14.8	16	14.0
Agree	58	46.4	23	37.7	69	60.5
Strongly agree	25	20.0	20	32.8	18	15.8
Total	125	100%	61	100%	114	100%

n= 300

University C appears to be doing better than the other two universities, a fact that could be associated with the design and the language (interactive) used in these materials. Universities A and B are known for producing study materials known as 'batches', largely copied and pasted from other sources. These do not use interactive language, and this could make it difficult for students to use them, as they are not user friendly.

4.13 Satisfaction with study materials/modules

Table 19 reports on the level of agreement by ODL students that the distribution of study material is satisfactory.

Table 19: Is the distribution of study materials/modules satisfactory

	University A		University B		University C	
Evaluation	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Strongly disagree	24	19.8	8	13.3	35	31.3
Disagree	42	34.7	10	16.7	40	35.7
Neither agree nor disagree	14	11.6	8	13.3	16	14.3
Agree	24	19.8	27	45.0	20	17.9
Strongly agree	17	14.0	7	11.7	1	0.9
Total	121	100%	60	100%	112	100%

n= 293

The findings indicate that more than 50% per cent of students did not consider that proper distribution of study material was taking place at Universities A and C. However, 56.7% of students from University B agreed or strongly agreed that this service was satisfactory.

These findings in a way imply a need for universities to put in place robust systems of module distribution without disadvantaging any students. One would expect a positive response from the students regarding the distribution of modules at this institution, because of its long standing and experience in ODL. The table above shows that all three universities have not done much in terms of module distribution as the majority of students did not agree that there was systematic distribution of these materials at their university.

5. IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE

The study has highlighted that the provision of QA in Zambia is new and dating back to 2016 when HEA begun to work on various quality guidelines and frameworks to monitor, regulate and accredit universities and their programmes. The findings suggest that university departments, units and schools should adhere to the established internal quality assurance (IQA) systems and procedures. There is a need to improve the strategic management of universities through a rigorous process of developing people with good leadership and professional competence which will ultimately improve the quality culture among university staff. Therefore, one of the strategic ideas is to restructure both public and private universities to be more responsive to the needs of students, members of the community and other stakeholders. The safety of national systems and legitimacy of the providers help to protect the public from fake providers by emphasising quality (Hodson and Thomas, 2003). The HEA should strengthen the guidelines for university's IQA but also leave room for innovation and creativity by higher educational institutions.

6. CONCLUSION

The advent of globalisation, diversification and massification of higher education has equally affected the manner in which African countries including Zambia have embraced QA provision from a national point of view trickling down to universities. Most of these institutions of higher learning are experiencing challenges in establishing their IQA of Open Distance Learning (ODL). However, some of the universities have been providing some form of quality in the programmes they offer although not in a structured manner even before the HEA guidelines were issued to them. It is important to note that while benchmarking is allowed in the provision of quality, there is need to contextualise such good practices to suit our systems. This in itself has been a challenge to Zambia and the universities that have no experience in QA provision of their programmes and services. Furthermore, more trainings and workshops are needed to build capacity of university academic and support staff in QA issues. The quantitative ratings of QA provisions in the universities entails that indeed ODL students have certain level of expectations with the way ODL is delivered and their assessment should seriously be considered.

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DECLARATIONS

Ethics approval and consent to participate: The researcher obtained informed consent from all individual participants that were included in the study and all participants were over 18 years old.

Consent for publication: All the participants in this study consented to submission of the findings for journal article publication.

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