Examination Administration Practices in College of Open and Distance Learning (CODL) of St. Mary's University: Implication to Quality Assurance: The Views of CODL Staff

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Abstract

The intent of the study is to explore the situation of exam administration practices in CODL, SMU from staff perspectives. An exam malpractice has advanced into a lucrative and organized criminal activity. This is a problem which is not restricted to any one country, but that of global proportions. For exam in ODL to solve the very important purpose for which it is meant to serve, considerations should be given to security. ODL institutions must try to ensure the maintenance of high standards in the conduct of exams. Hence, there is a need for the institutions to embrace exam ethics. This is done via very high level of professional and administrative resources. Likewise, this brings pressure to bear on the CODL, SMU to maintain proper security, before, during and after examinations. To this effect, areas of concern include, but not limited to, developing regulations, producers, and guidelines; appointing staff of high integrity as supervisors; arranging important monitoring of examination venues; applying sanctions when necessary; and planning and initiating on-line assessments. Finally, invigorating the exercise of writing reports is very important.

Keywords: Exam malpractices, ODL, Quality assurance

Introduction

Examination is an important tool for evaluating students learning outcome and requires proper planning to meet high standards. This paper, therefore, examines the processes leading to administration of face-to-face examinations in distance education with focus on the CODL of SMU. It highlights some procedures such as test development, test administration, and post- test administration procedures. It also identifies some quality control practices adopted in administering examinations at the CODL of SMU, and concludes that quality control in examinations is the means by which an educational institution ensures that test development and administration procedures meet high standards. Thus, the main objective of the study is to analyze the scenario of exam administration practices in CODL,SMU from CODL staff perspectives. In order to meet this main objective, the specific objectives have been framed: (i) To discuss the processes of examination administration in the context of CODL, SMU; (ii) To map out major challenges faced in examination administration of CODL, SMU; (iii) To assess the status of quality control mechanism effected by the College; and(iv) To suggest measures for improvement in exam administration as a focus of attempt.

Accordingly, the study attempted to address four basic questions: What are the practices employed by the CODL to effect exam administration? What are the major challenges observed in effecting exam administration? How appropriate and effective is the quality control mechanism? What are the lessons for future improvement? This descriptive survey entailed, both qualitative and quantitative approaches and employed questionnaire , interviews, and document analysis to collect data from the vice-president, quality manager, department heads, academic and administrative staff of CODL.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Its Relevance

The primary objective of ODL is to provide knowledge and skills to those who do not have access to conventional learning and thus avail education to the learners at their doorsteps through various media and technology. The basic motto of ODL is to establish equity in the education system through various modes of education (both the correspondence and on-line learning). This system provides great opportunity to those learners who are denied access to education in traditional institutions due to various factors such as poor economic condition of the family, parent's illiteracy, staying away from home for income generation etc., and to those who require updating their knowledge and skills through education. The mode of ODL is also called "Independent Learning", "Flexible Learning", as well as "Self-Learning". It can help to empower the learners by enabling them to take charge of their own learning and, in turn, to have greater control and ownership on their own learning at a minimal cost. Therefore, this system of learning can be termed as "fed by own" not "fed by others". Besides, in terms of flexibility, open universities have the autonomy to adapt different approaches for the development of course materials as well as learners' support services. The utilization of on-line learning in distance and open learning makes it in a true sense open or global learning (UNESCO, 2002).

As the concept is used throughout the world, it got different terms like distance education, correspondence education, home study, independent study, external study, off-campus study, open learning, open education etc., but their use and meaning denote more or less the same. These terms have come into vogue because of the historical circumstances in various countries; they have their peculiar characteristics most of which are similar to distance education (Sharma, 2007). But the most important terms used are distance education and open learning which jointly call Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Distance education refers to the mode of education where the interacting learner and teacher are separated by space and time, while open learning focuses on removal of many restrictions and rigidities in opening the doors of education for the needy learners(Koul,2000). Though in some countries distance learning and open learning are used for different functions, the modern system of education uses these two terms jointly to refer to the same and unified concept of ODL. The basic principle in both cases remains the same. The main philosophy that governs the system is learners' flexibility and democratization of education. ODL has expanded dramatically in recent years across the world, across the spectrum of subject areas, and across education levels. The main characteristics of ODL are open access, flexibility, self-

pacing, learner centeredness, self-learning, and a target group, Mohakud (2012). In Ethiopia IGNOU, The Open University, UNISA, are the few familiar names of ODL universities.

CODL, SMU

The CODL was launched on 2000 as Distance Education Division (DED) focusing on Business and Law Fields of studies. Since then the College has been making a speedy growth providing diversified programs to distance learners who wish to pursue their education in various fields of studies, via its regional offices and coordinating centers, which are located throughout the country. CODL has three departments established in 2012, namely, Department of Business and Economics, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, and Department of Agriculture and Developmental Studies. Recently the Department of General Education was established to run general distance education for students from grades 5-10.The highest organ at CODL is the Council of Open and Distance Learning. CODL is headed by a vice president who is directly answerable to the President of the University. Under the vice president are Office of the Academic Dean, Office of the Associate Registrar, Office of Centers Management, Quality Assurance Unit, Material Management and Distribution Unit, and Material Production Unit. Among the major duties and responsibilities of the Council of the College is to lay down the modalities of examinations and approve grades and promotions of students in accordance with guidelines issued by MOE, HERQA and SMU (CODL, 2021). CODL has a population of more than 10,000 students and 200 academic and administrative staff.

Issues in the Administration of Examinations in ODL

Learners in ODL study, work and at the same time take care of their responsibilities in the family and society. As a result, they tend to look for the easiest way out of challenges. They tend to use short-cuts. In the ODL system, short-cuts lead to exam malpractices and cheating. In many countries, today, including Ethiopia, exam malpractices have taken an alarming dimension.

According to Agunwa and Ademola (2014), exam malpractices have advanced beyond the practice of students bringing foreign materials into exams halls, copying from other students, assaults and intimidation of invigilators and supervisors. This malpractice has evolved into a lucrative and organized criminal activity. The scourge of exam malpractice and academic dishonesty is very large. It is also pervasive affecting every level of education. It goes across primary to the tertiary institutions. This is a problem which is not restricted to any one country, but is that of global proportions. At present, exam malpractices are at all levels where admissions, training, assessment, certification, registration, and regulation processes are hopelessly compromised. Agunwa and Ademola (2014) also highlighted that they involve fraud, dishonesty and corruption relative to sale of admissions, teaching malpractices, continuous assessment, automatic promotions of students from one class to another, leakage of question papers, impersonation, sale of grades and results, sale of honorary degrees, sale of handouts, sale of favorable inspections and accreditation reports, sandwich courses and certificate forgery, hacking into computer data base of public exam

boards, extortion of money from candidates by examiners, supervisors and invigilators. It is very sad to note that almost all categories of stake holders in education are represented in the chains of perpetrators that make up exam malpractice syndicates. These include parents who provide the funds which the students use to fund the crime. It includes officials of exam boards who supply leaked question papers to the candidates or accredit unsuitable schools as centers to compromise computer security systems.

Education has an essential role of producing leaders, professionals, workers and citizens with the character and competence to move human civilization forward. It is, therefore, the duties of those involved in the delivery of education service to contribute to this sacred role and responsibility of the education sector. There is no success without challenges. Therefore, education institutions and agencies must rise to the challenge of delivering quality education, if the education sector is to fulfill the responsibility of producing change agents with the character to shun corruption and the competence to deliver transformation. The biggest challenge is the growing deficits of ethics, integrity and best practices which are symbolized by the epidermis of systematic exam malpractices and academic dishonesty (Eghagha 2014).

We need to note that exams in ODL are very important because the results of those exams help in determining the future education, vocational or career as well as the survival chances for the stakeholders. ODL institutions' reputations may be affected by the learners' exam results. Feedback from the exam results may be subjected to class scrutiny by stake holders because exam related data can reveal the strength and weakness. Exam materials, in addition to qualitative and quantitative feedback, can help ODL institutions to improve their efficiency and effectiveness.

For an exam in ODL to solve the very important purpose for which it is meant to serve, considerations should be given to security. By its nature, ODL exam manifests more like public exams. As a result, it leads to greater risk of malpractices if not adequately controlled. This brings pressure to bear on the section or department of examinations and assessments to maintain proper security, before, during and after examinations. To this effect, areas of concern include, but not limited to (Agunwa & Ademola, 2014; Onyechere, 2011; Osuji 2012):

- Questions setting: Examination questions may leak from the lecturers and/or panel members that set the questions.
- Exam papers printing: Examination questions may leak from printers, DEA staff handling the papers, among others.
- Exam papers distribution: Question papers may be leaked while in transits or storage.
- Supervision of exams: An examination supervisor or invigilator may assist learners or may allow or ignore cheating.
- Improper invigilation: There are possibilities of learners cheating or cases of impersonations.
- Marking: Markers may favor recognized candidates.

- Data entry: Concerned staff may enhance or alter the marks of favored candidates.
- Exam result processing: Staff involved may enhance or alter the marks of favored students.
- Packaging and distributing: Exam papers can be leaked during the packaging and distributing process.
- Question paper at the regional center and study centers: Are the question papers delivered directly to the study centers or regional centers? Who is responsible for them?
- After the exam: Enquiries to be considered include: Are unused question papers returned to the exam unit in the headquarters? How are answered scripts returned to the headquarters? When are used question papers retained by the study centers? This makes it easier for the learners to access and use them for study purposes. But when question banks are used, the study centers may be required to return all unused question papers.
- Report writing: It is very important that a report is written at the end of the examination exercise. The report should include: assessment of the effectiveness of the current practices, identification of the problems with the implication of existing rules and regulations, and establishment of the basis for review of regulations to ensure better efficiency.

Examination Ethics in ODL System

According to Osuji (2014), exam is the major procedure used for the assessment of ODL students for the purpose of awarding degrees and certificates, among other things. The senate of every academic institution, including ODL, is vested with the authority to organize, conduct, control exams, and to award degrees and certificate. Therefore, to maintain credibility, integrity and to ensure quality, the senate of these institutions should prescribe rules, regulations and standards to govern their exams. This will be presented in the form of exam ethics of the institution. To this effect, exam ethics is viewed as a frame of reference to help in promoting a greater understanding of what constitutes ethical assessment practice. In other words, ethics simply means the ideals of what is right or what is wrong. It involves regulations, laws and professional codes of conducts. It provides a standard format of moral values and procedures to ensure efficiency. According to Okonkwo (2014) codes of ethics help in creating awareness of expected standard that constitutes ethical practice and to serve as affirmation of exemplary conduct.

Quality Assurance and Ensuring High Quality Examinations System

Quality in higher education is a much-debated topic. Today, most countries have national quality assurance agencies for higher education. Many have developed regulations for assuring quality in ODL systems as well. Adrianna J. Kezar states, "No topic has received so much attention in the last decade as technology and possibly no topic is as misunderstood or has received as little attention as distance education. In fact, people see distance education not only as subordinate but also at some level a threat to traditional practices of teaching and learning". Interestingly, ODL practitioners have been leaders in quality assurance (QA) from the very beginning. For example,

the course development practice at the Open University, UK has been a benchmark for many other open universities around the Commonwealth. In India, the quality assurance agency for ODL was established in1991 (DEC), whereas, the QA agency for higher education was established only in 1994.

There have been many robust systems for assessing the quality of ODL, including COL's Review and Improvement Model30, which has been implemented in many universities. While the operations of open universities are different from that of the face-to-face universities, there is often discussion on whether the criteria for QA can be the same for both. It is important to note some of the specific aspects of ODL to be considered within any QA framework:

- Products: the learning materials used, graduate outputs, pass rates, graduate destination, performance of competencies or practical skills;
- Services: interface with the university services, including registration and advisory services, tutoring and counseling, feedback and guidance on learning (assignments), support for progress as a learner, career advice, provision and management of study centers;
- Processes, procedures and policies: delivery systems, record keeping, scheduling, warehousing and stock control, quality assurance procedures, technology infrastructure, etc.;
- General philosophy: policy and mission statements, ethos and culture of the organization, attitudes of staff and levels of commitment, culture of quality, etc.

However, with the developments of new technologies, system wide quality assurance is possible and block chain technology is potentially one of the tools that can be deployed. At the same time, QA agencies need to consider new opportunities to improve quality by using LMS, OER and other interactive tools. According to Okonkwo (2014) a high-quality assessment system is essential for a high-quality education system. This is done cheaply. It requires very high level of professional and administrative resources. It's also an important requirement for Open Distance education and Learning institutions to develop assessment handbook which consist of rules, regulations and standards to guide the examination processes.

There is also a need for the instructions to constitute monitoring bodies or committee for the purpose of monitoring exam or exam related processes to ensure quality and compliance to the laid down rules, regulations and standards.

Findings and Discussions

Opinions of CODL Staff on Exam Administration Practices

CODL staffs located at the headquarters were considered as primary sources to share their opinions about the exam administration practices. Hence, the questionnaire on Exam Administration Practices was distributed to 23 staff members of CODL. The questionnaire contained 12 statements. The statements are about malpractices that may happen before, during and after examinations. Staff members who have direct and indirect relation with the issue under study were required to indicate their observation of how often the actions or the practices occur in the scale of Always, Frequently, Occasionally, Rarely, or Never with the weight of 5,4,3,2 1, respectively. Though there are some irregularities (skipping items, providing more than one response for a single item, and pattern to incline to one side of the scale), their responses are described below.

- 59% of the respondents indicated that plagiarism and cheating in continuous assessment/assignments occurred always or frequently, with 23% occasionally and 18% rarely or never.
- 40% of the respondents got the impression that contract cheating/use of essay mills/ ghost writing of assignments exist always or frequently, while 40% hinted occasionally, and 20% suggested rarely or never.
- 64% of the respondents held the opinion that cheating in formal examinations occur always or frequently, while18% suggested occasionally, and 18% hinted rarely or never.
- Pertaining to the availability of leaked exam papers or exam related materials from the lecturers that set the questions, and /or panel members, respondents hinted the followings:

  - 25% always or frequently
  - 35% occasionally
  - 40% rarely or never

- As regards with availability of leaked exam papers or exam related materials from printers, or department staff handling the paper, respondents gave the following responses:

  - 35% always or frequently
  - 20% occasionally
  - 45% rarely or never

- In connection with availability of leaked exam papers or exam related materials while in transits or storage, the responses are:

  - 33% always or frequently
  - 39% occasionally
  - 28% rarely or never

- Regarding the issue of an examination supervisor or invigilator may assist learners or may allow or ignore cheating, 38% of the respondents hinted always or frequently, 38% suggested occasionally, and 24% said rarely or never.
- Regarding markers may favor recognized candidates, only 9% suggested always or frequently, 26% suggessted occasionally, and 65% indicated rarely or never.
- Concerning whether staff may enhance or alter the marks of favored candidates, 5% of the respondents said always or frequently, 10% occasionally, and 85% rarely or never.
- In the case of staff involvement during exam result processing in enhancing or altering the marks of favored students, the opinion of the respondents are:

  - 10% always or frequently
  - 15% occasionally
  - 75% rarely or never

- Pertaining to the unused questions papers returned to the exam unit in the headquarters, the responses are:

  - 43% always or frequently
  - 9% occasionally
  - 48% rarely or never

- Finally, 48% of the respondents pointed out that the presence of reports written at the end of the examination exercise that include effectiveness and identification of problems/challenges, with 22% occasionally, and 30% rarely or never.

Overall the above findings may provide some blurred and yet a useful piece of information for the concerned bodies of the University. Moreover, they may shade light on the areas that CODL need to act toward improving the service quality, and thereby removing suspicion/ rumors towards the College and the University at large.

Regarding continuous assessment /assignments, as it is clearly stipulated in the brochure of CODL entitled **Teaching through Assignments (For Assessors/Evaluators) (2007),**

Assignment is a compulsory component in diploma and degree programs of SMUC. In the current practice of SMUC, assignments carry 20% of the final grade of the learner (p.3).

The document also highlighted that assignments are integral part of the continuous evaluation system in SMUC.

Nevertheless, this small study indicated that CODL seemed to be not on the right track in fulfilling the three major objectives stipulated in the document. The objectives are: (i) Assessing learner performance, (ii) Helping learner complete the course and program, and

(iii) Motivating and supporting the learner. The responses suggested that there are serious problems in relation to plagiarism and cheating in assignments as well as use of essay mills/ ghost writing of assignments (59% and 40% hinted always or frequently, respectively).The same is true for formal examinations where cheating is a considerable issue (64% suggested always or frequently).

Regarding the availability of leaked exam papers or exam related materials from different avenues, the study implied that the considerable majority respondents seemed to be convinced that there is availability of leaked exam papers or exam related materials always or frequently or occasionally (60% from developers, 55%, from printers…, and 72%while in transit…). The same is true for the malpractice that an examination supervisor or invigilator may assist learners or may allow or ignore cheating, whereas issues related with marking, data entry and exam result processing, the problems appear to be less worsening as compared with other issues. But one has to bear in mind that very few cases /isolated incidents are enough to discredit the University and academia and destroy the standard and quality of education, thus, the issues are not a matter majority vs. minority.

Concerning returned unused question papers to the exam unit in the headquarters, the responses seem unable to clearly show the practice trend, where 43%, 9% and 48% of the respondents hinted always or frequently, occasional, and rarely or never, respectively. This issue was raised with the assumption that when used question papers are retained by the study centers, it makes it easier for the learners to access and use them for study purposes. The mixed reaction maybe due to the clarity of the statement

With regard to the presence of reports written at the end of the examination exercise, that include effectiveness and identification of problems, there is no clearly singled out trend indicated by the respondents- 48% said always or frequently, 22% said occasionally and 30%said rarely or never. This issue is also raised because it is very important that a report is written at the end of the examination exercise. The report should include: assessment of the effectiveness of the current practices and identification of the problems with the implication of existing rules and regulations.

The Perceptions of the Vice-President and Head of the Quality Assurance Office of CODL

As specified in the introduction part, individual interviews were conducted with the Executive Assistant to the President, who presently oversees the major activities of CODL (since the vice president is on leave) and quality assurance head of the same. The intent was to get better understanding of the examination practices in the College and corroborate with the opinions of CODL staff.

The Executive Assistant to the President has been in CODL for more than 17 years where he served in different managerial capacities, including as the vice-president of the College for some years. He pointed that CODL has a written examination implementation policy/guideline and a brochure entitled Teaching through Assignments that highlights the ways assessors /evaluators can make an effective use of assignments evaluation as a means of learner support developed in 2007. Especially, the exam implementation guideline, as verified by the researcher, include, inter alia:

- Roles and responsibilities of the different units in CODL (from head office to regional centers),
- Exam types vs. Programs and courses,
- Roles and responsibilities of exam administration bodies (internal and external)
- Rights and duties of learners,
- Disciplinary actions,
- Finical issues, and
- Report writing.

As per the Executive Assistant, these documents have been dispatched to all concerned entities, including HERQA. Learners were usually made to know regarding their rights and duties by posting the summary on the notice boards via exam coordinators. Additionally, to ensure communication orientations programs to all staff of all 12 regional centers and 90 coordination centers have been affected. The interviewee also noted that final examinations of ODL are developed by the Testing Center of SMU, an independent body headed by a director. Once the exam/test development has been accomplished by the Center, the other two major activities, i.e. administration and post administration procedures are managed by the exam administration unit of CODL in collaboration with the exam coordinators, regional offices and coordination centers of ODL. According to the Executive Assistant, the administration and post administration processes are very difficult tasks with huge volume of activities which require a high level of accuracy. In addition, they involve a high risk of leakages and malpractices. As the interview respondent noted, the following difficulties might endanger the security ODL exams:

- Lack of clear and accurate information from region and coordination centers,
- Problems in packaging and distributing examination papers,
- Request of exaggerated expenses,
- Leniency in invigilation process,
- Use of essay mills/ghost writing of assignments (currently assignments carry 30%),
- Inconsistency in essay type correction by department tutors, and
- Loss of and delay in returning answer sheets.

Finally, the Executive Assistant suggested the following as possible measures to maintain proper security, before, during and after examinations:

- Revisiting of CODL exam administration structure,
- Optimizing the service in exam administration process,
- Continuous training and orientation sessions at all levels, and
- Enforcing administrative measures.

The Head of Quality Assurance Office (formally known as Center Management and Quality Assurance Office, thus having two major roles), has been in CODL for so many years serving at co- ordination center, regional center and head office. In the interview, he outlined the following major activities of the office vis-à-vis quality assurance:

- Coordination of annual plan preparation of the different offices and units of CODL,
- Monitoring the plan implementation process at term level (3 times a year) of the same,
- Establishing and managing the quality enhancement committee at CODL; and
- Progress reporting to the Vice-president.

About the office's involvement in exam administration process, the interviewee hinted that their engagement is very minimal; they are only visible in the orientation of exam coordinators and to some extent in issues related to the return of answer scripts and correction process. According to the head, the office has no experience, whatsoever, of inspecting the exam administration process at head office and on the fields and scrutinizing progress reports submitted to the head office. He also perceived that nowadays the practice of report writing is withering away due to unknown reasons.

The interviewee, in addition to the above reflection, has also noted that as an individual exam coordinator, cheating, crowded exam halls, availability of answer sheet key and copying using cell phones are some of the malpractices observed. Finally, he indicated the following issues as challenges reported to the office:

- Missing of answer scripts,
- Centers complaints with regard to requisition for exam materials,
- Delay in effecting the exams due to security problems, thus exam papers remain at the centers longer,
- Delay in returning answer scripts to the head office.

Finally, he indicated that there are occasions where learners in Addis Ababa appear with answers downloaded in their mobile phones.

Conclusion

In general, examination malpractice indicates a decline in the quality of education. This implies that the quality of education in a given country is low. This will adversely affect the national development.

ODL institutions must try to ensure the maintenance of high standards in the conduct of exams. To this effect, there is the need for the institutions to embrace exam ethics. This is done via very high level of professional and administrative resources. It is also an important requirement for ODL institutions to develop assessment handbook which consist of rules, regulations and standards to guide the examination processes. There is also a need for the instructions to constitute monitoring committee for the purpose of monitoring exam or exam related processes to ensure quality and compliance to the laid down rules, regulations and standards. The institutions handbook on exam processes need to be widely available to stakeholders, especially the staff and students. Therefore, to maintain credibility, integrity and to ensure quality, these institutions should prescribe rules, regulations and standards to govern their exams.

This brings pressure to bear on the CODL, SMU to maintain proper security, before, during and after examinations. To this effect, areas of concern include, but not limited to:

- Develop regulations, producers, and guidelines as well as sanctions to guide the conducts of both staff and leaners during examinations,
- Appoint staff of high integrity as supervisors,
- Arrange important monitoring of examination venues by other staff of high integrity,
- Apply sanctions when necessary; and
- Plan and initiate (at pilot level) to carry out on-line assessments.

Finally, stimulating the exercise of report writing is very important. The report needs to include:

- Assessment of the effectiveness of the current practices.
- Identification of the problems with the implication of existing rules and regulations; and
- Establishment of the basis for review of regulations to ensure better efficiency.

Therefore, the report should include challenge incidences such as:

- Conduct of learners and invigilators;
- Adequacy or inadequacy of accommodation facilities and exam materials; and
- Course examined and relevant numerical data such as number of scripts or candidates, invigilators among others.

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