

The quality of orientation in ODL

A correlational and content analysis of ZOU sessions held in the Midlands Regional Campus

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to assess the consistency with which quality is maintained in the orientation process. Orientation is a key university process intended to prepare new students for life in higher education (HE). For open and distance learning (ODL), orientation can be a key process for lessening some of the challenges associated with the separation of the learner and the lecturer. Indeed, for ODL students, orientation can be fraught with a variety of challenges one of which could be quality problems.

Design/methodology/approach – Convenient sampling was used to obtain a total of 89 students in the first semester and 34 students in the second semester. The respondents came from all the eight districts in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe. They belonged to various degree programmes found in the eight faculties of the institution. Correlation was used to determine quality variations. Using a mixed methods approach, the study sought the views of the students and the relationships between activities done in the two semesters of 2018. SPSS version 16.0 software was used to compute Spearman's correlations whereas content analysis was used to analyze the open-ended responses to the questionnaire. This mixed methods approach helped the researchers to analyze and compare the quality of the orientation sessions.

Findings – Results yielded a positive and high significant correlation between first and second semester variables ($r = 0.916$, $p = 0.000$), a finding indicating that staff members in the Midlands Regional Campus of Zimbabwe Open University have not changed their ways of conducting orientation. On a scale of 1 (least effective) to 5 (most effective), the average ratings for the presentations in the first and second semesters were 4.08 and 4.26, respectively. In the qualitative analysis, adequacy of the venue, timing, coverage of aspects and use of media were all rated positively for the two sessions. However, for the two sessions, some students mentioned negative sentiments to do with the provision of needed materials at time of student registration, the public address system, orientation packages, time management and communication.

Research limitations/implications – This paper looks at the process of orientation as it was done at one regional campus of an ODL institution in Zimbabwe. It also analyses the quality of the orientation using correlation as a lens that measures consistency and also by critically analyzing content in the respondents' voices. Implications are that the findings and recommendations can also be applied in other ODL (and even non-ODL) institutions with a view of finally coming up with common policies and procedures with regards to providing quality service and support to the twenty-first century student.

Practical implications – Findings were relevant and could be used for designing applicable orientation programmes in ODL institutions and for improving the quality of student support and services.

Originality/value – While a number of studies have been carried out on orientation in HE, it would appear that research on orientation in ODL institutions, especially in Zimbabwe, appears minimal, hence this study covers an unexplored niche.

Keywords Content analysis, Open and distance learning, Quality assurance awareness, Student orientation, Quality of orientation, Correlational analysis

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Institutions which offer studies through open and distance learning (ODL) delivery mode have to contend with an image problem regardless of the status of the quality (Jung and Latchem, 2012; Robson in Lentell and Perraton, 2003). Consequently, ODL institutions have to go the extra mile to assure clients of the reputation of their institutional processes. As the first stage in a student's university life, the process of orientation needs to undergo quality assurance to enhance effectiveness.

Orientation is a key university process intended to prepare new students for life in higher education (HE). Dictionary.com (www.dictionary.com/browse/orientation) defines orientation as "an introduction, as to guide one in adjusting to new surroundings, employment, activity, or the like" while the *English Oxford Dictionary* (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/orientation>) says it is a "course giving information to newcomers to a university or other institution". Although there is no generally agreed definition of student orientation (SO) in HE, some research on the constructs that measure it has been carried out (Alnawas, 2015). Defining quality, Sim *et al.* (2005, p. 1) say it is "fitness for use" which includes the identification of customer needs and attempt to meet these needs". Quality can also be defined as the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfils requirements. Student satisfaction which is one indicator of quality in HE is achieved if students rate positively the orientation programme:

Also, Orientation programs are geared towards introducing new students to college and university services that support their educational and personal goals, and they also assist students in gaining the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that will help them adjust and make a smooth transition into the college/university community (Arhin and Wang'eri, 2018, p. 2).

However, for ODL students, orientation can be fraught with a variety of challenges one of which could be quality problems. This study was carried out with a view to assess the consistency with which quality is maintained in the orientation process. If quality is not maintained, especially during and also after orientation, student retention and academic achievement may be compromised.

Statement of the problem

ODL students often face a lot of challenges due to separation from their peers, tutors and the institution through resources, time and geographic space. It has often been observed that most ODL university students do not attend orientation sessions and hence lack quality assurance awareness and other important information related to how they interact with learning materials, their tutors and peers. This lack of information may impact negatively on student retention, academic achievement and graduation rate.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to assess, by way of correlations and content analysis, the consistency with which quality is maintained in the orientation processes at the Midlands Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The study also sought to investigate whether the orientation sessions were effective and helpful to the students and to suggest areas for improvement.

Research questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1. Why is it necessary to hold orientation sessions for new ODL students at the regional campus?
- RQ2. How do ODL students rate the quality of orientations done at the regional campus?

- RQ3. What are the challenges faced by the ODL students with regards to orientation?
RQ4. How can the orientation challenges faced by the ODL students be overcome?

Hypotheses

For this study, the following null hypotheses were crafted and using a *t*-test for comparison of means and for testing for the significance of correlations, they could be rejected at 5 per cent level of significance:

- H1₀*. There is generally no consistency/correlation with which quality is maintained in the orientation process (to be rejected).
H2₀. There is no correlation between variables related to orientation preparation in the two semesters of the year 2018 (to be rejected).
H3₀. There is no correlation between variables related to orientation presentations by staff members and students in the two semesters of 2018 (to be rejected).
H4₀. There is generally no significant difference in the way members of staff deliver their presentations during the orientation sessions (to be rejected).

Review of related literature

The following aspects are covered in this review of related literature: the need and quality of orientation sessions for new ODL students, correlations between variables related to orientation sessions in ODL, the challenges faced by the ODL students with regards to orientation and the solutions to overcome the challenges faced by the ODL students.

The need and quality of orientation sessions for new ODL students

Orientation has recently been viewed as a factor affecting, among other variables, student retention and academic achievement (Majoni and Mashatise, 2015; Caplan, 2008; Arhin and Wang'eri, 2018). Orientation also enhances students' experiences (Larmar and Ingamells, 2010) and enables them to interact well and feel as being part and parcel of the overall university community.

The need for orientation is also highlighted by what new students seek and expect as they attend the sessions. According to Poot (2005) research findings at La Trobe University revealed that students sought the following from orientation:

- explanations of expectations;
- explanations of the different teaching and learning methods used;
- clear course aims and objectives and an understanding of where units and courses will lead;
- ongoing academic support throughout first year; and
- support of lecturers, tutors and other students.

Majoni and Mashatise (2015) have described the aspects of the orientation sessions done at ZOU's Mashonaland Central Regional Campus. These include the role of the Regional Centre, address by the Vice Chancellor, delivery mode and study skills, use of the library and use of ICT, registration and examinations, student services and programme specific orientation. Researchers in this study observed that the same issues were addressed at the Midlands Regional Campus, but included other aspects such as quality assurance awareness, sport, student experiences (i.e. address by a former student), address by SRC and

Alumni, writing of assignments and a mini tour of the Regional Campus. In Majoni and Mashatise's study it was revealed that students were satisfied with the orientation programme and benefitted from it.

The quality of the orientation process is another important factor. Quality of the orientation can be measured by student and tutor satisfaction ratings. A research carried out at ZOU by Dick *et al.* (2015) revealed that students and tutors, respectively, viewed orientation as effective (93.3 and 100 per cent agreed), and that the orientation package was provided (73.3 and 62.5 per cent agreed). "As part of the orientation package, it was opined that each student should be provided with a Communication and Academic Writing Skills module to enhance the quality of assignments produced" (Dick *et al.*, 2015, p. 73).

At NOUN Port Harcourt study centre in Nigeria, research findings by Patrick and Iherjirika (2012) showed that female adult learners were satisfied with the quality and manner of orientation for new students while their male counterparts were satisfied with the quality of orientation for e-examination. Thus in planning orientation universities should recognize the importance of new students' needs (Caplan, 2008) and therefore make sure that such orientation events and activities are of the highest possible quality (Poot, 2005). Hence there was need to investigate in this study if quality was maintained in the orientation processes at the Midlands Regional Campus of ZOU and whether the orientation sessions were effective and helpful to the students.

Correlations between variables related to orientation sessions in ODL

Research on correlations between learner support systems in ODL and student satisfaction has been carried out. Sim *et al.* (2005) found out that at the School of Distance Education of Universiti Sains Malaysia there was a high positive correlation ($r = 0.74, p < 0.01$) between the orientation programme and the overall satisfaction of quality variables. At the University of Cape Coast in Ghana, Arhin and Wang'eri (2018) established a test of correlation which showed that the orientation programme for students was significantly related to retention of students in distance learning ($r = 0.11, p = 0.01$) although the correlation was weak. Caplan (2008) has reviewed literature which showed that there was a clear correlation between orientation and student success whereas Larmar and Ingamells (2010, p. 212) said that "participation in a learning community is positively correlated to engagement, outcomes and overall satisfaction with higher education". In their study of orientation programmes and challenges at UGC-Academic Staff Collages from Maharashtra and Gujarat, India, Surve and Bagul (2015) came up with two important results which were that:

- (1) there was a (moderate to weak but) positive correlation between objectives of orientation programme for faculties and contents of the training programme ($\rho = 0.434, p = 0.000 < 0.01$); and
- (2) there was evidence of a strong positive correlation between effect of orientation programme on student evaluation and assessment ($\rho = 0.773, p = 0.000$).

In the case of ZOU Midlands Regional Campus, there was need to establish how the two orientation sessions held in the year 2018 were correlated.

Challenges faced by the ODL students with regards to orientation

Challenges some ODL students face with regard to orientation have been documented. For instance, Mowes (2005) reported that students at the University of Namibia commented of not receiving any information or invitation to orientation seminars, not being informed about all the available student support services during orientation, the orientation seminar being too short for students to know everything and career guidance and study skills not being offered during orientation seminars. Caplan (2008) has also mentioned poor event preparation and planning as other challenges.

Solutions to overcome challenges faced by the ODL students

Orientation is one of the many student support services and need to be of high quality (Nsamba and Makoe, 2017) – informing students in time, arranging of appropriate venue, good presentations, good communication, good peer-peer and student-tutor interactions.

There is need therefore for universities to come up with good orientation guidelines, procedures, principles and policies. For example, such procedures and policies could be of the form as those proposed by the University of Tasmania (Poot, 2005, p. 3), such as these:

- Orientation is a process, not an event. Orientation should extend from enrolment through to at least the first six weeks of semester.
- Information provision must be limited to what is immediately relevant at each stage of the orientation process.
- The academic and social integration of new students into the institution must be a priority for all staff during the orientation process.
- Students need to be provided with detailed information about the content and requirements of their units/course of study.
- Any discrepancy between the expectations of the students and the expectations of the institution must be explicitly addressed.
- Students must have access to appropriate study skills support.

It is envisaged that good quality SO would lead to student satisfaction and university reputation (Alnawas, 2015) and the needs of the employers would be met.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

According to McIsaac and Gunawardena (2001) ODL theories are grouped into three categories, namely, independence and autonomy, industrialization of teaching and interaction and communication. While various aspects of these theories have relevance in this study, however the theory of interaction and communication (Holmberg, 1988 as cited in Roberts, 2017) appears to be clearly linked to orientation in ODL. Key issues in this theory involve didactic conversation, personal relationship between teaching and learning, well developed instructional material and two-way communication, intellectual pleasure and study motivation, conversational concept and learner centred and personal communication (Holmberg, 1988 as cited in Roberts, 2017).

The theory of interaction and communication links well with the view of orientation as service provision through active dialogue with students. Orientation is viewed as one of the factors affecting student satisfaction and hence it should be of the highest possible quality. According to Alnawas (2015, p. 626; citing Pesch *et al.*, 2008):

[...] successful implementation of the concept of SO in HE means that a university: (a) looks at the educational experience from the perspective of the student; (b) regularly assesses student perceptions of the university's commitment to understanding and meeting student needs; (c) provides students with a challenging and quality education that will enable them to pursue successful careers; and (d) recognises and addresses the needs of multiple stakeholders, including the university, the students, and employers (Pesch *et al.*, 2008). When such students are produced, the reputation of the university is enhanced and the needs of employers are met (Pesch *et al.*, 2008).

Thus student academic achievement and the excellence (or quality) of the institution depend on several factors, some of which are student satisfaction, student performance, support services offered by the institution and its physical structures, among other factors. The quality of the SO seminar as one of the support services the university can provide to its students can be measured either quantitatively, qualitatively or both. This study therefore

attempted to measure quality of orientation quantitatively by adapting some attributes or dimensions of the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988; Shahin, 2006). These five generic dimensions are:

- (1) Tangibles: physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel.
- (2) Reliability: ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- (3) Responsiveness: willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
- (4) Assurance (including competence, courtesy, credibility and security): knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.
- (5) Empathy (including access, communication, understanding the customer): caring and individualized attention that the firm provides to its customers.

By also borrowing ideas from the work of Nsamba and Makoe (2017) who have evaluated the quality of students' support services in ODL at Unisa, South Africa, this study attempted to qualitatively evaluate the quality of orientation by analyzing the content in the positive and negative responses to the open ended statement: "Provide your own personal evaluation of the orientation. Offer any suggestions for improvement".

Materials and methods

All students from various faculties and departments who attended the two orientation sessions held at the ZOU Midlands Regional Campus during 2018 semesters were given the Orientation Evaluation Form (see Appendix) to fill in. The students had to fill in their bio-data in Section A, to tick on a Likert Scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree statements concerning orientation preparation (Section B) and to rate for effectiveness the actual presentations on a scale of 1 for "lowest" to 5 for "highest" (Section C). Section D was open ended and it asked students to provide their personal evaluation of the orientation, citing challenges and suggesting some improvements. Attending orientation was not compulsory. Convenient sampling was used. Of those who attended the first session (January–June semester), eighty-nine students (29 males and 60 females) completed the *questa-view*. For the second semester (July–December semester), 34 students (15 males and 19 females) completed the *questa-view*. The respondents came from all the eight districts in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe. They belonged to various degree programmes found in the eight faculties of the institution. Using a mixed methods approach, the study sought the views of the students and analyzed the relationships between activities done in the two sessions using Spearman's correlation. SPSS version 16.0 software was used to compute the correlations whereas content analysis was used to analyze the open-ended responses in the *questa-view*. This mixed methods approach helped the researchers to analyze and compare the quality of the orientation sessions.

Results, data analysis and interpretation

Quantitative data presentation and analysis

The students were requested to tick on a Likert Scale from Strongly Agree (coded 5) to Strongly Disagree (coded 1). "Neutral" was coded 3. Effectiveness of the presentations given by various people was rated from lowest (1) to highest (5). Thus 20 variables were created, coded and entered onto SPSS 16.0 as follows:

- (1) Venuedeq: the venue to conduct orientation was adequate and convenient.
- (2) Communication: communication to attend the orientation was effective and timeous.
- (3) Timing: the timing of orientation was suitable.

- (4) Presentereffafrndly: presenters were efficient and friendly.
- (5) Presntercompknowldg: presenters demonstrated comprehensive knowledge of their topics.
- (6) ZOUOperations: ZOU operations were clearly articulated.
- (7) Orientcoverall: the orientation covered all the areas I looked forward to hear.
- (8) Goodplanorg: the proceedings showed good planning and organization.
- (9) Avamedia: audio-visual media were adequately used.
- (10) Orienthandout: an orientation package was provided.
- (11) QAAwareness: effectiveness of presentation on quality assurance awareness given by quality awareness coordinator.
- (12) RegandExam: effectiveness of presentation on registration and examinations given by the regional administrator.
- (13) ZOUDelvmode: effectiveness of presentation on the ZOU delivery mode given by a regional programme coordinator (RPC).
- (14) Libserv: effectiveness of presentation on library services given by library assistant.
- (15) Sport: effectiveness of presentation on sports activities and services given by regional coordinator for sports.
- (16) StdExperience: effectiveness of presentation on students' experiences given by a former student.
- (17) SRC: effectiveness of presentation on Students' Representative Council (SRC) given by SRC President.
- (18) StdAdvisor: effectiveness of presentation on student services given by the Student Advisor.
- (19) ICT: effectiveness of presentation on information and communication technologies (ICT) given by ICT technician.
- (20) WritAssgn: effectiveness of presentation on writing of assignments given by an RPC.

Table I shows the means and standard deviations when all values of the variables for Semester I (Sem I) and Semester II (Sem II) had been summed up and averaged.

Table I shows that both means for Semester I (for preparations and actual presentations) were greater than the means for Semester II, probably suggesting that there had been some slight deterioration of the quality of orientation and service delivery. However, these differences were not statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$ ($t = 2.385, p = 0.253$) hence showing consistency in the delivery of orientation.

Table II shows descriptive statistics for each of the variables for Semester I and Semester II.

	Mean	SD
Table I.		
Means and standard deviations for Sem I and Sem II totals		
Sem I preparations	4.3000	0.16459
Sem I actual presentations	4.3500	0.30383
Sem II preparations	4.0825	0.23873
Sem II actual presentations	4.2612	0.32608

Variable	Sem 1 mean	Sem I SD	Sem II mean	Sem II SD
Venueadeq	4.6176	0.60376	4.3571	0.65598
Communication	3.9706	0.93696	3.9286	1.04515
Timing	4.2353	0.74096	3.8333	1.05730
Presentereffafrndly	4.7059	0.57889	4.3095	0.64347
Presntercompknowledg	4.6765	0.47486	4.3095	0.68032
ZOUOperations	4.5294	0.56329	4.1905	0.74041
Orientcoverall	4.4412	0.82356	3.9048	0.79048
Goodplanorg	4.3824	0.69695	4.1667	0.58086
Avamedia	4.1176	0.80772	4.0476	0.98655
Orienthandout	3.6765	1.34211	3.6667	1.14053
QAAwareness	4.0588	0.91920	3.7143	0.86351
RegandExam	4.7059	0.75996	4.0000	1.12619
ZOUDelvmode	3.8529	0.95766	3.8333	0.85302
Libserv	4.2353	0.74096	3.5000	1.10982
Sport	4.6471	0.91725	4.4286	1.06251
StdExperience	4.4706	0.66220	3.9048	0.98301
SRC	3.8529	1.10460	3.5000	0.89033
StdAdvisor	4.1471	0.78363	3.8095	0.96873
ICT	4.3235	0.72699	–	–
WritAssgn	3.9118	1.08342	–	–

Table II.
Descriptive statistics
for all variables

From Table II it is noted that the variables ICT and WritAssgn were not entered for Semester II. This was so because these topics were not included in the orientation programme for Semester II. However, for all the other variables it can be observed that the means for Sem I were slightly greater than the means for Sem II and this could imply that the overall quality of the orientation, as gauged by these variables, especially for library service (Libserv) and Student Advisor (StdAdvisor) had deteriorated. The *t*-test for comparison of means produced significant results for those differences ($t = 6.450, p = 0.000$).

Correlations

Table III shows significant ($p < 0.05$) Spearman's correlations for some of the variables.

In Table III, the numbers 1 and 2 after the variables represent Semesters I and II, respectively. Table III also shows that 27 out of 36 pairs of variables (excluding Sem I and Sem II means) were negatively correlated whereas the remaining 9 pairs were positively correlated. This could suggest that, on the whole, the first orientation session was rated more positively than the second session. These correlation coefficients were rather small, however (from less than $\rho = 0.5$ to about $\rho = 0.2$). Insignificant correlations (where $p > 0.05$) were not entered in the table. Nevertheless, it was observed that on the whole, there was a significant and high positive correlation between Sem I and Sem II means for all variables ($\rho = 0.758, p = 0.000$). This result is in tandem with Sim *et al.* (2005) who recorded a high positive correlation between the orientation programme and the overall satisfaction of quality variables. Thus one could conclude that there was some degree of consistency of the orientation sessions as there were slight differences in the students' rating of the orientation preparations and presentations for the two semesters. The students' actual voices (as recorded in this study in the qualitative content analysis section) shed more light regarding issues of quality and consistencies of the two sessions.

Testing of hypotheses

There was a strong positive correlation ($\rho = 0.884, p = 0.000$) between quality of orientation preparation done in Semester I and quality of orientation preparation done in Semester II.

Variables	Correlation (ρ)	1 tailed sig. level ($p \leq \alpha$)
Venueadeq1 and Venueadeq2	-0.346	0.022
Timing1 and Timing2	0.379	0.014
Timing1 and QAwareness2	-0.295	0.048
Timing1 and RegandExam2	-0.440	0.005
Timing1 and Libserv2	-0.419	0.008
Presentereffafndly1 and SRC2	0.425	0.007
Orientcoverall1 and ZOUdelvmode2	0.307	0.039
Orientcoverall1 and StdAdvisor2	0.306	0.039
Avamedia1 and Communication2	-0.326	0.030
Avamedia1 and Presentereffaf2	-0.304	0.040
Avamedia1 and RegandExam2	-0.356	0.019
Avamedia1 and ZOUdelvmode2	-0.336	0.026
Avamedia1 and StdExperience2	-0.473	0.002
Oriethandout1 and Avamedia2	0.363	0.017
Oriethandout1 and ZOUdelvmode2	-0.300	0.042
QAAwareness1 and Communication2	-0.297	0.044
QAAwareness1 and QAAwareness2	-0.416	0.007
QAAwareness1 and Libserv2	-0.441	0.005
QAAwareness1 and StdExperience2	-0.357	0.019
QAAwareness1 and StdAdvisor2	-0.316	0.034
RegandExam1 and Oriethandout2	0.308	0.038
ZOUdelvmode1 and Avamedia2	-0.351	0.021
ZOUdelvmode1 and Oriethandout2	-0.359	0.19
ZOUdelvmode1 and Presntercompknowldg2	-0.345	0.023
ZOUdelvmode1 and Timing2	-0.320	0.032
StdExperience1 and ZOUdelvmode2	0.289	0.049
StdExperience1 and QAAwareness2	0.328	0.029
StdExperience1 and Avamedia2	-0.426	0.006
StdExperience1 and Orientcoverall2	-0.365	0.017
SRC1 and PresenterCompknowl2	-0.300	0.043
SRC1 and Sport2	0.465	0.003
StdAdvisor1 and Oriethandout2	-0.308	0.038
StdAdvisor1 and Libserv2	-0.388	0.012
WritAssign1 and Orientcoverall2	-0.34	0.024
WritAssign1 and ZOUOperations2	-0.430	0.006
WritAssign1 and Presentereffafndly2	-0.418	0.007
Sem I means and Sem II means	0.758	0.000

Table III.
Showing significant
correlations between
some of the variables

Also independent samples t -tests indicated that there were no significant differences between values for the quality of orientation preparations done in Semester I and those done in Semester II ($t = -1.438, p = 0.194$). Thus $H2_0$ (There is no correlation between variables related to orientation preparation in the two semesters of 2018) is rejected.

There was a small positive correlation (although not significant at 5 per cent level) between the quality of orientation presentations by staff members and students in the two semesters of 2018 ($\rho = 0.144, p = 0.367$). There were also no significant differences between quality of orientation presentations given in Semester I and those given in Semester II ($t = -0.948, p = 0.368$). Thus $H4_0$ is rejected.

There were significant positive correlations between the majority of variables related to orientation presentations by staff members and students in the two semesters of 2018. For example, StdExperience1 and QAAwareness2 ($\rho = 0.328, p = 0.029$) and Presentereffafndly1 and SRC2 ($\rho = 0.425, p = 0.007$) were positively correlated. Thus, $H3_0$ is rejected.

Since $H2_0-H4_0$ were rejected, it implies that $H1_0$ is also rejected.

Thus, on the whole, it appears that the quality of preparation and presentations (i.e. implementation) of orientation sessions by ZOU staff members and students have been consistent over the two semesters of 2018. It remains to be investigated whether this consistency would prevail in the semesters after 2018. However, orientation planning and implementation have not been without challenges. The next section looks at the qualitative analysis of the data provided by the respondents.

Qualitative data

Findings and discussion

This section focusses on the findings (and emanating discussions) as they relate to each of the research questions and for each of the two sessions:

RQ1. Why is it necessary to hold orientation sessions for new ODL students at the regional campus?

Most of the informants gave their reasons why it was necessary to hold orientation sessions for new ODL students at the regional campus and were in favour that the sessions should continue to be held. The following sentiments support their views:

The orientation session was very helpful and should be continued every semester (Session I).

The orientation was a good thing for the university to us new students. I can say all that we didn't know about ODL was covered (Session II).

I had the chance to meet new friends and to learn about SRC, Sporting and other non-academic activities that I could join (Session I).

The ZOU new site (venue) was well cleaned and convenient. Orientation should continue to be held there (Session II).

The session was a good one. A lot has been learnt and achieved e.g., language, knowing one's ambitions and goals (Session I).

It was splendid. It gave us a chance to meet fellow students. Keep it up (Session II).

The above sentiments support the view that orientation sessions equip students with important academic and essential non-academic information and also measures student satisfaction (Alnawas, 2015), factors which lead to student retention (Arhin and Wang'eri, 2018).

However, some few students had negative views about holding orientation sessions for the regional campus. They commented that:

The event was poorly planned. I wonder why some people say it should be held again (Session I).

Time for the orientation was poorly communicated. Some were told it was 8.00am and others 9.00am. Some presentations were rushed though. Hence to me orientation was a waste of time and should be discontinued (Session II).

These sentiments allude to both semesters and depict the need for a thorough appraisal of the orientation process with a view to redress anomalies cited:

RQ2. How do ODL students rate the quality of orientations done at the regional campus?

On the whole, the orientation sessions held at the regional campus were rated positively. The following sentences and phrases echoed by the informants were in corroboration of the positive rating: "The service is excellent" (Session I), "Everything went well" (Session II), "Well presented" (Session I), "The presenters were friendly" (Session I), "Orientation was brilliant" (Session II), "A first class orientation session-keep it up" (Session I), "We really

benefited" (Session II), "The session was a good one. A lot has been learnt and achieved, e.g., language, knowing one's ambitions and goals" (Session I), "The venue was well cleaned" (Session II), "Communication was effective" (Session I).

The researchers noted that the students' ratings above do add to the board of knowledge on the service quality dimensions (Nsamba and Makoe, 2017):

RQ3. What are the challenges faced by the ODL students with regards to orientation?

Despite rating the orientation sessions positively (*RQ2* above), the informants mentioned the following challenges:

Communication to attend Orientation came late and during the actual Orientation time was not managed well (Both Sessions I and II).

Adequate time was not allocated to the presentation on assignment writing (Both Sessions I and II).

Electricity blackout was not planned for (Session I).

Library borrowing period was inadequate to cater for distant students and PHES (Physical Education and Sport) books in the library are few (Session II).

Some presentations were inaudible and rushed (Sessions I).

We did not get presentation programme and handouts (Both Sessions I and II).

Challenges faced by students with regards to orientation were not new since similar ones had been mentioned in other studies (Majoni and Mashatise, 2015; Mowes, 2005):

RQ4. How can the orientation challenges faced by the ODL students be overcome?

Suggestions as to how the challenges could be overcome were proffered. For instance, the majority of the informants said:

The university should provide students with the requisite materials as soon as they register and use the orientation sessions to explain more about those materials (Session II).

Improve on time management. For example, adjust orientation times and periods for students outside Gweru (Both Sessions I and II).

Also use local languages such as Ndebele and Shona to avoid any skip of information (Session II).

The institution must improve on communication system to update all students on intended programmes (Session I).

The ZOU presenters should provide us with handouts for the orientation (Session II).

Improve on the audio-visual media. The operator should be jerked up and man the ICT equipment well (Session I).

It will help if the new students are given a platform to participate and ask questions to the ZOU personnel during the Orientation (Session I).

It is noted that in a separate study by Majoni and Mashatise (2015), similar suggestions were given by the students. Further, Majoni and Mashatise recommended that time should be provided for students to tour the Regional Centre buildings and offices and highlight their functions. As depicted in the ODL theory of interaction and communication (Roberts, 2017) there was need for improved communication between students and the institution to minimize the occurrence of challenges. Also students needed to be allocated more time to ask questions. Analysis of students' responses appear to reveal that the qualitative data showed more discrepancies in orientation service provision than depicted in the quantitative data.

Conclusion

This study concludes that generally students were satisfied with the quality of orientation sessions held at the ZOU Midlands Regional Campus. This is highlighted by the majority of students who echoed positive sentiments; although there were few ones who echoed negative sentiments about orientation. The quantitative results also showed some positive correlations between orientation variables and positive ratings of the orientation preparations as well as actual orientation presentations. In some cases, negative correlations were recorded but they were rather small. Thus research questions of the study were answered and null hypotheses of lack of consistency in the sessions, lack of correlations between orientation variables and lack of overall quality were rejected.

Recommendations

The recommendations point to the need to continue having orientation sessions every semester, for thorough planning and preparation by the University so as to maintain quality, and to finally come up with good orientation principles and guidelines. There is also need for further research to investigate challenges and evaluate quality of orientation sessions held in other semesters and in other campuses of the ZOU.

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Further reading

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Appendix. Orientation evaluation form

**QUALITY ASSURANCE UNIT: MIDLANDS REGION
EVALUATION OF ORIENTATION**

As part of our quality assurance processes in the region, we would like to improve the quality of our orientation. Please take a few minutes at the end to evaluate the orientation process.

SECTION A

Date: **Gender:** Male Female

District

Degree Programme.....

SECTION B

Tick in the appropriate box

WORKSHOP/PRESENTATION COMMENT	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. The venue was adequate and convenient.					
2. Communication to attend the workshop was effective and timeous.					
3. The timing of workshop was suitable.					
4. Presenters were efficient and friendly.					
5. Presenters demonstrated comprehensive knowledge of their topics.					
6. ZOU operations were clearly articulated.					
7. The workshop covered all the areas I looked forward to hear.					
8. The proceedings showed good planning and organisation.					
9. Audio-visual media was adequately used.					
10. A workshop package was provided.					

SECTION C

On a scale of 1 to 5, rate these presentations for effectiveness with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Quality Assurance Awareness..... | 2. Registration and Examinations..... |
| 3. ZOU Delivery Mode..... | 4. Library Services..... |
| 5. Sport..... | 6. Student Experiences..... |
| 7. SRC..... | 8. Student Advisor..... |
| 9. ICT | 10. Writing of assignments |

SECTION D

Provide your own personal evaluation of the orientation. Offer any suggestions for improvement.....
.....
.....

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