THE PERCEPTIONS OF GEOGRAPHY AND ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES STUDENTS IN ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY (MIDLANDS REGION) ON THE USE OF ASSIGNMENTS AS TEACHING TOOLS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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Abstract

Assignments are a critical component in the Zimbabwe Open University where they are used as teaching tools. Assignments complement print-based courses otherwise known as modules within ZOU, face-to-face tutorials, telephone tuition and electronic tuition. This case study in the Midlands Region wanted to establish whether assignments are being utilised to meet their role in the open and distance learning. The study which was a triangulation of both quantitative and qualitative techniques utilised questionnaire, interviews and observations to collect data. It was established that assignments are very important to the Geography students. They assist them in preparing for their examinations. They engage students in research as they search for information. It was observed that the turnaround time for assignments was not always good. Some markers delayed in giving the marked assignments back to students. In some cases they did not make meaningful feedback and this did not assist students in their learning. Students were at times involved in malpractices such as plagiarism and deception. The study recommends that for assignments to be useful as learning tools markers need to make interactive comments on them. The students should receive marked assignment early enough so that they attend to their errors before they embark on the next assignment or write their final examinations. Students are encouraged to desist from malpractices such as plagiarism and work in an honest manner to produce their own assignments.

Key words: assignments, marking, ODL, students, Zimbabwe Open University

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323

1.0. Introduction:

Since the inception of Zimbabwe Open University in 1999, as an open and distance learning (ODL) institution (Benza, 2001), several students have registered with the university to further their education. The ODL mode is however different from that of the traditional learning mode where students and tutors interact physically with one another and there is physical infrastructure for teaching and learning (Hussian and Jumani, 2008). Instead in ODL learning normally occurs in a different place from teaching hence it requires different delivery modes from those that are used in conventional universities. Tutors and students share their activities either through correspondence and little face-to-face contact, or through the use of various instructional media. Assignment writing and marking are regarded as some of the most important aspects of open and distance learning. The student's learning and academic development is enhanced through the use of assignments. Chaudhary and Dey (2013) contend that assignments are critical in helping the students in achieving the real purpose of learning. According to Hussian and Jumani (2008) and Moon et al. (2005) written assignments develop a communication and correspondence link between the tutors and students as they provide the primary interaction between instructor and learner or tutor and learner.

In essence, in ODL assignments that are written during a semester constitute part of formative assessment. Formative assessment is 'all those activities designed to motivate, to enhance understanding and to provide learners with an indication of their progress' (Morgan and O'Reilly, 1999: 15). It is therefore important to ensure that formative feedback is frequent and complete, as tutors that represent the university and are the gatekeepers for university quality, actually use them to make judgements about the extent to which the students have met the objectives of the subject (The Commonwealth of Learning, 2004; Smith and Coombe, 2006). On the part of the students assignments support their learning as they compel them to read widely in search of answers to questions (Mupondi, 2005). The use of assignments in ODL is imperative as they assist the students to have a better understanding of the subject matter under study. Syed et al. (2011) contend that assignments meet different ends such as engaging the learner to study and go through the contents and books while writing the assignments, enabling them to search and find out the answers of the questions, enhancing their writing power, and on the other hand they

are a good source to judge their writing capabilities, expression skills and approach to explain, describe and respond a question among many other things. Nhundu (1997) argues that assignments offer one-to-one pedagogic dialogue between the tutor and the student. ODL students have very little face-to-face contact with lecturers or tutors; hence they depend mostly on the correspondence tuition such as tutorial letters and assignments. Assignment marking has a special function in ODL. In ODL, however, it is likely that assignments may sometimes be the only means of tutor-student interaction, and the marking process must ensure adequate feedback via as much meaningful, in-depth feedback as is necessary and possible (Puspitasari, 2008). Since the students studying in ODL may be geographically far removed from the tutors and there are limited contact opportunities it is critical to give students quality feedback on their assignments (Price, 1997).

Several scholars (Nicol, 2008; Race, 2009; Yorke and Longden, 2008) infer that effective feedback is most necessary at first year level of ODL at university for motivation, empowerment, retention and the development of self-critical learning skills. According to Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011) educationalists have long accepted that timely and effective feedback on assessment is essential for learning, and students value it. It is apparent however that many students fail to act upon the feedback for various reasons. Hounsell (2007), Lea and Stierer (2000), and Lea and Street (1998) postulate that students do not attend to the feedback because they do not understand the discourse of the discipline or academic language. Hyland (2001) observes that students do not act on the feedback because they do not have sufficient experience to deconstruct feedback comments. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) are of the opinion that failure to attend to feedback could be caused by an inappropriate understanding of the nature of learning and, perhaps an inability to apply feedback on a current assignment successfully to future work. The situation is made worse by the fact that some tutors write insufficient and meaningless comments. Students are therefore not inclined to attend to the comments. Segoe (2013) argues that comments such as 'Good' are not sufficient and did not tell students anything. Feedbacks comments should therefore be informative so as to help students to realise their mistakes and where to improve.

Distance students make a number of malpractices in writing assignments and these include plagiarism, fabrication, deception, cheating and purchasing (James, 2006). Plagiarism is act of reproducing the words or ideas of other person and then pass them off as your own without acknowledging the original writer. Plagiarism has incidentally become more rampant than before because of the increase in accessible online material (Wyburn, 2009). According to James (2006) fabrication occurs when students present false data which is not original but work that they have created and this includes making up citations or inventing quotations to back up arguments. Students often use this strategy if they suspect the markers are not well versed with the discipline and have a limited knowledge of scholars in that area. Other students fabricate to create an impression that they consulted several sources. Students also deceive the system by claiming that they have already submitted their assignments to their tutor while others cheat by copying the work of another student then submit it as their own (James, 2006). Others are known pay some specialists in the discipline to write assignments for them so that they get high marks (James, 2006).

It appears assignments in ODL are used more for scoring or performance assessment, than serving a teaching function. Some ODL students have raised complaints with regards the administration and use of assignments in their learning. It is against this background why this study was carried out in the Geography and Environmental Studies (GES) Department in the Midlands Region of Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The study intended to find out the perceptions of the GES students in the Midlands Region towards the use of assignments as teaching/learning tools. It sought to establish if there were problems associated with administration and marking of ODL assignments and how they were resolved.

2.0. Methodology

The study was delimited to the students enrolled in Bachelor of Science [Geography and Environmental Studies (GES)] programme during the first and second semesters of 2006 in the Midlands Region of Zimbabwe Open University. A purposive sample of N = 45 students out of 79 registered students was used for this study. The sample was considered relevant as the

researcher wanted to elicit information specifically from GES students. This concurs with Babbie (1992) who contends that this method is used when the researcher selects his sample on the basis of one's knowledge of the population. Questionnaires were administered to respondents when they visited the departmental office. Likert type rating scale was administered to collect the perceptions of students about the role of assignments in learning through Open Distance Learning System. A questionnaire with 26 items on the following aspects: the importance of assignments as teaching tools; administration of assignments; the quality of marking of assignments and the quantity of assignments given in a semester, was administered to the sampled students. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the sampled students to get more detail on the use of assignments as teaching tools. A sample of marked assignments was picked randomly to observe the quality of marking.

3.0. Findings:

3.1. Importance of assignments as teaching tools:

The study subjected the respondents to a number of questions which sought to establish whether assignments were important as learning and teaching tools. The general consensus was that assignments were very important in ODL. The majority of students were of the view that assignments prepare them adequately for examinations. Eighty four percent (84%) of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that assignments gave them adequate preparation for examinations. During interviews they revealed that assignment questions in GES were designed in a manner that forced to read widely. They had to consult a wide range of sources which included textbooks, journals, magazines and newspapers when researching for their assignments and this gave adequate preparation for their examinations. They revealed that the advent of the internet had enhanced both the quantity and quality of their research sources. Furthermore this process improved their research skills as they had to hunt for specific information required for the question. However thirteen percent (13%) argued assignments did very little or nothing at all to prepare them for examinations. They said questions set for assignments were never repeated as examination questions. Instead they said assignment questions equip them with general knowledge.

Most students felt that the time they had to research and prepare for assignments was adequate. A total of seventy-one percent (71%) believe there is ample time between receiving and submitting questions for marking. They however registered the feeling that even if time was available there was a dearth of literature to use as reference in the assignments. Fifty three percent (53%) admitted they used only the module to answer assignment questions. Modules are print-based courses prepared by experts in the particular subject which are used as basic texts within ZOU. Since in ZOU the learner and the tutor are separated by time and space modules are the instructional media; hence the module is referred to as "the lecturer" within ZOU. This is because they can replace the physical lecturer. They argued they were based in rural areas which were remote and lacked resources such as libraries and internet services. They also revealed that they rarely had access to newspapers and this affected the quality of their assignments. A number of assignments were sampled to check on the quantity and quality of literature used by students. Generally these assignments showed that they were thin on references with less than ten percent of the candidates having used not more than three sources. There was glaring evidence that the majority of students relied on the module as the main source of information. A visit to the ZOU regional library revealed that the geography section had very few texts and most of them were also outdated. A survey made in the bookshops in town revealed that they had very limited stocks of relevant geography texts. Most textbooks have to be imported and managers at the bookshops felt it was uneconomic to import such books as there was no guarantee the books would have market.

The study wanted to find out whether the students got any assistance to prepare them for assignment writing. Their responses showed that the Tutorial Letter No 2 entitled *'Guidelines on the Presentation of Assignments'* gave them enough guidance on assignment writing. A total of eighty percent (80%) of the respondents agreed that the tutorial letter was very useful as it gave them good preparation in assignment writing. All the tutors responsible for marking assignments revealed that generally GES students did not have assignment presentation problems. Statistics show that approximately over 80% of GES students are practising teachers who passed through a teachers training college where they were groomed on researching and

presentation of assignments. Serious challenges in assignment writing and presentation were experienced from students who did not have any previous tertiary training.

Universities differ when it comes to the inclusion of coursework in the final assessment of students. Some universities use it as requirement to qualify to write final examinations. In other words a student must have done all his coursework and passed it in order to be allowed to sit for the examinations. Others include it as part of the final result a student obtains at the end of the semester. In the GES department coursework is worth 20 % of the final mark. Students were unanimous in saying that assignments should constitute part of the final assessment. They even suggested that their contribution should be raised to 30 %. They argued that preparation takes a lot of their study time. Some argued the performance by an individual in an examination is not indicative whether one is sharper than the other. So many variables need to be factored in. For example one may have spotted the questions that happen to be for that particular paper and did not cover the rest of the syllabus. The other might perform badly because of stage fright yet all along one was a sharpshooter. Raising the contribution of coursework might encourage a lot of cheating. Weak candidate may end up with high grades as they would either copy from friends or engage specialists to write assignment for them. Again one works on one's assignment without much pressure and with lots of resources unlike in an examination where there is a lot of individual effort.

3.2. Administration of assignments:

3.2.1. Submission of assignments by students for marking:

The study wanted to gather information on the students' views on the way they submit their assignments for marking. The study also wanted to establish whether they were satisfied with the manner the assignments were dispatched back to them after marking. Most students were content with the method of bringing their assignments in person and signing for them on submission. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of the respondents said this was an efficient way of reducing the risk of losing their scripts. They however said that the exercise was costly and time consuming. Most students stay in the rural areas and experience transport problems. Travelling has become very costly. Transport is also unreliable. So submitting assignments is a hectic

moment. It was generally observed that when the assignments had been marked students could either collect their assignments in person or they could have the assignment send by post to them. Although 55% of the respondents said they received their assignment before the onset of examination 23% said the manner the assignment were returned to students after marking had problems. A number of assignments arrived to the students late and could not be used in examination preparations.

3.2.2. Turnaround time:

Feedback is very important as students need it so as to improve their performance. They take account of comments made by the marker for their next assignment or examination. Most students complained that they did not receive their assignments in good time to fully utilise them before their next assignment or examinations. Linn and Gronlund (1995) contend that through marked work students are able to identify their areas of weaknesses and strengths. They add that marked work contributes towards student's motivation. It is therefore very important to return assignments in good time to enable students to utilise them before submitting their next assignments, and in preparation for their examinations. It is also a good practice to plan submission of assignments in such a way that allows students to reflect on the first assignment before submitting the next. Fifty-five percent (55%) of the respondents thought most tutors do not meet the agreed turnaround time. Thirty-five percent (35 %) said they received their assignments when they came to write their examinations. Ten percent (10 %) said at one time or another they never got their assignments back yet marks will have been entered in the mark schedule. This made them wonder if assignments had been actually marked after all. Tutors need to recognise the importance of assignments to ODL students. They do not have as many channels of communication available to them compared to internal students.

3.3. Marking of assignments:

There was a general consensus that the quality of marking in GES was high. It is however important to look at various aspects of marking to get a better insight into how it could be of benefit to the learning of students in the department.

3.3.1. Use of comments:

Markers are expected to make comments on the work produced by the students. Seventy-one percent of the respondents said markers in GES write comments on their scripts. Twenty-four percent (24 %) said tutors do not make comments at all. ODL students operate in an individualistic fashion. If a tutor comments on the work a student has produced it becomes a way of opening up some interaction with the student. It is one important way of acknowledging the efforts being made by the student in an endeavour to learn. A student develops confidence and competence or otherwise from the comments made by the tutor. Usually markers have a tendency of focusing on the negative aspects. They concentrate on what the student failed to raise and do not affirm achievements. A sample of assignments selected for moderation showed that comments made by tutors were imperatives and assertions such as "Explain!", "Does not make sense!" Nightingale (2000) argues that such comments do not help the students to improve. They need to be backed by qualifications which point out exactly what the students need to improve on. They should always assist students to identify their weaknesses. Markers could effectively use feedback by first identifying aspects of the assignment which the marker thinks the student handled well, and then proceed to those that need improvement.

3.3.2. Use of ticks

Ticks can be used as an indicator of areas where the student raised strong points. Markers should be consistent on the use of ticks. Seventy-eight percent (78 %) of the respondents confirmed that markers in GES place marks where students will have raised a strong point. Twenty-one percent (21 %) disagreed and said ticks are blindly placed on the script. The researcher observed during moderation that some markers even placed a tick on a blank space. Some ticks were very large and carelessly constructed. It was always good practice to place ticks as indicators of valid points. Ticks created an impression about the marker.

3.3.3. Encouraging students through comments:

Seventy three percent (73%) of the respondents said that most of the comments made by markers motivated them to do even better. They revealed that comments made them realise their weaknesses and strengths. They went on to say as long as markers were objective and meticulous they were encouraged in their studies. There was however some discontentment

from 27% of the respondents who said some markers wrote some discouraging comments. Comments such as "Wrong!" "Poor!" and "Nonsense!" tended to put the steam out of the students. During interviews some students said such comments made them feel less confident. Observations made on some assignments showed that although some markers wrote negative comments the practice was not prevalent.

3.3.4. Justifying the grade:

According to Quist (2000) most pupils want to see the grade or mark they received. The same applies to many students in GES. Most GES students were driven by marks which were an extrinsic concern. As soon as they received their assignments they rushed to check the mark they got. Quite a number of students visited the departmental office to raise complaints on the marks they were awarded if they were low. Very few students had interest in the comments made by markers. This defeated the whole learning process. The comments assist students to identify where they went wrong, and why they got that grade. Comments provide the necessary feedback and they may involve content based issues. They maybe related to style of writing or critical analysis of issues. It is pertinent for students to attend to comments made by markers. Markers should make an effort to make sure that marks they award are closely related to the comments they make. Marking should be thorough. The marker must address issues in such a manner that gives a student a good indication of why they received a grade they did. Students must realise that the judgement is fair and just. This will motivate them to improve.

3.4. Number of assignments per semester:

ZOU semesters are fifteen weeks long. GES students register for on average three modules per semester, and are expected to write two assignments for each module. The researcher wanted to find out whether these assignments were adequate. Thirty-six percent (36%) were of the opinion that students should be exposed to more than two assignments per semester. They felt this would extend them in their research and preparation for examinations. On being probed further it was observed that these students were not employed anywhere. Hence they spend most of their time studying so had time to do more assignments. Twenty-seven percent (27%) disagreed while thirty-five percent strongly disagreed with the idea of increasing the number of assignments per module per semester. They argued that assignments that are set cover a wider spectrum of their

curriculum. They presented that they have work commitments and only do their studies as part time. They went further to explain that the length of a semester makes it difficult to have more than two assignments. The fifteen week period is for writing assignments preparing and writing of examinations. In real terms the period is very short. The study felt that two assignments suffice for students in GES department. This was because the students were part time, and they on average had to attend to a total of eight assignments for the four modules. In most cases this was done after hours as most students were full-time employees elsewhere.

3.5. Student malpractices

This study established that a number of students were involved in a number of malpractices when writing their assignments. These included plagiarism, copying work produced by colleagues and engaging other people to write assignment for them. It was observed that some of the students simply reproduced work from sources that they did not acknowledge. This trend was common among the first year students who revealed in face-to-face interviews that they did not know it was an academic offence. They had not developed the skills to synthesise data then apply it to answer assignment questions. In most cases they simply regurgitated information from journal articles. The study also observed that a number of students engaged other people to do assignments for them. This was particularly the case in courses like Techniques in Geography (HGES 106), Statistics in Geography (HGES 206) and Computer Applications in Geography (HGES 301) in which they scored very highly in assignments but performed dismally in in-class tests and examinations. Some students revealed that some students copied work produced by their colleagues when they either ran out of time or lacked competence to produce their own work. This was because they did not give themselves adequate time to prepare for their assignments. The study wanted to establish whether students copy assignments from colleagues. Thirty eight percent (38%) said they do not know whether there are students who copy work from colleagues, whilst another thirty eight percent (38%) of the respondents denied that students copy from each other. They purported that students worked independently. The remainder which is twenty-four percent admitted that they copy some of the difficult work from their colleagues. Of those who denied that they ever copied assignment from their colleagues, they instead said they 'consulted' their colleagues for ideas or 'compared' assignments with their colleagues instead of copying. The researcher established that there was rampant copying due to

a number of factors. Courses such as Statistical Methods in Geography (GED 206) and Techniques in Geography (GED 106) which were mathematical in nature were regarded as very difficult by several students. Observations revealed that most students scored very highly in their assignments and performed very badly in their examinations in these courses. This showed that they either copied from their colleagues who were gifted in the subject or they paid some other people to do their assignments for them. On average they ended up passing with 3rd class or even failing outright. Those who admitted copying said mathematical concepts in these areas were difficult to understand. Others said they had no time to do their assignments. Thirty five percent (35%) of the respondents said that from experience they have given themselves about two to three weeks to cram and master difficult concepts and have always passed. It was observed that some students a semester down the line, cannot work out some statistical problems which were in the exam they passed in the previous semester. The researcher concluded that some students actually copy assignments from colleagues to boost their course work marks.

4.0. Conclusions

The study made a number of conclusions concerning the perceptions of geography students in Midlands Region of the Zimbabwe Open University on the use of assignments as teaching tools. Firstly, the students felt that assignments set in the Geography Department were important as they forced them to do a lot of research. This improved their academic performance and also provided them with the necessary research skills. It was also established that the quality of marking was generally very good. Markers made interactive comments which helped students to identify their areas of weakness and strength. It was however observed that some markers did not do a thorough job as they simply flew past the scripts. They did not make useful comments on the scripts. It was also established that some markers took long to return marked scripts and this did not help students to improve in their next assignment. In some cases they were forced to submit their second assignment before receiving the first assignment. Some students were involved in a number of malpractices such as plagiarism, deception and engaging other people to assignments on their behalf. They did this in order to get good marks.

5.0. Recommendations

The study felt that assignments were being utilised as teaching tools in the Geography and Environmental Studies department of the Zimbabwe Open University. It was however imperative that the department considers a number of recommendations made so that it improves on how it deals with assignment issues. Since assignments are critical in ZOU the markers are supposed to mark expeditiously and return the marked assignments timely to the students. This will provide the students with an opportunity to use assignments in the study. If feedback is delayed then its value for learning is diminished. Marking should be conducted thoroughly so as to benefit the students. Comments should be meaningful as well as motivating. Comments should be used to encourage students to improve on their performance. Feedback should focus on how the student can improve in future assignments. According to Geoffrey (1998) feedback should be detailed and as constructive as possible. Linn and Gronlund (1995) contend that marking should indicate the student's strengths and weaknesses. It is important to avoid focusing on the weak points. A student is motivated if the marker also acknowledges the student's strength in the presentation. Assignments are therefore useful in the academic growth of a student. Comments should provide a degree of detail which is relevant to the topic. Ticks should be placed in a conscientious manner. ZOU students in general and those in GES should avoid cheating of all sorts when writing assignments. They should endeavour to put in hard work in their assignment as this is an epitome of a complete student.

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