INFLUENCE OF STUDENTS' FEEDBACK ON THE QUALITY OF ADULT HIGHER DISTANCE EDUCATION SERVICE DELIVERY

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ABSTRACT

The evaluation of a program's compliance with service delivery and features necessary for the attainment of the programs educational objectives, student outcomes and continuous improvement is an important element in program accreditation and continuous improvement process. The study reported in this paper investigated the possible effects of students' feedback on the improvement of adult higher education distance learning service quality in a South African rural-based university. The study interrogated the service provision factors that seemingly helped in improving the delivery of the program. Such information are vital for planning, good governance, policy formulation, monitoring and evaluation, and for decision-making. The study used a quantitative descriptive statistics analysis of data generated ranging from 2013-2014. It comprised of overall student satisfaction as the dependent variable and the explanatory variables were given by program management, facilitation, assessment, learner support, systems, resources, program outcomes and subject matter. Analytical results were obtained from the Mann Whitney Test. The population consisted of students enrolled in the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) program by distance mode. The 313 respondents sampled were randomly selected from a total population of 916 students. Data were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire. The results revealed that service qualities linked to effective management, facilitation, academic support and subject matter delivery were the main qualities that the students recommended for the improvement of the program. It is therefore recommended that adult higher education programs must have a documented systematically utilized and effective process involving program service delivery constituencies like assessment, academic support and resources provided, for the periodic review of the program educational objectives to ensure that the program remains consistent with the institutional mission, needs and criteria.

Keywords: **Distance education, higher education, improvement, measurement, service delivery, service quality, students' feedback.**

INTRODUCTION

The rapid migration from the traditional mode of providing higher education by distance learning or the adoption of hybrid approaches is posing a significant challenge to the planners, managers and facilitators of academic programs by distance mode, especially in the developing world. From the modest beginnings of the work in 1840 by the English educator, Sir Isaac Pitman (2014) and that by Anna Ticknow who in 1873 established a society that offered educational opportunities to women of all classes to study at their homes in Nasseh (United States of America), distance learning has been evolving (Clark, 2007). The modern practitioners and planners of distance learning would now have to keep abreast with mobile learning, the connectivist massive open online courses (abbreviated for convenience as MOOCs and which was popularized from 2008), open textbooks, online course structures and delivery models and the social media amongst a whole range of tools. Designers must also pay more attention to platforms and structures

for distance learning (Bentley, 2006; Buczynski, 2006; Shepperd et al., 2008; Zimmerman and Milligan, 2008; Zimmerman, 2008; Johnson and Rochkind, 2009; Cormier and Siemens, 2010; Nicholas and Lewis, 2010; Vollmer, 2010; Anderson and Dron, 2011; Hilton and Wiley, 2011; Hill, 2012; Toenniges, 2012; Brooks, 2012; Siemens, 2012, and Rodriguez, 2014; Feldstein et al, 2014; Omorogiuwa, 2014). The basic reality of the digital age is that distance learning can no longer depend on its traditional modes of doing business because of the overwhelming advancements being made in the application of the modern technologies of information even in the remotest parts of the world (Harsh and Sadiq Sohall, 2002).

The increasing exponential development of and dynamic use of modern information and communication technologies should suggest to scholars and practitioners in distance learning that paying attention only to the physical frameworks of ICT could backfire. Practitioners must pay equally dominant attention to students' feedback as a way of making service delivery more effective (Bentley, Selassie and Shegunshi, 2012; Lapointe and Reisetter, 2008; Landry et al., 2008, Williams and Williams, 2010; Coffey and Gibbs, 2000 and 2001; Ballantyne et al. 2000; and Jara and Metler, 2010). The extant literature has indicated that students' feedback, whether on the processes of assessment of instruction or of the quality of academic service delivery, is embedded firmly in all educational processes as a productive venture (Laurillard, 1993, Ramsden, 2003, Price et al, 2011). Therefore, the growing number of studies and body of literature on the subject on how best to provide quality services to clients in adult distance learning programs should not be undervalued. The study being reported here is based on the experiences from one of such programs by a rural based university campus in South Africa.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Advanced Certificate in Education (hereinafter, ACE) that formed the basis for this research is specially designed for the professional upgrade of practicing educators otherwise known as teachers. Some years after initial teacher training, the skills and knowledge acquired were discovered to be insufficient to meet the requirements of the present day (Aluko, 2009). For this reason, the South African Government decided that teachers' skills and knowledge gap should be filled through the provision of professional teacher development programs by distance learning mode in the different provinces. The program studied was that initiated by a rural based South African University Campus in response to the observed skills and knowledge gap. The researcher believed that exploring students' feedback after over six years of the implementation of the program could be valuable. The findings emanating from this study could help in making research-based suggestions for improving the quality of the ACE program.

In this study, the problems that one would want to understand centered on the components of the offering of the ACE program that need serious modifications in order to ensure that efficiency and effectiveness is built into the process. Lack of effective learning services greatly affects the possibility of a program to achieve its intended outcomes. This more so in South, where the quality of services in most government and private institutions and especially the education sector has however often been below standard. Massive increases in expenditure on services have not always brought the results wanted or what is expected of the outputs of the programs (RSA, 2009). By implication, if the learning services of the ACE program are below standard, it is unlikely that the program can meet its educational objectives and students outcomes. While building on work already done in the ACE program, there is need to focus more on outcomes as time, money and management is invested.

In particular, there is need to understand the program delivery components which might affect the possibilities of the program meeting its objective, and which when improved, should attract the adult learners to persist through the program. By so doing, one can establish which components need to be dropped in order to satisfy their academic needs.

As adult learning in the contexts of the rapidly developing modern information and communications technologies tend to define and re-define itself, one could suggest that it is prudent to pay close attention to adult learners' experiences and emotions and how participants in this program perceive the effectiveness of the delivery of higher education academic services by distance learning mode. As more and more adult learners seek to gain knowledge through formal and informal training delivered through self-paced distance learning, barriers to successful learning continue to crop up and have to be dealt with. In terms of the learning services, Johnson (2011) holds strongly that because computer-based learning involves learning both a system of content delivery and the content itself, many adult learners are stymied and frustrated by the learning system due to lack of prior experience with technology and assistance from course instructors. Paying close attention to learners' experiences and emotions should be important because, sociologically put, humans are always emotional (Scheff, 1997). As posited by Varlender (2008, 145-156) quoting Bloch (2002), 'human emotionality is an ongoing stream that pervades every aspect of our social lives'. It is now commonly understood that an emotion should consist of 'a subject feeling component of feelings, a physiological component of arousal and a motor component of expressive gesture' (Barbalet, 2002, 86). Such feelings, arousal, and expressive gestures normally inform adult learners' decisions to stay on or quit an academic program.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Students' feedback in this discourse has been conceptualized as the systematically collected information leaners give about the management of an adult higher education program by distance learning mode. The pursuit of high quality students' feedback should be based on the premise that an academic service without measured feedback could be unproductive both to the service provider and, even more importantly, the student (Ainley, 1999; Laurillard, 2002, 55; Richardson, 2005, 409; Christudason, 2006, 41-58; Beaumount, O' Doherty and Shannon, 2011, 671-687). Students' feedback could in many ways be productive for the improvement of academic programs delivery. It is important for designers of adult higher education programs offered by distance learning mode to utilize feedback from adult students that will help them understand their needs, motivation, expectations, and experiences. Creating information that taps into the strength of an adult experience and ensuring that clearly defined goals and expectations are laid out beforehand helps ensures higher participation and follow through in online courses (Johnson, 2011). Adult students enjoy taking responsibility for their own learning, and when properly guided and prepared for the learning experience, they are quite capable of achieving a high level of competence.

It is commonly agreed that students would feel part of evaluative studies if they know and see that their opinions lead to concrete and positive modifications of the academic program delivery and that their opinion is taken seriously (Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002). If not, they will not feel obliged to be part of any of such studies. The quality of an academic program can be significantly enhanced by a judicious and thoughtful attempt to understand how the consumers of the service perceive it. In particular, one would want to know which components would need amendment or which ones need to be improved in order to have value for the money expended.

Concerns over the value of students' feedback in the improvement of academic program delivery have been expressed over the years, and research findings arising therefrom were factored into designs that informed this study (Christudason, 2010). The concerns that have dominated the literature ranged from the purpose of collecting students' feedback through the design of the instruments used in obtaining the feedback to the validity of the feedback itself (Richardson, 2005; Marsh and Dunkin, 1997; Marsh and Bailey, 1993; and Arubayi, 1987). Scholars in the literature agreed that students' feedback serves a developmental purpose for academic program designers just as it plays benchmarking roles in terms of determining whether or not standards are being achieved (Richardson, 2005).

Over the years, these discussions and findings on the subject of academic service quality based on students' feedback have been examined and re-examined in the bid to ensure that the right procedures and standards are being followed. There is also the need to ensure that outcomes arising therefrom are systematically implemented so as to improve practice. This is one main reason this present study should be valuable in expanding the pool of knowledge in the area.

The measurement and evaluation of any learning effort and that of the delivery of the learning program itself is critical to the achievement of efficiency, effectiveness and, more importantly, securing customer confidence (Gurau and Drillon, 2009; Hattie and Timperly, 2007; Lapointer and Reisetter, 2008; Bentley et al., 2012). It is towards ensuring the achievement of this goal that different tools have been validated for use (Medved, 2010). In the context of this paper, students' feedback, conceptualized as the garnering of program assessment information from professional teachers enrolled in an adult higher education by distance mode, has been identified as one of the most effective means of improving academic program delivery by distance.

Adult students enrolled in distance learning programs often and rightly demand for service quality (Maila and Pitsoe, 2012). Service quality in this study was understood as perceived quality generally defined as the customer's given or self-judgment about the particular program's overall effectiveness (Zammuto et al., 1996 and Hassan et al., 2008).

The review of literature indicates that SERVQUAL (used here to refer to service quality) and TFQ (used here to describe the technical functionality of academic service delivery) have remained the two most dominant models in the discourse of service quality in education. The SERVQUAL model of service quality, according to Hassan et al. (2008), highlights ten major dimensions of quality clustered into five categories: assurance, empathy, reliability, responsiveness and tangibility. Whereas the TFQ model features three dominant dimensions of evaluation: the technicality of the outcome the functional quality of the encounter between the teacher and learner and the corporate image of the learning institution in this case (Author, 2011).

Research on students' feedback in the improvement of continuing professional development of teachers by distance learning mode have frequently argued for the acceptance and use of the SERVQUAL and TFQ models in coming up with what has been constructed as EDQUAL (that is, education quality). Scholars in the literature have opined that EDQUAL be used in describing the character of an input, the process of delivery, and the output or outcomes of any learning program if it satisfies both internal and external stakeholders (Cheng, 2003; Peng and Samah, 2006).

Equally important to the identification of students' feedback in the improvement of the quality of service delivery is understanding the intangible structures, processes and systems that come into play in higher education participation by distance learning mode. For example, distance learners, most of who are young or middle age adults, are frequently expected to engage in self-regulated learning, especially complex problem-solving. That is largely expected essentially because adult learners are lifelong learners who need to develop the important skills of self-regulated learning.

Ifenthaler (2012) has quoted Azevedo (2008, 2009), Schraw (2007) and Zimmerman (2008) as having defined self-regulated learning as the complex process in which learners are assumed to be metacognitively, motivationally and behaviorally active in their own learning as they gather information and process same to their own advantage as they try to solve problems. It is now known that as they activate existing knowledge or organize new information, they eventually set specific educational goals. Thereafter, they plan their own activities, monitor their performance as they solve problems, and evaluate the efficiencies of their own actions (Seel, Ifethaler and Pirnay-Dummer, 2009 and Writh and Leutner, 2008). If learning materials, teaching styles, and techniques, and delivery of

information are not well packaged, the results could be unrewarding. In such cases, the feedback expected could of little or no value. Yet feedback remains one of the major sources of improving the quality of course delivery and the provision of direct feedback to the teaching staff and other stakeholders (Keane and Labhraim, 2005). It is also known that academic service delivery over the span of two years is more likely to lead to improved quality if agreed standards are built into the practice of measurements (Bramley and Pollitt, 1998; Bramley and Gill, 2010).

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

Based on the importance of students feedback in program delivery improvement in adult higher education as established in the conceptual framework, the main purpose of this paper is to establish how students' feedback on the service delivery components of the ACE program can be used to improve on the efficiency and effectiveness of the different service delivery components of the program. The main interest in this paper is to interrogate how the service delivery components such as styles of facilitation, assessment, learners' support systems, adequacy of resources, outcomes, subject matter can be improved based on students feedback in order to ensure enhanced customers satisfaction.

THE MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

The main research question answered in this paper is how students' feedback assists in the process of improving on the efficiency and effectiveness of different service delivery components of the academic program studied. The researcher hypothesized that modifications and applications of program management, styles of facilitation, assessment, learners' support systems, adequacy of resources, outcomes, subject matter and closely monitored management techniques could be of great value in improving on the delivery of adult higher education by distance learning mode.

It was assumed that distance students who perceive generic improvement in styles of delivery will perceive the program as having been enhanced. On the other hand, it was assumed that adult students enrolled in higher education by distance learning mode who did not experience such improvements might not perceive the academic program as valuable in terms of styles of delivery. The advantage offered relies on the fact that presenting students with an opportunity to assess the quality of service delivery over a period of two years should normally be associated with the gains that come with comparative judgement (Thurstone, 1927, Pollitt, 2012; Kimbell, 2012).

It was assumed that findings presented in this paper may have a positive effect on specifying program delivery components that should be considered by planners and managers as they strive to improve the quality of academic programs provided to adult students enrolled in higher education for the professional development of teachers by distance mode.

RESEARCH METHOD

Design

The study used a quantitative descriptive statistics analysis of data generated. Data ranged from (specific years e.g. 2013-2014). Seven groups of factors that relate to the quality of the educational services provided by the rural based university were measured. Dominant among the seven factors were general management of the educational program, facilitation, subject matter, assessment, academic support, resources and outcomes. In other words, the study covered both process quality attributes and outcomes quality attributes.

The regression equation was comprised of the following:

$$Overall\ Student\ Saftisfaction = f(programme\ management, facilitation, assessment, learners\ support\ systems, resources, programme\ outcomes, subject\ matter) + \varepsilon$$

In statistical form

$$OSS_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 PM_t + \beta_2 F_t + \beta_3 A_t + \beta_4 LSS_t + \beta_5 R_t + \beta_6 PO_t + \beta_7 SM_t + \varepsilon$$

where
OSS = overall student satisfaction
PM = program management
F = facilitation
A = assessment
LSS = learner support systems
R = resources
PO = program outcomes
SM = subject matter

$\beta_0 = Intercept$

$\beta_1 \ldots\ldots\ldots \beta_7 = parameters$

Based on the level of significance which usually by default is given by 0.05%, significance of the results is determined by the probability values. Reject null hypothesis when p-value is less than 0.05% and alternatively accept when p-value is more than 0.05%.

The study reported in this paper was based primarily on the socio-constructivist perspectives influencing students' feedback. Relevant to this process, therefore, are the works of Rust, O'Donovan and Price (2005), Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2001) and Leas and Street (1998). Some of the major assumptions arising from those works include the following:

- **Facilitators and students should be active participants in an interactive feedback process that could help learners in constructing relevant meanings derived from their personal experience and beliefs that inform their own goals set for their learning and actions in a process that is reflexive (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).**
- **Students' feedback is actually a complex process that incorporates emotion, identity, power, authority, subjectivity and discourse and not just a question of linear communication (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 2001, 272).**

Population and Sample

The participants were part-time contact students who are taught at the weekends over a specified duration of time. In other words, they are distance learning students, and their perceptions about service quality may differ from those held by mainstream students. This was why it was not necessary to ask them to rate their overall university experience as other studies have done.

A total of 916 part-time students constituted the population. These students were adult learners with a number of social and economic responsibilities. Most of them were over the age of 40, which, in itself could be a challenge. From the population of 916 students, a sample of 313 students was randomly taken guaranteeing that each student had an opportunity of being selected to participate in this study by applying the Krejcie and Morgan (1971) table derived from the US National Education Association (1964) formula.

Instrumentation

The students' satisfaction instrument used in this study was designed to measure satisfaction with specific reference to the value of the content provided in enhancing their performance as teachers, learning materials delivery, planning and administration of the program, facilitation, criteria used in grading the students' assignments, advice and support and library resources.

The researcher reviewed related literature and came up with a questionnaire titled Students' Program Feedback Questionnaire (abbreviated as SPFQ). The questionnaire had three sections. Section One with five items was about the background of the respondents. Section 2 contained 25 items measuring the level of students' satisfaction with the services received and which particular components in the provision that needed improvement with a view to enhancing the quality of the academic program. The response options for each of the questionnaire items was constructed on a six-point Likert scale that ranged from excellent, through average, poor, bad to not applicable as deemed fit by the respondent.

Section 3 provided for free response using open-ended questions in which the respondents were asked to specify the positive and negative aspects of the program based on their experiences. The questionnaire titled SPFQ sought information on the value of the content provided such that it enhanced respondents' performance as learners and as teachers. Particular attention was paid to the components of learning materials delivery, planning and administration of the program, facilitation, criteria used in grading the students' assignments, advice and support and library resources.

Validation

The construct validity test in which three independent assessors participated resulted in the selection of the 25 items in Section 2. To arrive at this decision, the first draft of the questionnaire was administered to three independent expert assessors from three different universities that did not form part of the final study. Expert assessments in this context and in agreement with Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) are generally assumed to be capable of providing objective reference that should help in improving on academic program delivery.

They had good knowledge of the management of the off-campus program, and their selection was based on the researcher's interaction with their supervisors. After the first administration, the 30 items originally designed to test for sufficient coverage of the content of satisfaction targeting program improvement was reduced to 28 items, and after the second administration another three items were eliminated. Consequently, the questionnaire that was used contained 25 items.

Reliability

Contexts, content, time, intent, slippage and rhetoric in feedback questionnaires, in general, may affect the validity and reliability of data generated on students' feedback (Johnson and Sorenson, 2003; Christudason, 2010, 44). Furthermore, the anonymity of the learners' response is another important concern (Tan, 2004). That was why steps were taken to ensure that the instrument used was reliable to a large extent. The reliability co-efficient value of the questionnaire, using the test-re-test method was .95 at the 0.05 level of significance, and the instrument was therefore assumed to be sufficiently reliable.

Interpretative Norm

The overall composite impressions about academic program service quality in this context were derived from the process of aggregating derived variables. It was assumed that a high score (greater than or equal to 5%) should be deemed as implying an overall

positive impression while a low score (less than or equal to 5%) implied an overall negative impression. This actually means that any p-value more than or equal to 5% implies that the clients were equally satisfied with the quality of services rendered as per the particular item in reference. On the other hand, any p-value less than or equal to 5% means that the clients were equally dissatisfied with the quality of service rendered as per the specific item in reference. That was the interpretative norm used throughout the analysis in this particular report.

Data Collection

Below is the spread of questionnaires that were completed and returned by respondents in all centres.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Responses Received

Centres	No. of Students	%
Centre 1	35	11.2
Centre 2	64	20.4
Centre 3	101	32.3
Centre 4	28	8.9
Centre 5	63	20.1
Centre 6	22	7
Total	313	100

It would be observed in Table I above that the Centre 3 returned more responses with 32.3 % than the other centers. It was followed by the Centre 2 with 20.4%. Centre 6 that returned 22 questionnaires came last, and the reason was that the respondents at that Centre were probably not fully prepared for the exercise.

Ethical Considerations

It is ethically right for adult students to choose not to respond to items in a questionnaire as was observed in this study. It has been suggested by scholars in the literature that respondents should not be pressured into responding. It was for that same reason that permission was sought and obtained from the management of the institution where this study was conducted. The validity of data generated from this study was further enhanced by ensuring that ethical standards were adhered by allowing respondents to withdraw from the study at any stage and at any time.

Academic Program Delivery Improvement Actions Embarked Upon

Actual data presentation is preceded by the discussion of the academic program delivery improvement actions that the researcher undertook as this would help in clarifying the results that emanated from the study.

Results emanating from a first survey of the ACE academic program designed as a higher education service to enhance quality teaching among teachers (commonly known as educators in this context) suggested that certain aspects of the service delivery needed improvements. In particular, it was discovered in the first survey that the components of assessment, styles of facilitation and program management techniques needed modifications (Author, 2011, 1429-1446).

Based on that realization, improvement actions embarked upon included:

- A two-day induction program for facilitators that included topics like the modern techniques of facilitating adult learning in higher education relying on research information.

- **A two-day workshop on objective assessment in higher education and adult learning in which due reverence was given to assessment feedback, including providing clear indication of where the learners might have made mistakes in answering questions, the need to reflect the cognitive, affective and psycho-motor domains of learning, giving prompt feedbacks to students and communicating clear information on how best to respond to set questions in assignments and examinations as per the modules covered.**
- **A three-month workshop on effective program delivery and management for center managers and program coordinators paying close attention to the design of modules, prompt packaging and delivery, management of assets, tests, supervision of instructions and communication styles.**

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Based on the ideas drawn from the extant literature and the improvement activities the researcher as the program director and the progarm coordinator undertook, it was hypothesized that *modifications and applications of program management, styles of facilitation, assessment, learners support systems, adequacy of resources, program outcomes and subject matter content should improve on the service quality of the adult higher education program by distance learning mode.* To test this hypothesis, the researcher had to apply the Mann Whitney test.

The Mann Whitney test was used because the variances of the two samples (2013 and 2014) were not homogeneous. This was obvious because the samples were largely different. The sample sizes for 2014 were lower than 2013. Since this was the case, the researcher used the non -parametric version of independent sample t-test, which is the Mann Whitney.

Table 2. The Mann Whitney Values Test

	Years	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	P value
Program Management	Year 2013	208	121.91	25358.00	.963
	Year 2014	35	122.51	4288.00	
	Total	243			
Facilitation	Year 2013	253	144.91	36662.50	.187
	Year 2014	41	163.48	6702.50	
	Total	294			
Assessment	Year 2013	213	115.01	24498.00	.003
	Year 2014	25	157.72	3943.00	
	Total	238			
Learners Support Systems	Year 2013	224	123.02	27557.50	.030
	Year 2014	28	154.30	4320.50	
	Total	252			
Resources	Year 2013	219	122.42	26809.00	
	Year 2014	34	156.53	5322.00	.010
	Total	253			
Program Outcomes	Year 2013	251	145.02	36400.00	.578
	Year 2014	36	136.89	4928.00	
	Total	287			
Subject matter	Year 2013	255	149.37	38090.00	
	Year 2014	42	146.74	6163.00	.837
	Total	297			

In Table 2 above, the mean ranks relating to the improvement made to the component of facilitation was 144.91 in 2013 but that had moved up to 163.48 in 2014. This is a remarkable evidence of improvement made. The same improvement was observed in the components of assessment, academic support, resources provided. However, improvements were not seen in the components of programs and subject matter content. The null hypothesis of no improvement in the explanatory variables at 0.05 is rejected as shown by the improvements that were observed in assessment, academic support and resources provided.

The data available in Table 2 above have more than demonstrated that the mean ranks emanating from the administration in 2014 were better than those in 2013 in terms of *facilitation, assessment, learners' support systems and adequacy of resources.* This demonstrates that improvements made to the management of the academic program in the areas of facilitation, assessment, learners support system in terms of counseling and exposure to library and computer skills development among the students, as well as providing learning materials well ahead of the commencement of the facilitation sessions, are very valuable in improving on the quality of program delivery and should lead to students' satisfaction with the services rendered. The reason why we observed no show for the components of program outcomes and subject matter content could be that the modules used are set, agreed and managed nationally in South Africa; and, therefore, the providing organisation or campus, in this case, could not have made any modifications as was the case with the other components. If the Campus where the study was conducted had the liberty of modifying exercises relating to program outcomes review with the collaboration of the adult learners, it is most likely the outcome data would not have been anything different. To a large extent, however, the findings here seem to confirm those reported by different scholars on this subject (Gurau and Drillon, 2009; Hattie and Timperly, 2007; Lapointer and Reisetter, 2008; Bentley et al., 2012).

LIMITATIONS

Studies using students' feedback as the basis for making decisions on the improvements of academic programs service offers are commonly known to have been deemed inadequate. Some scholars argue that this is so because the students are merely asked to comment on their educational experience and those who do not respond generally do not pose any problems as they have chosen not to contribute to the exercise (Richardson 2005, Carless et al, 2011). However, the findings and recommendations based on the data used should be valid enough as long as a representative sample of all students who experienced the academic program was covered, which was the case in this study. In social science research, researchers commonly agree that a response rate of 50% is deemed as satisfactory (Richardson, 2005; Chilisa, 2012). Data generated for analysis in this study was taken from more than 50% of the population, and so the results would be valid for use in contexts similar to this one.

Another limitation that might have occurred in this study could be that the researcher made inferences based on samples that did not cover all students who enrolled in the academic program under reference. For that reason, there could have been sampling error because the properties of the sample used differ somewhat by chance from those of the entire population from which the sample was drawn because the study was done in different geographic sites with differing characteristics, for example, those from around the headquarters of the academic service provider might have experienced the service differently. However, this limitation was reduced because the sample size was increased in order to maximize the response rate. The results generated from this study are deemed relevant and valid because the sample was chosen at random from the relevant population and so there was no sample bias along the same lines highlighted by Richardson (2005) and Goyder (1987).

DISCUSSION

The study contrasted to a large extent with several other studies of students' feedback in the improvement of academic programs (Richardson, 2005; Peng and Samah, 2006, Omorogiuwa, 2014). The longitudinal approach used here enabled the researcher with the assistance of the program coordinator to work out and apply some changes made to the program over a period of two years. This way the process of overall program delivery was enhanced.

The data revealed on a very close observation that although there might have been an overall good level of satisfaction with the quality of service delivery related to program studied, modifications made to overall program management, styles of facilitation, assessment, learners support systems and adequacy of resources were very helpful in improving the quality of service delivery as measured by student evaluation. At the same time, when we pay attention to supporting students in terms of addressing the issues they confront on a daily basis in relation to the quality of the program delivery and promptly making learning materials, library and computer services available to them should go a long way in helping to improve on the quality of the service. These considerations should guide policy makers, program managers and curriculum developers in an adult higher education program by distance mode. This should suggest to both the providing university and the partnering stakeholders components that need closer monitoring and support.

Findings reported here largely confirm the view that careful enhancement of the said components is required whenever relevant stakeholders wish to provide higher education by distance mode to adult learners who are relatively more mature than those in initial teacher education programs. It becomes crystal clear that in order to ensure higher success rates in distance learning settings, experts advice and feedback to handle technical issues surrounding the content delivery system is required to help adult learners become more comfortable with the system (Johnson, 2011). If adult learners perceive a lack of support or find themselves spending too much time completing the program they feel could be done rapidly, they are likely to drop out.

The findings reported in this paper furthermore lend credence to the views tendered by Gurau and Drillon (2009), Priestman (2012) and Bentley et al. (2012) to the effect that students' feedback possibly provides valuable data to improve the design and implementation of higher education by distance learning mode.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of the research, it is therefore recommended that adult higher education programs must have a documented systematically utilized and effective process involving program service delivery constituencies like assessment, academic support and resources provided, for the periodic review of the program educational objectives to ensure that the program remains consistent with the institutional mission, needs and criteria. Drawing on the rich diversity and eclectic background of the adult learners in the ACE program is a fundamentally sound method of reinforcing the course materials. While it is not always possible to redesign a course for each new set of students, knowing the audience ahead of time and providing rich opportunities for integration of knowledge from experience and classroom is essential to engaging adult learners (Lawson, 2005). An instruction program integrated with evocative digital resources provides the opportunity for instructors to reduce anxiety and to help their students' connections.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this paper was to establish how students' feedback on the service delivery components of the ACE program can be used to improve on the efficiency and effectiveness of the different service delivery components of the program. Based on the data, it would not be wrong to institute that careful enhancement of the said components is required whenever relevant stakeholders wish to provide higher education by distance mode to adult learners who are relatively more mature than those in initial teacher education programs. However, it must be understood that the review of adult higher education program for improvement requires more than just the use of assessment feedbacks on service delivery components. Rather, attention must also be focused on appropriate monitoring of the currency of the objectives themselves. The researcher hopes that the results emanating from the study reported in this paper may help, depending on the context and circumstances, in improving on the quality and effectiveness of adult higher education by distance learning mode. More importantly, an attempt has been made in this paper to provide useful guidelines that could be considered in improving on the delivery of academic services that adopt distance learning strategies by different stakeholders in South Africa and globally.

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