Re-engineering the Trajectory of Open Distance Education Policy in Zambia through the Lenses of Distance Education Stakeholders

Francis Simui[1], Denny Nsokolo[2], Mitchelle Chiyala[2], Orleans Mfune[2], Vitalicy Chifwepa[2] Stephen Simukanga[2], Boniface Namangala[1] and Richard MC. Siaciwena[3]

[1]Institute of Distance Education, University of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia
[2]Higher Education Authority, Lusaka, Zambia
[3]Zambian Open University, Lusaka, Zambia

Abstract

This article examines an initiative aimed at re-engineering the trajectory of Open and Distance Education (ODL) from the perspective of stakeholders in Zambia. A qualitative research approach was deployed to engage 13 ODL stakeholders who volunteered to be part of a Focused Group Discussion to initiate the re-engineering of Open Distance Education sub-sector informed by prevailing realities on the ground. Emergent from a five day exploration were 10 themes namely: (i) Policy and strategic framework; (ii) Organisational and management Structure for ODL; (iii) Staffing and continuous professional development; (iv) Academic; (v) Learner Support Systems; (vi) Production and Delivery System; (vii) Physical and technological Infrastructure; (viii) Internal quality assurance; (ix) Collaboration and partnerships, and (x) Research, Innovation and publication. The ten themes were later crystallized into standards and guidelines to aid Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the development of ODL internal quality assurance policies and measures. The Framework is bench-marked to the regional and continental protocols and frameworks on Open Distance Education. The Framework promotes Access, Quality and Equity in line with the Sustainable Development Goal number 4, and encourages Collaboration and Partnerships among Higher Education Institutions to minimize costs and maximize Return on Investment. In the light of these findings, Open Distance Education landscape is expected to thrive and serve as a catalyst to the growth of of Higher Education in Zambia.

Keywords: **Distance Learners, Higher Education, Open Distance Education, Policy, Standards, Zambia**

1.   Introduction

In this discourse, we examine the outcome of an initiative aimed at re-engineering the trajectory of Open and Distance Education in Zambia from the perspectives of stakeholders within the Higher Education context. Ten clusters of standards emerged and further crystallized into guidelines to guide ODL practice in Zambia. The ten standards were: (i) Policy and strategic framework; (ii) Organisational and management Structure for ODL; (iii) Staffing and continuous professional development; (iv) Academic; (v) Learner Support Systems; (vi) Production and Delivery System; (vii) Physical and technological Infrastructure; (viii) Internal quality assurance; (ix) Collaboration and partnerships, and (x) Research, Innovation and publication.

Context

While expanding full access to higher level remains a desirable global goal and, in the case of Zambia, a national goal, achieving this aspiration is often hindered by over-reliance on conventional education that is dependent on brick and mortar for learning and face-to-face learner-lecturer interaction (Mays and Singh, 2020). For most developing countries such as Zambia, physical facilities and human resources tend to be far inadequate to meet national higher education needs. In addition, reliance on conventional education tends to limit opportunities for diverse groups of learners such as workers, housewives and other disadvantaged groups whose situation does not allow them to be physically present at higher education institutions.

In view of the limitations associated with conventional education, open and distance learning (ODL) has emerged as an irreplaceable alternative strategy for expanding access to higher education (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza and Shupikai, 2015). In contrast with the conventional education approaches, learners do not need to be physically present at an Higher Education Institution (HEI) in order to access education through the ODL mode thus allowing various types of disadvantaged groups to access higher education. More recently, the importance of

ODL has been brought to the fore by the COVID pandemic, which in the period between 2019 and 2021, placed severe limitations on face-to-face learner-lecturer interactions (Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020; Daniel, 2020; Davies, Chiocca, Hiller, Campbell and Naghib, 2020; and Hasan, 2020). Thus, in addition to opening up opportunities for diverse groups of learners, ODL has demonstrated its potential to allow learner continue education in the face of a global health crisis.

As in many other countries, ODL is an important feature of Zambia's higher education as a critical component of the country's strategy to increase access to higher education. Over the past two decades, the growth of ODL has been evidenced by the fact that while before the year 2000, the country had no University solely dedicated to ODL education, today the country has several such Universities (Higher Education Authority, 2020). Further, there are many universities that offer both conventional and ODL education. As ODL continues to grow, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) recognises the need to harness its potential for increased access to quality education by strengthening its role in higher education. In particular, the Authority recognises the need for ODL quality assurance policies and measures in higher education institutions that will enhance ODL learning programmes, products and outcomes (Higher Education Authority, 2020).

To foster this process of developing and implementing ODL quality assurance processes in higher education institutions, the Authority developed ODL Standards and guidelines to guide the decisions and actions of HEIs involved in ODL practice (Higher Education Authority, 2021). The ODL Standards and Guidelines were framed within the context of the Zambia Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ZSG-QA) and were benchmarked with the SADC minimum standards for establishing an ODL institution.

The ODL Standards and Guidelines are intended to provide guidance to HEIs in the development of ODL learning programmes and quality assurance systems and processes. on ODL because of its unique feature of delivering education via remote learning. In this regard, the Higher Education Standards and Guidelines for ODL in Zambia (HE-SG-ODL), are seen as complimentary to the ZSG-QA. They provide guiding principles for ODL and quality assurance areas of focus in ODL (Higher Education Authority, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

Aided by rapid technological advancements in the past few decades, ODL has evolved from a simple correspondence-based approach of delivering education to integration of electronic communications media (Dhawan, 2020). Today, distance learning modes include web-based models, mobile learning, audio and televisual models (McBrien, Cheng, Jones, 2009). With such variations and complexity in ODL modes, a number of quality assurance concerns emerge. Some of the concerns include the

question of how to design curricula for quality remote learning and the type of learner support systems required to facilitate effective teaching and learning under ODL systems. These concerns are compounded by the fact that for some countries, such as Zambia, there are no guiding national quality assurance frameworks for ODL in Higher Education. This lack of national quality frameworks has also been highlighted in the 2012 SADC regional open and distance framework. Given the proliferation of higher education institutions adopting ODL mode of delivery in in Zambia, the absence of a national ODL quality assurance framework there raises concerns about the quality of learning programmes offered through ODL. These concerns raise the need for standards and guidelines to aid Higher Education Institutions in the development of ODL internal quality assurance policies and measures. The goal of this paper, in this regard, is to use a multi-stakeholder perspective to examine core areas of focus for quality assurance in ODL and consequently, develop a national quality assurance for ODL.

Specific Objectives

The objectives of the study were:
i. To identify core areas of focus for a national ODL quality assurance system
ii. To generate standards that can guide HEIs in the development of ODL policies; and
iii. To generate guidelines that can foster ODL practice in HEIs.

Theoretical understanding underpinning the study

Theoretical grounding is critical as it serves as a safeguard against the danger that analytic outcomes are a result of arbitrarily taken decisions (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011). Thus, theory is a critical tool to bound researchers' level of freedom by providing a coherent and reasoned framework from which to make decisions.

The study adopted an eclectic approach as applied by Simui, Namangala, Tambulukani and Ndhlovu (2018) to inform the research process. The eclectic approach adopted a triad of the main theoretical models in use, namely linear, expert and interactive models as explained below.

The linear model

According to Loftis and Mortensen (2017), the linear model is the most widely held view of the way in which policy is made. It outlines policy-making as a problem-solving process which is rational, balanced, objective and analytical. In the model, decisions are made in a series of sequential phases, starting with the identification of a problem or issue, and ending with a set of activities to solve or deal with it. Loftis and Mortensen (2017) focused on dynamic linear modelling as a useful tool for exploring

time-varying relationships in public policy. In their study entitled 'A dynamic linear modelling approach to public policy change', the findings call attention to dynamics in the policy process. Similarly, in the current study, the linear model was reflected through emphasis on problem-solving as a starting point in the policy development process.

The expert model

According Shanteau and Stewart (1992:96), Hughes is argued to be the first known proponent of the expert model aligned to 'systematic research on decision-making experts'. The expert model rests on the premise that individuals with specialised knowledge and skills be given an opportunity to drive the formulation and development of a given policy. In addition, Weible, Heikkila, and Pierce (2017) observe that policy formulators collaborate to achieve their political objectives. They argue that professional competence is the most important rationale for collaborating, whereas shared beliefs are moderately important, and financial resources are not important. Further, May, Koski, and Stramp (2016), in consideration of the expert model of policy-making, unpacked differences in the supply and types of expertise. Their study was based on witness testimonies of congressional hearings for a policy area involving various forms of expertise. One key finding stressed the influence of a small cadre of hyper-expertise in drawing attention to problems and solutions across different venues. To this extent, the approach taken by the experts could be interactive and/or linear in nature.

In the current study, three experts with thorough grounding in ODL were engaged to drive the policy formulation process. The consultant engaged stakeholders at various levels to elicit critical information needed in the policy formulation process.

Resulting from the expert model is what Hinterleitner (2017) refers to as policy failures, blame games. In his study, Hinterleitner (2017) explored the mechanism between political elites engaging in blame generation and changes in policy practice. Apparently, policy's less visibility to the public was noted as one of the resultant effects of expert and linear loaded policy-making process.

The interactive model

The interactive model stresses that the process of policy-making is interactive, not linear. A central element in the model is that a policy reform initiative may be reversed at any stage in its life cycle by pressures and reactions from those who oppose it.

Unlike the linear model, the interactive model views policy reform as a process, one in which interested parties can exert pressure for change at many points. Understanding the location, strength and stakes involved in these attempts to promote, alter, or reverse policy reform initiatives is central to understanding the outcomes (Grindle & Thomas, 1991). In addition, Singh, Thomas, and Harris (2013) applied the Foucauldian theorisations of power in the discourse of policy formulation, implementation and interpretation. They observed that a process of code elaboration (decoding and recoding) takes place in various agencies involved in a policy matter, as seen through the use of guidelines to interpret policy at the implementation stage. In their study, they recommended that mid-level policy actors are crucial to the work of policy formulation, implementation, interpretation and translation because they are engaged in elaborating the condensed codes of policy texts.

However, the interactive model has its own challenges, for example, limited disclosure of information among the interested groupings. In view of the challenge inherent in eliciting information among participants focused on the interactive model of policy formation, Gailmard and Patty (2017) develop a model of 'notice and comment' while focusing on the strategic issues facing agencies and interest groups.

In general, all the three models (linear, expert and interactive) were present in the ODL Standards and Guidelines development for Zambia. As highlighted above, problem-solving, which is the main thrust for the linear model, proved useful in rationalising the project funding. At the same time, the presence of experts in ODL confirmed the relevance of the expert model as well. Further, the involvement of stakeholders in the policy development process resonates within the interactive model domain.

2. Methodology

To re-engineer the trajectory of Open and Distance Education from the perspective of stakeholders, we adopted a constructivist-interpretive approach (Creswell, 2009). In a constructivist-interpretive approach, advocates call for identifying a plurality of perspectives, interests and values. Linked to the constructivist-interpretive approach, an unobtrusive method with a focus on project source documents was applied. According to Sechrest (1979), an unobtrusive approach is non-disruptive and non-reactive, easily accessible, inexpensive and a good source of longitudinal data.

In addition, unobtrusive research methods offer a strong critique of positivism – the concept that truths about the social world can be determined by scientific measurement. They instead belong to the epistemological theory of interpretivism, which is that the social sciences are fundamentally different from natural sciences, therefore requiring researchers to reject empiricism and grasp the subjective meaning of social action (Bryman, 2004). In terms of ontological considerations, unobtrusive methods fit into the constructionism theory, whereby social phenomena and their meanings are reflected upon and revised by social actors (Bryman, 2004).

Research Design
The study applied a Case study research design nested within an unobtrusive approach. The unobtrusive approach was well suited for this particular study as it relied on archival data sources from the ODL standards development process. This approach is consistent with the thinking of the founders of the unobtrusive method (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, Sechrest, & Grove,1981), who argue that unobtrusive approaches are presumed to avoid the problems caused by the researcher's presence. In addition, unobtrusive methods, because they do not disrupt others, are easily repeatable. This enabled re-checking of findings and allowed questions of trustworthiness to be re-examined by others.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Name	Focus Area	Sex	Research Role
[1] FSZ	ODL	M	✓ Conceptualization, ✓ Data generation ✓ Article Drafting
[2] RSZ	ODL / Higher Education	M	✓ Data generation ✓ Article Editing
[3] SSH	Higher Education	M	✓ Concept Approval ✓ Data generation
[4]VCH	ODL / Higher Education	M	✓ Concept Approval ✓ Data generation ✓ Article Editing
[5] OMH	Programme officer	M	✓ Data generation
[6] EHH	Higher Education	F	✓ Data generation
[7] RCH	Finance / Higher Education	M	✓ Data generation
[8] FKH	ICT / Higher Education	M	✓ ICT connectivity ✓ Data generation
[9] DNH	Higher Education	M	✓ Data generation
[10] MMH	Higher Education	M	✓ Data generation
[11] SSH	Higher Education	M	✓ Data generation
[12] DKH	Higher Education	M	✓ Data generation
[13 MCH	Higher Education	F	✓ Data generation

A purposive sample was used in this study (Kemper, Stringfield, & Teddlie, 2003). It was chosen to address qualitative demands such as the need for reflexivity, fit for purpose, availability and accessibility. Table 1 highlights the pseudonym of key participants who were involved in the ODL standards development process.

Data generation procedure
In carrying out this study, we used documents focused on ODL standards generated from 10 to 14 May 2021. Data generation process took place during a workshop organized by the Higher Education Authority. At the end of the workshop, Standards were developed and shared with other stakeholders for further validation and adoption process.

Trustworthiness
In this study, Guba's (1981) four criteria on trustworthiness were applied. They are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The data generation process was triangulated using observation, focus group and individual interviews. The researchers used a reflexivity approach to decipher meaning from generated data. In addition, the researchers had early familiarity with the culture of participants prior to data generation. The data generation procedure and boundaries were documented for the purposes of ensuring transfer ability of the study findings to different settings.

Further, the elicited information was cross-checked by participants to avoid the usual emic/etic problems. This means that interpretation of physical traces or observations may be from the point of view of the stranger, or outsider (etic), and therefore may fail to grasp important in-group meanings (emic) (Berry, 1989). Given that the findings were presented verbatim, coupled with participant checks on the research, the study meets the dependability and confirmability criteria as well.

Ethics consideration
In carrying out this study, ethical issues as guided by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) were followed. For example, pseudonyms were used to represent each participant for confidentiality and anonymity purposes as shown in Table 1 above. In addition, permission was sought and granted from the Higher Education Authority before the study could be conducted. Further, the findings of the policy research process were disseminated to all stakeholders as demanded for in the ethical protocols.

3. Findings and Discussion

Emerging from this study are the following synthesized Standards and Guidelines crafted through a series of Focused Group Discussions namely: (i) Policy and strategic framework; (ii) organisational and management Structure for ODL; (iii) staffing and continuous professional development; (iv) academic; (v) learner Support Systems; (vi) production and Delivery System;

(vii) physical and technological Infrastructure; (viii) internal quality assurance; (ix) collaboration and partnerships; and (x) Research, Innovation and publication.

The ODL standards and guidelines explicitly focused on these components as salient features of an ODL system.

I. Policy and Strategic Framework

The first standard generated focused on Policy and strategic framework whose whose final crystallisation was that,

> The institution should have an ODL Policy and a strategic plan aligned to national and regional ODL policies and other relevant policies including those on cross cutting issues (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

The Standard on policy is consistent with Braimoh and Lekoko (2005) who noted the need for institutional policy framework in maintaining quality in open and distance education programmes in Southern Africa. Similarly, the University of Zambia successfully developed an ODL policy to guide ODL practice as a quality assurance measure (University of Zambia, 2016).

In view of the need to actualise the policy standard by Higher Education Institutions, there following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that:

i. *There is stakeholder consultation in the process of developing ODL policy and Strategic Plan;*
ii. *Its ODL policy caters for diverse circumstances of prospective learners (e.g., Geographical location, gender, socio-economic circumstances, race, etc);*
iii. *The policy promotes gender balance and gender friendly environment;*
iv. *The policy covers essential areas of ODL operations such as ODL philosophy; vision and mission; admissions; progression; assessment; staffing; learner support and quality assurance;*
v. *The strategic plan contains short, medium and long-term strategies for ODL operations;*
vi. *The strategic Plan has an implementation framework and a means of monitoring and evaluation;*
vii. *The strategic plan and ODL policy are periodically reviewed;*
viii. *The ODL policy and strategic plan respond to the Higher Education Act, National Development Plans, National Higher Education Policy, ZSG-QA, relevant regional ODL Quality Assurance Frameworks, African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education; and*
ix. *A policy on management of residential school is in place* (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

One of the critical characteristic of openness in ODL is the removal of barriers to learning. ODL should target all potential students without restrictions of age, marital, or employment status, among others (Bates, 2005). Equally, open and distance learning has been synonymous with offering educational opportunities to learners who, for one reason or another, could not have access to the conventional face-to-face educational system (McAndrew, 2010; Littlejohn & Pegler, 2014). Dalsgaard and Thestrup (2015) assert that there could be a political motive linked to opening access to education to all. Emphasis on education for all by the United Nation agencies such as the UNESCO resulted in initiatives that ensure that ODL provides the right to education for all irrespective of age, ethnicity, gender, and social status (UNESCO, 2002; 2015 cited in Selvaras, 2019). Openness in ODL as a focus on the removal of hindrances of access to learning cannot be overemphasised (UNISA, 2008). The convenience and flexibility of ODL have enabled millions of people to access higher education and this would have been an impossibility without ODL (Sharma, Kawachi, & Bozkurt, 2019).

II. Organisational and management Structure for ODL

The second standard generated focused on Organisational and management Structure for ODL whose whose final product was that,

> A Higher Education Institution has a functional organisational and management structure for effective management of ODL operations (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

The need for systems of operation, frameworks and organizational structure for both unimode and dual mode universities cannot be over emphasized (Siaciwena, 2006 and Siachiwena, 2000). It is through such structures that institutions effectively implement open and distance learning. Organizational structure is a critical element that defines the functionality of an organization. It is an interlinking system that shows the various levels of authority and hierarchy of functions in an organization. Grossi, Royakkers and Dignum (2007) described organizational structure as a framework that shows the relations that exist between roles of an organization. According to Robbins and Coulter (2007) an organizational structure is a formal framework by which job tasks are divided, grouped and coordinated.

In order to realise functional organisational and management Structure for ODL by Higher Education Institutions, there following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that:

i. *It has clearly defined ODL functional units for managing or coordinating ODL functions;*
ii. *Its ODL functional Units include Learner support, programme development and materials productions, ICTs and internal quality assurance;*
iii. *The functions, roles and responsibilities of functional units are clearly defined;*
iv. *Staff in the functional units are appropriately qualified* (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

The need for flexibility within ODL is in line with Holmberg's (1989) definition that focuses on the concepts of learner, educational organization and communication where distance education covers learning-teaching activities in the cognitive and/or psycho-motor and

affective domains of an individual learner and a supporting organization. It is characterized by non-contiguous communication and can be carried out anywhere and at any time, which makes it attractive to adults with professional and social commitments (Holmberg, 1989: 168).

III. Human Resource and Continuous Professional Development

The third standard generated focused on Human Resource and Continuous Professional Development whose final crystallisation was that,

> An institution should have adequate and suitably qualified human resource to ensure effective operations of ODL programmes (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

The importance of people (staff) to the creation, existence, success and progress of organisations including distance educational institutions cannot be stressed. Despite the technological advancement, staff play very important role in distance education. Staff have responsibility to ensure institutional quality and improvement of learning. (Dicoh and Wright, cited in Panda, 2004)

In order for HEIs to have suitably qualified human resource to manage operations of ODL programmes, the following guidelines were developed. A Higher Education Institution shall ensure that:

i. *Staff managing specialised functions such as learner support, instructional material design, quality assurance, online facilitation are appropriately qualified or trained in relevant ODL functions;*
ii. *Staff in (a) are employed on full-time basis;*
iii. *Academic staff involved in the delivery of learning programmes are trained in ODL teaching methodology and ICTs;*
iv. *Staff involved in the delivery of learning programmes are trained in online facilitation;*
v. *A continuous professional development plan for staff managing ODL operations;*
vi. *The coordinator of any learning programme offered through ODL shall be employed on full-time;*
vii. For each learning programme offered through ODL there is core staff supported by part-time tutors;
viii. For each course or module offered through ODL there should be a facilitator (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

Professional development has been noted as a critical catalyst in the successful implementation of distance education as observed by Siachiwena (2010) while managing capacity building in Open and Distance Learning through the SADC led project.

IV. Academic

The fourth standard generated centred on Academic and had further branches namely: Learning programmes, Learning Methods, and Assessment. The final synthesis on Learning programmes was that,

Learning programmes

> A higher education institution shall have learning programmes that meet aspirations and

needs of learners and society and that are in line with national, regional, and international standards (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has increasingly become popular because of its flexibility and learner friendly approach, particularly to those who could not get access to the formal education system. Distance education is more costs effective and can take place while continuing full-time employment (Moran and Rumble, 2004).

In order for HEIs to have effective academic learning programmes, the following guidelines were developed. A Higher Education Institution shall ensure that:

i. *has effective mechanisms for stakeholder participation in curriculum design, review, and validation;*
ii. *The learning programmes to be delivered by ODL are accredited by HEA;*
iii. *ODL learning programmes articulate clear purpose and learning outcomes;*
iv. *Course content, teaching methods and assessment methods are designed to meet articulated learning outcomes; and*
v. *The learning programme document provides sufficient information on further education, professional development and employment pathways for graduates* (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

Learner-centred approach delineate learning as individual "discovery". In distance education, it is viewed in terms of learners being seen evolving their own "truths" or "understanding" while reconciling the interaction taking place between practice and contribution from selected theoretical models (Walker & Daets, 2000).

Learning Methods

> A Higher Education Institution shall adopt ODL facilitation and learning methods that are learner-centred and help learners to enhance content knowledge, develop values, attitudes, professional competences, and other practical skills (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

In order for HEIs to have effective academic learning Methods, the following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that facilitation and learning methods of a particular module or course:

i. *are designed to take into consideration learner profiles, the nature of curriculum content and whether the learning is synchronous or asynchronous;*
ii. *include a combination of self-study, practical work, tutorials and formative assessment tasks and allow learners to demonstrate what they have learnt;*
iii. *involve use of different learning activities and accommodate individual differences of learners;*
iv. *provide learners the opportunity to interact with facilitators, content, as well as other learners; and*

v. *are flexible and integrate a variety of learning technologies that are accessible to learners* (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

Teaching and Learning Material

A Higher Education shall facilitate learner's access to suitable and adequate learning material intended to prepare the learner for learning and development of relevant knowledge, values, attitudes and skills (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

In order for HEIs to have effective academic learning materials, the following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that the learning materials:
i. *are designed to guide the learner through the learning process;*
ii. *provide for self- learning at learner's own pace(asynchronous) in order to realise learner's independent learning;*
iii. *provide for active learner engagement through appropriate in-text learning activities;*
iv. *are readily accessible to target learners upon commencement of studies; and*
v. *are diverse in nature and include Open Education Resources (OER) in order to meet the needs of diverse learners. They include modules, textbooks, journal articles, videos, audio resources* (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

ODL thrives on the recognition of a learner's prior learning experience. In this regard, and in line with the National student transfer guidelines, HEIs must integrate the RPL principle in their ODL policies.
Recognition of prior learning is a critical value within ODL as academics recognized the maturity and wisdom that students bring to the learning experience as advanced by Snyman and Berg (2021).

Mode of Delivery of ODL

A Higher Education Institution shall employ a wide range of appropriate media and technologies for delivery of programmes through ODL (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).
ODL seeks to provide learning opportunities for diverse groups of learners, including socially disadvantaged groups such as women, rural people, people with disability and other actors who may have limited access to conventional education. Higher education institutions, in this regard, must ensure that their ODL policies are inclusive, having regard for the need of diverse learners. Diversity and inclusiveness within education are amplified by the Sustainable Development Goal number four to be attained by 2030. As such, ODL can only be said to be 'quality' if it is inclusive to all learners and welcomes diversity (Simui, Kasonde- Ngandu, Cheyeka & Makoe, 2019; Simui, 2018).

In order for HEIs to have effective academic mode of delivery, the following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that:
i. *it specifies the type of media and technologies to be used for delivery of the ODL programme as outlined in the learning programme document and ODL policy, including support to be offered to learners in its use;*
ii. *the chosen media and technologies of delivery are efficient and facilitate learners' access to instructional material and information;*
iii. *the adopted media and technologies are inexpensive and accessible to learners and facilitators;*
iv. *the media and technologies are appropriate for different pedagogical approaches used in the learning programme;*
v. *the media and technologies allow for facilitator-learner interaction, learner-learner interaction and learner-content interaction;*
vi. *both synchronous (TV, Radio, Zoom, Google meet, Telephone, Tele-conferencing, Skype); and*
vii. *media and technology should be current.*

Learner interactivity is cardinal for effective ODL to take place in higher education, as amplified by Moore on the need for transactional distance between facilitator-learner interaction, learner-learner interaction and learner-content interaction (Moore, 1991; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Moore & Anderson, 2007). .

Assessment

A higher education institution offering its programme through ODL shall adopt learner assessment strategies that are based on the stated programme learning outcomes and support learners' development of cognitive, affective, reflective and practical skills (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

In order for HEIs to have effective academic learning assessment, the following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that:
i. *Learners are provided information about the different types of assessment and assessment techniques for the learning programme and course.*
ii. *Assessment tasks given to the learners evaluate the stated learning outcomes of the respective course;*
iii. *the assessment workload is appropriately linked to the level and credit requirements of the course;*
iv. *An external examiner is appointed for each ODL learning programme as required by the Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013 and the ZGS-QA;*
v. *there are systems for tracking and recording the learners' performance and progress.*
vi. *the standards and quality of assessment are rigorously monitored, maintained and enhanced.*
vii. *appropriate measures are in place to ensure the integrity of assessment.*
viii. *it ensures the security of assessment processes* (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

V. Learner Support

A Higher Education Institution shall have a responsive, efficient and effective learner support system that promotes effective learning through ODL (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

Various platforms exist for proving Learner support services to disstributed learners divided by geographical space and time among which include the Social Media. Simui, Mwewa, Chota, Kakana, Mundende, Thompson, Mwanza, Ndhlovu and Namangala (2018) demonstrated the potential of "WhatsApp" as a Learner Support tool for distance education. In order for HEIs to have a functional Learner support system, the following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that:

i.   *there is a clearly defined learner support cycle beginning from advertisement to graduation;*
ii. *there are administrative structures for learner support which are adequately staffed;*
iii. *adequate administrative and technical support is given to academic staff to enable them provide academic support to learners.*
iv. *a pool of facilitators are available for all its ODL centres to provide tutorial support to learners;*
v.   *a system and facilities to support interaction between facilitators and learners as well among and between learners.*
vi. *there is a wide range of communication channels through which learners can access facilitators and other learners such as by phone, e-mail, on-line discussion, and video conferencing;*
vii. *learners have access to handbooks, academic policy documents, academic calendar, learner transfer guidelines etc;*
viii. *there is in-text support built in the design of learning materials;*
ix. *material for supporting learners study skills development and career or academic development are available;*
x.   *the institution provides on-going support for learner progression across courses within a programme of study*
xi. *there is provision for learner counselling and guidance*
xii. *learner support is built into the design of learning programmes. In the case of e-learning, sufficient online contact sessions are planned and integrated into the learning programme and course designs* (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

The need for functional learner support is justified by the "community of inquiry" model. The model with a focus on online learning environments was developed by Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2000) is based on the concept of three distinct "presences": cognitive, social, and teaching (see Figure 1). While recognizing the overlap and relationship among the three components, Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001).
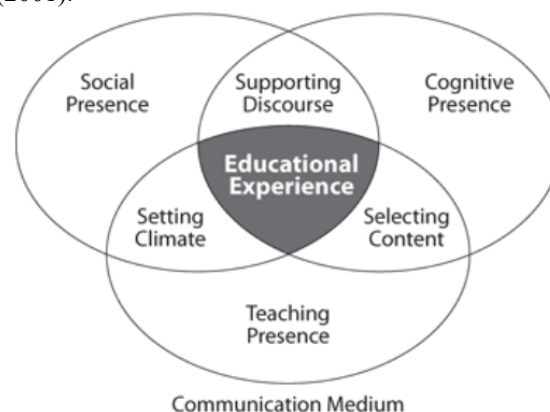

Figure 1: Community of Inquiry model

For distance education learners to have a meaningful educational experience, there is need for learner support that takes care of the Social, cognitive and teaching presences (Simui, Mpolomoka, Sakakombe & Mhango, 2020).

VI. Production and Distribution Systems

A higher Education Institution shall have an efficient and effective system of developing and distribution of instructional material for ODL (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

Instructional material production and distribution is a lifeline in Open Distance Education as highlighted by Mundende, Simui, Chishiba, Mwewa, Namangala (2016). Hence the need for HEIs to invest in instructional material production and distribution systems. In order for HEIs to have efficient and effective systems of developing and distribution of instructional materials for ODL, the following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that:

i.   *There is a policy provision governing the production and distribution of instructional material;*
ii. *It has a wide range of methods, channels and technologies for distributing instructional materials;*
iii. *production and distribution schedules are in place;*
iv. *there is timely production and distribution of instructional material;*
v.   *the distribution of instructional material takes into consideration the different circumstances of the learners;*
vi. *make use of OERs, Massive Open Online Courses(MOOCs) platforms and other online resources; and*
vii. *copyright requirements are observed in the development, production and distribution of instructional materials;*
(HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

VII. ODL Infrastructure and Resources

A higher education institution shall have adequate and appropriate physical and technological infrastructure, facilities, and resources to support facilitation, learning,

research and innovation in ODL (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

In order for HEIs to have adequate and appropriate infrastructure, the following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that:

Physical Infrastructure
A single ODL mode/online HEI shall ensure that:
i.   *it has administrative offices for principal officers;*
ii.   *the administrative offices of an HEI shall have facilities and equipment that are adequate to support administrative functions;*
iii.   *the principal offices shall have suitable signage for visibility and easy of location;*
iv.   *the principal offices shall have communication facilities such as office telephone line and internet connectivity*
v.   *it has dedicated offices for learner support services;*
vi.   *dedicated facilities for production and storage of instructional material and examination material;*
vii.   *it has ICT rooms;*
viii.   *it has conference/meeting facilities;*
ix.   *it has suitable facilities for face-to-face teaching and learning(for HEIs that may have tutorials, practical work and residential school); and*
x.   *it has a library facility* (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

Technological Infrastructure
A single ODL mode/online HEI shall ensure that:
i.   *it has an ICT policy;*
ii.   *an ICT plan for purposes of procuring, maintaining and upgrading of ICT equipment and technologies, ensuring reliability, privacy, safety, and security;*
iii.   *there is an ICT governance and management structure staffed with qualified personnel;*
iv.   *it has computing facilities (with sufficient bandwidth capacity) that allow for online teaching and learning activities such as audio-video conferencing;*
v.   *it has functional computers installed with appropriate software (with a valid licence and support) to facilitate online teaching and learning, institution operations and financial management;*
vi.   *it has sufficient infrastructure to address technical support.*
xi.   *it has an ICT technical framework which ensures that any change in technology is introduced in a way that minimises disruptive impact on an HEI's operations* (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

McBrien, Cheng, Jones (2009) advocate for virtual spaces by employing a synchronous online classroom to facilitate student engagement in online learning. This is in line with Affouneh, Salha and Khlaif (2020) who espouse the need for designing quality e-learning environments for emergency remote teaching in crisis related moments. However, it should be noted that a significant number of distance education students were reported to digital immigrants as reflected in Muleya, Simui, Mundende, Kakana, Mwewa and Namangala, (2019) in their study on 'Exploring Learning Cultures of Digital Immigrants in

Technologically mediated Postgraduate distance learning mode at the University of Zambia.' To this, while it is vital that HEIs ride on technologies to offer quality higher education through the distance learning mode, there is need to take on board digital immigrants whose learning styles may still profit from print media (Manchishi, Simui, Ndhlovu, Thompson, 2020; and Simui, Thompson, Mwewa, Mundende, Kakana, Chishiba and Namangala, 2017).

Interactive Learning Management System

A higher education institution shall provide an interactive learning management system that effectively supports e-learning (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

In order for HEIs to provide interactive learning management systems, the following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that:
i.   *Learning Management System is accessible to facilitators and learners all the time*
ii.   *Learning Management System provides for: learner to learner interactions; learner to facilitator interactions;*
iii.   *a monitoring and evaluation system is developed and implemented to track the use of the Learning Management System and assess its efficiency and effectiveness*
iv.   *there is a training programme for staff and learners on use of the learning management system*
v.   *there are mechanisms for management and maintenance of the learner management system*

Functional and up-to-date Student Information System

A higher education institution shall maintain a functional and up-to-date Student Information System (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).
ICT is critical in the provision of Information Communication Technology-Based Support to Distance Education Students as was demonstrated by Chifwepa (2006) at the University of Zambia. Thus, technological infrastructure is crusial for the success of ODL in Higher Education Institutions. In order for HEIs to maintain a functional and up-to-date Student Information System, the following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that:
i.   *it has a robust and secure Student Information System.*
ii.   *it maintains a comprehensive record of each learner's admission, academic progress and assessment results;*
iii.   *learners are able to access their academic record.*

Library Resources

A higher education institution library shall provide up-to-date information resources for ODL learning programmes, which facilitate teaching, learning, research and community

service for learners and staff (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

In order for HEIs to provide institutional library with up-to-date information resources for ODL learning programmes,, the following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that:

i. *library resources (including e-resources) shall be appropriate and shall include peer reviewed journals, text books, periodicals, monographs and other readings;*
ii. *library resources shall carter for diverse users including those with special needs;*
iii. *the library shall subscribe to databases and facilitate access by learners and staff to the databases; and*
iv. *the library shall establish and sustain institutional repositories* (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

Subrata and Debal (2003) advocates for setting-up of electronic libraries for quality Higher Education to take place.

VIII. Internal Quality Assurance For ODL

A higher education institution shall have a robust and well-functioning quality assurance system for its ODL activities (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

In order for HEIs to have a robust and well-functioning quality assurance system, the following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that:

i. *it has a Quality Assurance Policy, administrative structure and system for promoting continuous quality review and enhancement in ODL;*
ii. *there is continuous and periodic monitoring, evaluation, and benchmarking of processes, including self-assessment of learning programmes and institutional self-assessment for purposes of continual improvement;*
iii. *the internal quality assurance system conforms to the requirements of the national quality assurance agencies; and*
iv. *There is continuous capacity development in quality assurance for staff involved in ODL.*
v. *It collates and analyse ODL student progression, drop-out and graduation rates;*
vi. *it conducts periodically ODL students' satisfaction surveys;*
vii. *it conducts periodically, tracer studies to determine graduates' employability and social mobility;*
viii. *conduct periodically employer satisfaction surveys;*
ix. *collect and analyse data on research uptake (e.g., patents, copyrights, and adoption of innovations);*
x. *ensure that it conducts periodic staff satisfaction surveys* (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

The need for assuring quality in the delivery of ODL within higher education cannot be over emphasized as noted by Karam, Fares, Al-Majeed (2021) and Lucander and Christersson (2020). To this effect, the developed

standards serve as frame of reference to all HEIs and also help in aligning ODL policies to national, regional and global standards as highlighted in the objectives above.

IX. Collaboration and Partnerships

A higher education institution may have institutional collaboration and partnerships for mutual benefits and cost efficiency (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

Collaboration in ODL is a pillar in helping providers realize their goals to promote access at reasonable costs and high quality. According to Perraton (2004:27), at all levels of education are built on collaboration between partners. Collaboration partnerships have been formed at institutional, national, regional and international levels. The Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) is an old form of collaboration done at a regional level. Here members collaborate in terms of materials sharing and development, sharing of experiences, exchange of programmes , research, capacity building etc. DEASA is now extending its wings into the whole SADC region and opening wider areas for collaboration in order to improve on ODL offering in the region. Whatever level that collaboration exists at, it requires commitment, a clear understanding and meeting of minds for success and mutual benefit.

In order for HEIs to have institutional collaboration and partnerships for mutual benefits, the following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that:

i. *it affiliates with national, regional and global ODL professional bodies;*
ii. *it enters into Memorandum of Understandings (MoU) with strategic partners locally, regionally and internationally, which should be reviewed periodically;*
iii. *MoUs will clearly state the roles and responsibilities of each partner;*
iv. *clear evidence of benefit to the institution are outlined in the MoUs;*
v. *Partnership and collaborative relationships at national and regional levels are planned and effectively managed*

X. Research, Innovation and Publication

A higher education institution shall have mechanisms for evaluating the impact of its academic activities on students, alumni, industry, and the public (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

In order for HEIs to have mechanisms for evaluating the impact of its academic activities, the following guidelines were developed. An HEI shall ensure that:

i. *has a unit that coordinates research and innovation;*
ii. *it has a research agenda in strategic ODL themes;*
iii. *has a budgetary provision for research and innovation;*

iv.   conducts research learner profile needs and expectations;

v.   the outcome of reviews and data collection and analysis informs the design and redesign of instructional materials, assessment exercises and tutoring assignments;

vi.   it engages in collaborative research at national, regional and continental levels;

vii. there is capacity building in ODL research and innovation; and

viii. has platforms for publishing ODL research findings. (HE-SG-ODL, 2021).

According to Eya and Amini (2018), Innovation in Open and Distance Learning system is a concept which dates back to the early 2000s. Prior to that, worldwide, it was the concept of "Best Practices", which had emerged from the quality issues in the ODL system, mainly in the 1990s (Daniels, 2006). In the 1990s, quality issues were the major concern, and from these concern arose the adaptation of best practices. During the period of the 1990s, Creativity and innovation were considered part of best practices. Best practices in the ODL System were believed to be spread across six diverse principles. These principles may include:

i.   Flexibility: through various use of educational resources

ii.   Social: by facilitating access and collaboration

iii. Deep understanding: by encouraging reflection

iv.   Relevance: through interactive exercises

v.   Transparency; through explicit designs

vi.   Personal: through support

Innovation in ODL may be defined as any product or process that is new, useful and feasible to be implemented in the ODL system with the aim of improving service delivery (Eya and Amini, 2018).

4.   Conclusion

In conclusion, the re-engineered trajectory of Open and Distance Education has potential to increase access to quality higher education using minimal local resources available. The resultant product of the re-engineering was a framework of 10 standards with their associated guidelines namely: (i) Policy and strategic framework; (ii) Organisational and management Structure for ODL; (iii) Staffing and continuous professional development; (iv) Academic; (v) Learner Support Systems; (vi) Production and Delivery System; (vii) Physical and technological Infrastructure; (viii) Internal quality assurance; (ix) Collaboration and partnerships, and (x) Research, Innovation and publication. The Framework is bench-marked to the regional and continental protocols and frameworks on Open Distance Education. In the light of this innovation, Open Distance Education landscape is poised to thrive and serve as a catalyst to the growth of of Higher Education in Zambia. Without doubt, the ODL standards and guidelines serves as a frame of reference for HEIs in the development of ODL policies as well as promote internal quality assurance in provision of ODL in HEIs within Zambia.

5.   Implications

If higher education Institutions are to thrive and increase access to quality equitable higher education, the following are recommended:

i.   The need to wholly embrace Standards and their associated guidelines;

ii.   The need to develop tailor-made institutional ODL policies and strategic plans

iii. The need to cultivate the ODL practice among staff

iv.   The need to leverage Information Communication Technologies both for administrative and teaching purposes.

v.   The need to invest both in hardware and human-ware linked ODL skills.

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