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Academic Staff Perceptions of the Impact of Internal Quality Audit: The Case of Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract:

A quality assurance unit was put in place by the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) for all the regions in 2010. The unit has gone in leaps and bounce to ensure that the university attains the ISO 9000 certification among other quality initiatives. Internal quality audits have been conducted for quality improvement and also in readiness for ISO 9000 certification. These audits have been carried out after thorough preparation, which included selection and training of internal quality auditors. Contextually, these audits were carried out as an innovation to ZOU as the quality assurance is also in its infancy. This research was inspired by staff reaction during internal audits. The present study therefore, focused at establishing the perceptions of academic staff on the impact of internal quality audit on their work. A qualitative approach was used while the research design was the case study. The study adopted interviews for data collection and these were administered on all the 13 academic staff members of the Mashonaland East Region. Results from the study indicate that the majority of academic staff members understood the objectives of internal quality audits. Whilst academics view the process as systematic, generally it stifles innovation as staff is expected to perform certain activities as dictated by procedures, which may not be the most efficient way. In terms of communication of results, most academics were uncomfortable as results were first communicated to immediate supervisor thus bringing about a lot of anxiety among members. The study recommends that further awareness is required in making sure that all members appreciate the need for the internal quality audits in order to address issues of anxiety.

1. Background

The Quality Assurance Unit was put in place by Zimbabwe Open University for all the regions in 2010. The unit has gone in leaps and bounce to ensure that the university attains the ISO 9000 certification among other quality initiatives. Internal quality audits have been conducted for quality improvement and also in readiness for ISO 9000 certification. The internal quality audits have been carried out after thorough preparation which included selection and training of internal quality auditors. There was a thorough preparation for the audit by the auditors. They were given an outline of the conduct of the programme. The outline stipulated the preparation activities such as the communication of the pending audit to all staff members, pre-audit and post audit meetings. Having meticulously carried out the preparation and audit activities as planned it was expected that the impact was going to be by-and-large positive. The Quality Assurance Unit took cognizance of the negative view with which audits are perceived. Great care was taken to address some of the key drivers of these negative perceptions arising from the auditors, conduct of audits, communication and use of audit findings. The study sought to determine the impact of internal quality audits on academics' perceptions of their work.

2. Statement of the Problem

Internal quality audits are meant to improve the quality assurance system as well as the implementation of the system. Academics seem not to welcome internal quality which may retard quality improvement within the organization. In conducting the research the overarching question to be addressed is; what is the academics perception of the internal quality audits on their work?

3. Research Questions

The study aimed at answering the following research questions:

- Do academics appreciate the objectives of internal quality audits?
- How do academics view the internal quality audit process?

- How are the results of internal quality audits communicated?

4. Literature Review

4.1. Conceptual framework

Internal quality audits are a self interrogation of the quality management system with regards to the process and outcomes. It essentially aims at improving both the system and the outcomes of the operations of the system. Zimbabwe Open University's quality management system is still at its infancy. With only a few full internal quality audits having been conducted their impact on the perception of academics work has to be documented. National Computing Council Limited (1996:4) defines internal audits as, "the mechanism through which information about the effectiveness of the quality system is gathered." Shore and Wright (2000) define quality audit as not only an inspection regime but also a culture and a concept in the process of evaluating the public sector. Internal quality audits therefore focus on gathering information on the performance of individuals or groups within the organization, making value judgments on performance, suggesting improvements on performance of the same. In the process, the efficacy of the quality management system is tested. The whole process of evidence gathering and evaluation of performance is synonymous with policing, evoking resentment of the whole process from academics. Shore and Wright (2000) explain that quality audit is designed to bring new norms of conduct and professional behavior among academic staff. Academic staff has to adhere to laid procedures, policies and produce documents as evidence of satisfying given criteria. The requirements impose a new set of criteria for measurement of performance, which is contrary to monitoring the competencies acquired at graduation.

4.2. Academics' Perception of the Internal Quality Audit Objectives

One of the most important objectives of an internal quality audit as identified by Stimson (2001:38) "measuring the effectiveness of an organization's quality management system." Red-Bag (2012:1) corroborates that the objectives of internal audits are to ensure that, "the quality system is functioning efficiently and has the ability to achieve defined quality objectives; is understood and used throughout all levels of the organization; and can identify potential problems and resolutions to ensure a more effective quality management system is operative." Johnson and Milligan (2000) also substantiate the list of objectives by explaining that quality audit process has raised awareness of quality and systems and increased compliance and transparency of accountability. Examining the list of objectives shows that internal quality audits focus on a number of institutional aspects. Firstly, the objective identified by Stimson (2001) and Red-Bag (2012) indicates that internal quality audits aim to examine the efficacy of the quality management system. Internal audits investigate whether the quality management system is communicating the objectives of the organization. Does it provide the information that improves decision making and improve on service delivery. Secondly internal quality audits focus on the knowledge and performance levels against the laid processes, policies and procedures. The knowledge aspect incorporates the performance of the quality assurance coordinator. It is up to this function to ensure that the requirements of the quality management system are communicated and then measured during internal audits. Thirdly, internal quality audits bring to the fore, management commitment to continual improvement where financial resources needed to implement solutions are disbursed expeditiously. Academics view quality audits as bringing in a new culture of compliance, "requirement to prepare paperwork, as representing university compliance with institutional audit and they found this process burdensome," (Cheng 2009:5).

4.3. The Internal Quality Audit Process

Power (1994) notes that quality audits have been viewed as administrative control over the work of academics. This perception held by academics focuses on the content of audits with little regard for the motives of the process. Shore and Wright (2000) view quality audits as inspection regime, which has got the retrogressive elements of faultfinding. With such perceptions widely held in academics, hope for support for quality audits will be elusive. Such views call for an improved approach to quality audits to get the support of this essential constituency in pursuit of continuous improvement.

This negative perception in academic staff is confirmed by Harvey (2005), Morley (2003) and Newton (2000) further point out that audits divert academic staff time towards administrative jobs and this scenario may not do justice to teaching and learning. In Zimbabwe Open University little of the academics time is spent on teaching while most of the time is spent on research and development of teaching materials which also translates to almost an equivalent of teaching time in the conventional setting. In an attempt to take care of all these concerns and perceptions the Zimbabwe Open University meticulously followed the stages in quality audits from preparation right through to communication of audit findings.

Firstly, auditors were identified and from the academic and non-academic staff to get the buy-in of the process by the academics. National Computing Centre Limited (1996:7) contends that, "the auditors must be independent of the function or department being audited." It goes further to point out that auditors are selected from various functional units and trained by the manager. At the ZOU, auditors were selected from both academic and non-academic staff. The non-academic staff was selected from National Centre while academic staff were from regional centres. These were also trained as internal quality auditors and certificated. All these efforts were to ensure that, "the members making up panel have the right profile, ability and experience to assume such a responsibility," (Tertiary Education Commission 2004:40).

After training auditors were given audit areas for the each different audit period. Auditors for the various regions met before each audit. Tertiary Education Commission (2004:13) explains that, "preliminary meeting of auditors provides an opportunity for members to discuss audit process, future course of actions, pre-audit meetings and develop checklists for use." National Computing Centre

Limited (1996:13) substantiates this view by pointing out that, “a checklist to structure each interview with an auditee” is developed during the preliminary meeting of auditors. Preliminary meetings are used by auditors to strategize on the conduct of the audit, such as the pre-audit meeting, checklist, allocation of areas to auditors, communication of the audit schedule and end of audit meeting and communication sent to all the affected units or departments. Tertiary Education Commission (2004:29) notes that, “at the pre-audit meeting, explain the purpose of the audit to your auditees.” After thorough preparation, the auditors conducted the pre-audit meeting, where they spelt out the audit objectives, criteria, scope and schedule.

The audit starts in every case with an explanation of the purpose of the audit once again. National Computing Centre Limited (1996:13) points out that there is need to, “always explain the purpose of the interview.” Explaining the purpose of the internal audit should help to dispel the perception of faultfinding, but rather emphasize on improvement of the quality management system and individual performance. There is need to create a conducive environment. Tension must be removed from the auditees. National Computing Centre Limited (1996:13) emphasize this aspect by urging auditors to, “put auditees to rest.” If collegiality is established, the hope is that the auditee will be able to furnish the auditors with as much information as possible.

While every audit tries to fulfill the basic principles, in a study conducted by Cheng (2009) participants pointed out that, “time to ensure that quality audit is satisfied is time potentially lost to other professional duties.” Such perceptions are indicative of the fact that audits do not really add value to duties one carries.

4.4. Communicating Results of Internal Quality Audit

Auditing entails gathering data, which facilitate decision making about the efficacy of the quality management system and the performance of individuals or groups within the organization. Anxiety usually creeps onto the minds of the auditees as to how the information gathered will be used. National Computing Council Limited (1996:13) point out that there is need to, “explain what will be done with audit results, how the results will fit into problem analysis for the organization.” It is at this stage, where the auditors, “agree on the non-conformances recorded on each IQA Report with the auditee. Agree on corrective action and timescales for corrective action with auditee or departmental manager and document it on the IQA Report” National Computing Council Limited (1996:36). Tertiary Education Commission (1996:22) observes that judgments should demonstrate that, “the evidence on which judgment is made is clear, valid and reliable.” In this context, evidence is information, which satisfies set criteria. For instance, an unsigned controlled document is not accepted as evidence.

An end of meeting audit is held to conclude the audit. Tertiary Education Commission (2004:40) concurs by noting that, “at the end of the audit the panel gives an oral feedback at the end of audit meeting.” A summary of the process is given. Once again the audit objectives, scope and disclaimer closes are underlined. The non-conformances identified are outlined and other pertinent issues raised. Tertiary Education Commission (1996) points out that the audit report should not only highlight the weaknesses but also pinpoint the strengths identified in the audit. A report is produced which is submitted to the head of unit and manager. Tertiary Education Commission (1996:35) states that recommendations should be, “explicit and attainable within the timeframe, addressed to a specific person or body having the necessary power and responsibility for action.” It is usually this aspect, which raises negative perceptions, where someone feels has no power to address issues raised against his unit. For instance, if one’s office space is inadequate, this issue has to be forwarded to the relevant authority such that one cannot really give a timeframe for the issue to be resolved.

5. Methodology

The qualitative paradigm was employed as the study sought to carry out an empirical enquiry and give meaning to the academic staff’s disposition towards internal quality audit. Focus group discussion approach widened the academics’ horizon of the impact of internal quality audits on their work through cross-pollination of ideas. Focus group discussion was corroborated by interviews administered on academics on the same matter whose views for completely independent ideas.

5.1. Population and sample

Sixteen academic staff members in the Mashonaland East Region formed the population. All of the staff members took part in the study. They were, however put into two equal groups. One group (8) responded to interview questions while the other (8) took part in focus group discussions. The academics were put into groups according to the alphabetical order of their surnames.

6. Data presentation and discussion

6.1. Sub-problem 1: Academics’ appreciation of the objectives of internal quality audits (IQA)

The participants were asked if they thought that internal quality audits were necessary to the institution. The majority of the participants from the research pointed out that IQA were necessary. In elaborating most participants were of the view that IQA helped to establish shortcomings and possible solutions. Prevalent among the responses was the view IQA helped to clarify processes, procedures and expectations of the quality management system. Some of the responses were as follows:

Participant 1: They facilitated improvement, where the institution strives to satisfy ZIMCHE standards

Participant 2: IQAs have been instrumental in efforts towards the ISO9000 certification

Participants were also asked if the auditors explained the objectives of internal quality audits before the audits to which all the participants indicated that auditors have always clearly explained the objectives of the IQA to them.

The participants were asked to state what they thought were the objectives of internal quality audits. Some indicated that the objectives to examine the effectiveness of the QMS and that they were to monitor and promote quality standards in the organization. The following were some of the responses:

- To establish problem areas and recommend possible solutions
- To find out what protocols exist and whether or not they are being followed
- To ensure that staff adheres to quality standards and procedures
- To raise awareness of the QMS
- To improve on the QMS compliance levels in the region

These findings confirm the list of objectives of IQAs espoused by Red-Bag (2012) and Stimson (2001) who point out that IQAs are carried out to measure the effectiveness of the quality management system and to what extent they are implemented.

Asked what have been the outcomes of the internal quality audits, participants indicated that IQAs, impacted on transparency and quality standards maintenance in the region. Probed on what exactly that meant, the participant pointed out that IQAs helped to spell out the requirements of the QMS and followed through on its implementation through IQAs. This finding concurs with Red-Bag (2012:1) assertion that IQAs ensure that the quality management system “is understood and used throughout all levels of the organization.” One participant pointed out that IQAs had led to improved administrative operations, though classroom performance may be debatable. Other outcomes identified by the participants were;

- Uniform procedures throughout the organization
- Identification of problems and possible solutions implemented.

Over and above the existing literature, this study has established that quality management system has been able to establish uniform procedures throughout the ten regions of the ZOU and consolidate them through IQAs. By inference it can also be observed that institution has been able to build its capacity to handle quality issues through training of internal quality auditors which did not exist before.

6.2. Sub-problem 2: Academics` views on the internal quality audit process

The majority of the participants did not have reservations on the auditors, mainly due to the fact that they are qualified to execute their task fairly and objectively. This finding concurs with the views put forward by the Tertiary Education Commission (2004) which states that internal quality auditors must be qualified and skilled enough to carry that responsibility.

When asked about the average time spent auditing their area, participants expressed mixed views with some saying audits were too long while others said they were conducted in just enough time. According to some, the session lasted between 45min-1h15minutes, which according to the participants this was adequate as giving them ample time to adequately undertake the process. However, there were some sentiments against the time. The few opposed to the duration indicated that it was too long a time and that there was need for the programme to be time-framed so that the participants could plan other duties in advance. These views confirm the findings made by Cheng (2009). “time to ensure that quality audit is satisfied is time potentially lost to other professional duties.” Implied here is that both the audit time and the time to ensure conformity to standards during the overall execution of duties prejudices teaching time.

When asked to assess the relevance of the auditing instruments used to audit their area, there were mixed feelings from the participants as some felt that the instruments were not clear but others perceived them as being relevant. National Computing Centre Limited (1996) points out that auditors develop a checklist that will be used to guide the data collection process. With thorough preparation, a comprehensive and relevant checklist should be developed which cover the area of an auditee. To support the issue of relevancy, one participant said, “They are very relevant to us as they use the organization’s controlled documents such as the procedure manual, job descriptions which have already been distributed, so expectations are clear”. Relevance of data collection instruments aid in acceptability of the process.

There was consensus as the form of evidence acceptable to the auditors. Participants enumerated signed documents, documentary evidence in the form of reports, policy documents as the type of evidence required. This finding concurs with the Tertiary Education Commission (1996:22) view that evidence should be “clear, valid and reliable.” It should be clear that the criteria of acceptable evidence are understood before the beginning of the audit.

About the audit atmosphere created by the auditors, most participants were positive. The findings tally with the views put forward by National Computing Centre Limited (1996:13) that auditors must “put auditees to rest.” Some described it as fruitful, conducive, under conditions of mutual trust and respect while others described it as free and fair and yet others stated that it was friendly.

6.3. Sub-problem 3: Communication of the Results of Internal Quality Audits

Asked to evaluate communication with regards the audit notice and opening meetings participants noted that, notice of audits is given well in advance using memos which were circulated and signed by those in the area to be audited. This finding is in tandem with the views expressed by Tertiary Education Commission (2004) which explains that the essence of pre-audit meetings is to outline the purpose of the audit and other attendant issues. One participant described communication as, “adequate as they cover dates, time, scope, instruments used and areas to be audited.” Armed with information from the pre-audit meetings, auditees are psychologically prepared for it.

On whether the auditors held end of audit meetings one participant affirmed, “Yes, they do, in which they highlight major findings of the audit.” The findings highlighted during end of audit meetings were confirmed by one participant who responded, “Yes, that is

when they point out the N/Cs,(non-conformities) observations and corrective actions needed.” These findings concur with the Tertiary Education Commission (2004:40) which explains that, “at the end of the audit the panel gives an oral feedback at the end of audit meeting.”

Asked what the benefits of end of audit meetings have been, one participant noted that, that is when, “we establish the major problems and come up with solutions to improve operations.” This was also confirmed by another participant who responded that end of audit meetings, “point out areas which need attention.” One participant aptly summarized the benefits of end of audit meetings as to, “give feedback to staff.” These findings concur with Tertiary Education Commission (1996) which point out that feedback should be explicit, highlight strengths and weaknesses and solutions to challenges.

In responding to what have been the successes and drawbacks of the internal quality audits, participants pointed out that the major strengths of IQAs have been raising awareness of quality and clear dissemination of information of the QMS requirements for academics. In the words of one participant, “staff is now informed on what should be in place in their departments.” Another participant observed that, “quality is now enhanced in all units.” Yet another participant responded that, “implementation of solutions to problems amenable at regional level has been made possible.” These responses show that the objectives of IQA as identified by Red-Bag (2012) and Stimson (2001) are being adequately addressed by the IQAs.

One of the major drawback of IQAs highlighted by academics has been the, “demand for a lot of paperwork which has relegated lecturers to clerks is awful.” This finding is in sync with Cheng’s (2009) findings that academics view quality audits as bringing in a new culture of compliance through a lot of paperwork that trace fulfillment of laid procedures or as proof of having fulfilled a procedure.

Another participant pointed out that, “audits impinge on [our] professionalism.” This finding concurs with Shore and Wright (2000) who assert that quality audit is designed to bring new norms of conduct and professional behavior among academic staff. This is a situation where the work of academics is not regulated by professional associations but by quality assurance. It is however argued that quality assurance only tracks the performance of individuals against laid procedures as opposed to dictating the a new set of standards. If anything the quality assurance processes complement the efforts of those who have set the standards by way of checking on the level of compliance with set standards.

Participants fingered lack of resources as one of the drawbacks with IQAs. It is unfortunate that some of the challenges we face need resources for effective solutions. Consequently, “lack of resources to implement best solutions,” has been a serious drawback. Issues identified as non-conformities in the IQAs should be addressed in order for academics to appreciate the value of the process. If identified issues are not resolved as a result of lack of financial resources, then the IQAs will be viewed in negative light. Audits can be time-consuming thereby losing valuable research time in the process as noted by one participant.

7. Conclusion

- Participants were conversant and appreciative of the objectives of IQAs.
- The outcomes of IQAs in ZOU have been:
 - Uniform application of procedures throughout the organization
 - Identification of problems and possible solutions implemented
 - Capacity building in handling quality issues through training both internal quality auditors and all the ZOU staff on quality awareness.
- ZOU internal quality auditors are qualified and have the integrity to execute IQAs.
- The auditing instruments used by auditors are relevant.
- Acceptable evidence in IQAs has to meet specified criteria (objective, valid and reliable).
- Auditors create a conducive auditing atmosphere
- IQAs communication is quite good. It includes circular notices on IQA schedule and opening and closing meetings.
- Audit results and solutions are clearly communicated at the end of each audit and at the end of audit meetings
- IQAs have aided ZOU in identifying strengths, weaknesses and solutions to policies, procedures and practices thereby improving on quality service provision
- IQAs have raised quality awareness, clear dissemination of information on the QMS requirements for academics.
- The major drawbacks identified by participants have been;
 - The duration of IQAs is too long.
 - The demands of Quality Management System are laborious due excessive need for documentation of every task.
 - Lack of resources to implement suggested solutions
 - IQAs impinge on academics’ professionalism

8. Recommendations

- ZOU should consolidate and strengths the use of IQAs through continuous training of both internal quality auditors and all the staff members.
- Internal quality auditors should be further capacitated to perfect their quality auditing skills.
- Auditors should develop checklists that can be exhausted within the scheduled audit time.
- Management is encouraged to avail resources for implementation of identified solutions.

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