Innovation for Social Transformation: E-Marking Challenges Faced by Students. A Case Study of Zimbabwe Open University

Rosemary Ngara
Zimbabwe Open University, Box 1810, 16 Victory Street, Gweru East, Gweru, Zimbabwe

Meggie M. Ngara
Midlands State University, P. Bag. 9055, Gweru, Zimbabwe

Abstract

There are several objectives of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) quality management system among which are to provide quality teaching and learning. In line with this objective, Zimbabwe Open University has implanted ICT in teaching and learning processes. For the purpose of speeding up the delivery of ICT linked support services, in its 2017 Strategic Plan, ZOU proposed that Masters students submit assignments online and this innovation was soon adopted for all students at all levels of learning in all programmes in the second semester of 2017. The innovation, although in line with developments in the new information age, seemed to present challenges to students in terms of assignment submission and marking. A case study involving students in the teacher development department at the Zimbabwe Open University Midlands campus was conducted to determine the forms of challenges students faced with the introduction of e-marking of assignments. Data were generated via an open-ended questionnaire and interviews with individual students. Findings showed that students residing or working in urban areas delighted in the easiness of submission and receipt of assignment feedback while limited internet connectedness, lack of personal smart phones, uncommunicative marking by lecturers and student technological phobia were some challenges participants perceived in the introduction of e-marking of assignments. Among other things, the study recommends that Zimbabwe Open University should address the problem of student tradition in not moving with technological change by making it compulsory for students to study components of ICT which can help them demystify difficulties in using ICT and that the government of Zimbabwe needs to be more committed to the use of ICT in rural areas.

Keywords: Online assignment, submission, e-marking.

Introduction

Preamble

In the age of Information and Communication Technology and teaching and learning cannot be divorced from the use of ICT. According to Shaik (2013, p.51) “good teaching requires developing sensitivity to the dynamic, transactional relationship between three components of knowledge; content, technology and pedagogy.” The new learning environment developed by ICT is known as Interactive Learning environment, ICT has thus introduced a new paradigm in learning. The opportunities provided by ICT to support teaching and learning are many and fantastic but not problem free. A survey was conducted to determine perceptions of students at Zimbabwe Open University on the introduction of e-assessment of their course work.

Background

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has the mandate to advance, transform and transmit knowledge through a distance and open education system. There are several objectives of the ZOU quality management system among which are to “provide quality” teaching and learning…” (ZOU Quality Manual 2013:16). In line with this objective Zimbabwe Open University has embedded ICT in teaching and learning processes. Education should not lag behind technological development (Salehi & Salehi, 2012). ICT’s have the potential of increasing access to and improving relevance and quality of education (Nyandara, 2012; Situma, 2015). ICT makes it possible to deliver contents instantly (Ghosh, 2015, p. 68). Resultantly, Information and Technology affects institutions of Higher education in some ways or other. For instance, Information and Technology has brought about new trends in the assessment of students in institutions of higher learning. This development has brought with it new requirements on the part of students as they take part in making online assessment possible. Evaluation of student work can be done using ICT but can present students with challenges such as problems of connectivity (Mtae, 2016) and insufficient literacy to present assessment materials online. At the time this study was conducted, no study had been conducted to determine ZOU students’ reactions towards the implementation of online marking at its initial stages. What challenges would e-marking present to ZOU students? This and other related questions motivated the researchers to carry out this study. This qualitative case study explored the reaction of students towards the implementation of online marking at ZOU. It was against this backdrop that this study was carried out.

Statement of the Problem

In an attempt not to lag behind technological advancement, Zimbabwe Open University introduced e-marking for all students at all levels of learning in all programmes in the second semester of 2017. The innovation, although in line with developments in the new information age, was viewed with some disgruntlement by some students. Students at Zimbabwe Open University seemed apprehensive about the taking on board full scale by Zimbabwe Open University of online submission and e-marking of student coursework in the first semester of 2017. The innovation seemed to present challenges to students in terms of assignment submission and marking. Which forms of challenges did the introduction of e-marking present to students?
Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

- What forms of delights did students enjoy with the introduction of e-marking of assignments?
- What forms of challenges did the introduction of e-marking of coursework present to students?
- Why were students facing challenges faced in e-marking of assignments?
- How could the perceived challenges be redressed?

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- ascertain forms of delights students enjoyed with the introduction of e-marking of assignments
- determine forms of challenges the introduction of e-marking of coursework presented to students
- establish causes of challenges faced by students in e-marking of assignments
- propose ways by which challenges faced by students in e-marking could be minimised.

Literature Review

Related Studies

Dawnton, Glasfurd-Brown, & Mossop (2006) gave a report on a study carried out by Danson in 2006 in the pilot phase 2004-05 of the Online Course Submission (OCS)Project at Loughborough university which developed a range of Web content to support OCS. The support included a dynamic test directory, to enable staff and students to practise uploading files, a set of Help pages, an About section that explained the functionality of OCS system and an interactive plagiarism tutorial for students. The outcome of the pilot study found that students were generally comfortable with the idea of remote submission, students expressed strong support for it. Staff feedback was on the whole positive but there were some issues on the departmental processes, poor communication between administrative and academic staff, issues associated with anonymity and departmental policy on deadlines. In this study one perceived issue about OCS was that some students continued to work on the assignments after some of their fellow students had submitted their work at an earlier date and participants viewed this as clearly unfair.

The opportunities provided by ICT to support teaching and learning are not problem free (Salehi & Salehi, 2012). According to Idowu and Esere (2013) challenges of accessing ICT materials in Nigeria include: inadequate ICT infrastructure and lack of qualified personnel who can facilitate access to ICT. In ICT integration in education, both students and teachers may lack the necessity skills to access, process and use informants (Yunus, Lubis, & Lin, 2009). Barriers to ICT use are considered as extrinsic—those related to organisation such as access, time, support, resources and training and intrinsic – those germane to teachers, administrators, students as individuals such as
attitudes, lack of personal motivation, resistance, tradition and beliefs (Ertmer, 1994) and (Jones, 2004).

A study by Mtae (2016) sought to find out how the hybrid instructional mode of delivery (combination of face to face meetings and online instructions) to post graduate programmes was being received by instructors at the Open University by Tanzania. The findings showed that the hybrid instructional model appeared to be accepted by most of the instructors who were already using it. All instructors owned laptops, accessed internet easily through cell phones and institutional internet. However, poor internet access, connectivity and reliability presented themselves as main challenges.

In a study titled, “Implementing Online Marking at Tertiary Level: Lecturers’ Reactions” Ngara (2018) established that e-marking of assignments was painstakingly slow and posed a health hazard to markers’ eyes. These challenges caused lecturers to fail to meet assignment marking deadlines. Lecturers failed to deal with cases of plagiarism or copying decisively, and lecturers experienced rising workloads at the introduction of e-marking of assignments since assignment allocation. In the same study, participants opined that they could not use the review facility with ease since they had not been effectively workshopped to mark assignments in soft copy. The current study was related to the reviewed studies which like the studies reported on, also sought to determine challenges faced in the use of ICT in education. Nonetheless unlike the reviewed studies this study focused on challenges faced with the introduction of e-marking at an institution of higher learning in Zimbabwe.

Theoretical Framework

The Technology, Organisation and Environment Model which was developed by Oliveira and Martins (2011) guided the conduct of this study. Internal and external characteristics of an organisation are regarded as drivers for organisations’ adoption of technology or constraints to organisations in implementing technology are embedded in them. Environmental variables which include tutorial and technology support infrastructure determine the speed of uptake of technology by an organisation. This model was linked to the study since technological and personnel provisions made by Zimbabwe Open University in introducing e-marking of coursework could have influenced the nature of challenges students faced at the initial stages of this innovation. In addition, variables external to ZOU could have had an influence on the forms of challenges e-marking presented to students at the introduction of e-marking of students’ assignments.

Methodology

Paradigm

This study was grounded in the qualitative research paradigm. According to Bryman (2001, p.446) a paradigm is a “cluster of beliefs and dictates for scientists in a particular discipline influencing what should be studied, how the research would be done and how results would be interpreted”. A paradigm can be regarded as a whole framework of beliefs, values and methods that guide the researcher’s actions throughout the whole investigation process.
Qualitative research endeavours to understand the nature of a given setting and what it means for participants in that setting and what is going on for them (Chisaka, 2013; and Remadevi, 2011).

Qualitative research has several characteristics which are connected to this study. According to Chisaka (2013) and Creswel (2007) some of the features of qualitative research are:

- Research is conducted in the natural setting of social factors.
- The actor’s perspective (the insider or emic view) is emphasised.
- The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Chisaka, 2013; and Creswell, 2007).
- The product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive
- The research is an interpretive inquiry. The qualitative research is a ‘form of inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear and understand.

The researchers considered the qualitative paradigm relevant because they had interest in understanding the meaning ZOU students in the department of Teacher Development, had constructed about e-marking of their assignment in the early stage of moving from submission of hard copies of assignments to online submission of the same. The researchers were primary generators of data as they administered research instrument and conducted data analysis themselves.

Research Design

The study was an exploratory-explanatory case study since the study sought to explore the “what” and “why” ZOU students’ experiences and challenges in having their assignments, e-marked. This is in line with Yin’s view (2003 as cited by Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545) that the use of “what”, “who”, “how” and “why” leads to an explanatory case study. The case study method is essentially a research in depth rather than breadth (Yin, 2003) The researchers chose the case study because, it gives meaning to contemporary phenomenon to a researcher that is too complex for an experimental strategy and it gives explanations to the casual links in real life, and is able to describe the contemporary phenomenon in the real life context (Yin, 2003).

Data Collection Generation Instruments and Procedures

Open–ended, self-administered, written questionnaires and interviews were used to generate data from students. Instrument triangulation was meant to assist in scaling down demerits of one instrument with another. Thirty participants were sampled purposively and conveniently from a population of 93 students. Only those students who had had their coursework e-marked and those who could easily avail themselves for involvement in the study were chosen for participation. The study involved 14 students whose assignments had been marked online first time in the second semester of 2017 and another 16 students in their first semester of 2018 at ZOU and whose assignments had been e-marked first time in that semester. Data were generated via an open –ended questionnaire with 25 students and five interviews with individual students. Presentation of data was based on the research questions which guided the study. Ethical considerations made were those of informed consent and anonymity. Pseudonym name ‘S’ and a number were used to identify a participant and used in reporting the contributions made by participants.
Findings

Forms of Delights Students Enjoyed from the Introduction of E-Marking of Assignments

Participants gave several delights which they associated with submission of assignments online. Absence of or reduction in transport costs was one merit appreciated by eleven of the participants. Some participants made the following contributions:

S3: *Becomes cheap since there are no movements.*
S6: *Students no longer have the hustle of going to the campus.*

That the introduction of e-marking was a sure way of keeping up with technological development delighted nine of the participants. One participant made the following statement in support of this opinion:

S20: *We’re moving in line with trends in assessment.*

In addition, six participants perceived that e-marking of assignments was fast and efficient. In support of this view some of participants made the following input:

S13: *Assignments are not lost; assignments can be uploaded very time.*
S7: *Submitted versions can be edited before marking of assignments.*

In response to the question which required participants to state some delights they enjoyed at the introduction of online marking of assignments at Zimbabwe Open University, six times it was opined that there were no perceived delights associated with the introduction of e-marking by some students. In support of this view the following inputs were made:

S4: *Nothing delights me.*
S22: *Not delighted, as it presents challenges to some of us.*
S20: *Not very happy, no delights.*

Forms of delights students enjoyed with the introduction of e-marking of assignments which they associated with actual marking included: easy access to feedback, receipt of quick feedback, room for students to respond to markers’ feedback, adding to student skills in e-learning and receipt of communicative feedback. Some selected contributions support these opinions:

S14: *Feedback can be accessed easily; to me it was timeous.*
S7: *Comments by marker can be responded to.*
S28: *I can check feedback online, instead of going physically to campus to collect marked assignments.*
S11: *Marking is communicative; marker really speaks to student.*

Some participants opined that they had no delights in the actual marking of assignments by e-markers. The following input was made by participants:

L22: *Markers do not show any wrongs; they just provide scores.*
L12: *Some of my assignments did not reflect seriousness by marker- comments scanty.*
That participants gave opposing opinions on the merits linked with introduction of e-marking in terms of assignment submission and marking could be attributed to differences in places of residence and intrinsic barriers such as those of beliefs and resistance. Failure by e-markers to provide communicative marking could be attributed to the low levels of e-marking skills markers could have had at the pilot stage of e-marking.

**Challenges Faced by Students in E-Assessment of Course Work**

Some challenges which students associated with submission of assignments were: lack of knowledge on how to submit assignments online or computer illiteracy, absence of connectivity, failure to meet submission deadlines and myVista platform being not user friendly. Some of the supporting statements given by students were as given:

- **S4:** I had to travel to campus because I did not know how to submit assignments online.
- **S22:** I could not upload assignments on my own, the person I requested to do that for me, submitted them wrongly--I had to reverse everything at campus.
- **S11:** Couldn’t draw diagrams in my Maths assignment
- **S23:** No connectivity—network is not often good even at campus.
- **S25:** Network is slow, at often times there is no network where I live.
- **S4:** Failure to meet submission deadlines—some assignments are published late on myVista.
- **S22:** Platform not user friendly, I do not remember being able to access any Help section on myVista.
- **S21:** The assignment I submitted never showed.

Some four participants registered no challenges associated with online submission of assignments. Some contributions that were made in support of this sentiment were:

- **S1:** No challenges yet-----with my Smart phone I can submit assignments easily.
- **S3:** None—at my work place connectivity is good and steps to upload assignments are easy to follow.

Participants gave some views on some forms of challenges the introduction of e-marking of coursework presented to students, related to actual marking of assignments. Fifteen times it was opined that marking was not communicative and seven times it was indicated that feedback was delayed. Three participants were of the view that there was no mechanism to guard against cheating and plagiarism. Two others gave the opinion that the system was not strict on adherence to submission deadlines. Some students continued to work on the assignments after some of their fellow students. Statements given by some participants support these views.

- **S1:** No comments from markers.
- **S10:** First assignments were not marked in time.
- **S4:** We could not see marked assignments but just the mark.
- **S5:** Some students got away with cheating, some boasted about it.
- **S3:** Some students uploaded assignments after others had received feedback—we hear that portals for submission could be opened any time.

In one way or another, all participants were of the view that marking of assignments was problematic. This could be an indication that markers did their marking hurriedly
or had problems in using the review facility in e-marking. Late submission of assignments by students could be a result of late registration or even social or health issues students could face at the time when they would be expected to submit assignments online.

**Causes of Challenges**

Participants gave the causes on the challenges they perceived in line with online submission of assignments. These were given as: absence of face to face tutorials for students on submission of assignments online, tradition, administrative issues within ZOU, absence of connectivity and students not having smart phones. In line with views the following sentiments were expressed by participants;

> S3: It was because we were not taught how to operate myVista
> S20: We are used to conventional methods of assessment—no smart phones.
> S16: Assignments were uploaded very late- submission was delayed.
> S25: Connectivity issues

Causes of challenges associated with marking of assignments were given as tutors being new to the new trend in assessment, absence of tutor orientation of their role in e-marking, late submission of assignments and marker work overload.

**Suggestions Given by Participants**

Students suggested the following; Ict tutorials for students and markers, making ICT provisions for students in rural areas, allowing submission of hard copies of assignments as well and quick grading of assignments.

**Discussion**

The finding made in this study that students were generally comfortable with the idea of remote submission of submission of assignments and that students expressed strong support for it corroborates Dawnton, Glasfurd-Brown, & Mossop (2006). In this study it was found that e-marking presented challenges in the submission of assignment and e-marking of assignments. According to Dawnton, Glasfurd-Brown, & Mossop (2006) one perceived issue about OCS was that some students continued to work on the assignments after some of their fellow students had submitted their work at an earlier date and participants viewed this as clearly unfair, this finding was confirmed in this current study. This resemblance seems to confirm the reality that whether assignments are submitted as hard or soft copies, there is always the problem of some students not meeting submission deadlines.

In this study perceived barriers to e-marking of course work support the view that barriers to ICT use are considered as extrinsic- those related to organisation such as access, time, support, resources and training and intrinsic – those germane to teachers, administrators, students as individuals such as attitudes, lack of personal motivation, resistance, tradition and beliefs (Ertmer, 1994 and Jones, 2004).

The findings made in this study that poor internet access, connectivity and reliability and not having necessary gadgets such as smart phones presented themselves as main challenges are in agreement with findings made to find out how the hybrid instructional mode of delivery (combination of face to face meetings and online instructions) to
This study established that instances of cheating and plagiarism presented themselves and were not checked. This finding is in support of the findings made by Ngara (2018) whose study found out that lecturers involved in e-marking had no means with which to guard against plagiarism. This situation may obtain in initial stages of introducing internet mediated platform for teaching and learning. The current study also corroborates findings made by Ngara (2018), that absence of tutor orientation of their role in e-marking, late submission of assignments and marker work overload were causes of some e-marking challenges faced by students.

**Conclusion**

Findings made in this study are quite in line with the tenets of The Technology, Organisation and Environment Model which was developed by Oliveira and Martins (2011) which guided the conduct of this study. Technological and personnel provisions made by Zimbabwe Open University in introducing e-marking of coursework influenced the nature of challenges students faced at the initial stages of this innovation. In addition, variables external to ZOU such as issues of connectivity and technological phobia had an influence on the forms of challenges e-marking presented to students at the introduction of e-marking of students’ assignments.

Findings showed that students residing or working in urban areas delighted in the easiness of submission assignments and receipt of assignment feedback while limited internet connectedness, lack of personal smart phones, uncommunicative marking by lecturers and student technological phobia were some challenges participants perceived in the introduction of e-marking of assignments. Thus while e-marking may be considered as one of the in things in this new information age with many merits, it is not problem free.

The researchers suggest the following for the way forward:

- Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) to support introduction of e-marking by providing fully fledged tutorials or running workshops at regional campuses and district centres for new enrolments on on-line submission of coursework
- ZOU regional campuses to run e-marking workshops for markers for purposes of minimizing marker related challenges to the students.
- ZOU through MyVista to put in place anti plagiarism packages.
- Zimbabwe Open University should address the problem of student tradition in not moving with technological change by making it compulsory for students to study components of ICT which can help them demystify difficulties in using ICT.
- Further research needs to be conducted on the experiences of students and lecturers in e-marking in different faculties at ZOU.
- Further research needs to be conducted on experiences of students and lecturers in other institutions when other institutions of higher learning embrace e-assessment of coursework wholesomely as has been done by ZOU.
References
Chisaka, B. C. (2013). The qualitative research paradigm. In Action research: Some practical ideas for educational practice, Harare Save the Children.