

# ASSURING QUALITY OF A MODULE IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS

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Being quality minded in education means caring about the needs and expectations of learners and ensuring that they are met. Learners' perceptions thus provide important information for lecturers if learners' needs are to be met. This awareness led the lecturers of a module in Human Resource Management which formed part of a Master's programme to pose the following research question: Did the learning material and assessment system of a module in Human Resource Management delivered by distance education meet the needs and expectations of the learners? In an attempt to answer this question, some important concepts such as quality, quality assurance, quality teaching and distance education, were clarified and an overview of the module, Human Resource Management, was provided. Learners' perceptions of the module were also determined empirically. Both quantitative (closed-form items) and qualitative data (open questions) were obtained by means of a questionnaire. Thus the article illustrates how to tackle quality assessment by considering the needs of customers (learners) and ensuring they are adequately met.

## 1 Introduction

An assessment of the quality of learning programmes comes at a time when concern for quality in higher education is perhaps at an all time high (Nielsen 1997:288; Eaton 1999:26). Being quality minded in education means caring about the goals, needs, desires and interests of customers and making sure they are met (Whitaker & Moses 1994: 76).

Literature reveals that there is a growing interest in the application of quality management (QM) philosophy in the education sector. QM focuses on achieving quality and can be defined as a philosophy and guiding principles intended to meet the needs and expectations of external and internal customers (Bradley 1993:

169; Herman 1993: 2; Pike & Barnes 1994: 24; Greenwood & Gaunt 1994:26). Moreover, quality needs to be improved continuously.

All processes in any organisation contribute directly or indirectly to quality as the customer defines it (Swift, Ross & Omachonu 1998:93). Applying this principle to education means that the learning process needs to be assessed to determine the quality as defined by the learner. This will determine whether learners' needs have been met (Arcaro 1995:24).

This approach is also applicable to distance education where teaching and learning are separated in terms of time, place and space. A constant threat in distance education is that the "faceless"

numbers of learners may become invisible to educators (Wilcott 1995:41). Distance education programmes therefore do not always address the needs of the learners (Nielsen 1997:300). Learners' perceptions thus offer crucial information to lecturers if their expectations are to be met (Van Niekerk & Herman 1996:44). Ramsden and Dodds (1989:16) also regard *learners'* perceptions of content and teaching as central to the evaluation of a course. Educators and distance education learners must therefore continuously engage in a process of improving the quality of the learning experience (Schön 1995:27; Schargel 1994:3; Greenwood & Gaunt 1994:156; Wilcott 1995:39).

Recent developments in higher education in South Africa through *inter alia* the establishment of Education and Training Quality Assurance Bodies and the Higher Education Quality Committee focus on quality assurance in higher education (RSA 1997; RSA 1998:5). According to the National Plan for Higher Education (RSA 2001:19) "... quality is central to redress and equity. It is unacceptable for graduates in general and those from previously disadvantaged communities in particular, to be short-changed in terms of the quality of programme provision as it would not only impact on their ability to improve their own life chances, but it would also adversely impact on the broader agenda for social and economic development". This is likely to lead to increased assessment of learning material by learners themselves. The Norms and Standards for Educators 2000, for example requires an internal quality review process to ensure quality improvement (Explanatory notes

to the Norms and Standards for Educators, 2000:6). Implied in this review is the assessment by learners enrolled in the programme.

## 2 Problem Statement

Assessment of the learning material and its delivery constitutes a valuable indicator of whether quality has been attained. Thus the following research question was posed: *To what extent did the learning material and assessment system of a module in Human Resource Management (HRM) delivered by distance education meet the needs and expectations of the learners?*

In an attempt to answer this question, the article aims to:

- explain some concepts relevant to the research question;
- provide an overview of the module in HRM;
- determine the learners' perceptions of the module;
- propose how the learning material and assessment system could be improved to meet the needs and expectations of the learners.

## 3 Explanation of Important Concepts

### 3.1 What is quality?

It may be worthwhile to have a clear understanding of the quality concept. Juran (1999:2.1,2.2) and Goetsch and Davis (1995:3) provide two definitions of quality.

- "Quality" means those features of prod-

ucts and services which meet or exceed customer needs and thereby provide satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is a vital institutional goal and is considered as the absolute test of an organisation's effectiveness (Daugherty, 1996:85; Oakland & Oakland, 1998:188; Simpson 1993:61; Freeman 1993:27.

- "Quality" means freedom of deficiencies - freedom from errors that require rework, customer dissatisfaction, customer claims, et cetera.

Authors have tried to create a phrase that would clearly and simultaneously define both meanings for quality. The phrase suggested is "fitness-for-use", in other words the product or service conforms to the predetermined specification (Sallis, 1997:15; McClaskey & Owens, 1997:1-20; Juran, 1999:2.2). The question that is asked is 'Does this product or service do what is asked or expected of it' (Sallis, 1997:15). The 'fitness for purpose or use' is called the procedural concept of quality (Sallis, 1997:15). Educational results measured against performance indicators serves as an example. Sallis (1997:16) also distinguishes a second concept, the so-called transformational concept of quality which focuses less on systems and procedures and more on organisational transformation. This concept is based on the need to make the institution 'customer' rather than 'product' focussed (Sallis, 1997:16). It includes more intangible aspects of quality such as customer care and service. While procedural notions of quality are essential, by themselves they are not sufficient to guarantee customer loyalty.

It is usually personal service and customer care that ensure customers loyalty time and again.

### 3.2 What is quality management?

The Total Quality Leadership Steering Committee in Cincinnati, Ohio, regards quality management as "... a people-focussed management system that aims at continual increase of customer satisfaction at continually lower real cost. It is a total system approach and not a separate area or programme. It works horizontally across functions and departments, involves all staff members and extends backwards and forwards to include the supply chain and the customer chain (Siegel & Byrne, 1994:18,19).

Lewis (1993:9) elaborates on this definition by saying that quality management in education refers to a cooperative system in which both customers and suppliers mutually agree to, and meet the needs, requirements and expectations of customers on a continuous basis. Furthermore, quality management is more likely to succeed when there is an obvious, visible top-down commitment to it, implying that QM is management led (Jeffries, Evans & Reynolds, 1992:34).

At this stage it is necessary to define some of the key concepts in quality management (Juran, 1999:2.3).

*Product:* The product refers to the output of any process. It therefore refers to both goods and services. The product in education is an often debated topic. The major product in educational institutions is not the learner, but learning (Lezotte, 1992:44; Downey, Frase & Peters, 1994:11). Every effort should be spent to

add value to each learner's capacity to learn. Simpson (1993:61) however, regards the learning material as the product and the educators the after-sales service staff in distance education. It implies that the learning material should satisfy the needs of the customers (Lewis 1989:10; Henderikx 1992:34; McIlroy & Walker 1993:44).

*Customer:* The customer refers to anyone who is a user of any work output that has value added to it (Lewis, 1993:14; Frazier, 1997:12). A more subtle definition views the customer as anyone who can potentially create a perception of the organisation or service (Frazier, 1997:12).

*Customer satisfaction:* This concept refers to the state of affairs in which customers feel that their expectations and needs have been met. Customers in education will require, among others, academic standards, learning support, effective communication systems, and adequate preparation for the next stage of learning (Greenwood & Gaunt, 1994:34)

*Deficiency:* A deficiency includes any fault (defect or error) that impairs a product's fitness for use. Deficiencies may take forms such as office errors, failure to meet delivery dates, unavailability of study material on time and unanswered telephone calls.

*Customer dissatisfaction:* This is a state of affairs in which deficiencies (goods or services) result in customer annoyance, complaints, et cetera.

It is important to realise that customer satisfaction and customer dissatisfaction are not opposites (Juran, 1999:2.3). Customer satisfaction comes from those features which convince customers to buy

the 'product' (enrol at the institution or for a specific programme). On the other hand, customer dissatisfaction originates from deficiencies and is the reason why customers complain. Some products engender little or no *dissatisfaction* and do what the provider want them to do. Yet customers fail to 'buy' these products, because some competing product has features that provide greater satisfaction.

### 3.3 *Quality assurance*

Tait (1993:303) identifies a team approach where collaborative, non-hierarchical teams work and rework drafts of material and the collection of feedback from learners as possible quality assurance activities.

Barnett (in Nielsen 1997:289) classifies three approaches to quality assessment: objectivist, relativist and developmental. According to the objectivist approach pass rates or learner drop-out rates are taken into account. The relativist approach compares, for example, distance education programmes with those of residential universities. The developmental approach is geared towards identifying problems in the programme and finding solutions for them. It involves cycles of critical reflection and dialogue between educators and learners. Since this approach basically focuses on improving learning, it could be seen more as a means of *quality assurance* than *quality assessment*.

### 3.4 *Quality teaching*

Although quality focuses more on *learning* than on *teaching* (Cowan, 1994:59; Henderikx, 1992:34), the quality of the teaching influences the quality of

learning and thus the teaching remains important. In this regard, Hunt (1998:276) identified certain criteria for quality teaching. Amongst others, learners should be involved in active learning; guidelines should be given for answering questions; a marking schedule for self-assessment of assignments should be provided and written feedback on the assignments should be given. Learners' views on assignments should also be solicited in a systematic manner and used in the planning of future assignments.

### 3.5 Distance education

Distance education emerged as a way to offer educational programmes to learners at sites physically removed from educators. The process of developing and delivering learning material can effectively provide learning to these learners (Miller & Husmann 1996:103; Nielsen 1997:285; Eaton 1999:25). This assumption is based on at least three factors: learner responsibility, educator responsibility and administrative assistance (Miller & Husmann 1996:103).

#### 3.5.1 Learner responsibility

Learner responsibility can be viewed as the level of responsibility taken by learners in acquiring specific competencies (Miller & Husmann 1996:103). Higher education in general intends to enhance learners' critical thinking skills and independent study habits (Guri-Rozenblit 1990:75). In this sense, learners in Master's programmes approach more closely the ideal of the independent, self-directed learner (Guri-Rozenblit 1990:75; McIlroy & Walker 1993:46; Eaton 1999:26). How-

ever, this must be built into the learning experience (Garrison & Baynton 1987:3; Eaton 1999:26).

#### 3.5.2 Educator responsibility

Educator responsibility is vital to distance learning success and entails both instructional design and delivery to fit the unique demands of the distance education environment (Miller & Husmann 1996:104). A learner-centred approach needs to be followed. For example, TQM encourages innovative and flexible approaches tailored to meet individual learners' needs in terms of their intellectual ability, interest, experience and motivation (McIlroy & Walker 1993:46). This has implications for the design of course materials, support systems and how 'success' is defined and measured in distance education (McIlroy & Walker 1993:46).

#### 3.5.3 Administrative responsibility

Administrative responsibility has implications for course delivery methods, staff development, financial management and other technical considerations of programme delivery (Miller & Husmann 1996:104).

The Master's programme in HRM was designed by keeping the theoretical framework as described in the previous sections, in mind.

## 4. Overview of the MED Module: Human Resource Management

### 4.1 Learning material

HRM is one module of a Master's programme in Educational Management.

Offered through distance education, it is scheduled for one year, at the end of which learners write an open-book examination. Five study guides cover the main topics of the module. These are augmented by a number of articles.

The study guides use 'guided didactic conversation' which enhances critical thinking and reinforces reflective learning processes (Guri-Rozenblit 1990:76). The learners actively discover their own meaning by being involved in doing things (addressing problems) and thinking about their actions (Leder 1993:12; Bonwell & Eison in Hobson 1996:45). The aim is to enable learners to become competent educational leaders and managers in their particular educational settings.

#### 4.2 *How the assignment system worked*

Learners were expected to complete at least two assignments. The first assignment covered a number of problems related to the various HRM areas. It required that students complete any three of five questions. Each question involved the identification of a problem, investigating it by means of literature as well as interviewing or questionnaires, analysing the results and suggesting solutions. The aim was to give learners an understanding of the scope of the module and equip them with research skills necessary to address problems. Thus they had to apply research methods in Education. The second assignment required active involvement in a particular area of HRM at their institution. The intention was to analyse a problem as well as identify and implement solutions. Students who wished to continue with a dissertation of limited scope in HRM had

to complete a third assignment which was a proposal for the dissertation.

Before students submitted their assignments, they were required to assess themselves by means of a memorandum and assessment criteria. Steyn (1999:355) has indicated that self-assessment is a viable option to the traditional assignment assessment system. Amongst others, it provides immediate feedback; develops a desirable professional skill; provides crucial reinforcement of the conceptual understanding and intellectual maturation of learners' abilities to manage and helps learners to understand their abilities better. However, lecturers also marked the assignments in detail and provided feedback.

As regards the submission dates, learners had the opportunity to submit assignments four weeks after the due date. These due dates are provided to help learners plan their study programme, but are sufficiently flexible to allow for late submissions.

In line with expectations for quality assurance as described earlier, an attempt was made to determine students' perceptions of the module in HRM and how this module could be improved.

## 5 **Research Design**

### 5.1 *Quantitative and qualitative data*

Survey research was employed to describe the perceptions of the learners regarding the module in HRM. Both quantitative (closed-form items) and qualitative data (open questions) were obtained by means of a questionnaire. The first four questions determined biographical information. Then followed items that

determined learners' perceptions of their own knowledge of research methods and their preferences regarding the marking of assignments. This was followed by 18 statements designed for response on a five-point Likert scale, (from strongly disagree to strongly agree, eventually grouped into three categories). These statements centred on the *assignments* and on the *outcomes* (see Table 3) that were stated for the module. Finally, the questionnaire consisted of four open questions. These items aimed at determining learners' perceptions of the assignment system; what they found particularly interesting about the module; what they would change and how they evaluated their learning experiences.

Peer and student assessment of the questionnaire took place by means of a pilot study which led to some changes. Peer assessment also ensured face validity (the items were relevant) and content validity (there was a representative sample of content) (Schumacher & McMillan 1997:236). Since open questions were also used, this delivered some qualitative data and as such there was triangulation of data. The qualitative data were processed manually by two experienced researchers who agreed on the findings.

## 5.2 Sampling

The final version of the questionnaire was given to 45 learners (of a population of 120) who attended a HRM seminar on campus and was completed anonymously. Thus convenience sampling was employed (Schumacher & McMillan 1997:169). Since this is a non-probability sample, generalisations will be made with caution and perceptions are seen as

*trends* only. However, the perceptions described may be similar to those of the population because the biographical data reveal that the sample included a cross section of learners with regard to all the significant variables (as indicated in the next section).

## 6 Quantitative Results

Quantitative data were analysed by means of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences programme (SPSS). Results are described in the ensuing section.

### 6.1 Biographical data

The biographical information revealed that 2% of the learners had five years or less teaching experience, 22% six to ten years and 76% 11 years or more; 51% of the sample were in a management position; only 2% studied through medium of their first language; 60% had obtained their BEd honours degree (Educational Management) at Unisa and 13% at another university, 2% had an Honours degree from another university and 24% previously had obtained a general BEd Honours degree only.

### 6.2 Evaluation of own knowledge of research methods

Most (62%) evaluated their knowledge of research methods as *average*, 10% as *good* or *excellent* and 7% as *poor*.

### 6.3 Preference for assignment marking

Learners were asked to indicate their first, second and third choices regarding who should do the marking of their assignments. The results appear in Table 1.

*Table 1*

According to Table 1, 96% of learners want lecturers to assess assignments fully or in part. However, 60% are positive towards their own involvement in this process. This shows that the majority already assumes responsibility for their own learning. The ideal is the development of independent self-directed learners. Other learners still need support until they can shoulder accountability for their own learning.

#### 6.4 *Perceptions of the assignment system*

Items that determined learners' perceptions of the assignment system revealed the following results:

*Table 2*

Table 2 indicates that learners agreed that the assignments required intensive involvement in managerial practice and knowledge of research methods in education. Table 2 also indicates that although only 47% wanted to assess their own assignments before submitting them, 73% acknowledged that self-assessment was a valuable experience, and 78% that the assessment criteria helped them in completing the assignments. Learners agreed that the assignments helped them to identify, understand and discover possible solutions for problems.

#### 6.5 *Perceptions of the extent to which stated outcomes were reached*

The learners' perceptions of the extent to which the module reached its outcomes appear in Table 3.

*Table 3*

The data reveal that the main outcomes of the module listed in Table 3, were accomplished.

## 7 **Qualitative Results**

Qualitative analysis of the written responses revealed the following.

### 7.1 *Perceptions of the assignment system*

The following categories emerged with regard to learners' perceptions of the assignment system:

#### *Scope and structure of the assignments*

There was widespread praise for the scope and structure of assignments. Comments such as 'The assignment system is good' or '... very good'; assignments were '... well arranged and organised' were recorded. One learner commented that the assignments were the '... guiding force behind the whole module'.

#### *Guidance with the assignments*

Learners voiced their gratitude for the guidance provided in the two assignments. One learner wrote: 'The assignment system is good because you supplied us with a memorandum which serves as a guideline in completing the assignments.'

#### *Practical application of the assignments*

Learners indicated the practical value of assignments. The following comments substantiate this: 'The assignments prepared me to be a manager'; 'Assignments equip educators with skills of investigating, collecting data and solving their own problems'; 'The assignments are practical and also introduce us to the skills of problem-solving'.



### *Self-assessment of assignments*

Using self-assessment as a tool to develop independent learning and assisting in active involvement had both positive and negative responses. The positive comments included: 'The assignment system used in HRM has developed a skill of self-assessment which I previously lacked. It is an interesting and enriching exercise to mark your own assignment using criteria'; 'The assignment system allows you to get deeply involved in the evaluation which is quite exciting. It also helps you to develop skills to comprehend well'; 'I like to mark my own assignment before posting it....it encourages you to correct your own mistakes'; 'The assignments gave me an opportunity to reflect on the work I have done.'

Negative comments tended to express the following sentiments: 'An independent lecturer's opinion is more appealing than my subjective view of my work.' This may be attributed to the fact that some learners doubt their own ability and lack confidence in assessing their own work.

### *Time constraints*

A few responses referred to the time needed to complete the assignments: 'The assignments were too long to complete'; 'They discourage one to continue if one thinks of the long hours spent on one assignment' and 'The assignment had too many activities'.

### *Difficulty*

Some learners found the assignments difficult. For example, one wrote: 'The assignments cater only for those people who have undergone studies on manage-

ment and were very problematic for us who were facing management for the first time'. One needs to take into consideration that the admission requirements of the Master's programme did not exclude learners with no previous management training.

### *Preparation as researchers*

The assignments helped to equip learners with research skills. They stated: 'The assignments were geared to lead us to be successful researchers'; 'They prepare students for coherent logical argumentation in research' and 'They help with the compilation of a research proposal'.

### *Development of thinking skills*

Learners commented on the way the assignment system developed their thinking skills: 'I perceive the assignments as a way of assisting learners to think critically'; 'The assignments stimulate one's mind'; 'To me the assignments were challenging, thus helping one to apply intensive thinking and hard work'; They are stimulating and make one think creatively'.

## 7.2 *What learners found particularly interesting*

Most learners identified the practical work as particularly interesting. For example, mention was made of conflict management; problem solving; dealing with various stakeholders; and determining the types of problems that face managers. One learner wrote: 'I have learnt many practical things like how to handle conflict, negotiations skills, personnel development and many more which are also practical and useful at the school.'

### 7.3 What learners would change about the module

When asked what they would change about the module, some indicated that they would not change anything. Suggestions for change included 'More seminars'; 'Lecturers should allow more time for submission of assignments'; 'The module should not be an open book examination'; 'The scope of the work should be reduced'; and 'The self-assessment approach'. Concerning the last comment, the majority of learners had no previous experience of self-assessment.

### 7.4 How learners judge their experience of the module

According to learners the learning content and assignments developed learners' problem solving, conflict management and negotiation skills. For example, learners commented: 'There were challenging tasks that equipped me to solve problems in the school situation' and 'I learnt a lot of things, like how to handle conflict and negotiation skills ...'. In addition, mention was made of the development of insight into practice '... I learnt that problems that I thought are minor can lead to serious problems' and the importance of planning: 'This module has equipped me how to plan and prioritise'.

## 8 Conclusions and Implications for Improvement

The main strength of the module seems to be the practical requirements of the assignments, drawing on real-world experience. This facilitated the development of various desired skills in learners and

thus encouraged independence. However, Garrison and Baynton (1987:3) argue that independence must be examined in relation to *power* and *support*. Although many learners want to assume responsibility for the assessment of their own assignments (power), they generally expected additional assessment by lecturers (support). In this regard, learners could be asked in future to indicate with which questions they need additional support - only those questions need then to be assessed in-depth and detailed feedback provided.

Concerning improvements to the module, the time needed to complete all the questions of an assignment needs to be reconsidered. A solution could be to require only *one* question with a practical investigation. The remaining questions could involve the analysis of case studies which have already been completed. Apart from time constraints, some learners find the assignments too difficult and need additional assistance. In this regard extra seminars at the beginning of the year may be useful for those learners who are able to attend. For others, supplementary reading, especially regarding research techniques, may be adequate.

It is our duty as practitioners to improve ways of ensuring quality education that meets the needs of the learners (Mann 1998:21). Tackling quality assessment leads to more effective and satisfying learning experiences. This article illustrated how this could be done.

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Table 1  
Learners' preferences regarding the marking of assignments

Preference	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lecturers only	17	38
Both learners and lecturers in full	16	36
Learners in full and lecturers in part	10	22
Learners only	1	2
Total:	44	98%
Missing value: 1		

Table 2  
Learners' perceptions of the assignment system used in HRM

Statement	Agree		Uncertain		Disagree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
The assignments required intensive involvement in practice	45	100				
Assignments required know-how of empirical research methods	39	87	2	4	4	9
A set of guidelines were essential for completing the assignments	39	87	1	2	5	11
I want to mark my own assignments before submitting them	21	47	3	7	20	44
Assessing my own assignment was a valuable learning experience	33	73	2	4	10	22
The assessment criteria helped me in completing the assignments.	35	78	5	11	5	11
I prefer exact marks for assignments rather than categories	36	80	5	11	3	7
The assignments required that I take responsibility for my own learning.						
The assignments empowered me to identify management problems that I would have missed.	43	96	1	2	1	2
The investigation of management problems for assignments helped me to understand management problems.	44	98	1	2		
The assignments empowered me to identify solutions for problems.	42	93	2	4	1	2
The assignments better equipped me to do a research proposal.	29	64	9	20	5	11

