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Investigating the Extent to Which the External Quality Assessment of Final Year Student Teachers in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 Teacher Education Model Enhances Continuous Improvement and Accountability of the Teaching Practice Programme.

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ABSTRACT The study sought to establish the extent to which the external quality assessment carried on final year student teachers enhances continuous improvement and accountability of the teaching practice programme in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education model. The mixed methods design was used to collect data in two phases. The first phase used questionnaires to collect survey quantitative data while the second phase collected qualitative data through interviews and document analysis. The researchers sampled 28 teaching practice lecturers, 100 mentors and 100 final year student teachers from ten national primary teacher education institutions that responded to the questionnaire survey in the first phase. Three lecturers from the teaching practice department and three mentors were conveniently selected for interviews from the case study institution and its host primary schools respectively. The quantitative data was analyzed through frequency distributions and percentages while the qualitative data used themes and categories. The study revealed that the external quality assessment process in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education was skewed towards the achievement of accountability at the expense of enhancing continuous improvement of the teaching practice programme. The study recommends that the external quality assessment of final year student teachers in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice should strive to strike a balance towards the achievement of both accountability and continuous improvement of the quality of teaching practice.

INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, all primary teacher education institutions follow the 2-5-2 teacher education model. In this model, student teachers spend the initial two terms (thirty-two weeks) at college learning theory of education, applied education and research methods and then proceed to do teaching practice for five terms (eighty weeks) and finally return to college for revision and examinations for two terms (thirty-two weeks) hence is termed 2-5-2 model. Under Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education, the final year student teachers are externally examined towards the end of the last school term of their teaching practice by a team of external assessors regarded to be widely experienced in teaching practice to ascertain conformity to existing and acceptable standards. The external assessment of the student teachers is a responsibility that is shared by the Department of Teacher Education (DTE) of the University of Zimbabwe and the teacher education institutions. The external quality assessment serves to identify the teaching practice's

programme's strengths to fortify, weaknesses to rectify, opportunities to utilize and threats to eradicate in order to enhance continuous improvement of the programme.

One of the researchers, while working as the Head of the Teaching Practice Department in one primary Teacher Education College, encountered teaching practice challenges that kept on recurring over years of which some have been documented in some local research publications. These recurring challenges and publications prompted the researchers to establish the role played by the external quality assessment/evaluation process in the teaching practice programme towards enhancing continuous improvement and accountability. A study by Chivore in Perraton (1993) showed that field supervision by lecturers was inadequate while another by Chikunda (2005) revealed hurried lecturer supervision. Mandu and Mashava (2001) reported that mentors in Zimbabwe's teaching practice lacked regular in-service mentor development and support services. The University of Zimbabwe's Sub-Senate team on its routine quality assurance visit to the institution where one of the researchers was employed in September 2007, reported on students who had to be deferred when external quality evaluators observed students who had been repeatedly supervised within the same week. The continued resurfacing of such incidences involving lecturer supervision raises questions and doubts on the contribution of external quality assessment in enhancing continuous improvement of the internal quality assurance practices hence motivated the researchers to carry out the study.

The Rationale for External Quality Assessment

The increased demand for higher education entails rising costs to the public purse, hence intensified public and government concerns that institutions provide educational value-for-money. The increased challenge posed by employers to higher education over the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the graduates entering the labour market and the respect of students' rights and protection as consumers have increased the demand for higher education to demonstrate public accountability, efficiency and effectiveness and responsiveness to economic and social development needs (Singh & Lange, 2007). Higher education institutions are certainly the appropriate addressee for public accountability demands such as the demonstration of value-for-money, efficiency and effectiveness and responsiveness to socio-economic development needs in respect of graduate competencies, knowledge production and community outreach and the continuous improvement of programmes they offer. This means that higher education institutions

are being challenged to provide information to society at large on their results and explain what they are doing, how well they are doing it and whether their expenditure is sensitive to the nation's socio-economic developments. As Biggs (2001) shows, a quality institution is one that satisfies the demands of public accountability, providing an assurance that the institution keeps its promises to its customers. The customers range from a government that calls for greater accountability of public expenditure, to employers who want to know what they are getting, to the students who, quite rightly, are increasingly more demanding of institutions (SAUVCA's National Quality Assurance Forum 2002). The external quality assessment practice provides the opportunity to inform society of what institutions are doing and how well they are doing it through publicized external evaluation reports. The demand for public accountability to funders, accountability to peers and market accountability to customers that have confronted governments and institutions of higher education worldwide have led to the emergence of the 'New Public Management' paradigm which informs this study as its conceptual framework.

The 'New Public Management' paradigm aims at promoting efficiency, effectiveness and economy in the performance of the public sector by employing modern managerial tools (Amaoko, 2003). In the quest for efficiency and effectiveness in government, the New Public Management paradigm advocates for the adoption of the market-oriented 'best practice' model of private sector that seeks to enhance both accountability and continuous improvement of programmes offered by an institution. In market oriented higher education systems, governments expect institutions to be accountable to their students and the public for the quality of their services and the utilization of resources while they enjoy increased autonomy to make decisions at their own discretion that promote continuous improvement of programmes they offer. The external quality assessment process working in the New Public Management perspective seeks to establish the existence of the internal quality assurance mechanism and the extent to which it enhances both accountability to society and the continuous improvement of programmes on offer.

Trends in External Quality Assessment

According to Oosthuizen in Smout (2005) and Zuma in Strydom (1996) the external quality assessment or evaluation of programmes in higher education by academic and professional peers is a worldwide norm by national governments and quality assurance agencies in countries as diverse as the United States of America, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Britain, Netherlands,

Norway, Portugal, Australia, South Africa and China. The external quality assessment/evaluation practice in higher education primarily focuses on enhancing the continuous improvement and accountability of a programme (Dill, 2007; Friend-Pereira et al. 2002; Smout, 2005). Accordingly, an external quality evaluation process in teaching practice is expected to focus on the extent to which accountability and continuous improvement are enhanced by assessing the quality of students' teaching, provision of support services to students', mentors and lecturers, lecturer and mentor supervision and assessment. External quality assessment is designed to assist institutions and departments monitor the effectiveness of their internal quality assurance mechanisms in facilitating the continuous improvement and accountability aspects of a program such as teaching practice (Dill, 2007; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993; Woodhouse, 2003). Harvey & Green (1993) argue that the prime purpose of the external quality assessment is to ensure that higher education institutions have internal quality assurance mechanisms in place and share best practices that enhance continuous improvement and accountability of operations and that such practices work according to stated objectives, bring about change and have international credibility. It can then be argued that external quality assessment practice is primarily designed to promote both the accountability and continuous improvement aspects of a programme in higher education. It was the concern of the study to establish whether or not the external quality assessment focused on the existence and effectiveness of the internal quality assurance mechanisms in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice programme.

Worldwide practice is that the external quality assessment process is preceded by a self-evaluation report and is executed by independent external quality assessors (Fereira-Pereira, 2002; Smout, 2002). The external assessment process is usually designed to assess the existence, adequacy and effectiveness of internal institutional quality assurance mechanisms within institutions (Dill, 2007; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993; Woodhouse, 2003). The external quality assessors first scrutinize the self-evaluation report for evidence of the internal quality assurance mechanisms and their effectiveness towards ensuring continuous improvement and accountability. Extensive literature shows that the external quality assessors then visit the institution or programme in order to verify the correlation of data and the validity of the self evaluation report regarding the implementation and effectiveness of the internal institutional quality assurance mechanisms (Baignarh, Maimela & Singh, 2001; Brink,

2003; Friend-Pereira, J.C., Lutz, K., and Heerens, N., 2002; Smout, 2005; Thune, 2003; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993). In the South African Higher education system, for example, according to the Higher Education Quality Committee (2004) each institution is required to conduct a self-evaluation exercise where the institution presents a description, analysis and evaluation (supported by appropriate evidence) of the manner in which the institution manages the quality of its core academic activities. This is then followed by a site visit by a panel of peers which seeks to verify the claims made in the self evaluation report.

Scholars such as Friend-Pereira et al. (2002, Paxton (2006), Miller (2002) Smout (2005), Van Vught & Westerheijden (1993 and Wastiau-Schluter (2006) inform that during the site visit, the external assessors are expected to gather data through interviews with key stakeholders such as mentors and lecturers, undergraduate and postgraduate students, employers of the graduates, alumni and professional groups and also tour facilities, and analyze relevant documents. This way the external assessors are in a better position to identify the programme's strengths to be fortified, weaknesses to be rectified, opportunities to be utilized and threats to be eradicated in order to enhance continuous improvement of the programme. The study sought to establish how the external quality assessors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice collected their data.

Smout (2002) and Thune (2003) concur in that at the end of the visit, the external quality assessors hold a brief debriefing exit feedback meeting with the academic staff to table their feedback on the committee's findings, observations and recommendations for continuous improvement. In teaching practice, the external quality assessment debriefing meeting would provide feedback to staff on the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance mechanisms which include the quality of the lectures' teaching, that of students' teaching skills and competences, that of mentoring and lecturer supervision of students and the provision of support services to students on teaching practice, mentors and lecturers. This way, the external quality assessment reveals whether the objectives and learning outcomes of the teaching practice programme have been achieved. The study sought to also establish whether external assessors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice held debriefing meetings with staff after the assessment process.

According to global practice, the external assessors are expected to produce a final report soon after the visit detailing the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for consideration by the institution, department and faculty concerned for enhancing continuous improvement and

accountability (Friend-Pereira et al., 2002; Smout, 2005; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993). This final report by the external assessors is generally published. Wastiau-Schluter (2006) points out that in most countries in Europe and in South Africa, external quality assessment reports are published on institutional websites or by the body responsible for external assessment or by the Ministry of Education, generally on their websites or on the website of the independent umbrella organization for higher education institutions.

The publication of external assessment or evaluation reports seeks to ensure that the culture of public accountability of higher education institutions towards society becomes embedded, provides external stakeholders with information about programmes being offered and provides comparative information to potential students and their parents on which to base their programme and institutional choices. Scholars such as Vroeijens in Baijnath, Maimela & Singh (2001) and Wastiau-Schluter (2006) argue that the publication of the external assessment reports serves to inform current and potential students whether the programme of study is organized and run properly and that an appropriate educational experience is both promised and delivered leading to student transformation. The publication of findings of the external assessment report provides funders with adequate information to use in making informed funding allocation decisions. After the presentation of the final report, the institution or department concerned has to draw an action plan indicating measures that will be taken to act on the recommendations within a stipulated timeframe. The concern of this study was on establishing whether the teaching practice external quality assessment reports in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 model are published for public consumption in line with global standard practice.

Materu (2007) posit that the external quality assessment serves to establish whether the programme being offered is equivalent to those in other tertiary institutions and that standards being applied are consistent with international practice. Vidovich & Slee in Morley (2003) argue that the external quality assessment practice promotes professional accountability to peers, democratic accountability to the academic community, public accountability to funders and market accountability to customers. The literature from scholars such as Friend-Pereira et al. (2002), Materu (2007), Smout (2005) and Van Vught & Westerheijden (1993) shows that the involvement of external quality assessors from other institutions and foreign countries gives legitimacy and credibility to the institutional programmes, examination results and products in the eyes of the students, the institution, the public and the international community. Nielsen

(1997) also concurs in that the involvement of external evaluators from other countries holds the program, the institution and graduates to international norms and developments in the teacher education field. This study partly sought to establish the extent to which external quality assessors from other colleges and countries are involved in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. Notwithstanding the positive spinoffs of external quality assessment as discussed above, some critique of external quality assurance is worth noting. In a comparison of experiences of the institutional audits at three South African universities, Botha, Favish and Stephenson (2008), found that there were negative views about the value of external panel visits which included;

- shortness of the interviews and the perceived bias of some of the panellists, which militated against meaningful engagement.
- the interviews were very fragmented
- there was little engagement with the panel
- The audit visit seemed more focused on accountability (Botha, Favish and Stephenson, (2008:8)

If external quality assurance just turns into a compliance gimmick without real impact on actual performance as shown in the last bullet above in the researchers' view it loses its very essence. In this regard, Goodliffe and Razvi (2008:136) warn that, "... external quality audits can only act as potential drivers for change if they are carried out in conjunction with an institutional commitment to quality enhancement. One of the aims of this study was to determine whether the external quality assessment of final year student teachers in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education system enhanced continuous improvement of the teaching practice programme as opposed to being just a compliance and accountability gimmick.

External Quality Assessment of Teacher Education in Zimbabwe

According to the University of Zimbabwe Handbook of the Department of Teacher Education (DTE) (2004) final year student teachers are externally assessed towards the end of the last school term of their teaching practice by a team of external assessors regarded to be widely experienced in teaching practice to ascertain conformity to existing and acceptable standards. The external assessment of the student teachers is a responsibility that is shared by the

Department of Teacher Education (DTE) of the University of Zimbabwe and the teacher education institutions. The external assessment exercise is preceded by a self-evaluation report that is generated by the teaching practice department. According to the Department of Teacher Education (DTE) circular No1 of 2000 (DTE/TP/1/2000) on teaching practice, cited in the DTE Handbook (2004), the Teaching Practice Department is expected to hold a meeting to process the candidates' mark profiles to be presented for external assessment and generate an internal self-evaluation report for presentation to the Academic Board for further processing and ratification. Once approved by the College Academic Board and endorsed by the Principal, the report is submitted to Teacher Education Department (DTE) detailing the performance of the candidates and reflecting the districts and schools where they are deployed. After receiving the internal self-evaluation report on teaching practice, the University of Zimbabwe's Department of Teacher Education arranges for a team of external assessors comprising peer professionals from sister institutions to conduct an external quality assessment of the final year student teachers on teaching practice. It is the concern of this study to establish whether the conduct of external quality assessment practice in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice is in tandem with the current global practices and trends.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study was to examine the extent to which the external quality assessment of final year student teachers in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education system enhanced continuous improvement of the teaching practice programme in addition to and accountability. Specifically, the study sought to;

- Examine Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education system external quality assessment mechanism.
- To determine the extent to which the external quality assessment of final year student teachers in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education system enhances continuous improvement and accountability of the teaching practice programme.
- To determine whether or not the external quality assessment practice in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice programme is in tandem with the current global practices.

METHODOLOGY RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design used in this study was the mixed methods approach. The mixed methods design was preferred because it enabled the researchers to ‘mix’ both the qualitative design that collects text data (words) and quantitative design that collects numeric data (numbers) in a complementary manner and provided interaction rather than a dichotomy between these approaches (Gelo, Braakmann & Benetka, 2008). Through the use of mixed designs the researchers were able to overcome the limitations of purely quantitative or qualitative approaches by maximizing the advantages and minimizing the disadvantages connected to the single application of one of the two approaches (Creswell, 2007; Gelo, Braakmann & Benetka, 2008; Maree, 2007). The use of mixed methods in this study provided the researchers with a more complete analysis of the research problem through comparing data produced by the different methods which enabled the researcher to see the same phenomenon from different perspectives (Creswell, 2007; Denscombe 2001; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Robson, 2005; Maree, 2007). This way, the researchers were able to understand the problem in a more rounded and complete fashion than would have been the case had the data been drawn from just one method. The mixed methods design facilitated triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative methods and data sources in a single study as well as provided a convergence and corroboration of results from the different methods and designs in studying the same phenomenon (Borg and Gall, 1996; Creswell, 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie in Maree, 2007). Although quantitative and qualitative approaches differ in how they gain knowledge and the research questions they address, they are complementary and help provide a more complete analysis of the research problem (Maree, 2007). Given that the different research methods overlap each other somewhat, at times complement each other and are contrary at times, the use of mixed methods has the effect of balancing each method out and giving a richer and deeper understanding of the phenomenon

The use of Mixed Methods design enables the researcher to collect data either simultaneously/concurrently or sequentially. The simultaneous approach offers limited interaction between data sources while the sequential approach integrates the research designs and sources. In simultaneous or concurrent application of qualitative and quantitative designs, the researcher uses the two designs at the same time and neither the quantitative nor qualitative

data analysis is used to inform the other. The results from each type of analysis are not consolidated until *both* sets of data have been collected and analyzed separately (Creswell, 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie in Maree, 2007). After the interpretation of data from the quantitative and qualitative components, a meta inference is drawn which integrates the inferences made from the separate quantitative and qualitative data and findings.

The Mixed Methods design can either be of sequential explanatory or exploratory design which enables the researcher to collect data in two separate phases (e.g., interviewing before surveying or surveying before interviewing), (Creswell, 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie in Maree, 2007). The sequential **explanatory design** is when survey data using questionnaires is collected from a large population in the first phase and the results are used to plan the collection of the qualitative data using interviews and documentary analysis in the second phase (Creswell, 2002). The qualitative data in turn helps to explain the results of the quantitative data. The data analysis begins *before* all the data is collected (Creswell, 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie in Maree, 2007). In using the sequential **exploratory design**, the researcher begins with collecting qualitative data through interviews, observations and document analysis and then conducts a larger follow-up quantitative study using survey questionnaires. The purpose is to use qualitative findings to help explain and clarify the quantitative results (Creswell, 2002). This study preferred the sequential explanatory design where data using questionnaires was collected first from a larger population followed by the use of interviews, documentary analysis and observations.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised all teaching practice lecturers, all final year student teachers and their mentors in each of the ten national primary-teacher education institutions in Zimbabwe that responded.

Purposive sampling procedure was used to extract 28 teaching practice lecturers from the ten national primary teacher education institutions that responded. Due to the geographical spread of host schools in which student teachers were deployed and the prohibitive travelling cost involved, the researchers used convenience sampling to select host schools from which 100 mentors and 100 students who responded to survey questionnaires during the first phase of this study were drawn. Three lecturers from the Teaching Practice Department in each of the ten

national primary-teacher education institutions, three mentors and three focus groups of student teachers were sampled and interviewed. The participants of the second phase were selected from among those who had participated in the first phase.

Data Collection Instruments

The researchers used the survey questionnaires to collect quantitative data in the first phase of the study. The survey questionnaires provided a general overview of perceptions and experiences held by lecturers, mentors and students on the extent to which external quality assessment of final year student teachers on teaching practice enhanced continuous improvement and accountability in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education. The survey questionnaires comprised of both open-ended and closed-ended questions that were administered to final year students on teaching practice, their mentors and teaching practice lecturers. The researchers collected qualitative data in the second phase through a semi-structured interview schedule that comprised a few structured questions that were followed by unstructured open-ended questions which enabled the researchers to collect rich descriptive data from the information rich respondents. The interview schedule enabled the researchers to document real events, record verbatim what people said and observe the behaviour of participants who were immersed in the natural setting of everyday life in which the study was framed (Maree, 2007; Neuman, 1997). The semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to recognize several nuances of attitude and behaviour that could have escaped the researcher had he used other methods. The survey questionnaires generated 228 responses, while interviews generated in-depth understanding of the extent to which external quality assessment practice promoted continuous improvement and accountability in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. The researchers also analyzed available teaching practice external quality assessment reports (Academic Board Meeting of 01/04/2009 for intake 33; Teaching Practice Examining Report (March to June, 2008); Teaching Practice Report 2007: Ref: DTE/B5/94/07).

Data Analysis

Data analysis enabled the researchers to systematically search, organize, synthesize, present and transform data from questionnaires, interviews and document analysis into manageable units and increased the researchers' understanding of the phenomena under study (Borgden & Biklen

1992; Leedy, 1993). Data analysis enabled the researchers to bring order, structure and interpretation to the mass of collected data which resulted in the generation of patterns, themes, categories, constructs and inferences relating to the research question.

In the first phase, the quantitative numerical data collected through survey questionnaires was manipulated to reveal patterns, trends and relationships between variables (Neuman 1997). The collected data was analyzed and summarized through a table of frequency distributions and percentages that were subsequently displayed in graph form. The table and graph of frequency distributions revealed patterns, relationships and trends on the extent to which external quality assessment practice promoted continuous improvement and accountability in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice programme.

In phase two, the researchers used interviews, observations and document analysis to collect qualitative data. The researchers organised the qualitative data on the basis of themes, categories, general ideas, concepts or similar features that related to the main research question. In analyzing qualitative data, the researchers sought to summarize what had been seen and heard in terms of common words, phrases, themes or patterns that aided the understanding and interpretation of that which was emerging (Maree, 2007). This study transcribed verbatim the audio taped interviews and the results were cross-checked with the participants before their analysis. After the data collected through quantitative and qualitative techniques had been analyzed and interpreted separately, inferences from the separate findings were made and integrated for interpretation. At this stage, the qualitative data served to confirm the results of the quantitative data in instances where all the responses pointed to similar conclusions. In instances where responses revealed incongruities, the qualitative data did not confirm the quantitative data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The concern of this study was to establish the extent to which the external quality assessment practice in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice enhances continuous improvement and accountability. The participation of external academics and professionals from foreign countries as external quality assessors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice programme is articulated next.

Participation of external quality assessors from foreign countries

Data from survey questionnaires in **Table1** and figure1 show that lecturers (71.43%), mentors (67%) and student teachers (51%) agree that peer academics and professionals from foreign countries did not participate as external quality assessors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice. The interviewed three lecturers had this to say about the composition of external assessors;

1st Eh, eh basically the composition of external assessment is as follows; we have got local lecturers who become assessors, we have our sister colleges who become external assessors and more so we have got personnel from the department of teacher education eh making up really the system of external assessment. That is the composition of external assessment teams.

2nd It would be important to have regional and international academics coming for assessment because we would be learning how others are doing it then having new ideas being put together so that we improve on the way we are doing things because at times we might be holding on to things that are old fashioned not knowing that there are new trends in the education as some things from others might be useful so it's important that we have regional and international professionals coming to see how we do it, look at our instruments then they may give us new ideas.

3rd On, I can say we don't have any external assessors from our neighbouring countries or abroad we are relying upon DTE external assessors and also our sister colleges

The general picture that emerges is that academics and professionals from foreign countries were not invited to participate in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice's external quality assessors. The interviewed respondents concur with Materu (2007) and Nielsen (1997) in acknowledging the professional value of involving local, regional and international academics and professionals in the external quality assessment of Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice since it holds the teaching practice program and its graduates to international norms and developments in the teacher education field. Failure to involve external quality assessors from foreign countries leaves the programme's credibility and legitimacy in doubt (Materu, 2007; Nielsen, 1997; Vidovich & Slee in Morley, 2003) as it fails to ensure that the continuous development of 2-5-2 teaching practice programme is in tandem with international standards and developments in the field of teacher education. This discrepancy does not guarantee legitimacy, credibility and continuous improvement of the programme in the eyes of the international academic community (Materu, 2007; Nielsen 1997) and professional accountability to international peers and market

accountability to potential international employers (Vidovich & Slee in Morley (2003). However, lecturers from sister teacher education institutions do participate as external quality assessors of the final year student teachers in the 2-5-2 teaching practice. Participation of lecturers of the examinees as their external quality assessors is articulated next.

Participation of lecturers of the examinees as external quality assessors

International and local literature shows that the external quality assessment process in teacher education is normally executed by a team of external independent professional expert peers (Friend-Pereira et al., 2002; Smout, 2005; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993; DTE Handbook, 2004). Table 1 and Figure1 show that the majority of teaching practice lecturers (75%) revealed that local lecturers in the 2-5-2 teaching practice participated as external assessors of their own students and concurred with 38% mentors and 34% student teachers. 40% mentors, 38% student teachers while 21.43% lecturers indicated that local lecturers did not participate as external assessors of their own student teachers. The picture that emerges is that lecturers of student teachers being externally examined participated as external quality assessors over their own students and this practice in the researchers' view does not bring in new ideas that enhance continuous improvement of the teaching practice programme.

Interviewed lecturers in this study appeared not impressed by the use of local lecturers as external quality assessors over their own students in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice with the following statements emerging from the lecturers;

1st: External assessors are taken from lecturers from other colleges and lecturers from the same college can assess their students. So I think there is a problem in that, if you take lecturers from the same college and they are supposed to assess their own students. I think quality somehow is compromised because one cannot fail oneself as one ends up feeling for the students since one knows them. So even if a high performing student is not doing well that feeling of saying how can I do this to my college, I am exposing the system. One ends up not saying the truth so I think in that situation quality is compromised. The system would rather have an independent person who is evaluating independently when assessing students.

2nd: I can say that the use of local lecturers on their own students is very displeasing in the sense that this has been going on because of the economic problems in the country where really it has

been very difficult to sponsor or finance external assessors from perhaps the University or other colleges. Then now there is this system where we use our own lecturers to external assess our own students. It is really a weak one in the sense that we will actually be externally assessing ourselves. But as an external assessor myself, sometimes I have tried to be very much professional in the sense that I remember that I have actually failed two or three students who really belonged to my institution.

The above statements from the two teaching practice lecturers confirmed that local lecturers from institutions whose students were being externally examined participated as external examiners of their own students. The study showed that interviewed lecturers expressed dissatisfaction and reservations in the use of local lecturers as external quality assessors over their own student teachers. The lecturers' sentiments concur with Materu (2007) in that the use of local lecturers as external assessors over own students does not promote continuous improvement of the teaching practice programme and does not ensure that standards being applied are consistent with international practice. The use of local lecturers to assess their own students on teaching practice undermines professional accountability to peers, democratic accountability to the academic community, public accountability to funders and market accountability to customers (Vidovich & Slee in Morley, 2003). It is the researchers' conviction that teaching practice assessment by local lecturers should actually be classified as internal quality assessment. According to the University of Zimbabwe's DTE Handbook (2004), it is the responsibility of the Department of Teacher Education to put together a team of external assessors comprising peer professionals from sister institutions to conduct an external quality assessment of the final year student teachers on teaching practice and is very silent on the use of lecturers from the institution whose final year student teachers on teaching practice are being examined. The second lecturer's response shows that the use of lecturers from the same institution with students as external assessors is not standard practice in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice but was born out of the economic crisis in the country when it became very difficult to sponsor or finance external assessors from the University or other colleges. The study recommended that the use of lecturers from the same institution with students being externally examined be done away with. Instead the study recommended the use of independent external quality evaluators from sister colleges and the international institutions to ensure objectivity and ambiance with international trends and practices in teacher education and facilitate continuous

improvement of the programme. Data collection means by the external quality evaluators is articulated next.

Means of collecting data used by the external quality assessors

Literature on the quality evaluation practice of higher education programmes shows that as part of data collection, external quality assessors are expected to interview the key stakeholders such as lecturers, undergraduate and postgraduate students, graduates of the programmes, employers of the graduates, institutional management, external advisory committees, alumni, mentors; tour facilities, and analyze relevant documents (Friend-Pereira et al., 2002; Paxton, 2006; Miller, 2002; Smout, 2005; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993; Wastiau-Schluter, 2006). Data reflected in Table1 and figure1 show that lecturers (71.43%), mentors (46%) and student teachers (68%) conclusively revealed that external quality assessors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice did not use interviews as their data collection means. Data from the majority of lecturers (100%), mentors (68%) and students (73%) unanimously indicated that external quality assessors collected their data through lesson observations only. The analysis of teaching practice external assessment reports further revealed that external assessors mainly concerned themselves with lesson observations during their visits. The picture that emerges is that external quality assessors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice only use lesson observations to collect data on the quality of the teaching practice programme and do not interview key stakeholders as is global standard practice. The sole use of lesson observation at the expense of interviews by external assessors shows that their main concern is to establish the quality of student teachers' practical teaching skills and competences.

The external quality assessment practice in the 2-5-2 teaching practice seems to play down the concerns and contributions of stakeholders such as mentors, academic community, graduates of the programme, the funders, external advisors and employers of the graduates towards the programme's continuous improvement. Failure to interview key stakeholders does not guarantee the identification of the teaching practice programme's strengths to be fortified, weaknesses to be corrected, opportunities to be utilized and threats to be counteracted that encourage continuous improvement as advocated by (Friend-Pereira et al., 2002; Paxton, 2006; Miller, 2002; Smout, 2005; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993; Vidovich & Slee in Morley, 2003); Wastiau-Schluter, 2006). Issues such as the quality of student mentoring and the quality and regularity of lecturer

and mentor supervision and assessment, provision of support services for students, mentors and lecturers can easily be established through interviews with stakeholders.

Data collected through interviews with respondents and document analysis revealed that external assessors in their lesson observations concentrated on passing and failing student teachers on the bases of the quality of their teaching skills and competences. The picture that emerges is that data collection by external quality assessors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice does not focus on continuous improvement of the programme but provides summative judgment of individual student teacher's teaching competences at the end of their teaching practice leading to their subsequent certification or exiting from the teacher education system. The findings of the study concur with those of Biggs (2001) who terms this retrospective quality assurance that looks back to what has already been done and makes a summative judgment against external standards. "The agenda is managerial rather than academic, with accountability as a high priority; procedures are top-down, and bureaucratic..... the procedures adopted address "value for money", and are frequently counter-productive for quality in the sense of providing rich teaching contexts and enhanced learning outcomes" (Biggs 2001:222). If the main emphasis of external quality assessment is on making summative judgments against external standards then accountability takes a higher priority over continuous improvement. Hence the findings of this study revealed that the external quality assessment practice in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice is skewed more towards accountability than continuous improvement of the programme.

The use of standard assessment instruments

The in-depth interviews revealed that the external quality assessors were provided with note books in which they scribbled their student assessment impressions using their individual experiences and insights to come up with a final mark for a candidate and were not guided by any standard assessment instruments to ensure uniformity and objectivity. This is what three interviewed lecturers said;

1st if an instrument would be given where people would follow sort of a uniform instrument when assessing students knowing that we are all looking for the same things as external assessors rather than I go having my opinion the other goes with her opinion. As external assessor you are just given note books where you just write your comments then you sign, that's that and the student passes or fails on your decision.

2nd the external assessment doesn't have an instrument. When we supervise students i.e. college by college there is a specific instrument that is used to assess students eh there is criteria that is being followed but when these external assessments are being done there is no instrument really each external assessor has his own impression, understanding or recognitions, using his own insight to come up with an assessment of a student as a final mark.

3rd the external assessor goes out, he observes a lesson according to his/her experience and comes up with a mark and as long as you defend yourself it's okay. There is need for an instrument where assessors look at **A, B, C, D**. Then we are saying let's have a universal instrument where we are looking at lesson presentation not personal opinions. I can cite a case where a student just said 'I was waiting for an external assessor and you have come aa so I have prepared for you' and that offended that particular assessor and the student was pinned down on just that comment which is just a personal feeling. If there was an instrument to follow the student would probably only lose marks on personal conduct but would not lose all the marks.

Failure to use a standard assessment instrument by the external assessors in the 2-5-2 teaching practice programme is at variance with Materu (2007) who argues that a standard assessment instrument promotes credibility and transparency to the whole external quality assessment exercise and enables all the students' performances to be objectively evaluated focusing on identical attributes. This practice exposes student teachers to subjectivity as the quality of the assessment exercise depends on the level of experience, understanding and insight of the individual external assessors hence does not ensure credibility, transparency, uniformity and consistency. In such a scenario, there are likely to be as many interpretations of students' teaching competences as there are external assessors as each assessor focuses on those teaching attributes that interest him/her most. This raises a fundamental question that, if the external quality regulation function fails to provide a standard measure of quality teaching, how else can continuous improvement in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice be enhanced?

(Insert Table1 here)

(Insert Figure 1here)

Post-assessment meeting held by external quality assessors

Data from documents analysis revealed that the external quality assessors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice held brief debriefing exit meetings with the academic staff to conclude the

external assessment visit. The holding of brief debriefing exit meetings with the academic staff provides the team of external assessors with an opportunity to table their findings, observations and recommendations. Data from document analysis revealed that the debriefing exit meetings dwelt much on the quality of students' teaching performance and are silent on the quality of programme's internal assurance mechanism which include the quality of mentoring, the quality and regularity of mentor and lecturer supervision and assessment and the provision of support services for students, mentors and lecturers. These elements provide a foundation for ensuring continuous improvement of the programme. The practice of holding debriefing meetings with academic staff by external assessors resonates well with global practice in external quality assessment or evaluation and concurs with Smout (2002) and Thune (2003) though falls short by only concentrating on students' teaching performances.

Data show that soon after the visit, the team of external quality assessors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice produces a final report that details the findings, requirements, and recommendations for further consideration by the department to facilitate continuous improvement and accountability of the cited elements. The practice of producing a final report is in tandem with global trends in external quality assessment or evaluation as reflected by (Friend-Pereira et al., 2002; Smout, 2005; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993). After the presentation of the final report, the teaching practice department concerned draws an action plan indicating how it intends to fortify the observed strengths and correct the weaknesses. This practice in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice is in tandem with global practice on external quality evaluation (Friend-Pereira et al., 2002; Smout, 2005; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993). Similarly, in South Africa, according to the Higher Education Quality Committee (2004) after an external quality audit, the institution is required to develop and implement a quality improvement plan in response to the recommendations specified in the final audit report.

Data from the majority of the teaching practice lecturers revealed that the final external assessment report was only distributed to the DTE and the institution concerned and was not published which is contrary to what happens in most countries in Europe and in South Africa where external quality assessment or evaluation reports are published on institutions' websites for the benefit of the stakeholders and the public (Wastiau-Schluter (2006). Failure to publicize the external assessment report on teaching practice in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education model deprives the interested public and stakeholders of information about the quality of

programmes being offered by the individual institutions. This failure also deprives potential students and their parents of comparative information on which to base their programme and institutional choices and to establish whether the programme of study is organized and run properly and that an appropriate educational experience being delivered would lead to students' professional transformation (Wastiau-Schluter (2006). The failure to publicize the external quality evaluation reports does not promote the culture of public accountability of higher education institutions towards society in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teacher education.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study clearly show that peer academics and professionals from foreign countries were not invited to participate as external quality assessors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice programme. Failure to involve academics from foreign countries as external quality assessors leaves the credibility and legitimacy of Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice programme to international standards and developments in the field in doubt. The non involvement of external quality assessors from other countries does not guarantee accountability and continuous improvement of the programme in the eyes of the regional and international academic and professional peers and market accountability to potential regional and international employers.

A major conclusion of the study is that lecturers from the same institution with the examinees participated as their students' external quality assessors. The study revealed that the use of local lecturers as external quality assessors over their own students compromised quality since it was tantamount to the same lecturers assessing their work and could not fail themselves. This practice could also be seen as a form of inbreeding and does not help generate new ideas to the institution that enhance continuous improvement of the teaching practice programme in tandem with global developments in the field of teacher education. The admission by lecturers that the use of local lecturers as external quality assessors of their own students was not standard practice but was born out of the economic meltdown crisis in the country when it became very difficult to sponsor or finance external assessors from other colleges reveals their dissatisfaction with the practice and preference for independent professional experts under normal circumstances. This practice does not enhance the teaching practice programme's continuous improvement and

accountability to peers, academics, funders and employers hence the study recommends that the practice be discontinued.

While decisions pertaining to quality should be drawn from a variety of sources, the study revealed that the external quality assessors used the lesson observation as sole means of data collection and did not interview the stakeholders as is the global norm in quality evaluation in higher education. The sole use of lesson observation as means of collecting data focuses the external quality assessors' attention only on the students' lesson delivery skills and competences and excludes the teaching practice programme's internal quality assurance mechanisms that include student mentoring, the regularity of lecturer and mentor supervision and assessment and the provision of support services. Failure to interview stakeholders excludes contributions from key stakeholders such as lecturers, mentors, former students, employers, external advisory committees, alumni and funders that could enhance continuous improvement of the teaching practice programme. The sole use of lesson observation by the external quality assessors leads to summative judgments based on the quality of students' exhibited teaching skills and competences. If the main emphasis of external quality assessment is on making summative decisions then the agenda is managerial rather than academic in which accountability takes a higher priority over continuous improvement. Hence the findings of this study conclusively show that the external quality assessment practice in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice is skewed more towards accountability than continuous improvement of the programme.

The study also concludes that the external quality assessors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice do not use standard lesson assessment instruments to ensure uniformity among the external evaluators. Failure to use a standard assessment instrument leaves the student teachers to the mercy of the individual external assessors and does not guarantee a systematic and purposeful assessment that is bent on facilitating both accountability and continuous improvement of the teaching practice programme.

On a positive note, the study revealed that external quality assessors in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice do hold debriefing exit meetings with the academic staff to conclude the external assessment visit in which they tabled their findings, observations and recommendations and thereafter the external assessment team produces a final report that detail the findings, requirements, and recommendations aimed at facilitating continuous improvement of the teaching practice programme. The practice of holding brief debriefing exit meetings with staff

and production of a final report after the external assessment exercise is in tandem with current global practice in higher education and is commendable hence should be maintained.

A concern from the study is the fact that the final external assessment report was only distributed to the DTE and the individual institution concerned and was not made public. Failure to publicize the external assessment report does not encourage accountability to society by Zimbabwe's teacher education institutions and deprives the public and stakeholders of information about the quality of programmes being offered to enable them to make informed career choice decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides the following recommendations for consideration by primary teacher education institutions:

- That independent external quality assessors from sister colleges and the international institutions be invited to participate to ensure that higher education institutions share best practices in teaching practice that facilitate continuous improvement of the programme.
- That the practice of using local lecturers as external quality assessors to their own students in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice be discontinued.
- That lesson observation to be used in conjunction with interviews to enhance both accountability and continuous improvement. This way, external quality assessors collect data on students' teaching competences from key stakeholders and on the programme's strengths to fortify, weaknesses to rectify, opportunities to utilize and threats to counteract.
- That the external quality assessors of final year students in Zimbabwe's 2-5-2 teaching practice make use of a standard assessment instrument to ensure that all evaluators focus on uniform or identical teaching attributes that promote accountability and continuous improvement of the teaching practice programme.
- That the final external quality assurance reports be publicized to promote a culture of public accountability to society by teacher education institutions.

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Table1: External assessment of students on teaching practice

	Agree		Disagree		Not sure		TOTAL	
	no	%	n	%	no	%	no	%
Evaluators from foreign countries-mentors	5	5	67	67	28	28	100	100
Evaluators from foreign countries-students	4	4	51	51	45	45	100	100
Evaluators from foreign countries-lecturers	7	25	20	71.43	1	3.57	28	100
Local lecturers as external evaluators-mentors	38	38	40	40	22	22	100	100
Local lecturers as external evaluators-	34	34	38	38	28	28	100	100

students			8				0	
Local lecturers as external evaluators-lecturers	21	75	6 3	21.4	1	3.57	28	100
Interviewing stakeholders-mentors	13	13	6 8	68	19	19	10 0	100
Interviewing stakeholders-students	8	8	4 6	46	46	46	10 0	100
Interviewing stakeholders-lecturers	5	17.8 6	2 0	71.4 3	3	10.7 1	28	100
Use of lesson observation-mentors	68	68	1 9	19	13	13	10 0	100
Use of lesson observation-students	73	73	2	2	28	28	10 0	100
Use of lesson observation-lecturers	28	100	0	0	0	0	28	100

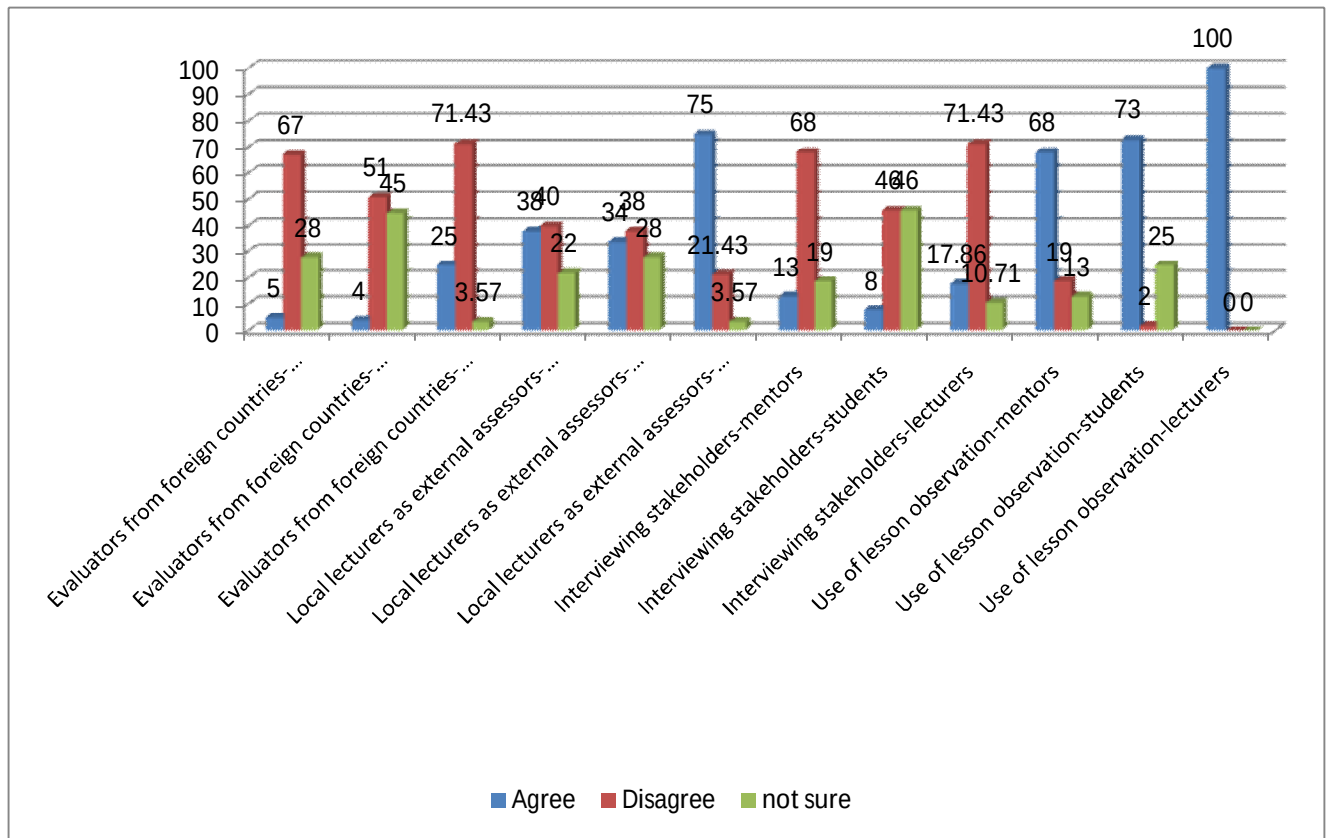


Figure 1: External assessment of students on teaching practice