Conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University:

Any missing links?

BY

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY.

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to uncover the missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University. It was positioned alongside the transactional distance theory, informed by a qualitative case study. It employed interviews, observations and questionnaires to solicit for information from a purposive sample of 344 staff and students. The study found out that respondents honed their responses towards a miscellany of ideas and management practices as is common in the literature rather than a coherent philosophy or approach to fostering continuous quality improvement. While most literature indicate that trends throughout the world emphasise on a linear relationship in observing and planning of quality initiatives, it fails to consider the issues of power, chance, opportunism, and accident as influential in shaping continuous improvement (Doherty, 2008). The literature appears to leave room for the role of local and institutional discourses rooted in the particular histories, contextual challenges and cultures of institutions. The study found out that the university under study is in the midst of instructional and technological changes and as a result, conditions fostering continuous quality improvement from a globalised viewpoint are still at the early stages of development. Quality is constrained by lack of a coherent philosophy for quality manifesting in the form of a credible global perception of the kind of university that everyone is aspiring to, resulting in continuous quality improvement efforts having different starting points. While the university has a well articulated vision of being world class, what appeared missing is ownership of this vision, motive to achieve great things, empathy and mutual trust. The university has a highly qualified, committed and dedicated staff but shortcomings related to a focused, trusted, sensitive personnel driven by values, beliefs, attitudes and philosophical underpinnings of open and distance learning were evident. The institution, as is common in the literature, only stopped at addressing the technical ‘know how’ of delivering quality yet the missing link appeared to be attending to the overall values and philosophical bases of quality in an ODL context. A cultural shift towards quality customer service values was seen as missing because student queries took long to be addressed. The study also uncovered the otherness tag hovering around open and distance learning practices that is fuelled by a hidden hand of power. Above all else, quality was seen as a paradoxical journey.

The value, intellectual contribution and new message of this study is providing a thought framework of the overarching conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an ODL context from a new perspective based on a case study. This case study serves as a mirror to other ODL institutions in recognising and managing the delicate dynamics of quality. The study thus, concludes that while literature point out that the university can make a difference through funding, staff development, technology and leadership, it cannot go far as what it achieves is partial and limited unless a culture shift towards quality service values is put in place. The university, as part of the wider society is subject to the dictates of the society whose attitudes have devastating effects on quality. The study recommends that quality processes require a supportive environment that explicitly recognises quality as a work value and as an enabler for reaching organisational goals. Quality is a life culture rather than an enhancing methodology. Thus, a useful insight was gained into perceived importance of quality in open and distance learning that can stimulate debate and discussion on the issue.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I am grateful for the support of my family. I could not have completed this project had it not been for the support and encouragement of my wife, Marian. This project has not been merely my dream, but our dream, and together we pulled it off! I hope that the future will prove that the effort was worth the price, and that together we can enjoy the rewards. Our children, Pride, Vongai, Marvellous and Alice demonstrated an understanding and maturity during the years that we were a family of students.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all my children, grand children and great grand children who shall aspire to attain similar qualifications.
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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AAOU: Asian Association of Open Universities
AAU: Association of African Universities
AFT: American Federation of Teachers
ANQAHE: Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
AP: Asia and the Pacific
AQANHE: African Quality Assurance Network for Higher Education
BMAS: Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards
CCS: Commitment to customer service
CEE: Central and Eastern Europe
CHEA: Council for Higher Education Accreditation
COL: Commonwealth of Learning
D.Phil: Doctor of Philosophy
ENQA: European Network of Quality Assurance
EQAM: European Quality Award Model,
EQM: External Quality Monitoring
HEC: Higher Education Council
HIV: Human Immune-deficiency Virus
HMIE: Her Majesty Inspectorate of Education
ICT: information and communication technology (ICT),
IMHE: Institutional Management in Higher Education
INQAAHE: International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education
LCD: Liquid crystal display projectors
LMX: Leader-Member Exchange
MPATI: Midwest Programme on Airborne Television Instruction
NAC: National Aids Council
NCES: National Centre for Education Statistics
NKI: Norwegian Knowledge Institute
OD: Organisational Development
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<td>ODL:</td>
<td>Open and Distance Learning</td>
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<td>ODLAA:</td>
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<td>OER:</td>
<td>Open Educational Resources</td>
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<td>OHP:</td>
<td>Overhead projectors</td>
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<td>OMU:</td>
<td>Open University Malaysia</td>
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<td>OU:</td>
<td>Open University</td>
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<td>PED:</td>
<td>Provincial Education Director</td>
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<td>Ph. D:</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy</td>
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<td>PSIP:</td>
<td>Public Sector Investment programme</td>
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<td>QA:</td>
<td>Quality Assurance</td>
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<td>QDA:</td>
<td>Qualitative data analysis</td>
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<td>SADC:</td>
<td>Southern Africa Development Community- Centre for Distance Education</td>
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<td>SADC-CDE:</td>
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<td>UK:</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<td>UNDP:</td>
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<td>UNESCO:</td>
<td>United Nations Education and Scientific Organisation</td>
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<td>UNESCO:</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
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<td>UNIDO:</td>
<td>United Nations Industrial Development Organisation</td>
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<td>UNISA:</td>
<td>University of South Africa</td>
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<td>WB:</td>
<td>World Bank</td>
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<td>WIDE:</td>
<td>West Indies Distance Education Centre</td>
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<td>WOM:</td>
<td>Word of mouth (marketing)</td>
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<tr>
<td>WTO:</td>
<td>World Trade Organization</td>
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<td>ZIMCHE:</td>
<td>Zimbabwe National Council for Higher Education</td>
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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM AND ITS CONTEXT

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

International development, particularly structural development, quality assurance and increased co-operation present new challenges for higher education institutions (Kettunen, 2008), which compete and co-operate in the global market (Rahman and Azhar 2010) and think beyond the immediate context (Filippakou and Tapper, 2007). Competition and cooperation have led to a situation where trust in the standard of higher education is no longer a sufficient requisite to guarantee quality. What is now needed is that higher education should be transparent and credible internationally and enable student and labour mobility (Kettunen, 2008). In this context there is need for rethinking quality and improvement in higher education (Houston 2008) and revisit institutional autonomy (Moses 2007) and then interrogate the state of practices (Hensher in Rahman and Azhar, 2010). In this regard, this case study confronted the controversial question regarding the conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an open and distance education context. The study thus, interrogated practices in the Zimbabwe Open University in order to uncover the missing links. This study sought to advance scholarship on the topic of continuous quality improvement in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) by examining the practices in the Zimbabwe Open University.

Defining quality in any context is not an easy task. In an educational environment, the complexities are heightened. To address the research question in this study, the theoretical model for defining quality in higher education, devised by Harvey and Green (1993) is applied in an open and distance teaching context. In this model, quality can be viewed as: exceptional,
perfection (or consistency), fitness for purpose, value for money or transformation (Harvey and Green, 1993). Each category or definition of quality is briefly defined as follows. Exception: Distinctive, embodied in excellence, passing a minimum set of standards. Perfection: Zero defects, getting things right the first time (focus on process as opposed to inputs and outputs). Fitness for purpose: Relates quality to a purpose, defined by the provider. Value for money: A focus on efficiency and effectiveness, measuring outputs against inputs. A populist notion of quality (government). Transformation: A qualitative change; education is about doing something to the student as opposed to something for the consumer: includes concepts of enhancing and empowering: democratisation of the process, not just outcomes. These sentiments are also echoed by Watty (2005) who argues that quality in higher education, in its various guises, is often referred to in terms of: efficiency, high standards, excellence, value for money, fitness for purpose or customer focused. This research looked at quality as continuous improvement. Quality as continuous improvement can be defined as a purposeful and explicit set of principles, practices, and techniques adopted to generate ongoing, systematic, and cumulative improvement in the processes and output of an organization (Witell, Antoni, and Dahlgaard, 2005). Continuous quality improvement is also based on TQM principles. According to Witell et al (2005), a review of TQM literature has shown that TQM principles – top management commitment, supplier quality management, continuous improvement, product innovation, benchmarking, employee involvement, reward and recognition, education and training, customer focus, and product quality – are critical prerequisites to successful TQM implementation.
In many parts of the world, the subject of quality in post-secondary education has received increasing attention. This is as a result of the rapid expansion of this sector in the recent education reform and the demand for the sector to respond to the trend of globalisation and to meet the ever-changing expectations of the respective communities in their development into knowledge-based societies (Law, 2010). In this regard, over the past few years, there has been a significant growth in quality initiatives aimed towards improving service delivery at institutional, national, regional and global levels (Williams, 2008). Quality has become a matter of major importance for higher education institutions generally but particularly so for institutions involved in distance learning (Twigg, 2000; Inglis, 2008 and Belawati and Zuhairi 2007). Within the higher education sector, the interest in quality was influenced by developments overseas where quality was taken as a response to public demands for accountability (Cleveland-Innes and Garrison 2010). In this case, this study confronted the issue of conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an open and distance learning context by interrogating practices in the Zimbabwe Open University taking into account that there is now consensus that in the context of post-secondary education, the concept of quality is multifaceted, value laden and stakeholder relative (Van Kemenade, Pupius and Hardjono, 2008).

The growing concern with quality in higher education has led institutions in many countries to look for ways of managing quality processes. Agencies such as European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA), International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education (INQAAHE), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), typically work together and share information about quality, standards, benchmarks and best practices (Belawati and Zuhairi, 2007). To Gola (2003), quality involves articulating
academic standards to meet society’s expectations, students’ aspirations, government’s demands, business and industry: and the requirements of professional institutions (Gola 2003:28). Thus, this study examined how far conditions and practices in the university under study were meeting these critical goals given that distance education must confront the widespread perception of poor quality of programmes, learning materials and support, and low throughput and success rates relative to the face-to-face institutions (Badat, 2005).

Universities fulfil significant functions economically, socially, environmentally and culturally (Zhao, 2002). This triggered this research considering that, with the rapid changes and development in every aspect of the world in recent years, most universities profess a commitment to the processes of change as they are confronted with formidable challenges as well. Globalisation, the advancement and convergence of information and communication technology (ICT), diversification of funding sources of higher education, and social and environmental issues are among the top major challenges that universities have to address (Neely and Tucker, 2010) prompting this research. Internationalisation of curriculum and the demand for e-learning and e-teaching impose great pressure on universities to achieve a breakthrough in the traditional contents and forms of educational delivery (Chiome and Kurasha, 2011). In this regard, it is pertinent to know how conditions in a university heighten or enhance quality practices.

Quality is also a contemporary topic triggered by a global tendency towards diversification of funding sources of higher education particularly the decrease in government funding over the past decade (Horngren and Harrison 2007). Another prominent trigger from an international
perspective is that higher education confronts dual pressures – of rapid growth in participation from a broadened socio-economic mix of students, and of an increasingly severe financial stringency (Moses, 2007). The funding deficiency has affected higher education infrastructure and most importantly, challenged academic freedom and institutional autonomy as universities are increasingly depending on private and industry funding (Zhao, 2001). It is important to interrogate practices in an open and distance education context to find out the extent to which the conditions enhance quality. The university under study has been long on ambition but short on financial resources (Chiome, 2011a; Mukeredzi and Ndamba, 2007).

Today, universities cannot escape from the impending changes as they have a broad public responsibility such as smooth transition to the knowledge economy (Daniel, 2007). This requires universities to develop new forms of relationship with their communities because academic integrity is an imperative (Gallant, 2008). There are complex social and environmental issues facing universities. For instance, Nelson (2002) posits that in Australia, these issues include regional security, social cohesion, bio-ethics and water quality. Universities have the responsibility to address the issues through research and development and providing intellectual leadership (Nelson, 2002). In this regard quality and academic integrity is a teaching and learning imperative as it is a bedrock of what Tierney (1998) called a responsive university. More so in open and distance learning since ODL has a daunting task to convince the public that it is credible (Mhlanga, 2010).

A look at Asia reveals that with 56 percent of the global population, it has over 70 universities dedicated to open access to education serving six million active students altogether (Daniel in
Jung, 2007). This increasing numbers of student enrolments driven by the paradigm of open access to education, in line with the belief of student autonomy and independence (Moore 2007), the issue of quality has become more pressing than ever before. According to a survey by Jung (2005), a quality culture has been emerging in the ODL institutions in this part of the globe. The findings of the survey were that all mega universities (universities with over 100 000 active students in degree-level courses) have developed and implemented Quality Assurance standards and procedures in key areas of distance education activities. They developed a more systematic and coherent quality culture. Capacity building efforts have also been instituted because technological boundaries had constrained the development of distance education (Cleveland-Innes and Garrison 2010). In this part of the world, at least half of the mega universities provide continuous staff development opportunities to improve the knowledge and skills of their academic and administrative staff. In comparison, the conditions in the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) need to be questioned to see how far they embraced these valuable lessons from the Asian universities. It is Jung (2005)’s position that considering the high number of student enrolment, quality assurance (QA) efforts of the ODL universities are becoming more important than ever for the future of higher education. ODL institutions are in the midst of instructional and technological changes and the QA frameworks of ODL in a globalised context are still at the early stages of development (Jung 2005). This appears to point to a need for investigating a wide range of innovative and good practices in ODL to uncover missing links. This prompted this study.

The concern for quality in higher education is there the world over. For instance, in America, distance education courses for academic credit have been expanding dramatically at colleges and universities (Ticoll, 2010). From 1995 to 1998, the use of Internet based courses grew from
22 percent of institutions to 60 percent (AFT 2001). A National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) survey estimated that more than 1.6 million students were enrolled in distance education courses in 1997 to 1998 (AFT 2001). Cotton in Twigg (2001) says ninety-four percent of all colleges and universities are either currently (63%) or planning to be (31%) engaged in distance and distributed learning. This expansion is coming up at a time when proponents of distance education point out that the practice may allow learning to reach thousands or even millions on an ‘anytime anywhere’ bases. For this reason, the conditions in ODL institutions need to be interrogated to see the extent to which they enhance quality. Kanwar (2011) and Mhlanga (2010) agree and add that there is belief in some quarters that this extraordinary growth, is outstripping the existing quality assurance capabilities of state agencies, accrediting associations and similar groups.

Concern for quality has been seen through partnerships. For instance, Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia (ODLAA) is a professional association for teachers, developers, researchers and other partners involved in open and distance learning (Kettunen, 2008). Its main concern is on enhancing partnerships through quality provision of distance education by its members. It offers various services to its members which include publications, research conferences, awards, consultancy services, distance education journals and symposiums that are targeted at the improvement of teaching and other services. The Zimbabwe Open University is a member of a similar organisation-the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa. What is missing though is the extent to which the Zimbabwe Open University has benefited from its association membership by enhancing the conditions fostering continuous quality improvement.
The Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) (Kariem 2010) is another organisation that was formed to enhance quality. The ANQAHE was established in 2007 as a non-profit non-governmental organisation. The purpose to establish the ANQAHE was to create a mechanism between the Arab countries in order to, among other things: exchange information about quality assurance; construct new quality assurance agencies or organisations; develop standards to establish new quality assurance agencies or support the already present one; disseminate good practice in quality assurance and strengthen liaison between quality assurance bodies in the different countries (Kariem, 2010). This appears plausible though the question remains as to how these lessons have cascaded into the ODL contexts so that quality is heightened. This research appeared to put this to rest as it sought to interrogate practices in an ODL institution to ascertain the missing links in enhancing quality.

Higher education existed in colonial Africa with clear objectives to produce graduates that would facilitate colonial administration (AAU, 2009). According to Materu (2007), as African countries gained independence, administrators saw the need to significantly increase the number and quality of personnel required to drive the machinery of the new independent administrations, as well as provide structures for national development. The universities consequently increased, in numbers, and courses offered (Tagoe, 2008). Furthermore, the lure of “white collar” jobs and the realisation that university degrees emancipated the mind, literally guaranteed a job and enhanced the social status of graduates, provided the elixir that promoted the attractiveness of higher education (AAU, 2009). As a result, enrolment soared, in many countries far beyond the capacity
of established higher educational institutions. This became a trigger needed to interrogate the capacity of an African university to deliver quality service under such circumstances.

Tagoe, (2008) takes a position that quality is imperative in university education in Africa. He argues that universities in Africa are confronted by challenges brought about by demand for efficiency, competitiveness, increased transparency and accountability; increasing mobility, globalisation, cross-border recognition and harmonisation of qualifications and awards; rising private contributions and interest in higher education; the challenge of the new modes of delivery to traditional approaches to higher education development; expansion in tertiary enrolments in Africa without a matching increase in funding; increased market demand for quality and relevance of education and the challenges of brain drain (Tagoe 2008:5). This being the case, what is missing though in Tagoe’s argument appears to be the extent to which ODL institutions continuously improve quality under the circumstances. The Association of African Universities (AAU) launched a new phase of its quality assurance work in 2007. Support for member universities of the AAU to develop strong internal quality assurance mechanisms is a case in point. This was also followed by support to existing and emerging quality assurance or accreditation agencies for development of capable external evaluation and monitoring systems within national higher education systems and development and implementation of regional framework on recognition of studies, certificates, diplomas, degrees and other academic qualifications in higher education in Africa was done (AAU, 2009). This was based on the Arusha convention, as an instrument to enhance inter-university collaboration and student mobility (AAU, 2009). This then shows there is need to question current practices in order to unearth missing links, considering that quality higher education in Africa could improve
retention of skilled human capital (Tagoe, 2008). Nyaigotti-Chacha and Ayoo (2001) point out that African universities like their counterparts elsewhere are struggling to emerge from a decade of crisis. A number of challenges such as rapid growth, the brain drain, frequent labour strife, campus closures, institutional deterioration, waning relevance and declining educational quality all teamed up to produce a generation of graduates feared to be less capable and probably less qualified than they were ten years ago. They further allege that research, a hitherto core function of the university system, has virtually ceased at many of these universities. At stake is the quality and relevance of the education offered against the background of globalisation and advances in information technology. This makes this research that seeks to interrogate practices to uncover missing links in the capacity of an ODL university to deliver quality services a more interesting and relevant venture.

African countries look to tertiary education to make a significant contribution to economic growth and competitiveness. In such circumstances, according to Materu (2007), improvements in the quality of programmes and institutions are critical. What this means is that the future of all universities who fail to confront and adapt is uncertain (Mhlanga, 2010). To contend with the rapid expansion in enrolment, it has become necessary to have in place mechanisms to assure that adequate resources are continually available and that the process of higher education provision is at least satisfactory and consistent with international norms (Doiron and Asselin, 2011). A focus on quality can be one way of confronting these issues. In this regard, the capacity of universities to meet stakeholder expectations becomes indispensable. The situation in a distance teaching university cannot be different from the other universities across the
continent. In this context, the next section looks at the context of open and distance teaching universities.

In the contemporary world, new forms of education which include distance education programmes, twinning arrangements, branch campuses, franchised operations, overseas partnerships, corporate universities and virtual universities are adding pressing pressures to the quality concerns (Stella and Gnanam, 2004: Pp. 143-148). Of these, distance education is growing rapidly, not only as a supplement to traditional institutions and programmes, but also as a replacement of those institutions and programmes (Mhlanga, 2010). Allen and Seaman (2008) reported a 12% increase in students taking at least one online course from 2007 to 2008. The growth is expected to continue over the next five years with estimates placing the number of students engaging in distance education in 2014 at over 18.5 million students (Nagel in Neely and Tucker, 2010). This expansion, on the surface appears plausible but Mhlanga (2010) makes it clear that universities cannot afford to expand at the total expense of quality. Quality in distance learning is linked to quality in higher education in general though there are some distinctive features of distance learning. The focus on quality appears to be driven by the needs that quality will satisfy. The current scenario of ODL higher institutions has several factors in common (Chiome, 2011a; Cleveland-Inns and Garrison, 2010; Mhlanga, 2010; AAU, 2009; Tagoe 2008; Montalvo, 2005; Alstete, 2004 and Poley and France, 1998). Some of the factors are that costs have been rising due to the increasing number of people enrolling as students and economic restrictions that imply better efficiency. Others are rapid knowledge development, growing public impatience with costs of education and lack of accountability and educational systems that are highly inefficient and characterised by high dropout (Mhlanga 2010).
The right of students to be informed about the quality issues of the institutions is well documented (Chiome, 2011a) and commonly accepted. Universities as public service points must prove the quality of their actions. Activities undertaken in higher education institutions are susceptible to control processes to enhance efficacy and efficiency (Montalvo, 2005:5). For these and other reasons, analysis of capacity to deliver quality services is an essential topic for national, regional and international debate. The factors stated here all point to the fact that quality should receive the seriousness that it deserves in open and distance teaching institutions.

Not only does distance education bridge special barriers to education; it also accommodates the lifestyle and personal circumstances of students (Cleveland-Inns and Garrison, 2010). It was the mission of this research, to work towards that goal.

According to Twigg (2001), many members of the higher education community approach the issue of quality in distance learning not as a desired end but as a problem that need to be solved. One reason for this is that there are many people who hold the belief that distance learning is so different from classroom-based education that new and separated standards of quality are needed. One participant even had the tenacity to ask: “how can a teaching/learning process that deviates so markedly from what has been practiced for hundreds of years embody quality education?” (IHEP cited in Twigg, 2001).

Quality indicators are also used in higher education as lenses for quality. Some of these are that quality equals tenured full-time faculty member with a Ph. D. teaching the course. It equals courses offered by and on a residential campus. It is equal to students learning by sitting in the same room with a professor (Twigg, 2001). This kind of thinking, which is part and parcel of
higher education thinking, brings complications to the capacity to meet quality criteria in an open and distance teaching university like the Zimbabwe Open University because there are other players in higher education who are frankly suspicious of distance education and think that its programmes are of low standards. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) (2001:5) stated:

A good number of educators remain sceptical of distance learning. Believing that teaching and learning are inherently social processes, these educators consider same-time same-place interaction central to a successful educational experience. This at least shows that there are still many people who think learning cannot take place in the absence of face-to-face interaction. Under the circumstances, it is important to focus on quality if distance education need to convince these sceptics, particularly those who lack first hand familiarity with distance learning (Chiome, 2011a).

Distance education appears to lack political support (Siaciwena, 2011). According to Siaciwena and Lubinda (2008), the Directorate of Distance and Open learning in Zambia which administers all open and distance learning activities in the Ministry of Education received 0.2 percent of the total ministry budget in 2006. In fact, they report that many educational policy makers, planners and parents are reportedly sceptical about the legitimacy and quality of open and distance learning provisions on grounds that it does not and cannot offer the same quality as conventional, on campus education. Siaciwena and Lubinda (2008), claim that the University of Zambia created opportunities for marginalised groups to acquire education through open and distance learning yet it is frequently snubbed when it comes to funding and political support. However, they point out that open and distance learning institutions lack effective quality assurance systems. They do not have adequate monitoring, research and evaluation base that is
needed to support informed policy choices, pointing out that ‘there is insufficient information on the performance of programmes and this raises doubts about their quality and tends to reinforce negative attitudes towards open and distance learning’ (Siaciwena and Lubinda 2008:10). It can be deduced from the discussion that the lack of comprehensive frameworks for coordinating various ODL initiatives leaves ODL outside most quality assurance and accreditation frameworks. This makes students and other stakeholders vulnerable to low quality provision and disreputable providers of ODL. This research then attempts to fill this void by examining the missing links in the capacity to deliver quality service in a distance education university.

The majority of the research on quality has been conducted in the conventional situations and environment, concentrating on more traditional methods of face-to-face encounters (Lewis and Smith, 1994; Zhao, 2002; Alstete, 2004; Abdullah, 2006; Chen, Sok and Sok, 2007; Houston, 2008; Rubanju, 2008; Tee Ng, 2008; Law, 2010 andMuijs, 2011). A relatively small amount of information has been gathered in the area of Open and Distance learning (Jung, 2005; Knowles and Kalata, 2006; Rabbi and Arefin, 2006; Chikuya, 2007; Siaciwena and Lubinda, 2008 and Kanwar, 2011). Consequently, knowledge of what is provision of distance learning and how it supports student-learning outcomes is relatively thin, with only a small number of studies providing insight (Gokool-Ramadoo, 2008). The same authors have long forecasted this scenario by recognising that while quite a lot of research has been done on the effectiveness of media, course design techniques and instruction, very little has been done to find out what are effective policies and what are the effective mechanisms for making policy at either national, regional or institutional level (Moore and Kearsley cited in Gokool-Ramadoo, 2008). It is a
research gap that needs to be attended to if providers of open and distance learning are to truly understand how to support student learning through non-traditional means.

The Context of the university under study

At independence in 1980, the Zimbabwe government adopted campaign style strategies to institute educational reforms in the country. Enrolments rose by leaps and bounds (Zvobgo 1985). The 1980 education for all policy saw a rapid expansion of secondary and primary schools. The impact of the large expansion was felt in higher education in 1984 and 1986 as the students who had begun secondary education in 1980 then completed their ‘O’ and ‘A’ levels (Zindi, 2006). The growing mass education cascaded into colleges, polytechnics and universities, resulting in a mismatch between number of school leavers and number of places in higher education institutions. The government reacted by appointing the Williams Commission in 1989. The commission was tasked with the mandate to find ways of addressing the high demand for university education. The commission, after through work, recommended among other things the establishment of a second university in Bulawayo; the establishment of private universities and the establishment of the Zimbabwe National Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) (Williams Commission, 1989).

The National Council for Higher Education Act was passed in 1990, which called for the introduction of open and distance teaching modes. The University of Zimbabwe then established the University College for Distance Education in 1993. It later became Centre for Distance Education in 1997 and through an Act of parliament evolved into the Zimbabwe Open University in 1999 (Chikuya, 2007). This was a new era in the provision of higher education in Zimbabwe.
The Zimbabwe Open University is expanding current distance education offerings and creating new programmes to address growing enrolment. At the same time that distance education enrolments are increasing, all state universities are facing unprecedented pressures to cut costs (Chiome and Kurasha, 2011). State funding for higher education is being cut dramatically and university endowments have decreased in value (Siaciwena, 2011). In response to the growing pressures to reduce costs, many universities have looked to distance education, particularly online education, as the primary method for reaching more students while lowering instructional costs (Allen and Seaman, 2008). Studies have shown that while distance education may be more cost effective in some situations, university decision makers need to consider quality so that it may not be a sacrificial lamb in attempts to cut costs (Siaciwena, 2011). Thus, this study which focused on uncovering the missing links by interrogating practices in an ODL university was, in some way, answering to this call.

In terms of student numbers the Zimbabwe Open University with an enrolment of about 21 000 at its peak is the biggest university in Zimbabwe and the second in Southern Africa after UNISA (ZOU, 2010). It is a leading institution in Zimbabwe offering all its programmes through distance education. As it attempts to consolidate these pulsating quantitative gains the Zimbabwe Open University does so, on the backdrop of increased competition, dwindling government support, donor fatigue and a depressed educational market (Chiome, 2011a). According to the dictates of the Phillip’s curve, there is an inverse relationship between quantity and quality of educational provision. Studies undertaken in Brazil confirmed the inverse relationship between quantitative provision of education and quality (Psacharopoulos and Woodhall cited in Gallant, 2008). Thus, there is a trade-off between quality and quantity. Studies in the Zimbabwe Open
University by Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2007) confirmed that the Zimbabwe Open University was growing at a fast pace but there was a serious mismatch between resources and rising enrolments. The worst thing is that as the universities grapple with the large numbers of students, the socio-economic outlook is not sympathetic either. This makes this research imperative since it sought to interrogate practices to see if there are any missing links in delivering quality education through distance teaching methods.

As enrolment in distance learning continues to grow and universities continue to feel the pressure to adapt by expanding their course offerings in an effective and efficient manner, the problem of how to ensure quality will continue to be an issue (Ural, 2007; Tarawneh, 2011 and Chiome, 2011a). This research examines an important aspect-quality of education through distance teaching that is often overlooked when allocating costs to instruction and design in an effort to increase awareness among those tasked with policy making responsibilities in higher education institutions. ODL institutions have to be responsive organisations that are not abstracted from societal and client needs (Knowles and Kalata, 2007 and Ural, 2007). What this means is that these institutions must address the issue of quality as a matter of agency. Universities must strive to produce quality graduates because the issue of quality impinges on the work of universities in many ways (Palloff and Pratt, 2007). For example universities are keen to establish how they compare with one another, or at least with other similar universities (Inglis, 2008). It is now widely accepted that quality is at the heart of education (Nyaigotti-Chacha and Ayoo, 2001). Quality is thus fundamentally important for the future well being of learners (Chiome, 2011a).
Though distance education has significantly improved, there still remains a perceived lack of quality (Aluko, Hendrikz and Frazer, 2007). On paper the Zimbabwe Open University has scored a first in pursuit of quality. Its vision is to become a world-class open and distance learning university (ZOU, 2010). What is left is to see the tangible results on the ground through interrogation of practices to uncover missing links in quality service provision. Quality should be the guiding principle in the search for excellence (Doiron and Asselin, 2011) because quality education is one that satisfies basic learning needs, and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experience of living (World Education Forum, 2000).

The context of quality in the Zimbabwe Open University has been influenced by two factors. The first being a statutory requirement from the Zimbabwe Higher Education Council together with the provisions of the Nziramasanga Commission of 1999. The second is the developments taking place within distance education and other similar establishments across the globe. For instance, the Indonesia Open University adopted and contextualized the draft of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) QA Framework to launch its own quality assurance programme (Belawati and Zuhairi, 2007). Agencies such as European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA), International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education (INQAAHE) and the South Africa Quality Assurance Agency are some of the notable agencies that signal the extent of the thrust for quality and standards. Universities can ignore these developments at their own peril (Mhlanga, 2010 and Padro, 2010).

In 1993 when the then Centre for Distance Education was established by the University of Zimbabwe, there was no discussion about quality in particular. The term that was of concern
then was standards which referred to the extent of the content of the course of study, the pedagogical treatment it received and the standard norms for evaluating student achievement (Chikuya, 2007). Currently, the Zimbabwe Open University has established a quality assurance department whose vision and mission is to establish systematic step-by-step processes for quality assurance, development of the quality assurance framework, raising awareness for quality and integrating Quality Assurance programmes into the university's annual action plans to bring about change in teaching and learning (Moore, 2008). This shows that quality is indispensable as institutional policy and strategy for continuous improvements. However, the missing links in efforts to influence the achievement of quality in the Zimbabwe Open University are yet to be interrogated though there are some studies that were undertaken in the Zimbabwe Open University pinpointing to the need for such a study as discussed in the next section.

**Studies undertaken in the Zimbabwe Open University that points at the need for quality**

Several studies have been undertaken in the Zimbabwe Open University that point at the need for quality interventions. One prominent study was on factors affecting completion of research projects at the Zimbabwe Open University (Majoni and Chidakwa, 2004). This study among other things, found out that the students did not have adequate reading materials; students did not consult their supervisors regularly; students had difficulty in selecting the research topics and supervisors did not guide students adequately in research work. This being the case, the need for quality appear prominent from these findings.
On a similar note, a study by Pfukwa (2001) on teamwork approach in ODL study material production revealed that when modules are produced using the participatory process, quality and standards are assured. The study further revealed that ODL environment was full of exciting challenges and recommended that key actors must adopt a proactive approach in their activities; all key actors in ODL environment must be extremely innovative and flexible; and actors must not be afraid to come forward with innovations that initially look frightening but are actually brilliant ideas when implemented. The study appeared to point at some of the challenges of implementing teamwork in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). What is missing though is that teamwork and other practices need to be interrogated, and this study was an attempt to fill that void.

Another study by Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2007) on quality assurance and quality control strategies in the Zimbabwe Open University revealed that the university was growing at a fast pace, resulting in a mismatch between resources and enrolment and this had ripple effects such as delays in the processing and releasing of results; inadequate communication; overstretched services; overworked officers and inadequate workshops and seminars that are crucial for preparing and updating staff on efficient service delivery. Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2007) further unearthed that quality as an attribute of product and service is often ignored in favour of quantity. These findings appear to indicate that by and large, the practices that influence the achievement of quality are being ignored in the services offered by the Zimbabwe Open University. In this case, the quality of the end product may be suspect rendering this research indispensable as it sought to know if there were any missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement practices.
Further studies have been conducted in the Zimbabwe Open University on the role of tutorials (Majoni and Chidakwa, 2005). The findings of the study were that the tutorials were indispensable as the students benefited from them. The indispensability of tutorials means that they have to be conducted with a focus on quality. Such practices need to be interrogated even though a study by Chikuya (2007) revealed that open and distance learning was a suitable and effective means of delivering quality programmes. This can only be true provided an enhanced capacity is ensured. Alternative lines and forms of research are therefore needed as a matter of some urgency, addressing precisely these omissions and absences, and geared therefore to the possible reconceptualisation of the capacity of the university to deliver quality services.

Products, technology and price are vulnerable to emulation by competitors (Mabey, Salaman and Storey, 1998). Many companies choose now to differentiate themselves on something that they assume is less easy to copy: quality of customer service. This appears missing in ODL despite the contested nature of ODL even with the university vision of becoming a “World Class Open and Distance Learning University” (ZOU, 2010). Indeed an ODL university cannot afford to remain mute on defining, debating and finally agreeing on ways of enhancing its capacity to deliver quality. Where this is not insisted upon, total chaos ensues and this will threaten the whole idea of learning through an open and distance teaching university. In fact the reputation of the university is severely damaged if quality is not put in the forefront. Against this background, this research took the quality debate in ODL contexts further and analysed the extent to which conditions in such a university enhance capacity to deliver quality services from a transactional distance theory rooted in interpretivism standpoint.
1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM
The implementation of continuous quality improvement by open and distance learning institutions is increasing. However, the results are not always successful. The Zimbabwe Open University witnessed a long period of relative neglect and stagnation that resulted in gross decline in the quality of education provision. Despite this, the university was experiencing escalating enrolments rising from a modest 6000 in 2000 to 21000 at its peak in 2006 (ZOU, 2010). On top of this, other challenges such as declining resources, academic brain-drain, overcrowding, deteriorating infrastructure, lack of resources for non-salary expenditures, such as university buildings, books, modules and demoralised staff were also mounting. This had ripple effects such as missing results, unfinished modules, high staff turnover and delayed publication of results in some instances and a decline in the quality of teaching and research activities. This greatly affected continuous quality improvement. The danger is that students may get second rate education. It will be difficult to get a good reputation in ODL where the instructor and student are separated. To this end, this study examined the extent to which the conditions in the Zimbabwe Open University are fostering continuous quality improvement. This is a case study because quality concerns, protocols and practices appear to be context specific.

1.3 PURPOSE OF STUDY
The purpose of this study was to interrogate practices in the Zimbabwe Open University to see if there were any missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS
1.4.1 Main research question
The study was guided by the following research question: To what extent do conditions in the Zimbabwe Open University continuous foster quality improvement?

1.4.2 Sub questions

The research attempted to answer the following sub-questions.

1. How do principles guiding the university continuously foster quality improvement?

2. In what ways do conditions in the university continuous foster and instil the quality-oriented and quality-producing spirit in staff?

3. What are the missing links in student related conditions that continuously foster quality improvement in an ODL context?

4. To what extent do the university practices continuously foster quality improvement?

1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study amongst other things sought to:

1. Establish ways in which principles guiding practices continuous foster quality improvement and deepen the capacity of the university to deliver quality in an ODL context.

2. Examine the staff related missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an ODL context.

3. Uncover student related missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an ODL context.

4. Determine the missing links in overarching practices that foster continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University.
1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The Zimbabwe Open University has been mandated through an act of parliament (Zimbabwe Open University Act 1999) to offer affordable and flexible university education through distance education. This mandate can be accomplished through quality provision of products and services. Quality has been placed high on the agenda of educational leaders, policy makers, and the students’ ever demand for quality education. Stakeholders have been placing high expectations on the education system in general and the Zimbabwe Open University in particular. This compels the institution to aim for the production of high quality products, services, processes, and by extension, students and graduates.

This study is of particular significance to academics and other researchers as it was designed to add some empirical evidence that may be useful in the ongoing debate regarding quality in open and distance education. Focusing on the social constructions of staff and students, the study sought to add other voices to the ongoing debate on quality. The government of Zimbabwe has been seeking increased levels of accountability from publicly funded institutions like the Zimbabwe Open University through the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE). This research attempted albeit in a small way to meet these critical stakeholder concerns. This will also go a long way towards accomplishment of national goals of providing quality education to all deserving citizens.

The Nziramasanga Commission (1999) acknowledged that the Zimbabwe government has made significant strides in the quantitative provision of education. However, it recommended that the country now needed to address the qualitative aspect of education. The Ministry of Higher
Education responded by setting up the Higher Education Council (HEC). On its part, the Zimbabwe Open University put in place a quality assurance division. Nevertheless, a study to determine the missing links in conditions in the Zimbabwe Open University that heighten or enhance such quality practices has not been done. This research was an attempt to fill that void.

Quality is well-defined in the Zimbabwe Open University whose vision is to become a world class institution, but little is known about the ways in which conditions in this university heighten or enhance quality practices since the ways of attaining and sustaining quality were not given equal attention. This study may help to divert the attention to that direction.

This research attempted to help in creating and operating a new kind of thinking aimed at providing consultancy to the Zimbabwe Government guiding them firmly on how to be on track towards a more prosperous, sustainable and equitable future by making higher education a national public good. It sought to advance the thinking that the fundamental duty of higher education is life development in general, providing a highly acclaimed quality higher education for all on the basis of merit without discrimination. This study attempted to enable the Zimbabwe Open University to continuously meet the needs of national labour market and citizens across the country. The research sought to orient the Zimbabwe Open University not only to be reactive, but to be proactive and to create general development changes that interest stakeholders where the Zimbabwe Open University is the bridge connecting the future, the vehicle carrying the people for crossing to a prosperous future where a quality society Zimbabweans believe in, dream of and in need of is expected to be created. This research is justified on the basis that it
attempted to contribute in a small way towards the attainment of the university vision, mission and mandate through interrogating and informing practice.

1.7 ASSUMPTIONS OF THE STUDY
The study proceeded on the assumptions that:

- The authorities at the Zimbabwe Open University would avail to the researcher the important and confidential information that untangle the missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in the university.
- The various constituencies the researcher will face will be open, sincere and willing to contribute authentic information that will unravel the state of practice in the Zimbabwe Open University.

1.8 SCOPE OF THE STUDY
I chose to conduct a qualitative case study given the dynamic nature of the research problem and the interpretivist research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994) because case studies are extremely useful for understanding a particular and unique problem in an in-depth way. This study sought to know how conditions in the Zimbabwe Open University heighten or enhance quality. It interrogated missing links in guiding principles, customer focus, staff related quality issues and practices that heighten, deepen, intensify and enhance quality in an ODL context.

1.9 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY
This was a case study of the Zimbabwe Open University. It collected information from four of its ten regional centres using a purposive sample of staff and students. Missing links related to
guiding principles, deliverers of service, student related, products and processes and the use of technology were considered in this research.

1.10 DEFINITION OF SPECIAL TERMS AND EXPRESSIONS

The following terms are defined to show the context in which they were used in this research.

The term quality is, in the context of this research reputable academic content that satisfies basic learning needs, ensure student academic achievement using adequate and appropriate resources, pedagogic techniques and enriching the lives of learners and their overall experience of living.

To continuously improve, in the context of this research is uninterrupted in time, sequence, substance, or extent of making something better. It is deepening, intensifying, enhancing and or regularly sharpening the capacity to deliver quality.

The term Quality Assurance is, in the context of this research used to mean a systematic internal review of educational provision to make sure that they conform to acceptable standards of education, research and scholarship, and that infrastructure is being maintained.

The deliverers of service in this research are the full time academic and non academic staff and the part-time staff of the Zimbabwe Open University.

Guiding principles, in this study, include the philosophy, the beliefs, the values and the attitudes and feelings that guide action.

Distance education is defined in this research as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner.
Missing links are in the context of this research lacking the state of being connected to the ideal.

**ICT**: Acronym for Information Communication Technology

Technology is, in the context of this research, the practical application of scientific knowledge to practices.

The term **Open Learning** is in the context of this research, an organised educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimised either in terms of access, or of time and place, pace, methods of study, or a combination of these (Perraton, cited in Chikuya, 2007).

The term **Open and Distance Learning** is in the context of this research, an organised educational process in which a significant portion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner and where constraints on study are minimised either in terms of access, or of time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these.

In the context of this research, **conditions** are the institutional ways of orienting role expectancies (Parsons and Shils, 1951). They are institutional procedures that may be invisible to members.

1.11 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE RESEARCH

This interrogation of the state of practice in an ODL university to uncover missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement presents in this section an outline of the intellectual traditions that contributed to the theory in which the study is embedded. The section examines the continuous improvement framework, contested nature of power and
knowledge relationships and Transactional Distance Theory. These three serve as references for the interpretation of the conditions heightening and influencing the achievement of quality in an open and distance education context.

1.11.1 Continuous Improvement Framework

In this research, quality was taken as continuous improvement. Continuous improvement is one of the core values of quality management, which is a people-focused system that aims at continual increase of performance by stressing learning and adaptation as keys to the success of an organisation (Deming, cited in Temponi, 2011). According to Temponi (2011), continuous improvement in academic institutions means exploring the needs and expectations of the institutions’ customer base – who may be the faculty, the students, the staff, the board of regents, the accreditation agencies, and the members of the community – re-evaluating the effectiveness of programmes and total quality initiatives at large.

The essence of continuous improvement is captured by the Japanese word *kaizen*, which means incremental improvements of the on-going processes (Watty, 2005). This stance is echoed by Temponi (2011) who says the process of continuous improvement, in general terms; include people, equipment, supplies, materials, and producers. In the continuous improvement approach to quality, every step of the process of an organisation, of a service, and of an operation has room for improvement. This research interrogated practices in the Zimbabwe Open University to find out if this is being done.

1.11.2 Power Knowledge Relationship

This study argues that quality is socially constructed and this is why there can be no rational, objective and ultimate explanations of such a phenomena. What counts as quality is contested.
The whole debate about quality appear to centre on Michel Foucault (1980)’s assertions on power. He analysed the nature of power in a number of contexts. Prominent among these are prisons (1979), asylums (1976) and the social construction of sexuality (1988). One of his central contentions is that power, by analogy with mass-energy in physics, can be neither created nor destroyed, but only transformed and transferred. Further, power is intimately tied to knowledge, to the discourse of education and learning, and the production of truth, myths or deceptions. To Foucault (1980), power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. Basing on this, this study argues that some quality constructions become more powerful than others as a result of power. The actors in this game are not on a level playing field. The debate on quality is not one of equals because as Paechter (1999) puts it: ‘Some voices are more equal than others’. The most powerful is the state as it provides the funds to run the university. The top management in the university represents it. This top management is less in the business of improving the system and more in the business of controlling the system.

Cultural capital can be used to explain the inequalities of power in society in which this debate on quality in an open and distance teaching university is taking place. Cultural capital comprising the norms, values and practices of a society, is like economic capital. A resource that can be used (Bourdieu cited in Kuh and Love, 2000). Those having ready access to the various sources of capital, including cultural capital, comprise the dominant class in society. This class has the power to determine the norms and practices including the knowledge to be valued and taught. The collection of accepted norms and practice is “habitus” which is reproduced in educational institutions. Students who by virtue of their ethnicity, age, gender and or socio-economic status, for example, do not share in the prevailing habitus; find
themselves in unfamiliar and possibly alienating situations. From this, Berger (2000) theorises that such students may not succeed in institutions where their cultural capital is neither recognised nor valued. Yorke and Longden agree that “the level of cultural capital is associated with retention and success” (Yorke and Longden, 2004, p. 81).

In looking at the missing links in factors that contribute to quality, the invisible hand of power cannot be ruled out as power has the potential to permeate, characterise and constitute the social body. Goldberger (1996) shares “how knowledge, knowing, class, race, gender and culture all intersect and shape one another” (p. 8):

> In any society, there are privileged epistemologies—the socially valued ways for knowing for establishing and evaluating truth claims—that assume normative standing. When a person’s ways of knowing are at odds with the dominant culture, he or she may experience a sense of coercion over “the right way to know” or may feel called on to silence or give up ways of knowing that are devalued. (pp. 8-9)

The study interrogated the state of practice to unearth missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement. In so doing, it exposed the exercise of power through the conditions fostering continuous quality improvement. In fact, Foucault (1980) contends that power, institutionalises, professionalises and rewards its pursuit. There are powerful constituencies that control the means of production of knowledge. In this context, the missing links in conditions heightening and influencing the achievement of quality are subject to constraints of the power knowledge relationships.

1.1.1.3 Transactional Distance Theory (TDT)

The concept of “transactional distance,” was advanced by Michael Moore (1991). Here, “distance” is determined by the amount of communication or interaction which occurs between
learner and instructor, and the amount of structure which exists in the design of the course. Greater transactional distance occurs when a course has more structure and less communication (or interaction). A continuum of transactions might exist in this model, from less distant, where there is greater interaction and less structure, to more distant where there may be less interaction and more structure. There is, these days, the problem of conflating of distance learning with e-learning (Chiome and Kurasha, 2011). It could be argued that e-learning provides such a high level of interaction that the “distance” is necessarily smaller.

The Transactional Distance Theory is concerned with independent study and highlights the shared responsibility of the teaching/learning enterprise with the independence of the learner seen as the most important and desired outcome (Moore, 2007; Gokool-Ramdoo 2008). Student control and freedom is integral to 21stCentury life-long education and learning. According to Moore (2007), TDT entails shared negotiation through dialogue and structure between teacher and learner. Structure and pedagogical dialog help organise the teacher’s and learner’s reflective practice and enhances student participation (Deschenes and Maltais in Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008). It promotes meta-cognition which is thinking about and organising one’s learning especially in a university like the Zimbabwe Open University with students who are more mature who may require less structure possibly within the constructivist patterns of teaching. Learning happens through mutual sharing and negotiations of meaning between teacher and learner in such a manner that the locus of control shifts from one to the other constantly through the feedback process which Saba (2007) coined ‘the feedback loop’. As the locus of control shifts, and the learner persists along the educational programme, the ultimate result is the creation of the persisting autonomous learner (Gokool-Ramdoo 2008). It is argued then that the TDT can have
applications along all supply chains of the distance education enterprise that include principles, practices in the university, staff and students as it can explicate and ensure the sustainability of quality distance education in a technology-driven world.

1.12 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was a qualitative case study because of the dynamic nature of the research problem and the interpretivist research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Case studies are extremely useful for understanding a particular and unique problem in an in-depth way. Qualitative methodology was seen as appropriate because quality constructions have a natural setting, use interactive and humanistic method and quality missing links are fundamentally interpretive. The qualitative method was preferred because the actual findings of the study are beyond anticipation of the researcher. This research was exploratory and inductive in nature as it focused on the existing constructions of quality factors. Qualitative research deals more with theory building rather than testing. This was the goal of this study in which the researcher proceeded with the study with some conceptual notions regarding probable theory that could be used in the study. There is flexibility in qualitative study as the research enjoys freedom in using theories to change as events unfold. In this qualitative study, all phases like restructuring of research questions, data collection, data analysis, theory building and theory modifying went on almost simultaneously as they interacted with each other.

The qualitative method employed in this study, was hailed by Marxwell (cited in Tasnim, 2006) as best suited for some specific purpose such as: understanding meaning, context, identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences, generating new theories and understanding the
process by which actions take place and developing causal explanations (Maxwell cited in Tasnim, 2006, p. 7)

1.13 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The research had limitations and thus took cognisant of the following inherent limitations in it. One limitation was the uneasiness on the part of the interviewees that arose from the presence of a tape recorder in front of them they felt uncomfortable to have their voices recorded. The researcher did everything possible to defuse the uneasiness, and assured the interviewees that strict confidentiality and anonymity was maintained.

Another limitation was that the researcher conducted all interviews, site visits, observations, and data collection. The researcher also functioned as an insider, that is, one who understands realities of the experiences that were being examined from an insider’s perspective. Building a collaborative and interpersonal relationship with the participants was intentional. The researcher and the participants discussed the social, cultural, and political practices and policies within the open and distance education context using an interpretivist’s standpoint. Listening to responses as an insider, the author was familiar with their “experiences and reflections about the rewards, difficulties, risks, and personal attributes and skills needed” (Smyth & Holian, in Flick, 2004) to enhance capacity to deliver quality successfully under the conditions. The researcher thus made efforts not to twist, turn, avoid or influence the participants in this study. The engagement in insider organisational research did not in any way taint the findings of the study. Rather, it added depth, dimension and rigour to the process as the research remained guided by the research questions which were a heuristic device that was recursive and circular in form. The answer to
one question led to another that broadens the range of information and guided the researcher into unexpected territory that was unplanned and previously unpredicted.

Another limitation was that this research has not been comprehensive enough to cover all leads to missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an open and distance learning environment. The research effort was also limited since it was confined to the timeframe for the study completion. Time compounded by financial restrictions further confined this study to one university. The quality issue being a national, regional and international issue, a study of more universities engaged in Open and Distance Learning could have produced more generalised findings. Due to the nature of case studies, this research had inherent limitations attached to this, particularly for the interpretation and application of results to a larger population. In addition to the inherent limitations of case studies some of which are highlighted in the research design section of chapter three, the number of participants was small and purposively selected. It should be noted then that the information gathered using case studies methods does not purport to become generalisable. Rather, the use of the naturalistic inquiry design sought “a deep understanding and explication of social phenomena as they are observed in their own contexts” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen, 1993, p. 16).

The analysis of findings was also a limitation given that this was subject to researcher interpretation or second degree constructions (Schutz quoted in Honer 2004). This could have been influenced by the personal open and distance learning experiences of the researcher who was both student and staff member of the university under study at the time of study. However, this bias was minimised through triangulation. Another limitation is that this study did not differentiate between different modes of distance education delivery. It is possible that the
themes in this study may or may not demonstrate a stronger association with one or more specific delivery options, such as correspondence learning, online learning, independent study, group or paced learning and many others that students in the Zimbabwe Open University may adopt. The goal of this research was to interrogate missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an open and distance learning university from a public-interest perspective. Many constituencies bring self-interested agendas in research. For instance, administrators worry facing competitors, staff worry about keeping jobs and students worry about passing their courses. The different categories of participants in this research brought competing agendas that often reflected political considerations first and quality concerns second. They then masqueraded them as missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement.

1.14 ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS

This thesis interrogated practices in an ODL context to unearth missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement. It is made up of five chapters. Chapter one addressed the context of the problem, highlighted the problem, generated the research questions and the objectives directing the study, the limitations of the study and the theoretical underpinnings of the study. Chapter two is literature review, theory application and will help identify gaps in existing knowledge that this research sought to address. Chapter three is about the research design, the instruments used, the research process, pilot testing of the instruments, triangulation and ethical issues. Chapter four is about data presentation, interpretation, analysis and discussion. The answers to the sub problems on the missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an open and distance learning context are exposed in this
Chapter five is the last chapter. Here the study’s findings are summarised, the conclusions arrived at from the findings and the recommendations derived from the conclusions reached are offered.

1.15 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter made an attempt to highlight context of the problem. It examined the background to the study. It then highlighted the statement of the problem, the research questions that directed this research, purpose of study, objectives of the study, assumptions of the study, significance of the study and definition of key terms. The selected methodology was also highlighted. The next chapter focuses on the quality debate further by exploring the review of related literature as it relates to quality in open and distance teaching. The intention is to find the gaps that this research could then fill in.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND RELATED DISCUSSIONS

2.0 INTRODUCTION
Chapter one provided information on the context of the problem as well as other relevant background information that gave the thesis value and purposefulness. Chapter two provides very critical information on missing links in attaining and sustaining quality within the context of open and distance learning. No qualitative study begins from pure observation. Prior conceptual structure composed of theory and method provides the starting point for all observation (Silverman, 2004). In this regard, this chapter attempted to develop a framework for analysing the missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an open and distance learning university. A brief look at the concept of quality, its origins and quality initiative is done. The chapter proceeded to look at quality in higher education, in open and distance learning and in the university under study. It went further to examine literature on the conditions in philosophy, leadership, customer orientation, ICT and the processes, products and infrastructure that influences quality. The idea here is to find the missing links that have a bearing in influencing quality in an open and distance teaching university.

2.1 THE ORIGINS OF QUALITY
In its inception, the concept of quality began as a way to meet manufacturing’s technical specifications (Jackson, Helms, & Ahmadi, 2011). However, now, there is nothing unusual about educationists having concern for quality. This has been going on for a time—certainly since Plato’s training programme for the Guardians (Doherty, 1994). The origins of present day
quality management are usually ascribed to Japan’s search for quality improvements in the
1950s and its success in moulding ideas on quality into a coherent operative philosophy. Much
of the increased awareness of the importance of quality in the West has been associated with
Crosby’s ‘doing it right first time’ and Peter’s customer orientation and leadership as being
central to the quality improvement process (Kelemen, 1999).

The concepts and practices of quality in higher education have only been with us for just over a
decade now (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). There have been intense discussions of all
issues to do with quality in higher education during this period. Some issues discussed included
issues to do with implementation, assessment and improvement of quality. Little discussions
though centred on missing links in ways of attaining and sustaining that quality. In all these
discussions, the conceptual discourse on quality took centre stage. It is against this background
that the next section is devoted to this issue.

2.2 CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE
In view of the varying appropriation of meanings to the key concept in this study, it is imperative
to clarify the meanings adopted in this study. It has to be noted that this is not an easy exercise
considering that “Quality” in higher education is a term that is highly contested, considerably
vague and highly contextual. Different interest groups attach different meanings to the term.

2.2.1 Defining Quality
There is no simple answer to what quality is, since “quality”, like “beauty” is subjective – a
matter of personal judgment (Doherty, 2008). In 1994 Doherty explored in some depth the
difference between quality defined as “fitness to/for purpose” or the slightly more nuanced “fitness of purpose” and quality defined as “excellence”, which was raised, yet again, by Cartwright (2007). The problem with “excellence” is that the concept is just as subjective as “quality”, which is tantamount to defining quality as quality and means nothing more profound than, “excellence is what I and like-minded others say it is”. In other words, excellence means compliance with our or my norms (Doherty 2008:256).

Quality is very hard to define. Taking the lexical meaning of the word quality as a basis, this term is used to describe the most immediate perception of the composition of an object (Aristotle cited in Kurzynski, 2012). In this case, those who speak of quality, refer to the composition of something, whereby it is typical for it to be compared to something else. There are various well-known definitions of quality. Crosby (1979) defines quality as “conformance to requirement” while Juran and Gryna (1980) define quality as “fitness for use”. Deming’s (1986) definition of quality as “a predictable degree of uniformity and dependability at low cost and suited to the market” is more towards quality in operation.

Deming in Marcouse (2004) said the customer defines quality. The customer may define quality by insisting on certain specifications or by exercising choice in the market. Another definition of quality by Marcouse is ‘fit for use’. Quality is one of the ingredients in purchasing decisions and in the case of universities on enrolment decisions and graduate employment. Expanding quality to services, the concept is defined as meeting the expectations of the customer (Abdullah, 2006). In education, using the above nomenclature, quality and quality management refers to a cooperative system in which both customers (students) and suppliers (faculty) mutually agree to,
and meet the needs, requirements, and expectations of customers on a continuous basis (Lewis, 1993). This is echoed by Trowler (2005) who viewed the student experiences through curriculum and teaching as central to the concept of educational quality.

Another view of quality is that it is not simply a matter of a product or service being more durable than an available alternative, but that it consists of a whole bundle of attributes that ensure that the needs of customers are satisfied (Luthans, 1995). As customers become more demanding, quality has become extremely important in giving an organisation its competitive edge. Indeed in the service sector, quality has been seen to be the most critical attribute (Easton, 1993). A seemingly broader view of quality according to Rollinston, Broadfield and Edwards (1998) is that a more effective and efficient use of resources can often be obtained if quality is built in during the production process. In this case quality can be assured if the links contributing to its achievement are in place.

Although the word quality has different connotations when used by different people, all definitions of quality include a central concept which is ability to meet or exceed customer expectations. The quality of a product is satisfactory when the product is able to satisfy the needs of the customer. In this context, the definition by Sallis and Hingley in Doherty (1994) that quality is the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs appear to hold water. This definition of quality goes hand in hand with the aims of this research in that it is customer driven. The dark area is how to
Quality management within departments comprises all activities and processes that are deliberately carried out to design, assure, evaluate and improve teaching and learning (Grant, Mergen and Widrick, 2004). What this definition implies is that to manage quality in a learning institution, involves developing missions and strategies, setting standards for professionals in teaching, administration and support. It comprises internal quality assessments, periodic self-evaluations, external accreditation procedures, external consultations with the field (professionals and their employers) and benchmarking (Kleijnen, Dolmans, Willems and van Hout, 2011).

Fitness for purpose was earlier raised in this section. However, the criteria for this have been heavily contested of late. Doherty (2008) postulate that fitness for purpose requires defining the purpose and setting criteria by which a judgement can be made, maintaining that it is much easier to devise criteria for manufacturing than education or other service industries, asserting that people are not widgets and inappropriate, unassimilated, unimaginative attempts (of which there have been many) to apply manufacturing methodologies to universities, colleges and schools quite rightly raise the ire of teachers, lecturers and researchers (Doherty 2008:256). Educational philosophers, psychologists and sociologists have argued the pros and cons of normative versus criterion-referenced judgments for several generations. The bone of hegemony in respect of knowledge is the exercise of power over what counts as knowledge (Doherty 2008). It is very well gnawed. The same is true of quality. Quality is taken as a status game in the
academia world. Most players will adopt the stance that the superiority of academic values over market values is a given, so that the application of a market-derived methodology to academia will have negative effects – more or less by definition. Cartwright (2007, p. 290) claims that, because of the QA agenda “sickness or pathology” has “befallen” academia. Staying with this confusion of methodology with values, one could equally argue that sociologists, Marxist literary critics and other writers have enjoyed excellent profits from the “theory” business for a couple of generations and, as a result, “sickness or pathology” has befallen the discipline of quality (Doherty 2008). The most important thing to note is that the quality issue is more than an academic argument about definitions of meaning. There is the question of who gets what from the paymaster’s limited pot and why (Doherty 2008). Paymasters generally expect to gain satisfaction from what they are paying for. In principle, it matters little whether the paymaster is the parent, the employer, the student or the government. The argument is the same, it is the exercise of power on what counts as knowledge and what counts as quality.

2.2.2 Multi-dimensional concept of quality in higher education

In order to ensure that open and distance education system is operated in accordance with the world standards, we have to, first and foremost, define the meaning of education quality. Defining quality in higher education has proved to be a challenging task. Researchers and practitioners have different concepts on what quality in higher education is (Chen, Sok and Sok, 2007). Definitions given by business organizations and the academic world on the term “quality” of higher education are quite different. Quality, one of the definitions used in business, is the extent to which the product meets the demands; another is “customer satisfaction” (Bornman,
2004). This is contested by Vroeijenstijn in Chen, Sok and Sok (2007), who however, comments that in higher education there is no clear indication of who is the customer. Moreover, due to the different perceptions on the meanings of quality, the academic world tries to define quality by using many variables. The World Declaration on Higher Education (1998) declared that quality in higher education is a multi-dimensional concept, which should encompass all its functions, and activities: curriculum, teaching faculty’s qualification, government, facilities, student characteristics, management and administration, and interactive networking.

In the service industries, the delivery of service through “customer expectations”, has been the product of a gradual evolution from: “quality is excellence, to quality is value, to quality is conformance to specifications, to most recently, quality is meeting and/or exceeding customers’ expectations” (Pariseau and McDaniel, cited in Angell, Heffernan & Megicks, (2008). The overriding value in measuring service quality in higher education lies in the identification of critical aspects of the service delivery (Abdullah, 2006). It has been found that when making the uncertain and high-risk decision of choosing a university, “the student will look for evidence of service quality”, confirming its importance in the university’s function (Donaldson and McNicholas, 2004, p. 349).

2.2.3 Quality stages/dimensions

The evolution of the concept of quality management over time has led to the development of focuses, and later models that have been understood and used as if they are exclusive. These can be summed up in three main stages (OECD 2009; ILO cited in Chiome and Kurasha, 2011).
Quality as conforming to standards: In this situation, the trainer and the training itself need to have some indispensable minimum content and some basic techniques and strategies that should be an integrated whole and easy to assess as regards how well functions are discharged and coordinated.

Quality as adapting to customer needs expectations and motivations: In this context, a product or service is said to be of quality when it meets the customer’s expectations. When it comes to learning institutions, the ‘customer’ is the various actors involved that is to say the productive system, enterprises, organisations, the family and the society into which the people who are trained will be inserted. Besides this, obviously the students themselves with their own individual nature and needs have to be catered to. Staff and teams in the institution are also internal customers.

Quality seen as a response to personal and social expectations and motivation through the creation of attitudes and knowledge: This level involves not only the intrinsic content of training but also management and organisational processes. It includes the staff, teams in the institution and generating a culture that involves every-one in the organisation in quality processes.

Quality seen as a response to personal and social expectations through the creation of the right attitudes that translate into a quality culture was the focal point of this study. In this case quality is seen as what positions an institution above or below the competition. It is that which determines whether the Zimbabwe Open University will thrive or become obsolete in the medium or long term. Today quality is put forward as a synonym for good business management, and this translates into competitive products or services.
2.2.4 Three discrete categories of quality development

Three discrete categories of quality development have been put forward by two authors. Senge (1995) traced the development of quality in all organisations. He came up with two categories indicating that the first wave was on process improvement, the second wave/phase was on organisational improvement and the third wave is organisational learning. Mackay and Kember (cited in Chiome and Kurasha, 2011) did the same with higher education institutions. In this regard, they indicated that these institutions started with quality assurance, then moved to quality enhancement and the third category is excellence initiatives. Organisational improvement and excellence initiatives fit well in an ODL context since these have capacity to reduce the ‘distance’ in distance education. This was the interest in this study.

2.2.5 Quality systems in higher education

There is a growing interest in quality systems as a means of accreditation and accountability in higher education. In this regard, conceptions and approaches to quality are being reviewed in various ways for numerous contexts of national and international interests. In this trend, the concept of quality has been defined in several ways as (Campbell and Rozsnayi, 2002, p. 19–20 and Mizikaci 2006, p. 38) point out:

*Quality as excellence:* This definition is considered to be the traditional academic view that holds as its goal to be the best.

*Quality as zero errors:* This is defined most easily in mass industry in which product specifications can be established in detail, and standardized measurements of uniform products can show conformity to them. As the products of higher education, the graduates, are not expected to be identical, this view is not always considered to be applicable to higher education.
Quality as fitness for purposes: This approach requires that the product or service has conformity with customer needs, requirements, or desires.

Quality as transformation: This concept focuses firmly on the learners: the better the higher education institution, the more it achieves the goal of empowering students with specific skills, knowledge and attitudes which enable them to live and work in the knowledge society.

Quality as threshold: Defining a threshold for quality means setting certain norms and criteria. Any institution that reaches these norms and criteria is deemed to be of quality.

Quality as value for money: The notion of accountability is central to this definition of quality with accountability being based on the need for restraint in public expenditure.

Quality as enhancement or improvement: This concept emphasises the pursuit of continuous improvement and is predicated on the notion that achieving quality is central to the academic ethos and that it is academics themselves who know best what quality is at any point in time.

The definitions stem from different approaches, and reflect different implementations. When implemented in the higher education contexts the industry focused quality measures present significant limitations. Therefore, the reflection of the quality concept into higher education has long been the debate in the academic contexts. Mizikaci (2006) takes the issue further and point out that quality systems adapted from business and industry operations need to be reoriented, and reinstalled for higher education conditions to turn the focus from the management-based to the education-based practices.

2.3 QUALITY DEFINED BY LAW

The law lays down minimum quality standards through legislation. In Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) sets particular standards that will ensure that institutions of higher learning operate within a quality framework. On the international
scene, there are international standards for quality that an institution can pursue. Once the institution satisfies the requirements, it can be registered and get accreditation. Some examples are:

- BS 5750: It is a British Standards Institution for quality systems.
- EN 2900: It is a European quality and standards institution.
- ISO 9000: This is an international standard for quality systems. It is recognised worldwide.

These are quality standards that have been adopted by organisations of many kinds. Only a few universities have adopted them. The university under study is working on ISO 9000 registration. Many governments have promoted the use of these standards and many organisations insist that their suppliers of goods and services should have been approved to one or other of these standards (Doherty, 2008). Firms that have registered with any of these international standards for quality systems say that they have provided a range of benefits to business (Padro, 2010) that can be of benefit to the education arena. These include increased competitiveness; increased customer satisfaction; less waste; cost savings; increased efficiency; better motivated employees; improved communications, and improved profits (Marcouse 2004:238). To shorten the distance in distance education, improved communication, customer satisfaction and motivated employees are imperative. This appears missing in the literature and was pursued in this study.

Substantial research has also been undertaken in the area of quality in education. One such prominent study was by Dotchin and Oakland (1992). In their findings they recommended that any model of quality must embrace the following common core:
Recognising customers and discovering their needs;
 Setting standards which are consistent with customer requirements;
 Controlling processes and improving their capability;
 Establishing systems for quality;
 Management’s responsibility for setting quality policy, providing motivation through leadership, and equipping people to achieve quality;
 Empowering of people at all levels in the organisation to act for quality improvement (Dotchin and Oakland 1992:141).

These characteristics of quality are not enough because the best quality can never be achieved in the context of a learning institution, but that improvements must continuously be sought. Most important, the missing links influencing the achievement of quality need to be known and pursued.

2.4 QUALITY INITIATIVES

The definition of quality is indeed elusive. Despite the abundance of research on quality management there is no universal consensus on how best to measure quality in higher education (Becket and Brookes, 2006). However, once we move away from the problematic of definition to consider the practical methodologies of quality assurance and control, we set foot on much firmer ground. There are a number of initiatives that an organisation can adopt in order to ensure quality (Marcouse, 2004; Daft 2006; Belawati and Zuhairi 2007; Inglis, 2008 & Hansen and Ghare, in Chiome, 2011a). Some of these are discussed below:

A much talked about quality initiative is quality assurance. Quality assurance has been defined as:

‘Systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by higher education institutions and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives, and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements (Harman, 2000:1).

The National Symposium on Reliability and Quality Control in Hanson and Ghare (2004) said quality assurance is a broad term used to include both quality control and quality engineering.

They went further to say that quality assurance embraces all the methods used by an interested
party to assure quality of product or performance. Belawati and Zuhairi (2007) are also of the opinion that quality assurance refers to a process of defining and fulfilling a set of quality standards consistently and continuously with the goal of satisfying all consumers, producers and the other stakeholders.

Another term commonly used is **quality assessment** whose common methods and elements includes a national coordinating body; institutional self-evaluation; external evaluation by academic peers; and published reports. These are four very critical areas that can benefit the Zimbabwe Open University if pursued and may constitute a missing link if not there.

**Quality control:** This is a system based on feedback. It is a means of gaining information so that errors can be corrected especially in manufacturing. In education, quality control requires feedback from staff, students and, ideally, employers. It requires regular review of modules, programmes and other processes. In engineering and manufacturing quality control is viewed as a set of measures undertaken to ensure that defective products or services are not made, and that the product or service meets pre-determined performance requirements (Belawati and Zuhairi, 2007). Marcouse (2004) further states that traditionally quality control is the responsibility of the production department. This was done to prevent faults leaving the factory. Today’s quality has the product and service aspect. This is in line with the business of the Zimbabwe Open University where products or materials are modules, tutorial letters, examination items etc. Services include tutorials, registration, assessment etc.
**Total Quality Management (TQM):** W. Edward Deming introduced TQM in early 1980s (Marcouse 2004:240). TQM is a philosophy. It is a way of looking at quality issues. It requires commitment from the whole organisation not just the quality control department. TQM considers quality in every aspect of the business. This can be the doctor’s prescription for an Open learning university like the Zimbabwe Open University.

**Continuous improvement:** This is a system where the whole organisation is committed to making changes on continuous bases. The Japanese call it *Kaizen* (Marcouse 2004). It is an approach for doing business that looks for continuous improvement in the quality of products, services, people and processes. Bessant and Caffyn (1997) define continuous improvement as “an organization-wide process of focused and sustained incremental innovation”. Continuous improvement is viewed as a particular set of routines that can help an organisation to improve performance.

**Zero defects:** The aim is to produce goods or services with no faults or problems. It is a management philosophy that requires commitment throughout the organisation. Lomas (2007) short down the idea of zero defects in higher education arguing that higher education is not in the business of producing like-minded, homogeneous graduates.

**Quality circles:** A quality circle is a group of employees who meet together regularly for the purpose of identifying problems and recommending adjustments to the working process. This is done to improve product or process.

**Training:** Training can make an enormous contribution to quality. It can be induction, new skills training or induction to the objectives of the organisation. Training is important where a company seeks to introduce a ‘quality culture.’
**Quality accreditation:** Obtaining quality accreditation includes schemes like ISO 9000. Companies must have in place a documented quality assurance system. An effective quality control system that ropes in suppliers and subcontractors must be put in place.

**Cross-functional improvement groups:** These are groups set up in an organisation. They look at how interactions between departments can be improved. These can be quality oriented.

**Benchmarking:** This is a process comparing a business with other businesses. Having identified the best, businesses attempt to bring their performance up to the level of the best, by adopting its practices.

**Quality audit:** Audit checks that the system does what it says it is going to do.

**Quality assessment:** The judgment of performance against criteria.

**Quality enhancement:** A system for continuously and consistently improving the quality performance of any process. This implies a sophisticated system for staff development and training as well as conscious methods of addressing and solving systemic problems. This can apply to any process, education included.

The Zimbabwe Open University can adopt, refine or adapt any of the initiatives described above depending on the tastes of its stakeholders. The most important thing is to take those initiatives that will influence the achievement of quality. These quality initiatives discussed in this section, are to be found in all quality systems in some shape or form.

### 2.5 ALTERNATIVE MODELS AND APPROACHES TO QUALITY

This section looks at alternative models and alternative approaches to quality. The idea is to see which model or approach best show missing links in attempts to continuously improve quality in an open and distance teaching context.
2.5.1 Approaches to quality

There are various approaches to quality that can be taken into consideration in defining and measuring quality. Some of these will be considered in this section as outlined by Astin (1982). These include nihilist, reputational, resources, outcomes and value added. The nihilist approach contends that quality cannot be defined and measured. On the other hand, the reputational approach is based on the consensus of opinion and is measured in terms of student selectivity, enrolment size and the size of graduate faculty. The resources approach is defined and measured in terms of highly trained and prestigious faculty, institutional affluence and bright students. The outcomes approach is based on the quality of degree recipients in terms of employment, earnings and important positions obtained. Value-added is another approach to defining quality and resides in the institution’s ability and capacity to affect its students favourably in their intellectual and personal development. The institution must make meaningful and observable changes in students’ value. This was the thrust in this study.

2.5.2 Alternative models for quality

There have been several re-examinations of fundamental educational processes and various new models have been proposed for educational quality in universities. Duke cited in Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) proposed a learning university model to exhort the universities to adopt a new paradigm to deal with the rapidly changing times to operate against a background of discontinuity and uncertainty. Harvey and Knight cited in Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) proposed a Transformative Model as the most appropriate learning-oriented approach to quality. The emphasis is on enhancing participants, adding value to their capability and ultimately
empowering them. Haworth and Conrad cited in Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) developed an Engagement Model of programme quality organised around the central idea (of) student, faculty and administrative engagement in teaching and learning. In the University of Learning model, Bowden and Marton cited in Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) examine the organisational characteristics of higher education from a pedagogical perspective to facilitate a dynamic learning process and derive the attributes of a University of Learning. Tierney (1998) collated the views of a number of leading authors on a model for excellence and came out with a responsive university model. The emphasis is on the development of new internal and external relationships through communication and partnerships as was the case in this study.

2.6 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework guiding this research is quality as continuous improvement (OECD, 2009; Sultan and Tarafder, 2007; Zhao, 2002). This is so because the purpose of quality management in any institution is to foster continuous improvement. The idea being that one can never get to a state where optimum quality has been attained. Bessant and Caffyn (cited in Watty, 2005) define continuous improvement as an organisation-wide process of focused and sustained incremental innovation”. In this case, continuous improvement is viewed as a particular set of routines that can help an organisation to improve performance. This is supported by Temponi (2011) who argues that creating a quality culture and long-term commitment to continuous improvement within an academic institution means engaging the administrative and academic systems, and engaging all stakeholders of the institution of higher education.

Deming and Shewart presented the cycle for continuous improvement (Hanna and Newman, 2001). This continuous improvement cycle is known as the P-D-C-A cycle and it is a set of steps
to be repeated in the pursuit of continuous improvement. The four original major steps of the cycle are:

1. P (plan) – gathering of data to identify and define the issue(s)/problem(s) that need improvements and identify ways to achieve them.
2. D (do) – implementing the plan by using a trial run, a test group, etc.
3. C (check) – analyzing the results to see if there is good agreement between the original goals and what was actually achieved; make adjustments if necessary.
4. A (act) – depending on the results from the check step, acting on the plan on a full scale or conducting further work by beginning with the P (plan) (Temponi, 2011, p19).

The use of the continuous improvement framework in open and distance education operations seems to be a direct reflection of acknowledging customer needs and commitment to improvements. This is because quality as continuous improvement is a management philosophy that is based on a set of theoretical principles that seek to mobilise organisational resources to increase stakeholders’ satisfaction (Witell et al, 2005). Critical success factors to continuous quality improvement initiatives include: top management support, open communication, effective coordination, and mutual trust (Cheng and Heng, 2002). If students are going to have their voice and viewpoints heard, then the culture of academic institutions must shift to cooperation among all its stakeholders (Temponi, 2011). Such cooperation will require that the academic institution’s culture enable the process, and students be trained as active participants in the education process. It should be clear that knowing students’ needs and expectations as well as using their feedback in open and distance learning should part of the progression to engage in challenging the traditional university structure.

What the foregoing discussion means to open and distance education is that a stakeholder approach to quality is needed. A stakeholder approach to issues of quality in higher education recognises the potential for a number of different perspectives of quality to be defined in the higher education environment. These perspectives reflect the views of a variety of stakeholders who, it is claimed, have legitimate authority to voice their perspectives (Vroeijenstijn, cited in...
Brodjonegoro, 2009). However, because it is not easy to please all stakeholders, who have different needs and require different strategies negotiated quality will be the driving force.

2.7 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Quality assurance has been one of the hottest topics in higher education in the last 20 years leading to the build-up of national external systems for evaluating teaching and learning. In support of this, Brennan and Shah (2000) observed that in Europe new forms of external subject assessments, institutional audits and various forms of accreditation have been developed as a response to demands of improved accountability, better efficiency and improved effectiveness of national higher education system. Zimbabwe has not been left out on this development. The Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education conducts institutional audits and various forms of accreditation in the Zimbabwe higher education arena.

Higher education institutions are driven to engage in reforms by a variety of forces, which mostly come from globalisation, supply and demand issues, competition, accountability, and technology. The quest for quality is attributed to a number of changing phenomena (Temple, 2005; Mehralizadeh and Safaeemoghaddam 2010). Accordingly there has been a good deal of research into the subject of quality in higher education, with well-recognised contributions from the UK, Australia, Spain, Germany, France, Norway, Canada and the USA, amongst others. However, what prompted this study is that this type of research is still thin in the African context.

A World Bank report appeared to paint a gloomy picture on African universities. It stated that African universities are facing deteriorating conditions:
Many universities operate under over-crowded conditions with deteriorating physical facilities, limited and obsolete equipment, insufficient library resources and institutional materials, outdated curriculum and absence of academic vigour and systematic evaluation of performance’ (Sunday Mail 2009: 3).

Over the past few years, there have been significant strides towards quality in higher education institutions the world over. A number of terminologies have been used to refer to similar attempts at improving the quality of higher education, such as quality assurance, quality assessment, quality improvement, and quality development (Hansen and Ghare, in Chiome, 2011a; Marcouse, 2004; Hopkin and Lee, 2001 and Harman 2000). These varying terminologies have one thing in common. They share a common purpose of ensuring that students receive a high quality and relevant education and are awarded credentials that are widely recognised by governments and employers (Belawati and Zuhairi 2007).

With the payment of fees, students are increasingly starting to look like customers, and may well start to behave like them. McManus in Gallant (2008), argue that students mount successful legal challenges based on various issues chief among them the quality of assessments. Thus students are increasingly behaving like customers and they may take the legal route to have their cases addressed. In response to this, at Northwest, in the support services, a customer orientation was adopted. A permanent Continuous Quality Improvement committee was established in order to identify and prioritise opportunities for improvement and to establish expectations. The committee developed and posted across campus the following pledge:

**Northwest Missouri State University recognises that quality service is an essential component of a quality university. Accordingly, we pledge our best efforts to provide quality service to you by:**

- Treating you with respect, fairness and honest. Making you feel important and earning your trust.
• Performing our tasks with competence and skill. Giving you confidence in the quality of what we provide.
• Communicating clearly and courteously the services provided. Making it easy for you to tell us what you need.
• Being flexible and open to new ideas. Accepting you and valuing your knowledge.
• Providing what we agree to deliver in a timely manner. Enabling you to depend on us to help meet your goals. (Hubbard, 1994, p. 138).

The Zimbabwe Open University can make such a pledge to students and other stakeholders like suppliers, the government and the community. In the event that such a pledge is not there then it can be said to be a missing link in fostering continuous quality improvement.

In the East African region, evidence over the last decade has shown that efforts to expand enrolment have not been accompanied by efforts to enhance educational quality (Nyaigotti-Chacha and Ayoo, 2001). Scarce resources have been used to expand systems with insufficient attention to quality improvement in areas such as curriculum development, teacher improvement and material production. As student numbers continue to rise without corresponding increase in the level of funding, critical areas such as research, leadership training, staff development and materials production will suffer as universities cut down spending. In addition to externally initiated systems, more and more countries are also requesting higher education institutions to develop internal systems for quality assurance including demands that such systems should secure the core processes in higher education – teaching and learning. Even though available evidence does not suggest that such systems have had a dramatic impact concerning the quality of teaching and learning, this has not prevented the interest in developing new forms of quality assurance as can be shown with the recent tendency for developing accreditation systems in Europe (Harvey and Stensaker, 2008). All these conditions have had a marked negative impact on the quality of education offered by institutions of higher learning and the Zimbabwe Open University is not an exception. This
situation has the effect of lowering the university standing in the eyes of prospective learners, the private sector and the wider society.

2.8 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN DISTANCE LEARNING

In this section, quality assurance in distance learning is looked at. However, before this is done some conceptual clarity in terms of distance education and open and distance education need to be undertaken.

2.8.1 The distance-education concept

In the interest of conceptual clarity several attempts have been made to describe the character of distance education. Among these descriptions those of Palloff and Pratt (2007); Bates (1999); and Keegan (1990) stand out. Keegan specifies five decisive characteristics of distance education that apply to what is happening in universities in Zimbabwe today.

These are:

• the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education);
• the influence of an educational organisation both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student-support services (this distinguishes it from private study and teach-yourself programmes);
• the use of technical media - print, audio, video or computer - to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course;
• the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education); and
• the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialisation purposes. (Keegan, 1990, p.44)

This clear definition undoubtedly covers what is referred to as distance education in this research. However, in North America even the dissemination of lectures from one university to another is now frequently called distance education, which to Holmberg is a misnomer.
(Holmberg, 1999). Regrettably an identification of distance education with quality education is still a long way. The concept of distance education must also be seen in relation to quality of instruction, processes and products.

2.8.2 The concept of open and distance learning

The term *open and distance learning* and its definition are relatively new in the field of education, having gained prominence only in the past 15 to 20 years (COL 1997). The language and terms used to describe distance learning activities can still be confusing, and geographical differences in usage may arise. In this context, COL (1997) takes a position that there is no one definition of *open and distance learning*. Rather, there are many approaches to defining the term. Most definitions, however, pay attention to the following characteristics:

- **separation of teacher and learner** in time or place, or in both time and place;
- **institutional accreditation**; that is, learning is accredited or certified by some institution or agency. This type of learning is distinct from learning through your own effort without the official recognition of a learning institution;
- **use of mixed-media courseware**, including print, radio, and television broadcasts, video and audio cassettes, computer-based learning, and telecommunications. Courseware tends to be pre-tested and validated before use;
- **two-way communication** allows learners and tutors to interact as distinguished from the passive receipt of broadcast signals. Communication can be synchronous or asynchronous;
- **possibility of face-to-face meetings** for tutorials, learner–learner interaction, library study, and laboratory or practice sessions; and
- **use of industrialised processes**; that is, in large-scale open and distance learning operations, labour is divided and tasks are assigned to various staff who work together in course development teams (COL, 1997: 15).

Quality has always been an issue in Open and Distance Learning. State initiatives in Western Europe began with the French CNED in 1939. The British Open University was established in 1969. The second stream of distance education development has been the introduction of distance education programmes within conventional universities (Dekker and Lemmer, 1993). Since distance education’s inception it has been increasing access to education, a reality that has compelled many countries to adopt distance education as part of their educational system.
(Garrison, 2000). This increased access to education happened at the backdrop of a new belief in student autonomy and independence because students studying at a distance often do so alone (Moore, 1993). As a result of this autonomy and independence, concerns about quality provisions become a central issue and subject to study.

One major drawback, however, is that we are short of information about the effectiveness of, and the critical conditions necessary for successful implementation of open and distance learning for higher education, owing to a number of reasons. One of which is that the uses of open and distance learning for higher education in developing countries is an under-researched and under-reported area (Perraton, 1997). As a result, the literature on adult education at a distance is, “like the practice, scarce, scattered, buried and extremely diverse” (Yates in Perraton, 1997). While this is the case, there are only a handful of initiatives, most of them still in pilot stage, to use alternative ways to provide basic education (Chiome, 2011a). Dodds’ (cited in Chiome, 2011a) appeal that the urgency of the governments to seek ways to harness the powers of distance learning which are becoming internationally recognised for higher levels of education, seems to have been ignored.

Quality improvement becomes imperative for ODL and governments have established agencies to improve quality of educational practice. Pressure is mounting the world over for universities to undertake continuous improvement. Zuhairi, Purwanto and Isman, (2002) prescribe the total quality approach for open and distance learning, which covers not only products but also services and processes as well. COL, (1997) say ODL providers must pay close attention to quality in terms of products, processes, production, delivery systems and philosophy. Bates,
(1999) also talks of ‘protecting quality’ especially in printed distance teaching materials. These are very important issues in ODL that if they are not there, then they constitute missing links.

There is growing evidence that ODL differs in numerous respects from the practices employed in face-to-face education. Quality in ODL covers a number of aspects such as physical products, pedagogical processes, production and delivery systems and philosophy (COL, 1997; Jung 2007). Quality of products includes course materials, number of graduates, examination pass rates, enrolments and other quantitative issues. Quality of processes covers areas such as learning and teaching processes, student advisory, and student support and communication among other issues. Production and delivery systems include course production, handouts, test-item production, marking guides and getting the required materials to students. Quality of philosophy covers such things as ODL vision, mission and policy statements, institutional culture, governance, corporate culture, public image and ethical issues. All this have been looked at in this study in the context of ODL.

The changing paradigm in higher education management at a distance compelled the Indonesia Open University to implement a quality assurance system. In its 2001-2005 Operational Plan concrete action was taken in the formal establishment of a Quality Assurance Committee charged with developing a quality assurance manual. Quality focused on three critical areas. These were academic quality; student participation; and internal management (Belawati and Zuhairi 2007, p. 6). In the process, the university went further to produce annual action plans to support continuous improvements. These are very good lessons to ODL institutions which if unavailable, constitute missing links.
There is also the element of cross border traffic in distance education. In this case, quality becomes an important issue for one to sustain markets abroad (Frydenberg, 2005). The UK Open University is well known for such practices. It is not alone in this business as United States private providers such as University of Phoenix Online, Cardean University and many others provide cross-border education. Another notable cross borderer distance education university is the Indira Gandhi National Open University that delivers its programmes into Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Doha and Kuwait among other places outside India (Jung, 2005). This appears to be a strong case for quality in the Zimbabwe Open University that has students scattered all over the world serviced by its foreign desk. It has also established links with other distance teaching institutions in the SADC region through the Southern African Development Community- Centre for Distance Education (SADC-CDE).

Open and distance learning is bringing in a new culture of learning. Thomas and Brown (cited in Weeks, 2012) suggest that educational needs of the twenty-first century pose fundamental challenges for educators and educational practice. To them, educational practices that focus on the transfer of static knowledge simply cannot keep up with the rapid rate of change that characterises the prevailing context. It is suggested by Thomas and Brown (cited in Weeks 2012) that practices that focus on adaptation or reaction to change fare better, but are still being outpaced by an environment that requires content to be updated almost as fast as it can be taught. Implied in effect is a quest for lifelong learning that ODL promotes. What is needed then is a “new culture of learning that is deemed to be more appropriate for a contemporary context of unprecedented change” (Weeks, 2012, p.1). Wit and Orvis (cited in Weeks, 2012) similarly
claim that within a contemporary “knowledge economy” students need new skills for college and careers and a failure to foster these skills and a culture of learning leaves them vulnerable. Such gaps were seen as missing links in this study.

2.9 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Zimbabwe Open University in 2005 established the quality assurance unit as a way of enhancing quality. Its mandate among other things is:

- Believing and living the core values of the university.
- Dedication to the highest level of excellence.
- Creation of an innovative and creative culture.
- Creating an organisation committed to lifelong learning.
- Cherishing and promoting integrity.
- Promoting the highest level of ethical standards.
- Quality improvements awards (Manhambara, 2005, p. 2).

In the event that these core values are implemented, the university will delight its stakeholders. Nevertheless, the need is there to uncover the missing links which, if corrected, these aims become a reality.

Mehralizadeh and Safaeemoghaddam (2010) posit that stakeholders in ODL need to share a set of fundamental philosophies, which include: acceptance of responsibility for quality by the top management; customer orientation; high level of employee participation; open and effective communication; fact-based management; and strategic quality planning. In this regard, Zimbabwe Open University is known for its commitment to strategic planning and management but short of strategic quality planning. The following strategic elements were cited in the strategic plan: This seems to be an area where the Zimbabwe Open University has shown some commitment to quality. These are:
• Growth that includes student enrolment growth, programmes growth, revenue growth and staff growth.
• Strategic partners to leverage their expertise and at the same time benefit from their financial support.
• Research and scholarship which focus on establishing a research base which is relevant to the development of Zimbabwe.
• Assembling a team of capable people. Able and willing staff members will drive the various processes that will contribute to the university’s vision and mission.
• Information and communication Technology whose aim is to create an ICT infrastructure with technological pre-eminence and effective, integrated information systems that support the business process of the university (ZOU Strategic Plan 2005-2009:11).

These growth ambitions are noble intentions that can derive a university to greater heights if there are no missing links that could derail strategic quality planning.

On paper it would appear the Zimbabwe Open University is doing enough in terms of assuring quality in service delivery. However, some observations made by Kettunen (2008) that successful evaluation of institutional performance means that there must be a general and common conceptual framework to describe and evaluate performance need to be considered. What this entails is that the framework for evaluating institutional performance should include the elements of the quality assurance and strategic management. This is what the Zimbabwe Open University has been doing but what appears missing is the open and distance learning element. To Kettunen (2008), the framework for evaluating quality and institutional performance must be flexible, because the aim of the quality assurance agencies is not to harmonise the quality assurance systems according to any particular predetermined model.

2.10 FOSTERING CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN AN ODL CONTEXT: ANY MISSING LINKS?

There are a number of factors that may contribute to quality in an open and distance learning university like the Zimbabwe Open University. This section addresses those issues in the
research questions that influence quality to see if literature can point to some gaps that can constitute missing links for this study. In this regard, the section looks at missing links in the guiding principles, in the deliverers of service, in the students, in the products, materials and processes and in the technology of open and distance education institutions in order to identify the gaps that this study pursued.

2.10.1 Missing links in the guiding principles fostering continuous quality improvement

This study appears to share the same kind of thinking with Brumback (2003) who maintains that any approach based on sound principles is unlikely to become just another passing fad. Principles are also better than rules in guiding behaviour, especially the behaviour of empowered people (Brumback, 2003). This implies that lack of principles driving ODL is a yawning gap and a definite missing link that needs to be addressed. However, it is important to understand the history of distance education if the links contributing to its success are to be understood. Jeffries (2009) confirms this by arguing that understanding the history of distance education is valuable in that it shows there was more than one historical path to distance education, and that the evolution of distance education has not been easy. Many of the same problems affecting quality and acceptance of educational innovations today have been faced by distance education throughout its history (Jeffries, 2009). The history of distance education could be tracked back to the early 1700s in the form of correspondents education, but technology-based distance education might be best linked to the introduction of audio-visual devices into the schools in early 1900s (Jeffries, 2009). It is said instructional radio failed in the 1930s. Instructional television was then viewed with hope. In 1932 the State University of Iowa
began experimenting transmitting instructional materials with the television. World War two slowed the introduction of the television.

The decades that followed World War Two saw great interest in television by educators. Notable is the Midwest Programme on Airborne Television Instruction (MPATI) that launched the flying classroom. At its peak MPATI would transmit educational television programmes to nearly 2000 public schools and universities reaching almost 400 000 students in 6500 classrooms in Indiana and five surrounding states (Gordon in Jeffries 2009). The number of educational television stations grew more rapidly in the 1960s and by 1972, 233 educational stations existed (Carnegie Commission in Jeffries, 2009).

Distance education programmes which exist today have a wide range of approaches such as independent study courses through computer networking, computer based study contact and feedback and computer delivered instruction (Moore, 2008). The Zimbabwe Open University has some lessons to learn from this history that can help in its pursuit of quality. The field appears to be in constant state of evolution. What this means is that quality links which appear plausible today are redundant tomorrow. There are a stream of new ideas and technologies balanced against a stead resistance to change. At times technology promises more than what it can deliver. The constantly changing learning theories and evolving technology must be factored into the missing links in fostering continuous quality improvement in an ODL context.

According to Lewis and Smith, (cited in Maguad, 2010), the philosophy of ODL is an important guiding principle in implementing quality. Without it, this can be a missing link. Madya and
Bahroom (2003) say that for ODL to be effective, it has to adopt the philosophy discussed below.

**Constructivist:** ODL should promote learners as active agents in their own learning, i.e. in the construction of their own knowledge.

**Collaborative:** ODL should enable learners at various performance levels to work together in small groups towards achieving an academic goal. It should promote exchange of ideas, develops critical thinking skills and help learners to retain information longer than working as individuals. It should also encourage team work in developing group goals while retaining individual accountability.

**Interactive:** To maintain learners’ interest, ODL should provide a means of practice and reinforcement to them. Learners answer questions and get immediate feedback. They learn from images, both static and moving. There should be good interactivity in the form of open questions, simulations and tools.

**Self-managed:** In ODL, learners learn on their own with minimal or without guidance of an instructor. They study at their own pace.

**Learner-centred:** ODL encourages learners to be responsible for their own learning goals and for the ways to realise them. It promotes active learning where learners search for new materials (Madya and Bahroom, 2003:3-4).

These philosophical underpinnings of ODL are important. The Zimbabwe Open University must be driven by such practices in order to come out with quality links that have roots in ODL philosophy. This is also confirmed by Prasad and Cherla (2009) who claim that the philosophy
of ODL is to make the learning/teaching process learner friendly by providing more freedom and flexibility to the students.

One important guiding principle is vision (Kariem, 2010). Vision permeates the organisation with values, purpose and integrity (Jeffries, 2009; Mizikaci, 2006). It affects quality in terms of its formation, implementation and shaping and reshaping of quality processes. For a quality vision to become a reality, Miles in Jeffries (2009) says it must be shareable and be shared with others. It must provide direction and driving power for change for the better. This vision must include a shared vision of the change process which can provide a starting point for strategy implementation (Kariem, 2010). The Zimbabwe Open University has a well articulated vision that this study interrogated to expose missing links.

A look at the vision of Open University Malaysia (OUM) brings to the fore the importance of vision. The vision of OUM is to be a leader and innovator in Open Learning. Its mission is to be the leading contributor in democratising education; develop quality education through multimode learning technologies, and develops and enhances learning experiences towards the development of knowledge based society. In an ODL context, the vision becomes the driving force while the mission is there to compliment the vision. Absence of both constitutes missing links.

Changes in education like quality initiatives are often at the mercy of organisational culture. Schrum in Jeffries (2009) argues that attempts at innovation have usually ignored the cultural and structural traditions of the socio-cultural system. If a university has a culture in place that is
evident, those involved in the rigorous maintenance of the status quo are not going to be eager candidates for its enthusiastic implementation if their cultural fabric is being threatened. What this means is that culture is a grey area for missing links.

2.10.2 Missing links in the deliverers of service

According to Al-Barwani and Osman (2011), research has shown that the key to the adoption and sustainability of educational innovations that promote student learning are the teachers and their commitment and readiness to take part. It is important, therefore, to involve teachers in all phases of the innovation cycle, ensure ownership and empower them with the required tools, professional development, and opportunities to make decisions and develop their own initiatives. It is crucial that teachers and other stakeholders see a direct and clear connection between a specific innovation and student learning outcomes (Al-Barwani and Osman, 2011). Brumback (2003) argues that any organisation should target the ideal standard of performance, namely, consistently competent, ethical and energetic behaviour that always succeeds in producing the best results. In support, Tasnim (2006) argues that education is the backbone of a nation. If the driver of that backbone is not happy and is dissatisfied with the work environment the future of the nation will be bleak. In this case, the case of the deliverers of quality services is important variable in the quest for missing links that influence the achievement of quality in an open and distance learning environment.

Madya and Bahroom (2003) point out that all educational provision should be of good quality, arguing that poor provision makes it difficult for learners to learn. This happens if deliverers of service lack capacity, willingness, attitudes and zeal to see the attainment of this quality. Chakanyuka and Chiome (2008) say that lecturers need support in order to accomplish tasks. Subramaniam, Othman and Sambasivan (2010) using the Leader-member exchange theory
(LMX) argue that staff feel more confident if they are taken as in group members. The Zimbabwe Open University employs two types of workers. The academic staff whose mandate is to oversee the co-business of teaching and research and the non-academic staff to support the teaching and research functions. Any idea of quality must embrace these two groups in order to transform the institutions’ quality culture (Sirvanci, 2004). This was the case in this study.

Sukirno and Siengthai (2011)’s ideas should be taken seriously. They argue that providing lecturers a space for participating in decision making has positive impact on organisational outcomes. Newton (2000) agrees and point out that more attention should be paid to the subjectivities of those delivering service. In this case, the role of service deliverers becomes central and is indispensable. The deliverers of service are employees with direct customer contact such as front line staff and regional academics whose conduct can build or destroy an institution.

One of the key characteristics of distance education according to Keegan (1990) is the physical and temporal distance between the learner and tutor. Consequently there are no lectures; no classrooms and learners study at their own pace (Holmberg, 1999). However, there is a lecturer who plans the programme, produces learning materials and manages the programme in each distance education programme (Perraton, 1997). Willis (1993:2) argues that “the success of any distance education efforts rests squarely on the shoulders” of its academic staff. Whatever media is the dominant delivery mode, there is a lecturer/tutor for each course who plans the programme, produces learning materials and manages the programme. For these and other reasons, Ibrahim and Silong (1997) found that the tutor was an indispensable learner support in distance education. Neely and Tucker (2010) support the idea and insists the faculty is responsible for both the content and the delivery. The role of service deliverers is ably articulated by Fuller and Smith (1991) who argue that neither simple and direct control by managers, nor bureaucratic solutions that standardise service transactions by means of rules, are likely to elicit
the required levels of responsible autonomy and sensitivity to interactional dynamics. They go further to propose the alternative routes:

- Attitudes and orientations of the deliverers of service is a critical aspect.
- Quality management emphasises the development of a quality culture among all organisational members.
- Work teams can monitor each other’s work.
- Improving the organisational culture by channelling identity and behaviour in ways that align with corporate objectives is a central prescription of excellence (Fuller and Smith 1991:8).

Another interesting study by Rosenthal, Hill and Peccei in Mabey, Salaman and Storey (1998) in one of the major supermarkets in the United Kingdom, unearthed the following findings. They found out that there is need for:

- Service Excellence Training: To educate staff in new customer service values and then finds ways of translating those values into individual behaviour.
- Employee Empowerment: To inculcate service quality values and competencies among staff. To increase the scope for continuous improvement in regard to service quality.
- Managerial Excellence: Excellent managers were to function as role models. Changes in attitudes and behaviours towards employees were seen as vital aspects of cultural shift.
- Commitment to customer service (CCS) by employees (Rosenthal, Hill and Peccei in Mabey, Salaman and Storey 1998)

This means to say service excellence, employee empowerment, managerial excellence and commitment to customer service are so indispensable such that their absence in the university under study can be a huge blow to quality efforts. These are important findings, which if implemented in the Zimbabwe Open University can contribute to quality.

Dickinson et al (cited in Chiome, 2011a) assert that distance education work equated with or exceeded the academic rigors of traditional classes. This accentuates the need for rigorous training for lecturers. To this end, the Open Learning Institute, Hong Kong has a specific professional development strategy for academic staff which comprises formal training and regular debriefing sessions (Lee and Yuen, 1993). This ensures that the distance education
The tutors also need special mentioning here because in the Zimbabwe Open University, occasional face-to-face sessions are organised for both didactic and socialisation purposes. Daweti (2005) has put across an argument that the tutor-learner dialogue is indispensable. Among other things, he argues that as learners meet the tutor, they learn to argue purposefully and in the language of their discipline, reflect critically and confidently, experience collective advances in knowledge and present their ideas both rationally and systematically. Thus, the tutor plays the roles of assessor, counsellor, teacher, manager, facilitator and demonstrator in order to promote both learning and learner success. Mays (2010) agrees but insists that they need to have education background. Porter in Sherry (1996) found that teacher mediation increases the completion rate for distance education courses, pointing out that students need tutor support and direction to enable them to make the transition from traditional classroom environments to self-directed learning.
Teamwork can be a factor that can influence quality. ‘A team is a group of people with common objectives and can effectively tackle any task that it has been set up to do’ (Everard, Morris and Wilson, 2004, p. 163). Bradford and Cohen (1984) stress the importance for managers to know how to tap subordinate talents excite them about the mission and build effective teams. They suggest that managers must learn to have impact without exerting total control, to be helpful without having all the answers, to get involved without demanding centrality, to be powerful without needing to dominate and to act responsibly without squeezing others out. Sultan and Wong (2010) agree and add that quality in general and service quality in particular is complex and multidimensional. These are clear guidelines that if implemented will continuously improve quality in an ODL context.

The contribution drawn from each member is of the highest possible quality, and is one which would not have been called into play other than in the context of a supportive team (Everard, Morris and Wilson 2004). When many groups in a learning institution fail to work at peak efficiency, then the effectiveness of the whole organisation suffers. It is also imperative to consider issues of selecting the members of the team (Silong, 1997 and Clay 1999). Whatever the composition of a team, all its members must learn what Evarard, Morris and Wilson (2004, p. 168) called “teamspeopleship”. Good “teamspeopleship” time their contributions, create roles for others and do some of the jobs that others deliberately avoid. Also equally important is the training of the team to spark action (Baba, 2007). The team has to be capacitated to enable it to meet its targets. In this way, teams can influence the achievement of quality in an ODL setting.
The issue of leadership for ODL cannot be left out when interrogating practices. Leadership has been seen by Bennett (2008) as one of the most powerful weapon for influencing quality in open and distance education arguing that there is a close link between the quality of leadership and distance education success. Comm and Mathaisel (2005) believe that every successful team has a leader. The leader must move with the times through a common vision. Learning institutions must be sufficiently well placed so that they are responsive to the changes in the global village.

This idea of commitment was raised by Koul (2005) who insists that one of the most significant factors contributing to quality assurance processes is institutional commitment which Koul (2005) says appears to be essentially a function of leadership. It manifests itself in the form of objects, practices and attitudes. The objects in this case can refer to the vision, the mission, the aims and the objectives of the institution, as well as quality assurance procedures and practices that provide direction for the staff (Comm and Mathaisel, 2005). According to Koul (2005), procedures that can be directly influenced by the leadership include meticulous implementation of quality assurance dictates, careful staff selection, staff sensitisation, capacity building programmes and delegation of power and responsibility to field operatives making them own the products and processes.

In higher education, independence is prized and shared governance is valued by the academics (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). Hence the leadership challenge is enormous (Newton, 2000). Historically, little attention has been devoted to this issue. The university under study cannot be an exception. There is a characteristic lack of leadership, in all aspects of governance in higher education (Chiome, 2011a). Borders are firmly entrenched between departments and dissension
is most pronounced across academic and administrative wings. The challenge to the higher education leadership, is to build activities in campuses, to reaffirm the common purposes (Lucas, in Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007).

ODL institutions must place special emphasis on the quality of performance and accomplishments, since reputation in the world of academia is attained through excellence (Sultan and Wong, 2010). Therefore, “…academias are expected to perform their role tasks according to the highest standards and reach the highest achievements possible in order to promote personal and institutional reputation” (Nir and Zilberstein-Levy: 2006, p. 539). In this regard, Keegan (2000) is of the opinion that in practice, role expectations in academia typically encompass a relatively large variety of tasks such as conducting research, fund raising, publishing new research in books, professional journals and scientific conferences, networking, teaching, community involvement and involvement in various university assignments.

Managing change is one area that Moore (2008) is of the contention that is critical in learning institutions. He went further to prescribe a range of models of change or change taxonomies and identifies how these can be used to help to bring about effective and sustainable change in both practice and policy. The key models that can benefit ODL focus around the following themes among others:

- Practice at different levels of engagement.
- Managing organisational change, identifying and dismantling barriers to change.
- Stimulating change in academic staff.
- Encouraging scholarly practice.
- Encourage evidence based practice.
- Balancing strategic change with innovation.
- Providing resources for change (Moore 2008:95)
The models prescribed by Moore (2008) appear to be a learning approach that supports the development of academic skills, provide motivation for change and encourage evidence based practice but appear to leave out philosophical underpinnings. This is echoed by Gewirtz (cited in Chiome, 2011b) that one of the assumptions underpinning government thinking on education in the United Kingdom is that so called failing educational institutions are largely the product of poor leadership. She was of the belief that through the cascading of best leadership practices all institutions can be a success. This assumption will be tested in this research where staff factors were put at the forefront of variables fostering continuous quality improvement.

Research has also confirmed that university governance and management is at the core of quality. Nyaigotti-Chacha and Ayoo (2001) argue that the experiences witnessed in our universities during the recent past have underscored the need for better governance of universities in terms of efficiency, accountability, transparency and flexibility, so that they can respond more effectively to the diverse and continuously changing needs of learners. They went further to point out that reform of educational management especially university education is urgently needed in order to move from highly centralised, standardised and command driven forms of management to more decentralised and participatory decision making, implementation and monitoring at lower levels of accountability. UNIDO (2007) agrees but adds that staff involvement is key to success. Bennett (2008) is worried that the attitudes towards stars may derail quality since a good teacher provides motivation for student success (Parr, 2005). This means to say lecturer performance has become a paramount priority (Sukirno and Siengthai, 2011). This was the case in this study.
2.10.3 Missing links related to learners/ customers

Canic and Richardson (2000) are of the view that in higher education; the notion of having customers is foreign to many campuses. They support this by arguing that even the suggestion of the term can arouse many emotions, preconceptions, and misconceptions. Padro (2010) support this view arguing that customer service does not work well for the academic affairs. Faculty and administrators alike are reluctant to call a student or anyone else a customer (Teeter and Lozier, cited in Maguad, 2010). They find the commercial flavour distracting and difficult to translate to education. Maguad (2010) further posits that in campuses that do admit they have customers, there is usually a general agreement that businesses, government agencies, and the society at large are customers. That is not generally the case with students. Many faculty members feel threatened by the notion that students are customers of the educational process. The idea that students (customers) are partners in developing and delivering quality education (the product or service) threatens the historic, traditional academic role of faculty as purveyor of knowledge (Maguad, 2010). The main reason for this stance is that all too often this perspective is reinforced by administrative actions that tend to put the benefits of the institution before the needs of the student body (Maguad, 2010). Many educational institutions are very hesitant to consider themselves as customer- driven entities (Lewis and Smith, cited in Maguad, 2010). Yet one fact has been proven over and over again. Customer-driven organisations are effective because they are fully committed to satisfying, even anticipating customer needs (Maguad, 2010). The future success of colleges and universities will increasingly be determined by how they satisfy their various customers. The successful ones will be those which very clearly identify their mission and the customers they serve. Thus, it is very important for colleges and universities to fully
identify their different customers and their corresponding needs failure of which they are creating gaps that impact negatively on quality.

Many organisations found that the old definition of quality, “the degree of conformance to a standard”, was too narrow and consequently have started to use a new definition of quality in terms of “customer focus” (Venkatraman 2007, p. 92). It is reported that many companies had initially concentrated all their efforts on improving internal processes with little or no regard for the relationships between those processes and the organisation’s ultimate customers (Brigham cited in Venkatraman, 2007). This failure to include the customer focus had resulted in companies struggling hard to survive and resorting to fire-fighting situations. In the context of higher education, due to the intangible nature of their processes, there is considerable discussion on the notions of educational quality (Harvey and Green, 1993). Thus, learners as prominent customers of the university are an indispensable factor in the search for missing links in practices that are meant to continuously improve quality in an open and distance learning environment.

A study in Ghana by Asunka (2008) reveals that learner motivation, possibly influenced by some environmental and socio-cultural factors is a dominant input factor that determines the success or otherwise of an online course. This makes learners an important constituency that influences the achievement of quality in teaching and learning. In ODL, the learner is in control of the learning process as the leaner and tutors are separate in time and space. ODL is an open and flexible mode where the learner is seen to be at the centre of his or her learning (Chiome, Chabaya and Chakanyuka, 2010). Armstrong and Hedge (1996) share this view when they say that the learner
is regarded as a self-activated maker of meaning, an active agent of the learning process. Things happen because of his/her volition and self initiated interaction with the world.

The rise of consumerism is also another direct threat to higher education institutions (Jung, 2005). The university under study is a fee paying institution and fees are rising all the time. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that students and their sponsors may come to view higher education as a commodity to be purchased rather than a social good to be enjoyed (Hart and Rush, 2007). Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) appear to share the same concerns when they hypothesised that a consumerist framework may promote passive and instrumental attitudes to learning and, in the long run, pose a threat to academic standards themselves. However, there are others whose position is that increasing competition should help to maintain the quality of teaching standards and that “student choice will increasingly work to drive up quality, supported by much better information” (Hart and Rush, 2007, p. 69). For these reasons, this research wanted to see how far the consumerism is affecting the quality of education in an open and distance education context.

There are special characteristics of distance adult learners that make them an interesting subject for study. Zmeyov (cited in Chiome, 2011a) summarised the special characteristics of distance adult learners as follows:

- They already possess considerable practical, social and occupational experience.
- They are conscious of their own life goals and the relevance to these goals of knowledge and skills to be acquired by life-long learners.
- They usually already possess a certain degree of background knowledge in the areas in which they want learning to move.
- They often feel the need to achieve new learning as quickly as possible (Zmeyov cited in Chiome, 2011, p. 36).
This research interrogated practices to try to uncover staff that are willing and able to employ adult education methodologies to motivate adult students. Oldfield and Baron (2000) are of the view that institutions should address the issue of quality through student feedback. The stumbling block is the power-knowledge debacle where some voices are not considered when quality issues are examined. Knapper and Cropley (2000), posit that adult educators should recognise that teaching and learning methods in adult education need to break away from the traditional face-to-face methods of conventional institutions. And begin to accept a goal that stresses helping students to become self-directed learners, people capable of critical thinking and individual initiative. This was pursued in this study.

The characteristics of distance learners must be viewed against a backdrop of a variety of shortcomings or challenges faced by students in such a situation. Cropley and Karl in Knapper and Cropley (2000) posits that these shortcomings include among others that learners at home do not have their time on task organised and supervised by an expert (e.g. a teacher). As a result they must take at least partial responsibility for planning and organising their own learning. These learners do not receive regular and immediate feedback during a learning task and Kagoda (2009) emphasise the fact that they need to be consulted to avoid half-baked graduates. In such a case, they must themselves evaluate their own learning. They do not learn in a group. As a result, they must develop skills in learning. Learning outside settings specifically designed to foster it requires special learning skills such as planning and organisation of learning, and evaluation by learners of their own progress. It also involves special psychological components of which motivation is possibly the most obvious. This research examined such links in the university under study.
The characteristics of learners appear important. In light of this, the target groups of distance learners must be known so that quality is planned around these attributes. Bates (1995)’s ideas appear relevant here. He categorises distance learners as:

- Independent distance learners studying primarily at home.
- Those in the workforce needing training.
- Those who are combining part-time study with work.
- Those who are studying fulltime, but only on campus.
- Those who are combining one or more of these situations (Bates, 1995).

In view of the above, students will clamour for instructor centred classroom experiences (Jaffee, 1998) that they are familiar with unless the institution respect the characteristics of distance learners in its ODL delivery mode. Saba (2007) recommends personalising of the teaching and learning process and Basaza Milman and Wright (2010) talks of sensitisation to ODL practices.

One important consideration related to students that can be of interest in fostering continuous quality improvement is cheating or the propensity to cheat. Cheating on the part of students and other unethical practices can derail quality efforts in an academic setting. To Koch, (2002) it becomes contaminated evaluations. Gallant (2008) is of the opinion that academic integrity is a teaching and learning imperative. To her, cheating is an old problem with new complications all the time. Thus, learning institutions need to pursue academic integrity and ethics as institutional policy and academic practice. In pursuit of this, one way that Gallant (2008) prescribed for universities is the need to build a coalition of stakeholders with an interest in enhancing academic integrity.

Student retention is also an important area to interrogate in order to uncover missing links considering that Chiome, Chabaya and Chakanyuka (2010) found out that at one time an
education programme lost 60% if its students to early departure. Hill (2009) gives very
important tips for what makes a successful online student in his examination of factors leading
to student retention. Some of these are:

- Be open-minded about sharing life, work, and educational experiences as part of the
  learning process.
- Be self motivated and self disciplined. With the freedom and flexibility of the online
  environment comes responsibility. Distance education as a process takes real
  commitment and discipline to keep up with the flow of the process.
- Be willing to speak up if challenges arise. There are no non-verbal communication
  mechanisms such as confusion, boredom, sleeping, frustration and early departure from
  lecture that tutors can use to determine whether students are meeting challenges.
- Accept critical thinking and decision making as part of the learning process.
- Have access to a computer and modem.
- Feel that high quality learning can take place without going to a traditional classroom. If
  the student feels that a traditional classroom is a prerequisite to learning, they may be
  more comfortable in the traditional classroom.
- Be able to use technology properly (Hill, 2009:10).

It is clear from this discussion that the student has a role to play if quality is to be realised in an
open and distance learning environment. Without the skills to use technology and a bad attitude
towards distance learning, quality cannot be realized.

The debate on student related missing links can be taken further. For instance, if one takes the
definition of quality as what the customers says it is, then there is need to focus on the student
as a customer considering that a customer is someone who receives your service or product
(Canic and Richardson, 2000). Students are the people whose quality requirements a university
must satisfy in order to succeed (Venkatraman, 2007). One of the major tenets within the
principles of quality management is the need for organisations to adopt a strong customer focus
as one of their major initiatives in the transformation of their organisational culture towards
quality (Schauerman, Mann and Peachy cited by Jacobs, 2008). Sometimes failure to address
customer needs can be costly (Sharrock, 2000). Good experiences help to develop a customer
base. Customers build long term trust and credibility that is as necessary in a competitive environment as the one characterising the operations of the university under study.

To understand one’s customers’ quality requirements, one must establish and maintain feedback mechanisms, on site surveys, telephone surveys, focus group meetings and so forth (Mehralizadeh and Safaeemoghaddam, 2010). It is paramount to maintain a consistent relationship with the customers. Customers’ needs change overtime. If one is not in touch, one’s customers’ needs may outdistance one’s capabilities (Doherty, 1994). There are always external and internal customers. People within the organisation may be receivers of services rendered by others. The needs of the various categories of customers must be met. From a methodological point of view, this research has chosen the student as the centre of the system. This seems to be the most appropriate point of departure, and the most relevant in terms of quality (Montalvo, 2005).

The circumstances of the students also play a significant role in quality. Their choice of distance education may be a result of their circumstances. Priebe, Ross and Low (2008) in their study on access to distance education for first generation students cited a reluctance to relinquish paid work to return to school. A participant in that study even noted that distance education gave her the opportunity to pursue both educational goals and work commitments. Findings on attrition (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006 and Lohfink and Paulsen, 2005) also support the peculiarities in the circumstances of distance education students. Their status as adult students with additional responsibilities is a significant factor in their choice of distance
education and cannot be a minor factor on issues to do with quality in a distance teaching environment.

Students acquire responsibilities prior to their enrolment with an open and distance teaching university. These findings are consistent with London’s findings cited in Priebe, Ross and Low (2008) that as young adults move towards increased independence, they come into conflict with their established family roles. This situation, leads to a complex interplay between the desire for personal growth through education, and the fear of losing the role in the family unit (London in Priebe, Ross and Low 2008). This conflict can be largely resolved through appropriate orientation programmes (Shupp, 2010). What might be missing according to Thurab-Nkhosi and Marshall (2009) is the institution that can adopt a method of teaching that allows the student to compromise and develop multiple roles simultaneously. The answer is high quality education (O’Neill and Palmer, 2004) aimed at retaining students (Saba, 2007). This was examined in this study.

2.10.4 Missing links in the Technology

This section looked at the technological factors influencing the achievement of quality in an ODL context to see if there can be missing links. Nyaigotti-Chacha and Ayoo (2001) argue that higher education is being challenged by new opportunities relating to technologies that are improving the ways in which knowledge is produced, managed, disseminated, accessed and controlled. Ticoll (2010) emphasise that technology heightens quality in ODL. Thus, this study tried to take the debate further and interrogate how the Zimbabwe Open University heightens quality through the use of technology in its delivery modes. Anderson (2005) comments on the
motivation for distance learners in particular to move from the lonely isolation of self-paced learning into a learning community of inquiry providing mutual support. He describes Educational Social Software (ESS) as a set of networked tools that support and encourage individuals to learn together while retaining individual control over their time, space, presence, activity, identity and relationship.

Ticoll (2010) is of the opinion that universities are not doing enough to reinventing themselves through technology. He argues that academics pay lip service to the notion that the new information technology is the key enabler of university transformation. In this case, progress has been slow on how technology can achieve the new paradigm in university education. The notion of electronic universities is sweeping across the globe like fire sparking interest in many universities. This study exposed the situation in a distance teaching university in Zimbabwe.

The educational technology is entering its golden era (Norris, Shin and Soloway, 2007). Mobile technology is one such area. In 2012, there were three providers of mobile technology in Zimbabwe. Pulist (2009) is of the opinion that mobile technologies afford educators new ways of thinking about teaching and learning as it is a technological platform for providing student support services. Studies showed that over 90% of young adults own mobile phones in the United Kingdom back in 2003 (Crabtree, Nathan and Roberts in Pulist, 2009). The growth of mobile phones is even more rapid than the infrastructure for fixed network phones (Vavoula, 2007). Mobile phones are now very popular in Zimbabwe with a subscriber base of up to three million mobile users from a population of 12 million (Potraz, cited in Chiome at al., 2010). The use of mobile phones can be of great interest to distance education. For example, the use of
Short message Services (SMS). This service allows for short text messages to be sent from one cell phone to another or from the Web to another cell phone. SmS Zimbabwe has a facility for 100% free SMS send in Zimbabwe though it may carry a small advert from the sponsors (SmS.co.zw). This facility can enabled distance educators to have SMS forum and SMS chart with students scattered throughout the world. SMS are relatively cheaper to use. In 2012, with one US Dollar, one could send twenty messages in Zimbabwe. Thus, the trend of having handheld mobile devices by the young generation most of whom are distance education students or potential ones, can well be utilised by the Zimbabwe Open University for disseminating important information and other related purposes for the students. This study looked at missing links related to this aspect.

Most educational technologists do link distance education to technology and may view it as different from other forms of education (Kanwar, 2011). The interest in utilising educational technologies to accomplish a variety of educational delivery needs has grown to a point where preparing teachers to use technologies is assumed to be the main function and primary intellectual interest of educational technologists (Jeffries, 2009). This stance is supported by Henning (2010) who pointed out that current trends in ODL internationally display the use of resources, especially technology in a radically different way than the first and second-generation approaches.

Recent developments in technology are believed to be removing some of the disadvantages associated with media in distance education. Bates in Jeffries (2009) suggests that new technologies promise a wide range of teaching functions and higher quality of learning, lower
costs, greater student control, more interaction and feedback for students. This position is supported by Pulist (2009) who posits that in this era of competitiveness, the business world has already made headway in the techniques of reaching their clients. Several researchers have highlighted the successful implementation of advanced ITC to promote quality in education. Notable among these is a study by Rabbi and Arefin (2006) who found out that wireless ad-hoc networking provide e-learning in remote areas that promote various educational services, such as web based learning, computer based learning, visual classrooms and visual collaboration. Anderson (2005) considers that social software offers a learner freedom to engage in a learning relationship with other learners and facilitates collaboration between individuals who are separated by location and time. The latter advantage is a tremendous benefit to learners engaged in distance learning programmes.

One big advantage of ICT in enriching learning experiences in ODL is through the creation of an interactive learning environment (Daniel, 2007). A Learner Management System (LMS) also popularly known as the e-learning system is an application that allows students, instructors and administrators to input information for the purpose of learning, support and keeping track of the learning process (Henning, 2010). There are very good examples of internationally popular LMS such as WebCT, Blackboard, SyllaBase, Ucompass and FirstClass. The Zimbabwe Open University appears to be in the right direction with the Zimbabwe Open University on line project. Series of functions such as e-mails, forum, bulletin boards, announcements and many others can be conveyed through the learner management system. However, there are some challenges that go with the use of LMS. Madya and Latif (2003) say that there is a tremendous
need for a proper set up and management of this system in order to minimise dissatisfaction among learners and their tutors. This study looked at this.

The use of ICT to enhance quality in ODL should be used with caution if studies in other countries are anything to go by. Some scholars such as Gulati (2008) have questioned the merits of applying advanced information communication technology (ICT) in developing countries where children and adults lack even the most basic living standards. Gulati (2008) found out that in rural China, the use of ICT is one way of promoting elitist education. The rural people do not have access to the computers and some parts do not have electricity. This was also confirmed in a study by Chabaya and Chiome (2008) on the use of computers in the Zimbabwe Open University. Up to eighty 80% of the students indicated that they did not have access to computers. Another study by Prasad and Cherla (2009) at Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University in India also painted a gloomy picture especially on the use of Open Educational Resources. They found out that only 16.3% of the students in their sample could identify the OERs. Of these, 84.25% felt they get less than 25% of their course content from the Internet. In another study, China was boasting of having the world’s second largest Internet population with 103 million users. However the sad story was that rural users accounted for a mere 1.2% of the total (Zhao, Hao and Banerjee in McQuaide, 2009). In situations like these, traditional technologies such as print media, radio and television remain more effective because the high costs of Internet service prevent poor people from accessing it (Gulati, 2008).

In terms of missing links related to technology, Pulist’s (2009) advice to institutions is important and is summarised below:
• The infrastructure facilities, dedicated server with adequate bandwidth, smart card readers have to be created even if they can incur huge expenditure.
• The special software for accepting the data and assignments online and evaluation of assignments have to be designed and developed to handle different student support activities automatically.
• The course contents have to be created in the desired formats like audio, video programme and others.
• Data warehousing and data mining facilities have to be created in order to deal with voluminous data and make inferences and take out reports.
• Training of faculty and staff associated with the system would be essential.
• Keeping in view the heterogeneity of the students, the services provided by the university may remain underutilised in the beginning.
• The students belonging to rural and remote areas may not be able to take full advantage of huge expenditure incurred by the university.
• System failure, lack of electricity, lack of technical expertise for handling sophisticated technology may at times perplex the students (Pulist, 2009, p. 5)

Pulist (2009)’s advice is important to ODL institutions. Should they incorporate this advice in their practices, the university will, through technology (Caswell, Henson, Jensen and Wiley (2008), attain and sustain quality. However what appears missing from the literature reviewed is what to do in situations where system failure is the norm. This study looked into that.

Jonassen’s (1999) model of constructivist learning environment is a case in point in designing appropriate learning environment and technology. This model suggests the provision of a range of resources, tools and supports within the learning environment to assist learners to engage in authentic activities such as projects, solving problems, solving cases and others through the use of technology. Relevant collaborative activities include researching and writing conceptual pieces, term papers and others on issues such as the digital divide, distance learning, student retention and others. However, Jonassen (1999) fell short when it came to situations where there is lack of electricity and lack of technical expertise. This study tried to address that shortfall.
A new concept that can be used by ODL institutions is the Open Educational Resources (OER). Open Educational Resources (OER) is a relatively new phenomenon. The term OER has been defined by UNESCO in Prasad and Cherla (2009) as the open provision of educational resources, enabled by information communication technologies, for consultation, use adaptation by a community of users for non-commercial purposes. They go further to say that OER is the teaching learning and research resources that are provided in the public domain permitting their free use by others. The purpose of these OER is to use information technology to help equalise access to knowledge and educational opportunities targeting educators, students and self learners worldwide. Access to and use of OER by Zimbabwe Open University students and educators can lead to quality in the provision of education and its absence is a missing link in fostering continuous quality improvement.

A leaf can be taken from other organisations that have used OER to equalise educational opportunities. The following are some of the projects that range from much specialised open knowledge cites and data sets to comprehensive collections and curricula:

- Commonwealth of Learning is supporting Open Educational Resources activities to infuse the principles of Open Educational Resources into the Commonwealth of Learning’s wide array of activities.
- United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) are creating an international community of practice on Open Educational Resources.
- Open University (UK) made its higher education learning resources freely available on the Internet, providing users with tools to help them manage their learning, and developing supported collaborative learning communities.
- Open Universiteit Nederland is working on the OER project to introduce OER to Dutch higher education by focusing on high quality, independent self-study learning materials in an open resource format.
- Harvard University developed the Open Collections Programme, making Harvard’s library treasures freely available on the web. (Prasad and Cherla 2009:3).
There are important lessons to draw from the use of OER. If such a practice is infused in the Zimbabwe Open University array of activities, a community of worldwide learners is created, the independent self-study concept will be enhanced and materials will be freely available to students thereby contributing to quality. Nevertheless, it has to be seen if this is not a missing link or quality grey area.

2.10.5 Missing links in the university-wide practices

There is little to be gained by increasing peoples’ motivation and capacity if working conditions will not allow their effective application. In Bandura’s model, beliefs about the situation is a fourth source of motivation; people are motivated when they believe the circumstances in which they find themselves are conducive to accomplishing the goals they hold to be personally important. To offer education of good quality, educational institutions and programmes must be adequately and equitably resourced. Lack of resources is an obvious missing link. The Inter University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) advocated for the establishment of learning environments that are healthy, safe and protective with respect to the following:

- Adequate water and sanitation facilities;
- Access to or linkages with health and nutrition services;
- Policies and codes of conduct that enhance physical, psycho-social and emotional health of teachers and learners; and
- Education content and practices leading to knowledge, attitudes, values and life skills needed for self-esteem, good health and personal safety (Nyaigotti-Chacha and Ayoo (2001:8).

This study interrogated practices in the Zimbabwe Open University to see to what extent they continuously improve quality.

Another important process aligned to learning environment that affects quality is communication. In line with the dictates of the TDT, ODL students experience intense
communications when deference to power is low (Chaminade and Johanson, 2003). Where there is less regard for hierarchy, there is more participatory decision-making (Chow Harrison, Chow, McKinnon and Wu, 1999). Any organisational or administrative structure must have effective communication for it to succeed. Distance education with its diversity of activities and staffing, the nature of its students, and externally based instructional programming, requires very effective communication. Verduin and Clark in Jeffries (2009) support this argument. They say information must flow in such a manner that all involved are aware of common goals, activities, procedures and required outcomes.

Organisational politics need to be considered in implementing innovations such as quality programmes. Power and politics are primary forces in the implementation process. In this case, innovators have been accused of being passionate about their innovation that their reality is distorted and they fail to consider the importance of building constituencies to help support their cause. Sarason in Jeffries (2009) even identifies a pro-innovation bias which often appears in the implementation of the innovation and any related researches that follow. Quality in education may suffer tissue rejection if it receives strong support from a relatively small segment of adopters and limited support from the group affected (Yeo, 2008). Effort must be made to develop support from constituents by finding real links with a broad commonality of interest that would form the basis for collision building.

Cost considerations are some of the issues confronting universities today (Venkatraman, 2007). Quality can be developed as a cost effective measure. The British Open University enrols about 100 000 students at a little more than a quarter of the cost per student at a conventional
university (Granger, in Dekker and Lemmer, 1993). This university can do more to promote the credibility and respect of distance education by focusing on quality to compliment the large enrolment. The Zimbabwe Open University is in the same predicament. Earlier on, it was noted that Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2007) found out that quality as an attribute of product and service is often ignored in favour of quantity. That on its own would be considered a missing link.

There are some important organisational issues that need interrogation to uncover missing links. Bates (1995) identifies a number of such issues, these are: Access: How accessible is a particular methodology or technology for learners? How flexible is it for a particular target group? Costs: What is the costs structure of each methodology? What are the unit costs per learner? Teaching and Learning: What kinds of learning are needed? What instructional approaches will best meet these needs? What are the technologies for supporting this teaching and learning? Interactivity and User Friendliness: What kind of interaction does this approach enable? How easy is it to use? Organizational Issues: What are the organizational requirements, and the barriers to be removed before this approach can be used successfully? What changes in organisation need to be made? Novelty: How new is this approach or methodology? Speed: How quickly can courses be mounted with this approach? How quickly can materials be changed? Bates (1995)’s ideas were analysed in this study.

Quality and excellence go hand in hand. To continuously improve quality, Bradford and Cohen (1984) discuss issues to do with an excellent organisation as one which (among many attributes):

- Works close to its potential
- Strives to be at the forefront of its field.
• Focuses on quality of products, services and members themselves as concerns for task accomplishment
• Focuses on a genuinely collaborative team effort, thus enabling members to share a commitment to making the unit extraordinarily successful in accomplishing agreed organisational objectives
• Focuses on continual attention to the development of members as integral to achieving tasks.
• Enables all members to prepare to do what is necessary in order to help the organisation exceed expectations
• Transmits information freely among members as well as between members and the leader (Bradford and Cohen, 1984).

Thus, the focus on quality can unlock a lot of potential when the university portrays the characteristics of an excellent organisation as outlined by Bradford and Cohen, 1984) through a shared vision (Avdjieva and Wilson, 2002). In addition, it is important to adopt proactive and creative strategies that guides and stimulates performance (Daniel, 2007) especially dealing with issues of programme delivery, student services, research and the continued professional development of members with a focus on quality. Koul (2005) posits that quality culture should be nurtured, failing which, missing links will appear.

According to Cuseo cited in Chiome et al. (2010), both the depth and breadth of student learning are enhanced by exposure to others from diverse experiential backgrounds who bring multiple perspectives and varied predilections or approaches to the learning process. In this regard, there are some pertinent processes that must be in place to continuously improve quality and expose students to diverse experiential backgrounds. For instance, continuous review of curriculum (QAA, 2004; Bornman, 2004; Mkuchu, 2011) monitoring quality processes (Comm and Mathaisel, 2005 and Koul, 2005), quality assurance (Kanwar, 2011), planned approaches to quality (Poley and France, 1998 and Venkatraman, 2007), research and scholarship (Chiome, 2011b), Total Quality Management (UNIDO, 2007 and Safaeemoghaddam, 2010), networking
(Kariem, 2010) and facilities (Chen Sok and Sok, 2007). Discussions on these issues have almost exclusively focused on conventional university settings. In contrast, comparatively little attention has been paid to open and distance learning contexts. This study was a departure from such a practice. Exposing student to practices that continuously improve quality in an ODL context will in some way contribute to their success.

2.11 SUMMARY

This chapter looked at the conceptual framework of quality. It then proceeded to review literature on quality in higher education, quality in open and distance learning and quality in the university under study. The chapter then rounded off by looking at missing links in those factors cited in the research questions and the research objectives. These were the guiding principles, factors in students, factors in the deliverers of service, factors in the processes and products and factors in the technology. In the literature, distance education has been seen as equalizing educational opportunities, alleviating social conflicts and empowering the less fortunate only if it results in quality educational provision. The roots of the quality movement according to the literature reviewed lie in the assumptions about people, organisations, and management that have one unifying theme of making continual learning the bases of fostering continuous quality improvement in ODL. This means improving the performance of the organisation as a total system. The next chapter will look at the research paradigm and research methodology that directed this research.
CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 INTRODUCTION

Chapter two of this study identified the work of other authorities on the four main research questions of the study. This chapter takes this issue further by describing the methodology used to provide data to investigate the issues raised in chapter one and discussed in the literature review. An introduction to the methodology was provided in section 1.10 of chapter one; this chapter aims to build on that introduction and to provide assurance that appropriate procedures were followed. The study adopted a case study method, which falls into the qualitative paradigm. The chapter is organised around ten major topics: the study region, the subjects, the sampling procedure, the instruments, ethical issues, trustworthiness, triangulation, pilot study and data processing. In this chapter I argued for the use of a qualitative paradigm and case study approach, as it is best suited to the research question. I also focused on some of the concerns that are commonly associated with the selected approach and some steps toward addressing these concerns. I suggested that there is a disjuncture between the planned research process and what happens in reality.

3.1 PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE STUDY

This section examined the ontology, epistemology, paradigm, knowledge and the methodology that propelled this research.

3.1.1 Ontology

Ontology is the basic assumptions about the nature of reality. In ontology, the question is: What is the nature of reality. The positivist paradigm insists there is stable, Law-like reality out there.
This study took the post positivist view that there is multiple, emergent, shifting reality out there that can be obtained through subjective experience (Seidel, 2010 and O’Leary, 2004).

3.1.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is the basic assumptions about what we can know about reality, and about the relationship between knowledge and reality. It answers questions on what is knowledge and what do we know about reality (Silverman, 2000). Positivists say meaning exists in the world while the interpretivists insist meaning exist in our interpretation of the world. Thus, this study subscribed to the argument that knowledge is interpretation.

3.1.3 Paradigm

A paradigm is an overarching perspective concerning appropriate research practice, based on ontological and epistemological assumption (O’Leary, 2004). There are three basic paradigms in social science research. These are positivism, interpretivism and constructionism. This study was grounded in the interpretive paradigm. It recognised the importance of the researcher’s perspective and the interpretative nature of social reality. The study was conducted from a qualitative, interpretive research paradigm. Interpretivists seek subjective views of individuals (Cantrell, 1993). For qualitative researchers the context is important in understanding the social world. In other words, the meanings that are derived from the study of social actions are informed by the social context in which they occur.

This research was based on the interpretivism to penetrate into the jungle of the life worlds (Matthiesen in Honer, 2004) because of the belief that ODL should promote learners as active agents in their own learning (Madya and Bahroom 2003). This was done by describing the correlates of staff and students action, their experience and their suffering, their success and translating them into what Schutz in Honer (2004) called second degree constructs of logical
consistence, adequacy and subjective interpretability. In this case, the interpretivism becomes a way to construct a viable, authentic depiction of meaning and human interaction.

According to the interpretive paradigm, sociality is produced as intersubjectivity by subjects who mutually interpret one another (Bohnsack, 2004). There is constant mutual interpretation. The connection between participation and observation consists in the first place of capturing and making interpretively available as many and as varied, as possible current and sedimended (deposited) forms of utterance and behaviour from some partial reality that is to be reconstructed (Honer 2004). In this study it consisted of understanding and reproducing, at least appropriately, the inside views of the normal participant in some cultural phenomenon. Safeguarding the subjective point of view is the only, but sufficient guarantee that social reality will not be replaced by a fictional non-existing world constructed by some scientific observer (Schutz quoted in Honer 2004). Thus, Denzin in Lincoln (2004) calls on social scientists to set aside tenets of logical positivism as the interpretive social scientist moves forward in the construction of a viable, authentic depiction of meaning and human interaction. The interpretive paradigm is best suited to examine interrelationships, emotional reactions and cognitive processes, which cannot be categorised into small and simple definitions (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p. 5). Exploring such sensitive and complicated issues entails the use of qualitative techniques. This was the case in this study.

3.1.4 Knowledge

While the positivists are of the view that accurate knowledge exactly reflects the world as it is, this research because of its interpretive inclinations, posits that knowledge provides suggestive interpretations by particular people at particular times. This was the case in this research.
3.1.5 Methodology

Methodology specifies how the researcher may go about practically studying whatever he / she believes can be known. The aim of this study was to establish the missing links in the conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an open and distance learning context by interrogating the state of practice in the Zimbabwe Open University. It examined how students and staff the internal customers of the university experienced the conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an open and distance learning context. It was necessary to gain access to their perceptions and evaluations of the factors and practices in the Zimbabwe Open University and to gain insight into the stakeholders’ personal experiences of these factors. In this context, the study was qualitative though underpinned by a philosophical assumption embracing a post positivist belief (O’Leary 2004, Denzin 1997 and Kelle 2001), underlining the need to view knowledge and reality as both subjective and objective and thus obtainable through multiple methodological approaches based on the concept of triangulation. The need for methodological integration was achieved through the use of open-ended questionnaire, observation, document analysis and the use of narrative interviews (Flick, 2002).

Qualitative researchers have quite consciously connected issues of epistemology and method. Merriam (1998) indicated that qualitative research is exploratory, inductive and emphasises processes rather than ends. In qualitative research, there is no predetermined hypothesis, no treatment, and no restrictions on the end product. In this research, I did not manipulate the variables or administer treatment. Instead, I observed, intuited, and sensed what is occurring in a natural ODL setting. I got close to the researched and this allowed me to distinguish what people do to what they say they do (Watson, Modgil and Modgil, 1997). Denzin (1997) defines
qualitative research as multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials, case study, personal experience, introspective, life story interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives (Mizikaci 2006). I used it in this research in order to provide a deeper analysis and information.

Creswell (cited in White, 2005) defines qualitative research as an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. In this study, I built a complex, holistic picture; analysed words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducted the study in a natural setting.

3.2 THE RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGICAL DESIGNS

This section will address issues to do with the research design used in this study. The methodological designs also used in the study will be looked at.

3.2.1 Research Design

Qualitative research may include multiple methods such as, case studies, ethnography and participant observation, grounded theory, biographical and participative inquiries (Strauss and Corbin 1994). Within the field of qualitative research, the case study methodology is the most prevalent method (Flick, 2004). In this study, I employed the descriptive case study (Merriam
It was descriptive because it focused on the systematic description or exposure of the salient aspects of quality with a focus on patterns that emerged. A case study that I employed in this study is a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence (Robson, in Flick, 2004). The intention was to provide a rich or thick description, which interprets the experiences of staff and students from their own perspectives. Hopkins and Lee (2001) argue that the case study allows a researcher to carry out intensive study of parts of a unit to discover relationships that exist among them, to identify the direction of such relationships and recognise what causes them. This was the case in this study.

The case study of one university was seen as enabling this study to probe deeply and analyse intensively the phenomena that lead to fostering continuous quality improvement in an open and distance education setting in order to unravel missing links. It also allowed me to probe beneath the surface of the experiences of staff and students (Best and Kahn, 1993). The purpose of such observation according to Cohen and Manion (1994) is to probe deeply and analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalisations about the situation in other open learning institutions. Another important advantage of case studies that was experienced in this study is that data was gathered by a variety of methods (Hopkins 1985; Merriam 1988 and Best and Kahn 1993). I collected data through open-ended questionnaire, observations, interviews, and document analysis.

However, the research took cognisance of the weaknesses of case studies, the greatest of which is its limited scope for generalisability (Gossley and Vulliamy in Kariem, 2010). When studies are confined to a fragment of a social unit or an isolated social case like the university in this
study, they do not usually produce enough data that can be applied to all cases. Thus, the missing links in the conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in the university under study may not be generalisable to other ODL contexts. Nevertheless, in this research, I argued that generalisability is a term that holds little meaning for most qualitative researchers (University of Sheffield 2008) and that generalisability is not a key consideration in qualitative research. Another weakness was the possibility of obtaining data, which is very subjective, and whose validity and reliability is difficult to establish. In this research, trustworthiness (discussed in a separate section) was the guiding principle.

3.2.2 Methodological design framing this research

The methodological design framing this research is system analysis (Kendall and Kendall, 2002). I also employed policy analysis and documentary analysis as subsidiary methodological designs. System is a collection of subsystems that are interrelated and interdependent, working together to accomplish predetermined goals and objectives (Kendall and Kendall, 2002, p. 901). Systems analysis is the process of gathering information about current system, which may or may not be computerised, identifying its strengths and problems and analysing them to produce a concept for a refined system (Whitten, Bentley and Barlow, quoted in Kariem, 2010). Its main strength is the goal of the analysis phase, ‘directed to understand requirements for a refined system’ (Kariem, 2010, p. 4) and developing a system concept that addresses this or decides that a new system is not needed. To achieve this, the research followed a basic process of analysis divided into three steps: understanding the system, identifying improvements and developing design for the To-Be system (Dennis, Wixom, and Tegarden, 2002, p. 94). It is an appropriate methodology for this research in that it analyses and tests current systems and
practices in the development of quality in the university understudy, indicating how they behave and offering to potentially design an accepted system for a future development of quality generally and in the university under study in particular.

I used policy analysis as a subsidiary methodological design. This is the process of assessing and deciding across alternatives based on their usefulness in satisfying one or more goals or values through following some stages (Kariem, 2010). It was an appropriate method for this research in order not to replace but to supplement political advocacy and to raise the level of argument among contending interests. The end result, hopefully, would be a debate on how the future development of quality in ODL in general and quality in the university under study in particular should be constructed in order to assist in addressing and achieving the societal concerns.

Documentary analysis is the careful examination of documents and their content in order to draw conclusions about the social circumstances in which the documents are produced and read (Bloor and Wood, 2006, p. 57-58). Its main techniques include: content analysis in order to describe the characteristics of documents; interpretative analysis in order to explore meaning within content; and critical analysis in order to focus on the relationship between documents and aspects of social structures (Kariem, 2010). It was an appropriate method for this research in order to examine current theories, policies, practices and settings justifying the adequacy of envisioning a future development of quality in ODL particularly for addressing and achieving local and global needs.
3.3 PARTICIPANTS

This section on participants looks at the population, the sample, the sampling technique and the sampling procedure.

3.3.1 Population

Cheng and Tam (1997) suggest that quality indicators may differ for internal and external constituencies. Cheng and Tam (1997) define internal stakeholders as current students and staff, while external stakeholders are employers, government bodies, institutional management, prospective students, and professional bodies. This study used perspectives of internal stakeholders to interrogate practices in an ODL institution. The population for this study was all the staff (full time and part time) and students in the 10 regional campuses of the Zimbabwe Open University.

3.3.2 Sample

A sample is described as a portion of the elements in a population (White, 2005). This study focused on four of the ten Zimbabwe Open University Campuses. Participants in this research fell into two categories. The first are the consumers- represented by students who want to know that the institution, the programme or the course conforms to generally accepted practice in the profession. The second were the practitioners who are actively engaged in developing and implementing the distance education programmes and who are grappling with quality issues on a daily basis. By joining those who need to get value for their money and those with a practical perspective and with responsibility for quality, the research hoped to arrive at a point of understanding that will contribute to meaningful missing links in conditions fostering
continuous quality improvement in an open and distance learning context both in theory and in practice.

Due to the lack of any standard definition of the ideal sample size for qualitative research, I was guided by the theoretical saturation paradigm defined by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) who attempted to establish a standard for determining when theoretical saturation has occurred. Building on Morse’s observation cited in Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) that saturation is key to excellent qualitative work I aimed to determine ideal sample sizes for this qualitative study. Guest, et. al. (2006) concluded that theoretical saturation generally occurs in as few as twelve interviewees and that for high level overarching themes, a sample of six interviewees may be sufficient to enable development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations. I then proceeded to interview six staff members and ten students from each of the four regions visited. A further fifty questionnaire information from students and twenty from staff members were collected from each of the four regions visited. In total 24 staff members and 40 students were interviewed and 280 staff and students completed a questionnaire for this research.

3.3.3 The Sampling Technique

This research is in the qualitative paradigm. In this case I made use of the non-probability sampling techniques. Some techniques in this category include snowballing, quota sampling, convenience sampling and purposive sampling (White, 2005). From these, I chose the purposive sampling that enabled me to achieve the research objectives. In some cases, convenience sampling was employed in order to utilise respondents who are available to the researcher during the time of the study. Patton (cited in Hoijer (2008) argues that the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information rich cases for in-depth study.
Purposeful sampling is done at random and is inclusive of sampling by case. The researcher here selected at random certain cases that will in all probability “yield the information that is required.” The information rich participants whom I selected were knowledgeable and informative about conditions fostering continuous quality improvement that I was investigating. The participants should be willing to talk (Le Coup te and Goetz in Silverman, 2000). This was the case in this study.

3.4 INSTRUMENTS

The instruments for data collection were the open-ended questionnaire, observation, interview and document analysis.

3.4.1 The Questionnaire

An open-ended questionnaire, a sample of which is in appendix, was used to solicit for information from the respondents. Section A looked at the biodata of respondents and section B looked at the missing links in those issues raised in the research questions. The questionnaire has been chosen because it is easier to construct, cheaper to administer and useful for collecting large amounts of data (Hopkins, 1985; Denzin, 1997). Processing of information from questionnaires is also less complex compared to observation (White, 2005). According to Nachmias and Nachmias (cited in Stake, 2005) a questionnaire reduces biasing errors, has greater anonymity and covers wide geographic contact at minimal cost. It is also fairly inexpensive, the main costs being those for, reproduction of the large numbers of questionnaires required. There were no mailing costs as researcher utilised the internal mailing system in the university at no cost. In this case the questionnaire was ideal for extracting attitudes, views and expectations of internal stakeholders of the university.

Cognisance was also taken of the weaknesses of the questionnaire. Chief amongst them is that there is no opportunity to probe beyond the given answers, to clarify ambiguous answers or to
appraise the non-verbal behaviour of respondents. In this study, these weaknesses were taken care of because interview and observation provided supplementary information and triangulation was central to this research. Another weakness of questionnaires is the lack of control over the respondents’ environment. Hence, one cannot be sure that the right person will complete the questionnaire or the respondents may go over the questions without giving it much thought. Questionnaires assume that respondents are literate, in this study; respondents are university employees and students whose minimum qualification is ordinary level of education. The problem of illiteracy falls out. Further, if questionnaires are mailed, the response rate will be low, and may affect sample size, validity of findings and the generalisability of findings. In this study, this disadvantage was taken care of by utilising the internal mailing system of the university. Another disadvantage of the questionnaire is the deficiency of analysing open ended questions which were part of the questionnaire (Wolf cited in White, 2005). This was the case in this study and these were analysed thematically like the rest of the qualitative data obtained through interviews and observation.

3.4.2 Interview schedule

One research tool chosen for this work was an in-depth interview; this enabled the construction of a rich description of the varied and multi-dimensional world of the interviewees (Shapira, Arar and Azaiza, 2010). An interview is a joint product of what interviewees and interviewers talk about together and how they talk with each other (Hoijer, 2008). The record of an interview that I made and used in this research in the work of analysis and interpretation is a representation of that talk. The interview was used because it promoted a two-way communication. It also allowed the researcher freedom and flexibility to probe deeper into staff and students’ experiences with the missing links in quality processes. This was possible because the content, sequence and wording were under the control of the interviewer (Cohen and Manion 1994). The interviews in this study were given prominence because they unite a high degree of openness and
non-directivity with high level of concreteness, because of this, in-depth interviews appear superior to other interview variants (Silverman, 2000).

One of the key techniques that was used in interviewing in this research is the use of probes. Patton cited in Hoijer (2008) identifies three types of probes: detail-oriented probes, elaboration probes and clarification probes. I used detailed probes to get more detail through follow up questions and elaboration probes to encourage participants to tell more about the issues that were being discussed. I used clarification probes whenever I was unsure of what the interviewee was talking about. The probes allows life processes to be examined, revealing transitions and development over the years, examining the meanings that interviewees attribute to phenomena connected to their personal lives and professional development (Josselson, 1995). I attained a rich and broad understanding of the studied phenomenon (Stake, 2005) by analysing interviewees’ narratives (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, and Bertsch, 2004) and exposing personal, professional and social issues. Many subjects are depicted more profoundly and meaningfully through stories that provide a live description of the narrators’ attitudes, acts and interpretations (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber, 1998). The story allows people to provide meaning for their life events, from their own subjective viewpoint, and to paint a rich picture of their world (Stake, 2005).

However, there were also challenges that I encountered. I found the process of interviewing a new challenge. I slowly developed a sharpened ability to listen with the eyes and ears of a portrait artist trying to capture the essence of the participant in his/her social setting. Narrator’s different perceptions may also distort the facts if not captured correctly. It this study, interview analysis was undertaken in order to minimize this disadvantage of interviewing. Interview
analysis was conducted according to the “Listener’s Guide” (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg and Bertsch, 2004) in which I read or listened to the text, tracked the different “voices” that the interviewee articulated to identify each one separately. This method can potentially uncover narrators’ different perceptions of themselves, their significant others and society.

However, as noted by Muijs (2011), both survey and interview based methodologies, while highly useful, have, when used as the sole means of data collection, some severe limitations. Post hoc interviews are heavily prone to attributional bias (the tendency to attribute to ourselves positive outcomes, while negative outcomes are externally attributed; Weiner, cited in Muijs 2011), as well as to self-presentation bias and interviewer expectancy effects (the tendency to give those answers we feel the interviewer wants to hear). Survey questionnaires are likewise limited, especially where they are cross-sectional, as only correlational data can be collected (Muijs, 2011).

3.4.3 Document analysis

Document analysis is also one area that I used to source for information. It is the careful examination of documents and their content in order to draw conclusions about the social circumstances in which the documents are produced and read (Bloor and Wood, 2006, p. 57-58). Babbie (1992) says that organisations generally document themselves through documents. In this study i looked at documents like charters, policy statements, mission statements and policy circulars. The last paragraph of section 3.2.2 also addresses issue to do with document analysis in this research.
3.4.4 Observation

Whatever the problem or the approach, at the heart of every case study lays a method of observation. Observation was used to collect information from the regions that I visited. Observation allowed me to describe in words the behaviour of the person being observed. At the point of recording I did not make any judgements or inferences. These were taken care of at the data analysis stage. Observations can be made by either a participant or non-participant observer (Cohen and Manion, 1994). All the observations were made in the university where I was a lecturer so I acted as a participant observer. During observation I focused on the self, the language, interaction patterns, communication, feelings, voice intonations and critical incidents among other things. I tried as much as possible to see life as it is and report it as it is. The observations were in three stages, namely descriptive, inferential and evaluative.

A case study conducted on participant observation lines is at the heart of many of the problems faced by the educational investigator (Cohen and Manion 1994). Bailey as quoted in Cohen and Manion (1994) identifies some inherent advantages in the participant observation approach. Observation studies are superior to experiments and surveys because data can be collected on non-verbal behaviour. In observation studies, I was able to discern ongoing behaviour as it occurs, and was able to make appropriate notes about its salient features. In this case study, observation took place over an extended period of time. So I developed more intimate and informal relationships with those to be observed in meetings and informal discussions.

Participant observation studies are not without their critics. Cohen and Manion (1994) say that the accounts that typically emerge from participant observations are often described as subjective, impressionistic, idiosyncratic and lacking in the precise quantifiable measures that are the hallmark of other researches. There is also the danger of the researcher “going native” as a result of playing a role within such a group. However, in this research attempts were made to cross-check interpretations of meanings of events through interviews, document analysis and administration of a questionnaire. Attempts were also made not to lose the perceptive and become blind to the peculiarities that were supposed to be investigated. Note taking also helped me to fight the acute boredom that was likely to be felt when observing.
3.5 PILOT STUDY

As was the case in this study, pilot studies are usually positioned as a test of a proposed research design (Yin, 2011). This study pilot tested instruments even though Holloway (1997, p. 121) suggests that “in qualitative approaches pilot studies are not necessary because the research has the flexibility for the researcher to learn on the job”. In this research I chose to agree with Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 201)’s position that see pilot studies as an essential aspect of the overall research process since “qualitative research design decisions parallel the warm-up exercise and cool down periods of dance”. Yin (2011) also sees pilot studies as part of the research training process, particularly for post-graduate students as was the case in this study.

Pilots are defined by Yin (2011, p. 37) as aiming to “help test and refine one or more aspects of a final study – for example, its design, fieldwork procedures, data collection instruments or analysis plans”. In this study, the interview schedule, questionnaire and observation instrument were pre-tested on 22 randomly selected respondents in order to discuss the length of the instrument, the format, and the clarity and appropriateness of the wording of the questions, which resulted in the revision or removal of some questions regarded as ambiguous. This was done to check that all questions and instructions are clear. Items that did not yield suitable data were also eliminated. This trial was a forerunner of the main data collection and was a research training process.

3.6 SUFFICIENCY AND SATURATION
The number of participants was not determined prior to the research and the criteria of sufficiency and saturation were used to determine the number of participants interviewed in the study (Rossman and Rallis, 2003). The point of saturation was reached when I began to hear the same information being reported by additional participants while sufficiency was reached when enough people were interviewed to reflect the range of participants and issues for the study (Rossman and Rallis, 2003).

3.7 ETHICAL ISSUES

Despite institutional safeguards, the burden for conducting ethical research lies with the researcher (Merriam, 1998). Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Each interview began with a statement of confidentiality with the provision for non-participation or withdrawal from participation at any time. Member checks were used not only for purposes of validity but also for verity in the description and interpretation of the participants’ perceptions. I engaged in self-examination at all stages of the research in order to eliminate research bias (Merriam, 1998). The case study involves obtaining a lot of personal and intimate data from respondents and in open democratic research respondents’ informed consent is sought (White, 2005). In this regard, each individual who took part in this research was consulted and agreement sought on what data to be collected and included in the research. The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of respondents was upheld and guaranteed in this research. Permission was also sought and was granted by authorities to conduct this research in the Zimbabwe Open University. The letter to that effect is in the appendix.
3.8 TRIANGULATION

Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (cited in Stake, 2005) say knowledge in social science is fragmented. The separateness or specificity of these bodies of knowledge is a consequence of method specificity. Each method is one discriminable way of knowing. To minimise the degree of specificity of certain methods to particular bodies of knowledge, this research used three methods of data collection. Interviews were supplemented by observations, document analysis and open-ended questionnaire. This was done so that the findings yielded by the different data collection methods are consistent. This increased the authenticity of the findings of this study.

3.9 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Reliability, validity, generalisability and objectivity are fundamental concerns for quantitative researchers. For qualitative research, however, the role of these dimensions is blurred. Some researchers argue that these dimensions are not applicable to qualitative research and a qualitative researcher's tool chest should be geared towards trustworthiness and encompass issues such as credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability (O’Leary, 2004). Strictly speaking, quantitative criteria such as objectivity and validity are not deemed applicable to qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 1997, Silverman, 2000). Hence, in this research, to establish "trustworthiness" of qualitative research, credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability were established.

3.10 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES
To collect data for this research, a plan with time frames and objectives was put in place that directed the research process from construction of instruments through pilot testing to data collection and up to data analysis. The first brief phase of the study focused on students and staff. Observations were made and interviews conducted and recorded on audio tape. Information yielded from observations and interviews was used to inform the development of the questionnaire, observation and interview techniques employed in the second phase of the study. The second phase of this study, which was the major one, entailed visits to the four regions to experience firsthand the goings on and share those experiences with staff and students. The subjects for this second phase were chosen on the grounds that they provided a reasonable representation of the various programmes on offer and the various sectors for the staff.

Prior to each encounter, a thirty-minute tape-recorded semi-structured interview was held for the purpose of confirming the conditions of the observations, providing assurances about confidentiality and other matters concerning the background of the study. The observations were recorded by the use of the scheduler with the mixed structured and semi-structured format. After the observations, further interviews were conducted in order to clarify issues in light of the observed session. The respondents were also called upon to elaborate on responses given.

Throughout the second phase, the accumulated qualitative data were continually subjected to analysis. The preliminary analysis was guided initially by the principles of comparative analysis and theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The research methods employed in the study were then fine tuned in the process. This was done in order to yield the evidence
necessary for the clarification and verification of critical concepts, categories and their properties. Through theoretical sampling, the evidence was used to verify emergent themes as the emphasis of the study slightly shifted from exploration to verification. The research was however essentially exploratory, seeking to identify those categories and concepts most adequate for the purpose of describing and explaining students and staff’s experiences with the missing links in the conditions that continuously improve quality in an open and distance learning university. The qualitative data was central to this task. Comparative analysis of qualitative data allowed those concepts and categories which proved most relevant to, dominant and most powerful in, an exploratory account to be scrutinised and validated. The progressive refinement and validation of key concepts and themes continued alongside, and in close relationship with, data collection.

Quantitative data was obtained through questionnaires and document analysis. This being a case study, there was a close relation between quantitative and qualitative data. The tendency to associate quantitative data with positivist verification is misleading. Both forms of data had a part to play in the verification and generation of concepts and themes in this study. Quantitative data are but another ‘mode of knowing’ and can be used in the same way as other evidence in the discovery of categories and their properties (Bloomer, 1997). The main contribution of quantitative data in this study was to assist in the generation of concepts and themes that had emerged rather than to verify the outcomes.

The final stage of the study entailed drawing all the relevant data into some coherent explanatory account of the missing links in the conditions that continuously improve quality in
the university under study. Comparative analysis of raw data had provided the major means of locating key categories. Concepts and themes were in turn subjected to continual critical inspection. It was the richness of the qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews, observations and document analysis that served to illuminate the processes involved. It provided greatest assistance in the generation of concepts and themes in this study.

3.11 DATA ANALYSIS

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously as an ongoing process throughout the inquiry (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The systematic data collection and analysis process discovered, expanded, and verified the phenomenon under study (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Based on information gathered from the open-ended questionnaires, interviews and observations, I identified the major themes or categories within the data using a pattern clarification process. In particular, data analysis followed Marshall and Rossman’s (1999) four stages, namely, organising the data, generating tentative themes, testing the emergent themes, and searching for alternative explanations. I particularly attended to data that challenged developing conceptualisations.

In this context the research proceeded with data analysis using the perspectives of (Marshall and Rossman, 1999) who see qualitative research analysis as ‘a search for general statements among categories of data’ (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, p. 111). In the same vein, I followed the procedures for data analysis outlined by Foster (1994). The interview excerpts and open-ended questionnaire responses of the respondents were brought together on the basis of their similarities. They made themes that differ from one another in terms of the subject matter and meaning that each theme represented as outlined by Luborsky (1994). To enhance the validity
and credibility for the data categorisation and of the interpretations, peer review and structured analysis were employed as discussed in Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Seidel (2010) point out that qualitative data analysis (QDA) is a process of Noticing, Collecting, and Thinking about interesting things. The QDA process employed in this study was not linear. In this process, the researcher did not simply notice, collect, and then think about things, and then write a report. Rather, the process had the following characteristics as given by Seidel (2010) Iterative and Progressive: The process was iterative and progressive because it was a cycle that kept repeating. For example, when I was thinking about things I started noticing new things in the data. I then collected and thought about these new things. In principle the process is an infinite spiral.

The process was also recursive: It was recursive because one part called me back to a previous part. For example, while I was busy collecting data I simultaneously started noticing new things to collect. Lastly, it was holographic: The process was holographic in that each step in the process contained the entire process. For example, when I first noticed things, I was mentally deeply involved in collecting and thinking about usefulness of those things. Thus, while there is a simple foundation to QDA, the process of doing qualitative data analysis is complex Seidel (2010). The key is to root oneself in this foundation and the rest will flow from this foundation.

The research was also mindful of the need to remain concise in the data analysis process. In this direction, citations that best represented a theme or an opinion presented by the majority of the respondents was used. Special indication is provided when a minority voice is presented. As
this is a case study, the methodology and analytical procedure applied in the study is multilayered. The research was interested not only in the variation in individual constructions of various aspects that influence quality expressed by the respondents, but also in what constitute the most common features of the constructions in each group studied. The primary analysis of the interview data and the questionnaire accounts was inspired by the rigorous procedure of phenomenography, as a first step on the way towards understanding socially, institutionally and culturally situated and constructed meanings.

The initial phase of data analysis was familiarisation when the transcriptions were carefully read in conjunction with the personal accounts with the aim of getting acquainted with the texts in detail. During this process, it was also necessary to make any corrections or editing. The analysis then continued with a phase of condensation. During this process, the most significant statements were selected to give a short version of the entire dialogue concerning the missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University. The selected significant dialogue excerpts were then compared in order to find sources of variation or agreement.

Taking into account the steps mentioned above, the next step of the analysis was to group answers that appeared to have similarities. Based on this grouping, the categories that form the result were developed. In the next step that can be called articulating. Finally the categories obtained were contrasted with regard to similarities and differences at a meta-level. The aim of phenomenographic analysis is to arrive at a set of descriptive categories, portraying similarities and differences concerning how a phenomenon in question is conceived of by people (Dahlgren
and Fallsberg, cited in Mayring, 2004). For further fuller explanation, see Mayring (2004) for qualitative content analysis in a companion to qualitative research pages 266-267.

3.12 DATA PRESENTATION PLAN

For presentation purposes, data were organised into smaller units in the form of main concepts, sentences and words, which involved a verbatim transcription of tape-recorded data and noting the tones of voices, emphases used, pauses and silences and unclear or indecipherable responses (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 282). Finally, data were arranged in categories denoting the major aspects of the state of affairs interrogated which then culminated into the writing of the research report. In writing the study report, direct quotes were used to capture what the participants themselves articulated. This, combined with the narrative form of the report, allows the participants, as it were, to “speak” for themselves (Xaba, 2011).

3.13 SUMMARY

This chapter attempted to look at the research paradigm, design and theoretical underpinnings that directed it. The issue of participants, sampling and instruments was also addressed. The chapter went on to look at pilot study, ethical considerations, trustworthiness and the budget for the research. The next chapter, the fourth in this study presents the data from this study, analyses the data and then proceeds to discuss the data vis-à-vis the research objectives raised in chapter one and the literature reviewed in chapter two.
CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This study interrogated practices in an open and distance teaching university in order to expose missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement. Stakeholders in a university include students, employers, teaching and non teaching staff, government and its funding agencies, accreditors, validators, auditors, assessors, and the community at large each with their own criteria and perspective. This study was influenced by the significant amongst these stakeholders who are active participants in higher education, namely the students, the teaching staff and the university management as these are the stakeholders who are principally responsible for, and participate in, the design and delivery of the university education process. This chapter aim to illuminate in detail the missing links in conditions promoting quality in the Zimbabwe Open University. The findings are separated into four sections based on themed groupings identified from documents, open-ended questionnaires and interviews. The chapter starts with the characteristics of respondents then examines the guiding principles, staff related factors and student related factors. The fourth section considers university wide practices. This section is divided into three sub-sections which are technology, university wide practices and suppressed voices of quality. In all instances missing links are exposed. The findings of the study were presented in the form in which they were extracted from the respondents in order to minimise bias. Care was taken not to taint the views from the respondents with the researcher’s, or the views of authorities in open and distance education. In the same sections, discussing the findings vis-à-vis the current literature on conditions that continuously improve quality in an
open and distance learning context was done. It is important to make it clear that institutional conditions facilitating the practice of quality form the organisation’s work environment (culture). Conditions are the institutional ways of orienting role expectancies (Parsons and Shils, 1951). They are institutional procedures that may be invisible to members. For example, an individual’s behaviour in an organisation may depend on whether the:

[...] culture of their organisation is flat or hierarchical; whether it mandates the same requirements for all members, or is flexible and individualised; whether it regards cognate organisations as mortal enemies or as potential collaborators, or ignores peer organisations all together (Gardner, 2006, p. xiii).

Thus, conditions fostering continuous quality improvement are tacit conceptions that people live by in the organisation at an unconscious level brought to the surface in this study through qualitative means. In this study, the institutional conditions that orient behaviours or role expectancies included those thematic areas that were covered from each of the four research objectives. The Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) that guided this research takes prominence in discussions because theories possess conceptual glue almost entirely missing from the literature. This glue offers an explanation for how and why things work as they do and so builds understanding. The presentation and discussion starts with the biodata of the respondents who participated in this study.

4.2 BIOGRAPHICAL DATA OF THE RESPONDENTS

The following section presents the profiles/characteristics of respondents in this study. In total 24 staff members and 40 students were interviewed. In addition, 244 students and 36 staff members completed a questionnaire for this research. The culture of an organisation is a construction of the people who work there, so this study supposed that some characteristics of organisational actors could affect the type of organisational culture (Rebelo and Gomez, 2011).
This is because, as stressed by Wang, Yang and McLean (2007), although few researches have shown that demographic variables are directly related to quality culture, it is reasonable to expect that the employees’ demographic characteristics are associated with their perceived organisational learning culture. The first sub-section looks at the biographical data of students.

4.2.1 Biographical data of students

In this section, the biographical data of 284 students who participated in this research is presented. This information is shown in table 4.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEASURE</th>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SEX</td>
<td>MALE</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FEMALE</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE IN YEARS</td>
<td>Below 20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31-50</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50 and above</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISTANCE EDUCATION</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXPERIENCE IN YEARS</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 and above</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHERE STATIONED</td>
<td>RURAL AREA</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>URBAN AREA</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROGRAMME</td>
<td>UNDER GRADUATE</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>POST GRADUATE</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In table 4.1, the biographical data of students show that the majority 168 (59%) were males. In terms of age, the majority of students in this study were aged between 31-50 years 150 (53%). In terms of distance education background prior to joining the university under study, 278 (98%)
are products of conventional systems of education. The majority 221 (79%) live in rural areas and they are under-graduate students 181 (64%). Interesting about the biographical data of students in this study is that the majority 98% did not have distance education background prior to joining the university under study. This exposes at a number of missing links. For instance, they are less informed about the available programmes and options, application processes, and the importance of independent study (Lohfink and Paulsen, 2005). This lack of experience is a particular disadvantage to students who are scattered in rural areas a situation that affects 79% of the student population in this study. A big disadvantage to such students is that they might experience culture shock (Haralambos and Heald, 2004) in an open and distance learning environment. The next sub-section looks at biographical data of staff respondents.

### 4.2.2 Biographical data of staff

In this sub-section, the biographical data of 60 staff respondents who took part in this research are presented. These are shown in Table 4.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEASURE</th>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SEX</td>
<td>MALE</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FEMALE</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE IN YEARS</td>
<td>Below 20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31-50</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50 and above</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISTANCE TEACHING EXPERIENCE IN YEARS</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 and above</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QUALIFICATION IN DISTANCE TEACHING</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGHEST QUALIFICATION</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The majority of staff members who participated in this study are males 42 (70%). In terms of age, the 31-50 year age group dominated 32 (53%) followed by the 20-30 age group 25 (42%). Of the 60 staff members, 53 (89%) had no distance teaching experience prior to joining the Zimbabwe Open University and 54 (90%) had any qualification in distance teaching. In terms of highest qualification, only 3 (5%) held a PhD. An interesting characteristic though is that 90% of the staff in this study had neither experience in distance education nor a qualification in distance teaching.

Most of the university lecturers do not have a background in education or in instructional and learning methodology especially at a distance. Instead, they have degrees in various subjects and are hired by the university on that basis. This aspect appears to be a major missing link as it has the potential to compromise attempts to continuously improve quality. Poumay (2003) cites similar challenges encountered in Belgium and points that this approach to ODL design and production is too hit and miss oriented and fail to ensure high quality teaching in a consistent and widespread form. Beaudoin (1990, p. 21) argues that teachers used to traditional education practices have to “acquire new skills to assume expanded roles not only to teach distance education learners, but also to organise instructional resources suitable in content and format for independent study”. The University of Liege in Belgium offers a degree in ODL design and development as a stop-gap measure (Poumay 2003). One of its critical orientations is dedicated to ODL design, production and delivery. It also promotes good practices in open and distance learning. These practices were unfortunately uncharacteristic of the respondents in this study.

A Ugandan study by Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010) on challenges faced by distance education found similar characteristics. Some of the lecturers in their study had obtained guidance about how to teach in a face-to-face setting from colleagues, but very few had
experience with distance education instruction and learning strategies. Their inadequacy is reflected in the lack of quality instruction, the lack of quality distance learning materials, and the lack of quality student support. Students are frustrated with this lack of support, but they are also challenged by the mode of delivery – print! The Ugandan culture tends to be a verbal, or talking, culture; thus, students feel pressure when they are expected to read and write for extended periods of time (Basaza, Milman and Wright, 2010).

In terms of qualifications, only three of the staff respondents held a doctorate. This speaks volume about the quality of the teaching staff in terms of the qualifications. In Uganda, the National Council of Higher Education sets standards for teaching and learning in postsecondary institutions. The Council recommends the number of doctoral and master’s degree holders that should be employed by each institution (Basaza, Milman and Wright 2010).

4.3 DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ON MISSING LINKS IN CONDITIONS FOSTERING CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

This section presents the results that are informed by document analysis, observations, open-ended questionnaires and interviews. Data was collected in two separate visits to the regions that lasted for about a month. Thus, the insights afforded by this process of data collection are limited: the observation data are based upon very few ‘snapshots’ taken on particular days, and should not be taken as indications of typical university business.
Six staff members and ten students were interviewed in each of the four regions that participated in this study. Among the staff that was interviewed are the following university personnel: one administrative officer, one student advisor, one programme co-ordinator, one regional director, one quality co-ordinator and a part-time tutor. The rest were given open-ended questionnaires to complete. In all instances, eight thematic areas were covered from each of the four research objectives. The questionnaire survey at the first phase of the study covered the same thematic areas. The majority of questions in the interview instrument were aimed at gaining an understanding of respondents’ views, attitudes, beliefs and behaviour related to the missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in the university under study.

There are dominant voices and unheard voices of quality in the Zimbabwe Open University. The findings of this study revealed these scenarios in the four sections under this heading. The first one concern the principles guiding university quality practices, the second involve the staff related missing links the third looked at students related missing links and the last looked at university-wide practices. This last section covered technology, practices and suppressed or unheard voices of quality.

4.3.1 Data presentation and discussion on missing links in principles fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University

This section present and discuss findings on principles fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University. It emanated from research question one:

How do principles guiding the university continuous foster quality improvement?
It is essential to establish the guiding principles and vision that all stakeholders involved in the quality process can buy into. The whole idea was to see how the university is building a university *credo*. As discussed in chapter two, building university credo is thought to be central to quality in an ODL context where the term credo is any system of principles or beliefs. In pursuit of this, an important aspect that was mentioned in this study is a system of principles and beliefs that continuously improve quality.

**Building a university credo**

An interesting finding regarding the principles fostering continuous quality improvement is through creation of a credible global perception of the kind of university that every stakeholder is aspiring to. In this regard, the respondents questioned the existing credo as they expected a university credo to be their guiding torch. This idea was subscribed to by both staff 34 (57%) and students 119 (42%). A regional director of one of the most successful regions had this to share with others:

> I worked hard and at times until late, in order to build everything from the start, to construct the staff, to build the regional campus credo. I worked towards the students and together with the students, very slowly, not running. It took us two years until we gained the stakeholders’ trust, it took us two years to write our credo, and at the same time the academics’ group underwent supplementary studies. Together we reached a world perception describing the university that we wanted. In one sentence I was determined: “This place will be a pleasure to come to”. That’s my credo. What has changed are the tone of speech and the very respectful consideration of students and the attempt to explain things to them.

Though efforts were made to build a university credo, what appeared to be the missing link is working *towards and together* with the students to build trust that was seen as a sure way of building a credible university credo or system of beliefs that guides action. This appears to be a recurrent problem in institutions of higher learning yet Mehralizadeh and Safaeemoghaddam (2010) point out that the point about these quality management systems is that their quality
philosophies do not arrive at “value free” within higher education and their management systems, without some underline quality philosophy driving them, it must be recognised that the quality systems framework derive from different traditions and have different starting points and languages. It will appear that while the university has a vision of being a world class open and distance teaching university (ZOU, 2010) the challenge is that without a credible credo it means everyone has his or her own starting point. In such a case, all and sundry will attempt to propagate quality management practices. This appear to fly in the face of Mehralizadeh and Safaeemoghaddam (2010) who posit that stakeholders in ODL need to share a set of fundamental philosophies, which include: acceptance of responsibility for quality by the top management; customer orientation; high level of employee participation; open and effective communication; fact-based management; and strategic quality planning. All these are possible with a credible university credo which unfortunately appeared missing in this study.

Visioning, re-visioning and vision engineering

The respondents in this study recognised and appreciated the existence of the university vision of being world class (ZOU, 2010). However 131 (46%) of students and 43 (72%) of staff exposed a number of missing links about this vision. For instance, the clarity of the vision was questioned. To them, an ODL vision must be clear enough to be understood by all those affected by it and it has to be shared. Some of these statements bear testimony:

The vision need be shared by all those to be directed by it. It should take account of stakeholder needs. I as a student will only accept a vision that takes account of students’ aspirations. (Student respondent)

A clearly articulated and well communicated vision provides the basis for informed planning. This vision is not a clear vision that drives decisions and provides opportunities for coherence.
The concern for a clear vision shows that the respondents in this study were concerned about where the university was heading. Senge (1990) concurs and adds that when there is a genuine vision (as opposed to the all-too-familiar ‘vision statement’), people excel and learn, not because they are told to, but because they want to. But the institution under study appeared to have personal visions that never get translated into shared visions that galvanise an organisation. Respondents in this study opined that they needed a guiding vision. Since to them, a quality vision needs to be put in place that will guide action. The following statements appear to point to this direction.

‘More importantly, time must be spent articulating a consistent massage regarding the vision and quality priorities. A powerful and guiding university vision that is future oriented, that takes account of students’ aspirations and work to minimise course altering factors will continuously improve quality. The current vision is far from this. ‘A university vision can make more of an impression on peoples’ minds than we can imagine. It guides and directs and stimulates performance. Ours does not.

A major challenge for the university is to find visionary academics with a thrust for quality and a heart for students.’ (Student)

Still on the vision, respondents added a related and more prominent theme the ownership of the vision for quality. Vision is vocation rather than simply just a good idea (Senge, 1990).

One very senior lecturer summed up the mood for ownership of the vision for quality in the Zimbabwe Open University by questioning its ownership and prescribing the way forward:

‘Who owns this vision? I appear to experience difficulties in understanding this vision. If students and staff are involved in shaping the vision, all persons will feel an obligation to make it successful. When individuals contribute, they feel ownership and commitment and will naturally follow the dictates of the vision.’

In apparent support of the ideas raised here, Senge (1990) maintains that if any one idea about leadership has inspired organisations for thousands of years, ‘it’s the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future we seek to create’ (1990, p. 9). A shared vision has the power to be uplifting – and to encourage experimentation and innovation (Senge, 1990). Still on vision,
respondents added visioning, re-visioning and vision engineering. They were of the opinion that the visioning exercise must be taken as a process especially in turbulent environments (Chiome, 2011b). Vision engineering was also seen as a means of focusing the university community towards quality. Some substantiating statements are:

*If conditions are not conducive to world class, then a visioning and revisioning process to produce systematic alignment of programme structures, strategies, and processes has to be put in motion. Unfortunately this is not being done right now.*
*There must be a clear picture of what the university or its practices and processes look like in a preferred image of the future.*
*The university management must use vision engineering to focus university community on the picture of quality to which attention will be given.*

The visioning exercise was by far seen as the cornerstone of fostering continuous quality improvement. This could be used as a beginning picture and then challenge students and staff to generate input and share in shaping and clarifying the vision which is the map way for heightening, attaining and sustaining quality.

*Visions spread because of a reinforcing process. Increased clarity, enthusiasm and commitment rub off on others in the organisation. ‘As people talk, the vision grows clearer. As it gets clearer, enthusiasm for its benefits grow’ (Senge, 1990, p. 227).*

If the shared vision spreads because of the reinforcing process of clarity and enthusiasm then the core mission becomes that of student learning. Respondents in this study were of the opinion that the university must be driven by the core mission and accountability for students learning. This extract bears testimony:

*The core mission of the university must be the student learning. The current mission is far from this. There is need to redefine the mission statement so that the university can focus its resources on student learning.*

The Zimbabwe Open University mission is centred on empowerment. This was noted by the respondents. Empowering people towards personal mastery empowers the organisation but only if individuals are deeply aligned around a common sense of purpose and shared vision
(Avdjieva and Wilson, 2002). To the respondents in this study, accountability for students’
performance is a large factor in measuring the core mission of a learning institution. They were
of the opinion that the visioning exercise must be taken as a process especially in turbulent
environments (Chiome, 2011b). The fact of the matter is that, in the university under study,
vision engineering was not in motion at a time when vision engineering should be seen as a
means of focusing the university community towards quality. A major missing link for the
Zimbabwe Open University is to focus its personnel so that it operates as visionary personnel
with a thrust for quality and a heart for students.

The respondents in this study recognized and appreciated the existence of the university vision
of being world class (Strategic plan 2010-2015). A clearly articulated and well communicated
vision provides the basis for informed planning (Bennett, 2008). Another important aspect of
the vision mentioned was that of a clear sense of mission and purpose pointing out that a clear
vision give clear signals to staff, signals that press and compel them to implement quality. In
their view, powerful and guiding university vision that is future oriented is important and time
must be spent articulating a consistent massage regarding the vision and quality priorities. A
university vision can make more of an impression on people’s minds than we can imagine as it
guides, directs and stimulates performance and change (Daniel, 2007).

A related and more prominent missing link was the ownership of the vision for quality pointing
out that if students and staff are involved in shaping the vision, all persons will feel an obligation
to make it successful. When individuals contribute, they feel ownership and commitment and
will naturally follow the dictates of the vision. Shared vision will energise and sustain an
organisation through thick and thin but only if people think systematically (Avdjieva and Wilson 2002). Elsewhere, Kekale cited in Kariem (2010) argues that a general starting point in fostering continuous quality improvement is to clearly define the aims and goals of institutes and faculties by using different measurements, assessments and indicators for monitoring how well the goals and aims are actually reached. He goes on to say, as a general aspect of quality management, reviewing regularly the clarity, completeness, interrelatedness, consensus and achievement of its stated purposes at both institutional and programme level is a requirement (Kariem, 2010). In this way, a widely shared quality consciousness in individuals and organisational units will be developed and quality attainment measures will be tried out in various service processes. Each unit will then develop its own unit quality management model, leading to the clarification of the university overall quality attainment and sustainment practices. There is also need for a visioning and revisioning process to produce systematic alignment of programme structures, strategies, and processes.

Vision, values and aims need to be closely aligned. This is important because the values that are identified signal what an establishment stands for – in short, what is valued. The following statement summed it all:

*The staff should demonstrate commitment to open and distance learning values through exemplifying consistent educational values in their behaviour and translating these into practical aims and policies, which engage the whole university community in relating their practice to educational aims and values.*

Thus, the missing links are conditions fostering continuous quality improvement that are led by a clear vision that is owned and is subjected to re-visioning exercises. The issue did not end
there. The respondents further raised the issue of values as guiding principles in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement as shown below.

**Values driven by trust**

Staff 49 (82%) and students 159 (56%) mentioned values as a driving force towards attaining and sustaining quality. Many values such as courage, conviction, flexibility, adaptability, restraint, empathy, excellent manners and humour were mentioned. However, what has been seen as missing in this study and one of the most frequently cited value in line with Anderson (2006)’s assertions was trust which they said affected the learning process in that staff must be trustworthy in all their dealings because values based on trust are built on a strong foundation. This supporting statement was extracted from the interviews:

*The starting point is that staff must be trustworthy in all their dealings because values based on trust are built on a strong foundation considering that trust is long lasting and values change over time. As such, conditions fostering continuous quality improvement must be based on firm values as values underscore the university’s future direction. There must be respect and concern for others and their rights.*

To the respondents in this study, values are part of conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an ODL context. However, because values change overtime, the missing link is that these values must be based on trust in order to sustain quality. They saw values based on trust as long lasting. To that they added *strong beliefs for quality.* It was a result that appeared consistent on all responses relating to the missing links in principles guiding conditions fostering continuous quality improvement that these conditions must be built on strong beliefs. The quality framework, procedures and policies need to be firmly based on agreed and strong beliefs for quality. One noted that:
Quality must be built on strong beliefs that quality is the touchstone for ODL success. The current scenario is that there is no framework of programmes with policies and procedures based on agreed beliefs.

Whilst on values, the reputation of the university was contentious issue in this respect. To the respondents, this reputation must be firmly entrenched in values. These are some of the statements extracted from interviews and personal accounts:

You can build strong reputation based on values and ethical practices. Best academics are attracted to a university with a reputation for its values. The community, the private sector and other stakeholders are attracted to an institution with a reputation for the values it reproduces in its products. Right now the Zimbabwe Open University has an egg on its face owing to missing results.

The Zimbabwe Open University has a strong reputation for its values as enshrined in the Zimbabwe Open University strategic plan (ZOU, 2010). This was acknowledged in this research. However, to the respondents in this study, the missing link is ethical practices. They claimed that ethics were at the forefront of attaining and sustain quality in an ODL context.

Some substantiating statements are:

Reflect on personal code of conduct when dealing with adults because students respect consistency and commitment.’ (Student)

‘Employ ethical practices in matters to do with teaching, learning and research.’ (Lecturer)

Koch (2002) argued that the products of education institution are various. The most notable characteristics are the intangibility and heterogeneity of the outputs of services, which are in contrast to those in the manufacturing industry that are more measurable and standardised in their specifications. As such, quality must be based on firm values as values underscore the university’s future direction.

On the issue of strong beliefs for quality, Stensaker (2005) mentioned that the picture of new organisational practices related to quality assurance in higher education, both on the national and
institutional level, is not very affirmative. The quality framework, procedures and policies need to be firmly based on agreed and strong beliefs for quality. It must be built on strong beliefs that quality is the touchstone for quality. The issue of values was raised by (Mizikaci, 2006), pointing out that in general, the core values have been learning-centred education, leadership, continuous improvement, faculty and staff participation, partnership development, design quality and development, management by statistical data and results orientation while focusing on the processes. The values for results orientation while focusing on processes appear questionable in the university under study.

The ability to establish and communicate appropriate values is an important dimension of leadership. These values will often include a strong commitment to developing: learners personally, socially, emotionally and morally; a sense of belonging; the care and welfare of learners and members of the community; openness and transparency; trust, honesty and integrity; and equality, fairness and inclusion (HMIE, 2007). To these aspects, respondents in this study added some, which include passion for success and achievement; promotion of collaboration and teamworking; and a sense of personal responsibility especially for adult learners who work on their own. There are values in the university under study but respondents thought clear values give staff and students a reason to embrace the quality culture.

**Building a culture of consistency and commitment**

In addition to values, beliefs and ethical practices, the respondents in this study (staff, 37 (62 %) and students 150; (53%) posited that the university is doing well to send large cultural messages to staff and students with every decision regarding quality of curriculum and instruction.
However what appeared missing in this regard is building a culture of consistency and commitment that was seen as the answer to quality woos. These statements appear to substantiate this stance:

There is need to build and maintain a quality culture based on determination, commitment and persistence. What appears missing for me is a university culture which values achievement. I think there is need to establish a high performance service culture to sustain quality.
What may be missing is a thrust towards promoting culture that takes account of the richness and diversity of the students' cultural capital. It means that there is need to be driven by a culture that is focused on quality results and quality processes because as students, we respect a culture of consistency and commitment. It must be distinctive, stimulating and relevant.

In addition to building a culture of consistency and commitment, respondents were of the view that to sustain that momentum, this culture has to be collaborative learning culture. Collaboration, learning and culture were said could work wonders for the university if intertwined for the purpose of achieving and sustaining quality. Respondents had this to say in this direction:

The culture is there in the university. What I am not happy about is building a collaborative learning culture within which students and staff learn from each other. A culture that promotes a community of learners and makes the university a learning organisation is what the university needs at the moment.

With a collaborative learning culture in place, the university will promote academic integrity.

Respondents voiced concern on the prevalence of cheating and other unethical practices that they thought are quality course-altering factors. Some issues of concern raised include:

There must be ethical learning opportunities for students. There are university regulations on cheating yes, but an approach to student cheating must be put in place. There is need to establish a university wide integrity movement. What is needed is to craft a thoughtful, positive and productive position on student ethics and academic integrity for the university, follow it religiously and quality will follow.

The respondents added values-based philosophical concerns to the university integrity movement. The argument for values-based philosophical concerns was that one of the major reasons for having the Zimbabwe Open University is to increase access to higher education
especially by disadvantaged groups. They then proceeded to state that quality considerations must not negate this critical aspect. The following statements appear to substantiate this:

*Quality considerations must be such that they are sensitive to and not negate equity considerations. The need for social relevance, meeting the needs of today’s learners is equally important. If there is quality, it must be felt in the socio-economic and political arena.*

The respondents in this study took cognisant of the fact that a focus on quality might downplay equity considerations if quality is not based on value-based philosophical concerns. The same concerns were shared by Oblinger (2001) who pointed out that for a host of human and economic reasons, open and distance education has gained momentum throughout the world. She even went further to posit that, for many countries, distance education has been the most viable solution for providing education to hundreds of thousands of students. Not only have the costs been kept low, but for people served by distance and open education, there may have been no other practical option (Oblinger, 2001).

It appears from the findings here that an important missing link concerning principles fostering continuous quality improvement was that the university was *failing to build a quality culture* yet respondents thought leadership can send large cultural messages to staff and students with every decision regarding quality of curriculum and instruction. In a similar study, Sirvanci (2004) found out that organisations that had adopted TQM transformed their institution’s culture into a total quality culture that involves elements such as teamwork, customer and market focus, employee involvement and participation, and process management. In this regard, a university culture which values achievement, high performance service culture, the richness and diversity of the students’ cultural capital is what appeared missing. This culture must be focused on
quality results but still keep an eye on quality processes. Students even said they respect a culture of consistency and commitment that is distinctive, stimulating and relevant.

Another prominent issue related to quality culture that came out of this study was the issue of collaboration in learning through a collaborative learning culture. Collaboration, learning and culture were seen as having capacity to work wonders for the university if intertwined for the purpose of fostering continuous quality improvement. These issues concerning quality culture as a missing link give rise to the issue of appropriateness. Two of the well known advocates of appropriateness as a definition of quality are Lewis and Smith (cited in Maguad, 2010). After a discussion of the issue, they exemplify the implementation of quality principles at Ohio State University (Lewis and Smith, cited in Maguad, 2010). According to these two authors, principles and concepts of quality are compatible with the best tradition and practices of higher education. The underlying philosophy, values, and norms reflected in quality systems are appropriate to higher education. These include: an emphasis on service; anticipating and meeting the needs and expectations of the constituents; recognising and improving transformation processes and systems; implementing teamwork and collaboration; instituting management based on leadership, knowledge-based decisions, and involvement; solving problems based on systematic identification of facts and the use of feedback systems and statistical methods or tools; and implementing a genuine respect for and development of human resources – the people who work in colleges and universities (Lewis and Smith, cited in Maguad, 2010). These same ideas were also applauded by Mizikaci (2006) who saw it as a way of cementing a high performance quality culture that was revealed as a missing link in this study. This does not mean to say there is no culture in the university under study. There are strong and weak cultures. Respondents were
arguing for a strong culture because according to Mizikaci (2006), strong cultures help institutions operate like well-oiled machines, cruising along with outstanding execution and perhaps minor tweaking of existing procedures here and there. According to Schein (2004), culture is the most difficult organisational attribute to change, outlasting organisational products, services, founders and leadership and all other physical attributes of the organisation.

Promoting institutional visibility and reputation

An important issue that came out of this study is the issue of promoting institutional visibility and reputation that was supported by both students 233 (82%) and staff 44 (73%). To this end, the respondents appeared happy with marketing efforts being undertaken by the university. They mentioned among other things ZOU on Thursday advertisements, outreach programmes, trade fare exhibitions and agricultural shows among the more prominent ones. However, it appears there is too much rhetoric and excessive use of verbal ornamentation (Student). Thus, they wanted the university personnel to walk the talk (Newspaper article). It was interesting to note that respondents wanted university staff to be bonded by their words. The following statement bears testimony to this:

‘The Zimbabwe Open University is not short of leaders with good ideas. For instance, the vision of becoming world class is well thought out. But there is need to walk the talk. In ODL everyone must make sure that their actions match their words.

We study on our own. We cannot depend on rhetoric. Rhetoric must be discarded in favour of reality.’

What the respondents questioned is too much rhetoric and excessive use of verbal ornamentation and insisted the Zimbabwe Open University need to walk the talk. If an organisation’s leadership is not “walking the talk”, then employees will disregard any change initiative as just “talk” (Comm and Mathaisel, 2005). The ODL service provider must make sure that their actions match their words. They need to be based on firm principles. According
to Brumback (2003), any approach based on sound principles is not likely to be just a passing fad because principles are better than rules in guiding behaviour. Thus, in calling for their service providers to walk the talk, the respondents felt the service providers will also depict characteristics that allude to student centeredness. It is with students at heart in all the actions that quality is attained and sustained in ODL since mature students like those in the Zimbabwe Open University adore recognition, approval and belonging.

In line with the dictates of the transactional distance theory, the respondents in this study pointed out that *provider visibility* is a missing link. To them, distance education need not necessarily be led through distance provision. This appears to be in line with the Transactional Distance Theory on which this study is grounded. It advocates for the blurring of the distance between the students and those offering services. These statements appear to capture the essence:

*Provider visibility is important. There need is there to show up everywhere. The distance education provider must show up at the point of client contact. This will add a tone of confidence where there was a tenth of confidence in distance education service provision.*

To illustrate provider visibility, Baba (2007) portrays the academic leader who promotes institutional visibility from a Canadian viewpoint as the “custodian of intellectual, social, and reputational capitals” who can reflect the institution’s cultural capital. On the other hand, Rosser, Johnsrud and Heck (2003, p. 2) studied the metaphors applied to the multiple roles of deans: “deans have been variously described as “doves of peace” intervening among warring factions, “dragons” holding internal and external threats at bay, and “diplomats” guiding and encouraging people who live and work in the college” (Rosser, et. al., 2003, p.2). Pointing out that there is need to capitalise on the respect staff and students have for a strong role model in
ODL by showing those being led that one will stand up for one’s convictions. A role model walks the talk and is respected and led by convictions.

**Lack of empathy and mutual trust**

Empathy is the ability to place oneself within the context of another person’s need (Flattley 2009:31). This concept was seen as missing from some of the programme coordinators in the university yet respondents (27 staff 45% and 148 students 52%) were convinced that it was part of the principles fostering continuous quality improvement in an ODL context. This excerpt bears testimony to the concerns of respondents in this study:

*If you work with adults then you must act as if you are in the same situation with a person requiring the service and then act on probable thoughts and feelings if you were in the same situation. Very good attempts for customer care are acknowledged but I still insist that there is lack of active listening which should be the basis of good customer service.*

To empathy, respondents added the issue of **mutual trust.** To them, there is need to lay the foundation for mutual trust among the various constituencies of the university in order to woo the hearts of the people in the direction of quality. One staff member rightfully posed a question:

*‘Why is it that we cannot trust employees to make decisions? We spell out in precise detail; how they must do virtually everything and go on to audit them to ensure they have followed every rule. The other respondents were prescriptive. The following statements substantiate this:*

*Ensuring the right quality environment and allowing trust to reign is the missing link. Everything said and done is for the betterment of the institution and not to hate or denigrate anybody. Laying the foundations of mutual trust among the components of the university is a sure way of wooing the hearts of the people. The leader must allow honest and constructive criticism to flourish. This will in turn nurture and create a sense of belonging among the cadres.*

The lack of empathy and mutual trust can be attributed to different levels of deference to power that exists within organisations (Chaminade and Johanson, 2003). High deference to power
suggests an unequal distribution of power (high power distance), and low deference to power suggests an equal distribution (low power distance). In line with the dictates of the TDT, ODL students experience intense communications when deference to power is low (Chaminade and Johanson, 2003). Where there is less regard for hierarchy, there is more participatory decision-making (Chow, Harrison, McKinnon and Wu, 1999). Power distance might act as an impediment to knowledge sharing (Chow, et al., 1999). Thus, respondents in this study may have been right in pointing out that if you work with adults then you must act as if you are in the same situation with a person requiring the service and then act on probable thoughts and feelings if you were in the same situation. Active listening is the basis of good customer service and defines excellence in leadership for an open and distance learning university (Chiome, 2011a). What this means is that empathy is an essential tool to hone and apply to situations requiring decisions about individuals as there is need to look behind the words and gain a sense of feelings when dealing with adult learners for one to be an excellent academic leader in an open and distance teaching university setting (Chiome, 2011a).

It means the need is there to allow honest and constructive criticism to flourish. This will in turn nurture and create a sense of belonging among the cadres. Personal humility and approachability were recurrent themes. Being able to chat to everyone, honesty, directness, integrity, high levels of emotional intelligence, curiosity, listening, determination, patience, drive, sense of humour, not being uptight or arrogant, having an inner locus of control, tolerance and “knowing you’re not going to be loved in a job like this” were other attributes listed (Chiome, 2011b). Thus, UNDP (2009) posits that with mutual trust, quality will be heightened through improvement in knowledge sharing within the organisation and boost
organisational productivity, allowing for acceleration of efforts to become part of the worldwide knowledge economy, leading to improvement of national economy. This will in turn increase employee satisfaction and retain employees within an organisation, reducing recruitment, selection, and training costs. This will also provide a stimulating and challenging environment within each organisation that will contribute to the reduction or reversal of the brain drain on a national level (UNDP, 2009). This happens with empathy and mutual trust which respondents said were a missing link.

**Commitment to the virtues of open and distance learning**

Commitment was cited as an important principle fostering continuous quality improvement by 33 staff (55%) and 196 students (69%). The Zimbabwe Open University was applauded for having highly committed staff. This was evident in many of the responses. However, a further analysis of the responses seem to clearly point out that the missing link is commitment to the virtues of open and distance teaching that is missing. Another look at the demographics of the respondents appears also to confirm this. In terms of distance education experience prior to joining the university under study, 98% of students and 89% of staff had nothing tangible to show in terms of distance education experience. Thus in this context it was not surprising that both students and staff agreed that commitment to the virtues of open and distance learning which they thought is an important principle that heightens quality in an ODL context, was unfortunately missing. Some of these statements gleaned from the interview excerpts bear testimony:

*The staff and students must be committed to the dictates of open and distance learning. To me, this unfortunately is not the case. Commitment from the tutors will be copied by students yet we see some of these merely despising distance education owing to their conventional university backgrounds. There is little more upsetting for lecturers than being under the supervision of an appointed person who shows a lack of commitment in their responsibilities as*
supervisor. Some appointed leaders in this university appear to be merely making time. Why not conduct a study to find how many of these have their students studying with the Zimbabwe Open University? You will get my point.

The commitment to the virtues of open and distance learning are important. Institutions are expected to be generally regarded among academic community and other stakeholders as well-founded, cohesive, self-critical and worthy organisations safeguarding their vision, mission, aims, functions, academic standards and social commitment to the range of stakeholder interests (Kariem, 2010). This unfortunately was said to be missing from all these ‘highly committed’ people.

The statement “I felt like I didn’t belong” potentially captures many aspects of being “a fish out of water,” in an alien institution. This may not be surprising considering that up to 89% of the staff in the Zimbabwe Open University are products of the face-to-face culture. What is disturbing though is that uncommitted staff will further isolate students and widen their distance from the institution (Moore, 2008) against the dictates of the theory underlying this study which posits that both the existing literature and the practices of ODL institutions clearly associate better student outcomes with less isolation (Garrison, 2000). Thus, the respondents in this study were not far from the truth when pointing out that the ODL provider must be committed to the dictates of open and distance learning since commitment from the provider will be copied by others yet we see some of these merely despising distance education students.

**Motive to achieve great things**

The 125 students (44%) and 31 staff (52%) in this study thought that the institution was staffed by highly motivated individuals. However, it was motivation to achieve great things in the university which they thought could be the guiding principle yet to them, it appeared missing
from these ‘highly motivated’ individuals. One student wrote in the open-ended questionnaires that:

‘The staff is motivated, yes, but in an open and distance learning university they must be motivated to achieve great things for the university.’ A staff member concurred and pointed that:

‘As a professional, one must aim to leave a landmark in the university.’

Allied to the motive to achieve great things is the issue of willingness to serve diverse clients.

Several of the participants in this research also cited the ability to connect, engage and serve a wide range of people from diverse backgrounds and listening deeply to understand others as a prerequisite for fostering continuous quality improvement in an open and distance teaching university. One respondent indicated:

*The ODL professional must be principled. One needs to project a positive, friendly and approachable persona. This is glaringly missing yet in ODL, a professional must be able to connect and engage with a wide range of people from diverse backgrounds.*

Another one added:

To the respondents in this study, motive to achieve great things for the university and willingness to serve diverse clients requires principled professionals. The respondents in this study were of the opinion that principled professionals continuously improve quality in distance education. The following statement appears to ably articulate this stance:

*Staff with principles has a reputation for building institutions that attract students, support and dedicated staff.*

The motive to achieve great things is further cemented by the fact that the numbers, socio-economic status, cultural background, experiences, needs and aspirations of students have changed greatly with the shift to a mass higher education system (Gordon, in Lomas, 2007). An increasing proportion of school leavers are entering higher education, as demonstrated by a rise from 15% in the early 1990s to 43% in United Kingdom universities in 2004 (DfES, cited in Lomas, 2007). With the majority of students having to pay towards the cost of their education through tuition fees, they are now concerned about receiving value for money (Biggs, cited in
Lomas, 2007). In such instances, ODL providers must be motivated to achieve great things so that students get value for money. This is why respondents in this study pointed out that staff with principles has a reputation for building institutions that attract students and dedicated staff.

**Summary of missing links in principles**

In this section on missing links in principles guiding quality in an ODL context several issues came up which include clarity of the vision, ownership of the vision, ethical practices, values based on trust and working towards and together with the students to build trust. In also emerged that building a culture of consistency and commitment, establishing a university wide integrity movement, being sensitive to and not negating equity considerations were some of the missing links in university principles. There appears to be too much rhetoric and excessive use of verbal ornamentation. Thus, respondents wanted the university personnel to walk the talk; lay the foundation for mutual trust among the various constituencies of the university and show commitment to the virtues of open and distance teaching through connecting and engaging with a wide range of people from diverse backgrounds. In this regard, the study winds up this section by taking a leaf from Gavino, Eber and Bell (2010), who make it clear that the key factor required for a successful transformational change process is the principles guiding the institution. With well grounded principles that are shared, the leadership team will find it easy to demonstrate its commitment to achieving the goals and supporting the process the institution is about to undertake. It will be even easier to be well versed and fully supportive of the framework to be utilised in the transformation process, and must model the requisite behaviours of an inclusive community. Having said this, the study turns to the sub-problem on missing links in conditions in staff heightening, attaining and sustaining quality in an ODL context.
4.3.2 Missing links on staff related conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University

Research question two was:

_In what ways do conditions in the university continuous foster and instil the quality-oriented and quality-producing spirit in staff?_

This research question required the study to interrogate and add the academic voice to the conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University. In an educational setting, lecturer performance has a strategic role and is the main factor determining student performance and hence university performance because teachers are a central actor in the learning process that takes place in schools (Sukirno and Siengthai, 2011). Studying conditions affecting lecturer performance in higher educational institutions from different settings is very useful for not only enriching and refining theory but also for developing reasonable recommendations to increase quality of higher educational institutions (Sukirno and Siengthai, 2011). There are undoubtedly problems within any initiative in higher educational institutions which can be perceived as management-led. Moreover, academics may be put off by the evangelical fervour of some quality proponents and especially when quality is perceived as bringing in more work with no direct professional benefits for individual staff (Brown and Koenig quoted in Mehralizadeh & Safaeemoghaddam 2010). Other problems can arise from the reluctance of staff members to disregard existing boundaries. Writing about the implementation of TQM in ten colleges and universities around Boston, Entin (cited in Cartwright, 2007) found that while senior management was often extremely enthusiastic about the initiative, the reluctance of academic divisions to adopt it was alarming and represented a serious disjunction
between market forces and the academic enterprise. Some obstacles such as insufficient trust between departments and staff members can create a low confidence level of ability to manage the process of quality. This research pointed out the indispensability of the staff member in enhancing quality. This is in line with developments elsewhere. For instance, Williams and Ceci (1997) point out that education quality correlates with the instructor performance, particularly with his or her availability, response time and flexibility when students have questions. Parr (2005) expresses the same opinion by saying that a good teacher plays the roles as a facilitator, assessor, participant, and also motivator to encourage student participation and provide update information. Therefore, it is imperative to interrogate missing links in the design and the organisation of the teaching and learning process. Heriyono (2009) exposed that improving lecturer performance might become a strategic approach for alleviating the educational problems. Therefore, identifying and facilitatating factors influencing lecturer performance in higher education has become a paramount priority (Sukirno and Siengthai, 2011). In this regard, this study looked at those missing links in staff related conditions fostering continuous quality improvement. The findings are presented and discussed below.

**Setting the tone by assembling the right team**

An important finding from mainly 49 staff respondents (82%) and 131 students (46%) in this study was that the recruitment practices in the university under study send wrong messages. To them the missing link was in the recruitment practices where mediocre staff found its way in the system. They thought an organisation sends a clear message through the recruitment and selection policy. The right team need to be selected and assembled in the first place that could spearhead quality. Some supporting statements were:
Some staff members are kept just for loyalty’s sake, yet loyalty only does not make a candidate the best person for the job. Mediocrity breeds mediocrity, setting off an organisational chain reaction of underperformance. This has not been guarded against at all costs. It appears as if the university employs the one size fits all approach in recruitment and selection. It must set the tone for quality through recruitment. The findings in this study appear to suggest that the university’s personnel selection policy is the ultimate message for quality. Few managers could single-handedly accomplish the desired tasks without the help of a dedicated, competent, committed and enthusiastic team (Schein, 2004). Thus, assembling a shared-responsibility team sets the tone for quality in any organisation particularly in open and distance learning. The respondents appeared not sure if the right team was selected and assembled in the first place in the university under study that could spearhead quality. This appears to be in line with Henning (2010)’s thinking that modern ODL institutions have to establish systems for the distributed facilitation of learning after registration, this includes provision of tutors, equipped learning centers, libraries, information, and communication technologies. This can be done if the right team has been put in place to do that. It can also be emphasised that teacher characteristics account for a higher proportion of variation in student achievement than all other aspects of a learning institution combined (Hayes, Christie, Mills and Lingard, 2004).

Studies tell us that the qualities and behaviour of academic staff have a significant impact on the students’ perceptions of high quality education (Sultan and Wong, 2010). It follows that the respondents in this study were justified to point out that mediocrity breeds mediocrity, setting off an organisational chain reaction of underperformance. The one size fits all approach in recruitment and selection has damaging effects to quality in any learning institution. The findings in this study appear to suggest that the university’s personnel selection policy is the
ultimate message for quality. Thus, assembling a shared-responsibility team sets the tone for quality in any organisation particularly in open and distance learning (Sultan and Wong, 2010).

Steer and spark action, stimulating change, innovation and connectivity

Respondents (38 staff 63% and 74 students 26%) in this study were of the opinion that the staff is credited with embracing change and the university is well known for its thrust on research and scholarship. However, the missing link was the provision of reward and recognition for excellence and staff need to be supported for them to embrace change that promotes quality in a learning institution. They also mentioned the issue of innovative spirit that was said to be missing in the university staff. It was the contention of the respondents in this study that ODL need to foster innovative spirit in staff. The supporting arguments were that:

*ODL institutions are of many gains and hues such that no one model of management can suit them all.*

*Distance learning needs to foster the innovative spirit because it lends itself to presenting different points of view and obliges students to construct knowledge for themselves.*

*The university must be in a position to provide reward and recognition for excellence, currently, this is not being done.*

The case here in terms of innovation is that the university must foster innovative spirit in staff which appeared missing. ODL staff must have courage to venture into new things in order to promote ‘culture of learning’ (Weeks, 2012). For example, at the time of study the university had just started a new concept that of the ZOUONLINE. However, to the respondents in this study, it was seen as not being enough as ‘more can be done with a lust for innovation such as promoting connectivity’. In stimulating change in staff, the university can also *promote connectivity*. This was an interesting finding of the study that the university is a collective and social activity where leaders are connected and they nurture connections among staff. The following statements substantiate this claim:
It is time the Zimbabwe Open University do away with loneliness and isolation because this encourages selfishness, pride and personal vendettas. Leadership is a collective and social responsibility. In this case, collaboration and cooperation should be the priorities in any open and distance learning institution where staff and students are helped to find their connections across departments, faculties, regions, units and programmes.

The university needs to encourage teamwork among staff members. They need to be connected themselves and then go on to encourage connections among their staff and students. Well connected students will easily sail through their programmes than those who do it alone. In an open and distance learning university, staff and students are stronger together than they are apart. The university appears to be failing to encourage both staff and students to see the big picture that cut across departments, go beyond gender, beyond age, beyond region, and beyond narrow thinking. For staff and students to be stronger together, catalytic leadership was seen as missing in the university. This was a major finding related to conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an ODL context. This aspect of catalytic leadership was ably captured by one respondent who took a stance that:

*Our university is failing in terms of being catalytic. In such a case the catalytic leaders steer and spark action rather than do things themselves. They empower rather than serve themselves. They are mission-driven, results oriented and customer focused.*

A related missing link unearthed in this study was that of ODL staff with foresight to perceive promising innovations. The argument for innovation was that open and flexible learning is of many gains and hues such that there is no one way of managing these practices. Lecturers should be knowledgeable, enthusiastic, approachable, and friendly. They should put more emphasis on the vocational aspects of their studies than the academic aspects (Hill, Lomas and MacGregor, 2003). To this end the need for flexibility and sagacity in promoting inclusive and democratic participatory practices was seen as the answer to ODL cries for quality (Hill, et al., 2003). Isolating sick ODL components for possible overhaul and integrity for eliminating distractions and negative forces are some of the features required of an ODL staff member. Endeavours for coping with increasing rates of environmental change and turbulence where the issue of both successful and sustainable organisational transformation takes centre stage (Avdjieva and Wilson...
This cannot just happen. There is need to stimulate change in staff. In this case, authorities according to the respondents in this study must be in a position to provide reward and recognition for excellence and be in a position to stimulate research and scholarship that promote quality in teaching, learning and material production which they thought were major missing links.

In stimulating change in staff, leadership can also promote connectivity. This was an interesting finding of the study that ODL is a collective and social activity where leaders are connected and they nurture connections among staff. What this implies is that with connections, administrative staff should be efficient and prompt in delivering support services, and providing adequate information (Sultan and Wong, 2010). Thus, the claim in this study that it is time the Zimbabwe Open University do away with loneliness because this encourage selfishness, pride and personal vendettas, is supported in the literature in which Sultan and Tarafder (2007), maintain that through connectivity, the staff should be proactive rather than reactive in delivering services. ODL being a collective and social responsibility means that collaboration and cooperation should be the priorities in any open and distance learning institution where staff and students are helped to find their connections across departments, faculties, regions, units and programmes as was propounded in this study as missing links.

The respondents in this study also raised the issue of sparking change by encouraging teamwork among followers in order to continuously improve quality in an ODL context. In such a case, the message was that authorities in an ODL context need to be connected themselves and then go on to encourage connections among their staff and students pointing out that well connected
students will easily sail through their programmes than those who do it alone. Thus, the message that in an open and distance learning university, *staff and students are stronger together than they are apart* appears valid since it encourages both staff and students to see the big picture that cut across departments, go beyond gender, beyond age, beyond region, and beyond narrow thinking. According to Comm and Mathaisel (2005) change must come from the top; a “bottom up” approach is rarely successful. Leaders must shift from the “command post” mentality to one of “common vision” driver. Earlier on it was pointed out that if an organisation’s leadership is not “walking the talk”, then employees will disregard any change initiative as just “talk” (Comm and Mathaisel, 2005).

Shifting from the “command post” mentality to one of “common vision” driver means to say there is need for **catalytic leadership** that was said to be missing in this study. Such personnel in an ODL context have the ability, courage and enthusiasm to steer and spark action rather than do things themselves (Baba, 2007). This was also confirmed as a missing link in this study which even went further to point out that those who empower rather than serve themselves and are mission-driven, results oriented and customer focused will surely capacitate staff so that they deliver quality educational services to students (Baba, 2007).

**World-class skills for world class performance**

Chakanyuka and Chiome (2008)’s findings that staff development is critical to departmental excellence in the Zimbabwe Open University were also echoed in this study. The 44 (73%) staff respondents acknowledged training programmes being undertaken. One cited the Kariba retreat for module writers as an example. However, what appeared as missing is the lack of continuity.
Respondents in this study indicated that there was a need for continuous skills upgrading to keep abreast of world trends in open and distance learning. Supporting statements were:

- *I need world-class skills to produce world-class results in a world-class university.*
- *Training and development is a one-off event when it should be a continuous and never-ending process.*
- *Further training in higher order research skills is not being prioritised.*
- *A significant number of module writers have not been trained in module writing at a time when module writing skills must be imparted to all lecturers in open and distance learning.*
- *I need to improve programme management skills, communication skills and quantitative techniques but no one is bothering.*
- *Workshops on research and other important aspects of teaching/lecturing should not be one-off things but be a continuous process.*

From these excerpts, one notes that respondents felt that there is training taking place but the missing link is lack of continuity. All these are crucial aspects of open and distance learning. Effective lecturers have to be competent in each area. The Zimbabwe Open University may be offering some of these services but there is need for sustained effort to ensure that all lecturers are adequately trained and, according to Harvey and Stensaker (2008), staff developed to meet the dynamic conditions of open and distance education. Thus, it can be argued that without adequate training and development facilities, lecturers in open and distance learning cannot effectively accomplish their goals and the goals of the institution.

In line with the idea of world class skills for a world class university, the respondents in this study were also of the opinion that:

*The training that we are receiving is not adequate for us to be able to withstand changes in the environment. There is need for capacity building in the university. We get research days; we need professional training days as well.*

The need for university wide capacity building was seen as directly influencing and heightening the attainment of quality. Their point was based on the fact that the present staff is geared to
working in, and for the traditional on campus course delivery mode. In this case, training in open and distance mode is the only answer to quality provision (Thurab-Nkhosi, and Marshall, 2009). This is why respondents in this study advocated for professional training days and capacity building programmes to be instituted. This is so because, quality in general, and service quality in particular, are accepted as being complex and multidimensional (Galloway and Ho, in Sultan and Wong, 2010).

In the process of capacity building, what is lacking from the university under study according to the respondents in this study is what they referred to as professional training days. The respondents were of the opinion that there must be professional training days set aside to staff develop the academic fraternity on quality issues. The academic fraternity was said to be the soul of the enterprise by Koul (2005) and this was supported by Harvey and Stensaker (2008). However, the same academics need to move out of the traditional garb and accept responsibility for quality (Schein, 2004). In this case they need to undergo training and retraining as new technologies come to aid educational dispensation. They must be encouraged to innovate in order to have capacity to meet diverse student needs and be prepared to meet students any time any where through technology (Jung, 2005). Chee (cited in Weeks, 2012) accentuates the need for nurturing a culture of learning within institutions of learning in order to prepare students for a rapidly changing world.

**Talent management and development system**

Still on world class skills for world class results, 31 (52%) of staff and 15 (5%) of students added the issue of talent management and development system. To them, the missing links are serious,
Some related statements include:

**ODL managers who do not identify talent and develop it always lag behind on quality. The more talent you develop, the better for your organisation.’**

Talent needs to be identified and then developed for the good of the organisation. Wise leaders scout for talent because they see it as an important weapon that they employ in pursuit of quality.

**Effective ODL systems look for the best talent, develop it, reward it and retain it. If they fail to do this, they keep on getting average performers.**

**My advice to ODL is that they must not suppress or disadvantage talent. Instead, expose them more to the quality culture in your organisation. In the Zimbabwe Open University, I propose an internship programme as the magic.**

To the respondents in this study, serious, effective and efficient systems are not in place in the university under study with a clear mandate to identify and develop talent. The argument was that in ODL managers who do not identify talent and develop it always lag behind in their quest for talent, an idea that is supported by (Marcouse, 2003). To these respondents, the more talent you develop, the better for the institution. Wise ODL authorities scout for talent, develop it, reward it and retain it because they see it as an important weapon that they employ in pursuit of fostering continuous quality improvement an argument that is supported by (Kariem, 2010). If they fail to do this, they keep on getting average performers in this case they must not suppress or disadvantage talent but expose them more to the quality culture in the organisation. Earlier on it was reasoned in this study that mediocrity breeds mediocrity, setting off an organisational chain reaction of underperformance.

Management’s role in extending discursive spaces has been seen in this study through sharing knowledge and talent management and development. The respondents then added another dimension that they thought is a pathway to fostering continuous quality improvement. This is
to engage in on-going professional learning. To this end, the recognition that effective quality management rests in large part on professional development (Mukeredzi and Ndamba, 2007) was also replicated in this study. The following missing links were noted and put forward:

The university is not keeping up to date with distance education trends. It has to go on to maintain and improve on current knowledge and ODL trends. Nurturing tutors’ technical, mental and emotional capabilities is an important step towards heightening and sustaining quality but is simply not receiving attention.

Once the university has identified talent, and builds their capacity through engaging them in on-going professional learning, then another missing link becomes that of deploying staff appropriately which respondents in this study felt was a grey area. One respondent put it this way:

Maximising the use of staff skills is a sure way of influencing quality because staff becomes confident if they are deployed in areas they are comfortable in. Some of them are not.

The respondents saw a missing link here. They thought that if the university wants to be a world class institution then staff needs to have world class skills. Creech quoted in Ncube (2007) appear to support this stance when he says training of people extensively and at every level, plays a vital role in transforming an organisation. Ibrahim and Silong (1997, pp: 10) recommend provision of “adequate training and development opportunities for staff that is linked to the achievement of standards”. On the other hand, Clay (1999, p. 1) underscores the need for training of distance education lecturers and tutors when she argues that “a well-planned, proactive distance training and support programme will result in distance instructors” who are “confident and hopeful of the new possibilities for teaching and learning ahead of them”.

The respondents in this study appear to bemoan the need to find ODL systems that help academic leaders to better explore change. This kind of thinking appears to support Jacobs’s
(2008) assertions that educational change of any significance comes about through the process of personal development of individual educators within the broader context that enables such individuals to engage with colleagues about the meaning of change, and identifies the absence of such a social context and discursive spaces at higher education institutions as a problem of change. For the university under study quality is heightened if the university creates space for academic development where commonalities underpinning the collective, are a shared phenomenon. This may not be the case right now. What is missing is the ability to mobilise resources and set in motion processes through which academic staff provide nourishment and shared learning through interaction.

**Valuing student voices**

A spectacular finding from 24 (40%) staff and 244 (86%) students relating to staff was their failure to value student voices. Teacher characteristics have been seen as important. The respondents in this study gave characteristics of a distance education teacher who will lead them to attain and sustain quality. The teacher of their choice is characterised by many things that can be summed up by this missing link-valuing student voices. In an interview, a student respondent in this study claimed that:

_The most important factor for successful distance learning is a caring, concerned teacher who is confident, experienced, at easy with the technology, uses the media creatively and is sensitive to the needs of the students._ A staff member added her voice in an interview and argued that:

_Our university is blessed with staff who discovers, critically examines, synthesises, organises, preserves, advances and creates knowledge, information and values through teaching, research, scholarship and public service._ A staff member then summed it up by declaring that:

_Distance education staff is sadly failing to value students’ voices._
The missing link appears clear. Students think staff is not valuing them. The biographical data of students indicate that they are mature people. Their judgments must be taken seriously. In the case of Nigeria, Alani and Ilusanya (2008) claim that no Nigerian university has ever been among the best 6,000 universities in the world, one reason for this is the failure to take advice seriously from stakeholders such as students. The need to make universities in Nigeria produce appropriate human resources and be on the same footing with their counterparts around the world calls for rethinking in most staff conduct (Alani and Ilusanya, 2008). The importance of staff who value students is further illuminated by Alani and Ilusanya (2008) who insists that in pursuance of quality objectives, the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) were developed by the National University Council (NUC). The BMAS documents provide criteria for the objective assessment of programmes and disciplines. The criteria include academic content, staffing, physical facilities, library, funding and employers’ rating of programmes (Alani and Ilusanya, 2008). Academic content is awarded a score of 23, staffing 32; physical facilities 25, library 12, funding of programme 5, and employers’ rating of programme 3. The most important point to note here is marks awarded to academic content and staffing. It means staff that value students are not short of this crucial aspect. In the university under study it will mean world class modules that are available on time.

**Capacity to develop self-managing learners**

Academics who value students were seen as able to develop self-managing learners by 29 (48%) staff and 100 (35%) students. What appears to be a highly salient finding in this study is that staff still nurtures the dependency syndrome contrary to ODL philosophy. It was the contention of the respondents in this study that the missing link is that distance education
teachers must have the capacity to produce students who can manage their affairs. They preferred teachers who can develop learners who are self-managing: The following excerpts bear testimony to this:

‘Independence must be the guiding principle in students who learn at a distance.’ Remarked one respondent while the other one went on to say: ‘the dependency syndrome must be done away with. Independence and creativity is the in thing in an ODL context. I expect tutors to take a leading role in that direction.’ Still another one argued in the interview that: I believe that current practices promote the dependency syndrome whereas distance education is a beckon of independency learning. This must be cascaded into students and the tutors must be the torch bearers.

Learner autonomy and independence were seen as critical skills that must be developed in open and distance education students. Learner autonomy refers to the varying capacity of the student’s ability to make decisions about his or her learning and the extent to which students rather than the instructor establish the characteristics of a learning programme (Moore, 1993). This appears to echo another finding elsewhere in this study that a virtual mentality must be instilled in students. This can only happen if students are self-managing, creative and independent (Weeks, 2012). Such practices will promote a knowledge based society (Chiome, 2011b). This is one of the missing links identified. In the same vein, the respondents in the study also expected distance education tutors to be skilled knowledge retrievers. This is in line with Bloomer’s (1997) assertion that the interests of modern day effectiveness and efficiency are better served by knowledge retrievers. This assertion appears to capture this concept well:

‘Knowledge retrieving is the in thing these days. The capacity to know about where to find information is the predominant source of economic advantage. Quality of a distance education teacher depends on the quality of information that he/she can assemble.’

The underlying point is that distance education tutors must be skilled enough to live and work in the global society, retrieving information for the benefit of the students, staff and other interested parties. Respondents seem to say a sizable number were lagging behind on this issue.
Taking pride in the collective enterprise and interactivity

It was the contention of the respondents (23 staff, 38% and 128 students 45% in this study that the university is working hard to craft a vision and sell it to staff and students. They even pointed out that some staff members are highly committed. In such circumstances, quality can be easily embraced by staff that have a clear vision that they own and support. However, the missing link is that there are signs of individualism. Supporting statements are:

*The missing link is staff who takes pride in the common enterprise.*

*Structure and process must foster creativity and collaboration for the good of the enterprise, right now it is not.*

The views of the respondents in this study were that what is put in place in terms of structures and processes must be such that they foster creativity and collaboration in pursuit of the collective enterprise. Once this is in place, the next important thing for the staff is *interactivity with the students.* In this case, the missing link being that there must be connectivity between students and academic staff in the university. This prominent finding came from both 31 staff (52%) and 119 students (42%). Some substantiating statements are:

*Distance education is being treated as correspondents at a time when I learn more from a tutor who is highly interactive so that my learning does not degenerate into mere correspondence learning.* Student

*There is glaring lack of connectivity between the student and the teacher. Without connectivity, the student becomes autonomous and isolated which may unfortunately result in procrastination and eventual drop out from the system.* Academic staff member

*Success in distance teaching and learning involves interactivity between tutor and student and between student and learning materials and between student and technology. This is being pursued at a superficial level.*

Interactivity and connectivity brings into fore the idea of virtual mentality in students. This can be done through connectivity between students and staff. Without connectivity, the students may
depart early due to frustration, isolation and procrastination (Lomas, 2007). The numbers, socio-economic status, cultural background, experiences, needs and aspirations of students have changed greatly with the shift to a mass higher education system (Gordon cited in Lomas, 2007). An increasing proportion of school leavers are entering higher education, as demonstrated by a rise from 15% in the early 1990s to 43% in United Kingdom universities in 2004 (DfES, quoted in Lomas, 2007). With the majority of students having to pay towards the cost of their education through tuition fees, they are now concerned about receiving value for money (Lomas, 2007).

**Energised, enthusiastic and interested academics who promote collaborative productivity**

An important and striking finding in this study related to missing links in conditions in staff that continuously improve quality was that respondents (33 staff 55% and 119 students 42%) noted that staff was highly qualified for the work they do. However, they insisted that the missing link was that distance learning must be driven by energetic, enthusiastic and interested academics. These statements appear to support this stance:

*The staff in the Zimbabwe Open University is highly qualified, but this is not enough. You need to have staff with energy and willingness to serve students from different backgrounds and during odd hours.* (Student)

*The same time same place mentality of face-to-face system is still rife in the Zimbabwe Open University yet ODL want staff members who are prepared to share their experiences at different times to different categories of students. This requires energetic and interested staff.* (Staff)

*The ever-evolving art and science of being a teacher, mentor and guide requires professionals who demonstrate enthusiasm for teaching using proven strategies that reach, motivate and inspire students. To me this is missing in this university.*

What can be deduced from the above responses is the Zimbabwe Open University has highly qualified people but they thought this was not enough as ODL need to be led by energetic,
committed, willing staff who demonstrates mentorship, professionalism and enthusiasm in the ever-evolving art and science of teaching. Thus, they even raised another equally interesting but related issue. In this case they thought staff must *promote collaborative productivity*.

The missing link related to tutors in the university under study was seen as failure to promote collaborative productivity as the area of collaboration was cited as indispensable. In this respect, teamwork was seen as a catalyst. These statements bear testimony to this:

*I suspect that collaborative productivity is weak yet collaborative productivity can be the doctors’ prescription for heightening and sustaining quality. There are too much individualistic tendencies. These days, individualistic orientations no longer have a place but fuller recognition of collective and collaborative action can help influence quality.*

The voices of attaining and sustaining quality in this case appeared clear. The missing link is that ODL teacher must be able to work in teams and networks that promote collaborative productivity and benefit the whole enterprise. According to Lomas (2007), the University of Phoenix is a typical example. It was founded in 1976 and is the largest private, accredited university in that country. Its mission statement emphasises innovation, continuous improvement and service quality. Many of its students study via the internet and this illustrates how it aims to provide a service that is convenient to the student (University of Phoenix, cited in Lomas, 2007). Weeks (2012) accentuates that engendering a culture of learning is hardly achieved over a very short space of time and suggests that it emerges in response to changing mental models that come into being through collaborative, purposeful interaction between the key role players involved.

**Enhancing university reputation through knowledge creation**

The area of creating knowledge was also a prominent finding in this study. The respondents (40 staff 67% and 43 students 15%) thought too few people were involved in research. The role of
research in achieving this knowledge creation was evident from the interviews as evidenced by the following excerpts:

*Research especially action research must be the engine for heightening, attaining and sustaining quality for the ODL tutor. Too few academics are involved in knowledge generation yet involvement in research promotes the teachers’ standing and enhances the university’s reputation.*

*There appears to be pessimism, cynicism and ignorance as far as research is concerned. Cultivating a research culture in distance education tutors so that they become knowledge creators in such a case, cynicism and ignorance will slowly disappear though not overnight.*

In the process of creating a knowledge based society, the respondents felt knowledge creation enhances the reputation of the university. The university under study was failing to instil a research culture, encourage research by training teachers in that aspect and using research as the engine to create new knowledge and help to find solutions to day-to-day problems in the university. According to Sukirno and Siengthai (2011) higher education plays its main role in creating expertise and acts as a center of excellence for knowledge creation and developing human resources necessary for a country’s development. In this regard, higher education is the engine that drives the economy and the vaccination against the worst effects of globalization (Brodjonegoro, 2009). To this, this research is adding the fact that with a very good research base, the distance education tutors will be able to create knowledge and increase their and the university’s reputation.

**Use of appropriate teaching, learning and assessment approaches**

The ideas raised by Mays, (2010) that employing a variety of teaching and learning approaches that include hermeneutic and constructivist approaches are particularly compelling because they inform practice were confirmed in this study in which 30 (50%) of the academic staff were mere discipline specialists without teaching qualifications. One respondent indicated that:
The question of teaching, learning and assessment approaches is important in our institution where the majority of the teaching staff are discipline specialists who lack a strong education background.

The missing link here is that most academics are discipline specialists who lack a strong education background. Thus, you cannot expect quality teaching from colleagues who are unable to employ a variety of teaching approaches that include hermeneutic and constructivist approaches (Mays, 2010). This confirms Woolfolk’s (2007) worries that academics should be wary of adopting single narrow understanding of learning as was the case in this study. Woolfolk (2007) further argues for variety in teaching approaches and the selection of appropriate teaching approaches for particular learning purposes. Mays (2010) concurs with these suggestions and go on to argue that many of our colleagues in ODL practice are discipline specialists who often do not have an education background. He further points out that accepting a position in higher education in general and ODL in particular, requires not only a mastery of one’s discipline but also an understanding of broad approaches to learning, and, by extension, teaching. This may entail participation in induction programmes. According to Mays, (2010, p. 2) ‘… our assumptions about the nature of learning need to be made explicit and used to justify, critique and improve our practice.’ In this case, the learning materials, the teaching programmes and the assessment will work synergistically together rather than in contradiction to each other if academics employ appropriate teaching approaches which were uncovered as missing links in this study.

**Ergonomically designed work stations**

A conspicuous finding in this study that was subscribed to by both staff 52 (86%) and students 219 (77%) was that the work stations in the Zimbabwe Open University are not conducive to
scholarship. The work environment for staff was cited as getting in the way of heightening, attaining and sustaining quality. Work environment plays an important role in staff job satisfaction. This includes everything from having the right tools available to providing basic comfort, such as proper lighting and noise control. This is what a staff member prescribed:

Staff members also need to have ergonomically designed work stations that include a comfortable chair that is the proper height and distance from constantly used work equipment such as the telephone and computer. It is also important to ensure that the work area is laid out logically and efficiently and the tools for the trade should be made available.

In the visits to some of the regional centres, the pathetic work environment was observed. It appears this is a critical area that needs attention. In one regional campus, the reception area was overcrowded with up to seven members of staff. The place appeared noisy and chaotic. Such a scenario does not augur well for heightening, attaining and sustaining quality. According to Silins and Mulford (2000) what is important to take note of is that quality of teachers' work life must be such that it builds commitment, engagement, learning and leadership. Under these conditions, the organisation makes the most of the resources it has. Silins and Mulford (2000) further confirm the need for ergonomically designed work stations by arguing that their evidence indicates that the positive perception regarding resources is more important than the actual level provided because it influences how and by whom the resources are used. This includes work stations which respondents said were not conducive to scholarship.

**Caring for the workers and staff retention strategies for them to go the extra mile**

One of the major themes that emerged from this study was missing links related to a caring environment for the workers in the university under study (35 staff 58% and 119 students 42%).
They cited the wonders of caring for the workers for them to go the extra mile. Here are some supporting excerpts from the open-ended-questionnaires and interviews:

*People work hard if they feel cared for by the organisation.*
*Along with hard work comes loyalty if one is recognised for the efforts so that one must feel more fulfilled and be more willing to go the extra mile.*

It is important to note that the staff in this study at times felt uncared for. This is in spite of the fact that the institution is run as a family of professionals. The issue of recognition of effort comes up even in other researches undertaken in the Zimbabwe Open University, as Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2007) pointed out. The large class sizes and thin academic staff levels place heavy burdens on lecturers which inhibit their effectiveness and ability to fulfil such duties as research and community service. On this note, lecturers may feel neglected and overburdened at the same time. Dillon (cited in Chakanyuka and Chiome, 2008) also found out that success of distance education was linked to the rewards available to the distance educators and argued that absence of recognition and tenure could negatively affect the effectiveness of distance educators. The lecturers in the study went further to suggest staff retention strategies as shown in the following excerpts:

*Retain staff to promote continuity.*
*There is too much staff mobility that affects quality in many ways.*
*The university must see that strategies are put in place to attract and retain the best brains for distance education.*

The issue of staff retention appears to be a hot issue in the university under study. Chabaya, Chiome and Chabaya (2009) found out that one reason for failure to submit research projects on time is the issue of culture neglect and culture decay in the university. Continuity is affected by staff exodus due to various challenges and Weeks (2012) believe that it affects the culture of learning. It was cited as a missing link in this research.
Existence of exclusive, territorial and competitive silos of power

Staff respondents in this study (46%) 28 were of the opinion that in the Zimbabwe Open University, there are what Taylor in Flattley (2009) called silos of power. These are groups within an organisation, which develop their own sub-culture and become exclusive, territorial and competitive in their relationship with other groups (Flattley, 2009). These statements substantiate this claim:

There are cliques in this university that yield power at the expense of others. These will get in the way of quality. To continuously improve quality, there is need to dismantle them.

Networks of cliques are highly counterproductive for the university. They are a major hindrance to building a quality culture.

Dismantling cliques promotes the one team dimension that can influence the achievement of quality.

A worrisome revelation related to silos of power is that they lead to disengagement from organisational citizenship behaviour (Subramaniam, Othman and Sambasivan, 2010). This appears more worrisome revelation since it was mentioned by 28 (46%) staff and 99 (35%) students in this study. Silos of power are related to some manifestations of the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory where some believed that they were not treated equitably in the university. Some either said some departments get more resources than others while some complained that some regions are marginalised. To them, this affects quality. They even pointed to the fact that:

One cannot be seen to be part of a clique. It is unethical for an ODL professional to be seen to prefer the company of some staff members above others.

The leader-member exchange (LMX) theory describes the nature of leader-follower relationship and highlights the variations in the manner in which a leader behaves toward each follower (Boyd and Taylor, cited in Subramaniam, et. al., 2010). According to this theory, leaders form differentiated relationships with their followers. Leaders select certain members for more favourable treatment and treat them as in-group members (Subramaniam, et. al., 2010). Those
who are treated as in-group members enjoy high quality exchange. These followers, in turn, exert extra effort for the leader and the leader reciprocates by doing the same for them. They are also more involved, more communicative, receive more information, have more influence and feel more confident (Dionne, quoted in Subramaniam, et. al., 2010).

Studies show that employees who experience higher quality LMX relationships enjoy higher levels of satisfaction and performance, lower levels of turnover and, most importantly, are usually given better quality of assignments by the leader (Graen and Schiemann, cited in Subramaniam, et. al., 2010). On the other hand, out-group employees are those who experience low quality exchange. They are less favoured by their leader and receive less valued resources. In terms of work performance, out-group employees tend to perform their work only based on the expectations of the job’s contractual requirements and they are perceived as less compatible by their leader compared to in-group employees (Zalensky and Graen, quoted in (Subramaniam, et. al., 2010). Therefore, those experiencing low quality LMX relationship are more prone to not trusting their employers and thus have a low desire for engaging in organizational citizenship behaviour and in this study in practices that continuously improve quality.

**Upholding academic freedom**

A very interesting missing link mentioned by (38) 63% of the staff is upholding of academic freedom. As one academic member pointed out, they were concerned that:

*The rationale and reasoning behind quality initiatives may be contrary to the virtues of academic freedom* (staff member).
The results here appear to show that while staff is embracing quality efforts, at the same time, they want to jealously guard their academic freedom. What appears to be a prominent missing link in this assertion is that the market values perspective of quality in the university under study is threatening the traditional culture and is running contrary to the virtues of academic freedom. It means to say, the university must take lessons from other institutions that have embraced quality before. Sirvanci (2004) argued that organisations that have adopted quality efforts such as TQM have transformed their institution’s culture into a total quality culture that involves elements such as teamwork, customer and market focus, employee involvement and participation, and process management. This argument appear to corroborate another finding which states that quality is being directed by those still clinging to the command post mentality. Youssef, (cited in Mehralizadeh & Safaeemoghaddam, 2010) cogently point out that while the general philosophy and language behind quality are attractive to nearly all academics, many elements of modern university culture make it difficult for quality actually to be implemented. Mehralizadeh & Safaeemoghaddam (2010) opined that perhaps the most important element in academic culture that frustrates the introduction of conventional procedures is the doctrine of academic freedom as it plays out in individual professorial classrooms and their professional lives. Faculty members traditionally have had the right to profess their disciplines as they see fit and to seek truth, wherever that search leads them (Mehralizadeh & Safaeemoghaddam, 2010). The content of their courses, the nature of their research, and their professional values over the years have been subsumed under the umbrella of academic freedom (Rutgers, 2004). Consequently, staff in the Zimbabwe Open university feel free (and perhaps well justified) to reject evaluative processes such as quality that might result in satisfaction or productivity measures that could be used to influence how they do their teaching and research especially if
this comes from what they perceive as a command post and directed by a vision that they do not own nor share.

The role of a university, as understood in its earliest days of formation in the medieval period (13th century Oxford, Paris etc.), was one of subservience to, or confrontations with, religious dogma and political ideologies (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). Therefore, the founding fathers of modern universities enshrined academic freedom in teaching and learning, as central to the development of universities (Thelon, quoted in Srikanthan, and Dalrymple, 2007). This was terribly not the case in this study yet this value should be embedded at the core of any quality model to successfully meet the contemporary criteria of service.

**Unbundling academic staff roles**

A very interesting finding from the (38) 63% of the staff in this study concerns their roles in the institution. To them, their roles were too many and this compromised quality. They suggested that these be unbundled so that they can act as specialists. In an interview, one programme co-ordinator put the argument this way:

*As a programme coordinator, I am expected to teach students, mark assignments and examinations, provide academic leadership, counsel students, advise students, conduct research, engage in community service and write modules. This is too much for one person. Another one concurred and added:*

*It is better to work in the regions. At national centre it is meeting after meeting on top of the ‘too many’ duties.*

To the academic staff respondents in this study, there were too many roles for them. Unbundling these will allow staff to specialise in areas that they are more proficient and competent in. In this case quality will be enhanced and the unbundling process allows faculty,
to some degree, to be involved in the processes in which they have the most experience and expertise (Neely and Tucker, 2010). Neely and Tucker (2010) appear to agree with the respondents in this study as they argue that staff members with training in curriculum design are involved in developing courses, while those with experience delivering instruction are able to focus on facilitating the course. In a traditional faculty model the faculty is responsible for both the content and delivery along with other functions like supervising graduate students, advising students, conducting research, and serving on university committees (Neely and Tucker, 2010). Good as these ideas appear, they need to be taken with caution considering that this specialisation may contribute to the overall quality of the curriculum developed but it may also cause the teaching faculty to feel they are too far removed from the material developed to teach it effectively (Sammons & Ruth, 2007).

According to Chiome and Kurasha (2011), the advent of technology as the key mode of delivery means that tutors, supervisors, trainers, instructional technologists, academic advisors, and graders are needed to deliver quality instruction in an open and distance teaching university. Schuster and Finkestein (2006) appear to agree with this stance as they indicate that information technology may be a contributing factor to the unbundling of the staff role as higher education institutions are pressured to increase the speed at which they deliver content to keep up with student demands.

Commitment to the philosophical underpinnings of open and distance learning
The respondents in this study, 40 (67%) staff and 159 (56%) students questioned commitment to philosophical underpinnings of ODL. To them, the team so selected to lead ODL processes must be committed to the philosophical underpinnings of open and distance learning. To the
respondents in this study, the right team must be competent in and committed to the philosophy driving distance education. Some excerpts supporting this stance are:

There is no evidence that the current crop of staff embraces the concept of open and distance learning, with a mission to heighten, attain and sustain quality.
Staff must share the Zimbabwe Open University vision and mission and embrace the philosophy underpinning distance and open learning.
The right people for quality are those who believe in the ideology driving distance education. May be this is not the case yet!

It would appear that the Zimbabwe Open University is not doing enough to train lecturers in open and distance teaching rationale, yet over 90% of recruits are mostly from conventional institutions. Dickinson et al (cited in Chiome, 2011a) argue that in spite of their crucial roles, new lecturers are often required to begin teaching distance education learning classes with little preparation. Without adequate induction lecturers fail to appreciate the needs of open and distance learning. Besides, developing personnel in line with the vision, mission and philosophical underpinnings of an institution is important in a university setting.

Competence in and commitment to the philosophy driving distance education has been defended further by Sultan and Wong (2010) who observed that the service experience of students is much more complex than that of banks, restaurants or telephone users. This is because within the educational context there may be better information flow and less weakness of relationships between staff and students. This further complicates the debate at a time when respondents in this study insist that there is no evidence that the current crop of staff embrace the concept of open and distance learning. They also fear that staff do not share the Zimbabwe Open University vision and mission and embrace the philosophy underpinning distance and open learning. This is why they rightly claim that the right people for quality are those who believe in the ideology deriving distance education. This may be the reason why it is claimed that developing personnel in line with the vision, mission and philosophical underpinnings of an institution is important in a university setting.
Positive attitudes towards open and distance learning

A key missing link related to commitment to ODL philosophy that came out of this study and was also raised by Clark et al., 2009) in a study of American higher education institutions is the attitudes of the teaching staff towards quality initiatives and towards the philosophical underpinnings of distance education (staff 44 (73%) and 250 (88%) students). Statements below point out this issue:

*There is need to change preconceptions about distance education.*
*There are conservative people amongst us whose attitudes must change otherwise quality will not be attained.*
*There is the tendency to employ conventional methods that can undermine quality in an open and distance teaching environment.*
*Attitude overrides all other competencies.*

The attitudes of staff were seen as a stumbling block to quality in the university under study. Hefferlin in Knapper and Cropley (2000) agrees that loyalty to the discipline is generally presented as of more importance than teaching. Lecturer resistance to change often reflects a general conservative stance among the professions. According to Knapper and Cropley (2000), there is a tendency to prefer known methods. Thus, lecturer attitudes towards an innovation like a quality initiative can be inhibiting to someone who wishes to experiment with an open and distance approach (Mays, 2010). It means that there is need to change preconceptions about distance education especially when respondents themselves point out that there are conservative people amongst them whose attitudes must change. Sukirno and Siengthai (2011) argue that providing lecturers a space for participating in decision making has positive impact on lecturers’ performance in teaching, research, publications, public services and managerial involvement activities. It appears this was not the case in this study.

Summary of staff related missing links

A number of missing links related to staff conditions fostering continuous quality improvement were raised in this section. These are: Mediocrity breeds mediocrity, setting off an organisational chain reaction of underperformance. More can be done with a lust for innovation such as to steer and spark action. World-class skills for world class performance means continuous skills upgrading to keep abreast of world trends in ODL and talent management system that is regular
and intentional is missing. Effective ODL systems look for the best talent, develop it, reward it and retain it. Student voices is not valued; staff appear to fail to take pride in the common enterprise and fostering interactivity and connectivity with students; staff lack energy and willingness to serve students from diverse backgrounds; professionals who demonstrate enthusiasm for teaching using proven strategies that reach, motivate and inspire students appeared missing yet individualistic orientations no longer have a place but fuller recognition of collective and collaborative action.

Current practices appear to promote the dependency syndrome whereas distance education is a beckon of independency learning; tutors appeared not to be skilled in creating knowledge to increase their and the university’s reputation. There appear to be more discipline specialists who lack a strong education background. The university lacks ergonomically designed work stations that promote scholarship and fail to care for staff to enable them to go the extra mile. There appear to be too much staff mobility that stifles continuity. There appear to be some who work under exclusive, territorial and competitive silos of power depicting the LMX theory and some appear not to keep up to date with distance education trends. The right people for quality are those who believe in the ideology deriving distance education because attitude overrides all other competencies and that staff and students are stronger together than they are apart.

In concluding this section on conditions in staff that continuously improve quality, Newton (2000)’s ideas appear relevant. In deconstructing the concept of quality, Newton (2000) suggests that academics are not passive recipients of management objectives, but in fact makers and shapers of the policy. He argues that if academics are to remain pivotal in efforts to improve the
quality of teaching and learning, more attention needs to be paid to their subjectivities and to the importance of the conditions and context of their work as was the case in this study. The next section presents data on missing links related to students.

4.3.3 Student related missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University

The third research question in this study was: What are the missing links in student related conditions that continuously foster quality improvement in an ODL context?

The research asked this question because students’ views on all aspects of their higher education experiences are now being widely canvassed and regarded as essential to the effective monitoring of quality in any serious university. In this regard, this research included their views as these were regarded as useful lens for pinpointing missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement. Knowing what customers expect is the first and possibly most critical step in delivering quality (Mathew, Mahenna and George 2005). Everard, Morris and Wilson (2004) further point out that quality is meeting or exceeding the expectations of the customer. A university has a variety of customers or stakeholders- parents, students, employers and government. However, from both a theoretical as well as a practical standpoint, this research took a position that the university would be better off understanding the needs of its primary and specific target audience-the students. This section will present and discuss the missing links in student related factors that continuously improve quality.

Student centeredness and participatory pedagogy

The 264 student respondents (93%) echoed by 23 staff 38% raised the issue of student centeredness claiming that open and distance learning has to be student centered. They
indicated that the non availability of modules puts students at a great disadvantage. This statement was extracted from questionnaire responses:

I work in a rural area where there are no libraries. If I fail to get a module where then is empowerment? I think there is need to ensure that the key basis for all decisions can be justified in terms of the student needs. I stand to be corrected. I think it is with students at heart in all the actions that quality is heightened in ODL’ (student).

Mature students like those in the Zimbabwe Open University adore recognition, approval and belonging, in such circumstances, quality can be expected (staff member).

To the issue of student centeredness, respondents added the lack of participatory pedagogy which they claim is a missing link in fostering continuous quality improvement. The respondents thought the Zimbabwe Open University is too teacher centred. Some respondents went further to say students can work as content co-creators. In this context, the respondents proposed a cultural shift and a change of perception from teacher-centred to student-centred pedagogical practices.

This excerpt captures the mood:

Changes in perception, from teacher-centered to learner-centered are needed in the university. This will lead to major revisions in mission statements, organisational policies and implement strategies such as the employment policies and the technology investment strategies. Priorities have to be given to the students rather than the university members or organisational units.

The mood and tone in this research was that of a cultural shift from teacher-centred to student centeredness. In this case, teaching in open and distance learning context has to put people first. It is an important finding of the study that quality initiatives must start with the people especially those who want to improve their livelihoods. This issue was captured in the following excerpts:

Nothing for us without us, declared one student.

The challenge in this university is that most quality initiatives are conceived far away from the people concerned. They are imposed from top to bottom. These are likely to be rejected.
Put people first, so that quality is implemented from the bottom up: by the people and for the people.

The need to put students first is widely documented. A survey conducted by Management Associate Europe in conjunction with the American Association and Japanese Management Association reported that nearly eighty percent of respondents in a survey of over 3300 business executives in Europe, North America, and Japan believe that improving customer quality service is the key to competitive success in the global market (Mathew, et. al., 2005).

What this means is that a major missing link this study unearthed is what Padro (2010) refers to as the customer service model. The respondents in this study thought quality efforts were sidelining this critical stakeholder in most instances since student respondents argued that ‘nothing for us without us’. Mathew, Mahenna and George (2005) quoting Johnson agrees and point out that while individual determinants of service quality may vary from industry to industry, in a general sense, service quality is nothing more and nothing less than the extent to which a service deliverer exceeds or falls short of the customer’s expectations.

This appears to be the idea of customer care, in which the university needs to apply the customer service model to quality in an open and distance learning environment. Following this logic, customer expectations, when exceeded, should lead to customer satisfaction – and ultimately, the customer’s end evaluation of the service quality level provided should also be positive. This kind of thinking has been heavily contested by Padro (2010). He posits that the customer service model does not work in higher education. The argument being that higher education institutions are three organisations in one: academic affairs, business affairs and student affairs. The
customer service may work for the business affairs sector and to a lesser extent for the student affairs; it does not work well for the academic affairs (Padro, 2010).

Tied to Padro (2010)’s argument is the *changing value definitions* (an important finding in this study) of the students as they sail through the programmes. These are not stagnant and to talk about any environment as permanently turbulent is silly (Poley and France 1998). Avdjieva and Wilson (2002) are of the view that management initiatives are viewed as managerialism and resisted by academics and staff. In their study, respondents said externally imposed frameworks may be interpreted as impinging on academic freedom. TQM’s requirement that students are involved as customers and part of the “teamwork” are accepted as a threat to the faculty’s autonomy (Motwani and Kumar, 1997). Academic staff rebuke at the idea of having a student as a customer, as in the “the customer is always right” type of scenario. The delivery of educational services is unquestionably different from the traditional transactions that take place when buyers are assumed to have sufficient information about the product to make fully informed decisions (Mehralizadeh & Safaeemoghaddam 2010). In education students may not be all that fully informed about the practices employed by their tutors.

**Student ownership of the learning process**

There are so many ways that the university under study employs to promote student learning. However, the staff 17 (28%) and 182 students (64%) in this study thought these practices were not adequate. To them, they were not promoting what they called active learning and thus failing to enhance ownership of the learning process. Active learning on the part of students has been seen as a way of fostering continuous quality improvement. This was supported in the following statement:
The university appears to be failing to instil, nurture and develop a sense of ownership of the learning process in students. Students are not in any way taking responsibility for their own learning. In active learning, students take responsibility (Weeks, 2012). This can be done through evaluating own learning. Self evaluation and evaluation of own learning, consistently appeared to have significant influence on the students’ success and the ownership of the learning processes. This was ably put across by one lecturer who argued that:

The Zimbabwe Open University students do not receive regular and immediate feedback during a learning task particularly assignment marking. Under the circumstances, they must themselves evaluate their own learning. This will contribute greatly to their success.

Two missing links stand out clearly here-active learning and ownership of the learning process by students. It means that the university appears to be failing to instil, nurture and develop a sense of ownership of the learning process in students. This could be further enhanced through active learning and through evaluation of own learning. In educational terms, there has been a shift away from traditional models in which most students might have been viewed as passive recipients of teaching, absorbing information in an uncritical way, to a growing enthusiasm for active, independent learning, which encourages deep, rather than superficial processing of information (Mizikaci, 2006). To this, could be added the issue of learner-centred education. In learner centred education, integrity and freedom of the individual is primary. Therefore, the teaching and learning process provides flexible sequences of study; negotiated objectives and content; negotiated learning methods; negotiated methods of assessment; and a choice of support mechanisms (COL, 1997, p. 18).

In learner centred delivery, there is need for flexibility that will give rise to flexible learning. The term flexible learning emphasises the creation of environments for learning that have the following characteristics:
convergence of open and distance learning methods, media, and classroom strategies;
learner-centred philosophy;
recognition of diversity in learning styles and learners’ needs;
recognition of the importance of equity in curriculum and pedagogy;
use of a variety of learning resources and media; and
fostering of lifelong learning habits and skills in learners and staff (COL, 1997, p. 19).

While learner centred education received overwhelming applause in both this study and literature reviewed, the missing link stubbornly remains since some respondents were cautious arguing that students’ experiences change over time and in order to sustain quality, there is need to focus on changing students experiences. Through learner centred education, the learner must transform “primarily unreflective systems of beliefs …into more reasoned, objective and justified thoughts” (Ndofirepi, cited in Giddy 2012, p.16).

Customer service orientation

Customer service is an area that there was a hum of consensus from 189 (67%) of students and 29 (48%) of staff who felt the university is failing to offer customer value. One student summed up the mood with this quotation:

‘A satisfied customer tells three to four people. An angry customer passes the news to at least ten people.’ (Source unknown)

A lecturer concurred and stated:

‘There is need to pay a lot of attention to good customer service. Definitely many among our ranks require training in it.’

The missing link appears to be customer service orientation in staff who handles students. The respondents were convinced that the university was failing to build long term trust and credibility through focusing on customer value. Some supporting statements are:
‘Long term market share is expected if the university gain commitment and by-in from
the students as customers of the university through quality service.’

‘Building long term trust and credibility through quality customer service is important
as it discourages competitors from entering the market where the customer is treated as
a king.’

It was interesting to note that respondents were interested in focusing on customer value.
Probed further, some of the respondents called for the establishment of a high performance
service culture. In this case, customer value for money was seen as the driving force for
quality. They opined that customer value was a missing link yet it should be the driving force
in all services. They supported this through statements such as:

Document customer expectations and act on them. For instance, the university can
establish niche markets and deliver programmes that are relevant and priced correctly
that students will buy.

In calling for the establishment of a high performance service culture, respondents noted the
customer relationship management techniques such as suggestion boxes that the university uses
as a good starting point. However, in the high performance service culture they were calling for,
customer queries must be acted on promptly. In this spirit, they called for service integrity. To
the respondents in this study, there was need for service integrity. To them this integrity comes
from a satisfied customer. This statement from a student ably articulates this issue:

‘Service integrity is a reliable way of fostering continuous quality improvement. The
university is failing to deliver what the customer wants such as modules, missing results,
corrections on mis-spelt certificates and providing transcripts on time. Failure to meet
customer expectations is an impediment to quality. A member of the support staff took
the issue further and claimed that:

‘The university is failing to leave a mark in the community through a lasting legacy of
service to its clients.’

The need to start with student services that bring a lasting legacy of service to the students were
echoed by other respondents. One of them called for blending physical and virtual contacts. It
was said this is done in order to bring a cultural shift in current practices of missing results, 
delayed results, missing modules and lacklustre performances. To this end, Jung (2005) cites 
very interesting experiences from Anadolu University of Turkey. In this university, priorities 
have been given to the students rather than the university members or organisational units. 
Specific changes include: 

- initiating highly interactive e-learning projects and virtual class models to meet the needs 
of Anadolu students to study in a more flexible environment, 
- introducing an online academic advising system to increase two-way-communication 
opportunities 
- implementing the policy which requires all the faculties to respond to students’ inquiries 
within 24 hours, 
- adopting the strategy of blending physical and virtual contacts to introduce need-based 
student services, and 
- including output variables such as students’ satisfaction and graduation rate as QA factors 
(Jung, 2005, p. 11).

As indicated above, though Anadolu university’s learner-centered QA system is still at its 
developmental stage and that more detailed QA standards and procedures are yet to be 
developed, Anadolu’s learner-centered QA approach still provides an insight to the Zimbabwe 
Open University and other ODL institutions that wish to implement QA measures in ways that 
assist in the progress of students in their studies and go beyond QA for the production and the 
delivery of course materials (Jung 2005). Practices suggested here all centre around the 
constructivist pedagogy of flexible learning which call for the fact that new knowledge is built 
upon the foundations of previous knowledge (Giddy, 2012). The importance of context is also 
emphasized and so is the fact that errors and contradictions are useful. All these are hallmarks of 
TDT, the theory underpinning this study. Educational institutions should develop the necessary 
competent human resources in order to conduct and manage knowledge configuration effectively 
(Brown, 2006). “This requires the creation of a cadre of knowledge workers – people who are 
expert at configuring knowledge relevant to a wide range of contexts. This new corps of workers
is described in the text as problem identifiers, problem solvers, and problem brokers’’ (Gibbons, 1998, p. i). Such new corps of workers will likely leave a mark in the community through a lasting legacy of service to the public as was said to be missing in this study.

**Rapid response policy**

A very important missing link that can have far reaching consequences for quality is the failure by the university to respond rapidly to students’ requests. Respondents thought the university badly needs a rapid response policy. The 52 staff (86%) and 269 students (95%) were in total agreement that missing results, queries that take too long to solve and the inability of regions to offer prompt answers to students were doing down the university in many respects. To this end, they suggested a rapid response policy. One student put it this way:

*It takes a month to access missing results because regional campuses cannot help students. The university needs to implement a policy which requires all the units to respond to students’ inquiries within 24 hours.*

The need for a rapid response policy by the respondents in this study may look farfetched but still provides an insight to the institution that wish to attain and sustain quality measures in ways that assist in the progress of students in their studies. Implied therefore by the respondents in this study is that the university had initially concentrated all its efforts on improving internal processes with little or no regard for the relationships between those processes and the organisation’s ultimate customers (Brigham cited in Venkatraman, 2007). According to Schein (2004), the contents of myths, stories, missing results and sagas reveal the history of an organisation and influence how people understand what their organisation values and believe. Jung (2005) cites very interesting experiences from Anadolu University of Turkey. In this university, they adopted and implemented a policy which requires all the faculties to respond to students’ inquiries within 24 hours. Should this happen in the university under study, then it could be seen as a breakthrough in one of the most contentious missing links in conditions
fostering continuous quality improvement. It may restore popularity of distance education because, according to Schein (2004), if the culture is good, it holds the potential for generating sustained competitive advantages. The popularity of distance learning has grown rapidly because of the integration of interactive instructional technologies like two-way audio/video courses and Web-based instruction via the Internet (Sherry, 1996). Timely responses and developing an understanding relationship with the instructor provide comfort for confused and frustrated online learners (Sherry, 1996).

**Personal interchange between tutor and student and among students**

A major student related missing link from 54 staff (90%) and 95% of students (271) is that there is little personal interchange between tutor and student and among students. The respondents in this study were of the opinion that there is need for the Zimbabwe Open University to compliment its distance delivery strategies with some face-to-face interface, to add to the few week-end schools that are currently on offer. Some statements to that effect were:

> Learning is an interaction process but there is little interaction. The need for interaction is thus important.

> The most pressing challenge facing the university is the need to support the learner through some form of personal interchange between tutors and students. The weekend schools that we attend are important as they are an eye opener.

The finding on the need for face to face interaction appear to be consistent with earlier findings in this university that face to face tutorials are indispensable (Majoni and Chidakwa, 2005). Internationally, American Federation for Teachers (2000) after a study recommended that:
‘Wherever it is feasible, opportunities for same-time same-place interchange between the teacher and student, or among students, should be built into credit courses taught at a distance.’ American Federation for Teachers (AFT) (2000:10). They even went further to say:

‘Our experience as educators tells us that teaching and learning in the shared human spaces of a campus are essential to the undergraduate experience and cannot be compromised too greatly without rendering the education unacceptable.’ AFT (2000:14).

In pursuit of the same aspect, however, Daniel (2007) has other views. He points out that those students who thought that they might miss the human contact associated with face-to-face instruction often find that, when distance learning has an effective support system, contact is both more personal and more effective than in conventional systems. This appeared missing in the university under study.

**Belief in the abilities and capabilities of ODL**

A very important missing link relating to students that was unearthed in this study is that there are some within staff and students who do not believe in the abilities and capabilities of the university to deliver quality. The 39 staff 65% and 165 students 58% in this study were of the opinion that the belief in the abilities and capabilities are critical to quality. One tutor indicated that:

*If you go to a doctor you are not confident with, you will not be cured. The same applies to students who do not believe there is quality learning in distance education. Such students may not benefit at all from distance teaching methods.*

The missing link here appears to be the fact that there are some students who do not believe in the abilities and capabilities of ODL. Damaging attitudes have been confirmed in literature. For instance, (Allen & Seaman, 2008; Bennett, 2008 and OECD, 2009), all concur that attitudes have a negative effect on quality outcomes. However they fall short of addressing the issue of
beliefs in the abilities and capabilities of ODL institutions that this study unearthed. It was also brought to light in this research that as a result of this and other challenges, students experience *culture shock* as they engage in ODL from a conventional background. In this regard, sensitisation and exposure to distance education appears to be a grey area for the students 96% of these had no distance education background. A similar finding was uncovered in Uganda where the students in that situation had damaging attitudes towards distance education. Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010) claim that some enrol in distance education courses with the attitude that distance education is easy because they can learn at their own pace; however, distance learning requires self-discipline and self-management. Unfortunately, some students drop out or do not graduate. Also, some lecturers believe that once you choose to study at a distance, you do not need extra support. Sensitisation and exposure to distance education methods will help students and lecturers to alter their attitudes towards distance education in Zimbabwe, a country that prizes face-to-face interactions and on-campus instruction.

**Culture shock resulting from inadequate support**

An important finding related to students’ background is culture shock experienced by the students entering an ODL institution (39 staff 65% and 151 students 53%). This may have resulted in higher attrition rates as a student observed:

*I am now left on my own. My colleagues have left citing lack of support in their studies. They are amazed that they are left on their own for too long.*

A staff member then added her voice to the same issue in an interview by declaring that:

*The university is not supporting the students especially those without distance education experience. Quality is intensified if we help them develop capacity to study on their own. This can even promote student retention and help minimise incidences of cheating*
characteristic of students who are left on their own. Another staff member indicated that:

Some students feel threatened by the shock coupled with the perceived lack of structure and direction if asked to chat their own way without support. McCarron and Inkelas (2006) suggest that universities provide support for adult learners, which include part-time study options, enhanced counselling services, online course delivery, accelerated study options and financial support. According Lomas (2007), the growing influence of a student as a customer is illustrated by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, which exercises an ombudsman role relating to disputes between students and universities in England and Wales. It instructed a university to offer a group of osteopathy students at least £9000 each in compensation for acknowledged failings in the curriculum, inadequate academic standards, inconvenience, stress and loss of earning power because their university failed to gain professional accreditation for the programme (Baty, cited in Lomas, 2007).

Freshmen orientation symposiums as linchpin between recruitment and retention

Students 213 (75%) and 37 staff (62%) in this study were of the idea that bridging the divide from recruitment to university student through freshmen orientation symposiums was a missing link. The induction seminars held each semester by the university were hailed as ways of fostering continuous quality improvement. However, the missing link was that they were seen as not enough in their current form. One issue that emerged from this study was that attrition rates are affected by the induction and orientation process that students felt are not enough in addressing practical difficulties of working at a distance, time management, surfing the web and other pertinent distance education issues. They want to be inducted in open and distance learning processes, as shown by the following excerpts from the interviews:
I need to be taught specific computer skills so that I can access information on my own. It is important that I am introduced to individuals and resources that I will need when in academic quagmire.

‘All course requirements must be provided at the initial stage so that one can plan the programme well.’ (Student)

‘I suggest we have induction before and after every semester. Some universities have freshman orientation seminar classes.’ (Lecturer)

There is need for induction workshops for both students and lecturers on the practical difficulties of working at a distance, time management, surfing the web and other pertinent distance education issues.

The Zimbabwe Open University has published an orientation handbook for new students and contacts orientations for new students at the beginning of their programmes. However, it would appear that the Zimbabwe Open University is not doing enough to train lecturers in open and distance teaching, yet recruits are mostly from conventional institutions. This research has established that orientations or freshman orientation classes are necessary for student retention (Shupp, 2010). It is a time in which basic habits are formed. These habits influence future academic success and personal growth as it marks the beginning of a new educational experience. Mullendore and Banahan in Shupp (2010) point out that new student orientation programmes are critical to this experience. They make substantial impact on welcoming and connecting students as they transition to university. Ultimately, as Shupp (2010) point out, orientation programmes are the bridge, the linchpin, between the last stages of recruitment and the first stages of retention.

According to Thurab-Nkhosi and Marshall (2009), at the University of the West Indies, in order to prepare students for the online experience, an orientation course entitled “Improving your study skills” was mounted. The course was intended to provide students with the opportunity to improve their capability in using web-based or online learning, as well as their critical reading skills. A total of 834 students participated in the six-week course, which covered the following topics: preparing for online learning; study strategies; understanding the reading process; and taking notes and writing summaries (Thurab-Nkhosi and Marshall, 2009). What appears missing
from Thurab-Nkhosi, and Marshall (2009)’s model is the aspect of using freshmen symposiums as linchpins between recruitment and retention that was unearthed in this study.

**Research influenced learner support services**

The respondents in this study (35 staff 58% and 210 students 74%) hailed the work of the centre for student management in the Zimbabwe Open University that its mission is plausible. However, they questioned the way they conceive of the learner support services. To the respondents in this study, it has to be *research influenced learner support services*. The following statements appear to support this stance:

> What appear missing are learner support services that are based on research pointing at the needs of the student such as modules, district libraries and more tutorial contact hours. They need to be based on the thorough understanding of the students’ circumstances, their abilities and their requirements.

It appears a major finding was that services in the Zimbabwe Open University were too provider-centered when the ODL context needs the learner-centered mode. In this regard there was the need to shift from provider-centred to learner-centred ways of fostering continuous quality improvement. Of particular interest to students in any ODL institution is whether they can receive enough support services from the institution and successfully complete their study.

Criticism of distance learning primarily revolves around the perceived passive and isolated environment of the distant learner (Hara & Kling, 2000). In this regard, leaner support means learners do not get stuck and loose motivation. Prasad and Cherla (2008) say that the philosophy of ODL is to make the teaching and learning process learner friendly by providing more freedom, flexibility and academic support to the student. The TDT, the theory influencing this research is also of the same view as it seeks to narrow the distance between service provider and student. Lack of support is one reason why students tend to seek learning conditions similar to traditional classrooms since they are familiar and comfortable with the face-to-face, instructor-
centered classroom experience, which minimises the students’ responsibility for their own learning (Jaffee, 1998).

A related but prominent finding related to student support was that the current support that they receive were not to them, research influenced learner support services. In this regard, this study went further to say learner support services that are based on research pointing at the needs of the students must be put in place. They need to be based on the thorough understanding of the students’ circumstances, their abilities, their changing value definitions, students’ background, customer value and their requirements as was pinpointed in this study. In discussing the role of service quality in higher education, Shank, Walker and Hayes (1995) note that: Higher education possesses the characteristics of a service industry. Educational services are intangible, heterogeneous; inseparable from the person delivering them, variable, perishable, and the customer (student) participates in the process. In that respect, colleges and universities are increasingly finding themselves in an environment that is conducive to understanding the role and importance of service quality. To them, this environment is a fiercely competitive one. Mathew, Mahenna and George (2005) echo this sentiment in arguing that the educational literature suggests how imperative it is for educational institutions to actively monitor the quality of the services they offer and to commit to continuous improvements in order to survive the increasingly fierce competition for highly desirable students and the revenue they generate. Implied in monitoring are simply research-based support services.

**Changing students’ value definitions and experiences**

A prominent observation from 28 staff 47% and 120 students 42% that came out of this study was the changing experiences of the students. What appears missing is capacity to monitor
these changes and apply appropriate student services that meet their changing quality criteria.

This advice from one staff member is worth mentioning:

Students’ experiences and awareness change from the time they are first enrolled to the time they are about to graduate. What is worrying is that services do not consider the changing expectations and value definitions of the students.

The missing link here appears to be the failure to monitor students’ changing value definitions and acting accordingly. This means the changing value definitions and experiences of the students were a missing link in this study since the university was said to be failing to monitor these changes and apply appropriate student services that meet their changing quality value criteria. What this means is that in such a situation if quality does not consider the changing expectations and value definitions of the students there is a missing link.

Quality in industry is easier where they apply statistical quality control techniques that could be adopted as they deal with tangible processes (Schein, 2004). Unfortunately in open and distance learning what happens in the teaching and learning arena is intangible. This results in higher education having to face with the main challenge of dealing with the intangibility of education (Venkatraman 2007). Therefore, the philosophies of fostering continuous quality improvement need to be adapted to accommodate the intangible aspects of student learning, their changing experiences and their changing value definitions (Giddy, 2012). Currently, higher education is faced with major criticisms from its stakeholders with respect to coping with the ever-changing market situations, socio-economic conditions and stiff competition worldwide (O’Neill and Palmer, 2004). Higher education could cope with such a dynamic situation by continuously improving their processes and by providing high quality education (O’Neill and Palmer, 2004). The success of distance education may well depend upon the ability of educational leaders to personalise the teaching and learning process to satisfy and retain distance students (Saba, 2007).
Thus in both the literature and university under study there appears to be a vacuum in addressing changing expectations and value definitions of the students which is a missing link.

**Student retention**

A major missing link in this study is student retention. Students 185 (65%) acknowledged student retention efforts employed by the university but questioned the fact that they are not need-based student services. One student respondent appears to have summarised this issue well. The student indicated that:

_The university is doing a sterling job in marketing programmes and lure students to the university. However, no similar tangible efforts could be said in relation to student retention and need-based student services._

It appears student retention is a topical issue in the Zimbabwe Open University. Chiome, Chabaya and Chakanyuka (2010) reported that one education programme lost 60% of the students in a space of two years. The university appears to experience challenges in this regard. Hill (2009) believe such challenges such as promoting active learning and ownership of the learning process; focusing on students’ learning outcomes, access irrespective of where the student lives and providing research influenced learner support services appear peculiar to ODL. Clearly, as competition for students has escalated among colleges and universities in Zimbabwe, student retention has become an issue of utmost importance (Chiome, 2011a). Since service quality and student satisfaction are important determinant factors in students’ retention, it is important that educational institutions measure students’ expectations about the quality of educational services (Houston, 2008). Oldfield and Baron (2000) emphasise that institutions should address the issues of quality, not only through the traditional routes of accreditation and course review, student feedback questionnaires on quality of course delivery and teaching, but
also through evaluating what students themselves consider being pertinent elements in service quality. To the students in this study, marketing efforts are superseded by retention efforts.

Missing from the literature just reviewed but tied to the missing links raised in this study is the issue of shifting students’ expectations and changing students’ value definitions that came out in this study. Sanders, Stevens, Malcom and Coats, (2000) point out that actively monitoring the expectations and preferences of students will also help educational institutions in the important decisions of determining where to allocate scarce resources. On the other hand, as Canic and Richardson (2000) have illustrated, universities often fail in the very service related areas where they feel least vulnerable. Citing a study, they indicated several areas of perceived weakness confronting American universities in their study. Among those cited included problems with: the university’s academic vision, its lack of exclusivity, the implementation and execution of new programmes, and perhaps worst of all, being accused of being “all talk and no action”. While such feedback is sometimes surprising and certainly disheartening to university authorities, administrators and academics, it is this type of information that the university need if it is to accurately assess where it is positioned in the minds of the student populations it wishes to recruit and serve.

**Focusing on students’ learning outcomes**

As expected from the literature (Haug 2003; Alstete 2004 and Tito 2007), suggesting that quality initiatives from the accountability and assessment sectors of education that emphasise on institutional inputs were not enough, was corroborated in this study by 33 (55%) staff and 51 (18%) students. The following quote bear testimony:

*The missing links appears to be lacking a gradual movement towards incorporating a focus on student learning as a measure of quality.*
The missing link here is that student learning should be a major measure of quality. It means this research has uncovered the fact that very little emphasis is put on student learning outcomes. This appears to be at loggerheads with much of the current thinking about students’ learning which is based on the constructivist approach to learning, in which the student is responsible for making his or her own meaning of the information presented through the various learning opportunities provided (Sultan and Wong, 2010). It also acknowledges the philosophy underpinning open and distance learning where a learner is his or her own master of destiny (Giddy, 2012). Related to this but missing from the literature just reviewed is the emphasis on willingness to promote academic integrity through heightening creativity that this research further uncovered. Education focuses on intellectual knowledge as Sternberg’s research (cited in Pedro 2010) points out, creativity, broadly defined, include aspects of knowledge, thinking styles, personality, motivation, and environmental context. The ideas of Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010) appear relevant here as well. They point out that the education system in Uganda is being challenged to produce job creators rather than job seekers. The curriculum has not been adapted to suit contemporary needs (Kasozi, 2006). Current teaching promotes rote learning rather than application, problem-solving, and entrepreneurial skills (Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010). This issue is also taken further by Kagoda (2009) who decried the process of curriculum reform: “We need the input of the private sector, Federation of Uganda Employers, parents, experienced educationists, retired teachers and any other stakeholders. If half-baked graduates affect us all, then why can’t we be consulted on something as important as curriculum?” He asks. Elsewhere in this study, curriculum construction was raised as a pertinent issue in the university under study confirming Kagoda (2009)’s fears raised here. Thus, a focus on student learning as a measure of quality and
willingness to promote academic integrity through heightening creativity in an ODL context appears to be missing from both the literature and in the university under study.

**Learning effectiveness through student empowerment**

The 35 (58%) staff and 200 (70%) student respondents in this study argued that quality must lead to learning effectiveness and in their opinion more attention should be paid to this issue.

This was substantiated by statements such as:

*There is no quality to talk about if it does not have any impact on learning, retention of students, graduation and employability.*

*It is through a more fully communicative educational relationship and the effectiveness of learning in which students are empowered to take control of their own learning that the practices of quality in ODL can reach maturity.*

The missing link here appears to be the fact that what constitute learning effectiveness are not the examination results but more to do with student empowerment. A culture of learning empowers the student to work in the global village (Weeks, 2012). Brown’s (2006) argument appears appropriate here that *navigationism* might be the new learning paradigm that lies beyond constructivism. In a navigationist learning paradigm, learners should be able to find, identify, manipulate and evaluate information and knowledge, to integrate this knowledge in their world of work and life, to solve problems and to communicate this knowledge to others. This is the kind of empowerment which is based on navigationism paradigm that respondents in this study claim are a missing link.

**Considering students’ backgrounds and needs**

An important missing link from 211 (74%) students and 18 (30%) staff was that staff in the university was not considering students’ backgrounds in its decisions. Considering students’
backgrounds has been seen to be an important factor contributing to quality. One lecturer ably
summed this view:

*It is imperative to consider issues like the students’ ages, cultural and socioeconomic
and political backgrounds, interests, experiences and familiarity with distance
education practices. This could be done through research.* Another one added that:

*I usually place a high value on the knowledge, values, feelings and experiences of the
students I interact with in order to get the most out of them. One way is to give them
considerable freedom to construct their own learning activities and assessment
procedures. This is currently not being done.*

The missing link here appears to be the failure to consider students’ background which in turn
affects what a respondent called *access irrespective of where the student lives.* This appears to
be an interesting missing link since open learning must reach students in all corners of the
country (Ural, 2007 and Moore, 2007). They need to access the university services where ever
they are. This was captured in the following assertions:

*The desire to provide access irrespective of where the student lives must be translated
into district centres so that those students who are unable to go to a campus location
are not left out.*

*Individual needs have to be accommodated.*

It appears the one size fit all approach was uncovered in this study as a missing link in meeting
customer value and customer expectations wherever they are. It means distance educators need
to employ different approaches to different learners other than the one size fit all approach. This
appears easy to say than do. Like many issues in education, Geelan (2001) insists that it is easy
to give verbal assent to the necessity for the adoption of different approaches for different
learners in order to support each student’s learning style, but this is much more difficult to
implement in practice. It may be easier in a conventional university with a group of say only ten
students that you know very well. It can be a mouthful with a group of hundred or so strangers
that is characteristic of the large enrolment in the Zimbabwe Open University (Chakanyuka and Chiome, 2008). Nevertheless, it is more ethically defensible and more educationally practical to recognise our students’ different epistemological commitments and metaphorical descriptions, and attempt to organise our courses so that there remains a level of plurality (Geelan, 2001 and Ndofirepi cited in Weeks, 2012).

In implementing this philosophy, an open and distance teaching university like the Zimbabwe Open University is often faced with the dilemmas of the many hats won by students. The question is whether students should be seen as customers all the time. Sharrock (2000) argues that to label students as customers is failing to recognise the many other hats they wear in their day to day lives. He describes four identities of students as customers when they want routine information from a department or faculty office. They are also clients when they are in need of expert guidance such as choosing a course or reviewing an assignment. They are citizens who have rights as when students appeal against certain institutional decisions. Lastly they are subjects when they are the subject of certain obligations such as being fined/ sanctioned for a late submission or when they need to work to a grade. Essentially however, the purpose of attaining and sustaining quality is to provide customer satisfaction. An understanding of the changing needs of students in their different roles as customers, client, subject and citizens which appears missing in most literature but uncovered in this study can only help to guarantee quality service to students. In this direction, there is need to develop a widely shared quality consciousness in individuals and organizational units (Jung, 2005). This might benefit the students.

**Failure to promote group spirit through collaborative productivity**

A major missing link subscribed to by 28 staff (47%) and 165 students (58%) is that of failure to promote group spirit because distance learners need to display group spirit and collaborative
productivity. They need to work with others in order to produce results. Some related statements are:

There is need to help each other in our studies especially promoting group discussions as they promote depth and breath, but this is not happening as frequently as we had wished (student).

We will continuously improve quality if we contribute to group work through researching and sharing information with colleagues. Currently little of it is taking place (staff).

As students, it is important to realise that collaboration and competition are two sides of the same coin because we are much stronger competitively if we collaborate (student).

The point appeared clear here that to continuously improve quality, respondents needed to see students having interactive sessions with other students and tutors in order to share knowledge. What this research unearthed is that there are a lot of collaborations in the Zimbabwe Open University but it is collective and collaborative productivity that they saw as missing. This could be achieved if staff and students are interconnected and integrated with others (Law, 2010). They questioned the personal interchange between tutor and student and among students in the university. What appears missing in this university and in the literature is according to Poley and France (1998), combining the best of visioning, strategy and organisational development (OD) into congruence that unify a quality culture with quality competencies and quality processes. This strategy is neither top-up nor bottom-up, but rather requires people to be committed members of the community and to be good citizens in the sense of becoming increasingly knowledge actors (Poley and France, 1998). In such a case, according to Venkatraman (2007), staff and students in the Zimbabwe Open University need to buy-in to the vision and mission of fostering continuous quality improvement, develop an understanding of their environment and culture and then go on to strategically orchestrate structures, people,
money and technologies so as to influence the attainment of quality. What all this means is that successfully attaining and sustaining quality in the Zimbabwe Open University could be achieved by adopting a quality framework which prioritises continuous improvements in the core processes, namely teaching/learning (Venkatraman, 2007). This will enable the university to be aware of the ever-changing customer needs and react immediately to their needs; efficiently utilise the resources by directing their usage on activities that truly satisfy customer needs; use the course evaluation’s feedback loop for making improvements in a systematic and continuous way and engage both learners as well as the institution members in its quality mission (Venkatraman 2007:109).

Students’ views on all aspects of their education experiences are now widely canvassed and regarded as essential to the monitoring of quality in universities (Hill, Lomas and McGregor, 2003). Their views will make the core of public domain data that will be used to make judgments and decisions on quality by promoting group spirit and collaborative productivity.

**Collaborative learning culture**

A missing link in both literature and the university under study is the fact that collaboration, learning and culture are areas that could work wonders for the university if intertwined for the purpose of fostering continuous quality improvement. This was alluded to by 32 staff (53%) and 99 students (35%) who claimed that this may include among other issues the involvement of others. This statement appears to support this view:

> Collaboration, learning and a culture for co-operation must be put in the fore-front in all quality efforts in the university.

Effectively involving teachers and students in the definition of quality teaching initiatives ensures that the initiatives are responsive to perceived needs and promotes a vital sense of
ownership (OECD, 2009). Opportunities can best be shared and so are challenges which can encourage institutional reflection on quality (Mhlanga, 2010). Collaboration, learning and culture can be opportunities to launch and strengthen reflection on quality teaching and find out new ways of improvement. Engaging the whole community, including administrative staff and students, is vital. This can be facilitated when leaders convey the relevance of everyone in the implementation of the quality culture (OECD, 2009). The students should be mobilised putting emphasis on their opinions and on the inputs that they can supply in the definition of quality of teaching and in the design of a specific initiative.

It appears this is an important finding in this study. It acknowledges that the culture for learning is there in the university. What is missing is captured in this assertion:

What I am not happy about is building a collaborative learning culture within which students and staff learn from each other.

This clearly shows that the issue of collaborative learning in open and distance education context is an important issue. Interaction is a principal objective of any instructional process because it is a fundamental expectation of both students and instructors (Berge, 1999). This appears to be in line with the transactional distance theory underpinning this study whose hallmark is on the importance of multiple perspectives groups (Moore, 1993). Successful learners in the 21st century must respond to many diverse pressures “such as the drive to use more multimedia, the need for lifelong learning and the changing labour market” (Segers & Dochy, 2001, p. 327). Technological advances and organisational infrastructure transformations have made collaborative teamwork within the labour force a necessity (Brown & Duguid, 2000). Gokhale (1995) describes collaborative learning as an instructional method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups toward a common academic goal. The
students through cohorts such as intakes used in the Zimbabwe Open University are responsible for one another’s learning as well as their own.

Thus, the success of one student helps other students to be successful (Gokhale 1995:2). Proponents of collaborative learning claim that the exchange of ideas by groups of learners increases learner engagement, improves problem solving strategies, and promotes higher levels of thinking (Bruner, Johnson & Johnson, quoted in Stefl-Mabry, Doane and Radlick, 2007). Research has revealed that students who establish social relationships with teachers and other learners in the community are more actively engaged in learning, report greater personal and academic growth, and are more satisfied with their education than are students who are more isolated (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2004). Although it is reported that educators across disciplines and academic institutions are incorporating collaborative learning into curriculum (Barkley, et al., 2004), Springer, Donovan, and Stanne (1999) observe that graduates still “go out into the workforce ill-prepared to solve real problems in a cooperative way, lacking the skills and motivation to continue learning” (Springer, et al., 1999 p. 21). There is need to focus on the student as an individual and the student body as a collectivity as the only way that everyone can win is for everyone to work together, knowing that a chain of human activity is as strong as its weakest link. The fact is that every member as an individual must play his/her part and sociologists concur (Haralambos and Hearld, 2004). They call this cognitive social capital, which is just a name for the networks of cooperation and trust that allow a whole community working together to achieve more than the sum of its members (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2004 and Stefl-Mabry, Doane and Radlick 2007).
Cultural shift towards customer service values

One important missing link related to students is the staff’s lack of customer service values. It was the contention of the respondents (253 students (89%) and 17 staff (28%) in this study that a cultural shift was needed in the Zimbabwe Open University if quality is to be realised. In this direction, they prescribed among other things that:

- Staff must learn customer service values that they will translate into individual behaviour. It appears some service centres in the university are a hell on earth.
- There must be a cultural shift where quality service becomes the central values of the university.

The missing link here appeared to be customer service values hence the need for cultural shift towards these. Through such practices, the university will in the words of a respondent, harness stakeholder satisfaction for long term reputation. The need for stakeholder satisfaction appears critical in missing links influencing the achievement of quality (77% students and 54% staff).

The contention was that the ODL enterprise stands to gain if:

- Students’ learning experiences translate into the value for money and long-term socio-educational impact.
- Stakeholder satisfaction is harnessed for long term reputation of the university. This must translate into employability of graduates vis-à-vis the perceptions of employers.

Since earlier on it was claimed that staff lacked customer service values, this had a bearing on stakeholder satisfaction which in turn impacts on long term reputation of the university. According to Alani and Ilusanya (2008) the Commission for University Education in Nigeria puts employers’ ratings as a measure of quality of a programme. Thus, in this regard, both the employer and the employee as stakeholders will be consulted and their views taken on board so that they are satisfied with what the university is producing.

Value for money institution

According to 189 (67%) students and 13 (21%) staff, customer service values meets stakeholder satisfaction and make the Zimbabwe Open University a value for money institution. Elsewhere,
a respondent claimed that *some services centers in the university are a hell on earth*. This stance was ably articulated by one respondent who reasoned that there is need for:

> ‘Good returns for public investment in education. The Zimbabwe Open University must be a value for money institution.’ And another one argued that:
> ‘The employers want graduates with readily applied skills, knowledge and attitudes that will drive their organisations to greater heights.’

The missing link appears clear, that the university is not yet a value for money institution.

According to Smith (2011), La Trobe University – a university with Metropolitan and regional campuses in Victoria (South Eastern) Australia embarked on extended and significant organisational change. He went on to say overarching principles and objectives that guided the review and organisational restructuring work include among other things, embedding a strong culture of service and a high standard of service delivery in all areas of the university and establishing ongoing review of processes, systems and performance to make the university a value for money institution (Smith, 2011). The university under study has a lot to learn from such practices so that it can turn service centres that are a hell on earth into value for money service centres.

**Contaminated tutor evaluations by students**

A very controversial issue that emerged in this study is the issue of tutor evaluation by students, mentioned by 125 students (44%) and 27 staff (45%). The interest in the finding concerning student evaluation has been what Mehralizadeh & Safaeemoghaddam (2010) labelled the bidirectional nature of the process of evaluation in higher education where academic staff and students are concerned. Tutor evaluations have been seen for all along as a way of promoting quality teaching (Chakanyuka and Chiome, 2008). However, some respondents in this study had other ideas. They pointed out that these could be ‘*contaminated evaluations*’. The paradox was
that staff evaluates students and students evaluate staff. Along the way some compromises of some kind might take place. One student pointed out that:

*I find it difficult to give a genuine evaluation to someone who will in turn determine my future.*

The dilemma on student evaluation was also experienced elsewhere. Mehralizadeh & Safaeemoghaddam (2010) accentuate that in a normal customer oriented scenario, customers provide feedback on products, services, and personnel. Rarely is the corporation that evaluates its customers and provides feedback to them (Mehralizadeh & Safaeemoghaddam, 1010). However, that is exactly what occurs in the university under study since students evaluate staff, programmes, modules and courses, but academic staff also evaluates students – who are customers – by means of grades, letters of recommendations, subsequent admissions decisions, and so forth. It is then argued by Koch (2002) that the bidirectional nature of evaluation in higher education subtly changes the sociology of the situation. Will either students or faculty “tell the truth” when they know that there could be retribution later? The evaluation channel, then, suffers from more contamination in higher education than in corporate settings (Koch, 2002). This appeared as the case in this study.

**Summary of student related missing links**

To sum up this section on the primary customer and specific target audience-the student, several missing links emerged. Students can work as content co-creators meaning the need for cultural shift and a change of perception from teacher-centred to student-centred pedagogical practices. Effective support system, nurturing group spirit introducing students to individuals and resources that they will need when in academic quagmire and research influenced learner support services were mentioned as missing links. Building long term trust and credibility by
focusing on customer value through establishment of a high performance service culture; documenting customer expectations and acting on them through a lasting legacy of service to clients appeared glaringly missing. Cultural shift in practices that denigrate the student such as missing results, wrong results, misspelt names on certificates need to be addressed and so is blending of physical and virtual contacts. It was also established that lack of customer service values and failing to act as a value for money institution impact on stakeholder satisfaction which also affects long term reputation of the university. Some fail to believe in the abilities and capabilities of ODL. The need for effective learning in form of leaner empowerment; active learning and ownership of the learning process, considering the changing expectations and value definitions of the students; access irrespective of location and student retention through need-based student services were cited as missing links. The individual within the group is critical since a chain of human activity is as strong as its weakest link.

It is important to point to the fact raised earlier on that students’ views on all aspects of their education experiences are now widely canvassed and regarded as essential to the monitoring of quality in universities (Hill, Lomas and McGregor, 2003). Their views will make the core of public domain data that will be used to make judgments and decisions on quality. What appears missing though from the literature and in the university under study is the fact that these results support the idea that, even from a learning perspective, it is important to take into account that students are not just learners but people, and social beings in particular. They are likely to succeed best as students in an environment where their broader human needs are met.

4.3.4 Missing links in conditions that continuously improve quality in university wide practices

The fourth research question of this study was:
To what extent do the university practices continuously foster quality improvement?

The key question is whether quality is inscribed in ambiguity or is clear for everyone to feel the atmosphere. This ambiguity or clarity takes its character from the conditions put in place to continuously improve quality. In quality management, attention is given to a broad array of aspects related to teaching and learning, which are frequently divided into three groups: inputs or requirements, processes and outputs or results (Becket and Brookes, 2006). In support of this argument, Yeo (2008) takes the debate further and point out that inputs or requirements include financial, physical and human resources. Processes include technical and professional but also relational variables such as accessibility of the professional, friendliness and credible communication. Output factors include pass/fail rates and competency levels at graduation but also indirect factors such as career opportunities for alumni and impact on the labour market and society (Segers, quoted in Kleijnen, Dolmans, Willems and van Hout, 2011). These factors contribute to the core goal of education: the transformation of the learner by which the initial competencies of enrolling students are transformed into the competencies of graduate students and teachers’ competencies and qualities are transformed into the qualities and competencies of graduates (Harvey and Newton, 2004; Becket and Brookes, 2006; Venkatraman, 2007, Kleijnen, et al, 2011).

In this regard, this section presents, analyses and discusses findings from the fourth objective of this study which looked at missing links in university wide practices to see to what extent they continuously improve quality. These will be presented in three sub-sections, the first one looks at missing links in technology. The second sub-section looks at missing links in practices of the university to see how far they heighten, enhance and raise quality. The third looks at suppressed
voices of quality. The suppressed voices were aspects that do not relate to any of the four objectives but are too loud to ignore.

4.3.4.1 Technology related missing links

This sub-section of the fourth objective presents the missing links on technology related conditions that continuously improve quality in an ODL context. This first part of the fourth objective looks at missing links in technology to see to what extent it is fostering continuous quality improvement in the university under study.

Technology usage and equity

Two missing links were raised by 54 staff (90%) and 273 students (96%) in this study that appears to show the paradoxical nature of technology. Open and distance learning was said to be an equaliser of opportunities. In this regard it promoted equality and equity. On the other hand, the new dispensation is calling for the use of technology to influence quality yet some respondents in this study saw otherwise. Ticoll (2010) who argues for the use of technology raises the point that improved technology has strengthened the positions of those on the offensive to see quality of education in open and distance learning. He takes a historical position that:

‘Libraries based on clay documents enabled the priest-base monopoly of knowledge in ancient Babylon. The invention of papyrus scrolls and the alphabet was key to the limited democracy of Greek city states and the rule of law in ancient Greece. The improved portability, ease of use and durability of parchment-based, bound books created by the papacy and monastic orders were critical to the speed of conversion to Christianity.’ (Ticoll, 2010, p. 7)
So in this case technology was seen as a weapon that is critical to the speed of conversion to ODL systems. This could be done through an information highway. These responses were extracted from open-ended questionnaires:

*An information highway could be opened to speed up conversion of conventional systems to ODL systems.*

The second important issue on technology and quality was related to issues of equity. On the ground, the availability and use of technology is uneven. In this context this study uncovered that a new era of educational inequity was slowly emerging as a result of using ICT in open and distance education. The dilemma is that the greater the dependence on technology, the greater the inequities created. A host of challenges such as availability of funds to buy modern technology, availability of experts and effective utilisation of ICT all team up to make technology ‘not reachable’ to the generality of the public (Chiome and Kurasha, 2011). Lack of training in and aversion to the use of technology is another reason compounding the challenges in the use of technology in the university under study.

The Zimbabwe Open University is not alone in this situation where technology is getting in the way of equity. Prasad and Cherla (2009) in a study in India found out that the majority of learners do not have access to the Internet at home even though there is large scale expansion of Broadband services in India. In a related study in China, Gulati (2008) has questioned the merit of applying advanced information communication technology (ICT) in developing countries where children and adults lack even the most basic living standards. He argued that in these countries, traditional technologies such as print media, radio and television remain more effective because the high cost of Internet service prevents poor people from accessing it. Daniel (2007) says that Internet connectivity is important, yet the proportion of people on
line is only 4% in India, 1% in Africa (half of them in South Africa) and 0.1% in Bangladesh a developing country like Zimbabwe. Though this picture is gradually changing, for now it is a quality paradox and a missing link in fostering continuous quality improvement in an ODL context.

The University Website failing to adequately portray special significance of the university

There was an agreement from 52 staff (87%) and 159 students (56%) that the university’s Website is far short of an interactive Website that is associated with open and distance learning. A look at the university Website to verify these claims showed that as compared to the Indira Gandhi University website, the Zimbabwe Open University on 28- February 2010 fell short of the following:

*There were no services like assignments for all programmes, handouts for students and a question bank diligently developed by the subject experts to help the students prepare for examinations.* In this regard, one student wrote in her open-ended questionnaire response that:

*The Zimbabwe Open University online database is seen merely as simple substitutes of edited hard copy information. They must be seen as a way to compliment the special significance of the university in the global community.*

The university’s on line database was seen as simple substitute of edited hard copy information when it must be a way to compliment the special significance of the university in the global community. This confirms Nyaigotti-Chacha and Ayoo (2001)’s argument that higher education is being challenged by new opportunities relating to technologies that are improving the ways in which knowledge is produced, managed, disseminated, accessed and controlled. These assertions appear to be in line with research findings that students currently use the Internet to compare higher education institutions. A survey of 10,000 US high school
students revealed that a university’s website is the third most important source of information for prospective students (Washington Post, in Oblinger, 2001). It appears the website of the university under study is not adequately portraying the special significance of the university to the international community. The issue of e-business was added:

_E-business could be the answer to some of the university’s challenges, but the university appears to drag its feet in this direction._

Even though e-business was seen as the answer to most of the university’s woes it was not fully exploited. In the global village, this is now an irreversible trend. Using the US as an indicator, e-learning is growing rapidly. The Gartner Group predicted that competition will lead 80% of traditional higher education institutions in the US to deliver 60% of undergraduate content through distance learning by 2003. And, by 2003, more than 50% of all colleges and universities globally will be offering courses and programmes to students anytime, from anywhere, to anyplace (Oblinger, 2001). It appears the university under study is not doing enough on this important aspect.

**Electronic newsletter**

According to 35 (58%) staff and 108 (38%) students, one missing link related to technology is lack of an electronic newsletter. An electronic newsletter was suggested as one way of fostering continuous quality improvement through information sharing and information dissemination. Some supporting statements are:

_The university does not have an electronic newsletter at a time when an electronic newsletter could be established and used to tap into the diverse insights and expertise of the Zimbabwe Open University community._

_An electronic newsletter could be used as an interactive system that allow students to ask questions, make suggestions and give opinion on issues pertaining to their studies._
What appears as a missing link here is that the respondents in this study thought an electronic newsletter is one way of enhancing quality that can be used to tap into the diverse insights and expertise of the ODL community but was found missing at the time of study. Henning (2010) subscribes to this opinion and accentuates that an electronic newsletter is an interactive system that allows students to ask questions, make suggestions and give opinion on issues pertaining to their studies. He gave an example of University of South Africa that has managed to bridge the distance between the university and its students through technology (Henning, 2010).

Networks premised around an electronic forum

One interesting finding from 39 (65%) of staff and 171 (60%) of students was that the Zimbabwe Open University is not utilising fully the technology at its disposal. An area that the university appears to be lagging behind is that of network premised around an electronic forum. A network of this nature was seen as a way of reinventing the university. Some supporting statements are:

The university is doing itself a disservice by not utilising an electronic forum. An electronic forum can be used to influence quality. For instance, a forum of tutors and students, a forum for students and students or even a forum of students in the Zimbabwe Open University and students from similar institutions could be established in which various university constituencies share information, debate issues or elaborate on information not otherwise available through normal distribution channels like the module or the newsletter.

Networks premised around an electronic forum enable people of like views and interests to organise and interact and overcome boundaries between groups.

It appears the missing link in terms of technology is clear here. There is need for networks premised around an electronic forum that will culminate in a forum of tutors and students, a forum for students and students or even a forum for students in one university with those in another (Henning, 2010). Henning (2010) further opines that networks premised around an
Electronic forums do not simply enable people of like views and interests to organise and interact but can help overcome boundaries between groups. However, Kanwar (2011) posits that universities cannot go anywhere when tutors are digital immigrants and students are digital natives. She proposed that tutors should accept that their students know more in terms of technology and engage them in a partnership. To her, it is important to partner the digital native through collaborations (Kanwar, 2011). By so doing, a network premised around an electronic forum can be established.

**Learning oriented social software limiting ability to navigate**

The need for learning oriented social software was a missing link as it was limiting ability to ‘navigate’. The 39 staff (65%) and 134 students (47%) in this study were of the opinion that learning oriented software is limiting the ability of staff and students to connect. Some relevant statements were:

> Learning oriented software is limiting our abilities to connect. The university needs to look into this issue.

> Information technology must be used to promote the idea that teaching is about being a wise companion. This means social software is needed to enable students and the university to interact.

> We need to consciously and intentionally create new patterns of relationships through the use of appropriate technology.

It appears the major missing link here was on the absence of software that support constructivist teaching and learning raised elsewhere in this study. The underlying pedagogy is supported by Dalsgaard (2006) who argues that *social software tools* can support a social constructivist approach to e-learning by providing students with personal tools and engaging them in social networks, thus allowing learners to direct their own problem-solving process. Social constructivism emphasises the importance of the learner being actively involved in the learning
process, unlike other educational viewpoints where the responsibility rests with the teacher to deliver knowledge while the learner passively receives it.

According to Minocha (2009) social software seems to match well with modern thinking about educational practice. In particular, it promises learners of new opportunities to be independent in their study and research. Social software tools encourage a wider range of expressive capability. They facilitate more collaborative ways of working and they furnish a setting for learner achievements to attract an authentic audience. To encourage these possibilities, Social software tools have evolved that create distinctive forms of support for learning and for independent research (Minocha 2009).

Further arguments for social software are that it is seen to accord with modern views on the deeply social nature of human mentality, no matter what the age of students, as demonstrated in the Horizon Project (Minocha 2009). This further demonstrates that the motivation for using social software tools and technologies is not restricted to higher education. Siemens (2004, p. 5) talks of connectivism by saying that the learning process: “… is focused on connecting specialised information sets, and the connections that enable us to learn more are more important than our current state of knowing.” He also states that: “connectivism is driven by the understanding that decisions are based on rapidly altering foundations. New information is continually being acquired. The ability to draw distinctions between important and unimportant information is vital. The ability to recognise when new information alters the landscape based on decisions made yesterday is also critical” (Siemens, 2004:5). Brown (2006) concurs and adds that constant connectedness is a given circumstantial reality underpinning learning environments in a navigationist paradigm. To “connect” and to be/stay connected is part of the skill to
“navigate”. This is the reason why respondents in this study concurred that the absence of learning oriented social software limits their ability to ‘connect’ and ‘navigate’.

**Pedagogical aspects of ICT**

The Zimbabwe Open University has been applauded for having computerised all its campuses. However, respondents in this study thought this was not enough to continuously improve quality. It was the contention of the respondents in this study (36 staff, 60% and 99 students, 35%) that it is not enough just to provide computers. The most important part they thought could continuously improve quality is the pedagogical aspects of ICT. To them:

*Pedagogical aspects of ICT that the university pays less attention have capacity to provide the foundations of ICT use in open and distance learning.*

*There must be a course that introduces students to online learning.*

*It is important to design support courses that promote collaboration so that students experience what learners in online courses typically experience.*

To put effect to the pedagogic aspects of ICT, the respondents proposed a model that appeared to be similar to the Jonassen’s (1999) model. One lecturer opined that the university need to:

*Use constructivist learning to create multi-media learning resources*

Constructivist learning appears to corroborate Jonassen’s (1999) model of learning. This model suggests the provision of a range of resources, tools, and supports within the learning environment to assist learners to engage in authentic activities such as projects, solving problems, solving cases and others (Jonassen, 1999). Thus, creation of multi-media learning resources was seen as a factor influencing quality. Authenticating statements are:
Learners must be able to use technology to analyse situations and solve cases.’ (Lecturer)

‘We need to engage in activities that enable us to explore the situation using various technologies.’ (Student)

The university has computerised its systems, this is acknowledged. However, we need not only computers, but multi-media learning resources.

The missing link here appears clear, use of Jonassen’s (1999) model of constructivist learning or something nearest to it to create multi-media learning resources for the benefit of staff and students.

Failing to harness innovations in ICT

It was the contention of the respondents in this study 45 staff (75%) and 125 students (44%) that the university under study was not proactive in harnessing innovations in ICT. They contended that there is need to benefit from ICT innovations before these become outdated.

Some supporting statements were:

‘An ODL institution must be in the forefront of harnessing the innovations in ITC across the globe not just to bark after the fact as is the case right now.’

‘The rate at which ITC applications are woven with pedagogy is not satisfactory. These issues appear to be addressed separately. They need to be interwoven.’

In addition to harnessing innovations in ITC, respondents added the need to increase options available in terms of technology. One student had this to say in an interview:

‘When new forms of technology come along, the old ones must not die. They must merely increase options available. I love to use the radio especially when I am doing other things like my work or driving.’ In an interview, a staff member added her voice to the same issue:

‘Students are looking less at technology now and more on content. Students do not care where their information is coming from as long as it is relevant to their needs.'
Two missing links stand out clear here. There is need to harness innovations in ITC before these become outdated and when new forms of technology come along, the old ones must not die. It means they need to increase options available. They reasoned that an ODL institution must be in the forefront of harnessing the innovations in ICT across the globe not just to bark after the fact as is the case right now. This stance is supported by Henning (2010) who pointed out that current trends in ODL internationally display the use of resources, especially technology in a radically different way than the first and second-generation approaches. The idea is to further create an environment of participation and self help, away from the industrialised, centralised, counter service type of approach (Bates, 1999; Henning, 2010 and Ticoll, 2010). This, according to Brown (2006), goes hand in hand with the shift from remote learning to a learner-centered approach to learning. It is acknowledged that a more technology-enabled environment is necessary for successful ODL and that it presents specific requirements and challenges for the management and services of ODL institutions (Henning, 2010). Thus, harnessing innovations and increasing options available becomes an imperative in technological usage.

Development of knowledge media

A major finding from 42 staff (70%) and 159 students (56%) that appeared to be the missing link related to technology was tapping into the convergence of telecommunication, computing and mobile technology. This interesting finding related to technology was that of knowledge media. In this case, the respondents were of the opinion that:

*The convergence of telecommunications, computing and mobile technology must be harnessed by the university in a bid to promote knowledge media.*
Distance learning entails changing the emphasis from classroom and teaching to the individual and learning. This can be done through the development of knowledge media.

The development of knowledge media was cited as a missing link since there is need to tap into the convergence of telecommunication, computing and mobile technology. Pulist (2009) argues that educational technology is entering into its golden era because the emergence of mobile technologies has afforded educators new ways of thinking about teaching and learning. Thus, mobile technology is the technological platform for providing student support services to the distance learner. To Pulist (2009), handheld digital devices can play a prominent role in reaching the distance learner. What appeared missing then is tapping the benefits of knowledge media including handheld digital devices.

Henning (2010) opines that the fifth generation in ODL that of intelligent flexible learning takes the advantage of computer-mediated technologies of the fourth generation and introduces automated response systems to add variety as is postulated in this study. Technologies to facilitate interactive responses and immediate automated responses are included (Caswell, Henson, Jensen and Wiley, 2008). In this regard, UNISA embarked on a series of workshops for senior management with an expert in online teaching to assess technologies available to facilitate Open Distance Learning in the university (Henning, 2010). The result of all this effort is that the UNISA staff can now decide if they should communicate by using Blogger, Wikispaces, or Twitter. They even have the option to upload lectures and experiments to YouTube. They do not stop there as they can also send RSS audio or video feeds to facilitate the distribution of information/alert to information. It is important to note that academics at UNISA can also join Linked-in or Zoom-info to facilitate communication (Henning, 2010). Collaboration with other academics can be done through Ygma, Google Docs, or Ning. They
can also create a presence in Facebook, MySpace or Second Life and publish using Creative Commons, Flickr, SlideShare or Merlot. This is what respondents in this study claim is the missing link since the university under study is failing to tap into the benefits of knowledge media including handheld digital devices.

Course on use of technology

The missing link unearthed under student orientation was corroborated under technology where 213 students (75%) and 37 staff (62%) in this study said a course on ICT use is pertinent to fostering continuous quality improvement in an ODL context. This is one area that both students and staff thought is a missing link as it influences quality if students are to be taught a course on use of technology. These statements appear to point to this direction:

*The first hurdle for distance education students is the use of technology. Some students do not know how to send an E-mail with attachment let alone to download that attachment.*

*A course must be there that will teach students how to interact with fellow students and their instructors on line. The Information revolution is based on production and students need skills to produce.*

The need for a course that will teach both staff and students to interact with colleagues has been supported by Pulist (2009) and Gulati (2008) who maintain that the student belonging to rural and remote areas may not be able to take full advantage of huge expenditure incurred by the university if he/she is not trained. Lack of technical expertise for handling sophisticated technology may at times perplex the students (Pulist, 2009). Training of staff and students associated with the system is essential but was uncovered as missing in this study.

Combining ‘high tech’ and the ‘high touch’ systems

According to 34 staff (57%) and 85 students (30%) an interesting missing link in the university under study is its failure to combine face-to-face methodologies with the benefits of
technology in order to produce quality results. This statement from a very experienced distance education tutor bears testimony to this:

What the university is failing to do is that we need both the ‘high tech’ and the ‘high touch’ systems in the university. Trust is easier to build in a face-to-face encounter. However, once this has been accomplished, the relationship can be continued and supported through the Internet.’

A tutor who produced excellent results in the previous semester had this to share with others:

I conducted face-to-face tutorials with my class and then follow this with an Internet chat room that allowed my students to chat with me and other students and broaden their understanding. Such practices appear to be rare in the Zimbabwe Open University.

The missing links appear clear here that a combination of ‘high tech’ and the ‘high touch’ systems in fostering continuous quality improvement in ODL is missing. This means that face-to-face methodologies could be combined with the benefits of technology and produce quality results. The university was failing to combine both the ‘high tech’ and the ‘high touch’ systems in delivering quality. According to Chiome (2011b), trust is the cornerstone of quality. Once trust has been built in a face-to-face scenario, the relationship can be continued and supported through technology (Chiome and Kurasha, 2011). This association was a missing link in this study. According to Thurab-Nkhosi and Marshall (2009), the University of the West Indies (UWI) is now a dual mode institution offering teaching by distance education as well as face-to-face. In addition to the three “bricks and mortar” campuses, the university has centres in all of its non-campus Caribbean countries as well as in the rural areas of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, which formed part of the network making up the UWIDEC and are currently part of the UWI Open Campus.
Thurab-Nkhosi and Marshall (2009), point out that in the West Indies, Through the UWI ODL network, the UWI offered degree and diploma level programmes at 30 centres located throughout the English-speaking Caribbean. These programmes were offered using a combination of synchronous (real time) and asynchronous (delayed time) interaction. The synchronous interaction was facilitated through the audio-conferencing system of UWI and face-to-face tutorials, while print materials and some computer-based activities and resources comprise the asynchronous elements (Thurab-Nkhosi and Marshall, 2009). This appeared missing in the university under study.

**Missing out on the age of networked intelligence**

Technology was seen as a way of empowering students. The respondents thought this is possible because technology makes knowledge an asset more widely and freely available. However, the missing link according to 23 (38%) staff and 197 (69%) students is that the Zimbabwe Open University students were missing out on the benefits of networked intelligence. Supporting statements are:

*The university has not joined the age of networked intelligence. Technology has the capacity to increase the availability of knowledge. This means the distribution of power based on knowledge is changing. The age of Networked Intelligence could bring in new power and freedom, particularly for university students who are knowledge workers.*

*The use of Open Educational Resources (OER) has empowered students more because these are electronic materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and re-use for teaching, learning and research.*

There are so many benefits of technology accruing to students in the university under study. However, students appear to lag behind in joining the age of networked intelligence and few are benefiting from OERs. Increasingly, ICT (especially the internet) was being used in distance education to create learning environments in which learners, tutors and learning resources could all be networked (Frydenburg, 2005).
The respondents in this study opined that technology has the capacity to increase the availability of knowledge since the distribution of power based on knowledge is changing. The age of Networked Intelligence could bring in new power and freedom, particularly for university students who are knowledge workers. For this to happen, the university under study could take a cue from the University of the West Indies. According to Thurab-Nkhosi and Marshall (2009) in order to ensure that e-Tutors, course coordinators and students remained active in the courses staff members of the course development unit of UWIDEc were assigned to monitor activity in the course and queries in the student-tutor discussion forum. These members of staff make weekly contact with course participants who were not interacting or were not active in the course. They do this because they joined the age of networked intelligence. This was not the case in this study.

**Creating a university that works better and costs less**

One area that the university was missing out according to 33 staff 55% and 129 students 45% is the fact that technology was also seen as having the ability to creating a university that works better and costs less. It means that technology could be used as a cost effective measure as it will enable the university to work better but cost less. Some related statements were:

*Technology can be used as a way of shrinking our responsibilities to others as the geo-boundaries crumble. Knowledge diffusion enables the university to be more effective and more efficient at less cost. This can be the greatest contribution of technology to quality efforts in an open and distance learning environment where increases in knowledge do not necessarily translate into increases in costs.*

*The university needs a rock solid understanding of the changes taking place in the knowledge society so that they can craft a vision for guiding the university through a period of great uncertainty and great opportunity at less cost. Technology is the black box for this.*

*Technology has the important role of spreading connectivity allied with the creation of open educational resources based on open-source technology. This may allow the
radical reduction of cost necessary for the Zimbabwe Open University to serve the ten million people at the bottom of the country’s economic pyramid.

The missing link here appears to be failure to understand changes taking place in the knowledge society so that the university can craft a vision for guiding it through a period of great uncertainty and great opportunity at less cost. According to Madya and Latif (2003) the Open University of Malaysia (OUM) took up this challenge with a vision of being a leader and innovator in open learning. Its mission, among others is to offer quality education through multi-mode learning technologies and enhance learning experiences towards the development of a knowledge based society. The university under study is aiming for this but appears to experience challenges. According to Caswell, et al., (2008), through technology the university can change the distance education’s role from one of classroom alternative to one of social transformer. Caswell et al. (2008) further posits that the role of distance education is changing. Traditionally distance education was limited in the number of people served because of production, reproduction, distribution and communication costs. The argument of the respondents in this study is that while it costs the university time and money to produce a course, technology has made reproduction and distribution costs almost non-existent. For instance, a course can be send electronically and any number of students can access the material.

The otherness of technology

While the debate regarding the regeneration of the university through technology rages on, new thinking emerged from this study that questioned the role of the information highway. The divisive vectors of race and inequality appear to re-emerge via technology. In this regard, 110 (39%) students supported by 13 (21%) staff members took the position that quality through
technology is at best stagnating and at worst putting minorities at the margins. One even said it is (in his/her words) *atrophying*. They cited the double edged characteristic of technology and its monster jacket as real dangers in ODL.

**Double edged role of ICT**

It was the contention of the respondents in this study that ICT is a double-edged sword. They pointed to the double-edged role of ICT, claiming that ICT can be a facilitator of quality and at the same time a potential risk to quality in an ODL context, owing to the dilapidated infrastructure and the digital divide that characterise students in the university. Some supporting arguments were:

*The dilapidated ITC infrastructure in the Zimbabwe Open University means lecturers and support staff will be frustrated in their efforts to promote quality. It is inappropriate to shuffle something as important as access to educational opportunities through technology to the periphery.*

*There are promising initiatives in the form of ZOUONLINE that can be utilised to promote quality. However, the digital divide that exists among the students in various situations risks increasing the gap between the rural based students and the affluent ones if efforts are not made to bridge it. As it stands right now quality through technology is atrophying.*

Technology was also labelled the *monster under the bed*. This is because the digital divide between the rural based, the urban based and the minorities led one of the respondents of this study to call the computer the *monster under the bed*. She claimed that:

*My access to the computer is almost zero %. I therefore cannot recommend to the university a monster under the bed as a factor contributing to quality. These sentiments were echoed by another respondent who argued that:*

*Given the digital divide between communities, technology is putting minorities at the margins. It has helped create this depressing and dangerous situation because historical, technological, social, political and economic changes are inextricably linked.*
Technology was also seen as a **radical reallocation of power**. Elsewhere in this research, a respondent blamed power struggles for most of the quality woes in the university under study. However, one of the respondents appears to have the answer to this scenario pointing out that:

> **ICT could be used to re-allocate power. In the emerging digital economy, what people know matters most. The Net is the technological enabling mechanism for this. The Zimbabwe Open University must make the Net offer the technological possibility for students to be masters of their own destiny by changing the way they live, work, organise, communicate and interact.**

What appears loud and clear missing link related to the issue of equity is **orchestrating discrimination** in the form of technology. Distance education is a form of equalising opportunities that is seen by many as a transformative vehicle for increasing the pace of change and reform in higher education (CHEA, 1998). However in this study, a new form of discrimination in the form of technology has been unearthed. It may be severe for the underprivileged students like women, as it comes at a time when the Los Angeles times quoted in Poley and France (1998) reported that the nation must face up to the fact that women are leaving or avoiding computer careers in droves, citing discrimination by co-workers, few role models, family-unfriendly work environments and a general sense that the field is irrelevant to their interest. Given the major role of computer science, technology and information and communication technology in teaching and learning at a distance, then quality is facing a serious threat. It is imperative that the university need to begin to take open and distance learning as more of a knowledge market place than an ivory tower. Otherwise the study found it as a way of masterminding the idea of putting minorities on the margin.

**Section summary and conclusion**

This section presented results on missing links on technology related conditions fostering continuous quality improvement. What came out is that while the university has a fully-bodied,
rich, strong, sturdy and strong ICT department, there were some glaring missing links that derailed quality. Some of those to come out include a lack of an interactive website, an electronic newsletter and electronic forum. Learning oriented software is yet to be. There is need to benefit from ICT innovations before these become outdated; tapping into the convergence of telecommunication, computing and mobile technology; combine face-to-face learning with the benefits of technology; embark on a course on use of technology; join the age of networked intelligence and create a university that works better and costs less. To conclude this section, it is pertinent to point out that the advent of the information age has amplified the requirement to process and acquire vast amounts of new information quickly (Clark, et al., 2009). Traditional instructional delivery methods are often unable to meet this challenge for already over-committed learners. Innovative instructional models are needed to facilitate the information delivery and knowledge conversion brought on by our societal evolution. The next section looks at the missing links in the university wide practices that continuously improve quality in an ODL context.

4.3.4.2 Missing links in the university wide practices that continuously improve quality

This study interrogated practices to unearth the missing links in conditions that continuously improve quality in an ODL context. One of the four objectives looked at the university wide practices that continuously improve quality. This objective was further divided into three parts. The first part of the fourth objective addressed issues to do with technology, the second part (this one) addresses university wide practices and the last part of the fourth objective looks at suppressed voices of quality in an ODL context. Commitment to attaining and sustaining quality in the Zimbabwe Open University is a central feature of the process of fostering continuous
quality improvement. This commitment is imbedded in the strategic plans and various policy statements and is brought to fruition in quality practices in the regional campuses. However this commitment appears to be inscribed in ambiguity. This ambiguity takes its character from the conditions put in place to attain and sustain quality. On this issue, the ideas in this section have been stimulated by a research undertaken by (Harvey and Green, 1993). Through a set of multiple data collection procedures involving survey, in-depth interviews and discussion seminars, Harvey and Green (1993) found out that the majority of the respondents made up of staff, students, employers, quality assurance agencies and accrediting institutions agree on adequacy of physical resources; adequacy of human resources; clarity of the aims and objectives to all participants; relevance of subjects and their content to programme’s aims and objectives; active student participation in all levels; relevance of the programme content to the award given; objectivity in assessment; consistency between assessment and course objectives; getting useful feedback from assessment; and providing students with transferable knowledge and skills as criteria for quality in higher education (Harvey and Green, 1993). This section tried to illuminate further this debate from the perspectives of staff and students in the Zimbabwe Open University. The conditions were approached at one of two levels. These are:

- Practices: what one does.
- Principles: guiding ideas and insights.

In higher education, there are two distinct types of processes: the services to the student body: in academic (e.g. enrolment, library), or administrative (e.g. Cafeterias, recreation) areas; and the teaching and learning (both education and research) activities (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). In this regard, this section looked at the missing links in the processes and products against the backdrop and attempt to arrive at some generalisations that could help policy makers as well as field practitioners in promoting the culture of quality that sticks in the context of an
ODL institution. The research looked for missing links in ways in which a well established university like the one under study can re-engineer the institutional settings, consolidate its achievement and safeguard its reputation in a bid to retain its student base. The university wide missing links for conditions fostering continuous quality improvement were clearly in focus. There are two groups of variables captured in this section. These are university context variables and internal university variables. The idea was to establish the conditions that influence the achievement of quality. As many constructions as there were respondents emerged. It is the conditions of quality that provides the strengths and backbone of the university. The respondents saw them as pivotal factors that make changes and the management of change possible and durable. They enable quality to ‘stick’. The themes that emerged are presented and discussed below

**Faceless bureaucracy**

A major finding from this study that added more weight to the missing links to conditions fostering continuous quality improvement is that 210 of the students (74%) and 38 staff members (63%) criticised what one student called:

*A faceless bureaucracy that is unable to accurately meet expectations of personalised services that recognise differences and uniqueness in the adult student population.*

Another one wrote in her accounts that:

*Many of my colleagues appear to have lost their tolerance for the bureaucracy in the Zimbabwe Open University. The university appears to be out of date with current customer care and quality initiatives.*

She then went further to ask:

*Why do I have to call so many places for my results? Why do I have to wait so long? Why can’t the region solve my problems right here?*
While respondents complained about the faceless bureaucracy, for Ulrich (cited in Houston, 2008), no action is rational unless the views of the affected but not involved are considered. In the face of these rising frustrations, the politics of quality have been dominated by macro and micro agendas towards: legitimising changes in sectoral structures and funding; focusing on value for money practices; reducing the autonomy of higher education institutions; and questioning the extent to which they produce work-ready graduates (Harvey cited in Houston, 2008). With a faceless bureaucracy, it means value for money practices are not followed.

Process integrity in a bifurcated environment-effect of two power centres

The bifurcated nature of the Zimbabwe Open University took centre stage in this research. Respondents (52 staff 87% and 193 students 68%) argued that this compromised the process integrity in the university as conflicting orders sometimes came from two distinct power centres. One respondent put it this way in an interview:

> There is need to assess risk and threats to quality and take active measures to avoid recurrence. One major threat is the bifurcated nature of this university. There is need for process integrity which is by and large compromised by conflicting orders from two different power centres-the region and the national centre.

It appears staff and students are greeted daily with multiple and often contradictory orders in their daily operations. The matrix kind of organisation in which they report to two almost equal power centres appears to compromise the quality of processes. In this case, bifurcation is a constraining rather that an enhancing aspect of quality and thus, a missing link. Zimbabwe Open University is a bifurcated institution. A bifurcated institution with concurrent powers held between a centre and its dispersed, decentralised regional campuses is difficult to run (Smith, 2011). The study unearthed that too many contradictory policy statements and proclamations are
made. The semi-federalist, decentralised operations involve different activities for and mechanisms of co-ordination between the centre and the sites (Sayed and Soudien, 2006). With respect to the Zimbabwe Open University, the national centre is responsible for funding the regional campuses but is not involved in the daily management and control of these. This, it is argued, is where the major missing link surfaces. Essential ambiguity in policy finds its first expression dealing a severe blow to attempts to attain and sustain quality. It is also reinforced through contradictory jurisdictions prompting respondents in this study to call for process integrity in a bifurcated environment.

Organisational service charter

The university under study faces challenges as a result of the rise in student enrolment. This is confirmed by Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2007)’s findings that the rise in enrolment is not matched by resources, as a result quality is being compromised. The 35 staff (58%) and 74 students (26%) in this study insist the missing link is a service charter. This view captured from interviews bear testimony:

*The university has witnessed an increase in student enrolment. This threatens the operational effectiveness of the university. A university service charter is the answer. The charter must become an integral point of reference in ensuring service excellence for students across the institution.*

To improve service quality, the respondents insisted that a service charter that will be a point of reference in ensuring service excellence is one instrument that will continuously improve quality. There are many stakeholders with varied expectations and representations to the university. This representation points to the complexity of the interlinked environments and expectations in which universities operate. To Houston (2008), interested parties see the university from economic perspectives (employers, industry groups), from societal perspectives (families of
existing and potential students, community organizations) and from educational perspectives (academic disciplines, other education providers). To meet these expatiations, a service charter appears appropriate. The Open University of Tanzania Client Service Charter explicitly outlines the need for the Open University of Tanzania to implement and provide good quality services to the public with the aim of satisfying customers and other users of its services according to their requirements and expectations (OUT, 2012). This was missing in the university in this study.

**Obsolete artefacts and lack of reliable facilities**

According to 57 staff (95%) and 242 students (85%), obsolete university artefacts and resources were seen as not conducive to heightening and sustaining quality. The major issue facing regional centres was space. Three of the four regional campuses visited used rented accommodation for all their activities. All the four campuses did not have classrooms for tutorials and for writing examinations. University vehicles were also in short supply. Lecturers were attending week-end schools on foot carrying assignments and other tutorial materials in person. Office space was also in short supply. In one of the regional campuses as many as eight officers were crammed in one room. Computers were also a scarce resource. No one appears to service them considering that in two of the regions at the beginning of 2010, there were more computers that were down than those that were operational. On this issue, Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010) posits that when an institution offers education, it does so on behalf of the state, regardless of whether it is sponsored privately or by the government. Thus, within its mandate, the government should prioritise educational infrastructure, including the construction of educational buildings. This was not the case in this study.
According to Schein (2004)’s model of quality that lasts, at the first and most cursory level is organisational attributes that can be seen, felt and heard by the uninitiated observer - collectively known as artefacts. Included in artefacts are the facilities, offices, furnishings, visible awards and recognition, the way that its members dress, how each person visibly interacts with each other and with organisational outsiders, and even company slogans, mission statements and other operational creeds (Schein, 2004). In the university under study, artefacts were said to convey wrong messages in regional campuses. These campuses are the points of conduct with the students. Respondents even opined that there is scramble for resources. To attain and sustain national, regional, and international quality, certain components are particularly relevant, notably sufficient and modern educational facilities such as library, textbooks, learning and living environments, and all kinds of equipment that support teachers’ and students’ teaching and learning processes (Mavondo in Chen, Sok and Sok 2007). Students must have access to reliable equipment (Belanger and Jordan, 2000). Limited access to reliable equipment prevents students from learning effectively. In regards to living environment, a good university needs to make sure it provides students comfortable and safe regional and district campuses. New teaching technologies and new electronic information sources are required by universities to remain competitive (Nelly and Tucker, 2010). Databases, up-to-date textbooks, periodicals, journals, advanced multimedia resources, high-speed internet, liquid crystal display projectors (LCD projectors), overhead projectors (OHP), computer labs, visual and audio, etc. assist researchers in doing their research and facilitate student learning (Chen, Sok and Sok 2007). In this regard, it can be argued that sufficient and modern facilities enable quality to stick in any learning institution. This was sadly not the case in this study.
In addition to an education, students search for other marks of quality: safe and up-to-date residence halls, state-of-the-art facilities, and the latest offerings in technology (Comm and Mathaisel, 2005). The costs of offering, operating, and maintaining these services for students, in addition to an education, are growing astronomically (Xaba, 2011). In order to address the lack of resources in the educational system, institutions must collaborate among themselves and with business to provide an infrastructure that will support distance learning. The institution under study appears to make minimal efforts to establish resource centres in various regions of the country due to prohibitive costs. However, if institutions collaborate and combine their resources, they could establish state-of-the-art resource centres for use by all of their students.

**Rich communicative relationships**

In terms of the responses from 273 students (96%) and 42 staff (70%), the absence of a rich communicative relationship is an important missing link unearthed in this study. They gave many examples such as missing results. To them it was translated to withholding information. To the respondents in this study, the staff, the students and the management must work at the same wave lengths so that quality is assured. Supporting statements are:

*There must be formal and informal performance discussions. Right now the university relies heavily on outmoded systems for communicating. There is too much top-down communication, too many talking shops and a lot of secrecy as regards to important information.*

*Performance measurement and their outcomes must be communicated to all stakeholders through developing rich, communicative relationships among the various stakeholders.*

*The need for status reporting is important. An in-house newsletter can be the starting point as it will provide clear and accurate information to students, employers and the general public on matters related to quality, standards and programmes on offer.*
Withholding information is a recipe for disaster. For instance, missing results are a clear indication of lack of communication and a real threat to quality. To add to the rich communicative relationships, the respondents added the weakness of failing to foster quality relationships. These statements were extracted from the questionnaire of staff and students:

All stakeholders are failing to share ODL values through networking.

There is need for all partners to work for a common purpose in order to pull in the same direction—that of quality teaching and learning.

Fostering quality relationship with other institutions that can contribute to the nurturing of quality in the university is there. What is missing is the need to create strategic alliances with universities in the region and abroad in order to tap from their experiences.

This study is founded on Moore’s (1991) theory of transactional distance. The theory of transactional distance is based on the principle that the distance in distance education is more than a geographic separation of instructors and students (Moore, 2008). It is a distance of perceptions and understandings that exists in every educational transaction regardless of whether the instruction is delivered at a distance. This distance has to be addressed in every educational transaction by students, instructors, and educational organisations if effective learning is to occur (Moore, 1991). The missing link of interactivity came up in this study, because successful distance education systems involve interactivity between teacher and students, the students and the learning environment and among students themselves (Moore, 1993).

What is missing in the university under study and at the same time thin in literature on ODL is the absence of a rich communicative relationship and failing to foster quality relationships as was unearthed in this study. Thus, quality and integrity of distance learning is a product of interactivity, quality relationships and rich communicative relationships which was not the case
in this study. Interactivity promotes active learning (Giddy, 2012). Sherry (1996) argues that interactivity represents the connectivity the student feels with the distance teacher, the facilitator and his/her peers. Garrison in Sherry (1996), support this stance by adding that the quality and integrity of the educational process depends upon a sustained two way communication. Without the connectivity bond, distance education becomes mere correspondence programme where the student is autonomous but isolated. Isolated forms of learning are prone to massive student early departure (Chiome, Chabaya and Chakanyuka, 2010). A sustained effective communication is a must for any innovation considering that Mkuchu (2011) posited that you may be surprised to find how many of the staff understands that the university is pursuing an innovation if communication is weak.

Chen, Sok and Sok (2007) quoting (World Declaration on Higher Education, 1998) point out that another significant dimension of quality of higher education is smooth interactive network between teachers themselves teachers and students, students themselves and institutes both locally and internationally. Students, therefore, are motivated to learn significantly through communicating, socialising and modelling on others. Findings elsewhere point out that interaction is the cornerstone of quality in an open and distance education context. For instance, Aldridge and Rowley (1998) examined the student experience and found that relationships with the lecturers and their fellow students are the central issues in determining the total quality in their learning.

Effectively communicating with students provides teachers with better understanding of student learning and knowledge management (Gapp and Fisher, 2006). As Checkering and Gamson in
Chen, Sok and Sok (2007) state that working with others often increases involvement in learning. Peer discussion among students, especially students in tertiary education, is an effective way of learning. Technical discussion among teachers is also an effective approach to solve problems. Lehmkuhle is reported to have stated in Massy’s (2003) research that sharing experiences among faculty often gave rise to new ideas about how to improve quality.

Another missing link related to interaction, connectivity and networking that was mentioned in this study is fostering quality relationships and cooperation. Konidari and Abernot (2006) also support the view that cooperation among professional groups of teachers could promote implicit learning and experience. And this group of teachers could create an intelligent team able to accumulate collective experience, knowledge and competence. Konidari and Abernot (2006) also support the view that cooperation among professional groups of teachers could promote implicit learning and experience. And this group of teachers could create an intelligent team able to accumulate collective experience, knowledge and competence. Konidari and Abernot (2006) also support the view that cooperation among professional groups of teachers could promote implicit learning and experience. And this group of teachers could create an intelligent team able to accumulate collective experience, knowledge and competence.

Networks for quality

A dominating voice from a majority of the respondents (40 staff 67% and 122 students 43%) was that an ODL institution cannot do it alone. They expected the university to network with other sectors, such as telecommunications, education and ICT. The government is not a limitless resource and cannot fully subsidise these sectors. Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010) mentioned that fostering continuous quality improvement in the university under study, they thought were a missing link in fostering continuous quality improvement in the university. Another missing link related to interaction, connectivity and networking that was mentioned in this study is fostering quality relationships and cooperation. Konidari and Abernot (2006) also support the view that cooperation among professional groups of teachers could promote implicit learning and experience. And this group of teachers could create an intelligent team able to accumulate collective experience, knowledge and competence. Konidari and Abernot (2006) also support the view that cooperation among professional groups of teachers could promote implicit learning and experience. And this group of teachers could create an intelligent team able to accumulate collective experience, knowledge and competence.
other institutions in order to assure quality. In this regard, the Association of African Universities can be of much help. One lecturer respondent cited the Southern Africa Development Community- Centre for Distance Education (SADC-CDE) as good example of regional cooperation that the university under study is an affiliate. Internationally, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) was established in 1991 with a handful of members. It has grown to become a global network, with over 180 members in about 100 countries (Tagoe, 2008).

A member of the staff added weight to the issue:

Invest in customer service as the reputation of the university hangs on the observed behaviours displayed at the point of contact like my place of work.’ Another one opined: Quality systems are not static but they are dynamic and capable for change according to circumstances. Networking is the key to remain relevant.

It appears a dominating voice from a majority of the respondents was that an ODL institution cannot do it all alone. They expected the university to network with other institutions in order to assure quality. One reason given was that quality systems are not static but they are dynamic and capable for change according to circumstances. The Arab world is a good example of the importance of networking (Kariem, 2010). Many higher education experts from Arab countries were invited to address issues of quality assurance in their respective countries. A round table discussion on how quality assurance bodies in the Arab States might work together took place (Kariem, 2010). The brain storming produced three possible scenarios: The first was to create a network; the second to start a non-governmental organisation for Quality Assurance Accreditation for Higher Education (QAAHE); and the third was to develop a commission for quality assurance and accreditation for Arab Higher Education institutions (ANQAHE). A final consensus to establish an ANQAHE was agreed upon in Abu Dhabi in 2005. The president of
International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) was invited to this meeting to support the initiation of the network (Kariem, 2010). The Outcomes of this meeting was to develop the first draft of constitution. A third meeting in Cairo, 2006 was organised to agree on the draft constitution, and on the launching of the network. The Network is working in association with the INQAAHE and in connection with the Association of Arab Universities. The mission of the ANQAHE is to ensure and strengthen QAAHE in the Arab region and to enhance the cooperation between similar quality assurance bodies or organisations in Arab region and with other regional and international quality assurance organisations. According to Kariem (2010), the main aims of the ANQAHE that can benefit the university under study are to: support and enhance quality assurance organisations in the Arab region; develop the human resources and establish a mechanism of cooperation in the field of quality assurance in higher education in the Arab region and sustain regional and international cooperation in quality assurance in higher education.

It has also been observed that whereas there exists a national accreditation body such as the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), carrying out some quality-related functions, no regional body currently exists in Southern Africa to carry out this vital function at regional level. However, it must be noted that these are organisations for quality and this study posits that the missing link is network for quality. To Shupp (2010), a university degree is supposed to be an international qualification that cannot be denied the highly deserved international perspective.

However, Kariem (2010) has other ideas on this issue conceding that there are some difficulties in that education in every country has its own culture and social circumstances. So what is
accepted in one country might not be accepted in another country though there is still a general similarity between all countries. The international accreditation in scientific sciences may precede the international accreditation in social sciences. This is because social sciences are connected to the cultural limitations of every society (Kariem, 2010). This will require the need to establish international standards that agree with the national needs and ambitions. To Kariem (2010), natural sciences have no home, but social sciences have homes. Every country has its own higher education system. The facilities are different. The finance is different. The number of students is different, but still there are a number of criteria that can be used and applied everywhere. Nevertheless, the respondents in this study advocated for a network for quality and not an organisation for quality. There is a difference between a network and an organisation.

Similarly, the organizational excellence models such as Rutgers Model (Rutgers, 2004) incorporate a focus on evaluating institutional self-assessment. The model emphasizes a focus on approaches, implementation strategies, and outcomes that translate readily into strategic plans with clearly identified improvement priorities, goals and action steps (Mizikaci, 2006). The university under study can implement the model since it has also proven effective in encouraging cross-departmental and cross-institutional strategies for heightening awareness of common issues, raising standards and expectations of performance, and facilitating communication and collaboration among, and within universities based on a common understanding of key values and concepts (Mizikaci, 2006).

**Establishment of quality measures and accountabilities**

An important finding in this study is the failure to establish quality measures and accountabilities by the university. Forty staff (67%) and 124 students (44%) in this study were
of the opinion that quality accountabilities and quality measures need to be established. These influence and at the same time continuously improve quality. One respondent had this to offer:

What gets measured gets done. There is need to be clear on accountabilities. Measuring the outcomes may be the answer. It is easier to see the quality of the processes as reflected in the products. Another added that:

The university must have standards that act as objective measurable outcomes. For instance, the academic can specialise depending on their expertise.

Specialisation is a form of the industrial and market orientation for the assessment of the value of an educational enterprise which is a way of establishing accountabilities and allows the faculty to focus on their areas of expertise (Neely and Tucker 2010). People must account for their performance at the end of the day because a person who gets measured performs. However, one academic respondent indicated that:

It is crucial that mutually agreed accountability measures must be put in place to entice academics to embrace quality assurance measures and accountabilities.

Another interesting dimension related to quality accountabilities is the effects of measurement of which one respondent gave a candid account in an interview that academics prefer mutually agreed understandings of quality. Discussion that might promote attention to Elton’s (cited in McKay and Kember, 1999) “quality Es” – enhancement, empowerment, enthusiasm and excellence – has been overshadowed by compliance with external agencies’ definitions of “quality As” – assurance, accountability, audit and assessment. Elton cited in McKay and Kember (1999) places quality systems and measures within universities into two categories. These are quality assurance and quality enhancement. Basing their arguments on this distinction, McKay and Kember (1999) argue that the quality assurance activities are a crucial
precursor to quality enhancement and excellence initiatives. These views are further illuminated by (Mizikaci, 2006) who posits that despite differences in the size and stage of development of their higher education sectors, many governments have decided that traditional academic controls are inadequate to today’s challenges and that more explicit assurances about quality are needed.

Extending the “quality As or quality Es” debate, Tee Ng (2008) argues that one important insight is that measurement changes the nature of the object of measurement. He supported quality Es by positing that to measure the temperature of a beaker of water at a point in time; one has to introduce a thermometer into the beaker. But the thermometer will absorb heat from the water. The resulting measurement is not the same as the temperature of the water at that point of time. The temperature of the water has also changed. To Tee Ng (2008), the fact that measurement changes the nature of the object of measurement is an important dynamic in educational quality assurance. The fact that one measures certain education outcomes affects the nature of education.

The moment one defines a scale to education, one has changed the nature of education. In the university under study, the quality assurance system is an active player in the system. What this means to the unit is that it does not just measure behaviour but it changes behaviour. The message here to the unit is loud and clear that what one measures may not be the actual natural behaviour, but rather the behaviour induced by the act of measurement (Tee Ng, 2008). Institutional inspections in themselves have an impact upon the institution, both positive and negative. However, beyond the issues of more work, external inspections can have a negative emotional impact on academic staff (Perryman, 2007) and present a high level of risk to individuals (Raban, 2007). Staff members tend to resist quality assurance when it appears to be a facade. A good example of this was found through a research by Anderson (2006), which
showed that Australian academics would continue to resist quality processes, treating them as games to be played and systems to be fed until university management, university quality agencies and academic staff in universities could draw on mutually agreed understandings of quality. Therefore, may it be ranking, banding or self-appraisal; quality assurance brings with it the danger of “a rat race” (Tee Ng 2008:121). Increasing the number of types of awards may simply increase the number of fields for institutions to compete in. Some form of competition and benchmarking is healthy but too much of that will make quality assurance an exercise in developing evidences, impeding or hindering a real drive for diversity and innovation.

**Quality assurance**

An issue related to accountability that was studied in this research is that of quality assurance mentioned by 60 (100%) staff and 284 (100%) students. The respondents concurred that the department of quality assurance was robust. It was seen as:

> …sturdy and strong in form. It is even strong enough to withstand or overcome intellectual challenges or adversity.

One respondent mentioned the fact that this department is now ‘fully-bodied and rich’ because it is now staffed in all regions and has personnel that is highly proactive. However, a closer look on some of the responses unearthed Newton (2000)’s worries as one respondent put it that:

> Frontline staff that includes academics and support staff are more concerned with impression management. They merely want to get by the activity since most of them lack training in quality assurance.

In this regard, Newton (2000) compares the dominant formal meanings as suggested in the field with the situated perceptions of the frontline staff. Under these aspects, he looked at quality as impression management, and quality as a culture of getting by. Newton also studied the
behavioural responses of academics to quality policy (e.g. sinking, coping and reconstructing), and suggests that academics are not passive recipients of management objectives, but in fact makers and shapers of the policy. He argues that if academics are to remain pivotal in efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning, more attention needs to be paid to their subjectivities and to the importance of the conditions and context of their work (Newton, 2000). Under the circumstances, the respondents went further to scrutinise the role of the quality assurance unit.

The role of the quality assurance unit

The role of the quality assurance unit became one of the most contentious and interesting missing links in this research. While the majority of the respondents hailed its establishment, they questioned its role particularly its capacity to realise its vision. A member of the academic staff raised the following issues in this regard:

*Establishing the quality assurance unit is plausible but it must be seen to be selling the vision, mission and objectives of the university. The question is: Does it have this capacity? Through training and involvement of others, the unit can raise institutional trust for quality in the university.*

A student respondent had this to contribute on the same issue:

*The role of the department is to spread the culture of quality. However, it appears it is terribly misfiring in this regard. For instance, there is need to advance the role of the students in the teaching and learning process. We are not sure what our role is in quality assurance.*

The establishment of the quality assurance unit was hailed in this study as a step in the right direction. It was said to be a robust unit that has established itself in all the regional campuses. It was also hailed and praised vociferously for having employed highly qualified professionals. However, missing links were uncovered on its role and on its capacity. Belawati and Zuhairi’s
(2007) case study of the Indonesia Open University is both relevant and instructive as it outlines the background to and the processes involved in developing a quality assurance system for an ODL institution, including developing job manuals, raising awareness and commitment among staff, internal and external assessment and benchmarking. Belawati and Zuhairi (2007) emphasise that quality in ODL covers a number of aspects which include pedagogical processes, production and delivery systems and philosophy.

On the other hand, Parker’s (2009) work looks at the commonalities between the frameworks for quality assurance in Australia, the UK, Canada and the USA. She identifies these commonalities as providing clear statements on educational goals, sustaining the institutional commitment to support learners, engaging in a collaborative process of discovery, which contributes to improving the teaching/learning environment. These may be aspects missing from the institution under study. The results of this study appear to illuminate the fact that the quality assurance unit is an important concept in the university. However, its wings need to be spread further so that it has capacity to drive university wide quality culture and be able to sell the university vision and mission. To do this, it was felt one way that can be used is training for quality. This appeared to be a major missing link of this study that the university must launch a programme within a programme. In this case there must be training specifically for quality. The following excepts appear to point at this view:

*If you want to improve a system, you need trained people to initiate and coordinate the efforts.*

* A training project must be put in place that will help to increase student success in their studies.*
The respondents in this study were also of the opinion that the training they were advocating for should lead to capacity building in the university. Capacity building was seen as directly influencing the heightening of quality. The following were suggested:

*The present staff is geared to working in, and for the traditional on campus course delivery mode. In this case, training in open and distance mode is the only answer to quality provision.*

*Staff sensitisation and capacity building programmes must be instituted.*

In the process of capacity building, what is lacking from the Zimbabwe Open University according to the respondents in this study is what they referred to as professional training days. The respondents were of the opinion that there must be professional training days set aside to staff develop workers on quality issues. Some supporting statements are:

*Fostering professional growth must be planned, diarised and implemented at all times without fail. This was not happening at the detriment of quality.*

*There is need to ensure that members have the necessary tools to be excellent professionals that will contribute to quality teaching at a distance.*

*There is need to create positive university image through nurturing conditions that stimulate learning which has not been happening up to now.*

The idea that quality assurance must spearhead capacity building has been practiced elsewhere with much success. One quality assurance unit in a university in Egypt had far more roles to play than the unit in the university under study. According to Kariem (2010) the main aims of the quality assurance unit in an Egyptian university are: establishing an internal system for quality; assist preparing the university units for meeting the accreditation requirements; improving the techniques of academic management via increasing its ability for continuous enhancement; enhancing programmes, teaching and learning plans for meeting accreditation requirements and advancing students’ roles in the teaching and learning process for providing graduates with competitive abilities in the labour market. The quality agent needs to drive the quality culture agenda in order to improve upon its own operations (Harvey and Stensaker, 2008). The QA unit
is mandated with spreading the culture of quality among staff and students, a missing link that was unearthed in this study.

The quality agency in a distance education context must be alert to opportunities for improving upon its own operations and endeavour to retain its integrity and credibility (Stella and Gnanam 2004). On this note, Kariem (2010) further pointed out that QA unit is mandated with forming the vision, mission and objectives of the faculty; establishing an enhanced data base for the faculty; training selected staff for operating as trainers in the quality field and preparing the annual report and self study. The Egyptian survey (Kariem (2010) further indicated that the main activities of the quality assurance unit include: conducting workshops for staff, students and beneficiaries for familiarising them with quality requirements; preparing a book in quality and accreditation; including the student’s guide information about quality and distributing it for students of the first academic year for free. This is yet to be seen in the university under study.

Avdjieva and Wilson (2002) argue that simply focusing energies on quality assurance programmes that are predominantly concerned with process improvement confines the efforts of higher education to the domain of adaptive learning. Moreover, educational institutions are not typically organised to support collective learning. They are complex and stratified organisations embedded within even more complex communities. Teaching is highly individualised while knowledge is highly fragmented. Quality assurance should be based on a university as a learning organisation. Meade (2001) says a learning organisation is open to innovation and change and aims to link the learning of individual staff to the learning of the organisation. In appropriate quality assurance environment, organisations need to have capacity for change management in order to demonstrably boost learning. This challenges the place of
the university under study in the fabric of national quality. *Quality assurance should make ‘organisations of learning’ ‘learning organizations’* because the roots of the quality movement lie in assumptions about people, organisations and management that have one unifying theme; to make continual learning a way of life (Avdjieva and Wilson, 2002).

QA can be seen as a quality assurance and accreditation system that has been developed independently of the constraints of the organisation management and funding that govern the conventional universities (Jung, 2005). Thus, it is critical that this unit be freed from the constraints of the university so that it has the capacity to implement its various mandates. It can even provide financial support to units so that they can carry out particular mandates successfully. Temple and Billing (2003) found the Czech quality assurance system not to be “robust” enough. They argued that the quality assurance agencies in this region were initially introduced due to a concern about control rather than quality enhancement.

In addition to training for quality, professional training days and capacity building, the respondents in this study further argued for *integrating quality with other initiatives*. In this interesting missing link of this study, it was reasoned that the impact of quality is felt most if it is integrated with other initiatives. One staff member contented that:

*Pierce meals do not work. There is need to integrate quality with initiatives like the university strategic plan or Organisational Development (OD) initiatives.*

The fact that pierce meals do not work led to the respondents in this study advocating for *integrating quality into institutional processes*. The core of quality management encompasses methodical proceedings of the plan/do/check/act (PDCA) cycle and an orientation towards continuous improvement, often termed as total quality management (Kleijnen et al, 2011; Venkatraman, 2007). In this regard, a significant finding of this study was the idea of quality as
Total Quality Management where respondents were of the opinion that the missing link was that quality initiatives must be part and parcel of the institutional processes. They argued that:

*Pierce meals do not work. There is need to integrate quality with initiatives like the university strategic plan or Organisational Development (OD) initiatives.*

*Quality assurance mechanisms are not being fully integrated into the university processes such as recruitment, registration, tutorials, examinations and students support.*

Integrating quality with other initiatives appears plausible idea. Kanji (1998) strongly contest this kind of thinking reasoning that the emphasis in total quality management (TQM) is on a strong central administration telling the units what to do. This is a top down decision making that does not augur well for higher education which is more akin to a flat organisation. Higher education highlights the traditional core values of academic freedom and disciplinary concerns. The one size fits all kind of prescription from total quality management thinking, does not allow this distinction.

Fitness of current quality management system in higher education is a controversial issue. In this context, there is still room to find out, as Temple (2005) stated, whether TQM is another management fad theory that might create significant educational and organisational problems, or could be considered as an essential source of good ideas that may be of great value to open and distance teaching. There has been much discussion in recent years about the “fall” of TQM, particularly in higher education, where TQM is viewed as “dated” (Mehralizadeh & Safaeemoghaddam, 2010:176). How has this state of affairs arisen? There is clearly a need, therefore, for specific studies that demonstrate the reality of TQM effectiveness and the viability of its implementation in an ODL context. TQM may escape the critical attention of researchers, because it is not firmly founded in traditional sociological or organisational theory.
To better achieve the objective of this study, an attempt is made to link TQM to scholarly sociological and organisational theories, so that knowledge about these theories may give new insights on advantages, possibilities and limitations of TQM in relation to quality improvement (Mehralizadeh & Safaeemoghaddam, 2010). UNIDO (2007) had other ideas, contending that Total Quality Management, as the name indicates, regards the continuous improvement of customer-oriented quality as both requiring active management and involving the entire company – and often suppliers and customers as well. TQM can be described in practical terms as customer focus, continuous improvement and teamwork. A great deal has been written about TQM, and more scholarly analyses have identified four fundamental orientations of TQM: systems, customer, learning and change. From this perspective, TQM is seen as a dynamic economic effort by firms to adapt and survive in dynamic environments. To UNIDO, (2007), TQM must first of all have the active commitment of top managers. They have to take personal charge, providing vision, forceful leadership and clear direction. They must translate this vision into detailed, long-term planning, often for a period of up to ten years. They must also establish, not least by their own behaviour, an appropriate style of management throughout the company, a style that can both give direction and encourage employees to take on more self-management. Thus, there are gaps in the literature regarding the adoption of TQM in higher education. Nevertheless, this research’s contribution is that TQM need to be fully integrated into the university processes such as recruitment, registration, tutorials, examinations and students support.

**Applying quality to curriculum content to have market-sensitive curriculum**

Missing links in curriculum construction came out strongly in this study from 58 staff (97%) and 230 (81%) students. In this regard, a market-sensitive curriculum was seen as fostering
continuous quality improvement in the university programmes. Some suggestions in that regard include:

A coherent and market sensitive curriculum is the life blood of a university academic programme. It is the curriculum that sets a university apart from its competitors. To this, one respondent added:

Extend quality issues to curriculum content. It is curriculum content which sets universities apart.

Curriculum issues have been highly supported in the literature (Bloomer, 1997; Paechter, 1999 and Kagoda, 2009) and seen as heightening quality (Parker, 2009). In support, Chen, Sok and Sok (2007) also posit that a coherent curriculum is considered to be the heart of the quality in higher education. Thus, in this study, curriculum construction was seen as imperative in fostering continuous quality improvement. This is because quality of learning was said to start from the ability of the university to assign higher value to quality curriculum construction. Some substantiating statements were:

Quality assessment is important. Why is it that the university does not have on demand examinations as is the norm in other ODL systems?” Questioned one of the respondents.

Instructional design in ODL must be such that it captures and promote the acquisition of cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills as is the case with all educational and training processes.

Efforts must be made to make instruction more learner-centered so that the university can produce self-directed graduates.

Instruction for adults, the majority of whom constitute the Zimbabwe Open University students, should be largely self-directed, focused and purposeful.

These statements appear to show that one missing link that respondents in this study saw as an impediment to fostering continuous quality improvement is the area of curriculum construction and curriculum content. To them, the key to quality is a relevant curriculum (Kagoda, 2009) that makes the Zimbabwe Open University graduates an envy of many. The major missing link is that it must be constructed and re-constructed to keep abreast of trends in the wider society.
In this regard, curriculum was seen as having the ability to make one university more successful than the others. According to Leckey and Neill in Chen, Sok and Sok (2007), the universities need to ensure that there is a standard curriculum. In that study, they found out that standardising the curriculum leads to the creation of a programme auditing committee, which encompasses peer evaluation among teachers and evaluative input from students. Mizikaci (2006) added to the debate on quality and the curriculum by pointing out that in spite of the common use of quality systems in higher education, the argument is that the concept of quality has not extended to curriculum content.

Another dimension on curriculum was put forward by Bornman (2004) who pointed out that a regular assessment on curriculum, courses offered, teaching skills, and material used are needed to achieve the intended outcome. Marshall in Chen, Sok and Sok (2007) also adds his voice to the curriculum debate, pointing out that *high-quality courses enhance the obligations and commitment of students to learn*, which can be considered an indicator of quality in education. He further argues that courses should be meaningful, valuable, and beneficial to learner’s career prospect. In this regard, course goals and objectives should be clearly communicated to the students at the beginning of the course, for example through a course outline. Chen, Sok and Sok (2007) further highlighted that there has always been concern about quality of courses and teaching on education quality. However, the academic programme alone cannot guarantee there will be quality. Theory is one thing, while practice is another. The Zimbabwe Open University students, who are mostly working adults, are exposed to social and working environments. They are given opportunities to be exposed to the outside world so that they can learn to be self-reliant as they marry theory to practice.
The university under study and other ODL institutions can also take a leaf from the success factors of NetVarsity curriculum (Jung, 2005). Among success factors of NetVarsity’s ICT training, *market-sensitive curriculum* is worth mentioning here. Recognising the fact that ICT training is a fast-changing area in any society, NetVarsy continuously updates and customises its curriculum based on skill needs of leading companies. Considering the fact that most of ODL students are working adults and seeking knowledge and skills applicable to their life, the case of NetVarsity’s *need-based curriculum development* and revision offers useful insights to other institutions.

Another issue that was also raised by respondents in this study concerning the curriculum is the issue of assessment where they regard quality assessment as important. They questioned why the university does not have *on demand examinations* as is the norm in other ODL systems. According to Mkuchu (2011), on demand examinations (ODEX) are made available to the candidate when s/he is ready and has requested for it. The time is determined by the learner and the examinations can be done manually or on-line (Mkuchu, 2011). In this regard, according to the respondents in this study, instructional design in ODL must be such that it captures and promote the acquisition of cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills as is the case with all educational and training processes. Efforts must be made to make instruction more learner-centered so that the university can produce self-directed graduates. In this regard, *social relevance* of the degrees and diplomas offered by the university under study was cited as one area that is a missing link in fostering continuous quality improvement. This statement appears to capture the essence of the views:
I think the university is missing the point because the key to quality is a relevant curriculum that makes the Zimbabwe Open University graduates an envy of many. It must be constructed and re-constructed to keep abreast of trends in the wider society. You see modules written in the 90s still being used. Some have been overtaken by events. Degrees offered must be socially relevant.

The assertions by the respondents in this study, comes at a time when the demand for programmes that are relevant to the employment market and employment is increasing exponentially. Pressure for enhanced services from different constituencies of society is increasing and the institution of open and distance learning is hard pressed to deliver (Hodgkinson and Kelly, 2007). The UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2004) for Higher Education defines academic quality as “a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their award. This can only happen if degrees and programmes offered by the university under study are market driven and have social relevance because quality in an ODL context is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them (QAA, 2004, p. 1). This definition puts students’ learning experience central to academic quality, implying the need for continuous review of curriculum and instruction to meet the changing needs of students. Although this definition is too general to be readily operationalised, ODL institutions can adopt various strategies for its implementation. The needs of students, as key customers, are fundamental in the design and delivery of programmes. It is no longer good enough to deliver a standard lecture to large numbers of people. At graduate levels, learning must be learner focused, since their accumulated work experience is a vital resource (Hodgkinson and Kelly, 2007).

Rubanju (2008) recommends a fundamental restructuring of the ways in which teaching and learning are delivered, including regular curriculum reviews and the use of ICTs. Rubanju (2008) notes that in the traditional lecture hall or classroom, theory and applications are not
linked. Studying via distance learning will allow students to apply theories to their own settings and to observe the effect on their environment. The results of these activities could inform curriculum reform and spur the introduction of educational theories and practices that are suitable for the current context. These ideas are relevant to the university under study where curriculum construction and reconstruction appeared as missing links in fostering continuous quality improvement.

Mood (cited by Kanwar, 2011) reports course goals and objectives should be clearly communicated to the students at the beginning of the course, for example through a course outline. Oldfield and Baron (2000) highlighted that there has always been concern about quality of courses and teaching on education quality. However, the academic programme alone cannot guarantee there will be quality. Theory is one thing, while practice is another. Therefore, students need to expose themselves to social and working environments. As Seymour (cited in Bornman, 2004) has emphasised, students should be given opportunities to be exposed to the outside world so that they can learn to be self-reliant and mature.

**Integrity of the examination grades**

Testing and examinations is one area that the 53 staff (88%) and 256 students (90%) respondents felt need to be addressed. Several issues came out of this theme. Prominent among these were the integrity of the examination grades. Some supporting statements were:

> Test scores and examination, grades are a tag that I wear at the university. They must be genuine, real and beyond reproach. It takes time to build up an institutional reputation.

> The university needs to take care to build a strong and reputable examination system because students want the academic titles that they earn to be not only recognised, but also to be credible and have a good reputation.
These sentiments were corroborated when looking at the documents to do with examinations. In one examination under study, eight five of the two thousand or so students who took part in the examinations logged an appeal against their results. Three quarters of these succeeded in having their examination grades changed. It showed why in the open-ended questionnaires there was a question which read:

*How many of the affected students did not lodge an appeal but were not satisfied with their examination grades?* May be this is one grey area where quality is being compromised.

**Assignment handling and turnaround time**

The system for handling assignments in the Zimbabwe Open University was questioned by 41 staff (68%) and 156 student (55%) respondents in this study. One student respondent even went to the extent of questioning:

*Why is it that at the end of the day, some assignments submitted on time are found missing?* And her colleague echoed the same sentiments:

*It is a fact that there is no quality to talk about when the handling of assignments is not water tight.*

The turnaround time for assignment feedback and examination results appeared to be a major missing link and a cause for concern in the university under study as a number of the respondents in this study pointed a finger at this area. Some supporting statements are:

*The lacklustre marking currently going on in several programmes need to be stopped.*

*‘We need to get immediate feedback on our performance so that we can address our weaknesses before the onset of the examinations,’* argued one student respondent. From these sentiments, it appears as if assignment handling and turnaround time left a lot to be desired. To improve any and all aspects of organisational performance will typically include assignment handling, turnaround time, work practices, modes of operation and performance outcomes. According to Smith (2011), organisations adopting a commitment to quality typically
focus on identifying good standards of performance and performance targets, working to meet the identified and desired standards of practice and then assessing performance against the standards and targets. They appeared to be saying, in Harrington’s words:

*Good is no longer good enough. To survive in today’s competitive environment, you need to excel. To excel, an organization needs to focus on all parts of the organisation, optimising the use and effectiveness of all of its resources* (Harrington, 2005, p. 107).

Thus, to this, Smith (2011) adds that interest in organisational quality is widespread. Organisations adopting a quality enhancement focus are concerned with continually improving organisational performance and effectiveness – working actively to review, assess, enhance and maintain any and all aspects of organisational performance that include assignments and their turnaround time for marking.

**Efficient quality monitoring systems**

The 34 staff (57%) and 256 students (90%) saw the need to keep an eye on the goings on in the whole university as an important missing link on factors that influence the achievement of quality. In this direction, one student said:

*An inbuilt quality monitoring mechanism must be put in place to ensure meticulous implementation of quality initiatives. A lecturer concurred and added: The peer-review process that staff has to undergo and the evaluation environment that exists in teaching and learning must be used as built-in determinants of quality.*

In this case the respondents posited that the built in monitoring mechanism, must be able to **monitor the entire system** considering that right now, students take a long time to have their results addressed. Some supporting statements are:

*The monitoring should include the entire system. This means there is need for some cost benefit analysis.*

*The need to keep an eye on ODL operations so that they meet the needs and expectations of the learner is one way in which quality can be influenced. Right now, we take decades to get our queries addressed if at all.*
Tied to an efficient monitoring system is the issue of **internal self control** mechanisms that one lecturer suggested:

*Internal self-control mechanisms will lead to more systematic strategies of quality assurance and quality improvement that are lasting.*

These extracts bear testimony that it was the contention of the respondents in study that a mechanism must be put in place to ensure adherence to quality. However, the same respondents did not agree with the idea of an internal quality assurance unit that acts as a watchdog. To them, *guiding principles* must be enough to guide action not a unit. They claim that as long as quality control and quality assurance units act as watchdogs or inspectorate units, they do not fit in the definition of a quality culture. In fact, Koul (2005) takes the position that in the long term, quality culture cannot be a function of external processes nor even that of internal cells. Thalner (cited in Houston, 2008) notes that a model developed outside education had greater credibility with external stakeholders, but may not account for the unique elements of higher educational culture, such as academic freedom.

What is needed is to harness the commitment of those implementing it so that they can purposely and willingly work to achieve it. Comm and Mathaisel (2005) maintain that until the higher education sector develops a way of measuring institutional contributions to student learning, it will be difficult to properly assess the effect of any particular effort on the quality of learning.

**Excellence in research and through research**

A key finding in this research that has been supported by a majority of academic 53 staff (88%) is that the university under study is leading in research efforts in the country. The centre for research and scholarship has been seen as strong enough to withstand or overcome intellectual
challenges or adversity. However, excellence that can be brought about by establishing a research excellence centre headed by what they called a research champion whose duties is to promote excellence in research and through research was seen as a missing link. They argued that the research and scholarship unit has been one of the most successful units. It organises workshops and conferences but still the practices, to them, do not measure up to their expectations. The supporting statements were:

The research and scholarship unit is strong enough to withstand or overcome intellectual challenges or adversity but not doing enough. It needs complete overhauling so that it becomes a centre for excellence in research and through research.

A research champion must be employed whose duties will establish a centre for research excellence whose purpose is to promote, recognise, reward and stimulate research and scholarship and to support the development of enquiry based learning. This will encourage scholarly proactive and foster evidence based practice.

The need for excellence in research is widely documented in literature. Srikanthan, and Dalrymple, (2007) point out that trustworthiness of university research is a crucial foundation of the integrity of scholarship. They even cited a number of disturbing trends, going as far as to question whether the integrity of universities, as a principal source of criticism about social and political trends, is compromised by limiting, “what they say so as not to offend potential donors” (Newman et al., quoted in Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). To them, this makes it clear that there is a demonstrable failure by the higher education leadership, to assert its core values in the midst of turbulent changes in the society.

In all the decisions that are to be made in the university, research must be in the fore front of informing policy and practice (Chiome, 2011b). Research is needed to confirm the realities on the ground so that decisions are made that address the real not perceived issues (Binsardi and
Ekwulugo, 2003). Research is also needed to chart the way forward for capacity building and many other issues that needs to be understood and analysed before solutions are worked out (Heriyono, 2009). It has to be noted that the findings in this study where the missing link is a research excellence centre headed by a research champion tries to feel a hole in the literature where Heriyono (2009) opined that universities’ research performances are still low. and Gapp and Fisher (2006)’s, ideas of achieving excellence through innovative approaches to student involvement in course evaluation within the tertiary education sector left out research excellence as was unearthed in this study. In the same vein, Nir and Zilberstein-Levy (2006)’s planning for academic excellence considered issues to do with tenure and professional considerations and less to do with excellence in research and through research.

**Making the Zimbabwe Open University a community**

There was agreement in this study from 29 staff (48%) and 189 (63%) students that workers in the university work as a family. The top echelons of the university popularised this kind of thinking.

*We are a family; this influences the achievement of quality in our university.*

*You see the Zimbabwe Open University is one big family. Now because we are present in ten regions of the country, we are slowly growing into a community. This will enhance our effectiveness.*

The idea of a university community that emerged in this study has various influences on quality. Noer (1993) says community is a concept that has diametrically opposed connotations. On one hand, it is warm, nurturing and supportive. On the other hand, it can be closed, narrow-minded and oppressive. In this case, it can stand in the way of achieving quality. This is why some respondents argued for making the Zimbabwe Open University a community centre.
Working as a Community Centre

Community responsibility was at the centre of the findings in this study. The 29 (48%) staff and 189 (63%) students acknowledged the work of academics in the community as highly responsible and most appropriate. However, they thought the missing link is that the concept could be further broadened. The respondents were of the view that the university needs to work as a community centre. These statements bear testimony:

The university working alone cannot achieve the greatest possible improvement and transformation in learning. Community responsibility is key because it takes a village to raise a child.

An ODL university must be linked to the different sections of the community it serves if the educational outcomes for all students are to be maximised.

The university and the community must work together rather than in competition with, or in isolation from, each other.

The community must look at the university to provide support and address social concerns. The Zimbabwe Open University must be the focal point of the community.

The missing link here appears to be the fact that the university and the community must work together rather than in competition with, or in isolation from, each other. In this case the university will be the focal point of the community. Manyanga (2008) point out that higher education in Tanzania covers pre-professional, technical/vocational education and training, which is imparted within post secondary institutions that admit candidates normally after completion of ordinary level secondary education. In both cases education is provided for an individual’s general functionality and gainful employability/self employability in the wider community. This is one of the reasons why respondents in this study posited that the community must look at the university to provide support and address social concerns.
Manyanga (2008) observed that the quest for quality characterises the modern world of business in all walks of life. In such a case, the provider of goods or service on one hand and the consumer or customer on the other need to agree on value for money exchanged for goods or services provided. This means the willingness to exchange is based on mutual satisfaction. The provider is keen to offer the services or goods that are saleable to the customer and the latter is willing to pay for the same upon satisfaction based on predetermined quality standards (Hodgkinson and Kelly, 2007; Manyanga, 2008; Inglis, 2008 and Mbizvo, 2011). In ODL teaching and learning setting, the institution is a provider while students and beneficiaries of the output of the institution can be seen as customers, also often referred to as stakeholders (Manyanga, 2008 and Mbizvo, 2011). This is one reason why the respondents in this study pointed out that the university and the community must work together rather than in competition with, or in isolation from, each other. These community members according to Manyanga (2008) include parents, employers, the government and the general public. To Houston (2008), for publicly funded universities, the government as a key funder of higher education is a crucial stakeholder. The education and training provider should therefore strive to meet the demands of a wide range of interested parties whose satisfaction must be assured if the service is to be considered credible (Manyanga, 2008). This is suggested as an important factor also for institutional sustainability and survival.

Community responsibility is at the centre of this finding. The point is that, the university working alone cannot achieve the greatest possible improvement and transformation in learning. Knowledge must be brought into intimate relationships with the real problems and concerns of the clients and the community the university is serving (Geelan, 2001 and Brown, 2006). Harrington, (2005) refers to this as connecting theories and thoughts to actions and
practices. Gavino, Eber and Bell (2010) recommend that institutions committed to implementing a diversity initiative conduct a pre-assessment before engaging in the formal institution-wide process. A pre-assessment effort would minimise surprises, roadblocks, and derailers (Gavino, et al., 2010). The purpose is to develop an understanding of the culture, its receptiveness to diversity initiatives, and willingness to embrace change. Understanding the internal forces, the level of openness or resistance, the sources of resistance and identifying champions will enable the process to be informed.

Belawati and Zuhairi’s (2007) case study of the Indonesia Open University is both relevant and instructive as it outlines the background to and the processes involved in developing a quality assurance system for that institution. It also acknowledges the relevance of the community. The authors of this case study emphasise that quality in ODL covers a number of aspects which include pedagogical processes, production and delivery systems and philosophy. However, they fall short of a university that works as a community centre as was uncovered in this study.

**Corporate loyalty**

It was the contention of 34 staff (64%) and 148 students (52%) in this study that corporate loyalty was a missing link in attempts to continuously improve quality in the Zimbabwe Open University. They cited staff mobility among others as one sign of lack of corporate loyalty in the university. Dominant voices in this study were clamouring for loyalty as a basis for quality in a university. They supported their arguments. Some of these voices are:

*Loyal people work harder. Loyal people serve the organisation longer.*

*Staff mobility affects the quality of educational provision in the university. It must be staffed by loyal people who stay longer.*

*This is a world of knowledge. The university’s capital is in the form of the knowledge possessed by its loyal cadres. This will influence the achievement of quality.*
The idea of loyalty that was said to be a missing link in this research, appear to be a highly contested concept as a way of ensuring quality in a learning institution. Hecksher in Clegg, Ibarra-Colado and Bueno-Rodriquez (1999) argues that the traditional emphasis on corporate loyalty was typically associated with an emphasis on conformity which often manifested itself as ‘inflexibility towards diversity’. He went further to argue that: ‘if you want loyalty get a dog.’ This may be a response to a perceived betrayal of trust. The respondents may prefer corporate loyalty but this statement may also mean that loyalty is a concept whose time has passed.

**Commitment to a continuous learning regime to build institutional commitment of service to the public**

The 56 (93%) staff respondents in this study noted the various training programmes that the university embarks on. However, they thought it was not enough since to them a commitment to a process of continuous improvement was the best way of fostering continuous quality improvement. Statements alluding to this view are:

*The employee must be committed to a process of continuous learning and the university must build institutional commitment of service to the public.*

*Learning and learning must be the motto. Even the Japanese who stated the concept are still engaged in learning.* This was an argument of one staff member in support of the continuous learning view.

*The responsibility of the employer is to provide the environment and opportunities for continuous learning that translates into service to the public.*

It is clear that training takes place in the Zimbabwe Open University but the missing link is that it has to be continuous and it has to be translated into service excellence to the public. These findings points to the need to build institutional commitment to quality. They mentioned two
critical missing links in the processes that need mentioning. Firstly, they thought current training programmes were falling short of their idea of a commitment to a process of continuous improvement which they thought was the best way of fostering continuous quality improvement. Secondly, continuous learning must translate into service excellence to the public. Thus, the idea of building institutional commitment of service to the public was muted in this study basing on the current state of affairs.

Earlier on, it was raised in this discussion that the unique and most lasting legacy of the university is excellent service to the public. Institutional commitment was seen by Koul (2005) as manifesting itself in the form of practices, objects and attitudes. This will result in staff that works to meticulously implement quality principles aimed at providing world class service to the public. Koul (2005) says it takes time to build institutional commitment. A yawning gap can be noted from Koul’s ideas. He is more worried with the institution and less with the public as was the finding in this study. In the university under study, leadership needs to be imaginative, patient and persistent to forge institutional commitment of service to the public (Thurab-Nkhosi and Marshall, 2009). The idea is to understand that the university is built, funded and maintained on behalf of the people who have invested in these state universities their hopes, their support, and more importantly their confidence. Should any institution fail to respond to public concerns, needs and problems, then it cannot reasonably expect to continue receiving the same level of support.

Institutional surrounds: Facilities modernisation

Gross under-capitalisation, dilapidated infrastructure and funding were seen as limiting university functionality. Thus, they mentioned institutional capacity or ‘institutional surrounds’
as coined by Twigg (2001). They agreed with Twigg (2001) that because expert evaluation of every course is a logical impossibility, we fall back on assessing the capacity of the institution, the ‘institutional surround,’ to deliver the course. In this regard, they mentioned facilities modernisation. Sixty staff 100% and 284 students 100% in this study saw facilities modernisation as ‘limiting the university functionality’, as one lecturer noted. They insisted that appropriate infrastructure would ‘enhance quality of processes in the Zimbabwe Open University. One senior officer of the university stated that:

The home for the Zimbabwe Open University concept that has been on the cards for a very long time is the answer to some of the missing links in fostering continuous quality improvement. The University must be housed in buildings that are of university standards. Distracters will always look down upon people who are housed in dilapidated buildings no matter how quality minded they are.

Another missing link to do with capacity was the demonstrated ability to offer the services that it says it offers. In this regard, they pointed out that funding is one source of drawback. This statement from a staff member who appeared to have inside information appear to support this view:

The university is grossly under-capitalised. As a result it cannot meet basic things such as module production and printing of individual results. The university is not simply broke, it is broken. A student complained that:

We are not getting student loans from the government as is happening in other universities. This affects our ability to pay for our courses.

The missing link related to inadequate funding appeared to be a hot bed as respondents saw adequate funding as contributing significantly to quality. This issue of funding is not confined to the Zimbabwe Open University alone as in Zambia, Siaciwena and Lubinda (2008) found out that partly because of inadequate political support, open and distance learning institutions in Zambia are greatly crippled by lack of financial support. Another missing link tied to the idea of
under-funding was the need for adequate budgetary support for the Zimbabwe Open University.

Statements to that effect were:

The government must give the Zimbabwe Open University the long overdue budgetary allocations that it not only desperately needs but rightly deserves. The backlog of un-built regional centres means that a stimulus budgetary package is needed. The Public Sector Investment programme (PSIP) funds must be channelled towards making the Zimbabwe Open University a world class university.

From these submissions, funding was seen as one major missing link that undermines quality. In this direction, because the Zimbabwe Open University is a state funded institution, this research has roped in the state as a promoter of any cultural shift in the educational dispensation (Jacobs, 2008). If the state is half hearted as was the case in this study in which conventional universities appeared to take state priority and gained more funding, recognition and visibility than an ODL institution, the missing links unearthed will remain in force for longer than is necessary. Campbell in Poley and France (1998) argue that any publicly funded institution will forget at their own peril that they are entities of their respective states and that citizens now expect that high quality, affordable education can increasingly be available conveniently on a lifelong basis. There is need for cultural shift first in the government policies pertaining to the provision of education through open and distance means (Siaciwena, 2011).

In a study in Uganda Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010) found out that the number of students overwhelmed available resources, such as books, Internet access, and study space. Digital resources, which a number of universities subscribe to, were available, but due to low Internet bandwidth, impatient students gave up before they could access the material they wanted. In some institutions in Uganda, the ratio of students to computers was so high that the scramble to access a computer becomes an obstacle to peaceful learning and research (Basaza, Milman and
Wright (2010). Distance education, may, in part, address the enrolment and space pressures occurring at face-to-face institutions, but distance students will also need access to technological resources making funding a critical area.

The lack of funding affects many areas such as lecturers’ living and working conditions (Manyanga, 2008). Because of heavy workloads (Mukeredzi and Ndamba, 2007), tight budgets and other funding shortcomings (Moses, 2007), lecturers in the university under study have very little time for research activities and fail to attend research workshops where their skills could be improved. A university needs to have adequate funds (Manyanga, 2008) to offer grants to students, support educational and research activities, implement goals and strategies, and renovate the various campuses (Chickering and Gamson, in Chen, Sok and Sok 2007). According to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (2010), a budget should be allocated to students to build stronger commitment and obligations to their study, to research activities, to faculty members and staff, to building renovation, and to facilities modernisation. This budget mainly comes from government funding, tuition fees, public donation, and research. The questions were not only on how to maintain quality but also how it can be enhanced in order to tackle increasing complexity of knowledge with minimal increment in costs (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). The capacity to deliver quality appears to be constrained by funding.

**Being strategic is about deliberate practice**

The 2005-2009, and the 2010-2015 Zimbabwe Open University strategic plans have been seen as ways of fostering continuous quality improvement by the respondents in this study. Both 44 staff (73%) and 122 students (43%) saw the plans as ways of influencing the achievement of quality. However, there are other missing links that they thought were not addressed in the plans. To them:
Being strategic is more than strategic planning it is about deliberate practice and the Zimbabwe Open University falls short in that direction.

There is need to move away from mere planning to real, effective and sustained practice based on those plans. Strategic intent is there in the university. What is left is the need to move away from the strategic intent to deliberate and sustained practice.

On one hand, the respondents in this study applauded the 2005-2009 and the 2010-2015 ZOU strategic plans, pointing that this was a clear indication that management was concerned about finding lasting ways of fostering continuous quality improvement in the university under study. However, to them, being strategic is more than strategic planning it is about deliberate practice and the university under study appear to fall short in that direction. Taking cognisance of the fact that educational processes are quite different from those of industry, especially with a long lead time of at least three years to see its effects in the graduating students of higher education, careful planning is required for a successful cost-effective quality implementation (Venkatraman, 2007). It is a fact that funders of educational programmes, the government, the public, and the business community would be concerned about the return they receive on their investments in education (Materu, 2007). Strategic intent is there in the university. What is left is the need to move away from the strategic intent to deliberate and sustained practice. This is what funders want on top of the intent.

For this reason, meticulous plans coupled with excellence in execution were seen as contributing to quality of products, processes and outcomes. Long-term planning is supposed to determine objectives for the future. This can bring problems in an ODL setting. Elsewhere in this study, respondents opined that ODL need innovative leadership because it is of many gains and hues such that there is no one way of meeting these unique challenges. It is therefore difficult to achieve distance goals in innovative and complex environments like ODL. Thus, this finding may be taken with caution. Mintzberg in Poley and France (1998) posits that strategies
cannot be planned because planning is about analysis and strategy is about synthesis. To him, planning by its very nature defines and preserves categories. Creativity by its very nature creates categories or rearranges existing ones (Poley and France, 1998). This is why strategic planning can neither provide creativity nor deal with it when it emerges by other means. Rather, the aim must be to lead, drive and help people embrace quality.

Temple (2005) argued that this quality higher education variant is in the tradition of what he called the planned approach to organisational change, or organisation development. Planned-approach ideas generally focused on two principles: evaluation of the current problems, actions and situation of organisation; and using this information to solve the organisation problems (Temple, 2005). Meanwhile, these premises have been criticised because of two reasons: their perceived shortcomings in achieving operational improvements and too much emphasis on a linear relationship in observing and planning of organisation improvement. Planned approaches do not consider the issues of power, chance, opportunism, and accident as influential in shaping organisation outcomes (Mehralizadeh & Safaeemoghaddam 2010), where being strategic is about deliberate practice.

The most damaging sin is unilateralism: patience pays

An interesting missing link in this study from 30 (50%) staff and 207 (73%) students that quality initiatives are unilateral was captured in the following interview excerpts:

Unilateralism was the most damaging sin that is committed by those leading quality initiatives. They fall in the same old trap ofinitiating change without consulting those affected. To them the right thing is to negotiate quality. The following excerpts from a student appear to support this stance:

If quality is to thrive, it must be with and not for students, staff and other stakeholders. The idea is to initiate change in educational practice through allowing key stakeholders to have real voice and become partners in the change.
In this regard, they contented, it is wiser to be patient since, according to one respondent, *patience pays*. The following except appear to point to this idea:

*The level of changes, complex relationships and the outcomes that are required to enable quality to take shape and achieve real changes in students are simply too time consuming that they cannot happen overnight. This calls for the need to be patient.*

The need to be patient was further heightened by what one respondent called the *paradoxical nature of quality*. This finding which appears to have far reaching consequences for attaining and sustaining quality in the Zimbabwe Open University merely points to the fact that if one is not careful and patient as suggested by the respondents in this study, then one will not realise the *self-contradictory qualities in quality*. This is the paradoxical nature of quality and this paradoxical nature of quality was raised in this study. A respondent argued that:

*Educational quality assurance is a paradoxical journey in many ways.*

The paradoxical nature of quality was supported by Tee Ng who saw it as both the “saviour” and the “devil” (Tee Ng 2008:122). In a bifurcated institution like the university understudy, it can drive certain performance standards at the national centre and then also go on to drive undesirable behaviours at the regional level, contrary to what it professes to achieve. One can possibly foresee a certain big emerging picture from quality assurance initiatives. But one can hardly predict the nature of the individual local responses. The real outcomes of quality assurance efforts are positive and negative concurrently, predictable and unpredictable at the same time (Tee Ng 2008). These are not contradictions but rather are paradoxes that help one to appreciate the dynamics of quality assurance better.

Another paradox of quality assurance is that it is often concurrently centralisation and decentralisation, especially in a bifurcated institution like the university under study. The national centre has repeatedly stated its intention to decentralise its power to the regions to
encourage diversity and innovation. However, the national centre still carries a great responsibility for achieving university wide outcomes and providing high value for public money (ZOU, 2010). Thus, there is a need to ensure accountability and standards. So, the situation in the university under study is much more accurately described as a paradoxical form of centralised decentralisation. On one hand, the university attempts to decentralise power, give autonomy and devolve responsibilities to the regions. On the other hand, there is a risk of declining educational standards once university controls are lessened, hence the need for a robust quality assurance system, to insure against the loss of control and facilitate authoritative communication and managerial scrutiny (Watkins, Quoted in Inglis, 2008).

The issue of negotiated quality was raised alongside the paradoxical journey. There are lessons to be learnt from the past. Doing quality improves quality (Doherty, 2008). Talking about it or trying to impose it does not. Managers and leaders need to reflect more carefully than is their wont (established custom) on the purposes and procedures of QA in education (Doherty 2008).

At least Williams (2008, p. 19) appears to have the last word:

[. . .] the biggest challenge of all remains: how to win the hearts and minds of the ordinary academic, how to shift the perception of quality assurance from one of external policing or central control to one of internalised, individual, professional academic responsibility, bringing with it the wish, intention and means to do even better by one’s students. Will this take another ten years? – at least. Holy grails do sometimes take a while to find.

Thus, as noted by Kleijnen, et al, (2011), quality management often gives rise to standardisation and control, which may collide with the need for adaptation to new developments, innovation and individual professional accountability. In the quality paradoxical journey, the key question is whether quality management contributes to learning process and to improvement of education or merely “feeds the beast of bureaucracy” (Newton, 2000) by creating burdensome but futile
management procedures and paperwork. Kleijnen, et al, (2011) argue that advocates of quality management frequently resort to education and management rhetoric and claim wonderful beneficial effects for the quality of higher education. Reality, however, can hardly meet these wonderful claims and therefore the adversaries often spawn equally impassioned counter-rhetoric (Ahaus, cited in Kleijnen, et al, (2011). This is the paradoxical journey that was unearthed in this study.

**Summary and conclusion of missing links in university wide practices**

This section sets the stage for missing links in university wide practices and prompts the reader to rethink about how the processes and practices in the university under study will impact the future of distance education. Missing links in shifting philosophies, assumptions regarding learning, new models of education and technology that led to reconceptualisation of both the teacher and the learner were discussed. The section illustrated from a global development perspective, how university-level distance education has shifted. Not only does it bridge special barriers to education; it also accommodates the lifestyle and personal circumstances of students. It also have to be noted that post-industrial online learning embraces new pedagogical approaches and enables student-centeredness, collaborative study, and constructivist learning opportunities. Why and how online learning intersects with new technologies and constructivist epistemologies were explored as missing links.

There are two groups of variables captured in this section. These are university context variables and internal university variables. Some missing links to emerge in this section of the fourth objective include the need for process integrity in a bifurcated environment because of the effects of two power centres; university charter must become an integral point of reference
in ensuring service excellence for students across the institution. There is scramble for resources and failure to link heightening of quality with cost effectiveness of programmes. Quality measures and accountabilities appeared missing yet what gets measured gets done. Department of quality assurance is now ‘fully-bodied and rich’ but should realise that academics are not passive recipients of management objectives, but in fact makers and shapers of the policy its wings need to be spread further so that it has capacity to drive university wide quality culture and be able to sell the university vision and mission. Fostering professional growth appears not to be planned, diarised and implemented at all times through professional training days. Quality appears not to be integrated with other initiatives yet quality initiatives must be part and parcel of the institutional processes. Rich, communicative relationships appeared missing.

Also missing is ability to foster quality relationships through lessons learnt forum that include feedback on quality threats; an inbuilt quality monitoring mechanism that ensure meticulous implementation of quality initiatives and excellence in research and through research. A coherent curriculum was said to be the life blood of a university academic programme because it is the curriculum that sets a university apart from its competitors yet the university appeared failing to assign higher value to quality curriculum construction that also include on demand examinations; more learner-centered instruction; integrity of the examination grades and socially relevant programmes that addresses the needs of the students promptly. The university appeared to be failing to establish a research excellence centre headed by what respondents called a research champion whose purpose is to promote, recognise, reward and stimulate research and scholarship and making the Zimbabwe Open University a community. Corporate loyalty was seen as debatable. Loyal people work harder and serve the organisation longer but
emphasis on conformity manifests itself as ‘inflexibility towards diversity’ rendering it a concept overtaken by events.

Other missing links in university wide practices are that infrastructure was limiting the university functionality such that distracters will always look down upon people who are housed in dilapidated buildings no matter how quality minded they are. There appear to be gross under-capitalisation and stimulus budgetary package. Investing in strategic effort where strategic planning is about deliberate practice, is real, effective and sustained practice based on those plans was seen as missing. The most damaging sin though appeared to be unilateralism yet quality must be with and not for people. The paradoxical nature of quality calls for patience to counter self-contradictory qualities in quality. The next and last section on data presentation, analysis and discussion looks at suppressed voices of quality in an ODL context.

4.3.4.3 Suppressed voices working as silent assassins of quality

One question in the questionnaire and interviews asked the question:

*What other missing links do you think hinder the process of fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University?*

An interesting finding from this question is that 53 (88%) staff and 230 (81%) student respondents believe that there are suppressed voices that negatively affect quality. Although there was no specific objective directed at such views they were an off-shoot of this study. They came from the question which was in both questionnaires and interviews which asked: Which critical missing links are important to consider in fostering continuous quality improvement in ODL? The resultant responses appeared to be too loud to ignore since what is perceived as lack of quality may be nothing more than damaging attitudes towards ODL. The question resulted in unearthing some major missing links that appeared to be suppressed voices of quality in ODL.
These act as change inhibitors. They have been labelled *silent assassins of quality* by one respondent. This section will look at these voices of quality that have often been ignored that this research unearthed. Their direct consequence according to one respondent is the *steady loss of motivation to improve quality*. Flexibility in qualitative research permits one to go beyond the stated objectives.

**Entrenched mental models: Damaging attitudes towards ODL**

An important finding from 200 (70%) of students and 50 (83%) of staff unearthed by this study was the damaging attitudes towards ODL. These were seen as affecting values and practices in the university. There were far more damaging attitudes to quality than those that promote it. These statements were extracted from the interviews and may be just a tip of the iceberg:

> *The need is there to change attitudes values and practices that have become reutilised. Some damaging attitudes are destroying the image of the university. These must be discarded.*

Research has shown that on average, most countries allocate just 0.002 of their national budget to ODL despite the great strides it has made in increasing access to quality education across the globe (Siaciwena, 2011). Kleijnen et al, (2011) opines that quality management is a delicate process that is subject to competing values and strong ambivalences. In this regard, its effects in terms of improvement of educational quality are controversial.

Some of the manifestations of these damaging attitudes are seen through the otherness of the university, the otherness of its students, the low status accorded to distance education and the belief that learning equals face-to-face teaching. This is being promoted by a close knit highly conservative old boys’ clique from conventional universities. Some of these manifestations are discussed below:
The otherness of open and distance learning

The otherness of open and distance learning, its students and its staff is damaging all the very good work that is going into quality in an open and distance education context. Faced with this kind of construction, one regional campus in this study lost 15 (60%) of staff to a conventional university in a space of two years. They left an open and distance teaching university not because there was no quality but in order to shrug off the otherness tag. Only one staff member who was on a temporary contract in the conventional university transferred in the opposite direction. Thus, there appears to be construction of ODL as other; construction of the staff in ODL as other and construction of the students in ODL as other. There appears to be manifestations of construction of the ODL system, the staff in ODL and ODL students as other. Siaciwena (2011) says ODL is considered inferior in most circles and it is under-funded. As Law (1997) argues, distance learning may seem to offer attractive short-term gains – but student success and course/institutional credibility rest on the resolution of fundamental and longer-term quality issues.

The otherness of ODL emanates from conservatives who fail to appreciate that learning paradigms are changing. Brown (2006) posits that learning paradigms are already starting to shift beyond the changes experienced in the 20th century in terms of the role of teaching and learning. While the role of the teacher first shifted from ‘‘teaching’’ to ‘‘learning facilitation’’, the latest shift is towards ‘‘facilitated and supported enquiry’’. Soloway (2003), for example, argues that inquiry into authentic questions generated from student experiences is now the central strategy for teaching. Therefore contemporary educational paradigms where ODL is in the driving seat focus not only on the production of knowledge, but are beginning to focus more and more on the
effective application/integration/manipulation/etc. of existing information and knowledge (Brown, 2006). Unfortunately this is being sidelined in favour of conventional systems.

In a study in India by Gogoi and Hazarika (2011) some interesting findings on awareness of the college students on different aspects of ODL were deduced from the data. Only 12% of the respondents agreed that the degrees awarded by ODL institutions and those by the conventional institutions are equivalent. Majority of the respondents (about 70%) opined that the students who pass through conventional mode get priority in the job market. About 57% of the respondents agreed that only non-meritorious students go for distance education. With this kind of thinking, quality in ODL may be a different battle field altogether. This seems so since Hunt (1998) posits that in 1998 distance learning at Sheffield University was at that time struggling to establish its respectability as a field of academic study arguing that the process and context of study form part of the content of study, and personal development is a stated aim. Thus, the introduction of the course was clearly politically and academically significant, with financial considerations a poor second.

This otherness appears to be discrimination which may be a monster under the bed that impinges on quality efforts in an ODL context. After all, generally speaking, quality is a matter of negotiation between the different stakeholders or parties concerned about the expectations and requirements, which is a fitness for the purposes which are most frequently defined in terms of criteria related to academic standards, financial effectiveness, and social usefulness (Tarawneh, 2011).
The most detrimental part was that of the otherness of the university coming from society. There are also researchers who argue that while universities can and do make a difference in terms of quality, what they can achieve is partial and limited because educational institutions are also part of the wider society, subject to its norms, rules and influences (Mortimore, 1997). In some studies in schools, Reynolds and Packer (1992) paint a gloomier picture when they allege that schools have an independent of only 8-15% on student outcomes. Modern science in early modern Europe was born not without a struggle (Giddy, 2012). Thus, with this kind of thinking, if societal attitudes are not addressed then the quality debate in an ODL context is still far from being settled despite internal efforts to the contrary. The poor attitudes students may have towards distance education could be addressed through sensitisation, orientation, and the provision of tool kits that help users to study at a distance (Chiome, 2011a). Prospective students must be informed that distance education is not easy; rather, it requires self-discipline. The public-at-large could be informed about the benefits of distance education: It is not only cost-effective but also enables people to study where they live and to contribute to their families and communities as they study (Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010). In the words of Mbizvo (2011) ‘ODL has a distinct advantage in that it reaches out to all levels of society and tackles geographical challenges in education’ (Mbizvo, 2011, p. 5)

The otherness of the students in ODL

The otherness of the students of the Zimbabwe Open University appears to affect quality. Students even voiced concern that they are being ignored in important government programmes. They cited the following:
There are no H.I.V. and Aids grants from the government, the National Aids Council and the Non Governmental organisation for distance education students.

There are no student loans and grants for us as the Zimbabwe Open University students. It appears as though some universities are using political clout to get advantages that are unavailable to competitors.

The computerisation programme by His Excellence got the rounds in all universities, teachers colleges and secondary schools except ours.

It appears as though some universities are using political clout to get advantages that are unavailable to the university under study. Ural (2007)’s students in his study do not have clear views about the concept of independent learning and they seem to be distant to the thought that distance education encourage students to become self-planning and independent learning type students. The findings of the study show that the students do not feel very enthusiastic about being sidelined in important programmes by the state and other players. This may explain the otherness of distance education students.

One touching example that was given was that the Ministry of Education at one time instructed all its arms that no graduate with a degree in educational management is eligible to apply for the Education Officer post. One student complained:

_How on earth can a graduate in Physics or Shona or Religious Education for that matter out-compete me to become my Provincial Education Director (PED)? Where did that person learn about performance management, staff development, strategic planning and so forth?_

Another one shared this secret:

_A whole intake of a Masters degree in public health at a local conventional university had its offer letters withdrawn after the vice-chancellor discovered that 12 out 15 of the successful applicants were the Zimbabwe Open University graduates._

The other one wrote:
I do not understand if they say my educational planning, measurement and evaluation and Supervision of educational personnel is not enough to make me an education officer!

The others also questioned why qualifications were so downgraded by individuals without through knowledge of ODL. What appears missing is the fact that much of the e-learning 2.0 movement is geared to affordances of new technologies and software for such purposes as providing full and flexible access to a global network of resources delivered onto the desktops and laptops of students and faculty (Doiron and Asselin, 2011). Further, models such as learning commons spaces, collaboratories, and virtual learning communities springing up in various guises, indicate that learning in tertiary institutions has reached a point of no return in its transformation (Barone, 2005). What this means is that the cumulative advances and innovations in digital technologies, coupled with the evidence that learners entering tertiary education today have changed fundamentally in their learning needs/styles (Rowlands and Nicholas, 2008), should be enough evidence to awaken us to the realities of new learning landscapes which are emerging around us (Clark, Logan, Mee and Oliver, 2009). Thus, it may be hard to accept but it is the reality that as the first generation to have grown up always having the Internet, new media, and access to many learning opportunities, today’s educators are faced with growing evidence that the traditional methods of teaching and learning are disconnected from current student motivations and learning styles (Doiron and Asselin, 2011). It should be made clear that while universities look toward the horizon for direction in digital learning environments (Johnson, Levine, Smith and Stone, 2010); students are living these trends (Kanwar, 2011).

Life in a marginalised university

Several respondents in this study lamented the kind of life they lived in what the study will call a marginal university. One respondent indicated that her parents had pre-conceptions regarding distance education. She indicated that:
'They consistently discouraged me telling me to go to a better conventional university.'

Another respondent who is a PhD student said she failed to get a PhD place at a prominent conventional university where her husband is teaching. The reason given by the husband was that:

‘You are a product of an upper top.’ Apparently ‘upper top’ refers to rural day secondary schools that are notorious for sub standard education brought about by lack of adequate educational resources. The following excerpt sums this issue:

*The Zimbabwe Open University is certain to fail if left on the periphery and treated as a marginal university.*

What these highly acclaimed professionals fail to appreciate is that the world is moving from knowledge management to sense making. According to Brown, (2006) an emerging paradigm shift within management and information sciences suggests that the focus should in future shift from knowledge management to sense making. Snowden (2005, p. 16) describes sense making as:

. . .the way that humans choose between multiple possible explanations of sensory and other input as they seek to conform the phenomenological with the real in order to act in such a way as to determine or respond to the world around them.

He then continues to say that it is about ensuring cognitive effectiveness in information processing in order to gain a cognitive edge or advantage. This trend makes a lot of sense when we think about the difficulties we all experience in our daily work and life due to the abundance of information and interaction that requires us to apply new skills in order to manage our environments meaningfully (Brown, 2006).

**Low status accorded to Distance Education**

This study further unearthed that there are deep-seated prejudices against distance education. These then cascades to students and staff. Some supporting statements were:
The association of distance education with the less privileged contribute considerably to its low status in university rankings.

The low status of distance education is demonstrated as much by its absence from some universities as by its presence in others.

In terms of funding, the Zimbabwe Open University is given low status. It occupies inferior rented facilities.

The Zimbabwe Open University is delegated to the domain of inferior education. These assertions that the operations of the Zimbabwe Open University are seen as peripheral activities were also confirmed through observation. All the campuses visited had facilities that are not suitable for university business. One such regional campus was bundled in a single house. The low status given to distance education emanates from the fact that many people fail to appreciate what it really is. According to Moore (1997) it has been pointed out that in any educational programme, even in face-to-face education, there is some transactional distance. Seen in this way, distance education is a subset of the universe of education, and distance educators can draw on, and contribute to, the theory and practice of conventional education. Nevertheless, in what we normally refer to as distance education, the separation of teacher and learner is sufficiently significant that the special teaching-learning strategies and techniques they use can be identified as distinguishing characteristics of this family of educational practice (Moore, 1997). Furthermore, according to Ural (2007) campus-based traditional universities have difficulty in providing a good quality education due to crowded classrooms. As a result, to lighten the capacity load of traditional universities, distance education lectures can be part of the solution (Ural, 2007). Gogoi and Hazarika (2011) further point out that it has been found in their study in India that the present scenario of the level of awareness and attitude of the college students towards ODL system is not very encouraging. Unless the students are aware about the merits and
accessibility of the ODL system and form a healthy attitude towards it, it will not be possible
to attain equity and access of the higher education, which is the need of the hour (Gogoi and
Hazarika, 2011).

**Learning equals face to face interaction**

The assertion that how can a teaching/learning process that deviates so markedly from what has
been practiced for hundreds of years embody quality education? (American Federation of
Teachers (AFT), 2000:7) was also confirmed in this study if these statements are anything to go by.

*There are still people who believe that learning is like a person standing in front of a room stuffing information into students like grain into a hen.*

*Some people laughed at me thinking that to learn is the same as spoon feeding.*

*My friends think face to face is the best way of learning. They say there are too many possibilities, too little time and to little investments in distance education that will not match the same time same place initiatives.*

As respondents in this study grapples with the acceptance of ODL, others elsewhere have seen
the light. For instance Brown (2006) posits that new information technologies, and particularly
the Internet, are dramatically transforming access to information, are changing the learning and
research process, how we search, discover, teach and learn. On the other hand, Restak (2003, p.
57) points out that, within the modern age, we must be able to rapidly process information,
function amidst chaotic surroundings, always remain prepared to shift rapidly from one activity
to another and redirect attention between competing tasks without losing time.

The need to promote learner centered education becomes imperative. According to Brown
(2006), a distinction between teacher-centeredness and learner-centeredness lies in the
responsibility accepted for the learner’s learning process and learning achievement. In a teacher-centered paradigm which is characteristics of face-to-face engagements, the teacher accepts this responsibility. Opposed to that, in a learner-centered education paradigm that ODL need to promote, the learner accepts the full responsibility for his/her own learning. It is for this reason that self-directed learning plays such an important role in effective learner-centered education system that is characteristic of ODL institutions. Note however, that according to Brown (2006), this does not mean that the teacher or educational institution has no responsibility. The focus shifts towards the instructional design of a conducive learning environment, in which effective learning can take place. The learning equal face-to-face mentality has been rebuked by Doiron and Asselin (2011) who posit that youth growing up during the past few years have had unique experiences and cultural influences such that they may have developed methods of learning out of step with how we traditionally structure and provide education in situations where access to digital technologies is more common and more deeply penetrated throughout the whole society.

Old boys’ network’s invisible hand of power

The old boys’ network from conventional universities uses its invisible hand of power to fuel the damaging attitudes towards distance education. This network is too conservative to accept that learning is no longer associated with spoon feeding but that open and distance mode is the new thing. Some of the substantiating statements are:

The belief that distance education is part time learning and not full time is putting breaks on quality. They prescribe outmoded business and administrative systems. Politics and priorities in higher education are based on the University of Zimbabwe’s prescriptions. Same set of people make the rules of the game in higher education and go on to administer the rules as well. Unfortunately they lack the knowledge of open and distance education including its challenges and prospects.

ODL must contend with the poor reputation created for distance education by the correspondence courses offered by some conventional institutions code named block
release. These are poor quality operations with shoddy learning materials and minimal student support. They are merely used as cash cows to subsidise on-campus operations. The old boys’ network appears to have an invisible hand of power. Power is intimately tied to knowledge, to the discourse of education and learning, and the production of truth, myths or deceptions (Foucault, 1980). To Foucault (1980), power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. The same set of people makes the rules of the game in higher education and go on to administer the rules as well. Unfortunately they lack the knowledge of open and distance education including its challenges and prospects (Minocha, 2009). It means to say the Zimbabwe Open University must contend with the poor reputation created for distance education by the correspondence courses offered by some conventional institutions code named block releases. Block-releases have been labelled by respondents in this study as poor quality operations with shoddy learning materials and minimal student support that are merely used as cash cows to subsidise on-campus operations. The truth of the matter is that the old boys must come to grips with the fact and reality that “new learners” (Gapp and Fisher, 2006) need to be better prepared to live and work in a digital world and that educators need to be careful that education does not remain “fixed in monomodal instruction with homogenised lesson plans, curriculum, and pedagogy . . .” (Kellner, 2004, p. 14). As a result, the literature on new practices in education at a distance is, “like the practice, scarce, scattered, buried and extremely diverse” (Yates, cited in Perraton 1997). Dodd’s (cited in Chiome, 2011a) appeal that the urgency of the governments to seek ways to harness the powers of distance learning which are becoming internationally recognised for higher levels of education seems to have been ignored.
Shock and injury resulting from differing constructions of reality

An important finding of the study which appears to be suppressed in open and distance learning contexts is the shock and injury experienced by both students and staff. This is as a result of different constructions of the reality on the ground. These assertions from one part time academic appear to support this kind of experience:

I had delivered one of the best lectures one day basing on my own judgment. I felt at the time that I had given my best and felt that I was succeeding as a distance educator. However, I experienced the shock of my life to hear that the students went to the Regional Director to complain that they were so frustrated by my presentation that they wanted to drop out! I was actually hurt and frustrated that I nearly dropped out of the system myself. So what you may see as a threat to quality may be just another opinion from a different angle. What counted as success for me was seen as dismal failure by the students.

This important finding of the study which appears to be suppressed in open and distance learning contexts is the shock and injury experienced by both students and staff. This is as a result of different constructions of the reality on the ground. However, one respondent shot down this and reasoned that what you may see as a threat to quality may be just another opinion from a different angle. What counts as success for one person can be seen as dismal failure by another. What is needed in this case is what some respondents in this study called image building.

Binsardi and Ekwulugo, (2003)’s findings that universities must seek to re-position themselves in order to improve their image and reputation was collaborated in this research in which the Zimbabwe Open University image was dealt a severe blow by damaging attitudes. The meaning of marketing has evolved over time but the most enduring theme in these developments has been the centrality of the customer in the decisions of the organisation (Maringe, 2005).
Marketing is a term that describes any exchange relationship to ensure that parties in this relationship derive the maximum benefit from the exchange. Institutions however differ in the extent to which they conceptualise and implement the marketing idea and the Zimbabwe Open University appears to blame for this deterioration in its image. The product orientation concept adopted by Kotler in Maringe (2005) can minimise the damage. Kotler quoted in Maringe (2005) considers product orientation as being driven by a need to offer the highest quality, performance and innovative features. Universities all over the world pride themselves in being excellent at what they do and in delivering quality products and programmes of the highest standards (Anderson, 2006 and AAU. 2009). Unfortunately, standards for this quality and excellence are usually internally determined and assumed to be what the customers want or need (Fuller, and Smith, 1991; Lomas, 2007 and Maguad, 2010). Lessons from this study point to a paradigm shift in this regard.

Brown’s (2006) advice to ODL institutions that they should move away from providing content per se to learners but should focus on coaching learners to find, identify, manipulate and evaluate information and knowledge, to integrate this knowledge in their world of work and life, to solve problems and to communicate this knowledge to others may appear farfetched but is relevant to ODL institutions if they are to claim their rightful place. Learners should be connected and networking in various ways in the digital age. Thus, in this regard, Gogoi and Hazarika (2011)’s advice that the funding authorities may allot a sizeable amount of fund for promoting ODL among people, and that the ODL institutions should also spend a portion of their earning for making the people aware and developing a healthy attitude in them. Highlights of the achievements of the students of ODL system should receive serious attention in ODL institutions.
Knowledge power struggles

A major finding of this study and one with the most far reaching consequences for quality is the struggle for knowledge power that has affected quality in an ODL context. It has been seen that knowledge is a critical component of societal interaction. This scenario appears not surprising as Ticoll (2010) noted that the dispersion of political power has matched hand in hand with the dispersion of control over knowledge. The definition and organisation of knowledge in society is a consequence of the distribution of power in that society. Some of the revelations from those that are privy to the debate are:

*If knowledge is power as is said, then it follows that some forms of knowledge are more powerful than others. It is no accident that the least powerful forms of knowledge are those taught to the least valued groups in society and are those associated with open and distance learning.*

*In our education system, monopolies and oligopolies of knowledge have been built up to support those on the defensive. Open and distance learning must move in fast to strengthen the position of those on the offensive. If it fails to win this war, then it is fighting a losing battle. In this case, the quality that you are looking for will always be there but with a question mark.*

To add assault to injury, a student quoted one prominent academic who once publicly declared that:

*‘In Zimbabwe there are only two universities-the University of Zimbabwe and others.’*

Apparently in reality, Zimbabwe had more than a dozen universities when this statement was made by those with the power to label and go on to make sure that the label sticks! It is clear that the people with influence and power tend to define their own knowledge as superior and then go further to institutionalise it in the education system (Foucault, 1980 and Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). They will measure educational quality in terms of this definition. In this way,
power and privilege remain within the same social group (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). This scenario appears not surprising as Ticoll (2010) noted that the dispersion of political power has matched hand in hand with the dispersion of control over knowledge.

This is so because respondents in this study believed that in our education system, monopolies and oligopolies of knowledge have been built up to support those on the defensive. Open and distance learning must move in fast to strengthen the position of those on the offensive. If it fails to win this war, then it is fighting a losing battle. In this case, the quality that this study was seeking will always be there but with a question mark! According to Harvey and Newton (2004, p. 157), quality has “contributed little to any effective transformation of the student learning experience”. Negative effects emerge from a strong emphasis on external control and overestimating accountability. In this regard, this might provoke a shift of power from the departments to the institutional level and to government (Newton, cited in Kleijnen, et al, 2011).

The bone of hegemony in respect of knowledge is the exercise of power over what counts as knowledge (Doherty, 2008). It is very well gnawed. The same is true of quality. Quality is taken as a status game in the academia world. Most players will adopt the stance that the superiority of academic values over market values is a given, so that the application of a market-derived methodology to academia will have negative effects – more or less by definition. Cartwright (2007, p. 290) claims that, because of the QA agenda “sickness or pathology” has “befallen” academia. Staying with this confusion of methodology with values, one could equally argue that sociologists, Marxist literary critics and other writers have enjoyed excellent profits from the “theory” business for a couple of generations and, as a result, “sickness or pathology” has befallen the discipline of quality (Doherty, 2008). The most important thing to note is that the
quality issue is more than an academic argument about definitions of meaning. There is the question of who gets what from the paymaster’s limited pot and why (Doherty, 2008). Paymasters generally expect to gain satisfaction from what they are paying for. In principle, it matters little whether the paymaster is the parent, the employer, the student or the government. The argument is the same, it is the exercise of power on what counts as knowledge and what counts as quality. What people involved in the power struggles fail to appreciate is the fact that they inflict untold shock and injury to both staff and students.

Moore and Kearsley (1996) maintained that special instructional design and communication procedures can overcome barriers of distance in education and promote individualised instruction and improved satisfaction with distance education. They proposed a definition of distance education that places increased emphasis on the organisation and design of distance education:

Distance education is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result it requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organisational and administrative arrangements (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 2).

Thus, in distance education, there is need to consider Louis and her colleagues (cited in Hayes, et al., 2004) who argue that reform proposals over emphasise the structural elements of restructuring and overlook the need to improve the culture, climate and interpersonal relationships in learning institutions which are as critical to the success of any change agenda.

Summary and conclusion of the sub-section on suppressed voices

Some very glaring missing links were unearthed in this section. Suppressed voices of quality in the university working as change inhibitors are in effect, silent assassins of quality; there were far more damaging attitudes to quality than those that promote it. Some of the manifestations of
these damaging attitudes were seen through the otherness of the university and its students, the low status accorded to distance education and the belief that learning equals face-to-face teaching. The invisible hand of power from a close knit highly conservative old boys’ clique from conventional universities appeared to fuel this. In consequence, factors such as those discussed in this last section of the last objective of the study not only influencing the working and learning environment of ODL staff and students but simultaneously become the subject of their study. ODL cannot therefore fulfil its purpose – i.e. its quality is not measurable – without reference to these factors some of which are inflicting shock and injury to the staff and students.

4.5 SUMMARY

This chapter discussed the findings of the study. It tried to put the findings in the context of the theory that directed this study. Where the theory depicted weaknesses, relevant literature that is in tandem with the theory was consulted. The message though was consistent throughout that open and distance education managers and academics still do not understand that quality is something you do, not wrangle about, that to have a positive effect it needs to be motivated by the desire of the whole organisation including support staff and students to create the best student learning experiences within the available resources. Rabasso and Rabasso’s (2010) opine the major contribution a university can make to a free society is by preserving its independence as an institution committed to the free exchange of ideas, to critical analysis, to experimentation, to exploration of a wide range of ideas and values, to the study of the consequences in terms of values that are themselves subject to careful scrutiny. The next chapter, the last one in this study, summaries the research and its findings, then go on to make conclusions based on the findings discussed in this chapter and then make recommendations for practice, further research and open up gaps for others to pursue this study using different spectacles.
CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This study brought to light missing links on the conditions that promote continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University, theoretically informed by interrogating practices. The state of affairs was excavated, exposed and discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter takes the debate on and the quest for quality in ODL further by presenting the summary of the findings of this study. Having scanned through the findings of the study, the chapter reaches conclusions derived from the findings. The crucial missing links that promise the flowing of a culture of quality in open and distance learning will be presented in this chapter as recommendations. The idea is to outline the road map that may help ODL institutions in general and the university under study in particular and other similar institutions to attain their goals of providing quality, relevant, socially acceptable and globally recognised qualifications.

5.2 RESEARCH SUMMARY

This study started with controversial question regarding the missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an ODL context by interrogating practices in an ODL institution. It was a case study gathering data from a purposive sample of 344 staff and students. Of these, 24 staff and 40 students were interviewed and 280 staff and students completed a questionnaire for this research. Observations were also made in the four regions that were included in this study and content analysis of documents was made.
The main intellectual contribution underpinning this research and its realisation is that the concept of quality has been found to be multifaceted and value-laden, and various stakeholders who represent key groups in society, including government, employers and the professions, students and staff, the management of the educational institutions and the general public, place emphasis on different dimensions of the concept. Although quality has generally been defined as the extent to which the product meets customer expectations, its application in an open and distance education context has been difficult as ODL institutions have variety of customers including students, staff, professional bodies, employers, government, sponsors and society in general. Prioritising and balancing the needs of these diversified customers with different sometimes conflicting expectations and interpretations of quality has long been a challenge for defining and measuring quality in a consistent and comprehensive manner (Raban, 2007).

In this regard, the findings of this study can be seen as “a negotiated quality” that is used to draw the map way of continuous quality improvement in an ODL institution in a new era of international sustainable development and knowledge based economy. Attaining this transformation is to have implications or positive impacts on the institution understudy in its quest to provide a highly acclaimed quality higher education for the students, educating, preparing and equipping them with the required knowledge and skills in order to participate positively in their national future development and knowledge creation operations. Providing them with capacity to advance and develop theoretical and practical means that guide and put them firmly on how to be on the right track towards a more prosperous future.
5.3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study therefore found out that attempts to heighten and sustain quality across all of the operations of the university under study are flawed in view of its tenuous fit with teaching and learning. The argument being that connectivist theory currently informing pedagogical practices in ODL calls for placing emphasis more firmly on coming up with a range of teaching strategies that would support student learning than on simply presenting the curriculum and hoping for the best. Two focal points emerged. These are student learning and a dynamic collaboration around it. Transformation of the student and indeed the university itself forms the thrust of the findings of this study. The university was seen to be driven by a well articulate vision of being world class but creation of a credible global perception of the kind of university that we are aspiring to appeared missing. The visioning exercise is done in the many strategic workshops but vision, re-visioning and vision engineering appeared missing and the ownership of the vision was questionable. The university is built on strong values but values driven by trust and building a culture of quality and consistence appeared missing. The study further unearthed that commitment to the virtues of open and distance learning, promoting institutional visibility and reputation, motive to achieve great things, empathy and mutual trust were some of the principles fostering continuous quality improvement in an ODL context that appeared missing in the university under study.

The second objective looked at missing links related to staff conditions fostering continuous quality improvement. The study found out that the university has a highly qualified, enthusiastic and committed staff. However, shortcomings were unearthed on setting the right quality tone by
assembling the right team, stimulating change and innovation and promoting connectivity in staff and students who might be stronger together than they are apart. Catalytic leadership was also said to be missing. World-class skills for world class performance, talent management and development system, engaging in on-going professional learning and creating interdisciplinary discursive spaces were said to be some of the missing links in staff related conditions fostering continuous quality improvement. Thus, staff was seen as failing to take pride in the collective enterprise, failing to advance the connectivist mentality through heightening interactivity with the students and promoting collaborative productivity. Other staff related missing links were lack of energised, enthusiastic and interested academics who develop self-managing learners and promote knowledge based society through use of appropriate teaching, learning and assessment approaches. The study also unearthed the need to unbundle staff roles, provision of ergonomically designed work stations, staff retention strategies, acknowledging professional shortcomings, dismantling existing silos of power and upholding academic freedom which respondents saw as staff related missing links in the university under study. Other prominent missing links regarding staff issues include staff with an unwavering commitment to the philosophical underpinnings of open and distance learning and who exhibit positive attitudes towards open and distance learning. On the whole, the research appears to agree with Newton (2000) who suggests that academics are not passive recipients of management objectives, but in fact makers and shapers of the policy. Their performance is what makes a difference in continuous quality improvement.

Quality has various meanings attached and the focus varies from one educational setting to another. Among the various philosophies driving quality, elements of customer focus, process orientation and continuous improvements are the most common philosophies that have direct
implications for teaching and learning. In this regard, the third objective of this study looked at missing links in conditions pertaining to the most valuable customers of the university, the students. The research uncovered that there is lack of participatory pedagogy with little or minimal personal interchange between tutor and student and among students culminating in failure to promote group spirit in the university. The research further pointed that students are not involved in matters to do with their studies forcing them to declare that nothing for them without them. Students appeared to lack adequate freshman orientation seminar classes; research influenced learner support services; blending of physical and virtual contacts and value for money services. They felt like a fish out of water in an alien institution. Customer value and service integrity appeared questionable. The research also exposed missing links in networking for quality, considering students’ backgrounds, learning effectiveness through student empowerment, active learning and ownership of the learning process. Some more prominent missing links include failure to respect changing students’ value definitions and experiences, failure to focus on students’ learning outcomes, inability to access university services irrespective of where the student lives, absence of student retention through need-based student services, some form of unwillingness to promote academic integrity through ethical practices, inability to focus on the individual within the group and not having a rapid response policy to address student queries on stipulated times.

The fourth research objective interrogated university wide practices to uncover missing links. Findings from this fourth research objective were presented in three parts. The first of the three parts looked at missing links in technology. The university under study was hailed for prioritising technology. Respondents cited computers for all academic staff, the e-learning initiative and the creation of a robust ICT department as evidence of the university’s intentions
to use technology to continuously improve quality in its operations. Globally, the use of educational technologies is increasing because the technologies can help bridge the distance between the learners and their learning environment. Sadly, this is still at its infancy in the university understudy owing to a number of challenges. These include the university website which they saw as falling far short of being an interactive website. They also questioned why there was no electronic newsletter, electronic forum and appropriate learning oriented software that are cornerstones of Transactional Distance Theory that guided this research. To the respondents in this study, the pedagogical aspects of ICT fell short of Jonassen’s (1999) model of constructivist learning. It also appeared as if the university was failing to harness innovations in ICT before they are outdated and combining face-to-face learning with the benefits of technology. They saw the university under study as dragging its feet in joining the Age of Networked Intelligence. The study also uncovered the other side of technology which they labelled double edged role of ICT and feared it could be the monster under the bed that puts minorities at the margins and lead to radical reallocation of power when all what they wanted was to create a university that works better and costs less. The increased use of educational technology in ODL will only exacerbate existing challenges, which must be addressed. ODL is unlikely to succeed without collaboration (a major finding in this study) involving the government, the educational institutions, and the business community.

In the second part of the fourth objective, the study argued that the conditions fostering continuous quality improvement manifest themselves in the practices, processes and programmes that are put in place to continuously improve quality. In this regard the study found out that the university has a robust quality assurance unit that is sturdy and strong in form. It is even strong
enough to withstand or overcome intellectual challenges or adversity. There were training programmes for staff in place. The study further uncovered that the conditions for quality while superficially attractive to some, on closer examination fits poorly in the problem context of the university and open and distance learning context. There are some conditions that they thought failed to stimulate learning in terms of the dictates of the Transactional Distance Theory that directed this research. In this regard, the study found out that quality is inhibited by poor infrastructure, an irrelevant curriculum, inadequate expertise in distance education, and poor attitudes towards distance learning. They questioned process integrity in a bifurcated environment with its effect of two power centres, lack of organisational service charter, scramble for resources, integrating quality with other initiatives and rich communicative relationships that foster quality relationships as prominent missing links. There was also lack of coherent curriculum owing to challenges in curriculum construction, integrity of the examination grades, turnaround time for feedback, failure to enhance excellence in research and through research and promotion of corporate loyalty through commitment to a continuous learning regime. Further, institutional surrounds were affected by infrastructure due to under-capitalisation. In all instances, the paradoxical nature of quality was evident in the contradictions in the responses.

The third part of the fourth objective came from the question: Which critical missing links are important to consider in fostering continuous quality improvement in ODL? This unearthed a remarkable finding concerning attitudes systematically designed to discredit ODL institutions which respondents in this study agreed were inflicting shock and injury on both staff and students. They chronicled life in a marginalised university and reasoned that there are still many who believe learning equals face to face interaction. The power-knowledge game was damaging excellent work going on in the university understudy and possibly many other ODL institutions.
The study further uncovered shock and injury resulting from differing constructions of reality and old boys’ network’s invisible hand of power that became visible in this study. May be, when the quality of distance education is improved as a result of updated curricula, improved instructor training, the provision of modern resource centres, and access to broadband Internet services and reliable power, these attitudes will probably change.

To sum up this section on the summary of findings the study takes a position that future research approaches can build from these findings with more robust instrumentation and larger samples and involving more institutions. In the next section, the study takes a position and reaches conclusions based on these findings.

5.4 CONCLUSIONS

This study started with controversial question regarding the missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an open and distance education university. The purposively sampled respondents in this study generated rich data and some insights despite the limitations of the methodological approach. The section on discussion of findings lends credence to the study’s position that a fresh approach is necessary to rethink conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in open and distance education, as the conditions in the university under study appeared to be narrowly focused essentially around adapting conventional or industrial quality systems to open and distance education. The study thus argues that to continuously improve on quality, there are several underpinning factors that work synergistically together as unearthed in this study. Fostering continuous quality improvement could lead to sharing a learning culture and creating an organisation we would like to work within and which can thrive in a world of increased interdependency and change.
This research takes a stakeholder approach to quality and concludes that there is no single best approach to quality as there are various competing factors that contribute to quality. A stakeholder approach to issues of quality in higher education recognises the potential for a number of different perspectives of quality to be defined in the higher education environment. A blueprint for the university is not possible because unlike natural sciences that have no home, social sciences are culture and contextually bound. The factors that really count in an educational enterprise reside not on paper but in the minds of the stakeholders. While universities can and do make a difference in terms of quality, what they can achieve is partial and limited because educational institutions are also part of the wider society, subject to its norms, rules and influences. There is need to put on spectacles provided by one theoretical perspective, and then learn what we can of the conditions fostering continuous quality improvement, then remove these spectacles and replace them with a different pair and see how the view changes—what is visible now that was hidden before and vice-versa. In fact, in most cases the more different the pairs the better.

The study further concludes that there is an ongoing interest and debate among academics, administrators and students on how an open and distance teaching university should benefit from quality initiatives. This study argues that the Zimbabwe Open University can employ some of the organisational learning methodologies to establish new patterns of thinking and a culture change to create a better future for its students because quality assurance is still in its infancy in many departments of the university. Its future appears to be in jeopardy because of a three-pronged crisis uncovered in this study. The first is the formidable obstacle of internal resistance to quality
manifesting itself in attitudes and public responses to the idea of quality in particular and open learning in general. Second, is the failure of this university to identify itself with a specific quality assurance model, epitomised in the battles between competing positions whether should be prescribed from a department or should primarily be an inbuilt mechanism. Third, is the failure of the university under study to domesticate the quality idea and make it into a home grown philosophy resulting in the utilisation and application of quality ideas based on borrowed wisdom from the conventional universities.

The study takes a position that quality as adapted to higher education must be made to preserve the traditional values of academic freedom and collegial modes of operation. As flexible approaches are developed, the relationship between administration and academics, and industry and education sectors, could be expected to change from one of antipathy (or apathy, at best) as at present, to one of synergy that is currently missing. The key issues are managerial responsibility for quality, the empowerment of staff for quality improvement, setting of standards that reflect customer requirements and building a culture for quality. However, the underlying issues stem from the fact that implementation and assessment models of quality systems in the university under study are forms of conventional university based concepts, which might lead to situations in which ODL aspects may remain unattended. One such aspect is the curriculum. In this research it was found out that in spite of the common use of quality systems in the university understudy, the argument is that the concept of quality has not extended to curriculum content and curriculum construction.
The current conditions of fostering continuous quality improvement appear not socially acceptable as they do not follow a clear philosophy and theory. The point about the current quality management practices is that their quality philosophies do not arrive at value free within the ODL context. Without some underline quality philosophy driving ODL, it must be recognised that the quality practices derived from different traditions and which have different starting points and languages are hard to implement. Quality practices in the university under study appear to over-emphasise the structural elements of restructuring and overlook the need to improve the culture, climate and interpersonal relationships in the institution which are as critical to the success of any change agenda. This means the need is there to share a set of fundamental philosophies, which include: acceptance of responsibility for quality by the top management; customer orientation; high level of employee participation; open and effective communication; fact-based management; and strategic quality planning as unearthed in this study. There is no doubt that quality assurance department has helped to focus attention on quality and facilitated a better understanding of the underlying issues. It is, however, ill equipped to make a major impact on the ground as was unearthed in this study. There are lessons to be learnt from the past. Doing quality improves quality. Talking about it or trying to impose it does not. Managers and leaders need to reflect more carefully than is their wont (established custom) on the purposes and procedures of QA in an ODL context.

This research further takes a stance that above everything else, no matter how much you invest in new equipment or new systems, the key to your success lies in the attitudes, outlook, skills and support of your people. It's your people who will help you to respond to the pressures of a changing world and deliver the benefits you seek and help you continuously improve quality.
This study supports that at the heart of any successful ODL reform is the building of trust, respect and the valuing of staff and their contributions. The biggest drawback though is the attitudes towards ODL in which the practice is treated as a stepson/daughter of higher education. To the respondents in this study, ODL is an anathema or a detested curse in higher education. Educational quality in the context of open and distance learning is therefore not a simple and clinical act of introducing standards and measuring against those standards. This study amply illustrates powerful and paradoxical dynamics at work that at times inflict both shock and injury to both students and staff. The case study serves as a mirror to other ODL institutions that they can use in recognising that quality assurance is a delicate balancing act between conformity and diversity, and between standards and innovation. The real outcomes of quality assurance efforts are positive and negative concurrently, predictable and unpredictable at the same time. These are not contradictions but rather are paradoxes that help one to appreciate the dynamics of quality assurance better. Otherwise, the quality debate still rages on because it is a paradoxical journey. There appear to be different constructions of the reality on the ground as unearthed in this study. What one may see as a threat to quality may be just another opinion from a different angle or simply attitudes towards that. What counts as success for one person can be seen as dismal failure by another making quality a paradoxical journey.

This study was primarily concerned to attempt some clarifications of contested issues and to make some suggestions as to why so many academics are pathologically averse to what they incorrectly or otherwise perceive quality to be. It had some weaknesses chief among these is the fact that the researcher is an insider. Tacit knowledge illuminates findings obtained through qualitative means. At the same time it poses a threat to reliability of the research. The researcher
attempted to increase trustworthiness of this study by means of member-checks. Taking data and tentative interpretations to colleagues from whom they were derived, and ask them if they are plausible. Data were also taken to conferences for scrutiny by other academics. Long term observations were made by the researcher dating back to 2008. The researcher’ assumptions, worldview, biases and theoretical orientations were clarified at the onset to help minimise these. The missing links are attributed to the university under study and hence difficult to generalise though generalisability is not an aim in case studies. This study was not an attempt to answer one specific aspect of fostering continuous quality improvement in ODL. It was broad. This is a multifaceted thesis. Quality is difficult to quantify. It is a qualitative concept. Hence this is a qualitative research. It is qualitative because there appears to be an overdose of one aspect of research in this country yet there is a gold mine next door in the form of qualitative research.

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the foregoing conclusions, this research proffered the following recommendations:

- The main recommendation of this study is that there is need to revisit and for *rethinking conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an ODL context* before they reach a plateau.

- To be open to unexpected futures, as well as to anticipate the challenges that profound change will ultimately force the university to face, call for fostering a culture that builds capacity for self-improvement and organisational learning.

- Quality must be understood as continuous workflows oriented to taking decisions to improve the situation and that enthusiasm and passion for excellence are more
predictors of success in quality than do inspections. Enthusiasm overrides barriers to innovation adoption.

- Policy makers at both national and institutional levels must have a keen interest in developing a level playing field in matters affecting both distance and campus based learning.

- The fact that the majority of the teaching staff are mere subject specialists without education background, confirms the need for a university wide teaching and learning centre that promotes pedagogy and orient staff to ODL systems.

- There must be a course on e-learning that prepares both students and staff to benefit from this development.

- Stakeholder approach to quality must be adopted because gaining acceptance of, and commitment to, reflective practice and consequential adaptation and innovation is vital. Ideally, any model for management in any organisation can only succeed, if it represents the shared values of the stakeholders.

- At the implementation level, quality should be driven by a quality improvement system from the staff-student interface, governed by collegialism and commitment, with senior management support, all meant to enriching the learning experiences.

- There is need to dismantle the top heavy administrative structure and cumbersome bureaucratic system that certainly slow down quality efforts in the university and work to live a lasting legacy of service to the community. Collaboration and not hierarchy is a key requirement in continuous quality improvement.

- The university must establish strategic alliances, networks, consortia, collaboratives, and partnerships as forces that nourish quality in an open and distance learning context.
• The need to expand the quality and diversity of market-driven programmes could greatly enrich the offerings.

• Orchestrating congruence through combining visioning, strategy and organisational development techniques can be a more dynamic and fluid approach that will influence the achievement of quality in the university under study.

• The university needs a 24 hour rapid responds policy to address student queries promptly.

• The Zimbabwe Open University need to promote research and scholarship so that it becomes a source of idea-explosions that create a lifelong learning fabric in society. There must be research and knowledge champions who are the keys to success in this regard.

• Institutions that establish people systems that are well supported with technology are most likely to succeed in the quality endeavour in a knowledge society that we live in.

• The governing culture enshrined in the Zimbabwe Open University should be collegialism based on shared decision making, integrity and commitment to knowledge creation.

• There is need to move away from the ‘teacher centered’ approaches to ‘student centered’ teaching in which the preoccupation is on the empowerment of learners who need to take control of their own learning and accept the authority of their own knowledge, experience and values.

• The students should be supported and challenged into risk taking ventures to wrestle with their profession in new and creative ways leading to metacognition, knowledge, awareness and control of one’s own learning.
• Effective distance education should not be an independent and isolated form of learning. The quality and integrity of the educational process depends upon sustained, two way communication in the form of teacher-student connectivity, interactivity and authentic learning experiences.

• The current and future knowledge-based economy and society need knowledge transformers who have the capacity of creating new knowledge, transforming information and their own knowledge and adapting knowledge to environmental needs for sustainable development.

• There is need to create collective consciousness in which teachers learn from students as well as vice versa and where students can work as content co-creators.

• Higher education institutions must collaborate among themselves because if institutions combine their resources, they could establish state-of-the-art resource centres for use by all of their students in rural areas where most of their students reside.

• Lecturers must receive training in distance instructional methods and learning strategies. These sessions can be offered at their current institutions as a job requirement. Teaching will not be recognised as a profession until it is treated as such and individuals who lecture are required to obtain training and to receive some form of certification.

• There is need for establishment of the academic committee responsible for implementing continuous quality improvement.

• There is need to unbundle staff roles.

• There is need for the provision of ergonomically designed work stations.

• There is need to portray a professional corporate image by accounting for the attitudes that threaten ODL practices.
5.6 FURTHER RESEARCH

Completion of this study indicates a need for further research in several areas.

- The instruments that were designed as part of this study needs to be further developed so that university authorities can be informed on the ways of enhancing quality from another angle.

- Further research needs to be undertaken to identify whether a quality framework could be established that is cost effective in universities that are poorly funded.

- A number of questions remain unanswered, such as the quality model for distance education. Also, questions around how to support both students and lecturers so that they can deliver quality services remain unanswered.

- More research into the diversity of and interactions between cultures in academia might prove useful.

5.6 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER FIVE

This study interrogated practices to bring to light missing links in conditions that continuously improve quality in an ODL context. Empirically it was informed by a case study of an ODL institution. Chapter five closed the study by summarising the study and main findings, drawing conclusions and making recommendations for the future.
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McQuaide, S. (2009). ‘Making Education equitable in rural China through Distance Learning.’ In *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning,* 10 (1) 1-17.


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Tee Ng, P. (2008). The phases and paradoxes of educational quality assurance: The case of the Singapore education system. Quality Assurance in Education. 16 (2), 112-125.


Thurab-Nkhosi, D. and Marshall, S. (2009). Quality management in course development and delivery at the University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre. Quality Assurance in Education. 17 (3), 264-280.


presented at to 16th Annual Conference of Asian Association of Open Universities. (AAOU), Soul, Korea, 5-7 November, 2002.


Appendix 1: INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT FORM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of researcher:</th>
<th>Chrispen Chiome</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution:</td>
<td>Zimbabwe Open University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree:</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy in Education</td>
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<td>Research Topic:</td>
<td>Conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University: Any missing links?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Study:</td>
<td>To promote student retention, motivation and success in programmes of open and distance learning through quality services that meet students’ and societal demands.</td>
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</table>

**Methodology**

This study is going to be a case study of the Zimbabwe Open University. Data will be collected from staff and students in selected regions and units of the university. Participants will be required to complete a questionnaire or engage in a face to face interview with the researcher where data will be recorded on an audio-recorder. Completing the questionnaire should not take more than 35 minutes while face to face interview should last approximately 30 minutes per person.

**Research Ethics**

Persons who are willing to participate in this research should read the following information carefully so that they can make an informed decision about their participation.

**Conditions for participation**

Participation in this research is voluntary and participants should do so out of their own free will. The participant is free to withhold any information that they may decide not to share with the researcher or withdraw from the interview at any point if they feel like doing so for whatever reason.

**Protection accorded to participants**

1. **Confidentiality:** The research will uphold all participants’ right to confidentiality.
2. **Anonymity:** Names of regions, units and individuals will not be revealed. The research will instead, use pseudo names which may not in any way link the participants to the data collected.

3. **Risk:** There will not be any risk involved in participating in this research. Permission to conduct this research was granted by the registrar of the Zimbabwe Open University.

**Data Analysis**

Data will be analysed using the content analysis techniques and thematic approach and presented in themes that emerge from the study.

**Use of data collected**

1. The end product of this study will be a Doctoral Thesis.
2. The data collected will be available for inspection by the Research Supervisor, the Research Degrees Committee, Internal Examiners of the Zimbabwe Open University and appointed External Examiners from other institutions.
3. It is envisaged that some of the chapters or the entire document will be published later on.
4. All information about the participants will be treated with strictest confidentiality and will not be revealed to anyone else except the persons noted unless required by law.

**Benefits and Compensation**

There are no direct benefits to any individual participant. However, this being a form of action research that seeks to improve practice, the participants will benefit from the results of the study as the university focuses on quality informed by their responses.

**Informed Consent**

The purpose of my participation has been clearly explained to me and has been made available to me. I understand what my participation entails and that it is voluntary. I will be allowed to ask questions and opt to withhold information that I may deem unfit to divulge. I may withdraw from participation at any point without any penalty. I have read and understood the Informed Consent Agreement and I sign it freely and voluntarily and a signed copy has been given to me.

**Signature of volunteer participant:** ........................................

**Date:** ........................................

**Signature of researcher/Agent:** ........................................

**Date:** ........................................

**Contact details:**
If you are willing to participate and you need to seek clarification about anything related to this study please contact Chrispen Chiome on +263 912905274 or E-mail: chrischiom@yahoo.ca. Or Contact Dr. Owence Chabaya, Education Consultant University of Fort Hare, Phone 0027723040832 RSA, E-mail: chabayaowence@yahoo.com
Appendix 2: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STAFF AND STUDENTS

Questionnaire for staff and students on missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University

DEAR RESPONDENT

I am Chrispen Chiome, a student of the Zimbabwe Open University undertaking research on missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement in an open and distance learning context.

You have been purposively selected as a respondent. Kindly answer the following questions on a separate paper provided and hand over the answers to the receptionist at your earliest convenience or by 30 April 2010.

You need not reveal your identity as the information sourced from you will be treated in strict confidence and used for academic purposes only.

You are free to opt out of the research if you so wish. Should you wish to take part, you may sign the consent form attached and I thank you in advance for taking part in the research.

SECTION A: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Your sex
2. Your age
3. Your experience in Open and Distance learning in years before joining ZOU.
4. Your experience in ZOU.
5. Your department and programme.
6. Your highest qualification.
SECTION B: MISSING LINKS IN CONDITIONS FOSTERING CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

What do you see as the missing links in fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University? In all instances, support your answer.

7. Missing links in guiding principles that include philosophy, vision, mission, values, culture and others that you consider relevant.

8. Missing links in staff that may include among others skills, motivation, commitment connectivity and others you deem relevant.

9. Students related missing links that may include student support, student queries, pedagogical preferences, customer service and students’ expectations among others.

10. Missing links in the use of technology to continuously improve quality in the university.

11. Missing links in university wide practices that may include quality assurance, research and scholarship, pedagogical practices, examinations, curriculum construction among others.

12. What other missing links do you think hinder the process of fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University?

13. Which critical missing links are important to consider in fostering continuous quality improvement in ODL?

14. What can be done to continuously improve quality in the Zimbabwe Open University?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH
Appendix 3: Interview guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE ON MISSING LINKS IN CONDITIONS FOSTERING CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

In the following interview, the research would like to find out the missing links that get in the way of fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University. You are required to answer the questions as honestly as you can. In all instances you are required to support your views. You may also cite any missing links that you deem important but have not been mentioned in this interview guide.

1. Your gender
2. Your Age
3. Your experience in Open and Distance learning in years before joining ZOU.
4. Your experience in ZOU.
5. Your department and programme.
6. Your highest qualification.
7. Missing links in guiding principles that include philosophy, vision, mission, values, culture and others that you consider relevant.
8. Missing links in staff that may include among others skills, motivation, commitment connectivity and others you deem relevant.
9. Students related missing links that may include student support, student queries, pedagogical preferences, customer service and students’ expectations among others.
10. Missing links in the use of technology to continuously improve quality in the university.
11. Missing links in university wide practices that may include quality assurance, research and scholarship, pedagogical practices, examinations, curriculum construction among others.
12. What other missing links do you think hinder the process of fostering continuous quality improvement in the Zimbabwe Open University?
13. Which critical missing links are important to consider in fostering continuous quality improvement in ODL?
14. What can be done to foster continuous quality improvement in Zimbabwe Open University?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH
Appendix 4: Observation Instrument

SECTION A: Descriptive Observational variables
1. Comments on processes
2. Comments on Infrastructure.
3. Comments on technology used.
4. Comments on university website.
5. Comments on staff morale.
6.Comments on staff and students interaction.
7. Comments on attitudes.
8. Comments on work environment observed.
9. Comments on staff-staff interaction.
10. Any other descriptive observational variables

SECTION B: INFERENTIAL OBSERVATIONAL VARIABLES

1. Are students and staff seeking opportunities to excel?
2. Is staff committed to their work?
3. Do staff show customer care?
5. Are there signs of stress, confusion, frustration among staff or students?
6. Are there signs of personal clashes?
7. What attempts are made to influence quality?
8. Is the infrastructure, technology and processes heightening the attainment of quality?

Any other inferences made on missing links in conditions fostering continuous quality improvement?

SECTION C: EVALUATIVE OBSERVATIONAL VARIABLES

1. What is the level of tolerance for quality?
2. What is the quality preparedness of students and staff?
3. Is the infrastructure and technology used appropriate for quality?
4. What is the level of commitment to quality from both students and staff?
5. How is the staff and students fostering continuous quality improvement?
6. What has been observed as the major missing links in driving quality in the Zimbabwe Open University?

SECTION D: CRITICAL INCIDENTS

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<th>DATE</th>
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Appendix 5: Permission to carry out research