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The Seven Strategies for Enabling Faculty Success in Distance Education. How is ZCAS positioned and what could be learnt in terms of Distance Education Administration?

1.0 Introduction

This technical uptake is meant to provide insight on DE administration using the seven strategies for enabling faculty success in DE (Howell et al., 2004). The update covers aspects of DE and its administration from the ZCAS point of view. Forthwith, the seven strategies have been used to explain what has been done in the case for ZCAS in relation to each of the seven strategies; lessons that could be learnt therefrom and concludes by provide a way forward to ameliorate the identified gaps.

2.0 Distance Education at ZCAS

In August 2014, ZCAS introduce Distance Education (DE) as another mode of delivery in addition to full-time and part-time modes. Since then, a number of activities have taken place and continue to unfold in a bid to perfect DE administration. This includes among others the formation of a DE Committee; training of selected staff on DE Administration; development and upgrading of the eLearning platform using Moodle; training of lecturers in Moodle and other DE pedagogies; writing of course modules to guide DE delivery; marketing interventions including school visitations; conducting of residential schools; introduction of more programmes on DE etc. In a nut shell, the DE journey continues to unfold with new challenges manifesting on the way. With concerted efforts by all staff at ZCAS, DE continues to take shape, thus providing another source of income for ZCAS. It is on this basis that a lot more needs to be done to ensure its sustainability.

3.0 Distance Education Administration

DE administration is a support function under the Directorate of Research, Consultancy and Distance Education (DRCDE). Its aim is that of ensuring that DE programmes are identified, developed, delivered, monitored and evaluated to determine their success. Effective and efficient administration of DE requires effective collaboration and communication with faculty, students and other stakeholders. Above all, the timely provision of resources is a critical undertaking for successful administration of DE. It is about giving sufficient support and providing incentives to those participating in DE (Howell et al., 2004). As such, the DRCDE works hand in hand with other functions namely – Registrar’s Office, Directorate of Academic Studies (DAS); Directorate of Professional Studies (DPS) and Directorate of Finance (DOF) in a bid to ensure its success.

4.0 The Seven Strategies for Enabling Faculty Success in Distance Education

1. *Enable colleges and departments to accept more responsibility for DE activities*

Like any other mode of delivery, DE should be looked at on an equal basis. It is therefore expected that all ZCAS departments should adequately get involved and accept more responsibility in terms of planning, execution and evaluation of DE activities. The need to buy-in DE activities is critical and success will be depended on the concerted efforts of all faculty members.

For ZCAS, a number of coordinated efforts have been made and continue to be made to ensure that DE activities are successfully implemented. For instance, the coordination of distance learning plans with that of other modes of delivery; writing of DE modules; tutoring and monitoring of student activities; cohort group and peer interaction; and student organisations especially during residential schools. Nonetheless, much more still remains to be done such as organisation of special events for students; research facilities and student participation; providing more information and instructional resources; and generally creating more time to attend to other cross cutting aspects on DE. It calls for more buy-in from all stakeholders (Howell et al., 2004, p 40)

2. *Provide faculty more information about DE programmes and activities*

The need to provide faculty with more information about DE programmes and activities cannot be over emphasized. According to Howell et al., this fosters increased collaboration, understanding and goodwill amongst various stakeholders. More data on DE activities needs to be provided on a consistent basis to facilitate decision making. This may include rating on DE; student demographics; completions reports; enrollment counts; grade point averages; attrition rates, etc.

ZCAS has been trying to provide the available information on DE programmes and activities through meetings; reports; emails; MEMOs and use of the portal. Nonetheless, much more needs to be done in a bid to increase information flow.

3. *Encourage faculty to incorporate technology into their traditional classrooms.*

Indeed, faculty transition from traditional to distance learning models especially as they relate to the use of technology is the way forward. From the onset, ZCAS opted to use Moodle as an eLearning platform through which DE should be offered. As such, efforts have been directed to ensuring that faculty gradually gains confidence in the use of ICT delivery modes. Without abandoning the long-established practices of delivery, efforts have been directed on not only training faculty in the use of online education but also on ensuring that faculty has sufficient ICT skills for effective tutoring. Similarly, efforts have been made and continue to be made to assist students appreciate online learning pedagogies in a bid to create a level playing field amongst participating stakeholders. Nonetheless, and as Howell

et al., put it, more innovative efforts to provide technical and training support on the use of ICT to delivery DE programmes is vital.

4. Provide strong incentives for faculty to participate in DE

It is undeniable fact that institutional rewards, workload expectations and incentives are crucial in the promotion of faculty. Administrators are encouraged to provide appropriate incentives in the areas of tenure, promotion, release time, workload, recognition, pay, and other rewards that may be deemed useful (Howell et al, 2004). However, it has also been acknowledged that many administrators find it difficult to determine appropriate compensation for work in distance education unless where similar activities have been replicated. Though DE is still in the infancy stages at ZCAS, efforts to try and reward faculty participating on DE activities have been made and continue to be made though not to expected levels. As such, additional work on DE such as the development of modules and their subsequent reviews; an allowance for tutoring on DE; marking of scripts, etc. are paid for. It is expected that as DE activities expand further, more incentives will be introduced and awarded to faculty as and when it merits.

5. Improve training and instructional support for DE faculty.

In the current changing teaching environment, in particular the DE environment, continuous improvements in training and instructional support for DE faculty is critical. The department of DE at ZCAS has been engaging staff into appreciating various instructional techniques to support effective and efficient course delivery. This is done by exposing staff to the use of Moodle and making presentations on the kind of training and instructional support required for successful implementation of DE. As a deliberate move, ZCAS encourages the use of ICT for efficient and effective course delivery. Efforts have been made and continue to be made to demonstrate the effective and efficient use of ICT such as chat room, emails, forums, Skype, Facebook, twitter, and any other feasible pedagogy that can be used. Nonetheless, there is still much that needs to be done in this area especially in a bid to marry preparedness and availability of time to accomplish this level of innovativeness.

6. Build a stronger DE faculty community.

A strong DE faculty community is paramount for the successful implementation of DE activities. This would also enhance effective communication and collaboration. As indicated in the preceding paragraphs, a number of strides have been made and continue to be made in a bid to build a stronger DE faculty community. Strides are also being made to ensure that ZCAS is affiliated to other DE communities in order to enhance collaboration and the exchange of vital information. ZCAS is in the process of registering with the International Council for open and Distance Education (ICDE), a global network for online, open and flexible education. ZCAS also believe in team effort as a means to successful implementation of DE.

7. Encourage more DE scholarship and research.

Since inception of DE programmes, ZCAS has been making frantic efforts to build capacity of its staff, particularly, by involving them into the scholarship of DE materials. Priority has always been given to staff when it comes to writing of DE modules unless where competence is not available. Many a times too, staff have been encouraged to participate in research related activities in order to enable them improve on their scholarship abilities. As a starting point, research activities have always been provided for in the yearly budgets although funding is not the only way to encourage scholarship (Howell et al., 2004). Nonetheless, much more needs to be done in terms of exposing staff involved in DE activities to workshops, seminars or symposiums, and research related activities. This requires that ZCAS provides more incentives and support. For instance, encouraging faculty to publish articles in journals or peer review journals.

8. Conclusion

There are a number of lessons that could be picked from this technical update. A well-motivated faculty could minimize challenges in the DE administration. DE scholarship and research can be improved on; a stronger DE faculty built; acceptance of more responsibilities of DE activities achieved; acceptance of changes in DE instructional techniques and use of ICT in general; and generally encourage innovative ways of administering DE could better the manner DE is administered. This requires team effort and adequate support by provide various incentives to faculty and other stakeholders.

References:

1. Howell, L. S., Saba, F., Lindsay, K. N., and William, B .P (2004) Seven strategies for enabling faculty success in distance education. *The Internet and Higher Education*. pp. 33 – 49, ELSEVIER.