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Impact of regulatory frameworks on the quality of distance education in Uganda's higher education: a case of Uganda Martyrs University-Nkozi (UMU)

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the impact of regulatory frameworks on the quality of distance education in Uganda's higher education institutions with a focus on: identifying the existing regulatory frameworks for distance education, their impact and challenges as well as strategies to enhance them with a case of Uganda Martyrs University (UMU) using an exploratory design. Findings reveal that UMU implements different regulatory frameworks which include accreditation by the National Council of Higher Education (NCHE), quality assurance, credible and efficient assessment of the students and student support services. These have enabled the university to improve and maintain the quality of education through employing qualified staff, assessing students credibly, providing appropriate student support services and fostering open communication and collaboration among the students. These arise with challenges which included some distance learners being located in remote areas where access to online services is challenging due to poor internet and unreliable power sources, lack of proficiency in using digital platforms by some students and the rapid advancements in technology which leads to issues in data protection services. Therefore, government should put in place appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure that higher education institutions comply with the existing regulatory frameworks.

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1. Background of the study

Higher education in Uganda had taken drastic precedence and development from early 1922 when the first University known as Makerere University was established arising from the later constituent college of the University College of London and the University College of East Africa and in 1970 became a fully-fledged University teaching and award graduate and undergraduate university programs (Omona, 2012). Its role in diversifying the higher education trail in the country cannot be underestimated with its input in the establishment of other Universities in the country and of today, close to 11 Public Universities are in existence (Charles et al., 2024). Looking at higher education in Uganda and the role of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in developing, monitoring and evaluating long-distance learning. Distance education in higher institutions of learning has evolved significantly since its inception in the late 19th century. The first form of distance education can be traced back to correspondence courses offered by universities like the University of London in 1858, which allowed students to learn from far away using mailed materials (Simonson et al., 2019). The advent of radio and television in the mid-20th century expanded access to education, enabling institutions to reach larger audiences. With the rise of the internet in the 1990s, online learning emerged, offering greater flexibility and interactive capabilities. Today, distance education has become a mainstream approach that incorporates

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various technologies and pedagogical strategies to cater for the different needs of students and enhance global access to higher education (Ofoyuru et al., 2016).

Following Uganda's independence in 1962, the need for a comprehensive regulatory framework for higher education became increasingly evident. The government recognized that higher education was essential for national development and began to develop policies aimed at expanding access and improving quality. The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) was established in 2002 as a pivotal regulatory body to oversee universities and other institutions of higher learning (National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), 2007). The NCHE's mandate includes accrediting institutions, setting standards and ensuring compliance with national education policies. This marked a significant shift from the earlier unregulated landscape to a more structured approach aimed at improving educational outcomes (Kasozi, 2017).

However, Uganda faced numerous challenges, including rapid enrollment growth and concerns over the quality of education provided by various institutions. In response, the government introduced the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act in 2001, which aimed to create a regulatory framework that emphasizes financing, quality assurance, accountability and institutional autonomy (Charles et al., 2022). This legislation established clear guidelines for the operation of higher education institutions, facilitating the establishment of new universities while ensuring that existing ones met specific quality standards (Namara et al., 2024). The emphasis on quality assurance was crucial in addressing the emerging concerns over the credibility and relevance of higher education in the labour market.

The regulations, Monitoring and supervision of Higher education and more so University and other Tertiary Institutions operations in Uganda are under the care of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) which was formalised in 2001 with a critical role in establishing, managing and guiding the operations of the Higher Education Institutions semi-autonomously (Kasozi, 2017). As a regulator, it is charged with the duty of establishing strategies and focusing on enhancing and repositioning curriculum development, learners, and staff to ensure accessibility and the quality of higher education for the general transformation and development of society. More recently, the regulatory framework for higher education in Uganda has continued to evolve, responding to both local and global trends in education. Initiatives aimed at internationalization, financing (Muweesi, 2021), research development and innovation have become integral to the framework. The government has also emphasized the need for public-private partnerships in education to enhance funding and resource allocation (Musana & Bisaso, 2024). The ongoing reforms indicate a commitment to creating a more dynamic higher education landscape that not only meets the needs of Ugandan society but also aligns with international standards.

Focusing on studies done by other Universities, this study examines the impact of regulatory frameworks on distance education. The University was established in 1993, and it has positioned itself as a leader in innovative educational approaches, particularly in distance education, which has gained traction due to increasing enrolment demands and the need for flexible learning opportunities that cater for the diverse needs of students (Nansubuga et al., 2019). This is one of the higher institutions of learning in the country that has put great emphasis on expanding access to learning opportunities through non-traditional methods in the form of distance learning with a series of distance education programs that are prepared and designed to address the growing need of Higher Education (Ofoyuru et al., 2016).

Uganda Martyrs University (UMU) has effectively implemented distance education across various programs and courses, adapting its educational offerings to meet the needs of a diverse student population. The university's approach includes the use of technology-enhanced learning tools, such as online learning platforms, multimedia resources, and interactive forums, enabling students to engage with course materials and collaborate with peers and instructors remotely. Programs such as Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Business Administration, and Master of Public Administration have been tailored to incorporate distance learning methodologies, ensuring that students receive a comprehensive educational experience that balances academic rigour with flexibility (Mugabi, 2012). Supporting the unique challenges faced by distance learners, UMU has developed structured support systems, including orientation sessions, academic advising, and access to library resources. The university offers training for faculty to enhance their skills in delivering online content and facilitating virtual discussions, thereby fostering a supportive learning environment. Additionally, UMU has established partnerships with various organizations to provide practical experience through internships and fieldwork, ensuring that distance education

students gain valuable hands-on knowledge that complements their theoretical studies (Otto & Musinguzi, 2013).

UMU's commitment to quality assurance in distance education is reflected in its adherence to national regulatory standards set by the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). The university continuously evaluates and updates its distance education programs to ensure they meet both local and international standards, focusing on student outcomes and satisfaction. Through regular feedback mechanisms, UMU engages with students to refine course content and delivery methods, making necessary adjustments based on their experiences and needs. This iterative process not only enhances the effectiveness of the distance education programs but also reinforces the university's reputation as a leader in innovative higher education in Uganda (Kasozi, 2017).

Thus the study is paramount to examine the existing regulations available in Uganda such as the Quality Assurance framework, Accreditation Evaluation Framework, Equating qualifications, ICTs and Institution Monitoring Frameworks among others by Universities in Uganda with a focus on Uganda Martyrs University -Nkozi and how these frameworks do impact on the quality of distance education provided by the University with a focus the challenges faced at the Implementation level, especially with the growing number of distance programs taught and general examination of the guidelines and how they are affected by the end user more so staff and students with the probable solution to enhance and address the above challenges in line with the available minimum standard established by the NCHE and the Universities and other Tertiary Institutions Act 2001 as amended by the government of Uganda supervised by the Ministry of Education and Sports.

2. Purpose of the article

The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of regulatory frameworks on distance education in Uganda Martyrs University.

3. Research objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives.

- i. To identify the existing regulatory frameworks for distance education at Uganda Martyrs University.
- ii. To examine the impact of the regulatory frameworks on the quality of education provided at UMU.
- iii. To assess the challenges faced while implementing regulatory guidelines related to distance education at UMU.
- iv. To identify strategies to overcome the challenges in implementing distance education

4. Research questions

The study intended to respond to the following research questions.

- i. What are the existing regulatory frameworks for distance education at Uganda Martyrs University?
- ii. How do the regulatory frameworks impact the quality of education provided at UMU?
- iii. What challenges are faced while implementing regulatory guidelines related to distance education at UMU?
- iv. What are the possible strategies that can be employed to overcome these challenges?

5. Theory of the study

The study was guided by the stakeholder theory developed and advanced by R. Edward Freeman in 1980. The theory states that businesses should consider the interests and needs of all stakeholders when making decisions. This theory defines stakeholders broadly to include employees, customers, suppliers, investors, communities and governments and emphasizes that creating value involves balancing these diverse interests. The theory highlights the ethical obligation of organizations to engage with

stakeholders, foster open communication and incorporate their perspectives into strategic decision-making, which leads to sustainable business practices and long-term success. This theory has become a foundational concept in business ethics and corporate social responsibility.

To boost Freeman's assertions above, the university's critical and outmost role especially in Uganda is embedded in teaching, research, innovations and community outreach and this is catered for in most mandates right away at the establishment of any higher education institution in Uganda more so in the programs they do teach and how they are meant to impact on the people and community they do serve with the core component advanced to boost distance education such as integration of ICT services in the areas of Open distance and e-learning (OdEL), University Learners Management environment, adoption of latest and new teaching advances to boost online administration of teaching and learning such as zoom, dig-talk, voov among others without forgetting the probable measures to halt and even detect plagiarism cases such as usage of turnitin, grammar among others with an anticipation to address the distance education challenges among higher education institutions especially with the latest advent of the adoption and embracement of Artificial Intelligence that has widely attracted a lot scholarly implications especially in boosting university regulatory frameworks as a critical direction to promote and glorify distance education amongst Higher education institutions world over and Uganda in particular.

Therefore, Stakeholder theory was selected to guide this study because it is highly relevant to regulatory frameworks in higher education institutions. After all, these frameworks must address the interests of all stakeholders such as students, university staff, government bodies and the local community. Regulatory policies often aim to ensure quality education, equitable access and accountability, which reflect the concerns and expectations of these groups. By applying stakeholder theory, higher education institutions are enabled to align their practices with stakeholder needs which leads to transparency and collaboration to improve the quality of services provided. This approach encourages institutions to engage with stakeholders in decision-making processes thus creating responsive and effective regulatory frameworks that address the complexities of modern educational environments.

6. Literature review

The literature review was done in line with the main themes in the objectives of the study and these are; the existing regulatory frameworks for distance education, the impact regulatory frameworks on the quality of education, challenges faced while implementing regulatory guidelines related to distance education and strategies to overcome these challenges.

6.1. Historical review of distance education

Distance education has evolved significantly over the years, shaped by technological advancements and changing societal needs. In the United States, the origins of distance education can be traced back to the early 20th century when correspondence courses began to gain popularity. Institutions like the University of Chicago and the American School of Correspondence were pioneers in this field, providing educational opportunities to those unable to attend traditional classes (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). The rise of radio and television further transformed distance education, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, with universities leveraging these mediums to reach broader audiences. This era marked the beginning of more formalized distance learning programs, establishing a framework that would eventually incorporate online platforms in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Moore & Kearsley, 2011).

Mason and Rennie (2006) show that in the United Kingdom, distance education has similarly rich roots, with the establishment of the Open University in 1969 being a significant milestone. This university was founded to provide higher education to those who were unable to attend traditional universities and it utilized a blend of printed materials, broadcasts and face-to-face tutorials. This model emphasized accessibility and inclusivity, making education available to a wider demographic, including working adults and those in remote areas. The UK's distance education system has continually adapted, incorporating technology such as online learning management systems and interactive media to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes (Mason & Rennie, 2006).

According to Kinuthia (2009) the landscape of distance education in Kenya has developed more recently, particularly as the country sought to expand access to education following independence in 1963. The establishment of the University of Nairobi's Distance Education program in the 1990s marked a pivotal moment in Kenyan higher education. This program aimed to address the educational needs of students in rural areas and those balancing work and study. The advent of mobile technology and the internet in the 21st century has further transformed distance education in Kenya which has enabled the rise of e-learning platforms and expanded access to quality education. The Kenya Education Network (KENET) and partnerships with international universities have continuously facilitated this growth (Kinuthia, 2009).

In Uganda, distance education commenced in the early 1990s when the government recognized the need to expand access to higher education amid growing demand. According to Namagero, the establishment of the Open University of Uganda in 2008 marked a significant milestone that offered flexible learning opportunities to non-traditional students. Initially focused on correspondence courses, the model evolved with the integration of technology through the use of online platforms and radio broadcasts which helped reach remote and underserved students. The National Council for Higher Education has since supported various institutions in developing distance learning programs, emphasizing the importance of accessibility and inclusivity in education. Today, distance education in Uganda continues to grow, addressing the challenges of urbanization and the need for lifelong learning in a rapidly changing job market (Kasozi, 2017).

6.2. Existing regulatory frameworks for distance education

According to Pilipchuk et al. (2022) regulatory frameworks are structured systems of rules, laws, and guidelines established by governmental and regulatory bodies to govern specific sectors, ensuring compliance, safety, and fair practices. In this article, regulatory frameworks meant rules and guidelines that are put in place at Uganda Martyrs University to ensure the provision of quality education while adhering to national and international standards. Moore and Kearsley (2012) define distance education as an instructional delivery system that allows students to engage in learning remotely, using technology to facilitate communication between teachers and learners through online platforms, video conferencing and multimedia tools. Distance education in this study refers to a mode of delivering educational programs and courses where students and lecturers are separated by physical distance and therefore utilize technology to facilitate learning.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2022), accreditation is a critical requirement for institutions offering distance education to ensure that programs meet established quality standards and are recognized by employers and other educational entities. In the United States, the Higher Education Act mandates that institutions seeking federal funding must be accredited by a recognized accrediting body, which evaluates the institution's educational quality, student support services and institutional effectiveness. This accreditation process is essential for maintaining academic standards and providing students with confidence in the legitimacy and transferability of their credits and degrees. Accreditation serves as a quality assurance mechanism that upholds educational standards in distance learning programs (Bakkabulindi, 2024).

Another important regulatory framework for higher education institutions is state authorization. This is a crucial aspect of distance education where institutions are required to adhere to specific regulations in each state where they wish to enrol students (National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA), 2023). In the United States, the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) provides a framework that allows institutions to offer online programs across state lines without having to obtain separate authorizations from each state (NC-SARA, 2023). This reciprocity agreement helps streamline the regulatory environment for online education and therefore ensures that institutions maintain compliance with state laws while expanding access to students nationwide. Institutions that do not obtain the necessary state authorization risk legal penalties and the inability to enrol students.

Quality assurance standards are essential regulatory frameworks for maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of distance learning programs in higher education institutions. Institutions are required to

adhere to established frameworks such as the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) standards in the UK, which provide benchmarks for evaluating educational quality (Edwards, 2023; ENQA, 2019). These standards emphasize critical areas such as student engagement, teaching quality, assessment practices and institutional support services which helps to ensure that online programs meet rigorous academic expectations. Compliance with student privacy and data protection laws is crucial for institutions offering distance education. In online learning environments, this means that institutions must implement appropriate policies and practices to protect personal information and ensure that only authorized personnel have access to sensitive data. By adhering to these legal requirements, institutions not only fulfil their legal obligations but also foster trust among students by reassuring them that their personal information is secure and respected throughout their educational experience.

Institutions offering distance education are mandated to provide comprehensive learner support services to ensure that students have access to essential resources throughout their studies. These services typically include academic advice, technical support and mental health resources, which are vital for addressing the unique challenges faced by online learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Effective support systems enhance student retention and success rates and also contribute to a more engaging and satisfying educational experience. Institutions should establish transparent and consistent assessment and evaluation standards for online courses to ensure fairness and uphold academic integrity. These standards should clearly outline the criteria for evaluating student performance, the methods of assessment and the processes for addressing academic misconduct Edwards (2023). This promotes equity among students and fosters trust in the evaluation process since the students are in a position to understand how their work will be judged and the expectations they must meet. In addition, robust assessment practices like formative and summative evaluations are essential for providing meaningful feedback that supports student learning and growth in a distance education context.

Continuous improvement policies are also essential for institutions offering distance education to promote the regular review and enhancement of online courses based on student feedback and assessment data. By systematically analysing course evaluations, learning outcomes and student engagement, institutions can identify areas for improvement and implement necessary changes to enhance educational quality Edwards (2023). This process helps to maintain the relevance and effectiveness of online programs and also fosters a culture of responsiveness and accountability within the institution. Engaging students in this process by soliciting their input further empowers them and reinforces a commitment to providing a high-quality learning experience tailored to their needs.

6.3. Impact regulatory frameworks on the quality of education

According to Baker et al. (2017), accreditation plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of education in higher institutions by ensuring that they meet established standards of academic excellence and institutional integrity. It serves as a benchmark for evaluating educational programs, fostering continuous improvement and accountability. Accreditation processes involve rigorous assessments of curriculum, faculty qualifications, student support services, and resources, which in turn promotes transparency and builds public trust. Makhoul (2019) notes that accredited institutions are more likely to attract qualified faculty and motivated students, improve learning outcomes, and facilitate better career opportunities for graduates, ultimately elevating the overall educational landscape.

Ademe (2023) contend that quality assurance standards significantly enhance the quality of education in higher institutions by establishing clear benchmarks for academic performance, institutional practices, and student outcomes. These standards encourage institutions to adopt systematic processes for evaluating and improving their educational offerings, which fosters a culture of accountability and continuous enhancement. By implementing regular assessments, feedback mechanisms, and compliance checks, institutions can identify areas for improvement and ensure that their programs meet both national and international expectations Edwards (2023). This focus on quality not only enriches the learning experience for students but also helps to maintain institutional credibility, ultimately leading to better educational outcomes and greater employability for graduates.

Compliance with student privacy and data protection laws is essential for maintaining the quality of education in higher institutions, as it fosters a safe and trustworthy learning environment (Kessio & Chang'ach, 2020). By protecting sensitive student information, institutions not only uphold legal and ethical standards but also promote student confidence in sharing personal data, which is crucial for effective academic support and advising (Alghail et al., 2023). Asserts that adhering to these laws ensures that data is handled responsibly, reducing the risk of breaches that could compromise students' safety and academic integrity. This commitment to privacy enhances the overall educational experience, encouraging open communication and collaboration between students and faculty, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes and institutional reputation. Tinto (2012) indicates that providing comprehensive learner support services significantly enhances the quality of education in higher institutions by fostering an inclusive and conducive learning environment. These services, which include academic advice, mental health resources, tutoring and career counselling address the diverse needs of students, thus helping them to overcome academic challenges and personal obstacles. By promoting student well-being and engagement, such support not only improves retention and graduation rates but also cultivates critical skills and resilience, ultimately leading to higher academic achievement and more prepared graduates. This holistic approach ensures that all students have the resources they need to succeed, thereby elevating the overall educational experience and institutional reputation.

Continuous improvement policies play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of education in higher institutions by fostering a culture of ongoing evaluation and adaptation (Ewell, 2010a). These policies encourage institutions to regularly assess their teaching methods, curricula, and support services, ensuring they remain relevant and effective in meeting the evolving needs of students and the job market. By systematically collecting and analysing feedback from students and faculty, institutions can identify areas for enhancement and implement targeted interventions, leading to improved learning outcomes and increased student satisfaction (Ewell, 2010b).

According to Elliott et al. (2020), transparent and consistent assessment and evaluation standards for online courses significantly enhance the quality of education in higher institutions by ensuring that all students are held to the same rigorous benchmarks, fostering fairness and equity in the learning environment. When assessment criteria are clearly defined and uniformly applied, students are better able to understand expectations and outcomes, which can improve their motivation and engagement (Stowell, 2004). This clarity not only helps in maintaining academic integrity but also supports educators in delivering more effective feedback, ultimately leading to a more robust and meaningful learning experience (Duncan).

6.4. Challenges faced while implementing regulatory guidelines for distance education

Malinda et al. indicate that the major challenge is the diverse interpretation of regulatory standards across institutions, which leads to inconsistencies in their application. Different institutional missions and contexts affect how quality assurance is understood and executed, complicating efforts to meet regulatory expectations. The resources required for effective implementation such as staff training, data collection and program evaluations also strain budgets, especially for smaller institutions with limited funding Ademe (2023). Compliance with student privacy and data protection laws is another significant challenge. The Institutions struggle to balance the need for data collection and analysis with the requirement to protect sensitive student information. Murray (2018) shows that many higher education institutions are involved in complex legal landscapes, including regulations like FERPA in the U.S. and GDPR in Europe, which require a deep understanding of legal obligations (Kessio & Chang'ach, 2020). Furthermore, the rapid advancement of technology outpaces institutional policies, leading to potential vulnerabilities in data protection practices (Alghail et al., 2023).

Gunawardena (2023) assert that providing comprehensive learner support services is essential for student success but poses some challenges. The Institution often find it difficult to identify and address the varying needs of a diverse student population, particularly in online learning environments. The lack of face-to-face interaction exacerbates feelings of isolation among students, making it harder to provide tailored support (Crisp & Cruz, Gunawardena, 2023). The institution faces resistance from staff who are accustomed to traditional teaching methods and are hesitant to adopt new practices (Malunda et al.,

2021). Moreover, the data collection required for evaluating program effectiveness can be overwhelming, especially when institutions lack the necessary infrastructure or staff to analyse and act upon that data (Ademe, 2023).

According to Bwire et al. (2020) transparent and consistent assessment and evaluation standards for online courses are crucial yet often difficult to establish. The rapid growth of online education has out-paced the development of clear guidelines, leading to potential disparities in student experiences and outcomes (Stowell, 2004). The Institution face difficulties in ensuring academic integrity in online assessments, as remote environments can create opportunities for misconduct that are harder to monitor than in traditional classroom settings.

7. Methodology

This exploratory qualitative study was carried out to gather in-depth information on the impact of the series of University regulatory frameworks in enhancing the quality of distance education in Higher education institutions and respondents were selectively captured among students and staff and purposively to attain views on their understanding of the existing regulatory frameworks for distance education at Uganda Martyrs University, implementation Challenges faced while implementing them, their impact to enhance and promote distance education using case study interview responses generated from the small selected respondents with a view and aim of gathering strong but strong opinions and understanding of the subject matter and the obtained results were transcribed, coded interpreted and analysed thematically as received by the respondents indicated in Table 1.

Table 1 above shows the biographical information of the respondents who acted as a study sample. The first one is Geoffrey a male lecturer with 14 years of experience in the age bracket of 50–55. The second respondent was Grace, a female lecturer between 45 and 50 years of age and had 10 years of experience. Paul was the third respondent, a male third-year student of distance education and was in the age bracket of 30–35 years old. John, a second-year male student aged between 35 and 40 was the fourth respondent while Lilian, a female first-year student in the age bracket of 25–30 was the fifth respondent.

8. Findings

This section presents the findings which were obtained during the study. The presentation of the findings is done following the main themes of the study objectives.

8.1. Existing regulatory frameworks for distance education at Uganda Martyrs University

The first objective of the study was to identify the existing regulatory frameworks for distance education at UMU. The respondents who participated in the study revealed that all distance learning courses offered at the University are accredited by the National Council of Higher Education (NCHE) and to confirm this, each student enrolled for any programme at the university pays a certain amount of money to the body. One of the lecturers who participated in the study asserted as follows.

Table 1. Study sample demographic information.

Name of respondent (pseudo)	Position	Gender	Age bracket	Level of experience	Population (N)	Sample (S)	Sample techniques
Geoffrey	Lecturer	Male	50–55	14 years	1	1	Purposive
Grace	Lecturer	Female	45–50	10 years	1	1	Purposive
Paul	Student	Male	30–35	Third year	1	1	Purposive
John	Student	Male	35–40	Second year	1	1	Purposive
Lilian	Student	Female	25–30	First-year	1	1	Purposive
Total					5	5	

Source: Primary Data.

Before we start a new course or programme, we have to get accreditation from the National Council for Higher Education. All courses at our university are fully accredited which shows that our programs meet the highest standards of quality and relevance. (Geoffrey – Lecturer UMU).

This implies that the university's compliance with the NCHC guidelines as well as the available quality Assurance framework standards are followed to enable only those accredited programs to be taught as per the basic and minimum standards to kick start or offer the reviewed course programs under the distance education arrangement.

In addition, the study also established that quality assurance is a major regulatory framework emphasized by the university in all courses including those under distance education. The respondents asserted that all staff members especially lecturers who handle different courses are qualified. The respondents indicated that the university has a quality assurance committee that is tasked with regular reviews and assessments of curriculum, research and innovation and student support. One of the interviewees had this to say.

Our university maintains rigorous quality assurance by employing qualified staff and operating a dedicated quality assurance office to oversee our academic standards and ensure continuous improvement. (Grace – Lecturer UMU).

The analogy reaffirms the need for all universities and more so those offering distance education to embrace careful programs and processes to recruit well and qualifying staff to address the issues of qualification mismatch and non-qualifying staff attending programs offered by the university.

Furthermore, the respondents indicated the university ensures credible and efficient assessment of the students. It was established that distance education students engage in both online assessments and face-to-face examinations, especially at the end of each semester. In addition, the respondents said that the university has a well-defined assessment framework that outlines the evaluation methods, including formative and summative assessments and utilizes online platforms and learning management systems that facilitate secure assessments. In an interview, one of the students indicated as follows.

During course works and final examinations, the university ensures credible assessment through both online and face-to-face methods. This gives us confidence in the integrity of our evaluations. (Paul – Distance Education Student).

This indicated the university's readiness and programmed arrangements to ensure quality assessment administration and the available assessment programs such as formative, diagnostic and summative assessment with the adoption of modern assessment technologies online to cater for those present and distant.

Lastly, the respondents revealed that there a well-established student support services at the university. The respondents said that there is a student support office at the university that offers guidance and assistance to distance education students on various issues. The respondents further asserted that the university has put in place multiple communication channels such as emails, forums and chat platforms for students to reach faculty and support staff easily. In conformity with this, one of the students said as follows.

Student support is well implemented here. The university has an office dedicated to student support and they offer guidance and assistance to distance education students on various issues which makes our learning experience much better. (Lilian – Student UMU)

This thus indicates that the universities offer great communication outlets to enable students to acquire the necessary updates from the respective lecturers as well as the wider university platforms and this eases the communication gap which is widely looked at as a key stumbling block for many higher education institutions.

8.2. Impact of the regulatory frameworks on the quality of education provided at UMU

The respondents who participated in the study indicated that because of implementing different regulatory frameworks, the university is known for academic excellence and integrity. They revealed that this was built over time through employing qualified staff, assessing students credibly and providing

Table 2. Transcript analysis of the impact of the regulatory frameworks on the quality of education provided at UMU.

No.	Item	Response
1	Implementation of Regulatory frameworks to enhance academic staff excellence and integrity	“By strictly adhering to established regulations, we have been able to create a name for ourselves. This university is known for academic excellence and integrity. The institution has gained public trust through consistent adherence to quality assurance standards, obtaining national accreditation, and actively involving stakeholders in curriculum development and assessment processes which has fostered confidence among students, parents and employers. This trust positively impacts the quality of education as it encourages higher enrolment rates, attracts qualified staff and promotes collaboration with industry partners.” (Geoffrey – UMU lecturer)
2	Implementation of regulatory frameworks to foster open communication and collaboration among the students and staff	“The university encourages open communication and collaboration among students through online discussion forums, group projects, and different social media channels. This allows us to share ideas, resources, and feedback in a supportive environment that enhances the quality of education.” (Grace – Lecturer UMU)

Source: Primary Data.

appropriate student support services as seen in response 1 above in Table 2. This means that an enabling environment in the university is provided for by the university management and measures are put in place to address all the would-be integrity issues that may arise from the support services offered to students by their respective lecturers. The products are meant to have a widely recognised national and international accreditation and thus the curriculum offered should be integral and all-around.

Likewise, the study also established from the respondents that implementing regulatory frameworks has fostered open communication and collaboration among the students which has resulted in the provision of quality education. The respondents indicated that the university encourages the use of online discussion forums, group projects and social media channels which allows students to share ideas, resources and feedback in a supportive environment. Regular communication and collaboration enable students to connect and learn from each other’s experiences as advanced by response 2 in Table 2 above. This collaborative learning embedded with new technological advances is regarded to be the main source of communication from which learners are given a chance to advance their creativity through the various academic forums created to complete their class projects as well as lecturer-student feedback channels.

8.3. Challenges faced while implementing regulatory guidelines related to distance education at UMU

Despite the existing regulatory frameworks, the university faced some challenges in fully implementing them. The respondents said that some distance learners are located in remote areas where access to online services is challenging due to poor internet and unreliable power sources. These challenges hinder students’ access to essential online resources, learning materials and communication with lecturers and other students limiting their engagement and participation in coursework. One lecturer explained as follows.

As the name goes ...distance education... most of the students are situated in remote areas where access to online services is challenging due to poor internet connectivity and unreliable power sources. So sometimes you send them materials but they can’t access them. (Grace – Lecturer UMU)

The nature of the students and the location matter a lot and thus from the feedback especially limited access to power sources that enable ICT gadget usage as well as limited internet access and coverage is a true hindering factor to enabling distance learning since most of them cannot access these services thus end up missing the classes and failing to meet the NCHE class attendance minimum standards under the learner’s attendance frameworks.

Another challenge which was identified by the respondents was the poor Information Communication (ICT) skills among some distance education students. The respondents explained that some students lack proficiency in using digital platforms and therefore struggle to access learning materials, participate in online discussions or utilize support services effectively which leads to frustration and disengagement. One student had this to say.

Some distance students lack knowledge and skills of using digital platforms, which makes it difficult for them to access learning materials, participate in online discussions, or effectively utilize support services, leading to frustration and disengagement. (John – Student UMU)

This means that universities should embrace modern contemporary programs to orient the new students on the necessary ICT and digital skills to enable them to comply and a best fit in the changing teaching environment that calls for onlinsation of all teaching services to bridge the distance education gap. They should use the available programs to bridge this.

In addition to the above challenges, the respondents also revealed that the rapid advancements in technology lead to issues in data protection services. The respondents said that when new technologies emerge, they often introduce complex software and systems that may not have been thoroughly vetted for security vulnerabilities, making them susceptible to cyberattacks, data breaches and unauthorized access. A senior lecturer who participated in the study indicated as follows.

The rapid pace of technological advancements has outstripped the current data protection measures in place, leading to increased vulnerabilities and challenges in safeguarding sensitive information within the university. (Geoffrey – Lecturer UMU)

This lack of familiarity and adoption of the latest teaching and learning software on the side of lecturers can create a big problem as far as online resources security is concerned and thus. This calls for intensive exposure and training by universities on the best and latest technological trends to address the complex challenges of technological access many staff handling and the growing number of Distance Education programs across the University.

9. Discussion of the findings

The findings of the study established that Uganda Martyrs University is accredited by the National Council of Higher Education (NCHE) and to confirm this, each student enrolled for any programme at the university pays a certain amount of money to the body. These findings are in line with the literature that was reviewed. For example, the U.S. Department of Education (2022) states that accreditation is a critical requirement for institutions offering distance education to ensure that programs meet established quality standards and are recognized by employers and other educational entities. It was also established that quality assurance is one of the regulatory frameworks emphasized by the university in all courses including those under distance education. The university has a quality assurance committee that is tasked with regular reviews and assessments of curriculum, research and innovation and student support. Likewise, Ademe (2023) contends that quality assurance standards significantly enhance the quality of education in higher institutions by establishing clear benchmarks for academic performance, institutional practices, and student outcomes. Thus, the university should ensure credible and efficient assessment of the students by adopting a well-defined assessment framework that outlines the evaluation methods in the form of formative and summative assessments and utilizes online platforms and learning management systems that facilitate secure assessments. Institutions should establish transparent and consistent assessment and evaluation standards for online courses to ensure fairness and uphold academic integrity. The findings further revealed that there is a well-established student support service at the university handled by the student support office which offers guidance and assistance to distance education students with various issues. In line with this, it was established that the university has put in place multiple communication channels such as emails, forums and chat platforms for students to reach faculty and support staff easily. This finding correlates with the reviewed literature for example, the U.S. Department of Education (2021) states that institutions offering distance education should provide comprehensive learner support services to ensure that students have access to essential resources throughout their study.

In line with the impact of regulatory frameworks on the quality of education, the findings of the study show that adhering to different frameworks has enabled the university to attain academic excellence and integrity. This is because the university employs qualified staff, assesses students credibly and provides appropriate student support services. The findings align with the literature reviewed by Baker et al. (2017) who established that accreditation plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of education

in higher institutions by ensuring that they meet established standards of academic excellence and institutional integrity and Makhoul (2019) who noted that accredited institutions are more likely to attract qualified staff and motivated students. The findings also revealed that the university has gained public trust through consistent adherence to quality assurance standards like obtaining national accreditation and actively involving stakeholders in curriculum development and assessment processes which has fostered confidence among students, parents and employers. This rhymes with the reviewed literature for example NC-SARA (2023). This reciprocity streamlining the regulatory environment for online education ensures that institutions maintain compliance with state laws while expanding access to students nationwide. Lastly, on the impact of the regulatory frameworks on the quality of education, the findings of the study revealed implementing regulatory frameworks has fostered open communication and collaboration among the students which has resulted in the provision of quality education at UMU. The findings showed that the university encourages the use of online discussion forums, group projects and social media channels which allows students to share ideas, resources and feedback in a supportive environment. This finding also relates to the literature reviewed by Bwire et al. (2020) who asserts that maintaining academic integrity supports teachers in delivering more effective feedback which leads to meaningful learning experiences.

The findings revealed that some distance learners are located in remote areas where access to online services is challenging due to poor internet and unreliable power sources which hinder students' access to essential online resources, learning materials and communication with lecturers and other students. This challenge limits student engagement and participation in coursework. This is in line with Gunawardena (2023) who asserts that institutions often find it difficult to identify and address the varying needs of students in online learning environments which makes it harder to provide the required support. Additionally, the findings of the study revealed that some students lack proficiency in using digital platforms and therefore struggle to access learning materials, participate in online discussions or utilize support services effectively which leads to frustration and disengagement. Furthermore, the findings revealed that the rapid advancements in technology lead to issues in data protection services through introducing complex software and systems that may not have been thoroughly vetted for security vulnerabilities thus making them susceptible to cyberattacks, data breaches and unauthorized access. The above findings correlate with the literature which was reviewed by Stowell (2004) who said that the rapid growth of online education has outpaced the development of clear guidelines and this has led to potential disparities in student experiences and outcomes and (Lee-Post & Hapke, 2017), who indicates that some institutions face difficulties in ensuring academic integrity in online assessments due to remote environments.

10. Conclusions

It can be concluded from the findings of the study that UMU implements different regulatory frameworks. These include accreditation by the National Council of Higher Education (NCHE), quality assurance, credible and efficient assessment of the students and student support services. Implementing different regulatory frameworks has enabled the university to improve and maintain the quality of education by employing qualified staff, assessing students credibly, providing appropriate student support services and fostering open communication and collaboration among the students. Employing qualified staff ensures that students receive instruction from experts who bring both knowledge and experience to the classroom, credible assessment methods enable fair and accurate evaluation of student performance, ensuring that achievements reflect true understanding and mastery of the material, providing appropriate student support services addresses diverse needs, helping students overcome challenges and thrive academically while fostering open communication and collaboration among students encourages a sense of community and shared learning, which enriches discussions and deepens understanding. As a result of adhering to these frameworks, the university is better equipped to deliver high-quality education and support the overall academic success of its students.

Despite implementing different regulatory frameworks, the university is still facing some challenges related to this. The challenges include; some distance learners being located in remote areas where access to online services is challenging due to poor internet and unreliable power sources, lack of

proficiency in using digital platforms by some students whereby they struggle to access learning materials and the rapid advancements in technology which leads to issues in data protection services. Limited access to stable online services results in missed lectures, incomplete assignments and a general disconnection from course materials and peers while the lack of proficiency in using digital platforms affects participating in discussions and utilizing essential tools for learning. These barriers contribute to inequities in educational access and achievement which affects the overall effectiveness of distance education and affecting student retention and success.

11. Recommendations

Based on the above conclusions, the forwards the following recommendations.

Higher institutions of learning should ensure that they are accredited by the National Council for Higher Education. Accreditation will serve as a mark of quality assurance and ensure that educational programs meet established standards of excellence. This accreditation process will enhance institutions' credibility, which is vital for attracting students, staff and funding. It also provides students with confidence that their degrees will be recognized by employers and other educational institutions thus facilitating further education and employment opportunities.

The government should put in place appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure that higher education institutions comply with the existing regulatory frameworks since it is essential for maintaining educational quality and accountability. These mechanisms will help identify areas where institutions may fall short, allowing for timely interventions to address deficiencies and improve standards. Regular monitoring will promote transparency and encourage institutions to adhere to best practices thus safeguarding the interests of students and the broader community. Furthermore, effective evaluation processes will inform policy decisions by ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently and that educational programs align with workforce needs and societal goals.

Distance education students should ensure that they improve their skills in using digital platforms because it is essential for effective engagement in online learning environments. Enhanced digital skills will enable students to navigate course materials, participate in discussions and utilize resources more efficiently which will lead to a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Strong digital competencies will prepare the students for the increasingly technology-driven job market, where employers often seek candidates who can adapt to various digital tools and platforms. By investing time in developing these skills, distance learners will be able to maximize their educational experience, foster better collaboration with peers and achieve greater academic success.

12. A Recourse for higher education institutions

The University should invest in a stable internet connection by using a wired connection for better stability and use mobile hotspots as a backup. They should Invest in reliable and user-friendly learning management systems (LMS) and other educational technologies, Provide dedicated technical support to both faculty and students to address any technical issues promptly and offer training programs to enhance the digital literacy of faculty and students. Also, Universities should Utilize a variety of interactive teaching methods, such as online discussions, virtual labs, and simulation and empower students to take their learning through self-paced modules, project-based learning, and peer-to-peer collaboration and maintain clear and consistent communication channels between faculty and students. Likewise, they should Provide faculty with comprehensive training on online teaching methodologies, instructional design, and technology tools. Establish mentorship programs to support faculty in their transition to online teaching and offer ongoing professional development opportunities to keep faculty updated on the latest trends and best practices in online education. Provide personalized academic advising to help students navigate the complexities of online learning. They should Develop robust assessment strategies that align with learning outcomes and accurately measure student achievement. Implement quality assurance mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of online programs. Regularly review and refine distance education policies and practices based on feedback and evaluation data. By

implementing these strategies, the university will have effectively addressed the challenges of distance education and provide high-quality learning experiences for its students.

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