

## Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning amid AI Hype: A Case Study of Three Universities in Zambia

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### Abstract

*The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into education has triggered significant changes, especially within Open and Distance Learning (ODL) systems, creating both opportunities and challenges for maintaining quality. In Zambia, where ODL is crucial for expanding access to higher education, AI's impact raises essential questions about upholding educational standards. This study investigates how AI is being integrated into quality assurance processes at three Zambian universities—University A, University B, and University C. These institutions, representing both public and private sectors, have adopted AI-powered solutions for curriculum delivery, assessment, and student support. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research examined the strategies these universities employ to balance technological progress with preserving the quality and equity of educational experiences. Data gathered from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis offered insights into the successes and challenges of AI in improving ODL, while also highlighting institutional issues such as digital infrastructure, faculty readiness, and ethical considerations. The findings add to the broader discussion on AI's role in education and provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to enhance the quality assurance processes of ODL programs in Zambia and beyond.*

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### Introduction

The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed various sectors, including education, providing new opportunities and challenges for enhancing learning experiences. In Zambia, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has become a critical mode of delivery, offering flexibility and accessibility to higher education for a broader population (Muwana & Mumba, 2018). However, ensuring the quality of education in ODL poses unique challenges, particularly amid the hype for AI, where technological advancements can both enhance and complicate educational processes (Nyirenda, 2020).

Quality assurance in education is vital for maintaining standards of excellence in learning outcomes and experiences. In the ODL context, this encompasses curriculum design, teaching methodologies, assessment techniques, and student support systems (Fadzil & Munira, 2008;



Simui et al., 2018). The integration of AI into these aspects presents both opportunities for innovation and concerns regarding consistency, equity, and authenticity in learning experiences (Parveen, et al. 2023, Chirwa, 2019).

This study focuses on quality assurance mechanisms in the ODL mode of delivery amid the growing influence of AI, specifically within three universities in Zambia: University A, University B, and University C. These institutions represent a cross-section of public and private universities that have embraced ODL to varying extents, making them ideal for examining how AI is being integrated and its impact on quality assurance practices (Kalunga et al., 2021).

The research aims to examine how these universities are implementing quality assurance practices in their ODL programs amidst the hype for AI. It analyzes the strategies used to leverage AI to enhance educational quality, the challenges faced, and the effectiveness of these methods in ensuring that ODL remains a viable, high-quality option for learners (Mwansa, 2022).

By analyzing the experiences and practices of these universities, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on quality assurance in ODL. It provides insights into the role of AI in shaping educational quality, highlights best practices, and identifies potential areas for improvement. Ultimately, the findings of this research will be valuable to policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in the education sector in Zambia and beyond as they navigate the complexities of integrating AI into ODL to foster educational excellence (Phiri & Ndhlovu, 2023).

## **Research Context and Rationale**

The rapid development of technology, especially artificial intelligence (AI), has transformed the education landscape, significantly affecting teaching and learning methods (Istrate, 2024). Open and distance learning (ODL) has become a practical alternative to traditional education models, particularly in areas with limited access to conventional institutions, such as Zambia. The Zambian education system has increasingly adopted ODL to expand access to higher education, improve learning opportunities, and meet diverse learner needs. However, integrating AI into ODL raises essential questions about quality assurance mechanisms and standards. Despite growing interest in AI's potential to improve educational outcomes, there remains a lack of understanding of how these technologies influence quality assurance processes within ODL frameworks. This study examined the quality assurance practices used by three universities in Zambia amid the AI enthusiasm, offering insights into the challenges and opportunities AI presents to the ODL sector. By exploring the connection between quality assurance and AI in ODL, this research seeks to add to the ongoing discussion on educational quality in the era of emerging technologies, thereby guiding policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in Zambia's higher education system.

## **Conceptual framework and/or theoretical perspective**

The conceptual framework guiding this study is rooted in the principles of Quality Assurance (QA) in Open and Distance Learning (ODL), particularly in the context of the rapidly evolving landscape of artificial intelligence (AI) (Istrate, 2024). Quality assurance in ODL encompasses

a range of processes and practices designed to ensure that educational programs meet established quality and effectiveness standards. In the context of this research, the framework draws on existing literature highlighting the importance of stakeholder engagement, continuous improvement, and the integration of technology to enhance educational quality. The study posits that the infusion of AI technologies into ODL can both challenge and enhance traditional QA practices. By examining the interplay between AI and QA in ODL, this research sought to identify best practices and potential pitfalls institutions may encounter when adopting AI-driven solutions. The conceptual framework is informed by the idea that while AI can facilitate personalized learning, streamline administrative processes, and provide data-driven insights, it also raises critical questions about equity, accessibility, and the need for robust ethical standards in educational practices.

The theoretical framework for this study is anchored in the Systems Theory developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1901–1972) and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework collectively founded by D. Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson, and Walter Archer. Systems Theory posits that educational institutions operate as complex systems where various components interact and influence one another. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of ODL, where the integration of AI technologies necessitates a holistic approach to QA that considers the interdependencies among technology, pedagogy, and learner engagement. As Garrison, et.al (1999 & 2014) opine, the CoI framework on the other hand, emphasizes the significance of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence in creating a meaningful learning experience in online environments. By applying these theoretical lenses, the study explored how integrating AI into ODL can enhance or hinder the three presences critical to effective learning. This dual theoretical approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities that arise in the QA processes of ODL programs in Zambia, ultimately informing the development of strategies that leverage AI to improve educational outcomes.

### **Research questions**

1. How are quality assurance practices currently implemented in Open and Distance Learning programmes at selected Zambian universities within the context of Artificial Intelligence integration?
2. In what ways are Artificial Intelligence technologies incorporated into quality assurance processes in Open and Distance Learning programmes at selected Zambian universities?
3. What institutional, technological, and pedagogical challenges do universities encounter when integrating Artificial Intelligence into quality assurance systems in Open and Distance Learning?
4. How do key stakeholders perceive the influence of Artificial Intelligence on the effectiveness of quality assurance in Open and Distance Learning programmes?

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, which is particularly suited for exploring complex phenomena such as quality assurance in ODL and the role of AI. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and practices of stakeholders involved in the quality assurance processes at the selected universities.

The research design the case study, enabling a comprehensive examination of the quality assurance practices within the unique contexts of each university. The case study design is advantageous as it facilitates the exploration of specific instances of quality assurance in ODL, providing rich, contextualized insights that can inform broader discussions on the topic.

### ***Selection of Participants***

The study focused on three universities in Zambia that have established ODL programs and are actively exploring the integration of AI technologies into their educational practices. The selection of these universities was based on their diverse approaches to ODL and their varying levels of engagement with AI. The universities included a public university, a private university, and a distance education institution, representing a spectrum of higher education contexts in Zambia. Participants for the study were purposefully selected (Kombo & Tromp, 2006) to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the quality assurance processes in ODL. The research targeted key stakeholders, including university administrators, faculty members, quality assurance officers, and students enrolled in ODL programs. The rationale for including a diverse range of participants was to capture multiple perspectives on the quality assurance mechanisms in place and the perceived impact of AI on these processes. A total of 39 participants were recruited for the study, comprising 3 administrators from each University, 4 faculty members from each University involved in teaching ODL students, and 6 ODL students from each of the three universities. All these participants were purposively selected.

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. These methods were selected to triangulate data sources and enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. Interview and focus group guides were used as a primary data generation instrument while journal publications were used as secondary data generation instruments to back up data from the main research instrument.

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with university administrators, faculty members, and quality assurance officers to gain insights into their perspectives on quality assurance in ODL and the role of AI. Only participants who were involved in Open and Distance Learning activities were purposively selected for the interviews. The interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses while allowing for flexibility in exploring emerging themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Modrow-Thiel, 1993). Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted either in-person or via video conferencing platforms, depending on participant availability and preferences. The interviews were audio-recorded after participants consented and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

### ***Focus Group Discussions***

Focus group discussions were organized with students enrolled in ODL programs to gather collective insights on their experiences with quality assurance and AI integration. Two focus groups, each comprising 5 students, were conducted at each university, for a total of 30 student participants. The discussions were facilitated by a trained moderator who encouraged open dialogue among participants, allowing them to share their thoughts and experiences related to the quality of their educational experience and the use of AI tools in their learning (Sushil et al., 2016) Each focus group session lasted approximately 90 minutes and was also audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### ***Document Analysis***

In addition to interviews and focus groups, relevant institutional documents were analyzed to provide context and corroborate the data collected from participants. These documents included quality assurance policies, program evaluation reports, and strategic plans related to ODL and AI initiatives. Document analysis enriched understanding of the formal quality assurance frameworks in place at each university and of how these frameworks align with stakeholders' perceptions and experiences.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data analysis process employed a thematic analysis approach, involving several essential steps. First, the interview and focus group discussion transcriptions were read multiple times to familiarize the researchers with the content and identify initial themes, as Caulfield (2023) suggests. Then, initial codes were created from the data, highlighting important features and recurring ideas related to quality assurance and AI in ODL.

The coding process was carried out using qualitative data analysis software, which helped organize codes and identify patterns within the data set. After coding, the researchers grouped related codes into broader themes that reflected the study's main findings. These themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and addressed the research questions.

The final themes were organized into a thematic framework that highlighted the study's main findings, including the current state of quality assurance practices in ODL, the perceived impact of AI on these practices, and the challenges and opportunities of incorporating AI into quality assurance processes. The analysis also included a comparative review of the findings across the three universities to identify similarities and differences in their approaches to quality assurance and AI integration.

### ***Limitations***

While this study provides valuable insights into quality assurance in ODL amid the AI hype, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First, the qualitative nature of the research means that the findings may not be generalizable to all universities in Zambia or other contexts. The study is limited to three universities, each with unique characteristics and approaches to ODL and AI.

Second, relying on self-reported data from participants may introduce bias because individuals might perceive their experiences and the effectiveness of quality assurance practices differently. However, this limitation was addressed through triangulation using data from documents. Furthermore, the rapidly evolving nature of AI technologies means the findings could quickly become outdated as new developments emerge.

Despite these limitations, the study adds to the growing body of research on quality assurance in ODL and the role of AI in higher education. The insights from the research can guide future policies and practices, helping universities in Zambia and elsewhere address the challenges and opportunities AI brings to open and distance learning.

## Research ethics

Ethical considerations were fundamental throughout the research process. The study adhered to ethical guidelines established by the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, ensuring they understood the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants trusted that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous, with all identifiers removed from transcripts. Extra precautions were taken to prevent any physical or psychological harm to participants. The researchers maintained a respectful, non-judgmental attitude during data collection, fostering a safe environment for participants to share their experiences and perspectives openly.

## Literature Review

The concept of quality assurance in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has gained significant attention, especially with the increasing integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in educational settings. Quality assurance in ODL involves a comprehensive approach to ensure that educational programs meet established standards of excellence. This includes designing and delivering curricula, teaching methods, assessment techniques, and student support systems (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). As AI technologies advance, they are more frequently adopted in ODL to improve various aspects of educational delivery. For example, AI-powered tools can personalize learning experiences, provide instant feedback, and streamline administrative tasks, potentially enhancing the overall quality of education (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). However, these developments also pose challenges, including the need for robust digital infrastructure, the risk of widening educational inequalities, and concerns about the reliability and fairness of AI-driven assessments (Selwyn, 2019).

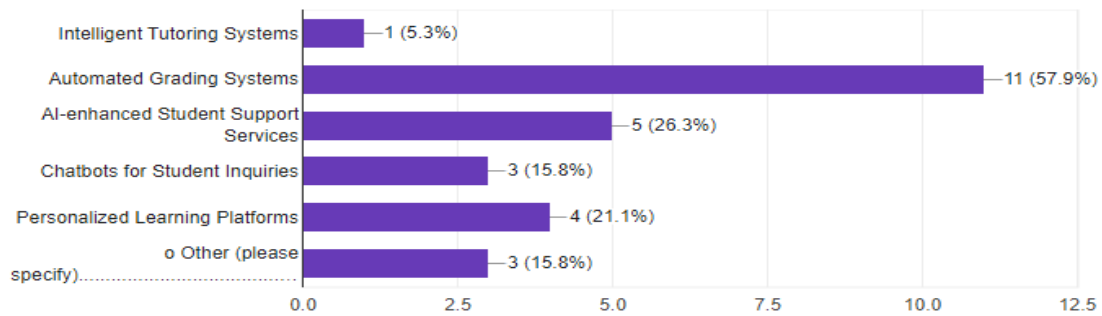
Chen, et al. (2020) found that AI has been extensively adopted and used in education, especially by various educational institutions. Fadzil and Munira (2008) predict that AI could lead to a significant and exciting shift in open and distance learning, greatly influencing the future of all open and distance learners, while Quy, et al. (2023) add that AI can completely transform the way we learn and teach.

In the Zambian context, the implementation of AI in ODL and its impact on quality assurance practices are emerging areas of interest. Studies have indicated that while AI can provide significant benefits in terms of accessibility and personalized learning, the effectiveness of these technologies depends on local educational infrastructure and to incorporate them effectively (Chirwa, 2019). A study by Mkwizu and Junio-Sabio (2024) concludes that more research is needed on Quality Assurance (QA) in Distance Education to align with post-COVID-19 trends in improving QA. This emphasizes the need to expand research on QA in Distance Education to include aspects of artificial intelligence (AI). Therefore, the current study will be conducted. Three universities in Zambia—University A, University B, and University C—serve as relevant case studies for examining these dynamics. These institutions have adopted various AI-driven solutions to support their ODL programs, such as intelligent tutoring systems, automated grading, and AI-enhanced student support services (Kalunga et al., 2021). However, the success of these initiatives has been mixed, facing challenges like inadequate technological infrastructure, limited digital literacy among students and faculty, and concerns about maintaining academic integrity in an AI-mediated learning environment (Mwansa, 2022).

### Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The study that aimed to explore how AI is integrated into quality assurance processes at three Zambian universities revealed interesting findings, as outlined in the following thematic areas.

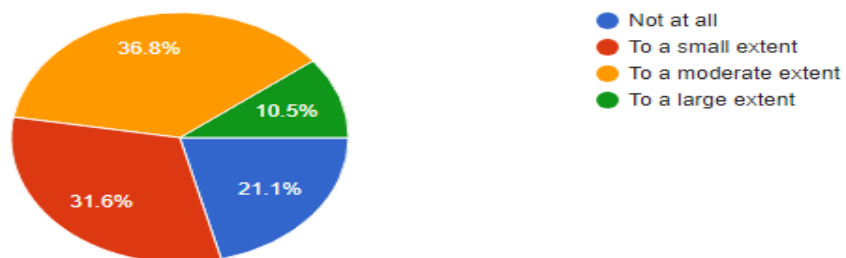
#### I. Adoption of various AI tools in Open and Distance Learning (ODL)



**Figure 1.0: Adoption of various AI tools in Open and Distance Learning**

The above graph shows that the most popular AI tool in ODL is automated grading systems (57.9%), which streamline the assessment process by quickly and consistently evaluating assignments and quizzes. Their popularity likely comes from their efficiency and ability to handle large numbers of students familiar in ODL programs. Conversely, the least used AI tool is Intelligent Tutoring Systems, with a response rate of 5.3%. In comparison, the AI-Enhanced Student Support System at 26.3% indicates a growing trend toward improving the student experience through personalized support. The 5.3% may suggest either limited adoption or lack of awareness of the benefits of Intelligent Tutoring Systems. Overall, the chart shows that although automated grading systems dominate AI use in ODL, there is significant potential for growth in adopting other tools like intelligent tutoring systems and chatbots. This trend highlights AI's potential to enhance teaching and learning experiences in ODL programs.

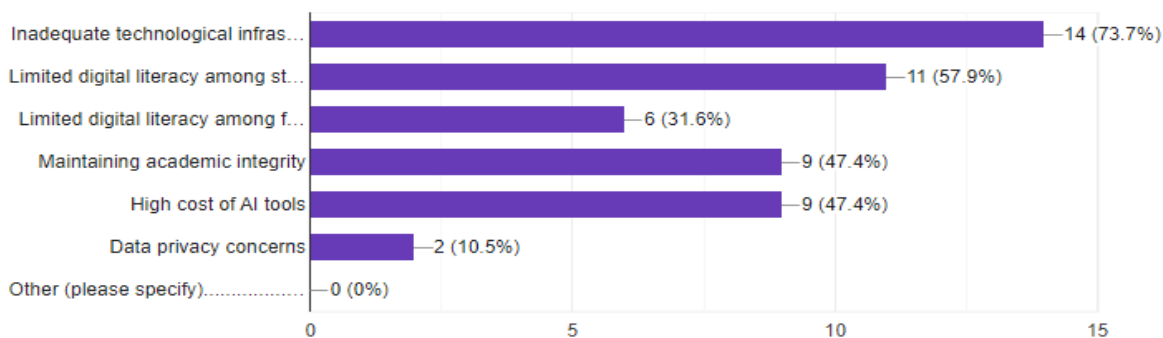
#### The extent to which AI is integrated into ODL programs



**Figure 2.0: The extent to which AI is integrated into ODL Programs**

The chart illustrates AI adoption levels in ODL, with most programs (68.4% combined) using AI to varying degrees. The significant portion of 36.8% adoption shows growing awareness and use of AI capabilities. However, the smaller 10.5% segment indicates that many institutions have yet to utilize AI, leaving room for further growth fully. This pattern of adoption is likely influenced by financial constraints, as implementing AI solutions often requires substantial investment in software, hardware, and staff training. These costs can be prohibitive, especially for institutions with limited budgets or competing priorities. Technical challenges also slow down integration, since developing and maintaining AI systems demand specialized skills and robust IT infrastructure. Many schools, especially in developing regions, may lack the technical capacity or access to skilled professionals needed to manage these complex systems. Policy and governance issues may also contribute, as they complicate AI adoption. Some educational systems lack clear guidelines for implementing AI technology. Without a solid policy framework, institutions may feel uncertain about compliance, best practices, or future planning. Ethical concerns can also be a barrier to full adoption, as some institutions hesitate over data privacy, algorithmic bias, and potential job losses. These ethical issues raise questions about fairness, transparency, and societal impacts of AI in education. The findings suggest that institutions in the "not at all" or "small extent" categories need targeted support to address this gap.

**Major challenges in integrating AI into ODL programs**



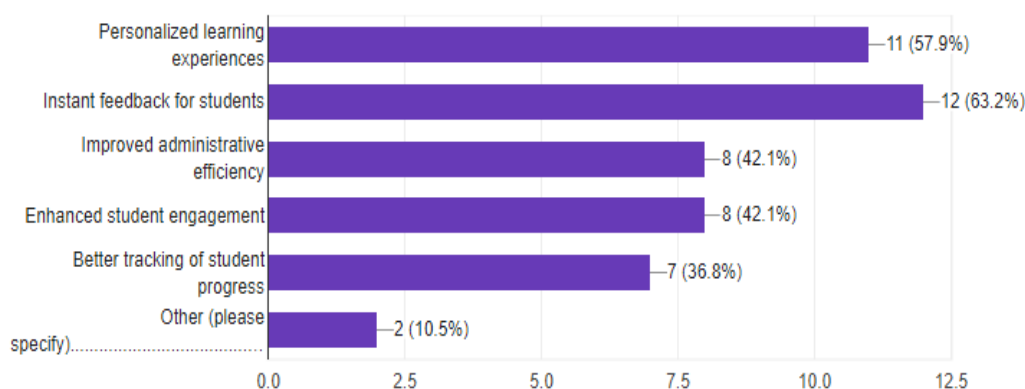
**Figure 3.0:** Major challenges in integrating AI into ODL programs

Inadequate Technological Infrastructure (73.7%), as shown in the chart, indicates that this is the biggest challenge, suggesting that institutions lack enough technological resources to effectively integrate AI into ODL programs. Problems may include unreliable internet, insufficient hardware, or outdated software systems. Although data privacy stood at 10.5% response, it remains critical. Institutions need to ensure that AI tools follow data protection laws and protect user information. Despite these challenges, the study found best practices for integrating AI into ODL for quality assurance, such as restrictions on results upload and system upgrades. One participant from University B said: “AI requires ongoing learning, staying agile, continually advancing your know-how, and fostering a collaborative environment to keep up with AI’s brisk technological march.” The findings suggest that fixing technological infrastructure and improving digital literacy should be top priorities for successful AI integration. Strategies to reduce costs, like partnerships with AI providers or using open-source tools, could help overcome financial barriers. Lastly, institutions must create policies to effectively address academic integrity and data privacy issues.

**How to address the challenges of AI integration in ODL Programmes**

The study revealed several suggestions from respondents on how to address best the challenges of integrating AI into ODL programs. It was recommended that making ICT courses compulsory in the first year of university and increasing investment in AI technology are essential. Emphasis was placed on properly citing sources to facilitate accurate quoting and prevent plagiarism. Keeping AI knowledge bases up to date was also seen as vital for maintaining the accuracy and relevance of AI tools. One participant from University B stated: “There is also a need to properly train faculty to leverage AI tools in the classroom effectively. Educators lack familiarity with these technologies in many places, necessitating ongoing training and support to bridge the gap.” Personal investments, such as purchasing devices like computers and securing reliable internet connections, were proposed, along with using residential physical contact periods for hands-on AI experience. Ensuring that AI-generated outputs are verified with anti-plagiarism software was stressed to uphold academic integrity. Addressing network connectivity issues, increasing institutional funding, and conducting awareness programs to promote AI adoption were identified as additional strategies. Suggestions also included banning unfair practices, orienting students on AI tools, and providing detailed guidance on their use in ODL programs. Some challenges, such as poor network connections in certain areas, were acknowledged, with a call to prioritize solutions, including improving infrastructure and effectively using AI applications.

**Opportunities AI tools provide for ODL programs**



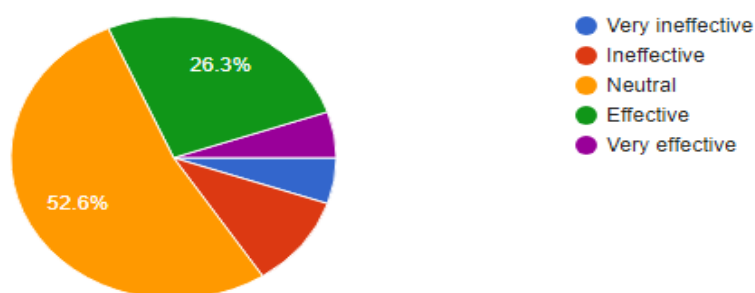
**Figure 4.0:** Opportunities AI tools provide for ODL programs

The study identified various opportunities that AI tools offer for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programs. A response rate of 57.9% was received from participants regarding personalized learning experiences. They argued that AI tools can analyze individual learning styles, preferences, and progress to create customized educational experiences. This feature is especially useful for ODL, where learners may not have direct access to instructors. Personalized learning ensures that students can progress at their own pace and receive content suited to their abilities and needs. Examples include adaptive learning platforms and recommendation systems for study materials. The study also showed, as seen in the chart below, that 63.2% of respondents considered instant feedback for students as one of the key opportunities AI tools provide for ODL programs. These findings align with Zawacki-Richter et al., (2019), who argue that AI-powered tools can personalize learning experiences,

offer immediate feedback, and streamline administrative tasks, thereby potentially enhancing the overall quality of education. The highest-rated opportunity, instant feedback, allows students to quickly identify and correct errors. AI tools such as automated grading systems and chatbots deliver immediate responses to queries, quizzes, and assignments. This is especially beneficial for ODL programs, where delays in communicating with instructors can impede learning progress.

The study also shows that improved administrative efficiency and increased student engagement (42.1%) are among the opportunities AI tools offer for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programs. The argument is that AI tools simplify administrative tasks, such as enrollment, scheduling, and performance tracking. For ODL institutions, this reduces staff workload and improves operational efficiency. Automating routine tasks allows administrators to focus on enhancing the quality of education and addressing student needs. Additionally, AI tools are said to promote engagement through interactive features like virtual classrooms, gamified learning platforms, and AI-powered tutoring systems. In ODL settings, maintaining student interest can be difficult due to the lack of physical interactions. AI helps bridge this gap by providing dynamic and engaging learning environments. Better tracking of student progress (36.8%) was also identified as a benefit of integrating AI into ODL programs. It is said that AI enables detailed monitoring of individual and group progress through analytics dashboards and reporting systems. ODL programs benefit from this by identifying at-risk students and offering timely interventions. Tracking tools also help educators assess the effectiveness of course content and make data-driven improvements.

### *Effectiveness of current quality assurance practices in ensuring high-quality ODL*



**Figure 5.0:** *Effectiveness of current quality assurance practices*

The pie chart suggests a critical need for reform in quality assurance practices within ODL. The overwhelming perception of ineffectiveness (52.6%) underscores challenges such as:

- Inadequate monitoring mechanisms
- Limited stakeholder engagement
- Poor alignment with global quality assurance standards

The somewhat higher "Effective" segment (26.3%) may indicate some successes, possibly in areas like course design or content delivery. However, the small share of "Very Effective" and

the large "Ineffective" category show that current practices might be lacking in comprehensiveness or executed inconsistently.

To improve perceptions and outcomes, it is essential to focus on several key strategies. First, strengthening monitoring and evaluation processes is crucial. This can be achieved through regular audits and the establishment of feedback loops to continuously assess the quality of content and its delivery. Second, investing in capacity building is vital. Equipping educators and administrators with comprehensive training on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) best practices will enhance their ability to deliver effective education. Additionally, incorporating learner feedback is indispensable. By integrating students' experiences and insights, quality assurance mechanisms can be refined to better meet their needs. Lastly, adopting technology-driven solutions can significantly improve transparency and efficiency in quality control. Leveraging innovative platforms ensures a streamlined approach to maintaining and enhancing educational standards.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight both the great potential and the current challenges of integrating AI into quality assurance processes for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programs in Zambian universities. Although AI tools like automated grading systems and personalized learning platforms offer significant opportunities to boost efficiency, engagement, and student support, issues such as uneven adoption levels, limited technological infrastructure, and data privacy concerns emphasize areas that need attention. Meeting these challenges through more investment in technology, training for educators, and the creation of strong quality assurance policies will be key to fully realizing AI's benefits. By focusing on building infrastructure, promoting digital literacy, and ensuring the ethical use of AI, ODL programs can better meet global quality standards and improve learning outcomes for diverse students.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

I declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper or otherwise.

### **Authors' contributions**

*The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.*

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