# Enhancing Quality in Open and Distance Learning

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**Synopsis**

*Open and Distant Learning (ODL) has proliferated in recent years due to increased demand for education opportunities for an increasing world population, the view that education is a major contribution to national economic success, and because of globalization and the improvements in Info-communication Technology (ICT). While this is laudable, there is a need to ensure that the ODL is carried out with sufficient quality and rigour that will produce results, in the form of trained manpower and knowledge enhancement, fulfilling the practical purposes of ODL. This paper looks at the primary reasons for, and the key issues concerning, quality in ODL, the quality indicators that can be adopted, and some suggestions of regional cooperation to promote and enhance quality of ODL in South East Asia.*

## Introduction

For both developing and developed economies, education is seen as an essential driving force for national development and economic upgrading. This need places continued pressure on the demand for Open and Distance Learning (ODL). With expanding population, the need for cost-effective and efficient way of providing access to

education for many more places demand for expanded ODL. Improvements in technology, including ICT and the availability of the Worldwide Web (WWW), have given powerful tools for ODL. The principles and techniques of ODL have also been extended to traditional learning as a supplement to regular face-to-face teaching. The recent global health scares from SARS and the avian flu have highlighted the usefulness and importance of a system of delivery of education that can be conducted without the need for physical coming-together of students and teachers, at least for a time.

The growth of education globally has been accompanied by an expansion of private providers, mainly third-party providers, some of which are very business-oriented and may not have the right standards for what they do on behalf of their partner universities. There is thus a need to provide consumer protection from the activities of dubious qualification mills. This has added to the somewhat unhealthy image, in some quarters, of ODL – this being a relative recent mode (compared to the many centuries of traditional education), students, parents, employers and governments alike have questioned the quality of such a mode of education and qualifications from ODL programmes are not as well-accepted.

The rapid expansion of ODL itself brings along with it a myriad of issues and challenges. One of the most critical issues then is that of quality, and this must be addressed in a concerted way. This paper gives an overview of the quality aspect of ODL and discusses the key issues related to the provision of good quality in ODL. While ODL is applicable not just to higher education, much of the discussion in this paper refers to higher education, but the principles are nevertheless of relevance to other levels. Also, the information and ideas are not new, but need reinforcing. Extensive reference has been made of the draft document entitled "Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning for Southeast Asian

Countries"[1] prepared by SEAMEO SEAMEOLEC, 2007, which the author gratefully acknowledges.

## ODL in South East Asia

While ODL has been around for many decades, in South East Asia (SEA), the introduction has been staggered and uneven. In Indonesia, distance learning was first introduced in 1950 as correspondence courses for teachers. Only later, in the 1980's and 1990's did ODL become more widespread and significant. The Universitas Terbuka was established in 1984 in Indonesia, while Malaysia set up the Open University Malaysia in 2000. Singapore has many foreign colleges and universities conducting their programmes in a distance and semi-distance mode, the Open University UK (OUUK) was present in the city-state since 1991, and the SIM University was established in 2005 for adult learners, allowing a more open access to a local university education than was previously available. Two other countries, Thailand and the Philippines, had a slightly earlier venture into ODL, since the 1930's and 40's, while the other countries such as in Indochina have more recent histories of ODL of significance. Nevertheless, the ODL in SE Asia is set to grow more aggressively as the region searches for a cost-effective and efficient way to provide access to education for every citizen at all levels (*Jegede & Shive, 2001*[2]).

## Characteristics of ODL

In order to define quality for ODL, let us look briefly at what ODL is and the chief characteristics of this form of education.

*Keegan (1996)*[3] defines distance education as an education system

38

having several characteristics, including:

a. The quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process, unlike traditional face-to-face formats.
b. The influence of an educational organization in the planning and preparation of learning materials and provision of student support services.
c. The ODL system uses technical media: print, audio, video or computer to unite teacher and learner and carry the contents of the course.
d. The provision of two way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue.
e. The absence of the quasi-permanent learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals rather than in groups, with the possibility of occasional meeting, either face-to-face or by electronic means, for both didactic and socialization purposes.

Although distance and open learning are not the same, some of their characteristics are similar. However, there are some characteristics that are peculiar to open learning. Characteristics of open learning identified include:

a. Access is to any person who wishes to participate in the programme offered without consideration of age, occupation and education background. In some open learning institutions, no educational prerequisite is required.
b. Students are allowed to choose their programme of study, relevant to their particular needs.
c. Students may enter or leave the programme at a juncture of their choosing, and a formal qualification is not necessarily the main driving force for the studies.

In both open and distance learning, there is also the element of flexibility to varying extent, in terms of what learning mode to use (printed text, video, audio, on-line, etc.), the sequence of learning, the time and place for study and whether study is done individually or in a group.

With the advent of the computer and the Worldwide Web, ODL has been augmented significantly, and perhaps, challenged by the concept and availability of virtual learning (variously referred to as e-learning, online learning, web-based learning). Many of the attributes of ODL are facilitated by the computer network and an electronic learning management system (LMS). In particular, communication between students and instructors is much better facilitated, much quicker, and more opportunities are opened up for collaborative learning; also, the learner has unprecedented access to knowledge through the www. The characteristics of virtual learning are described in greater detail by *Paulsen (2002)*[4], and will not be elaborated here.

An ODL system that supports the attainment of its objective of enabling student learning without the need for regular face-to-face instruction should have components that allow for (a) decision-making and control of academic and administrative standards and processes, (b) programme design, course creation and production, and timely distribution of course materials, (c) management of students and their academic progress (registration, tutorial, academic and non-academic student support, evaluation, certification), and (d) management of teaching staff, resources, finance, equipment and facilities, and information.

## Why Do We Need to Pay Particular Attention to Quality?

There are several reasons [5] for paying particular attention to quality:

a.  <u>Learning effectiveness</u> – quality has a great impact on learning, on the retention of enrolled learners, on graduation rates, on the employability and usefulness of graduates, and on the appetite for, and attitude towards, continuing education after graduation.

b.  <u>Stakeholder-satisfaction</u> – this applies to students principally, but also has an impact on how employers perceive the education provider and qualifications it issues. Students want value-for-money education and quality is a critical component of this proposition. Future funding support to the education provider can be more forthcoming when the satisfaction of the stakeholders is achieved. With high quality in place, good staff can be attracted and retained.

c.  <u>Accountability</u> – a quality assurance system enables the education provider to be accountable to various ODL stakeholders, including the individual receiving the education, staff of the institution, employers of graduates, and the country for which ODL is set-up to train its manpower).

d.  <u>Competition</u> – the education market is increasingly international and competitive, and quality distinguishes the good players from the also-rans and the mediocre, giving a distinctive advantage to the former.

e.  <u>Long-term status & viability</u> – quality is also the key to the growth in reputation, appeal and sustainability of an education provider.

41

# The Focus of Quality Assurance

To further answer the question in the preceding section and to identify where the focus on quality assurance should be, it might be instructive just to ponder what the different stakeholders want from ODL. Some are enumerated below (not an exhaustive list).

a. What does the student want? – some common objectives include learning of a skill, knowledge for career or self-satisfaction, a qualification acceptable for employment, relevance of content & experience, flexibility during learning period, and support for his/her learning, value-for-money.

b. What does the employer want? - graduates with readily-applied skills & knowledge, but having also other non-academic skills, opportunities for staff upgrading.

c. What does the institution want? – good reputation, healthy student intake, robust academic system, successful graduates.

d. What does the country/society want? - trained manpower of right quantity and quality, good returns for public education investment, value-for-money institutions and programmes, a learning community, new knowledge for advancement

The term, *quality*, has been described as "fitness of purpose—meeting or conforming to generally accepted standards…", while *quality assurance* is a "planned and systematic review… of an institution or programme to determine that acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being maintained and enhanced" (*CHEA, 2001*)[6].

According to *"The World Declaration on Higher Education"* (*1998*)[7], '*quality* in higher education is a multi-dimensional concept, which should embrace all its functions and activities, viz., teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship,

staffing, students, buildings, facilities, equipment, services to the community and the academic environment. Quality also requires that higher education should be characterized by its international dimension, viz., exchange of knowledge, interactive networking, mobility of teachers and students, and international research projects, while taking into account the national cultural values and circumstances.'

The declaration further noted that 'internal self-evaluation and external review, conducted openly by independent specialists, if possible with international expertise, are vital for enhancing quality. Independent national bodies should be established and comparative standards of quality, recognized at international level, should be defined. Stakeholders should be an integral part of the institutional evaluation process.'

What do we look for quality in? Well, there are many dimensions, and standards have been listed in various publications (*e.g., by ODLQC, 2005*) [8] but some notable broad areas to focus on are described below. In enumerating them, we should be mindful that many pertain to ODL as well as face-to-face learning and learning which is not open-access. However, some are more pertinent to ODL, given its open and distance nature. Also, the discussion about quality in this paper is done by asking questions on the areas identified rather than providing answers and recommendations.

- Programme and Courseware
  Is there a rigorous process to plan, design and develop the curriculum of a programme? Is the content coverage adequate, relevant and regularly updated? Is there a logical sequencing of courses? Are there clearly-defined learning objectives? Are the materials suitable for self-learning, and issued in a timely manner? What provisions are there for credit transfers and

43

exemptions? For qualifications that are laboratory-based, does the curriculum provide for adequate practical education? [Note: In this discussion, "course" also refers to "subject" and is a component of many making up a "programme" the successful completion of which constitutes a formal qualification]

- Delivery modes
(Including the technological system employed to enhance learning). Are these suitable for the nature and requirement of each course, and for the kinds of students on ODL? Do students, with time and work constraints, have flexibility in learning from the delivery system?

- Learning effectiveness
Is there due regard for the appropriateness to the learning styles of students? Is the development of relevant skills and abilities achieved? What system is in place to ensure suitable progression of students to the higher levels? How is the wide access to knowledge on the internet (Google, Wiki's, etc.) incorporated in the learning of students with adequate guidance?

- Evaluation & Assessment of learning outcome
How appropriate are the test procedures and instruments to evaluate the attainment of learning objectives? What objective and rigorous moderation and QA of the examination process, including the use of external examiners? How secure is the examination system? How is assessment at a distance handled?

- Student support
What effective system of support is there for autonomous

44

learning? What support service to provide advice and encouragement to students on programme progression, changes of courses, coping with studies especially for working adults, time management, technical help? How efficient and timely are the administrative services? What financial aid is there for those in need to complete their studies?

- Communication and Interaction
For ODL and online learning, these aspects are important elements for the success of student learning and teacher assessment of student learning. How is the effectiveness of teacher-student and student-student interaction measured and assured? Is there timely communication of information and schedules to students? How is the interaction incentivised and accounted for in the final grades?

- Feedback
What mechanisms are there for feedback from stakeholders on teaching quality, learning effectiveness, programme attributes, learning support, usefulness of graduates? What processes are in place to make timely changes in response to valid criticisms/suggestions?

- Staff
Quality of staff for ODL is one of the most critical challenges. Does the recruitment process identify suitable faculty for ODL? As many teachers are part-time or at locations remote from the parent institution, how is the quality monitored? How are these trained appropriately for ODL? Is there adequate complement of instructional designers, IT specialists, academic counselors to support the programmes? What is the reward system which incentives innovation and dedication to ODL?

- Students

  A question of quality of students – since admission is open, this point is more about the extent of bridging and subsequent support to enable the student to achieve his/her potential in the studies. By the way an institution admits, and provides or does not provide bridging courses, can academically poorer students succeed through the programme? Or are we sacrificing quality and rigour in the name of "open" access? How much value-add does the institution contribute to the student? We should also remind ourselves that the learning chain goes all the way from the institution to the teachers and to the students, and any break or deficiency in the chain will adversely affect the whole process and objectives of the education exercise. If we work only on the education institution's end to upgrade delivery systems, ICT infrastructure, how do we ensure that at the other end, the students have the capacity and IT resource to benefit from the delivery?

- Facilities

  How is laboratory work provided in distance mode? Are laboratories, libraries (including online library resources), ICT (reliability, access, downtime, speed, security, user-friendliness, help-desk services, IT staffing, 24-7 availability), and other teaching facilities of adequate standard?

- Accreditation and recognition

  What measures are in place to ensure a similar quality of ODL as that of traditional face-to-face education, and hence a general acceptability of qualifications obtained by ODL? How is the programme quality measured through performance of graduates in the workplace? What professional accreditation is obtained for programmes?

- Research

  Is there active research or innovation in ODL pedagogy, methodologies and use of technology for enhancement?

- Institutional support

  Is the mission of the institution supportive of ODL? What commitment is there to ODL particularly when other modes, e.g., on-campus face-to-face education, are also used?

Clearly, many more questions on quality can be asked. Also, knowing the areas of focus for quality enhancement is only partway to success; another equally important part is to define the corresponding qualitative and quantitative quality indicators, and to track these for progressive improvements.

## Process of Assessing Quality

The journey towards quality in ODL must be systematically planned and programmed. It is a deliberate effort and is not achieved in a short time. The process of QA in ODL consists of a closed cycle of activities that include:

a. Defining the standards to be achieved;
b. Defining the performance indicators to be measured;
c. Audit and matching against standards set;
d. Identification of improvements;
e. Implementation of improvements and review.

A diagrammatic representation of the process is shown below.
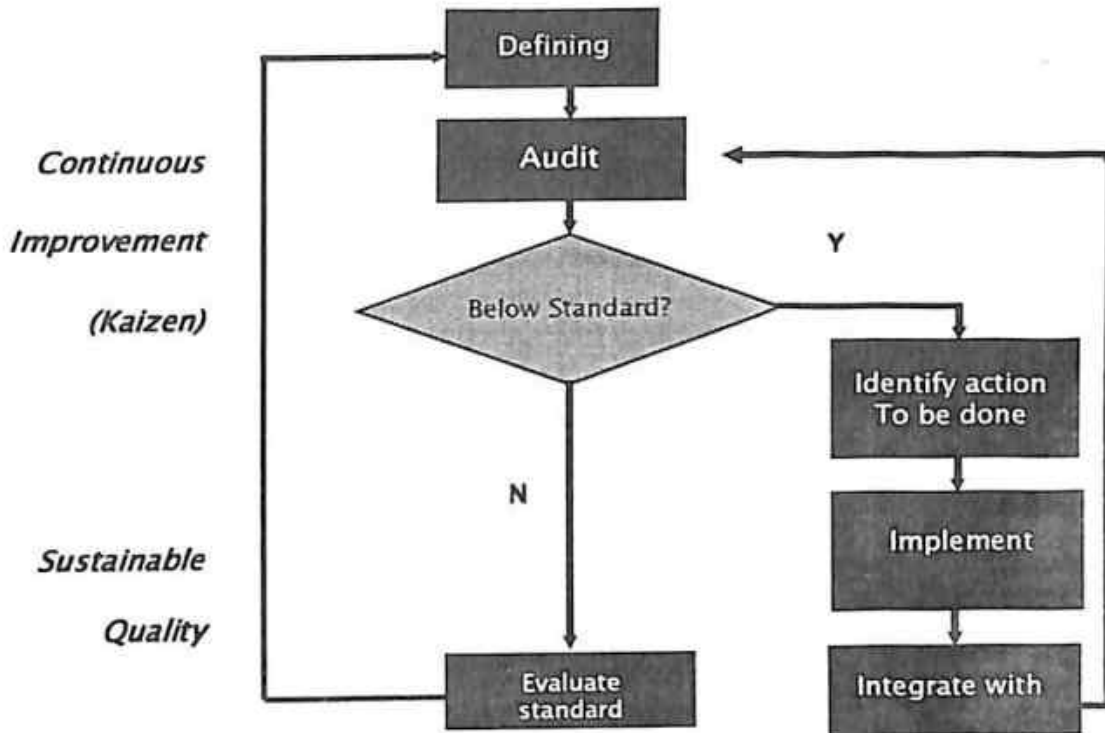
**Quality Assurance Process (from SEAMOLEC Draft Guidelines 2007[1])**

There are various ways to make an assessment:

a. Self-evaluation – this is an internal process of evaluation and reflection, and should be continuously done and adopted as a culture within the institution;

b. Peer review by panel of experts that preferably includes overseas members,, and involving desk study & site visits – this should be done at both programme and institutional levels, as the reviews would be looking at different attributes and intended outcomes;

c. Surveys – students, graduates, employers, professional bodies;

d. Analyses of statistical data, performance indicators, best practices, and benchmarking against best-in-class entities.

48

What is most important, after all the critical analyses and evaluation, and the identification of improvements, is the willingness and actual mobilization to implement the changes. This will require the commitment at the highest level to make the changes.

## Regional Collaboration for Quality

Within SEA, ODL is at different stages and sophistication of development. Many may still not have the expertise to set-up and run an effective quality management system, and some may not have the financial resources to implement quality-enhancing policies. There is thus impetus and scope for collaboration to lift the quality of ODL in the region. Some of the practical steps include:

a. Sharing of best practices – a depository or exchange for best practices to be shared and discussed. If the country is large enough, then a national depository allows for sharing that is culturally and contextually relevant.

b. Audits – programme and institutional audits by experienced teams made up of auditors from various institutions in the region that will help to identify weaknesses for rectification and suggestions for improvements.

c. Sharing of resources – an example is learning resources in the form of developed courses, online re-usable learning objects, assessment methods, etc., that can be shared among institutions, thereby reducing costs and increasing content capacity at the beneficiary institution. Often, because of the diversity of language and culture in the SEA region, the use of an international language such as English in course materials will facilitate.

d. Expert services – exchange, attachments, services of experts in institutions

e. Research collaboration – in such areas as pedagogy of distance

learning, andragogy, e-learning, assessment, cultural adaptation of existing processes and standards; sharing of research findings and possibly a centre for ODL research for the region.

f.  Benchmarking – assistance in using the right institution/ department/programme to benchmark against, and sharing experiences in benchmarking.

## Conclusion

The issue of quality in ODE is wide-ranging and this paper merely skims the surface of this topic. What is clear is that as ODL become an increasingly common means of providing affordable accessible education for the masses, the quality issue needs to be tackled vigorously and urgently so that this mode retains and improves on its acceptability, and students who get an ODL education receive learning that is of high quality and qualifications that are recognized as readily as those obtained through traditional face-to-face education.

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