PERSPECTIVES ON DISTANCE EDUCATION

Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Selected Case Studies

Alan Tait, Editor

THE COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

At the Bangkok conference of the International Council for Distance Education in November 1992, ICDE and the Commonwealth of Learning signed an agreement designed to encourage research in open and distance learning. Soon after the conference concluded, two research groups were established to review existing research in particular areas of distance learning and to work towards publishing both the existing research and results of newly commissioned research. This publication marks the first collection to emerge from the work of the quality assurance group, chaired jointly by Jocelyn Calvert of Deakin University and Alan Tait of the United Kingdom Open University. It consists of a set of case studies of quality assurance practices in distance teaching universities, along with an introduction by the editor. The case studies presented here represent a significant addition to existing work in the field of quality assurance, particularly at a time when universities in many parts of the world and distance teaching universities, both new and established, are placing great emphasis on reviewing and, where necessary, revising what they do in accordance with established principles of quality assurance and with practice in sister institutions. The Commonwealth of Learning is pleased to publish this collection of case studies as one of its continuing series, *Perspectives on Distance Education.*

Ian Mugridge
The Commonwealth of Learning

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Hans-Peter Baumeister was born in 1947 and studied literature and history. In 1979, after two years of teaching, he joined the German Institute for Research in Distance Education. Apart from the task of managing the research institution, he is mainly involved in presenting the results of the institute's work to applicants in higher education and enterprise, thereby mediating between theory and praxis. He takes part in international distance education projects as well.

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Ingeborg Bø is executive director of the Norwegian Association for Distance Education (NADE). She has her degree in languages from the University of Oslo, and has worked for NKS, the largest distance education institution in Norway, for more than 20 years in different positions. She has acted as secretary for NADE's standing committee on quality and has presented NADE's quality standards at different workshops and conferences. She is a member of the organising committee for the ICDE conference in 1988, chair of the programme committee for the European Distance Education Network conference in 1992, and a member of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities Board.

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Badri N. Koul

Badri N. Koul until recently was the pro-vice-chancellor at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi, and the founding head of the Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE) at IGNOU. His major contribution has been to conceptualise, develop and implement post-graduate training programmes, specifically the Postgraduate Diploma and Master of Arts in Distance Education, which are being given by IGNOU in 19 Commonwealth countries today. So far, he has put together four books and about 100 articles on various aspects of distance education, besides teaching language, designing curriculum and staff-development and being the

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Tim O'Shea has a B.Sc. in mathematics and experimental pschology from the University of Sussex and a Ph.D. in computer science from the University of Leeds. He has carried out research on the educational applications of computers at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Edinburgh. He joined the United Kingdom Open University in 1978, where he founded the Computer Assisted Learning Research Group and worked on a range of educational technology research and development projects. His best known publication is *Learning and Teaching with Computers: The Artificial Intelligence Revolution*, with John Self (Prentice Hall 1983), which has been translated into various languages, including Japanese and German. His other publications include eight books, more than 100 articles, and the six-part BBC series *The Learning Machine*.

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Anne Downes has a degree in English from the University of Leeds, and joined the United Kingdom Open University as an administrator in 1975, working initially in the university's North-West Regional Centre based in Manchester, where she was involved in providing services to students and tutorial staff. In 1985 she moved to the university's headquarters in Milton Keynes, where she held a number of administrative posts. She joined the quality assurance team as secretary for quality assurance in February 1995.

Michael Robertshaw

Michael Robertshaw was born and bred in the United Kingdom, but since 1978 has been a "professional expatriate" working in Nigeria, Sudan, Fiji, Brunei, and Hong Kong. Educated as a mathematician, he first moved into distance education in 1983. Ten of his twelve years in distance education has been spent in Hong Kong, where no-one is distant from anyone. He joined the OLIHK in 1989 as one of the first staff and is responsible for many of the quality assurance systems that have been established and regretted. In addition to managing the mathematics team and courses, he has been chairing the quality improvement team since its creation in 1994 because he has read more books on quality assurance than anyone else.

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Alan Tait is a Staff Tutor in the School of Education at the United Kingdom Open University, and editor of the journal *Open Learning*. He has published articles in the major journals in the field of open and distance learning, and has edited the books *Key Issues in Open and Distance Learning* (Longman 1994), and *Supporting the Learner in Open and Distance Learning*, with Roger Mills (Pitman 1996). Alan has been active in international development in Europe, both East and West, and in developing countries, and is co-organiser of the Cambridge International Conference on Open and Distance Learning.

x

INTRODUCTION

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

Alan Tait

This collection of case studies reflects and, in turn, will reinforce the widespread development of quality assurance in open and distance learning (ODL) around the world. Despite the variety of cultures and histories in industrialised and industrialising countries, it is clear that quality assurance has established itself widely as a framework of ideas and practices within which the management of open and distance learning takes place. The World Conference of the International Council of Distance Education (ICDE) on this subject in 1995, and the 48 papers explicitly contributing to its discussion (Sewart 1995), in addition to other recent conferences on the theme (Atkinson, McBeath, and Meacham 1991; Tait 1993a) indicate how central to the agendas of practitioners and academics the issue of quality assurance has become. It is in this light that the Commonwealth of Learning and the ICDE have set up a Research Group on Quality Assurance, of which the publication by Deshpande and Mugridge (1994) represented the first fruit. This collection of case studies takes forward the COL/ICDE project by focusing more closely on open and distance learning, making available a range of case studies from Germany, Norway, Israel, India, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, and Canada, representing countries varied in social, economic, and indeed educational structures. In their variety, the case studies demonstrate the widespread nature of development and, at the same time, the importance of context, an issue discussed further in this introduction.

Many elements of quality control and assurance systems have been practised from the early days of modem open and distance learning; for example, producing learning materials (Lewis 1989; Freeman 1991), monitoring correspondence teaching, and visiting tutors in study centres to endeavour to rule out bad practice (Tait 1993b). The industrialised and distributed nature of educational systems in open and distance learning has facilitated the recent development of quality assurance systems. However, these systems have represented less *quality assurance* and more *quality control* in the old fashioned industrial sense of the word, in their overall tendency to check on performance after it has been completed, rather than to build in a commitment to meet the needs of users and continuously improve. It is also clear that, within education as a whole, open and distance learning is by no means alone, nor necessarily in the vanguard in the implementation of quality assurance practices. Quality assurance is developing in all educational sectors, and a wide range of publications attest to this, both in the critical examination of ideas (Barnett 1992) and the more functional "how to do it" publications (Sallis 1993). There is also pertinent literature in the field of health care (Whittington and Ellis 1993). This introduction does not attempt to provide an up-to-date bibliography of the field of quality assurance, although that task could be usefully undertaken.

In summary, the quality assurance system attempts to define, in consultation with the user, what services should be provided to the user. It involves the accurate analysis of what needs to be done, with information broken down in what can seem an exhaustive fashion. The quality assurance system then finds ways of monitoring and evaluating that analysis, and builds in procedures with users and providers for continuously seeking to improve practice. Embedded in the practice of quality assurance is the notion that expertise is widely distributed in the organisation; that is, that not only the higher levels of management understand what should be done. In fact for many it is those working closest to the "customer" who best understand his or her needs.

The immediate users are often termed *customers* in quality assurance jargon, not necessarily to denote a purchaser-supplier relationship, but to denote the reasonableness of the user's expectation that he or she will receive what is needed and agreed.   The user includes not only those receiving a service outside the institution or organisation (for example, the student), but also different sections of the university internally; that is, the examinations department in receiving an agreed service from the computer centre is its "customer". Equally, the course team provides a service to the examinations department, who become "customers". As quality assurance processes spread throughout the organisation, and as the commitment to continuous improvement developed through teams becomes a widely accepted practice, the objective changes to total quality management (TQM).

What is the down side? Quality assurance brings considerable culture change to an organisation. Quality assurance may diminish some areas of professional autonomy: first, in that students are taken to have enhanced status as "customers"; and second, in that educational professionals may not be accustomed to having to account for their actions. Quality assurance is also time-consuming, and in its techno-rational approach to the excitement of learning and teaching can seem bureaucratic and stifling. It can, if abused, be employed as a managerial weapon to enforce subservience and have the effect of reducing creativity and independence of thought, particularly damaging in the educational sphere.   Within higher education in the United Kingdom over the last decade, universities have moved from professional autonomy, which was least subject to enquiry (Trow 1994: 29), to one of the most demanding external structures of quality assurance, which directly affects funding, and has led some authors to view academics within the system as losing the right to the term *profession* as they become members of an "academic proletariat" (Barnett and Middlehurst 1993: 126).

In many countries, however, students are required to pay an increasing proportion of the costs of their study and will no longer behave in a subservient manner, accepting poor service or care from university teachers and administrators (if they ever should have done). If a modern distance teaching organisation is not to produce more drop-outs than graduates, or to lose students to competing institutions, then quality assurance will form an important element in its methods of work.

This collection of case studies aims to demonstrate that it would be of value to learn more about modern quality assurance systems for distance education in an international context, with a view to embedding developments within any new institution. While the concepts can be learned from the literature relatively easily, and case studies of practice elsewhere are of considerable help, no quality assurance system can be transplanted from one institution to another across organisational, social, and cultural boundaries. The development must be home-grown, recognising its context.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

This introduction attempts to give weight to the social and cultural complexity both of education and of the institutions in which it is organised. For some writers on quality assurance and open and distance learning this complexity is not acknowledged. Simplified notions are drawn from the business sector and uncritically applied in the educational context, and ignore the complexity and indeed contradictory demands in some cases of the various stakeholders: students, academic and professional interest groups, research funders and practitioners, government, employers, society at large, and future generations. For example, Murgatroyd, writing from a North American background on quality assurance and open and distance learning, asserts that misunderstandings can be swept away when *quality* is simply defined "in terms of 'fitness for use' where value of 'use' is determined by students and those who seek to use their competencies for some specific purpose" (Murgatroyd 1996: 9). He continues with assertions such as "Quality has nothing much to do with resources" and "Quality is measurable not abstract" (ibid.: 9–10). These assertions deny that there is anything to discuss and appear to support a version of managerialism that is out of place in more thoughtful approaches to organisational change in any context. As Perraton (1995: 180) has commented in criticism of those he terms the "new quantifiers", and in questioning the ends of those who misuse education:

> Fitness of purpose may usefully force us to ask questions about special
> ends – about the nature of our audience as well as the style of our
> teaching, for example – but takes us down a further regression in asking
> "whose fitness?" and "what purpose"?

It is not only evident that purposes are varied and, in some cases in conflict, it is right that the educational domain should remain one in which ideological conflict in quality assurance is acknowledged and indeed studied (Lentell and Murphy 1992). Failure to recognise the contested nature of quality assurance will result in ideology dominating academic exchange, with quality assurance serving as a mechanism to diminish and marginalise debate about institutional purpose, even when individual freedom to teach freely within the subject is protected. It is clear that the adoption of quality assurance in the most thoughtful and productive way will acknowledge its contested nature and recognise the need to achieve a balance among some of the contradictory elements, and to recognise the compromise that such a balance necessarily represents.

The European Commission, for example, provides in its discussion of quality assurance a valuable context of university traditions in Europe, namely, on the one hand, the Humboldtean and Napoleonic tradition (more generally known as the *continental model* with its emphasis on state control), and the British tradition, which until the recent past had more power and autonomy vested in institutions themselves. The 1993 study, however, is able to find within this differentiated picture common patterns of development in the field of quality assurance in higher education, in particular in France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Five common elements are identified:

- the existence at the supra-national level of a managing agent for the quality assurance system, who should be independent and responsible for managing the system at a meta-level;

- the importance of a mechanism of self-evaluation, so that academics feel they own the system;

- the connected importance of peer review, and site visits by external experts accepted as unbiased specialists in the field;

- the importance of reporting in such a way as to facilitate development and improvement rather than judging or ranking; and

- relationships between outcomes of a quality review system and funding, which it is suggested should not be direct and rigid as this will lead to a "compliance culture" rather than a real interest in quality assurance.

(Commission of the European Communities, Education, Training, Youth 1993: 20–24)

Although the study is now somewhat outdated on the situation in the United Kingdom (where many of the warnings offered in this study have been ignored in the new mechanisms of the Higher Education Funding Council), it is offered here as a way of informing readers of the considerable work that has taken place in education as a whole, acknowledging the complexity of the environment in which quality assurance for open and distance learning has to be thought through.

Any "off the shelf" solution from the latest management book or passing consultant will not provide such background. While their simple remedies may seem superficially attractive, in the form of instant programmes that can be globally applied, such approaches are unlikely to do anything but give quality assurance a bad name.

THE CASE STUDIES

The seven case studies serve to introduce the reader to a wide range of current issues as well as practices. Hans-Peter Baumeister of the German Institute for Research on Distance Education sets out the ways in which, within European and international discussions of quality assurance in university level distance education, Germany is relatively excluded because of the particular social and intellectual history of that country. As we look to the ICDE and COL to assist in different ways with international networking and development, the case study acts as a useful reminder of the privileging effect of the English language as distance education becomes more international (Tait 1994: 92) and, more importantly, the extent to which open universities in the Commonwealth share terms and values, and may in many cases have received substantial consultancy from the United Kingdom Open University and thus structures and systems. Any consideration of quality assurance in open and distance learning in an international context, however, must remember that what Baumeister terms the "Anglo-American educational environment" does not represent the whole picture.

From Norway, Ingeborg Bø sets out a system of quality assurance in a national context which, while derived from the specific social, historical, and indeed geographical context of a "long country with high mountains and deep valleys, and with its population widely distributed", might serve in her view as applicable not only to distance education institutions in Norway, but also to providers elsewhere. Of interest in the Norwegian case is the fact that the government decided that correspondence education (as it was then termed) should develop in the private schools where it had been pioneered, and that accordingly national legislation governed aspects of quality, for consumer protection in particular, from as early as 1948. Recent developments have seen quality assurance become more sophisticated in scope, covering more than course material and aiming to assure learner support and delivery in addition. Responsibilities were pushed downwards to the institutions, in particular on a collaborative basis through the Norwegian Association for Distance Education (NADE), the organisation in which all distance teaching organisations receiving government funding are members. Bø also draws out

4

the effects of internationalisation and globalisation in the educational market, and identifies how important quality assurance will be in an environment in which learners have choices, see themselves as customers as much as students, and will increasingly demand evidence of the quality procedures of the purchase they are making.

Sara Guri-Rozenblit from the Open University of Israel (OUI) reveals some aspects of the complexity of institutional and cultural factors in her case study. Although the United Kingdom Open University was influential in the establishment of the OUI, its academic autonomy was embedded in an academic culture more like that of Spain or Germany. The small number of central faculty, however, meant that quality assurance had to engage with the fact that external academics on contracts would outnumber internal course writers. The reliance on a small academic faculty has also thrown responsibility for the management of tutoring, including assignment and examination setting, onto junior academic staff.

Badri N. Koul notes in the Indian context, as other authors do elsewhere, the role that the poor reputation of distance education plays, and the importance therefore for institutions to not only assure quality but to be seen to assure quality. The historical sketch of the development of higher education in India, and in particular the dangers when institutions operates on a market basis, ignoring any regulation by national bodies, are reminiscent of the parallel situation in unreformed correspondence education in Western Europe. Three Indian universities are examined in detail in this case study, of which one alone, Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, has explicit provision for quality assurance in its plan of management both in terms of structure and in its plans to set in place a total quality management system in the university. Koul identifies in the context of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, his own institution, the importance of training and professional development focused within a quality assurance framework.

Tim O'Shea and Anne Downes, from the United Kingdom Open University, argue that the external framework imposed in the British context in recent years by the Higher Education Funding Council has demanded the communication of existing quality assurance procedures to the outside world, rather than their invention. In the authors' view a commitment to quality has always been "an intrinsic part of the academic professionalism of our staff", but they acknowledge that balancing a commitment to diversity and creativity has been difficult to balance with the need to satisfy the demands of a national system in which the United Kingdom Open University is but one, albeit unique, institution. The British case study outlines the quality assurance procedures for both curriculum design and teaching and learning (that is, student support), which represent continuity over more than 25 years, as well as the more recent creation of a small number of dedicated roles in the quality assurance domain.

From the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong (OLIHK), Michael Robertshaw is able to describe an institution that has managed the change from primarily external to internal mechanisms for quality assurance. The history of OLIHK is bound up in the external dimension in particular. In 1989 the planners of the OLIHK met representatives of the British Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), a natural arrangement given Hong Kong's status as a Crown colony. However, by 1990, Hong Kong had established its own body, the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA), which in the external peer visitation tradition of the CNAA made regular visits to the OLI. Robertshaw debates the factors that contribute to strengths and weaknesses in the process of external review, and goes on to describe the development of internal procedures at the OLIHK. These most recently include a dedicated quality improvement team, who have specific responsibility for reviewing quality across the institution.

The University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada, provides a library service for distance education students. Kate Seaborne from Distance Education Services at that university examines the informal approach to quality that exists in the library services

operation and analyses the steps that would be necessary to convert these to a formal, structured, and documented quality assurance system. The case study provides an interesting example of an operation that is clearly committed to quality without having a formal system, and of the organisational steps necessary for conversion. In this way it will be of interest to colleagues in a range of institutions. The balance between cost and benefit in moving towards a formal system is debated at t he conclusion of Seaborne's case study, an issue which many readers are no doubt facing at the present.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Reviewing the issues that these case studies reveal creates an agenda of issues for consideration in the creation or development of approaches to quality assurance, which can be summarised as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Alternatives for consideration in creation of quality assurance systems in open and distance learning

external imposition through legislation or other "enforcement" mechanism	internally generated development
technicist non-problematic approach	acceptance of complexity, values, and dissent within educational environment
costs of formal QA systems	benefits of formal QA systems
dedicated institutional QA structure	integrated within existing management structure
adoption of "bought in" system	development within cultural environment of organisation and society
comprehensive "total" QA system	piecemeal development within separate areas
institutional independence	potential for inter-institutional collaboration

Table 1 suggests opposites or alternatives, but in reality a continuum will be found within which an individual institution can analyse its present position, construct a matrix, and plan a path.

To conclude, this introduction has attempted to establish, by describing these seven case studies of quality assurance in open and distance learning that:

- quality assurance is no longer an option in modern open and distance learning;

- quality assurance represents at the same t ime a range of contested values about the nature of quality and the legitimate interests of stakeholders and management, which need to be addressed and discussed;

6

- international case studies represent essential material for study in the context of globalised practice, but institutional solutions will be particular and individual; and

- trends towards the convergence of methodologies in education, breaking down the barriers between distance and conventional education, are evident in the quality assurance field, where practitioners from both sectors can valuably learn alongside each other.

It only remains to recommend the substance of the book to readers.

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GERMANY'S PLACE WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL DISCUSSION OF STANDARDS AND QUALITY IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: SOME UNSYSTEMATIC DELIBERATIONS

Hans-Peter Baumeister

INTRODUCTION

Taken from my experience with work on the manual *Planung, Entwicklung, Durchführung von Fernstudienangeboten* (*Planning, Development, and Implementation of Courses in Distance Education*) published in 1995 which is the first systematic compendium on distance education in German — this case study compares the international discussion on quality in distance education with the German situation. The Austrian and Swiss is similar in many ways since we share a common tradition in our systems of higher education; but, of course, some differences still remain.

This case study is divided into three parts. It begins with a short survey of the German system of higher education and its development over the last three decades. Although not a complete sketch of the system, this survey provides background information about distance education. The second part explains two or three differences between the German and the international situation. The third part introduces a new manual put together by the German Institute for Research on Distance Education (DIFF), and attempts to connect our German situation with standards abroad.

One remark in advance: in a short article one must necessarily simplify some complex facts, for example, the structure of national education systems or the specific differences among institutions of distance education in different countries, especially in discussing international standards of quality. Both aspects are indeed strongly interwoven, but the German system of higher education sets different standards for both traditional and distance education universities than are met in international discussion insofar as it is influenced by the Anglo-American tradition. It will therefore be necessary to discuss some basic issues in the German higher education system. I will try to keep these passages short and will refer only to literature that could interest those who read German and who want more detailed information.

THE GERMAN SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

As in other countries, the main standards for distance education[1] in Germany are set by the traditional structures in higher education. According to Louise Moran in her article "Who Sets the Agenda for Quality in Distance Education?" (1995), it is clear that the higher education system "tends to define quality in terms of traditional expectations of excellence and prestige". But "traditional expectations" differ from country to country and we must therefore look briefly at the German system.

In principle, the German system of higher education is based on equality. All universities (and, since the 1970s, the polytechnics, too) are committed to the same mission: differences in prestige or structure are not great; distinctions between institutions for mass higher education and for an elite do not exist. Students pay no fees. At the beginning of the century, when only 1% of the population entered universities, the only task of the universities was to educate the country's elite, that is, the narrow band of economic, administrative, and academic leaders. At present, the proportion of a year group that now gains an academic diploma has risen to over 20% (including 7% to 8% at a polytechnic). This increase in attendance has put the universities in a dilemma: established in the nineteenth century as elite institutions, a fact which to this day determines the self-image of many university professors, they have become institutions of first qualification for professionals like teachers, physicians, lawyers, and economists. But ore than 90% of students are not interested in an academic career, nor will they have the chance to become top managers in industry or administration. Nevertheless, the German universities as a whole (although in some faculties or chairs one can observe slight moves towards reality) retain their belief that the philosophy of teaching and research oriented on a personal relationship between professor and student is capable of facing the challenges of the twenty-first century. The main emphasis still lies on *Bildung*, a term rooted in the idealistic German philosophy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It means the broad and, in principle, pure and non-instrumental education of an individual aimed at becoming a cultured member of society. In this philosophy, *Bildung* would be the best basis for a successful professional life with its specific demands: any specialisation at an early stage would disturb the process of enculturisation. As one consequence of this philosophy, the universities (not the polytechnics) insist on maintaining a significant distance from the demands of working society[2]. Maybe this distance is not specifically German insofar as undergraduate programmes are concerned: it can be found in other systems of higher education, too. But, due to this distance, the position of German universities as a whole could be characterised by the term *wissenschaftlicher Elfenbeinturm* (academic ivory tower). It is obvious that such a concept of higher education must reach its limit in times of mass education. In countries where universities and their teaching staff are subjected to continuous assessments by students and others, this realisation has created considerable consequences for the higher education system as a whole. But in Germany no system of teacher assessment by students exists.

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[1] I use *distance education* as *Fernstudium*, which includes only forms of higher education, like university or polytechnic based forms.

[2] In general I follow here the report of a workshop of the German Rector's Conference on *Quality in Study and Teaching*, June 1993.

10

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN GERMANY

The concept of higher education in Germany has been disturbed by two recent developments, which are to some extent also important for the future status and role of distance education in Germany:

- The role of German universities was discussed afresh because of demands from industry that undergraduate programmes create knowledgable professionals and thus take on a more service-oriented role in society. Since it was clear that open access to undergraduate programmes would demand an almost complete revision of the contemporary identity of universities, the discussion started with the question of open access to programmes of continuing education. What is important in this context is by whom the discussion was initiated. Neither politicians nor universities called for open access to universities. Practitioners in the economy began this discussion because they saw the danger, in times of mass education at the university level, for professionals to somehow lack perspective if they had no chance to satisfy their ambitions by gaining more prestigious diplomas. In other words: professional training would no longer be attractive if it led to a dead end and all chances of getting a better paid job were blocked. In the view of industry, this development would devalue their former status in Germany (Tippelt 1995).

- The Commission of European Union passed a memorandum on higher education in Europe which took up central elements of those university systems in which a more structured framework could be found, for example, different institutions for the education of the elite than for mass education. Therefore some sections of this memorandum saw the universities, insofar as their role as institutions for mass education is concerned, closer to the needs of individuals in the workplace. Such a point of view is obviously less compatible with the German tradition.

It would be wrong to look for differences only on the surface. Differences depend on a divergent relationship between the individual and society and its institutions in our history. The problem in our case could be encapsulated in the following question: Which is more important: the institutions and their courses or individual needs? If the institution-centred approach in education is preferred, then as a consequence the individual is obliged to find his or her way through the structure of educational programmes. Therefore Germany has a relatively complex institutional structure in the educational sector. If someone without *Abitur* (university education qualifications) wants to study, then each institution along the way expects a pass in the respective examination before the student can enter the next level.

The student-centred approach, which can be found in the European Union memorandum, prefers a more market-oriented system in which individuals can make choices. Although the high reputation of the institutions is something that is obviously accepted in market oriented systems, the "clients" and their demands also constitute a very important factor. And, in order to satisfy their demands, it would be the system, if found to be inappropriate, that would be slightly altered, and not the other way round.

While the student-centred approach is the most accepted premise within international discussion about quality in distance education, it should be clear now that in Germany this discussion starts from other origins.

Germany has also signed the Treaty of Maastricht with its article to support the development of distance education. German researchers and institutions participate in the respective programmes of the Commission to investigate and to develop both distance education as a system and its individual elements. It may seem paradoxical, given the

situation just described, that as an example, the German Institute for Research in Distance Education (DIFF) is the oldest institution within the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) and that the Fernuniversität is one of the bigger European institutions in the field. But this paradox would be resolved by considering the origins of these developments in the late 1960s. Initiated by a very popular book *Die deutsche Bildungskatastrophe* (*The Disaster in German Education*) (Picht 1964), there was an enormous eruption of politico-educational activity that had the backing of nearly all social forces and was supported by huge budgets. These social forces could be compared to the development seen in the United States as a consequence of the so-called *Sputnik-shock*. At that time German society was open to new thinking and solutions such as distance education in order to activate all its potential resources. Reports on different national systems in distance education were written and published and many different commissions discussed the question of the best institutional grounding of distance education in (West) Germany[3], with the institutional results described above. But in the 1970s and mainly in the 1980s we were confronted with something like a "roll-back"; the social consequences of educational progress started to crumble, budgets were cut, and some important regulations within the inner order of universities established during the reform period were revised by principlal decisions of the *Bundesverfassungsgericht* (Federal Constitutional Court). In other words, over a period of fifteen years (1965 to 1980) no de-institutionalisation in favour of more individualisation was achieved; and it is only in a condition of individualisation that a real working system of distance education can be established.

So, at the end of this development, insofar as distance education was concerned, the *Wissenschaftsrat* (National Scientific Council) published a report on this sector (1992) in which one could find important positive recommendations but also analysis, in particular of the Fernuniversität, which showed that Germany had lost contact with the international debate on distance education around the end of the 1970s. The Wissenschaftsrat did not address open access to universities for new types of students. It saw the main task of distance education as improving programmes of continuing education. Such programmes will indeed be an important sector; but on their own they are not enough to interest university teachers in distance education. And also, for the Fernuniversität, they offer only a very restricted perspective compared with traditional universities.

However, looking at German developments, you have only half the truth; in the meantime, it has become obvious that the international discussion about quality in distance education was very much influenced by the Anglo-American context and consequently was a limited discussion. Not only Germans were on the periphery of this exchange of news but other countries on the continent were too. Taking the book *Collaboration in Distance Education: International Case Studies* (Moran and Mugridge 1993) as a part representing the whole, what I mean becomes clear: international collaboration only took and continues to take place within a particular cultural sphere, where not only the same language is spoken but also the whole system of education is very similar. This sphere is characterised by the fact that distance education is currently a well-accepted form of education at all levels of the educational system. But acceptance of distance education at the level of higher education does not automatically mean that it has earned an academic reputation; the Anglo-American system of universities is a highly

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[3] In the former German Democratic Republic a well structured system of distance education already existed, but it was used for specific purposes in a socialist state and is therefore not comparable with the question discussed here.

graded one in terms of quality ranking. In this framework, distance education belongs to the mass education sector (Bottomley et al. 1995). This distinction between elite and non-elite education is one of the basic issues for establishing an accepted system of distance education. Another basic issue is founded on the importance of the whole spectrum of teaching performance for lecturers, which finds expression in the regular assessment of lecturers on their long route to getting a permanent appointment—a procedure unknown in the German academic tradition. But the distinction beween elite and non-elite education is a rather more complex issue in its implications for the international discussion on quality in distance education.

In nearly all Western nations with a very highly industrialised standard of production and with a well developed service sector one is confronted with a system of mass education. But while in continental Europe it was the existing institutions, generally speaking, which expanded to meet the needs of our societies, developments in the Commonwealth for the most part established a new quality of educational provision with the system of distance education. And it is within this new realm that the international discussion on standards in distance education is located. I realise that also *outside* this realm, as in Germany, the same terms are used when we join international events or publish in international journals on distance education; but—and this is my core thesis—we start from different social and intellectual backgrounds, with the result that professionals outside this Anglo-American sphere of distance education are not automatically part of the international exchange on quality and standards.

Without discussing this argument in all it ramifications, I would just like to give one example of what I mean: an expert in distance education will more likely have opportunities for a professional career in the Commonwealth using the English language. Apart from difficulties in principle with the contemporary labour market for academics, a wider range of possibilities exists for jobs in the field, including single or dual mode institutions, traditional universities with flexible learning, or even private companies and consultants. At the same time this example shows that there is already a huge forum of interested professionals who contribute to this international discussion, as will a glance into *Open Praxis*, the journal of the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE). The fact is, though, that we are confronted with all the signs of mass education, almost unknown in Germany, but we have only a handful of distance education experts.

To discuss international standards makes sense—apart from a general academic interest—if you see the advantages for professional life. But after all, one must admit that in Germany there is no significant quantity of employers who would be interested in new methods of teaching offered in a student-oriented way. Only a few institutions, mainly in the polytechnic sector, are making new efforts, though it would be wrong to call it a national movement. In such a situation it would not be advisable to build an academic career on experience in distance education. This is one central reason why you will meet only little interest in international discussions on standards in distance education.

Another important item that is typical for international discussions in this field and that has not as yet been assimilated into the German situation is the student-centred approach. Moran (1995) talks about seven values and processes which should be central in "any distance teaching institution", and the first two of them are generated from students' needs. But her viewpoint is not limited to institutions of distance education: traditional universities in the United Kingdom are also encouraged to "adapt their teaching methods and design of their courses to accommodate new types of student" (Hodgkinson 1994).

Both *professionalism* and *student centred approaches*, are key terms in a well functioning and widely accepted distance education system. They are also key terms for

the current challenge, namely the use of modern technologies to prevent the phenomenon expressed in the German book *New Technologies on the Lookout for Applications* (1995). It should be obvious that successful applications will start from a broad experience in distance education, for example, using them for student support. But the view in Germany on quality is the view of the suppliers (Bargel 1995), since our academic system as a whole is not student-centred.

However, it might be hoped that the global potential of the new media and the necessity to develop strategies to use them in international educational developments will bring new impulses. But this perspective cannot ignore the current situation, namely the broad lack of professionalism in Germany in the field of distance education.

THE OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING MANUAL

In 1994 the DIFF started a programme of professional training in distance education for those participating in a five-year federal government programme to increase the number, the quality, and the professionalism of open and distance learning programmes at traditional universities. In the German scenario it is obvious that a programme for developing more professionalism in distance education must start from scratch insofar as the implementation of distance education at traditional universities is concerned.

Our programme is built on four elements:

- an open and distance learning manual;

- workshops;

- consulting; and

- evaluation.

In this case study I want to concentrate on the open and distance learning manual.

Although a considerable number of articles and reports have appeared over the past several years on different aspects of distance education in Germany, such as the role of written material or the innovative potential of the new media, no systematic compendium like Rowntree's *Exploring Open and Distance Learning* (1992) has ever been published. Consequently, it was not only more difficult for practitioners to get an easy and quick overview on how to organise distance education, but staff members and opinion leaders at universities, ministries, or even private companies found it almost impossible to inform themselves about distance education as a system and its implications in Germany.

The philosophy behind the open and distance learning manual is on the one hand quite simple, namely to offer information (which should be tested through practical experience or research results) about all important issues that could be helpful for implementing distance education courses or other forms of flexible learning in higher education. The difficulty with this approach is obvious: how can one get tried and tested results when the decentralised system of distance education in Germany only exists in the form of a few projects?

At the DIFF we have solved the problem by taking the international experiences gained in a considerable number of co-operative ventures in research and development (for example, the "What Is Europe?" course; Bang et al. 1995) and adapted it to the German scenario. Having taken this course of action, we hope that we have built the content of

14

our manual on specific German conditions but, whenever possible, have widened the focus to include experiences abroad. To give a few examples, I would like to mention that we have indeed achieved, on the basis of many thoroughly evaluated projects, a high degree of professionalism in developing *written* material in Germany too, an experience that can stand up to any international comparison. This experience includes all stages, from negotiating with authors and revising texts for learners to questions of layout. But the results of this experience must be embedded into a learner-oriented environment of distance education. Consequently, course managers and authors should have information about learners based on evaluative measures, their situation, motivation, their workload with and without distance education, and so on. And here we must admit that almost no systematic knowledge is available; even the student at traditional universities is, in terms of educational research, almost an unknown being in Germany. This was one field in which we have linked national and international experiences.

Another field of similarity is marketing, apart from the whole complex of tuition, which is also a subject in which the specific German experiences should be better assessed in the light of how to look after students at traditional universities and less in the light of international standards of distance education. In a university system in which each institution is accustomed to huge numbers of students enrolling without any effort on their part and the state guaranteeing the whole institutional budget, no one demands the development of marketing approaches; the only small exception is perhaps the field of continuing education. In the open and distance learning manual, *marketing* means the whole complex of communication between a provider of a service and its (potential) customers and not only the problem of advertising, which often seems to be seen as the only element of marketing. Although I would maintain the position that institutions of higher education are not commercial companies but institutions, still they should develop a communication strategy with the rest of society and explain how they contribute to its needs. By this means they will "advertise" their potential to transfer services, of which continuing education and distance education are among the more important ones. Both areas aim mainly at target groups within the immediate environs of a university, where one can find quite a few more or less good information campaigns of German universities; but only very seldom will one find flexible learning programmes an important element of the whole range of possible services. In this context we have also learned from universities abroad how fruitful an exchange between universities and the surrounding regions can be when initiated using instruments of marketing. Distance education will also profit from this type of communication.

In this sense the open and distance learning manual tries to inculcate an understanding of marketing that also includes the problems of a pricing and distribution strategy for distance education.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Of course, no *ideal* solution for distance education exists in the world and, further, the different elements of the international debate on standards and quality reflect to a certain extent different national or regional experiences that could not always be taken as internationally valid. But some deliberations in relation to international developments in distance education are more "international" than others. And I am convinced that in Germany we belong to the less international side for several reasons I have tried to outline above. But I am far from thinking that this is a specifically German situation; other regions in the world, too, do not take part in international exchange. In my opinion two consequences should be drawn:

- We should encourage more experts from other regions interested in the international debate to participate in this discussion. One possible strategy could be to stimulate or to strengthen regional groups within the icde.

- We need more permanent international forums, such as joint course development (with expertise coming from different regions and societies)[4] or journals (maybe also regionally oriented) which are open to different experiences of distance education and not influenced by one or two national or cultural contexts.

Existing bodies should co-ordinate these activities — since those instruments perhaps already exist — but their outcomes should be better integrated into international discussion.

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[4] Feasley (1995) exemplifies and confirms implicitly what I mean: co-operative approaches to distance education seem to be limited in his article to the Commonwealth of English-speaking nations and regions although he mentions differing cultures as a main barrier for international co-operation. But he does not deepen this aspect by considering distance education systems outside a certain sphere.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SYSTEM FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY FROM NORWAY

Ingeborg Bø

INTRODUCTION

The theme of the seventeenth world conference of the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) in Birmingham, United Kingdom, in 1995 "Quality in Open and Distance Learning", reflects the concern for quality in the world of distance educators, and, in turn, reflects the general demand for consumers and the market that products maintain a certain standard of quality, not at all a new phenomenon. We are trying to find new ways of assuring quality and this case study from Norway illustrates this new approach.

Distance education is growing both in its traditional sense and as new technologies are dramatically change the concept of distance education. We can also see the influence of distance learning on the traditional education system. Both aspects also contribute to the need for a general discussion about quality and quality assurance and a concern within each institution to assure quality.

Before describing the Norwegian case I would like to highlight some issues identified by Van den Berghe (1995) in working with the question of quality from both the legislative and the institutional point of view:

- Why should we be concerned with quality systems? What is or should be the main driving force?

- What is the long term perspective of our quality exercise? What do we hope to achieve?

- Where do we want to achieve higher quality? What type and range of activities are to be considered?

- What common rules shall we adopt? What principles will guide our approach to quality?

BACKGROUND

Norway has a long tradition of distance education. The first distance education institution was established in 1914 as a private enterprise, for a variety of reasons. If you look at a map of Norway, you will see that it is a long country with high mountains and deep valleys, and with its population widely distributed. The potential for distance education is obvious.

During the Second World War, the number of people taking advantage of distance education as a means of getting a formal education, and also greater general knowledge, grew tremendously. After the war, when the time had come to rebuild the country, the government saw the great potential in the use of distance education in order to raise the general educational level of the population. The establishment of a state correspondence school was considered but abandoned. Instead it was decided to take advantage of the existing correspondence schools and to regulate their activity through a special law. Thus Norway was the first country in the world to pass a special law regulating distance education when the law was passed in 1948.

The main objective of passing a law was to ensure the quality of correspondence courses in order to protect students (that is, the customers), from any bad practice by the market forces. Another goal was to stimulate the sound development of good educational institutions in order to create new opportunities for people to acquire new knowledge and skills.

The law of 1948 was abandoned in 1992 and, effective January 1993, the regulation of distance education was integrated in the *Act of Adult Education of 1976*. Under the law of 1948 the quality of correspondence courses was mostly assured through governmental control. But by abolishing this law and making a new regulation, the concept of quality assurance had changed dramatically: the responsibility for quality assurance was moved from governmental control and placed within the educational institutions themselves. This case study presents some of the traits of the two different systems and describes the process of developing and implementing the present system.

QUALITY CONTROL THROUGH GOVERNMENTAL REGULATION

According to the Act of November 12, 1948, amended in 1969, concerning Correspondence Schools, only institutions accredited by the Ministry of Education were allowed to offer correspondence courses. The ministry controlled the activities of the institutions through a Council for Correspondence Schools. The most important activity of this council was to investigate each course by examining the course material thoroughly both from a subject related and pedagogical point of view. Each course could then be accredited by the ministry for five years at the most before being renewed.

The council also from time to time inspected the institutions' activities as a whole to ensure quality and sound use of the financial support provided by government. Over the years the financial support to distance education became substantial and an important reason for keeping the accreditation scheme.

THE INSTITUTIONS' OWN QUALITY ASSESSMENT

As in any market-driven enterprise, the Norwegian distance education institutions had to deliver quality products in order to get satisfied customers. Thus important quality assessment work was done in response to the institutions' own internal demands. In 1968 some of the most important institutions founded the Norwegian Association for Correspondence Schools, now the Norwegian Association for Distance Education (NADE). This association formulated its own code of ethics for distance education from the very start.

NADE organises seminars, develops pedagogical literature, and holds in its constitution a commitment to work for high standards within its member institutions.

A NEW APPROACH TO QUALITY ASSURANCE

The ministry's Council for Correspondence Schools was abolished when the Act of 1948 concerning Correspondence Schools was repealed in 1992. According to the new regulations for distance education, now integrated into the *Act of Adult Education*, the responsibility for quality assurance was to lie with the institutions themselves. The rationale for this change has been discussed in three different articles by Ljoså and Rekkedal (1993, 1994, and 1995). Four main reasons may be assumed:

- weaknesses in the old accreditation scheme;
- the government's recognition of the high level of competence within the independent distance education institutions;
- general technological and pedagogical developments in distance education; and
- recent ideas about how quality improvement work should be implemented and organised in general.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE NORWEGIAN ASSOCIATION FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION'S QUALITY STANDARDS

In describing the development of the present quality assurance system within NADE, I will relate the description to the questions posed by Van den Berghe and cited earlier in this paper.

Why should we be concerned with quality systems?
What are they? Should they be the driving force?

The situation in Norway, as far as quality assurance is concerned, can be seen from two different angles:

- The state accreditation scheme was a top down approach which regulated the activities of the independent distance education institutions.
- The institutions themselves had developed a whole range of measures in order to assure the quality of their activities all based on the demand from the market.

20

From the state's point of view it is important to have laws protecting the consumer from bad practice, such as our general law concerning consumer protection. But, in addition, the state wants to place certain demands on the institutions because governmental grants were allocated to the institutions according to the work undertaken with students. A certain system of measuring the actual activity has been worked out by NADE in co-operation with the ministry. Because of state funding, the government demands specific regulation in addition to the common consumer regulation. When spending public money, certain rules must be adhered to. However, according to the new law, the government wanted the regulation to be as general as possible and to leave the details to the institutions themselves. This was something new.

NADE, as the representative body for distance education institutions, was asked by the ministry to develop guidelines for quality assurance within distance education. The governmental Council for Correspondence Schools was abolished and the responsibility for quality assurance was placed within the institutions involved, to stimulate the development of quality awareness as near to the actors as possible. A bottom-up approach was adopted, very much as a result of the confidence in the distance education institutions that had developed within the ministry. A mutual trust had developed over the years between the Ministry of Education and the institutions represented through the association.

Since money is being allocated yearly by the Norwegian parliament to distance education institutions, the government needs to ensure the quality of the institutions and the activities being conducted. Only institutions accredited by the ministry can receive governmental funds. Thus the act regulating these activities has one paragraph demanding that the institutions' activities are in accordance with a high quality standard.

Why should the institutions be concerned with quality? One obvious reason is the demands from the ministry as described above. This is the external reason for quality work. But more important as a driving force is the demand from the students and the market. Unless the service offered from the institutions meets a certain standard, the number of students will drop. The mission of the institutions is to offer education and knowledge to anyone who wants it. The institutions have a responsibility towards their students to offer as good a service as possible. This is the driving force. They also want to present a visible demonstration of their concern with quality in order to get the confidence of the market and thus new satisfied customers.

What is the long term perspective of our quality exercise?
What do we hope to achieve?

Whether we like it or not, distance education is considered second rate by many people. Those of us who work within the field know better. Nevertheless we must realise that we have a hard battle to fight in competing with the traditional educational system as far as public recognition is concerned. One very important means in raising the awareness of the potential of distance education is to find ways to improve its status. There is no better way to obtain this than through the delivery of quality products. Satisfied students and customers are the best advocates for open and distance learning.

What we hope to achieve in the long run through our quality work is higher recognition to the benefit of our students and our institutions. The potential of distance learning is great and, with quality recognition, the learning method may develop into other areas. With the development of flexible learning methods with various learning traditions, each teaching approach must meet a certain standard of quality in order to ensure good final results.

Distance education is becoming more and more international. With the growing use of information technology in distance education, national borders are no longer prohibitive for the distribution of distance education courses. Students may select from the world market of courses. We are just seeing the beginning of this development. The demand for quality and the documentation of quality assessment schemes are becoming more and more necessary. Students want to be able to choose courses from different institutions and combine them into complete course packages and obtain their degrees. Mutual cross-border certification and recognition will become necessary. Otherwise the courses offered will not be recognised by other degree awarding institutions.

Where do we want to achieve higher quality?
What type and range of activities are to be considered?

According to the Act of 1948 Norwegian distance education institutions had to be accredited by the Ministry of Education according to certain rules and quality standards and inspections were conducted by the Council for Correspondence School. However the area that was subject to specific detailed examination was the individual printed course material. All course material had to be sent to the Council for Correspondence School for examination by consultants. Four different aspects were to be considered:

- pedagogical;

- subject-related;

- language; and

- equal opportunities.

It was felt that too much focus was being put on just one part of the educational activity of the institutions. With the amendment effective from 1993 it was specified that the evaluation of quality ought to have a broad basis and that the responsibility for ensuring the quality of the learning material, the teaching, and the practical implementation of the study programmes should be delegated to the individually approved distance education institutions. NADE was requested by the ministry to prepare guidelines for quality standards in distance education. In documents related to the bill this total concept was expressed as follows:

- Quality assurance, follow up, and control should be concerned with the total educational programme (learning material, teaching, guidance, and follow up), and not just part of the course material, as is currently the case.

- A course or an educational programme should be implemented according to a study programme that is determined and described beforehand, either in the course material or in a separate study programme or syllabus.

- Requirements must also be made of the marketing. Since a school's own advertisements and course descriptions are often the only information that prospective students have when they register for a course, it is important that these advertisements be realistic and truthful.

- The training should normally be open to everyone, and the advertisements ought to occur in a way that complies with this principle.

As NADE was requested by the ministry to develop guidelines for quality standards in distance education according to this new approach, a working group was appointed by NADE's Executive Board. This working group carried out an introductory study of this matter and a standing committee on quality was established by NADE's Executive Board in December 1992.

After having looked into different ways of approaching the question of quality assurance, the committee chose to take as a point of departure a matrix of problem areas for evaluation that is described in a report from Lund University (Nilsson 1992).

This matrix was adjusted and adopted to distance education and the requirements made by the ministry and the committee. The committee wanted to describe the whole range of activities within distance education. The activities were divided into four main categories:

- information and counselling;

- course development;

- course delivery; and

- organisation.

Each of these main categories is again divided into four phases:

- conditions and constraints;

- implementation;

- results; and

- follow up.

These categories are combined in a matrix of 16 elements, which are called *quality areas*. For each of these quality areas, certain factors have been specified, which can or ought to enter into the institution's evaluation of its own quality. These factors may be more or less important for different institutions and types of activities. In some cases other factors besides those included here may also be relevant. The idea was to describe the range of activities as completely as possible and then define required standards for each factor. However, for some factors, the committee has not specified general standards, which does not mean that the institution itself cannot specify a required standard. The whole matrix of quality areas is presented in Appendix 1.

To illustrate the quality standards related to a quality area in the matrix, quality area 6.0 Course Development Implementation is set out in Appendix 2.

What common rules shall we adopt?
What principles will guide our quality approach?

I have mentioned that according to the new regulation of distance education in independent distance education institutions, the responsibility for quality assessment lies with the institutions themselves. NADE as a membership organisation has developed a system for quality assurance and control through the guidelines. The committee has described certain requirements and standards that are to be followed in order to comply with the accepted norms. Words like *shall*, *must*, and *ought to* are being used in the description of the standards. Nevertheless the standards are meant to be recommendations. The individual institution must have freedom to define its own requirements on the basis of its own circumstances and possibilities, because the institutions differ greatly among themselves as far as purpose, type of activity, resources, and size are concerned. At the same time, they must establish certain minimum requirements that are expected to be met if the institution is to be able to maintain a justifiable level of quality.

These quality standards have been developed and agreed upon through close co-operation among the independent institutions, NADE's standing committee on quality, and the

ministry. All have been involved in the development of the standards and are active in their continuous revision and implementation. It is important to stress the fact that the responsibility lies with the institutions themselves and that they must define their own standards in addition to the common standards described in the NADE handbook.

Each year the institutions must report to the ministry about their work with quality assessment and improvement. NADE organises workshops and offers guidance to the institutions. From the mandate of the standing committee on quality, I will cite the following main tasks:

- The committee should prepare recommended quality criteria and/or standards for the most important constituents of a distance education institution's products and services. The standards ought to be relatively general or take the form of examples of what is generally regarded as good practice — and not be formulated as detailed rules.

- The committee should call attention to areas where an accredited institution ought to document and report its quality assurance measures. If necessary, it can offer a simple recommendation with examples. Whereas the first task concerns the products, this task concerns the processes that are to give rise to quality products.

- The committee ought to take the initiative to regularly discuss quality matters that come under NADE's jurisdiction at conferences, at joint training measures, and in information pertaining to research and development work. Under this point, the committee ought to aim at generating understanding of and enthusiasm for quality improvements in the association's member institutions. NADE ought to encourage the ministry to support activities of this kind.

- The committee will offer opinions in cases that are referred to it by the executive board.

The quality assessment system developed by NADE has a character that makes it applicable not only for independent distance education institutions in Norway, but also for other types of educational providers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Quality assessment and assurance are matters for continuous concern and discussion among distance educators. We have found in Norway through the approach developed by NADE in co-operation with the ministry that the institutions have become more aware of the necessity of ensuring quality in all fields of activity in order to supply the students with the product they demand. It represents ongoing work that has to involve all who are employed in distance education. It is no longer a matter just for educators, but concerns the switchboard operator as well as the course designer and the market consultant.

This total quality management reflects the general trend in the market but also an awareness of the importance of the individual performance of each and every one of us in order to get an optimal result from our students. Another important factor is the growing internationalisation of the educational field and the growing competition among different types of education providers.

It is only through quality assurance that distance education will become the effective tool it can be, both within continuing education and within the traditional school system.

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APPENDIX 1

OVERVIEW OF QUALITY AREAS AND QUALITY FACTORS

	Conditions and Constraints	Implementation	Results	Follow up
Information and Counselling	1 External constraints Organisation Partners	2 Channels Content	3 Student body Other results	4 Evaluation Customer reactions
Course Development	5 External constraints Organisation Target group Staff Partners	6 Supervision, co-operation Follow up and guidance of authors Choice of media Formative evaluation	7 Course description Material meeting requirements Teaching aids	8 Evaluation Customer reactions Updating and/or revision
Course Delivery	9 External constraints Organisation Students Materials Teachers Partners	10 Two-way contact Teaching and guidance Exams and tests	11 Students' achievement of goals Course completion Learning results	12 Evaluation Customer reactions
Organisation	13 External constraints Organisation Partners	14 Management Communication Future orientation	15 Achievement of goals Financial results Repute	16 Evaluation Reporting

APPENDIX 2

6.0   COURSE DEVELOPMENT – IMPLEMENTATION

6.1   Supervision, Management, and Co-operation

6.2   Follow Up and Guidance of Authors

6.3   Choice of Media and Learning Material

- choice of media

- use of existing learning material

6.4   Evaluation of Product under Development

- subject related

- methodological and/or pedagogical

- linguistic

- with respect to equal status between gender

- with respect to target groups

Quality Standards

6.1.1   The project manager should make the participants in the development project aware of the conditions and constraints that have been specified for the project.

6.1.2   The project manager ought to see that the development work follows a fixed plan with respect to time, resource input, and other conditions. He or she should also report departures from this plan and implement corrective measures.

6.2.1   The institution should make relevant competence requirements of authors, consultants, and others who are brought into the development process.

6.2.2   In accordance with Norwegian law and contract legislation, the institution ought to have clear agreements with an contractual obligations to authors, consultants, and others.

6.2.3   The institution should give authors, consultants, and others necessary guidance and training regarding aspects of distance education in order to assure quality in their work.

6.3.1   The institution ought to be able to justify the choice of media and use of existing learning material on the basis of the programme's goals and the student's needs and qualifications.

6.4.1   The institution ought to evaluate course material during the development process. The following ought to be considered:

- subject content and level

- methodological and pedagogical arrangements

- adaptation to expected students (target groups)

- linguistic formulation and utilisation of the media

- equality and gender considerations

The material should be evaluated by at least one person who is qualified in the subject matter in addition to the author before it is put into production.

QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF ISRAEL

Sarah Guri-Rosenblit

INTRODUCTION

Many of the full-fledged, autonomous distance teaching universities that were established in the early 1970s, following the model of the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU), have initiated special quality mechanisms in designing their learning materials, monitoring their learning and teaching process, and assessing their students. These quality assurance procedures purported both to improve the quality of academic teaching in a distance learning setting, and to ensure its respectability and credibility in the context of the national higher education system.

This case study examines the quality assurance procedures exercised by the Open University of Israel (OUI) in relation to comparable and different procedures employed by some other large distance teaching universities. With a small nucleus of full-time academic faculty and heavy reliance on external colleagues from traditional universities, the OUI has adopted unique quality mechanisms in its everyday operation and organisation.

This case study analyses the special quality assurance processes used by the OUI for course approval, for course development, and for monitoring the learning, tutoring, and teaching functions. The merits and the problems associated with employing these quality procedures are elaborated.

Before presenting and examining the quality assurance mechanisms at the OUI, the meanings attached to *quality* in higher education settings, in general, and in distance teaching universities, more specifically, are discussed.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The pursuit of quality is an important issue in higher education world-wide. In the last decade both national governments and international organisations have shown a growing interest in defining and assessing quality in higher education institutions (Vught and Westerheijden 1993; Westerheijden et al. 1994). But quality is a vexed, complex, and relative term. Vught claims that "The concept of quality is as elusive as it is pervasive. Universal agreements on the meaning of quality or a final answer regarding the definition of this concept seems impossible to reach" (Vught 1994: 36). Harvey and Green in trying to define what quality is in higher education have reached the conclusion that "it

means different things to different people, indeed the same person may adopt different conceptualisations at different moments ... There is a variety of 'stake holders' in higher education, including students, employers, teaching and non-teaching staff, government and its funding agencies, accreditors, validators, auditors, and assessors ... Each have a different perspective on quality. This is not a different perspective on the same thing, but different perspectives on different things with the same label" (Harvey and Green 1993: 10). Harvey and Green had grouped the various definitions of quality into five categories:

- quality as exceptional;

- quality as perfection or consistency;

- quality as fitness for purpose;

- quality as value for money; and

- quality as transformation.

Traditionally the notion of quality in higher education has been associated with meritocracy, with belonging to a small, privileged, and exceptional class. Education at Oxbridge or at the Ivy League universities in the United States, for example, implies distinctiveness and exclusiveness. All of the distance teaching universities (DTUs) have been established on a totally different philosophy. They were meant to open up the higher education systems to diverse and heterogeneous clienteles, to widen access to university studies, and to contribute to the democratisation of higher education systems. Concurrently, they have had to prove that the education they offer is valuable and on a high level, and in some aspects of an even higher quality than their traditional counterparts.

Excellence is often used interchangeably with *quality*. Excellence sees quality in terms of high standards (Moodie 1988; Reynolds 1986). Aspiring for excellence in research is a common goal of all universities, but excellence in teaching is rarely rewarded. Many scholars consider instruction as a compulsory task that they have to perform, and devote most of their efforts and energy to their scholarly studies. But DTUs by their very nature pay special attention to teaching. By establishing high standards in distance teaching, the DTUs have ensured themselves a unique and respectable position in the academic world. Clearly, one of the important areas in which DTUs choose to excel is the development of high quality learning materials, which are designed to facilitate and enhance self study. The preparation of the materials is at the centre of the learning and teaching system at all DTUs, taking up the largest proportion of academic faculty time. The course materials produced by DTUs are "transparent" in the sense that they are open to scrutiny and criticism, and thus there is control over the quality of instruction by virtue of its public nature (Perry 1976; Reddy 1988; Guri-Rosenblit 1993).

The fact is that DTU students are not the only beneficiaries of high quality learning materials. Faculty and students at most traditional universities use extensively the materials developed by the DTUs as university textbooks, because of their clarity, integrated structure, and overall appealing design (Guri 1987; Guri-Rosenblit 1990). The learning materials are routinely scavenged by faculty at traditional universities for ideas and content presentation. Some DTUs have become the biggest academic publishing houses in their countries. In this sense, many DTUs have contributed most conspicuously to the production of high level university textbooks, mainly at the undergraduate level. Furthermore, since the textbooks or study units are written in the spoken language of each national setting, many DTUs, such as those in Spain, Israel, and Germany, have played a crucial role in assisting all first degree students to overcome some of the difficulties they encounter when assigned to read mainly in English.

In order to achieve high quality learning materials, each DTU had to define special quality assurance procedures. It is important to distinguish between these and quality control procedures. The latter refers to a set of operations that measure, and if necessary adjust, a product's appropriateness according to a set of predetermined required criteria. Quality control in relation to academic teaching entails considerable conceptual and practical difficulties (Alexander and Adelman 1982; Guri-Rosenblit 1993). It is particularly complicated to define exact standards against which it is possible to evaluate the fitness of an academic course for its purpose—whose purpose, and how should fitness be assessed?

Quality assurance does not purport to clarify the standards or specifications against which to measure or control quality. "Quality assurance is about ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality, however defined and measured, is delivered. The assumption implicit in the development of quality assurance is that if mechanisms exist, quality can be assured" (Harvey and Green 1993: 19–20).

In the context of this case study, it is important to state that most of the procedures employed at DTUs for monitoring the quality of the self-study courses are mainly quality assurance procedures, rather than quality control mechanisms that specify exact criteria against which the quality of the final products such as study units, textbooks, and readers can be assessed.

COURSE APPROVAL PROCEDURES

In most traditional universities, course proposals are rarely subject to a thorough evaluation. Frequently the appraisal process is no more than a "rubber stamping formality at faculty or Senate level which ensures that outward forms of appraisal—title, syllabus and examination arrangements are consistent with prevailing practices" (Adelman and Alexander 1982: 9).

In DTUs, mainly at those that focus their activity on the development of learning materials, course approval is usually subject to more stringent quality assurance procedures as compared to traditional universities. The need to employ special control regulations for course approval at the OUI stemmed mainly from its unique model of operation. From the outset, the OUI was planned to base its academic work upon a nucleus of internal faculty members working together with outside contributors from other major Israeli universities. The OUI was established in 1974 by the Government of Israel and by the Rothschild Foundation, and it has been greatly inspired by the remarkable success of the UKOU. Interestingly the OUI has in some respects followed the recommendations of the UKOU's planners more closely than the UKOU itself. When the UKOU was initiated, both the planning and the advisory committees had recommended that it be based on a small internal faculty. "The Advisory Committee envisaged that the University would require a central professional staff of between forty to fifty. This total included not only academic staff, but also the administrative and operational staff that would be required" (Perry 1976: 77). But the first vice-chancellor, Walter Perry (now Lord Perry), invested a huge effort to alter this decision and to mobilise a substantially greater number of academics. He insisted that the academics engaged in developing a course be full-time members of the institution: "I am quite sure that we were right to employ as our main course creators full-time academics of the Open University, and eschew the original idea of the Advisory Committee, and indeed of the Planning Committee, of using mainly consultants or people of secondment from other universities" (Perry 1976: 92).

Naturally, the size of the academic faculty influences the quality assurance procedures employed by each DTU in approving course proposals and in developing its courses. The German Fernuniversität had, in 1991, 430 professors with around 53,000 students (*EADTU News* 1993). In 1992, the UKOU had an academic staff of 810 with nearly 100,000 students (Open University 1992), while the Spanish Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia (UNED) had over 800 professors with nearly 100,000 students (UNED 1992). In contrast, in 1994, the OUI had only 32 full academic faculty members with over 23,000 students (Open University of Israel 1995).

Obviously, a DTU like the OUI, which depends heavily on the employment of external academics from other universities, faces specific problems and has to establish totally different quality assurance procedures compared with a DTU that possesses a large staff and develops its materials mainly with its internal faculty.

As a consequence of the small internal faculty at the OUI, several hundred scholars from the seven traditional Israeli universities are employed on short-term contracts to consult, write, and re-write varying portions of its courses (Guri 1987). The co-operative work between internal and external faculty and the continuous recruitment of outside contributors have led to the creation of special course approval rules, described schematically in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Course approval procedures at the Open University of Israel

The recruitment of external academics is performed in several ways, which range from personal acquaintance to a systematic search for experts. Guidance is crucial for outside contributors, since most of them are not aware of the special characteristics of the OUI's learning system. Jenkins (1983) specified several models for training writers at DTUs:

- training by correspondence;

- self-tuition;

- intensive workshops; and

- in-service training involving an editor and a writer working closely together.

The OUI uses an alternative mo del in which the external academics are personally matched and guided by the internal academic faculty. Obviously, some course teams also combine both internal and external authors. All of the external contributors receive guidance on the elements that compose a self-study written course, and are advised on how to prepare the course proposal and write the sample material.

The decision to request sample materials from tentative authors resulted from a series of previous failures, in which many of the written study units did not meet the basic requirements of an instructional text, and had to be dumped. Even brilliant scholars with an outstanding reputation in the academic world can fail to transfer their knowledge and expertise into an instructional written discourse. Writing texts with a didactic apparatus suitable for self-study settings requires special skills that are quite often different from those required for writing a scholarly article or lecturing. Some of the external professors were either surprised or shocked when presented with challenges to their assumptions about teaching and were forced to rethink how they should present their subject matter. A few resisted training and criticism and resigned from writing for the OUI.

The need to institutionalise quality mechanisms for approving and writing learning materials at the OUI results partially from the fact that part-time external faculty lack the institutional commitment of full-time permanent staff. "Conflicting loyalties among part-time writers may result in the production of material which is unsuitable for distance learners. Also, because of the academic freedom they have previously experienced, they may be reluctant to allow any modifications to be made to their work by the permanent staff" (Carr 1984: 17). Naturally, the contracted authors are much more concerned with the students in their own institution than with the needs of students learning at a distance. Many of the authors may be too busy to devote sufficient time and energy to the development of self-study courses.

It is important to note that the prevailing ethos about academic autonomy in each national setting is a crucially important variable that influences the nature of the quality mechanisms employed in each DTU. The concept of academic autonomy assumes that what goes on in a particular classroom is the sole responsibility of the professional scholar concerned, which rests on a view of the academic "as professionally competent over the full range of activities he [or she] undertakes, and this competence includes the necessary knowledge and skills to make or seek insightful and valid appraisals of his work and act on these appraisals" (Adelman and Alexander 1982: 16). In Germany and Spain, for example, where the ethos of academic autonomy is most valued and sacred, it was unthinkable to develop formal compulsory quality assurance procedures for evaluating the learning materials written by professors at UNED or at the Fernuniversität. Both of these DTUs employ the author and editor model (Smith 1980). In this model the materials written by a faculty member are edited by a professional editor. The work of the editor may be limited to proofreading and assisting with graphics and layout, or it may involve substantial restructuring of the author's work. But even the editor's employment at UNED and at the Fernuniversität is not mandatory, but just available and recommended.

At the UKOU, on the other hand, the evaluation of writing by colleagues is an integral ingredient of the course team approach. It seems that in the United Kingdom it was easier to implement quality assurance of teaching as compared to DTUs in continental Europe. The external examiner system in the United Kingdom attempts to ensure comparability of standards across higher education institutions. The external examiner system, by its very nature, puts limits to the practice of academic freedom, by appointing external academics to evaluate and even change the content and structure of the final exams, in courses taught by fully established academics. In such an environment, it might be speculated that it was simpler to implement the UKOU's course team approach.

The OUI faced the most complicated situation. The ethos of academic autonomy is most guarded and valuable in Israeli universities, comparable to the situation described in Germany and in Spain. But the OUI had decided to employ stringent quality procedures for developing its courses. As a result, some scholars from the Israeli traditional universities had felt reluctant to undergo procedures of inspection and criticism, and did not co-operate with the OUI. Some even claimed openly that assessment contradicts the very basic concept of academic autonomy (Guri-Rosenblit 1993).

Those contracted scholars who are willing to write for the OUI are asked to submit a detailed course proposal (the same procedures apply also to the OUI's internal faculty). In the proposal they must specify the following details:

- the theme of the course;

- its place in the disciplinary programme;

- the level of the course (introductory, intermediate, or advanced);

- the course's prerequisites;

- the course's overall goals;

- the structure of the course and its division into study units;

- specific objectives of each learning unit;

- a brief description of each study unit;

- audio-visual material to accompany the written learning materials;

- prospective radio, television, computer, or satellite programmes to be developed;

- the academic staff who will comprise the course team;

- proposed academic consultants to whom the study units will be sent for evaluation; and

- a tentative timetable for completing the writing.

The detailed course proposal is usually sent for evaluation to as few as three and as many as seven experts in the field, who work at other Israeli universities or, in a few cases, abroad. Some of the evaluators may be internal faculty, who may also comment on the sample material, which is usually a study unit or a substantial part of it, in relation to the clarity and pedagogical quality of the written text. Comments are asked from both an academic and an editor.

The course proposal evaluators are asked to comment on the following matters:

- the scope of the course's content as reflected in the proposal;

- the structure of the course and its division into sub-themes;

- the appropriateness of the content to the course's specified goals; and

34

- the update of the course's content.

The comments of outside experts are needed to gain a variety of possible perspectives on a given topic from several professionals. It enables the OUI's subject committees, which are composed of academics coming from different disciplines to discuss each proposal constructively. The area committee of social sciences, for example, is composed of psychologists, economists, sociologists, e ducators, and political scientists. In such a structure in which very few experts represent any given discipline, it is impossible to evaluate a course proposal without the assistance of expert outsiders.

Subject area committees then discuss each proposed course in the presence of the author or authors. In such meetings three alternative decisions might be reached:

- to approve the development of the course as it was proposed;

- to approve the course proposal with restrictions, in which case revisions are needed; or

- to reject the course proposal.

Between thirty to forty proposals are discussed in the various subject committees each year. Approximately 20% are rejected on the grounds of inadequacy or poor quality material, and another 20% require redrafting. Decisions are taken by a majority vote of the subject committee's members. If corrections are needed, the author is advised how to go about them. Sometimes the subject committee will reassemble to discuss a revised proposal. Minor corrections are sent to the committee's members individually for comments. If the course is approved without restrictions, the subject committee submits its decision to the academic committee, the OUI's higher academic authority (comparable to the senate in other universities).

The academic committee, composed of the OUI's academic faculty and professors from other Israeli universities, is chaired by the OUI's president. Only rarely does the academic committee refute the decisions of the subject committees; however, its members might ask for clarifications and require changes or reconsideration of various elements. The fact that the academic committee is comprised of scholars from a broad spectrum of disciplines, working at different universities, enables it to perceive the development of a specific course in the context of the total higher education system. This perspective is particularly beneficial when dealing with an interdisciplinary course. After the academic committee approves a proposed course, a "green light" is given, and it enters the development phase.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Course development at the OUI takes between three to five years, the greatest proportion of that time being devoted to the writing and rewriting of learning materials. Most of the course materia ls are approximately 1,000 pages, divided into ten to twelve study units. Eighteen to twenty-four courses are required to complete a bachelor's degree. The development of a course involves a team of professionals and costs over $250,000.

A given course may be written by several authors or by just one, but there is always a course team chair who is responsible for the scope and content of the total course. The course team chair determines the course's structure and methodology and is responsible for directing the other authors, if any.

The course team includes all of the academics involved in writing the study units and a course co-ordinator, whose task is to regulate the team's work and to provide a link between the authors of the study units and the others participating in the course production process, such as academic consultants, editor, graphic designer, media specialist, librarian, publishing office, and so on. Course co-ordinators are usually doctoral students or they hold a master's degree in the specific course area. The course's chair and the co-ordinator constitute the "nuclear course team".

Successful co-operation between the "nuclear course team" and the other members of the team depends greatly on the management skills and the personality of the course co-ordinator, especially when an external academic is responsible for the development of a course. Around 15% of approved courses are dropped in mid-production due to a variety of problems, the most common of which is the submission of poor quality texts or the failure of external academics to devote enough time to completing the study units according to the timetable they had promised. In order to encourage external authors to submit their texts according to a given schedule, the OUI has initiated a special incentive. The authors are promised to be paid twice the amount of money for writing a study unit if they complete it by the deadline agreed upon between themselves and the head of the course development administration. A course chair is paid twice the sum for developing a course if the development of the whole course is accomplished according to the deadline specified in the initial contract. This specific policy, which has been in practice only since the end of the 1980s, has resulted in a significant improvement in the pace of course development.

Whether the writer is an external academic or an internal faculty member, the first draft of each study unit is addressed to the nuclear course team. If the chair or the co-ordinator do not recommend any drastic changes, it is sent for comment to two to five outside and internal experts in the appropriate field (Guri 1987).

Evaluation of the study units is performed on the basis of some definite questions, the most common of which are (the order does not imply any priority):

- Is the material up to date and accurate?

- Are the explanations clear and fluent, and do they meet the standards of self-study materials?

- Are the presentations interesting and stimulating?

- Do the learning activities and assignments enhance learning and assist the student to comprehend the main points and critical issues?

- The study unit is designed for 15 to 20 learning hours. Does the scope of the unit meet this criterion? Is it too overloaded, or is it too limited?

The goal of the evaluation at this stage is to analyse the content and instructional quality of the learning materials carefully and critically. By using the intellectual resources of other universities, the OUI tries to upgrade academic instruction through collective criticism and intensive brainstorming. Obviously, collaboration with other universities is essential in the OUI, which, as stated before, is based on a tiny internal staff.

If most of the critical comments recommend a revision, the nuclear course team meets with the author, and the required revisions are discussed. Some authors take it upon themselves to revise and even to rewrite their first draft, while others prefer to pass the mandate to the course team, mainly to the course co-ordinator. Occasionally, a unit has to be rewritten by a different author. In all cases, the nuclear course team has a crucial role in deciding on the instructional design of each unit.

The OUI's quality assurance mechanisms in the course development process may be analysed in relation to some other models. Smith (1980) classified course development procedures in distance teaching universities into five broad categories:

- the course team model;

- the author/editor model;

- the contract author/faculty model;

- the educational adviser model; and

- the intuition model.

The OUI's model combines some components of the "course team model" and the "contract author/faculty model", adding to them its own unique elements (Guri 1987). The concept of a course team, consisting of academics, television and radio experts, editors, graphic designers, educational technologists, tutors, and others as needed, has been developed by the UKOU. The OUI is based on a scaled down version of the course team approach, because it relies on a small internal faculty. The OUI invests great energy in guiding external contracted scholars, and in ensuring a flowing communication among team members. Naturally, in teams consisting largely of outside contributors "communication among them and the co-ordination and integration of their individual contributions in terms of content, pedagogy, etc., are more difficult to achieve" (Carr 1984: 18).

The contract author/faculty model is used by universities that rely on external contributors. According to this model, outside experts are contracted to write a course or a unit, "but the material is vetted by the full-time faculty of the University" (Smith 1980: 65). Smith indicates that this "model enables courses to be developed much more quickly than would happen under a course team arrangement, but significant amendments and revisions to the original drafts are much more difficult to effect under this system" (Smith 1980: 65).

The basic elements of the contract author/faculty model exist in the OUI, but with substantial modifications. The drafts written by external authors are subject to the same quality assurance procedures as those written by internal faculty. Quite often the external work requires more substantial revision than the materials written by the OUI's faculty. Thus the development of courses based heavily on outside contributors takes more time than those produced by internal academics.

Halperin argues that the involvement of external academics in writing the OUI's courses has had an impact on improving the academic teaching at the traditional universities. He claims that the OUI has contributed to Israeli higher education "by paying pre-eminent attention to effective pedagogy and by addressing the crucial question, 'what is quality in higher education?' (Halperin 1984: 99). As hundreds of professors from the traditional universities have come to be involved in the OUI's work, "the spin-offs for improved teaching elsewhere cannot be doubted" (Halperin 1984: 99).

MONITORING THE LEARNING, TUTORING, AND TEACHING PROCESSES

Developing high quality learning materials does not suffice for assuring the quality of the learning and teaching process. The DTUs that have adopted an open admission policy, like the UKOU and the OUI, had to invest special efforts to ensure that their "exit requirements" are stringent, in order to establish their credibility in the academic world.

Open admission, by its very nature, attracts heterogeneous student clienteles, some of whom lack basic study skills or are unable to cope with academic studies for a variety of reasons. On one hand, the DTUs have had to construct special support devices to assist those who might benefit from university level education with appropriate help and encouragement. On the other hand, they have had to define high learning and teaching standards, which naturally result in a relatively high drop-out rate, especially at the initial stage of the studies. Opening the university gates to anyone who wishes to pursue academic studies constitutes a most advanced and liberal admission policy. Those who are capable of coping with the study requirements irrespective of their prior formal qualifications succeed and progress; those who find it too difficult, drop out.

Special quality assurance regulations to ensure the quality of the learning, tutoring, and teaching processes have been constituted at the OUI. Some mechanisms refer to the unique interaction between the teaching course co-ordinators and the senior academic faculty, and others relate to the monitoring of tutors by the teaching course co-ordinators.

The reliance on a small academic faculty has dictated the transfer of most of the tutoring and teaching responsibilities to junior academic staff, who include the teaching course co-ordinators and the student support team. At the OUI in 1995, 192 teaching course coordinators were responsible for the instruction of 339 courses, studied in 2,359 study groups held in over 100 study centres (Open University of Israel 1995). The teaching course co-ordinator is responsible for the whole range of activities that are part of the learning and tutoring processes: preparing the assignments and final exams; recruiting and guiding the tutors; preparing instructional aids for the intensive tutorials held once a week; monitoring the tutors' work; checking the final exams; and recruiting external examiners, if needed. Clearly, the teaching course co-ordinators possess a significantly wider and greater academic responsibility compared to teaching assistants at traditional universities. Some of the teaching course co-ordinators hold a doctoral degree, but most of them are either doctoral students or hold a master's degree in the specific relevant areas of the course or courses they are responsible for. Ideally, the course co-ordinator, who had been responsible for the development of a given course, becomes the teaching course co-ordinator after the development phase has been completed. But it is not always the case.

Special mechanisms were established so that senior academic faculty could monitor the teaching course co-ordinators. Those who have not completed their doctoral studies must submit all of the final exams for evaluation by the senior faculty. In areas in which no internal expert exists at the OUI, external academics are contracted for that purpose, usually those who were in charge of developing the relevant courses. Once a year all of the assignments and exams prepared by the teaching co-ordinators are evaluated by senior academic faculty, and submitted to the head of the teaching administration (who is an academic faculty in charge of the overall teaching operation). The teaching course co-ordinators are promoted professionally on the basis of their performance's evaluation.

In several areas, such as in education, mathematics, and computer sciences, teams composed of both senior and junior faculty are responsible for teaching courses in the relevant disciplines. In 1995, a special revision committee, headed by Professor Ginzburg, who was the OUI's president from 1977 until 1987, has recommended that the OUI's activities be restructured on disciplinary departments, and that the division between course development administration and teaching administration be abolished. This committee stresses that the current volume of the OUI's operation justifies the enlargement of its senior academic staff and the enhancement of the collaboration between the senior and junior academic faculty in the teaching phase.

The teaching course co-ordinators are responsible for mobilising the tutors and for guiding them in their responsibilities and teaching activities. Each tutor is assigned a certain number of students (from 15 to 40) with whom he or she interacts in writing

(checking assignments); orally (counselling via the phone); and in a tutorial group meeting. It is important to note, that currently over 80% of the OUI's student body prefer to study in the framework of intensive tutorials, which means meeting with the tutor once a week for three hours in each course. Since distance does not constitute a real obstacle in Israel, the OUI has gradually moved towards providing more face-to-face tutorials, at the students' request. Such a situation, puts a heavier role on the tutor's shoulders, and threatens the centrality of the learning materials in the learning and teaching process. Thus monitoring the tutoring sessions is crucially important to both ensure comparability of standards in hundreds of study groups spread across Israel, and to guarantee the centrality of the instructional test in the OUI's operation.

The intensive tutorials had led to the creation of staff development training, in which newly recruited tutors are initiated to the unique elements inherent in a distance teaching university, like the OUI. They are encouraged to elaborate various topics presented in the study units. But it is emphasised strongly that the written text with its didactic apparatus is in place of the professor in a regular university, and by no means are the tutors expected to lecture or teach the subject matter instead of the textbooks. They are to facilitate the students' learning, and assist in comprehending difficult and complicated issues.

In order to ensure common standards, the teaching course co-ordinators are urged to prepare general syllabi for the tutorials, and to provide slides, overhead transparencies, and television and satellite programmes, if relevant. The quality of the tutorials and their effects are evaluated and researched constantly by the evaluation division, resulting in recommendations for ongoing changes and improvements. Each semester, the teaching course co-ordinators are submitted a report as to the students' achievements in each study group, as well as the results of evaluation questionnaires reflecting the students' evaluation of the learning materials and the tutorials. In addition, the teaching course co-ordinators must visit at least once per semester each of the study groups they are responsible for, and to submit a summary report to the head of the teaching division. Furthermore, samples of the assignments, checked by the tutors, are evaluated each semester by the teaching co-ordinators, in order to guarantee as much as possible common evaluation measures.

An additional quality assurance procedure relates to the final exams, which refer only to the content presented in the study units. In order to ensure comparability of standards, the final exam is checked not by the group's tutor, but by either the teaching course co-ordinator or external examiners contracted for that purpose by the OUI.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

All of the quality assurance procedures at the OUI discussed in this case study provide an example of how a small internal academic faculty can manage quite efficiently the operation of a relatively large scale distance teaching university. The OUI has succeeded in doing it by tapping the intellectual resources of other neighbouring universities, and by defining special quality assurance regulations to ensure the quality of its learning materials and of the learning and teaching processes.

Such an example might be of special interest to both developing and small size developed countries, in which a large DTU like the UKOU, based on a large academic staff, is not feasible.

However, it is worth mentioning that the insistence on assuring quality in the contest of the Israeli OUI has its pitfalls and prices. The fact is that the internal academic faculty is

"over-worked", and torn between many responsibilities. It is difficult to recruit on an ongoing basis external academics for writing and revising the learning materials. It is already clear at this stage of the OUI's development, that there is a real need to extend the size of the academic faculty. The move towards the departmental structure described here will ease the burden on the internal faculty. Compared to some other large DTUs, however, even if the OUI's internal academic faculty doubles or triples, it will still constitute a small faculty.

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QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICES AND PRINCIPLES:
THE CASE OF INDIAN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Badri N. Koul

INTRODUCTION

At one time, standards of education in India were maintained through a prescribed syllabus and a final examination to evaluate student performance. Even though this approach to quality control did not quite serve the purpose, most of the efforts to improve it came to naught. Then, after independence in 1947, a conceptual shift from quality control to quality assurance was noticed. Efforts made to improve the quality of education through inputs like streamlined funding, appropriate infrastructure, and relevant guidelines pointed to a new guiding assumption, that if the quality of the inputs improved, then the quality of education stood assured. Reality, however, did not seem to confirm this stimulus–response relationship. In 1982, debate on quality issues became more intense when the first open university in the country was established. This debate has led to yet another shift—to total quality management in which the attention has shifted from inputs to the processes of education. Such a close parallel between education and industry is obvious today in the context of distance education, where the phenomenon of total quality management is just emerging. The next ten years will see how it shapes and influences education in India.

QUALITY CONSCIOUSNESS IN INDIAN EDUCATION: THE BACKGROUND

Ever since university education was introduced in India (1857 to be exact), its quality has remained generally intractable. It is true that well-meaning educators have, from time to time, expressed their concerns about its quality, but, by and large, the overall dynamics of education have been governed by market forces—mainly the vast gap between supply and demand:

> ..hitherto Allahabad has conformed to the practice of the three original universities, and confined itself to conferring degrees on candidates who pass its examinations …" (*Quinquennial Review of 1897–1902*, 22)

The ever increasing demand for personnel to support a rapidly expanding bureaucracy for the education of an exponentially rising population allowed us to accept mediocrity even a century ago as we do today—no wonder that we have become hoarse talking about falling educational standards for decades now.

In spite of the various significant steps towards reform taken in the late 1920s, the scene at the end of the first quarter of the century did not show any appreciable improvement:

> ... the theory that a university exists mainly, if not solely, to pass students through examinations still finds too large acceptance in India, ... They have been hampered in their work by being overcrowded with students who are not fitted by capacity for university education and of whom many would be far more likely to succeed in other careers. (*Simon Commission Report of 1929*, 29–30)

> If the theoretical standards of the curriculum were really enforced, the elimination would be much higher, but the University of Calcutta has depended for the finances of its post-graduate work on Matriculation fees, and for financial reasons among others has kept its standards low. This low standard in the end-examination means lax promotions, and lax promotions means ill-graded classes, and ill-graded classes mean an impossible task for the teacher and consequently worse teaching; ..a vicious circle ... (West, 111)

By the time India became independent, the weaknesses of the institution of Indian education were quite conspicuous:

> Anyone who studies the story of universities in India since 1857 cannot escape the conclusion that the system of higher education inherited at independence from the British Raj was dangerously weak in three ways: (i) During the British rule we failed to set and maintain the quality of teaching and the standards of achievement essential to a university, (ii) We failed to devise, and to persuade Indians to accept, a content of higher education suited to India's social and economic needs and (iii) We failed to establish patterns of academic government and relations between universities and state, which would accord to university that degree of autonomy without which they cannot serve society properly. (Ashby and Anderson, 138)

Efforts to overcome these weaknesses were started in earnest with the Education Commission (1948–49), which assumed that quality assurance was a consequence of adequate inputs. Some of the major steps taken are manifest in the following:

- the establishment of the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1956;

- the Association of Indian universities;

- the various State Boards of secondary and higher secondary education;

- the Central Board of secondary and higher secondary education;

- the National Council of Educational Research and Training (1961);

- the Asian Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (1962); and

- the establishment of Academic Staff Colleges (in the mid 1980s) to provide orientation and refresher programmes for the junior academic staff of colleges and universities.

At the level of higher education, the following measures were seen as sufficient to ensure quality in education:

- prescribing qualifications for various personnel to be employed;

- fixing the minimum levels of infrastructure in terms of land, buildings, classrooms, laboratories, furniture, equipment, libraries, and so on;

- providing guidelines for the content and conduct of syllabuses and examinations;

- providing funds and grants in aid for the promotion and development of new subject areas; and

- establishing new institutions.

At the secondary and higher secondary levels, the key to quality assurance continued to be seen in reforming, upgrading, and updating the syllabuses and examinations, as well as enforcing strict adherence to recruitment norms. These measures instilled confidence and for a while it was felt that the quality of education in India had been secured for the future.

The corresponding expansion of education and the speed with which students entered at all levels of admission, together with the rising aspirations of newly awakened populations of diverse learner communities, however, opened the way for independent institutions and unrecognised universities that would neither depend on the University Grants Council for grants, nor observe the necessary conditions to make their operations legally valid.

This contemporary scenario recalls a mirror-image in what has been reported about the situation around a century ago:

> The organisers of Bengal High Schools were discovering that these schools could be run on a self-supporting basis without Government grants, and they need not therefore submit to the conditions which the department imposed. (Government of India, 22)

Obviously, the steps taken since 1947, though based on a different paradigm, have not improved the situation to the extent expected.

More recently, with the establishment of open and distance education, the issue of quality has become more serious. Partly because distance education institutions launched courses without any reasonable understanding of the distance education system, very often without sufficiently preparing for effective distance education transactions, the questioned perception that distance education could provide an effective teaching–learning environment and the issue of falling standards came to the fore when the practices and principles of conventional and distance education were compared. The initial reaction of distance educators in India manifested in their building a defence for distance education as an effective educational system, as if quality was an issue only for distance education systems and not for the conventional system. The perceived effectiveness of conventional education was used as a standard measure for the effectiveness of distance education. Distance education expanded with an overwhelming momentum, both in its use and misuse, as teacher training and science-based programmes began to multiply rapidly on the one hand and professional–vocational and awareness–extension programmes expanded on the other. The debate become broad based as the validity of using conventional notions of effectiveness as a measure for the effectiveness of distance education came to be questioned. The attention of those

concerned shifted slowly but steadily from mere perception to the reality—hardly anything in concrete terms could be characterised as a quality assurance mechanism in the Indian educational system, be it conventional education or distance education. The UGC has realised as well that they play a recommendatory and funding role and that, if an institution can mobilise funds independently, it will not bother about UGC recommendations and guidelines. It was time the issue of quality in education was addressed afresh.

This brings us to the latest thinking on and the steps taken to achieve quality in education. Rather than depending on the assumption that quality is assured by ensuring inputs, the paradigm of the 1990s is that quality can be assured only when all the processes involved are ensured through appropriate management—not assumptions but appropriate activities ensure quality. Accordingly, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) was established (in 1995) within the UGC to plan and implement schemes for ensuring quality in higher education. For distance education operations in India, the Distance Education Council (established in 1992) within Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) is expected to take this responsibility and work in close collaboration with NAAC. Both bodies, however, have as yet taken only what may be called the initial steps.

QUALITY ASSURANCE: THE CASE OF HIGHER DISTANCE EDUCATION

At present seven open universities operate in India. Of these, two state open universities have yet to start operating; another two have started operating but they have not reached a stage when their quality assurance practices and principles could be looked into. The remaining three universities are Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU) of Andhra Pradesh (1982), Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) of Ne w Delhi (1985), and Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU)) of Maharashtra (1989).

It is clear from the organisational structures of BRAOU and IGNOU (see Appendices 1 and 2) that they have no mechanisms provided explicitly for quality assurance. The tasks involved, however, make it necessary to incorporate various mechanisms which may be labelled *quality assurance scheme* at the conceptual level and *quality assurance operations* at the implementation level. YCMOU, on the other hand, explicit ly provides for quality assurance in its management plan (see Appendix 3). The relevant details of each university's quality assurance activities are as follows.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University

The main function of BRAOU is the preparation and delivery of educational programmes. Accordingly, quality assurance measures are related to the following six processes:

- planning academic programmes;

- developing curricula and learning materials;

- producing learning materials;

- implementing programmes;

- reviewing programmes; and

- developing human resources.

Planning Academic Programmes

New academic programmes are usually identified with the vice-chancellor through informal discussions with and suggestions or guidelines received from the state government, the UGC, and other national bodies. Faculty may also initiate proposals. Proposals initiated by either the vice-chancellor or faculty are placed before the co-ordination committee, which is a non-statutory advisory body made up all senior functionaries like the deans of the various faculties and directors of the various service units. After the co-ordination committee approves the proposal, the faculty or department prepares a detailed proposal for the consideration of the academic senate, the highest statutory academic authority of the university that is empowered to approve academic programmes. The detailed proposals approved at this stage are submitted to the executive council, the highest policy making and administrative authority of the university, for administrative sanction to launch the programmes.

The vice-chancellor, the faculty, the co-ordination committee, the academic senate, and the executive council, all serve as a means of assuring the relevance and quality of the programmes at the planning stage.

Developing Curricula and Learning Materials

After a programme is finally approved, an expert committee made up of the internal faculty members and external subject experts is constituted to prepare the curriculum. The committee may meet once or twice for this purpose, and the curriculum thus designed is sent for approval to the academic senate. Thus, it is the subject experts and the academic senate who look into the quality of the programme at this stage.

The approved curriculum and syllabus are passed on to the course team, which consists of subject experts (both from the university and from outside institutions) and an audio-visual producer, who is designated for the programme or course. The team is headed by a subject expert, who is designated the editor and is responsible for content editing and the quality of presentation. Language is edited by language experts. The course team also identifies the audio-visual components of the materials, which are developed by the audio-visual centre with the help of the producer and subject experts. Depending on the nature of the course or programme, field practitioners are also associated with the development of learning materials as course writers, editors, or audio-visual programme developers. In a few cases, the print materials are sent to external assessors for their comments, which are subsequently used to improve the materials. The audio-visual materials are previewed by the internal faculty before they are duplicated for use by students.

The quality assurance mechanisms that function at this stage include:

- editing learning materials for different purposes (content, format, and language);

- co-ordinating with the producer of audio-visual materials and previewing the audio-visual materials before they are duplicated; and

- orienting the course writers to make them familiar with the requirements of quality.

Producing Learning Materials

The learning materials in manuscript form are printed by the material production division of the university with the help of private printing agencies. They follow a style manual that the university prepared with the help of printers and internal faculty members. Internal faculty read the final proofs to ensure error free publications. Similarly, the audio-visual unit is responsible for producing the audio-visual tapes in accordance with an audio-visual manual prepared by the university.

Thus the internal faculty, the audio-visual unit, and the printing division are collectively responsible for the quality of print and media learning materials at the production stage.

Implementing Programmes

When a course is implemented, the three main processes are distributing learning materials, providing student support services, and issuing examinations. Learning materials are distributed from the material distribution division at headquarters, and they are responsible for preparing and adhering to despatch schedules. Student support services are provided by a network of study centres at different locations. The directorate of student services located at headquarters is responsible for ensuring the quality of these services by determining the norms and patterns of support services required at different study centres. The examination branch of the university is responsible for the reliability and validity of evaluation. The schemes of evaluation and the conduct of examinations are developed by the faculty with the help of external experts wherever necessary, and are approved by the academic senate and the executive council before implementation.

Reviewing Programmes

Learning materials are reviewed on the basis of feedback from learners, counsellors, and subject experts and they are updated by internal faculty. The university has set up a separate system evaluation unit, which conducts regular studies on the different aspects of learning materials and implementation processes. The feedback from these studies is used to revise materials and improve practices.

Developing Human Resources

The university has established a separate unit for staff training and development. This unit undertakes orientation and training programmes for the academic and administrative staff to improve the quality of their services.

Indira Gandhi National Open University

At IGNOU, quality assurance activities focus on processes quite similar to those at BRAOU, but the measures taken to achieve the desired quality differ considerably.

Existing built-in quality assurance mechanisms are as follows:

- planning the course or programme;
- developing the course or programme;
- producing the leaming materials;
- implementing the course or programme;
- reviewing the courses and follow up activities; and
- developing human resources.

Planning the Course or Programme

Each school or division is expected to present a perspective plan covering a period of about five years. This perspective plan must be approved by the co-ordination committee and, subsequently, after incorporating the modifications the committee suggests, the perspective plan must be approved by the planning board. Within the approved perspective plan, the school or division is expected to prepare a project concept pertaining to each course or programme that they want to launch. This project concept is

developed through the services of experts in the relevant field or any other means such as workshops, brainstorming sessions, and so on. The project concept is submitted to the co-ordination committee and then to the planning board for their approval.

After the project concept is approved by the planning board, the school or division develops a detailed outline of the curriculum components of the course or programme. The project design must be enriched in consultation with an expert committee, made up of subject experts and instructional designers. It is then submitted to the school board for approval.

After looking into various aspects of the project design and enriching it through interaction with experts, it is finalised as a project report, which presents the total instructional design of the course or programme for the academic council to consider.

While the project report is being shaped, another document called the *launch document* is developed in co-operation with the admission and evaluation division and the communication division. The launch document outlines relevant schedules as well as the infrastructure needed and the kind of services required to implement the course or programme. The launch document is also submitted to the co-ordination committee for approval.

At this point the planning stage is over. So far the mechanisms for quality assurance at the concept and design stages lie with the co-ordination committee, the planning board, the school board, and the academic council. Following these steps meticulously, the quality of the course or programme is sure to meet the objectives of the university, social relevance, economic viability, and operational feasibility.

Developing the Course or Programme

Using the approved project report and the launch document, the school or division moves on to the stage of course or programme development. Usually, the task of co-ordinating development is given to a course or programme co-ordinator, who assists the course contributors, content editors, language editors, instructional designers, audio-visual producers, and personnel involved in the project.

Course contributors, the main constituent of this team, are usually identified with the help of an expert committee. They undergo a two-day orientation programme so that they may design materials in accordance with the house style adopted by a particular school.

First drafts received from the course contributors are passed on to content editors (who are subject experts), language editors, and format editors (who are instructional designers). They look into the pedagogic and presentational attributes of the materials and make changes. The final draft is prepared and thoroughly proofread before camera-ready copies are prepared.

Besides developing the learning materials, course contributors are expected to suggest topics that need audio-visual support. These suggestions are written up as *academic briefs*, which are further developed as *academic notes*, which outline in detail the expected academic content of the audio-visual materials to be prepared. Sometimes the academic briefs and the academic notes are prepared by the course contributors; other times they may be prepared by the internal academics themselves. The academic note is passed on to the communication division, who assign a producer to produce the programme. The producer and the academic work together to build both the script and the production script. The producer plans and arranges for the technical facilities and technical support required to produce the materials. Rushes collected from outdoor as well as indoor shooting are edited at the post production centre to finalise the first version of the audio-visual programme, which is previewed by a committee of internal academics

and technical personnel. After approval the programme is passed on for duplication and packing.

The quality assurance of course or programme development, and print and audio-visual materials, therefore, relies on the following mechanisms:

- orienting the course contributors;

- content editing by subject specialists;

- language editing by language experts;

- format editing by instructional designers;

- collaborating to identify themes for audio-visual materials;

- combining academics with audio-visual producers and providing high-level technical facilities; and

- previewing the audio-visual programmes before finalising them.

Producing the Learning Materials

The quality of learning materials production depends on the following:

- the quality of the paper on which they are printed;

- the cards in which they are bound;

- the quality of the printing itself;

- the appropriateness of layout;

- accuracy in typography; and

- the placement of diagrams.

Similarly, in the case of audio-visual materials, quality depends on the quality of blank tapes and duplication, which is carried out at the university.

The mechanisms to ensure the quality of paper, card, and blank tapes are the advisory technical committees, which set the minimum standards for the quality of the materials the university is to use. The general quality of printing is assured by penalty clauses in the agreements with the printers. Duplicated copies of audio and video tapes are also randomly checked.

Implementing the Course or Programme

A course or programme is implemented through many processes: the despatch of materials; counselling, tutoring, and practical work at study centres; assignment handling; query handling; feedback; and evaluation. The quality of these processes is assured by ensuring the prerequisites which support them as follows:

- *Despatch of materials*: availability of materials in the warehouse, availability of schedules, adherence to schedules, quality of packing;

- *Counselling, tutoring, and practical work*: availability of schedules, adherence to schedules, punctuality, regularity, availability of facilities, attendance of learners, quality of learners, quality of counselling or tutoring, practical work and interaction, use of audio-visual materials, learner satisfaction;

- *Assignment handling*: availability of schedules, adherence to schedules, short turn-around time, quality of assessment;

- *Query handling*: pre-admission services, on-course services, and post-course services;

- *Feedback on*: quality of print materials, quality of audio-visual materials, quality of counselling, tutoring, and practical work, quality of assignments, quality of support services in general; and

- *Evaluation*: availability of schedules, adherence to schedules, conduct of examinations, turn-around time in the case of assessment, handling of appeals made by the students and discipline issues, results (time taken for declaration) and their accuracy, regular and timely certification.

At study centres and regional centres, quality assurance mechanisms comprise the various monitoring schemes and related feedback mechanisms that originate there. Regional centres are expected to monitor study centres for the quality of their management, tutoring, and counselling, and their general function and facilities, while study centres provide feedback on their infrastructure, the functioning of tutors and counsellors, and learner behaviour.

Reviewing the Courses and Follow Up Activities

Course review activities depend mainly on the feedback made available to regional centres and, in turn, to headquarters. Along with the project report at the start of the course, a review document is prepared, which outlines a timetable for receiving feedback as well as the various areas under which feedback is to be received. Feedback informs decisions about whether the course should continue (entailing preparation of new assignments and programme guides for every year), be modified (entailing maintenance of courses through supplements and minor revisions), expanded (entailing restructuring of courses and also increasing the content by means of revisions), or withdrawn (if the course is no longer relevant).

Developing Human Resources

The Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE), an IGNOU constituent, provides staff development programmes for the academic and non-academic staff to improve the quality of their input.

Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University

The approach followed at YCMOU is quite scientific in the sense that total quality management was planned for as a significant concern right from the beginning. Accordingly, YCMOU made arrangements to:

- develop a quality system for the university;

- develop a total quality management model for the university;

- implement the quality system in the university; and

- develop and establish a mechanism to perpetuate total quality management in the university.

The quality system in conceptual terms has already been articulated in a preliminary quality manual, indicating clearly the dimensions of quality that will be attended to (namely the *time* a function will be executed, the *product* or *service* specified, and the *costs* involved) as well as the administrative and operational mechanisms needed to materialise the system. The work done so far includes a policy decision to:

50

- appoint management representatives to co-ordinate the overall quality assurance activities;

- set up a quality advisory council consisting of officers and experts who will be responsible for implementing this quality assurance programme;

- establish a quality assurance centre for total quality management—such a centre would be entrusted with the responsibility of supervision and verification of the quality standards laid down; and

- organise training programmes for in-house staff to implement the quality system.

Further additional work has been completed:

- detailed documents on the interface of departments; the responsibilities of every division, centre, and section of the university; and procedures for reviewing the feedback received from various units, as well as those for revising the details and distribution of the reports; and

- procedures for documentation, both at the institutional and the departmental levels, including those required to materialise the quality system. Accordingly, departmental processes have already been analysed and component activities have been identified. More work needs to be done to make the system completely functional.

IMMEDIATE REQUIREMENTS

In the context of quality assurance, IGNOU and BRAOU have operated and continue to operate on more or less similar conceptual lines. Differences at the operational level relate to differences in their administrative structures and the powers of various counterpart authorities and officers.

In actual practice problems that hamper quality assurance occur at various stages. The major problem areas, which provide directions for immediate research work, are as follows:

- It is not unusual to ignore some of the steps at the planning stage. We need to identify the steps that are ignored, the circumstances in which they are ignored, and the reasons they are ignored; and then we need to identify ways to improve the planning process.

- Once the first draft of the printed material is available, it is not subjected to all the checks described here. In many cases, if the various types of editing are actually effected, the proposed modifications are not incorporated in the final versions. Even proofreading does not come up to the mark. Set norms are needed for getting quality work done by course contributors, artists, and so on, as at present their relationship with the co-ordinator remains a long drawn tug-of-war. Consequently, our print materials display inadequacies only after improvement is possible. We need to locate the weak spots in print material production early on, and find their causes and ways to overcome them.

- For audio-visual materials, the only effective quality assurance mechanism is previewing, yet even that does not appear to be sufficient. Another way to improve the quality and utility of these materials must be found and put in place.

- As far as the quality of printing and duplication of audio-visual materials is concerned, various mistakes are made; for example, blank tapes may be sent to study centres; a diagram that should be printed on page 5 appears on page 32; or diagrams are lost at the printers and need to be redone. The reason for such mistakes needs to be found and mechanisms to block them must be developed and used.

- Feedback at the implementation stage is still minimal or unavailable even though procedures to obtain it are in place. Also, the turn-around time for assignments continues to be unreasonably long. To reduce the average turn-around time and to get regular feedback and use it purposefully, we need to find the causes of slackness and tighten the schedule.

- We need a system of post-implementation activities; for example, surveying the types of employment graduates have been able to find.

- Materials intended to be used outside India need special attention to the content presented (it has to be free from Indian bias), the language used (it must have international acceptability on issues like sexism in language), the raw material used (quality of paper, audio-tapes, and so on), presentation (quality of printing, packaging, and so on), and support services. Norms have yet to be developed for this purpose; but beforehand we need to sensitise ourselves to international needs and develop mechanisms for their quality assurance.

- Although stride offers staff development programmes, including long term programmes like the post-graduate Diploma in Distance Education and Master of Arts in Distance Education, a mechanism is needed to ensure the utilisation of these programmes at operational levels.

- Some of these problems have procedural solutions available in the powers or function of school boards. However, school boards do not seem to function as they should (for example, to evaluate educational material and to make suitable recommendations to the academic council, to review the facilities of the study centres, and so on). The implication is that we need to review the function of the school boards and other authorities. Restructuring may already be overdue.

- Exploration into, experimentation with, and implementation of advanced technologies may solve most of these problems. How do we proceed in this case?

Research into solutions to these problems deserves immediate attention, whatever the priorities of university management.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The YCMOU experience may provide useful insights and also guidance, but it must be obtained and detailed before it can be used by others. Obviously, we have a long way to go; total quality management is still a distant goal.

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APPENDIX 1: BRAOU ORGANISATIONAL CHART

APPENDIX 2: IGNOU ORGANISATIONAL CHART

APPENDIX 3: YCMOU ORGANISATIONAL CHART

THE ROOTS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AT THE BRITISH OPEN UNIVERSITY

Tim O'Shea and Anne Downes

INTRODUCTION

The founders of the British Open University did not use the term *quality assurance* but they were very much concerned with the design and implementation of robust educational systems. In this case study we will argue that quality assurance principles and processes are inherent in the Open University's approach to supporting distance learning and were demanded by the educational mission of the university.

We take the view that there are three key quality assurance principles for an educational institution:

- that the institution have an educational mission that can be related in a tangible positive way to the educational well being of society at large or some particular community;

- that it is possible to measure success in achieving that mission by focusing primarily on the quality of the student learning experience; and

- that at any time the institution should have explicit goals for the further enhancement of the quality of student learning experience.

Quality assurance processes vary depending on the educational design and delivery methods of the institution but must fundamentally be concerned with the iterative use of feedback information from a range of sources, including admissions data, examinations data, student progress statistics, survey data, interview data, tutor data, graduate employment information, and employer views. Such feedback data can be used to inform changes in provision at a whole range of levels, from small elements of courses and course design to the broader curriculum and arrangements for local or institution wide tutorial or pastoral support. To achieve greatest value, feedback driven processes can also be embedded in hierarchical networks for multiple use. That is to say lower levels of feedback will be aggregated and compared with higher levels of feedback to form synoptic views of the educational provision and the feedback information can also be used to determine what feedback collection processes should be initiated in the future.

Quality assurance has been the subject of much debate in British higher education over the past four years and universities have been subject to both external assessments of teaching quality focused on particular subjects and external academic audits, which address the workings of universities as a whole. The Higher Education Funding Council

for England, which is responsible for funding the Open University, has just embarked on a new round of subject-based assessments of the quality of education, and a quite polarised debate about the future of external quality audit and assessment continues (O'Shea, Bearman, and Downes 1996). However, from the perspective of the Open University, concern for the quality of educational provision is not new, and striving for excellence has always been an intrinsic part of the academic professionalism of our staff. So a focus for us has been explicating and communicating our quality assurance processes to external assessors and auditors.

Below, we look at the extent to which quality assurance processes were built into the Open University and how well those measures have served the university in a changing environment. We hope to demonstrate that, as an institution that was established with a modular curriculum, many of the quality assurance processes are embedded in the structure of the institution, and have been evident throughout its life. At the same time, we recognise that current thinking within the institution is much influenced by the methodologies and guidelines of external audit and assessment. We consider whether these influences are directing us towards genuine enhancement of quality, looking as examples at the development of a mission statement, curriculum design and approval processes, and teaching and learning.

DETERMINATION OF MISSION AND OBJECTIVES

Current audit and assessment methods depend upon a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the provision in the relevant subject area. The Open University has in recent years restated its mission, as follows:

> The Open University is –
>
> *Open as to people*
>
> It will play a leading role in the move to mass higher education by serving an increasingly large and diverse student body.
>
> *Open as to places*
>
> It will make its programmes and services available to people throughout Europe and beyond.
>
> *Open as to methods*
>
> It will harness new technologies and educational techniques to serve students in their homes and workplaces.
>
> *Open as to ideas*
>
> It will be a vibrant academic community dedicated to the pursuit and sharing of knowledge.

These words by no means represent a new strategic approach for the institution. The following extracts from the inaugural address of the university's first chancellor, Lord Crowther, contain a vision of the university which, after nearly 30 years, continues to hold good:

We are open, first, as to people. Not for us the carefully regulated escalation from one educational level to the next by which the traditional universities establish their criteria for admission. The first, and most urgent, task before us is to cater for the many thousands of people, fully capable of a higher education, who for one reason or another, do not get it, or do not get as much of it as they can turn to advantage, or as they discover, sometimes too late, that they need. Men and women drop out through failures in the system, through disadvantages of their environment, through mistakes of their own judgement, through sheer bad luck. These are our primary material. To them we offer a further opportunity…Wherever there is an unprovided need for higher education, supplementing the existing provision, there is our constituency. …We are open as to places. This University has no cloisters – a word meaning closed. … We are open as to methods. … already the development of technology is marching on, and I predict that before long actual broadcasting will form only a small part of the University's output. … Every new form of human communication will be examined to see how it can be used to raise and broaden the level of human understanding … We are open, finally, to ideas. It has been said that there are two aspects of education, both necessary. One regards the individual human mind as a vessel of varying capacity, into which is to be poured as much as it will hold of the knowledge and experience by which human Society lives and moves. … the (other) regards the human mind more as a fire that has to be set alight and blown with the divine afflatus. That also we take as our ambition …

The sentiments of this inspiring speech have undoubtedly attracted many staff and students to the university, and have been echoed by a concern for access, equality of opportunity, use of innovative methods of teaching and learning, and the dissemination of knowledge and good practice, throughout the systems and procedures that have been developed to produce and present courses and learning resources over the years.

In 1969, it was sufficiently unconventional for a university to claim to be open, rather than exclusive, and to offer the flexibility of modularity rather than a three-year programme of learning. However, although the mission of the institution may be widely shared by staff and students alike, critics might ask how far the Open University has achieved its standards of openness and equality of opportunity.

Since 1971 (Perry 1976) the university has used its Institute of Educational Technology to lead and guide a range of monitoring and feedback activities and to measure the real effect of admitting students without educational qualifications to undergraduate level courses. In doing so, the university has been looking for the apparent factors that contribute to student success, in terms of preparedness before entry, progress rate, academic support and guidance, teaching media, and learning resources.

These monitoring and feedback processes provide data on which future policy decisions can be based. Many examples of enhanced provision result from the identification of good and successful practice, over the years. However, external scrutiny of process and content, in the form of audit and assessment respectively, has looked for evidence that all parts of the institution are engaged in structured processes of feedback and review, and that the whole university is constantly improving performance towards achievement of its aims. We quickly recognised that quality improvement had been greatest when enthusiastic individuals and groups had used the available mechanisms to good effect. External scrutiny has been a force for bringing each unit or activity to a minimum level of dialogue about quality assurance, but in some cases the process diverted energy and enthusiasm that might have stimulated excellence on a more piecemeal basis. A

fundamental question for the Open University, as an increasing proportion of staff engage in quality assurance related dialogue, is the extent to which we can realistically expect examples of excellence, in our particular disciplines, regions, or courses, to form the baseline quality assurance procedure for all others.

CURRICULUM DESIGN, CONTENT, AND ORGANISATION

The university developed a multi-faceted approach to student learning, which includes teaching materials, correspondence tuition and tutor support, and assessment, each with a range of procedures to assure quality at the outset, and a process of review throughout the life of a course. The system of course planning has been devolved increasingly over the years, and much of the responsibility for carrying forward the development of the course profile now rests with the individual academic units. Nevertheless, the university as a whole maintains oversight of the curriculum profile, and assures that the programme of courses being developed is academically appropriate and that individual course proposals conform to agreed policy and practice. The single most important element of the Open University's approach to quality assurance in this area is the course teams, described below, which collectively have academic "ownership" of individual courses.

The five-year forward plan of each academic unit contains details of the courses, packs, or other provisions that the unit intends to produce and present in each year of that period, given certain assumptions about staffing and resource levels. The plan is approved by the faculty or school board, which comprises all its academic staff, representatives from other academic and service units, full-time research students, and representatives of the student body and tutorial counselling staff. The sum of these unit plans, when approved, represents the university's commitment to curriculum development.

The curriculum is divided into modules or courses, which may contribute to one or more programmes of study leading to an award or may be offered as free-standing courses. Academic approval therefore takes place at two levels:

- the award level; and

- the course level.

Award Approval

A new programme of studies leading to an award is sponsored by an academic unit, through its faculty or school board and approved by a curriculum development committee and by the academic board, acting on behalf of senate (though some new proposals require a full senate discussion). Teaching and assessment strategies are considered by the relevant university-wide committees. The university has to be satisfied that support areas can accommodate the new programme within the capacity constraints that exist. Approval for a new programme of studies is sought in the third year before the programme is presented for the first time and before consideration of the constituent courses begins.

Course Approval

If it is agreed within the unit that a course proposal is academically appropriate and that there is a likelihood of staff and resources being available to develop and maintain the course over a specified period, the outline proposal is incorporated within the relevant academic unit's five-year plan. Three years before the course is due to be presented, plans begin to be developed in more detail, a formal course proposal is drawn up for approval by the appropriate academic unit board and the procedure for the appointment of an external assessor begins.

This course approval process includes:

- approving the details of course titles, general subject matter and detailed syllabuses, their objectives and the method of assessment, the structure and relationship of the course components, tutorial, broadcast, and resource requirements, and any relevant regulatory requirements;

- appointing members of staff to all course teams, including course team chairs, subject to ratification by the curriculum development committee; and

- nominating external course assessors for the approval of the curriculum development committee and appointment by the academic board.

A separate approval and external assessment is required for every new course, as well as for any significant change to an existing course. A decision on what constitutes a significant change in this context is made by the pro-vice-chancellor (curriculum development). Academic units have delegated authority to approve new courses and packs in certain circumstances, where resource and academic issues have already been resolved. So the faculty or school board is the main forum for debating academic and pedagogic issues connected with the course and for approving the details of the course. Referral to university-level committees takes place when any aspects of the course proposal go beyond agreed policy or practice, and may require specific approval by the appropriate committees of any plans to use broadcasts, audio or video cassettes, computing, or residential schools.

The Course Team

The course team is led by a chair, who provides its academic leadership, and the formal responsibilities of this role are specified in the university's government structure. Other members include a course manager, who is responsible for the administrative arrangements of course production; a number of writing academics; possibly one or two academic reading members; a BBC producer if television or radio programmes are included; possibly a member of the Institute for Educational Technology to advise on the delivery of the course; and an editor and designer to assist with the presentation of the final printed texts. Like the course components, the exact mix will depend upon the requirements of the individual course.

The course team carries the academic responsibility for ensuring the quality of the university's teaching of each course. It has a range of tasks:

- the definition and development of the intellectual subject matter of the course;

- the identification and development of the course's teaching strategy, integrating the range of resources for teaching and student support that are available;

- creating and implementing the appropriate assessment strategy for the course;

- ensuring the production of high quality teaching materials;

- planning, implementing, monitoring, and reviewing the presentation of the course to students.

Course team members bring with them the knowledge and expertise gained from being involved in the production and presentation of other courses. An editor not only comments on the format of the printed material, but will be able to advise authors on the way the information is presented.

The team's method of operation is intended to embed quality assurance procedures. Throughout the development and production of a course, the peer group constantly monitors, discusses, and revises the draft course material, which is subjected to a process of collective criticism and development. Having work constantly scrutinised by a peer group, and being involved in discussion of teaching and learning strategies for each course, serves as ongoing staff development for all members of staff and produces high quality courses. This process is also applied to the academic content in a wider sense, and to the teaching of the subject matter, and the examination and assessment policy. Integration is crucial in developing a successful course, both in terms of content and the use of different media to provide students with a stimulating learning experience.

When a course is being produced, some or all of it may be developmentally tested on a group of students with appropriate experience and attainments. If the course is to be a re-made version of a course that has been, or is about to be discontinued, notice will be taken of the evaluations of its predecessor, including the views of students, tutors, and external examiners.

Open University courses are divided into "units" (broadly the material required to teach a student for 12 to 15 hours per week) and "blocks" (which are groups of associated units within a course). Before a course is finalised for presentation to students it will have been scrutinised, in part and in whole, by an external assessor and by assessors of individual blocks.

The university encourages innovation in its academic staff, and innovation is one of the criteria for promotion. Innovation is also encouraged through the university's study leave policies. Encouragement to pursue research and participate in course development as inter-relating activities both feed the course development process, and offer opportunities to disseminate research findings widely.

The university has always been proud of its innovation in curriculum and course and programme design, and the quality assurance processes that support them. External scrutiny has usefully encouraged us to be more explicit about these processes, and it has also posed some very real questions about the roles we ask staff to assume, and their preparedness to do so. Although the role of the course team chair has long been established, we are now explicitly documenting what is required to undertake this role effectively, what are the pitfalls in the course production process and how can they be avoided, and how to encourage course teams to access as much information as possible about good practice within and outside the institution. At the same time, tensions develop and trade-offs are made as we attempt to increase the rate of course production, to use new technology to enable more frequent updates of material, and to be more innovative in assessment. The objective has to be to meet these new goals without long-term loss of quality or consistency.

Colling and Harvey (1995) discuss educational teams and the management of quality, and suggest that "Course teams responsible for delivery of academic programmes rarely behave as teams. Experience shows the prevailing culture is one based firmly on individual autonomy, which is often jealously guarded …". In the Open University we would argue that is not the case. Our academic staff are committed to the team approach, and the end product, in the form of tangible multi media course materials with integrated

teaching and assessment strategies, can be publicly credited to all members of the team. We would argue however that the collaboration upon which the team depends is hampered by external assessment frameworks, in this case for both research and teaching quality, which still focus on a single discipline or subject area, making no real allowances for the interdisciplinarity that is so well served by a course team approach. If, as has often been convincingly argued (Beecher 1989), that many academic staff have a stronger allegiance to their subject than to their institution, then the current external quality assessment methods are likely to further reinforce this single subject focus within the university to the detriment of interdisciplinary innovation in course content.

TEACHING, LEARNING, AND STUDENT SUPPORT

Supported open learning combines the provision of high quality multimedia teaching materials with tutorial and counselling support. Together they provide an integrated system of course presentation, incorporating advice on preparation for study, and describing options for the choice of course and award, support, and administrative arrangements. Students receive a study calendar, which helps them to pace their studies and links suggested dates for the study of each unit with corresponding broadcasts and assignments. The study calendar is complemented by details of local tutorial support, where applicable, provided by the regional centre.

The university's 13 regional centres provide a service to enquirers, applicants, and students. Each regional centre operates its own enquiry and advisory service and enquirers about the university's courses and awards are encouraged to seek personal advice in support of the printed material brochures about particular awards, courses, and packs. When an applicant first accepts a place on an Open University course, they are assigned to a tutor–counsellor. On a designated entry course, the tutor–counsellor will act as both tutor and counsellor. For subsequent or higher-level courses, students will be assigned to a tutor for the specific course, while the tutor–counsellor may continue to provide a counselling service, or this may be provided direct from the regional centre.

The university has a large body of around 8,000 associate lecturers (tutors and tutor-counsellors), all of whom work part time. Many of them also have full or part time work for other organisations. For 10%, the Open University is their sole employer. They live all over the United Kingdom and the mainland of Europe (including the Channel Islands, and remote Scottish islands), though all are connected to one of the regional centres. Formal responsibility for the appointment of associate lecturers rests with regional directors, advised by regionally based members of academic units (staff tutors and regional managers) and senior counsellors. In addition to recommending associate lecturer appointments, they have a responsibility for supervising their work, and ensuring that tutorial and other support policy and strategy are implemented effectively.

Recruitment needs are therefore assessed annually, and the staff tutors, regional managers, and senior counsellors take responsibility for the recruitment process within their region or academic unit, in accordance with the *Guidelines for the Appointment of Tutorial and Counselling Staff*, which incorporate internal policy and the principles of fair selection and equal opportunities. The various associate lecturer roles are outlined in a recruitment document *Teaching with the OU*. Further details of staff roles are set out in other publications which summarise best practice; for example, *Supporting Open Learning* and *Effective Tutorials*.

In the last few years about 1,000 new associate lecturers have joined the university each year. Dealing with such a large number of staff, at a distance, most of them only working for the university a few hours a week, demands a rather different approach than that used

with full time staff. The university communicates regularly with its associate lecturers through written materials and face-to-face meetings. New staff normally attend at least one induction meeting, and experienced staff on average attend a staff development event every other year. Current topics are covered as necessary and often include the future plans of the university. Written communications cover a wide range, from the newspaper *Sesame* to individual letters. Some regions produce their own newsletters for associate lecturers.

The tutor is responsible for correspondence tuition, guided by detailed marking schemes for all courses. The marking of tutor marked assignments is monitored by central and regional full time academic staff (and, in some cases, by experienced tutorial staff), and this monitoring process provides feedback to the tutor and the staff tutor or regional manager on the quality of the grading and qualitative feedback awarded to the student.

The course tutor is also responsible for both maintaining personal contact with his or her students and responding to queries and concerns about the course. The course tutor may respond through face-to-face contact, although other factors, such as geographical distribution, may place greater emphasis on contact by letters and telephone. Within the tutorial strategy for each course, tutorial contact hours are allocated, most of which are likely to be concentrated in the form of evening or weekend tutorial meetings or day schools. Because tutorials are non-obligatory, they are regarded as supportive rather than essential to the teaching and learning process. They are usually focused on tackling students' problems and misconceptions and developing observational and interpretative skills, the ability to discuss, and so on, rather than on the transfer of a body of knowledge. The course tutor can play a significant role in "enriching" the presentation of the course, through tutorial meetings and by bringing contemporary developments to the students' attention within the framework of the course.

On some courses, students spend a week, or shorter period, at a residential school to carry out work for which laboratory or group work has no substitute. The residential schools committee, which is responsible for the central co-ordination of this aspect of the teaching provision, has a quality assurance working group, which developed a framework for quality assurance at residential school, both in terms of staff monitoring and to cover wider aspects of the students' learning experience. The university undertakes to take all practical steps to enable everyone to participate as fully as their circumstances allow.

The external audit of institutions, and assessment of the quality of education, claim to respect diversity among institutions, and discipline areas within the same institution, but have caused us to review how far we can expect to provide the same inputs to the student experience across our range of provision. The argument that what is excellent today becomes expectation tomorrow drives efforts to disseminate good practice, but we must now ask what we can say to students and assessors about the standard of provision they will receive in support of their studies, and which we can assure. The formulation of minimum standards, and the quality control processes that monitor them, are not attractive to academic colleagues, who have never seen control and policing as the route to quality enhancement. Yet there are strong pressures from society in general, apart from the development of quality "terminology" in higher education, towards the issue of student charters, articulated learning objectives (which, by implication, will be achieved if the institution is providing input of appropriate quality), and complaints systems. It is critical to balance the extent to which we transmit these pressures, and the need to perform well in external assessments against the extent to which we allow and encourage diversity at the expense of structures and systems, in deciding on, for instance, internal resource flow, the funding of new initiatives, and collaborative arrangements.

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ENHANCEMENT

The quality and quality assurance mechanisms of the Open University are more exposed to scrutiny than those of any other institution of higher education in the United Kingdom, through the size of its student body, its associate lecturers, the wide-spread availability of its course materials, and the visibility and audibility of its television and radio programmes. Accordingly, it is not too surprising that the university acquitted itself very well when formal external quality assessment and quality audit were introduced. Also, in this case study we have argued that given the mission of the university and its approach to both the curriculum and to student support, then quality assurance has always been a necessity for us and that the main development in the last few years has been the communication of the associated processes to external bodies.

The approach the Open University has taken has been to create a small number of new staff roles, such as those held by the authors, with a primary focus on quality assurance and a quality assurance panel that takes a university wide view of this area. Our current concern is to maintain a healthy culture of quality enhancement in the face of resource constraints and the negative side-effects of external quality assessment and audit. While our mission is the secure foundation for applying the principles of quality assurance, we argue that there is a real risk that external assessment processes, especially coupled with institutional success in these arenas, will lead to a stifling of innovation in such areas as interdisciplinary provision and new models of student support and might even result in the creation of bureaucratic procedures that attempt to over-standardise on the perceived critical minimum components that underpinned the past success. In the face of these pressures we need to provide the space in which small and large scale quality enhancement experiments can take place.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

If genuine institutional learning is to occur, then a reasonable proportion of these experiments must fail. So we must take calculated risks and at the same time we ensure that we properly document the lessons we learn from both the failures and the successes of different variations on our approaches to supported open learning. These lessons must be shared with the widest possible audience within the university. In tandem we must encourage the development of local groups concerned with quality enhancement. These may be focused on an area of the curriculum, a geographical region in which we operate, or an aspect of the way we support learners. In conclusion, then, we consider that if we are to continue to work towards the Open University's historic mission, then we must support, promote, and gather feedback from quality enhancement driven experimentation, innovation, and diversity in both the curriculum and in learner support.

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DEVELOPING QUALITY SYSTEMS IN THE FAST LANE: THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Michael Robertshaw

INTRODUCTION

Establishing good practice in quality assurance requires time and energy. With governments trying to get "more for less", educational institutions are finding it difficult to provide the necessary resources. This case study describes how The Open University of Hong Kong, formerly the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong (OLIHK) responded to the call to establish good quality, high standard distance education degrees with no real preparation time and minimum funding. This case study discusses the conflict that arises between the need to quickly demonstrate externally that quality systems are in place and the desire to allow staff to evolve systems that they "own".

Many of the quality systems at the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong had to be implemented quickly, and part of the approach we adopted was to import standards and quality systems from other established distance education providers. This approach was certainly a key factor in the speed with which OLIHK achieved recognition as a provider of quality education. However, the institute is now finding that importing systems can lead to problems of lack of ownership by participants and that the speed of development has left the institute with bureaucratic quality systems that fail to fully achieve their aims. This case study describes how the institute is now addressing these problems as it enters a period of stability.

External involvement has been a major feature of the OLIHK's development, as well as a major feature of its success. The institute has been visited by external accreditors four times since 1989. In addition, its quality assurance systems currently involve over 250 external peers. Given the institute's small number of academic staff, the contribution of some external accreditors has been crucial; for others, the institute has failed to identify suitable roles to justify their involvement. This case study explains why this conflict occurred and how the institute is attempting to strengthen the role of external accreditors.

The origins of OLIHK are important in understanding the causes of some of the problems with the quality systems, as described in Swift and Dhanarajan (1992). The original quality assurance systems are described in Dhanarajan and Hope (1991) and in Reid and Robertshaw (1992), with the latter article raising some concerns about the development of systems under tight resource constraints.

CONTEXT

The government established OLIHK in 1989 in response to demands for increased access to tertiary education for working adults and the need to retrain the workforce to meet the changing profile of the industrial and commercial sectors. The institute was given four months to prepare for its first intake into eight courses. Following its "user pays" policy, the government required that OLIHK become self-financing by 1993, with decreasing subvention until then. Although the institute was given the right to award degrees, the government insisted that OLIHK subject itself to external review at both the institute and the programme level.

Students need satisfy no requirements before registering, apart from the ability to pay fees, which have increased by 135% since 1989. Student numbers have grown from 4,200 to 20,000 in 1995, with more than 60 courses now on offer for 25 degrees. Sixty full-time academics are now assisted by about 750 part-time tutors, who are each responsible for supporting 30 to 35 students through tutorials, assignments, and telephone contact. The first 161 students graduated in 1993 and more than 1,000 students graduated in 1995. The first suite of degrees were externally validated in 1992, and the institute expected to be awarded self-accreditation status in mid-1996.

Pressure from students for the speedy development of programmes has been heavy. Students are eager to improve their qualifications and earning power quickly. Many hope to e migrate before the change of sovereignty to China in 1997 and educational background plays a major role in an individual's eligibility. Self-financing pressures the institute to seek new sources of students to maintain and improve its staff–student ratios. However, there is now greater competition from local and overseas institutions that are moving into the distance education marketplace with their own programmes in response to their own financial pressures.

In 1989 OLIHK faced a community unconvinced of the validity and credibility of open and distance education. Tertiary education then typified the closed nature of traditional "ivory towers". Existing standards were perceived as dependent on high entry standards, and the quality of conventional education was taken very much for granted. The introduction of an open educational system produced disbelief in many that anything of value could be produced. The institute's staff were aware of the need to address this misconception from the beginning. This led to the introduction of very elaborate systems for quality control, although the development of these systems was not always done in a structured, holistic manner.

THE ORIGINS OF THE OPEN LEARNING INSTITUTE OF HONG KONG'S QUALITY SYSTEMS

The institute has never properly identified what it means by the term *quality*. For understandable reasons, the emphasis has been more on speedily demonstrating that stringent quality systems exist rather than allowing staff to evolve a quality culture, identify an approach, and then develop appropriate efficient quality systems. The result has been an emphasis on "fitness for purpose" but with "whose purpose" never clearly identified. Certainly the need to satisfy external reviewers has been given a high priority, considering the circumstances. However, this external focus may have distracted the institute from fully considering the other aspects of quality management such as

efficiency and effectiveness. The approach adopted accepted the dangers of redundancy on the basis that it was better than having systems judged deficient. Insufficient attention was given to the "value to be added" by a new procedure or body and whether the gains justified the costs, which were considerable especially given the resource constraints.

It is important to set the record straight as to the causes of this approach. The institute had little time to plan before commencing operations and, once started, it had increasing numbers of courses and students to worry about. At the beginning, the institute was principally concerned with developing programmes and getting courses running. Financial restrictions ensured that new staff were appointed only when registrations justified it; there was no spare capacity for contemplation or forward planning. Most decisions were made by the small group of senior staff without real open debate. Many issues were addressed only when the need became urgent. This crisis management was not the fault of senior staff nor was the lack of debate a deliberate attempt to exclude. Under the extreme pressures faced in the early years, there seemed to be no alternative. However, the institute has developed quality systems that have more than satisfied external reviewers and produced programmes acceptable to students and other institutions despite this apparent recipe for disaster. Successfully establishing quality programmes so quickly has been due to three factors:

- borrowing from elsewhere;

- over-designing the quality assurance systems; and

- requesting external reviews.

WHY RE-INVENT THE WHEEL?

In proposing the OLIHK, its planners were aware that government would not provide the funding required to establish it in the conventional manner. Funds would not be forthcoming to allow for a long preparatory period for planning, course writing, or system development. Certainly student fee revenue would be insufficient to finance the staff and time required if courses were to be developed from scratch in the usual manner. The planners decided that the institute should import existing courses from other, internationally recognised distance education institutions whenever possible. In many subjects the adaptation of such courses would require little effort and the institute would gain publicly from the association with such institutions. Furthermore, by using assessment material from the "home" institution, standards could be guaranteed equivalent to international levels.

The British Open University (UKOU) was a key player during the early years, through the provision of many courses, consultants, and a number of senior staff. It was not surprising that when establishing quality assurance systems staff looked to the comparable UKOU systems for a starting point. A number of key policies, such as the general assessment policy, still closely resemble those in use at the UKOU. The advantage was that such policies, like their courses, had stood the test of time in an environment similar to that facing the institute. The UKOU's indirect influence on policies, like courses, is now diminishing as the institute matures and as the differences between the two institutions become greater; however, the importation of standards and quality were certainly key factors in the external reviews and in the speed at which the institute overcame many of the suspicions that existed in 1989.

As mentioned previously it was difficult to ensure that systems introduced were efficient or effective. The speed at which the institute grew allowed insufficient time to fully consider the consequences of new procedures and regulations. Perhaps subconsciously aware of this the institute took a very conservative approach to its systems, making them bureaucratic and centred on senior staff. Such systems overload staff even more; but it was believed that this was the price that had to be paid in order to demonstrate quality in the face of the public suspicion. Now that graduates are being produced, self-accreditation status seems guaranteed, and workload pressure has lessened, the institute is taking time to review its system and is asking questions like:

- Does this add any value?

- What are we trying to do and does this do it?

- Can this be simplified? and

- Can this be devolved?

EXTERNAL REVIEW

Originally Hong Kong polytechnics and colleges offering degrees were subject to regular inspection by the United Kingdom Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). In May 1989 a CNAA panel met with staff to review plans for the opening of the institute that autumn. The submission staff had prepared was based almost entirely on plans drawn up by the planning committee. The advice the panel gave has set the direction for the main quality assurance systems. In particular they strongly advocated the involvement of external peers in course selection, development, and adaptation, and in programme review. They also correctly questioned staff ownership of the plans, recognising the importance of this quality assurance.

In 1990 the newly created Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) took over from CNAA. OLIHK has received three further visits: institutional visits in 1990 and 1995, and programme validations in 1992. The main benefits from these came not only from the panels' recommendations on the quality systems but also from the internal preparations and the external publicity. As HKCAA itself recognises, visits are in part to encourage the institution to stop and take time to review itself. Given the pressures on the institute, this review was precisely what was required. During the hectic first six years, it is unlikely that the institute would have stopped and reflected without the threat of impending visits. On each occasion preparation of the submission revealed serious gaps in the systems, which were quickly patched, as was confusion among staff about policies and direction. At that time the principle concern was to satisfy the perceived requirements of the panels rather than to evolve an internal approach to qualify. This is not to say that staff were not concerned about quality, but that on a daily basis there were pressing, immediate problems to deal with and so acceptance of any reasonable, imported, or quick-fix systems was relatively easy to obtain.

The value of the external reviews does not mean that they were totally successful. Preparation for and participation in the visits required a lot of staff time and funds. The institute was not always convinced that what it gained justified this cost. On a number of occasions it was felt that the panels failed to properly address issues of internal concern. Panels were under the direction of HKCAA and the absence of input into this by OLIHK was a source of frustration. The main emphasis of external accreditation is to publicly investigate quality, which inhibits the influence that the institution can have on the panels' terms of reference. Interestingly, the success of the mock panels used in the

preparation for visits — a group of external, senior local academics — undertook a review of the institute's submission and interviewed staff on what they perceived as a major issue after being briefed by the institute. In all cases the mock panels identified serious problems that later "real" panels failed to.

The institute has made maximum use of the panels' findings to help convince the public that it is a high quality education provider of international standing. Each panel complimented the institute on its progress and commitment to quality. In 1990 these reports temporarily allayed government concerns about the institute's ability to manage its own affairs. In 1992 the validations provided a spur to enrolments, especially after the civil service announced equal treatment for OLIHK graduates. In 1995 the panel recommendation for self-accreditation will form the basis for an application for university status. HKCAA's involvement certainly has played a major role in reducing public fears about the quality and standard of education provided by the institute.

EXTERNAL PEERS

External peers feature at most stages of course and programmes development, validation, and revalidation. The associated systems were strongly influenced by the visiting panels and, consequently, it was perhaps more important that the externals be seen to be involved more than for achievable and useful roles to be defined for them. Certainly experience has shown that some of the bodies involved are often unable to add much value to the issues they consider. This was not through any lack of effort on the externals' part, but rather that they were not qualified to add to the issues presented to them and the institute had failed to prescribe a realistic role for them. The institute now recognises the weaknesses and considerable effort has recently gone into amending these bodies to ensure that they can add value.

An advisory peer group is required for each programme to advise on the curriculum and on the syllabi of courses. Group members are acknowledged experts from the other tertiary institutions, professional organisations, and employers as appropriate. Advisory peer groups are very effective during the design phase of programmes, for they provide a depth of experience that the small internal programme teams often lack. Certainly their presence provides a powerful weapon for the institute in its claim of equivalence for its programmes compared to those offered elsewhere. Unfortunately these groups were unable to be as effective once development commenced. Programme teams then busy with daily problems and under the pressure of heavy workloads in general failed to keep the group members involved, even on an annual basis. When meetings were held, the group members often had forgotten the context and the intent underlying the original decisions, understandable since they all work outside of distance education and have their own pressures.

Recently the institute undertook its first serious review of such groups. Clearly the lack of regular, intimate involvement with the programmes is crucial. Since little value is expected from the groups in their current form, the incentive for programme teams to use them is low. The perceived benefits do not appear to justify the costs. In defining *eligibility for membership* the institute originally opted to be conservative, excluding externals involved at the course level because of concern about conflict of interest — at the course level an external may feel reluctant to criticise the syllabus proposed by the group that he or she had contributed to. The revised policy is to allow, if not encourage, the appointment of such externals (for example, external examiners) to the groups. Such individuals are always involved and have direct experience of what distance education

involves. It is expected that their experience will enable the groups to make a greater and more effective contribution to annual reviews of programme development. The value of their contributions are now seen to more than balance earlier concerns. Of course, the effectiveness of these groups will still depend upon the willingness of programme teams to make full use of them — a challenge when recommendations of the group can conflict with the intentions of the team.

Visiting panels were particularly concerned that there should also be an external presence in the internal validation and revalidation system for programmes. The institute created the programme review and validation committee, upon which at least three eminent external academics sit. In theory this body reviews the final submission for each programme and recommends whether the programme should be offered. Faced with a wide diversity of subject areas, the externals are not normally qualified to question the curriculum in detail. The problems of intimate knowledge of distance education and regular involvement also apply for these externals. The committee has often to resort to simply checking that protocol has been followed in the use of peer groups. HKCAA has expressed concern about the effect that self-accreditation has on programme review, as it effectively removes the obligation to seek external expert review, especially in light of this committee's current membership. The institute's response has been to require the appointment of an eminent expert as external programme assessor to serve as a temporary member of the committee when it considers the validation or revalidation of a programme. This individual will undertake a major inspection of the submission from the programme team on the committee's behalf, including discussions with students, tutors, external examiners, and peer group members. The assessor will then be in a position to lead the discussion at the committee meeting, with the permanent external members there to provide an institutional perspective and continuity.

At the course level, externals play three roles: developer, assessor, and examiner. In a number of areas it is not possible to import whole courses because of cultural and social differences or because of the lack of suitable material. Sometimes a course is available but requires major adaptation or it has to be written from scratch. There have been some attempts to have internal staff write material, but realistically the institute does not have the resources to free an academic for sufficient time to write material of the required standard or quality; therefore individuals from other institutions are contracted to prepare courses. Out-sourcing has the advantage of obtaining a subject expert for the writing, who is not always available internally, but the approach has had its problems. Although fully briefed on the requirements by instructional designers, many course developers discover that they have not fully appreciated the time and effort required to produce good quality distance education material and development falls behind schedule, or worse. For example, Hong Kong has no history of quality distance education and many developers are experiencing this mode for the first time. Seeking overseas developers with experience in distance education introduces other problems: isolation, communication, and ignorance of local conditions. Attempts have recently been made to improve the communication between the internal course team and the developer, but inevitably this places further strain on the internal academics and course designers.

An external course assessor is appointed to assist the institute in determining whether a course reaches the required standard. This individual must be a recognised expert in the subject, although he or she may not have any experience in distance education. Initially the institute required the assessor to provide an opinion on the final version of the course, although he or she was encouraged to contribute to the intermediate stages of development. In a number of cases, however, this approach failed to prevent the assessor raising strong objections to the final version. With the reorganisation of course development to improve communication, the system now requires all developmental stages to pass through the assessor for comment. Responses to any of the assessor's

concerns must be recorded for consideration at the course approval stage. The institute is faced with the need to handle the assessment of the quality of the distance teaching provided by a course and must rely on overloaded internal staff.

The presentation of each course must have an external examiner, who is responsible for overseeing the standard of the assessment and the final grading of students. This externally centred system has always worked well. Most externals are familiar with what is required of them, although some transition is required to oversee at the course level rather than the programme level. The quality of reporting by externals does vary, and procedures have been adjusted in an attempt to address this problem, although the key player is the internal academic responsible for the course (the co-ordinator). Often the quality of the external work is a refection of the quality of the briefing with the co-ordinator and regular communication between the two.

One of the problems the institution faces in using external peers is locating the large number required. In 1995 the institute had 250 externals in various forms, all of whom are expected to be of senior rank and most local. Although there are five universities, the size of departments reflects the population of six million. With the need to regularly replace externals (for example, every five years for external examiners), finding suitable replacements is likely to become a daunting task. The willingness of individual academics to help the institute has been a major factor in establishing its credibility. The association with so many senior academics from "proper" tertiary institutions reassures much of the community and quietens critics.

INTERNAL REVIEW

An essential element for any quality conscious institution is regular review of its systems — not the type of review under pressure that comes with external panel visits, but ones that involve consideration over time and revision on the basis of reflection and internal debate. As systems and courses stabilise, more time and energy has become available, leading to major overhauls of a number of the quality assurance systems. The institute is now striving to take a more structured and holistic approach to the management of quality. In particular, it now seeks to simplify, to increase participation and ownership, and to raise the awareness of quality issues. This section of the case study will concentrate on how this change is affecting some of the institute's systems.

At the programme level, the institute has still not actively addressed "fitness for use" in terms of the acceptability of its qualifications by employers. Ignorance of the value of distance education qualifications is still common in the Hong Kong, and graduates report that employers still consider an OLIHK degree as second, or even third rate. Even top government officials still make statements that without high entry requirements it is not possible to guarantee high exit standards. The lack of resources, the emphasis on teaching rather than research, and its youth means that the institute's public profile is still relatively low in comparison to the universities. The institute is currently building its case for university status, which would further enhance its standing. Eventually, however, it will be the performance of OLIHK graduates themselves that will transform public opinion; in the meantime the institute needs to find ways to further promote its degrees through professional recognition and contact with employers.

Course presentation provides one example of how the original quality assurance systems led to ritualisation in execution through over-design and a failure to widen ownership. At the end of each presentation the co-ordinator is required to submit a report on all aspects

of the course. Concern about the quality of the course reports led to a detailed prescription of what the report should contain. However, although the reports increased in length, most of their content was descriptive, despite the principal need for critical analysis to seek ways of improving courses. In a display of lack of faith in the value of this system, busy co-ordinators were content to "follow orders" and get the job done as quickly as possible by ensuring that something was entered under each of the prescribed headings. Aware of the difficulty of expecting the academic board to effectively review scores of reports, each semester the task of providing a summary of all reports was given to two senior staff, who were expected to report before the end of the following semester. These reports became a bottle-neck as their number grew to more than 70 each semester and senior staff became over-committed. Summary reports were provided more than a semester late and again tended to be descriptive. As any proposed improvements to courses required the board's approval, they were not being implemented until after a further two or three presentations. The system was fine in theory, and consumed a lot of paper and effort, but failed through its inability to establish itself within the culture existing at the different levels of participation or to take into account participants' workloads.

The original reporting system failed to demonstrate trust at the co-ordinator level, as most staff were new to tertiary and distance education. By centralising review at the senior levels two groups of stakeholders — the programme team and school committee— were bypassed. These two groups have the greatest motivation for ensuring that the course presentations are critically reviewed and that proposals for improvement are developed and implemented. The system has now been overhauled on the basis that such reviews are best considered by those directly involved, descriptive information actually adds little, critical analysis must be emphasised, and the workloads of all involved must be taken into consideration. A new shorter format for reports has been produced, which encourages co-ordinators to structure reports according to the character of the course and to the type of problems that were encountered. Reports now go to the programme team, who assess the quality of the report, require amendment if necessary, and consider its contents in the context of the programme in which the course features. A summary of all reports with recommendations for improvements requiring approval and assessment on the effectiveness of previous changes is sent to the dean, together with only those reports on courses in their first or second presentations. Again, a quality check on the reports is undertaken by the dean. All team reports are then considered by the school committee, which now has the authority to approve most improvements previously requiring academic board's consideration. The committee's report on all programmes plus only those reports on courses in their first presentation are sent to a committee of deans for consideration. This body identifies any issues of institutional concern and prepares a final summary report for the board.

The new system encourages quality reports through peer review, requires judgements on presentations by those most closely concerned with them, concentrates on only the first two presentations of a course since most problems occur during these two presentations, demonstrates trust in programme teams and school committees, contains a system of checks and balances to ensure that an appropriate level of review is being undertaken, and results in a substantial reduction in the effort required by senior staff and the board. The key element is trust, which was not a characteristic of the original systems.

Another important factor in quality management is staff training. Staff must be trained to ensure that they have the skills required by the quality systems and these skills must be enhanced regularly to ensure that they can improve the quality of their work. Staff training is another area in which the institute is now trying to address an earlier deficiency. When a new co-ordinator arrives, he or she often finds that courses were in mid-presentation or that extensive preparatory work awaits their arrival. With no slack in

staffing and tight budgets, only minimal resources were allocated to training new co-ordinators or upgrading the skills of current staff. The limited training on course presentation took place on the job and was provided on an ad hoc basis by fellow co-ordinators. The high quality of course presentation is more an indication of the enthusiasm and professionalism of the staff than of a carefully structured training programme. The institute is now in the process of producing a training manual on the central aspects of co-ordination. It will allow the new academic to arrive at any point during a presentation, by identifying tasks to be done each month and by directing the staff member to the relevant section. Training will still depend on an experienced mentor; however, he or she will only check the new co-ordinator's work and indicate any variations in practice specific to a course, programme, or school. The intentions are to extend the training package with videos on distance education, the history and structure of the institution, and scholarly activity and research in the OLIHK context.

THE QUALITY IMPROVEMENT TEAM

As deficiencies in the institute's original approach to quality assurance became more apparent, it was decided to create a quality improvement team with specific responsibility for reviewing quality across the institute and for fostering a quality culture in which individuals would take responsibility for quality rather than relying on formal systems and procedures. This body was given the job of overseeing quality in all areas, both academic and administrative. Its primary role was to assist sections of the institute to establish good practice in assessing and improving existing quality systems. In addition, it reviews the quality systems that lie across a number of sections; for example, review of course presentations. The existence of the team raised concerns in the institute that it was to be the "quality police" of management and so care was taken to minimise this threat. Members of the first team were deliberately chosen from middle management and, when visiting individual sections, the emphasis is on assisting the section, rather than auditing it, on the basis that ownership of the conclusions of the visit must lie with the section.

Once a project has been identified, a team is established using staff members from other units and, where appropriate, external experts. To ensure that all activities of the project team are transparent, a member of the unit to be visited, but from a different section, is included on the team. This also provides the team with access to information on the unit when it meets without the section and widens the experience of such visits across the unit.

The team meets with the section to agree on terms of reference and to establish the way forward. The next step is normally for the section to produce brief documentation describing its operations and detailing its own critical review of the quality of operations, recommending ways to improve quality. The team responds to the document, suggests ways in which the section's approach could become more customer-oriented, and raises issues that the section may have omitted or minimised. When agreement has been reached on how the section should proceed, the team produces a report for the section and for management. In this way the section shows the institute the quality of its programmes based on an independent review and can gain support for any proposals to change its operations. The objective is that after the team "leaves" the section will continue this process of self-review.

The quality improvement team has now completed its pilot year and is offering recommendations as to how it can improve its own operations. Although created with the approval of the academic and administrative boards, the team lacks official

representation on either board, making reporting and involvement difficult. A strong commitment by top management is essential to the success of any attempt to establish a quality-centred culture in the face of strong acceptance of the status quo. Although this support was provided on creating the team it is now felt that the commitment to quality needs to be demonstrated regularly through greater participation by senior management in the team's activities, which would facilitate communication with the two boards.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is always easy to criticise with hindsight. It could be argued that management would have been better to have insisted on a slower pace of development to allow time to train staff, evolve quality systems, and encourage an ethos of "getting it right the first time". But a slower pace of development would have required "quality" time, something that none of the customers would allow or could afford. Government wanted an expansion in adult education quickly and at minimal cost; students wanted to graduate quickly; external reviewers wanted quality systems in place immediately; and competitors were always ready to take over the market. OLIHK has made tremendous progress in a very short time compared to similar projects. It has shown that it can be done and that there are risks. Its solutions to questions of quality during the first few years may not have been the best, but the solutions did ensure that students were provided with a high quality education of international standing. Now that the institute has time for reflection, OLIHK is trying to amend its practices in line with good quality management.

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QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE PROVISION OF LIBRARY SERVICES IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Kate Seaborne

INTRODUCTION

The University of Victoria offers undergraduate and graduate level distance education courses and degree completion programmes in child and youth care, education, nursing, public administration, and social work for professionals in British Columbia and other western Canadian provinces. Fiscal restraint is forcing a re-examination of the well-established models for the delivery of these programmes. Concerns have been raised about maintaining the costs of full-service delivery and administrators are asking, "What do learners really need?" Overall, these pressures raise questions among programme managers, faculty, and senior administrators about the nature and effectiveness of the learning environment that they provide. There is an interest, therefore, in developing frameworks for assessing and reconsidering the quality of the services provided.

The recent focus on "quality" in higher and distance education suggests that many educational institutions are beginning to take up the goal of ensuring quality service. But what does quality mean in an educational context? Nunan and Calvert (1992, 31) note that "the issue of quality is often raised in conjunction with concerns about expansion, structural change and fiscal constraints. In this context, the term quality signifies approval, commendation or satisfaction– in short, it provides a means of approbation". Quality means different things to different people as Moran (1995), Cowan (1994), Robinson (1994), Nunan and Calvert (1992), Freeman (1991), and others have pointed out. Each of the stakeholders of an academic programme of distance higher education (students, faculty, administrators, employers, and government) is likely to have different views about what constitutes quality. Inevitably, therefore, any discussion of quality assurance must take into consideration the lack of consensus evident in the literature and the workplace about what quality service actually looks like. Fortunately, defining quality assurance is less problematic. Freeman (1991, 26) says that the term "quality assurance carries the implication of preventing failure. The emphasis is on 'right first time' … and is suggestive of a pro-active process". Attempting to synthesise a variety of definitions of quality assurance in higher and distance education, Warren, McManus, and Nnazor (1994, 4) describe it as "a continuing, active and integrative process for maintaining and improving" the delivery of programmes and services. Robinson (1994, 187) defines it as "the set of activities that an organisation undertakes to ensure that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or service". This definition accords closely with parallel definitions drawn from the fields of public and business administration. For example, in the context of the Federal Public Service of Canada, a report from Statistics Canada (1995) defines quality assurance as "practices that are intended to improve or maintain" service delivery in the public sector.

This case study will examine a client-focused service unit, INFOLINE Library Services at the University of Victoria, which bears a reputation for excellence in its delivery of services but has no formal quality assurance system. I will first provide some background on the inception of INFOLINE services and the evolution of its mandate and financing over the last 15 years. Drawing on documentary evidence, Robinson's (1994) framework for quality assurance systems, and two substantial meetings with INFOLINE services staff, I then go on to analyse the degree to which INFOLINE services has in place key elements of a "quality assurance" system. These elements are:

- a quality service policy and plan;

- standards for service;

- functions and procedures required for service delivery;

- documentation of procedures;

- monitoring of service quality; and

- involvement of users.

THE INFOLINE LIBRARY SERVICE

Background

In 1980, the University of Victoria's Division of Continuing Studies established a service unit to provide library support for students who were enrolled in distance education programmes offered by the Faculty of Education and the Schools of Child and Youth Care, Nursing, Public Administration, and Social Work. The division's goal was to make the full resources of the university libraries easily accessible to students enrolled in the distance programmes. To this end, the unit was placed in a collaborative relationship with Distance Education Services, which provided curriculum development consultation and technical and production support to the university's programmes of distance learning.

The unit, known as INFOLINE, was initially staffed by two library employees: a librarian and a library assistant. Students could access the staff through a toll-free phone number. Books and articles requested by students were sent out by post or courier.

In its first year, INFOLINE served 171 distant students out of a total of 765; handled a total of 397 requests for materials or information; and sent out a total of 2,210 items (articles or books). Over the first decade of its operation, INFOLINE expanded its services, making the full resources of the university libraries, including the services of a librarian, readily accessible through the telephone, the fax machine, or electronic mail to students enrolled in the university's distance programmes. Fifteen years later, INFOLINE has developed a reputation for the fast and efficient delivery of library materials and research resources to University of Victoria students scattered throughout the province. The unit has grown in size to four full time staff, one part time staff member, and one temporary employee and occupies its own office within the library. In 1994–95, the unit served 908 students out of a total of 5,849, handled a total of 1,851 requests, and sent out a total of 11,468 items. Several factors have contributed to this increase in use:

- student enrolments are on the increase for individual courses and for degree programmes;

- more courses are available in each of the distance programmes;

- course writers are encouraged to design assignments that emphasise the use of library resources; and

- student users rate the service highly and recommend it to other distant learners (Seaborne 1995; Brown and Molzahn 1994).

Paying for INFOLINE

From the outset, the INFOLINE unit's budget allocation included salaries for library staff and casual help. It also covered the costs associated with a toll-free telephone line; postage and courier costs; photocopying costs; charges for searches of commercial on-line data bases; and charges for printing information brochures and administrative forms; as well as travel costs associated with visits to off-campus sites.

By 1990, as concerns about the rising costs of the library service grew, a plan was developed to implement fee-paying services for non-university clients. A set of unit charges was developed for various services; for example, the loan of a monograph from the university libraries, the provision of a copy of a periodical article, a reference, or a literature search.

Since 1990, INFOLINE has negotiated a number of contracts with outside clients, including significant relationships with the provincial government's Ministry of Education and North Island College on Vancouver Island. As anticipated, these contracts have proven to be very beneficial to the university and to the INFOLINE service. The contract revenues have cross-subsidised the traditional services, thereby reducing the university's contribution to INFOLINE's non-salary operating budget. Two-thirds of the non-salary costs of providing the service have, since 1990, been covered by revenue generated from the external contracts and the remaining one-third has been provided through a grant from Continuing Studies. They ensure that INFOLINE's budget can be sustained at a level which enables the unit to continue providing full service to distant learners. In addition, the contract librarian and library assistants who are hired to deal with the new clients provide assistance with regular INFOLINE business as their time permits. Unfortunately, in 1995, the Ministry of Education notified INFOLINE that planned cutbacks in its internal programmes would result in a reduced budget for the library services contract. INFOLINE is also anticipating that the North Island College contract may be reduced as the college increases its permanent collection of library holdings. It is clear that cutbacks in these service contracts will affect the unit's ability to continue to provide the same level of service to distant students. Forecasts of cutbacks in external contracts, coupled with parallel reductions in funding by the Division of Continuing Studies, have forced senior administrators to begin to ask hard questions about the cost and the significance (to students) of a number of services, including INFOLINE.

QUALITY ASSURANCE AT INFOLINE

Library Services

On the face of it, INFOLINE Library Services appears to have provided an innovative and widely appreciated set of services since its inception in 1980. But what procedures and systems did it have in place to provide assurances of service quality?

Documentary data provided a context in which to ground a study of INFOLINE's approach to quality assurance. The co-ordinator of INFOLINE has published several reports

describing its service (1993, 1995). They provide historical details and statistical data on the volume of the service. A strategic plan, developed by the staff as part of the Division of Continuing Education's strategic planning process in 1991 and updated in 1995, defines the unit's values and goals. Brochures, request forms, and other informational documents illustrate the ways in which the service is described to users. Surveys of users and interviews with students provided a range of clients' perspectives of the service.

Semi-structured group discussions with the INFOLINE staff provided the opportunity to explore their perspectives on the nature of their service and on elements of quality assurance. In co-operation with the INFOLINE director, I used Robinson's (1994) framework for assessing a quality assurance system to develop a set of interrelated questions to guide four hours of discussion. The following questions were posed at two meetings in December 1995:

- Does INFOLINE have an internal policy on quality service? Has this policy been translated into a plan?

- Has INFOLINE set standards for the delivery of library service? Are all the INFOLINE staff aware of these standards? Are these standards achievable? reasonable? measurable? Are the users (learners, faculty, and external clients) aware of the standards?

- Has INFOLINE identified the key procedures that need to be in place to achieve the standards set for library service? Is the learner the starting point for some of them?

- Are the procedures for library service clearly documented? Are they readable and user-friendly? Does everyone who needs to know about INFOLINE's procedures have access to information about them?

- What kind of monitoring system has INFOLINE designed to reach its standards for library service delivery? Do these monitoring systems check whether standards are being met and procedures followed? Does monitoring result in improved performance of a review of practice or a reappraisal of standards?

- Have the users (learners, faculty, and external clients) been involved in setting and monitoring these standards?

Robinson's (1994) framework for examining quality assurance systems includes several additional elements that seemed relevant only to organisations already explicitly committed to the operation of a quality assurance system. For example, the framework recommends that an organisation take into account the degree to which staff are involved in the development of such a system, the type of training provided to staff and how that training is linked to quality assurance, and the costs of implementing and maintaining quality assurance activities. Since INFOLINE has not explicitly adopted a quality assurance system, these elements were not included in the discussion.

The unit's perceptions of how it functions to provide library support to distant learners and external clients is summarised below. Elements of what Robinson (1994) describes as a quality assurance system that have been incorporated into INFOLINE's approach to the delivery of library services are identified. All quotations are drawn from the transcripts of the interviews.

A Quality Service Policy and Plan

Organisations with a quality assurance system will have a policy on quality with which all staff are familiar and will have translated this policy into a practical plan (Robinson 1994).

INFOLINE does not have an explicit, formal policy for "quality service" or a practical plan to guide delivery of service but, based on the staff's collective experiences in dealing with clients of the university library, they share the belief that users want:

- rapid delivery of requested books and other resources;

- a sufficient amount of material or information to be useful to the user; and

- a quick response to the user on the status of the request, if we are going to have any difficulty in filling it.

Although the unit lacks a formal policy and plan for providing quality service, they say that the goal statements formulated for their strategic plan reflect their implicit policy on quality and provide the framework for their plan of service delivery:

> *GOALS*
>
> - To maintain the quality of the distance education programmes by providing or facilitating access to appropriate library resources as required.
>
> - To provide all users with effective mechanisms to request and receive library materials.
>
> - To enable [University of Victoria] distance students to receive library services comparable to those provided to regular students on-campus.
>
> - To provide a level of service that will encourage external clients to continue their contractual arrangements with INFOLINE for library services.
>
> - To monitor the library services provided to distance students and fee-based clients and to utilise formal and informal evaluation procedures to determine the effectiveness of specific services and the need for any change or enhancement in service level.
>
> (Continuing Studies Library Service: *Strategic Plan*, 1995)

If the unit were to adopt a formal quality assurance system, it could reformulate these components into policy and planning statements.

Standards for service

An organisation with a quality assurance system specifies and defines reasonable, achievable, and measurable standards for key activities and procedures and communicates them to everyone concerned (Robinson 1994).

INFOLINE has not developed formal standards for service, but staff describe the value statements in their strategic plan as the equivalent of a set of standards:

> *VALUES*
>
> 1. Developing and maintaining credibility with all users by providing prompt and responsive service:
>
> - requests for library materials from distance students and fee-based clients are filled as quickly as possible;
>
> - all enquiries for library information or materials are acknowledged and given thorough attention;
>
> - individual users are always informed of the status of their requests;

- requests from individual users take priority over other duties and tasks.

2. Taking a proactive approach to service:

- library needs are anticipated and mechanisms are developed to fill those needs as required;

(Continuing Studies Library Service: *Strategic Plan*, 1995)

The staff believe that their informal standards for practice (as described in the value statements) are reasonable and achievable under normal conditions. When they encounter problems in achieving them, they tend to perceive the problem to be outside the span of their control:

> whether we can supply what they want depends on whether we own it, whether it is on the shelf or whether we can get it through the inter-library loan office. And as much as we can hustle at this end, whether we can deliver in good time, in the end, depends on how quickly other library staff wrap the materials for mailing and on the effectiveness of the priority post service. (Staff interviews 1995)

On the other hand, they are not sure how these standards could be easily measured. They recognised that an examination of service delivery cannot be separated from the individuals who take part in the transaction, in this case, the INFOLINE staff and their clients. They also realise that each transaction is unique and is likely to be judged by the individual client's perception of service quality.

INFOLINE communicates its service standards to its student clients through brochures and library services information that is incorporated in course materials. Fee-paying clients are informed of these standards via intra-agency memos and other documentation. This example illustrates how the standard of timeliness is addressed in the brochure for student users:

> The INFOLINE staff attempt to provide as prompt service as possible. In most cases, your request will be handled with 48 hours of receipt. …The average time to receive material from INFOLINE is one week. … there may be delays due to the mails or the unavailability of certain items. If you have not had a response from INFOLINE within two weeks of making your request, please call 1-800-563-9494 to check on the status of your requests. (INFOLINE brochure 1995)

The unit has also produced a video for student users, which they hope will dramatise its service standards through a case study of a distant student using INFOLINE to help her research an assignment. The video introduces the library staff and illustrates how requests are handled:

> The idea for the video has been developing since we saw from a couple of surveys that new students feel quite shy about requesting library assistance. We hope it will demystify the process of requesting library material so that they will feel very comfortable about calling in a request.

The video will be distributed to new learners in a variety of ways: as part of an introductory package of information from the individual programme areas, as a component of courses with a library assignment, and through INFOLINE on a loan basis.

If INFOLINE chooses to implement a formal quality assurance system, it will need to develop a set of standards that specify and define how library service will be delivered. The first step they would take would be to diagram their procedures for delivering library service. A table or chart helps to depict the complete set of procedures that need to be managed (Robinson 1994; Lovelock 1992). Working from the diagram, the staff can develop specifications and definitions for standards of delivery which they believe are reasonable and achievable given their working situation, and which they also believe can be measured. For example, a standard for service to distance education students might read: "a student's request for library materials will be moved through the INFOLINE office in 48 hours from the date of request, or the student will be contacted". As noted earlier, the INFOLINE staff have indicated that, under normal conditions, they can turn around a student's request within 48 hours of receipt, so this example would be perceived as reasonable and achievable. This standard could also be measured by having staff keep details of each transaction using a management tool such as a record of activity. This tool permits them to measure themselves against the standards they have set for library service and develop their own plans for self-improvement, if required.

Key Functions and Procedures Required for Service Delivery

An organisation with a quality assurance system has identified and analysed the key functions and procedures required to achieve the standards it has set and has established the clients of the service as the starting point in designing at least some of these functions and procedures (Robinson 1994).

Through its strategic planning process, INFOLINE has done a thorough, though informal, job of identifying and analysing its functions and the procedures required to achieve the standards it has set for itself. The key functions are identified in its strategic plan's mandate statement. These are to provide

> library support for off-campus and distance credit, certificate and diploma programs sponsored by the Division of Continuing Studies

and

> … fee-based library services for external organizations, institutions and individuals.

INFOLINE's procedures are based on their assumptions about the user's needs, their collective experience in the delivery of library services, and the values they have articulated in their strategic plan. To a considerable extent, the needs of the clients have been taken as the starting point in identifying and analysing the unit's functions and procedures. The staff believe that the procedures they have designed for service delivery reflect an accurate analysis of user's needs for library service. INFOLINE's procedures for service are summarised below.

The telephone is still the principal medium of access to the INFOLINE staff but, over time, the means of access have been expanded to include regular mail, fax transmission and, more recently, electronic mail. Requests received by telephone are recorded on an answering machine in response to a message on the machine that instructs the user to list the library material they require or to describe the type of information needed for research purposes. A library assistant transcribes the telephone messages each working day. Users are only called back if there is a query about their requests. The requests for specific titles are handled by a library assistant, and requests for reference assistance or literature searches are passed on to a librarian. Fax and e-mail requests are passed on to the library assistant or a librarian, depending upon the type of request. As noted earlier,

the unit's objective is to successfully address every request within a 48 hour period. Most material is sent by mail or private courier directly to the student's home address. Small quantities of articles are occasionally sent to students by fax.

Any circulating book in the University of Victoria libraries can be loaned to users. Loan periods are the same as those given to on-campus users. INFOLINE also has a large office collection of uncatalogued materials to support the distance programmes, including duplicate copies of books, articles, and audio-visual items designated as supplementary materials for the various courses. Items from this collection are sent on short-term loan to individual distance students as required. Periodical articles are copied on demand for users from the library collections. Interlibrary loan requests are placed on their behalf when necessary.

In response to requests for reference or subject assistance, literature searches are conducted using the appropriate CD-ROM or on-line databases. Due to the short deadlines in most undergraduate courses, the librarian usually selects materials from the search results to be sent to the distant student. Printouts from the database searches are sent directly to graduate students and provincial government clients so that they can select their own references.

The staff believe that most of the procedural problems they experience lie outside the scope of the unit's responsibility. For example, they describe typical student complaints as revolving

> around seeing books on recommended reading lists and not being able
> to get them from us. The typical situation is that students will see a
> book and call for it and five other students are on the list to get the
> book ahead of them and there are only two copies. And that's not our
> fault. The program area is really at fault here because they are
> responsible for providing us with additional copies of any books (one
> for every 10 students registered) that they put on the reading list.

In this case, INFOLINE has developed a procedure to deal with the situation but depends on the academic area to ensure that it is followed and the staff must bear the brunt of student dissatisfaction if it is not. An analysis of this problem from a quality assurance perspective might lead the staff to redesign the procedure they have established with the academic units to deal with the provision of multiple copies of recommended readings.

Documentation of Procedures

An organisation with a quality assurance system in place will have documented its procedures for delivery of service. The documentation will be clear and explicit in its description of procedures, it will represent practice, and the information will be presented in a readable and user-friendly format (Robinson 1994).

The INFOLINE staff are currently developing their first procedures manual as a reference resource. They recognise that, while the current staff is familiar with procedures, it would be very difficult to train new staff without a written discussion of procedures for reference. However, they point out that the procedures manual can be only a guide because so many of the decisions they make about trying to address learners' requests are subjective:

> only from years and years of experience can you learn when you're not
> providing sufficient materials. It is not that six items are not sufficient

and seven are. We use judgments every day in what we provide. We have no hard and fast procedures.

If INFOLINE were to adopt a formal quality assurance system, it would need to design a procedures manual that clearly defined the unit's standards for service delivery and described how these would be addressed and measured.

Monitoring Service Quality

An organisation with a quality assurance system in place has set up systematic monitoring mechanisms to check whether standards are being met and procedures followed. The data collected via the monitoring mechanisms are disseminated to everyone concerned and are used to improve performance, to review practice, or to reassess current standards (Robinson 1994).

INFOLINE does not have a regular monitoring system in place. At present, the only formal monitoring is done with those users who request reference assistance (for example, information about a specific topic). Forms that ask for an assessment of the reference service are sent out with the material and the onus is on the users to return them. Apart from this one monitoring mechanism, the unit relies on users' unsolicited comments on the basic library service (for example, requests for books or articles that are listed as supplementary reading in the course materials) to determine whether they are achieving the informal standards they have set for service delivery:

> we assume that if we've given the users what they've been looking for then the only variable is time. Did they get it in a timely manner so that they could use it? …We assume that the user will get back to us if the request is late or if they didn't get what they asked for. And over the years, the number of people who have complained about not having received materials is very small. We do get delays because of the mail service but that seems to be the most troublesome issue for them.

Unsolicited comments come to them in two ways: either directly to the INFOLINE office by note or phone call or indirectly through learners' comments on evaluations of distance education courses and the services that support course delivery.

In 1993, INFOLINE surveyed its student users about the effectiveness of the delivery procedures and found that, on the whole, learners were very satisfied with the way their requests were handled. Student reviews of the INFOLINE service collected for other studies of the University of Victoria's distance education programmes bear out these findings (Seaborne 1995; Brown and Molzahn 1994). A user satisfaction study conducted with employees of the Ministry of Education determined that there were high levels of satisfaction with the contracted services provided by INFOLINE (Ministry of Education 1995).

The unit believes that it would do a more comprehensive job of monitoring the quality of their service delivery if it had more time and more staff. If INFOLINE were to adopt a quality assurance system, it would need to attach monitoring mechanisms to all its procedures and add responsibilities for data collection and analysis to existing job descriptions. The staff would also need to hold regular sessions in which they could review the collected data and use it to assess standards, procedures, and practice.

Involvement of Users

An organisation with a formal quality assurance system involves the staff and the clients in setting and monitoring standards for service delivery. Staff are also involved as "internal clients" in setting and monitoring standards for their work environment (Robinson 1994).

Through the strategic planning process, INFOLINE staff have been involved in identifying the values and goals that define the library service and in developing the procedures that guide its practice. In this way, the staff are implicitly involved in setting standards for service delivery and in creating a work environment that supports their beliefs about practice. Clients have not been directly involved in these processes.

If INFOLINE were to adopt a formal quality assurance system, it would need to find strategies for incorporating the views of its clients in developing standards, which could prove challenging for a service unit dealing with clients at a distance. Interactive communications technologies such as teleconferencing or computer conferencing, however, would provide a means by which clients and INFOLINE staff could come together in focus group discussions. These sessions would enable staff to increase their understanding of clients' needs, test assumptions about existing standards, and solicit the clients' views about service quality.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Any organisation that focuses on service quality is likely to have put in place, implicitly, elements of a quality assurance system, as was clearly the case with INFOLINE. The unit has spent considerable time identifying and analysing the procedures required to achieve the standards set out in its strategic plan. And although the unit has not, to date, regularly monitored all procedures to ensure that standards are being met, the solicited and unsolicited feedback it does receive suggests that, overall, users are very satisfied with the quality of service they receive from INFOLINE. The staff discussions about quality assurance systems also illustrate the unit's collective willingness to turn the process of reviewing standards and procedures into an opportunity to look critically at what they do. In a discussion about procedures, for example, they focused on a routine that they have established with academic programmes to supply additional copies of books on recommended reading lists. They rely on the programmes to bring these lists to their attention and to provide required copies and, frequently, the programmes neglect to provide the materials until students call for them. Discussion of this matter has caused the unit to reassess the procedure and to open discussions with the programmes on how to improve communications on this matter. Equally as clear, an organisation like INFOLINE could divert significant resources to the implementation of a full-blown system of quality assurance, with consequent costs and benefits. On the benefit side, a comprehensive monitoring of standards and procedures would increase communication between the unit and its clients as well as prompt regular reviews of practice and reassessment of standards. On the cost side, implementation of a quality assurance system would require a significant reorganisation of the staff's roles and responsibilities in order to incorporate monitoring tasks. Given the small number of staff and the volume of activity, they would be hard pressed to add additional monitoring tasks while maintaining their current standards of service.

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