

Quality Assurance for Distance Education in the Digital Age



Keynote Address, Distance Education Programmes in a Digital Age: Good Practice Guide Workshop hosted by SAIDE and CHE

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Transcript

I am delighted to be at this review workshop for the QA Guidelines developed by SAIDE and I am very grateful to the SAIDE Director Ms Jenny Glennie and the organisers for the invitation. Jenny Glennie has been a very distinguished member representing South Africa on the Board of Governors of the Commonwealth of Learning and has been a consistent supporter of COL in several activities and we are very grateful for her valuable contributions. Thank you, Jenny.

My topic today is ‘QA for DE in a digital age’. After a brief review of the context of HE today, I will look at the trends in QA in Higher Education in the last decade. I will share with you some of the ways in which COL has responded to the challenges of QA and provided support to Member States. Finally, I will conclude with two emerging areas, OER and MOOCs, which will require QA agencies to embrace new perspectives and protocols.

But first the context. In the previous decade we have seen an unprecedented demand for higher education. In 2007, there were 150 million tertiary students globally, a 53% increase over 2000. We find that the number has increased to 165 million in 2012 with an estimate that this is expected to rise to 263 million in 2025.

If we look at the African region, we find that tertiary enrolments have doubled between 2003 to 2011. How do we ensure that quality does not become a casualty to quantity?

Second, the issue of globalization and the mobility of students. In the decade starting in 2000, the number of international students has grown from 2 to 3.6 million, an increase of nearly 80%.

Where do African students go for higher education? Interestingly, the top three destinations are France, followed by South Africa and then the UK.

This rising demand for HE has given rise to a range of non-traditional providers—private, cross-border, online and distance education institutions. Private provision has been the fastest growing sector globally, accounting for nearly 46% of all tertiary enrolments globally.

In Africa DRC and Gabon account for the largest presence of private provision followed by Mozambique and Botswana. Who regulates the private providers? Where do students complain in the case of deficient services/content? What are the standards of curriculum, learner support, assessment and certification? What of faculty quality?

The developments in ICT have had a major impact on the way we teach and learn.

There is an increasing trend towards online learning. In 2010, 6.1 million students were taking at least one online course accounting for 31% of all US Higher Education students. This Slide gives you an idea of this increasing trend. As technologies become more accessible both developing and developed countries will move towards more online and distance provision.

Africa is the most dynamic eLearning market on the planet. In the last two years, dozens of countries in Africa have embarked on new government backed initiatives to integrate learning technology into education and training. Africa has an average of 15 percent of online enrolments with Senegal leading at 30% followed by Zambia at 27.

How have these developments influenced QA policy and practice? What are the discernible trends?

Let me take two major UNESCO events—the World Conferences on Higher Education in which the global community adopted key declarations. If we go back to the World Conference on HE organized by UNESCO in 1998 and look at the Declaration, we note that there are some references to the ‘enhancement and preservation of quality in teaching’ but there is no reference to quality assurance.

However, when we look at the Communique that was adopted by the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education, we find frequent references to quality assurance throughout the text. The members note that ‘quality requires both establishing quality assurance systems and patterns of evaluation as well as promoting a quality culture within institutions.’ We seem to have moved from quality to ‘quality assurance’ and ‘cultures of quality’.

National QA systems flourished during this decade across the world—spreading to 117 countries in the 2010’s as compared to the 65 in the 1990’s (Eaton, 2012).

Forty four of the 54 Commonwealth countries have some form of QA agency.

Judith Eaton, the President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation in the US, notes two influences on QA during this period—one, that the QA systems were developed in the Western world and these were followed by the developing world; and two, the QA systems were based on traditional HE which was primarily classroom based and faculty dominated. How can QA systems be more contextual and open to new types of HE provision?

With the increase in the number of QA agencies, what has been the overall impact among administrators, faculty and students? A study by Stensaker et al (2011) in Norway, shows that the most positive impact

was on institutional leadership and administrative staff who felt that QA had influenced internal quality with the establishment of new routines and procedures, governance and discussions of teaching-learning. Academic staff were less enthusiastic but agreed that QA had a positive impact on research and staff engagement. Interestingly, the students did not know much about QA nor did they find it relevant to them.

In addition to national QA agencies, there has been a substantial increase in the number of regional and international QA networks in the last decade. The African Quality Assurance Network, the Caribbean network, CANQATE, the European Association for QA in Higher Education or ENQA, are some of the regional entities that now link with country-based QA systems. The increasing mobility of students across borders and the growth of online learning will further strengthen international QA initiatives.

Another development supporting student mobility is the number of Qualifications Frameworks which have been developed in over 70 countries. For example, Europe has both national and regional frameworks. Australia, Hong Kong and New Zealand have national frameworks. (Eaton, 2012)

In the past decade, we have witnessed the growing prominence of rankings, a hierarchical comparison of the effectiveness of different institutions according to specific indicators. More than 50 countries use rankings and there are 10 international and some regional rankings (Eaton, 2012). QA may not seem relevant to students but rankings are definitely more attractive. (Hazelkorn, 2011)

The past decade has witnessed the increased emphasis on outcomes. The Association of American Colleges and Universities summarized the essential learning outcomes for college graduates and these can be adopted and adapted by institutions. The OECD's Assessment of Higher Learning Outcomes (AHELO) can be used by countries to test generic and discipline based skills.

To sum up, we have seen a move towards greater accountability and regulation. There is an increasing trend towards the regionalization and internationalization of QA; a focus on outcomes—for institutions as well as for students. There are more tools available now than ever before, to measure outcomes, rankings, and to compare different institutions.

How has QA developed in ODL institutions across the Commonwealth?

There has been a huge expansion of dedicated distance learning universities across the Commonwealth, with the most recent African institution being the Open University of Mauritius. ODL institutions have always been under pressure not just to establish their efficiency and effectiveness but also to demonstrate it.

There was no discussion of QA when the first open universities were set up. The discussion in the 1960's and 70's referred to 'standards' which Roger Mills defines as 'objective measurable, outcomes. [1] What then were the criteria used to measure standards? As Koul sums up, these were i) 'process of course preparation and the quality of study materials' ; ii) 'feedback and interactivity in the guise of counseling, tutorials, assignments' and iii) 'usability of ODL for the subject concerned'[2]. The reference point was the conventional system where high standards were upheld in terms of well-qualified faculty; adequate infrastructure and facilities; regulated entry requirements; prescribed curriculum, classroom attendance and evaluation procedures.

The nineties became the decade when QA dominated discussions of ODL. The discussion shifted very quickly from developing QA systems in distance education in developed countries (Australia, UK, New Zealand, Canada) to how these could be adapted to different contexts (India, Hong Kong, for example).

In this present decade the emphasis has shifted to the integration of both external and internal QA measures so that institutions develop ‘cultures of quality’. A more recent shift is the focus on self-improvement rather than accountability.

The Open University of Malaysia, has developed a Quality Management System (QMS) to assure the quality of its course materials. Four departments of the university have an ISO 9001: 2000 certification from the Standard and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia. It is also accredited by the Malaysia National Accreditation Board responsible for accrediting both conventional and ODL institutions.

The model in this case reflects an attempt at constantly trying to improve its processes through internal and external quality assurance measures, the latter pertaining to national as well as international standards. For instance, Universitas Terbuka and the Open University of Malaysia have gained ISO Certification; the former has also received international accreditation from the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE)[3].

Institutions such as The Open University in the UK and IGNOU comply with standards set by the national bodies namely the QA Agency in the UK and the Distance Education Council of India respectively.

The perceptions about the effectiveness of distance education in the developed countries are quite different from those in the developing world. For instance, the UK Open University (UKOU) ranked fifth among the 100 universities surveyed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)[4].

Some institutions have developed their own QA policies such as the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). The Open University of Sri Lanka was assessed successfully by the University Grants Commission based on the same criteria as in the case of the 14 conventional universities in the country. However, the Senate and the Council of OUSL believed that this did not take into consideration the specific features that characterize ODL. To fill this gap, OUSL developed a QA framework for ODL in 2005 in partnership with UGC and COL.

Here is an example of an open university taking the lead in developing standards and quality measures that would be applicable at the national level and cover the over 25 providers of distance education in the country.

QA is not restricted to well-endowed institutions alone. Kyambogo Teacher Training College in Uganda complements its distance education provision through face to face tutorials on weekends. If a student does not come for two consecutive sessions, the tutor gets on his/her bicycle and travels miles to the student’s house to find out what is the problem. This culture of care is synonymous with the culture of quality in the institution

As the 2009 UNESCO Communique indicates, in the past decade the emphasis has shifted to the integration of both external and internal QA measures so that institutions are encouraged to develop ‘cultures of quality’, the subject of a book published by COL in 2006.

Prof Koul and I were the editors and we described the culture of quality as an institutional culture that promotes the introduction of an internal QA system where everyone takes ownership; values capacity building for implementing QA; stresses accountability to stakeholders and focuses more on learning rather than on instruction alone.

Let me share some of the initiatives that COL has undertaken in support of QA.

The COL approach has been threefold: to influence policy at national and institutional levels, develop resources and to build the capacity of institutions and individuals in QA.

COL continues its advocacy efforts to establish that open universities and campus providers have the same purpose that all universities serve. And if all institutions are judged according to the same benchmarks, there is less likelihood of Open and Distance Learning being considered second rate. The Open University, UK is assessed like any other university by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). It is true that many open universities have a social mission and a more flexible delivery mode. But if the judgements are based on fitness for purpose, quality of courses, effective learner support, and student achievement, there is no need for separate QA regulations only for ODL provision.

Today, there is no dearth of free models and guidelines that can be adopted or adapted. COL has developed several QA Toolkits and publications, as well as a QA micro-site with free resources.

As you know, there is little evidence of any real mutual recognition of qualifications within and across regions. International and regional bodies have an important role to play as it is often not possible for developing countries to muster the human and financial resources to develop such protocols on their own. For example, COL has developed a *Transnational Qualifications Framework* for use by the 32 small states of the Commonwealth, which is now a free resource for adoption and adaptation by any country.

COL has developed a Review and Improvement Model (COLRIM), which helps institutions to assess their respective practices as a step towards external accreditation or as an ongoing process of continuous self-improvement. It is a simple five-step process which can be undertaken by any institution.

It is a low-cost ‘do-it-yourself’ model which does not require a panel of external experts but engages internal staff. It involves developing systemic thinking and organizational learning; and focuses on capacity building.

It is meant for both ODL and campus institutions and is available as a free resource or OER.

Finally, what are the key issues in QA as we go forward? I have picked two prominent developments: OER, MOOCs—that have implications for QA agencies and HE institutions.

With the rise of social media, there has been a global movement towards collaboration in the development and sharing of content. The fundamental principle is that any materials developed with public funds

should be made available free to others to use as required. OERAfrica is a key player that has made major contributions to advocacy and content development on the content.

But since anyone can adapt the content, who is responsible for the quality of repurposed content? How do institutions ensure the integrity of their credentials? And what is the role of QA agencies?

In the OER scenario, quality dimensions of content such as accuracy, relevance, currency, pedagogic effectiveness in terms of learning design would apply just as they would to any content. However, areas in which OER quality measures will be different would relate to reusability and openness. Is the content accessible, even to learners with special needs; can it be localized to suit other linguistic and cultural contexts: are there any barriers related to technology such as bandwidth or software requirements?; the issue of discoverability relating to metadata and tagging and interoperability, or ease of reuse in different software environments are important considerations.

What does the global community think? COL and UNESCO organized a World OER Congress in Paris last June. Recognising the need for QA in OER, the Paris Declaration on OER recommends that the global community ‘promote QA and peer review of OER. Encourage the development of mechanisms for the assessment and certification of learning outcomes achieved through OER’

Let us now come to the second major development emerging partially out of the use of free content or OER. This is the Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs. Started at the University of Manitoba in 2008, this has gained traction in the ivy league institutions of the United States and has resulted in major consortia of the top universities on both sides of the Atlantic: Coursera, EdX and Udacity in the US with FutureLearn led by the UK.

What is a MOOC? An Observatory of Borderless Higher Education report sums up that MOOCs are usually free of charge; designed for large numbers; designed to encourage peer to peer learning and meant to award completion certificates rather than course credits.

Let me share just one example. MITx offered its first course on Circuits and electronic in May last year at which 155,000 students from 160 countries registered, of which 7157 passed the course. Even though the pass percentage is well below 10%, the edX president Prof Anant Agarwal says ‘if you look at the number in absolute terms, its as many students as might take the course in 40 years in MIT’

A recent survey conducted by the Chronicle of Higher Education asked the professors running the MOOCs if they believed that students who succeed in their MOOCs deserve course credit from their institution, 72% said no. What does this say about the quality and rigour of the MOOC offerings?

How will QA agencies measure the quality of MOOCs? The research results from the pioneers in MOOCs will provide excellent data for developing world institutions to review their teaching-learning practices for better quality and outcomes. Will MOOCs encourage the global mobility of students? Or the development of flexible frameworks for credit transfers, and recognition of qualifications?

But since MOOCs are offered globally and to a diversity of learners, the question is can one size fit all? What of student verification and academic integrity? Is a peer reviewed assessment acceptable? Is there a

delinking of the institutions which teach and the institutions which credential? Will this result in the rise of Degree Granting Bodies or DGB's? What will be the role of accreditation?

As we view the developments of the last decade, we note that there is an increasing move from self-improvement to external regulation, from traditional ODL delivery to more digital and online provision. MOOCs were unforeseeable some years ago and we now see a trend from an institution-centred to a more learner-centred approach. Will the QA agencies of the future provide more facilitation rather than regulation? Will the QA agencies of the future seek less compliance and encourage more creativity? Do we see the focus of QA agencies shifting from HE to lifelong learning?

But for the time being, what would agencies and institutions need to do? One, be flexible enough to embrace new provision; two, measure the degree to which the new developments facilitate student learning and three, encourage institutions to be relevant to the needs of the 21st century

Thank you for your kind attention

[1] Roger Mills, 'A Case Study of the Open University, United Kingdom' in Koul & Kanwar. (2006) *Towards a Culture of Quality*, Vancouver: COL. p.144.

[2] Koul and Kanwar. 2006. p 178.

[3] Latchem & Jung, 2010. p. 163

[4] J Daniel, A Kanwar, Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic, (2005), 'Mega-university=mega quality?' Keynote by Sir John Daniel at 2nd World Summit of Mega-Universities, 25 September, 2005, at <http://www.col.org/colweb/site/pid/3588>