

# Benchmarking Quality in Open Distance & Online Learning: COL Experience



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Distinguished colleagues, thank you for the invitation to be part of this important Round Table. I will present the COL experience in 'Benchmarking Quality in Open Distance & Online Learning'

As the pandemic engulfed the world, most institutions had to pivot to emergency remote teaching. One silver lining at this time was the global acceptance of distance and online learning. A study in the UK found that the majority of HE students rated the quality of online learning as excellent.

But many did not have adequate technology infrastructure such as the University of Hyderabad, where 40% students reported unreliable connectivity while 18% could not access online classes at all. Clearly there was a learning crisis.

Open Educational Resources were in high demand as teachers looked for quality digital content. In a North American study conducted during the pandemic, 44% of administrators were positive about faculty use of OER, while a quarter of teachers believed that OER could contribute significantly to teaching and learning.

In OER, since anyone can adapt the content, who is responsible for the quality of the repurposed material? How do institutions ensure the integrity of their credentials? And what is the role of QA agencies? COL's quality assurance guidelines for OER cover four key areas: Learning processes; Content; Format; and Technology (TIPS).

During the pandemic, we have seen another phenomenal increase in MOOC enrolments. India's MOOC platform Swayam provides a centralised directory of courses and institutions can provide up to 40% credits which are transferable across institutions.

After wide consultations, COL has developed Guidelines for QA and Accreditation of MOOCs. Clearly one size does not fit all and localization for specific contexts is important. QA Agencies need to consider how credit equivalence and transfer will be provided.

Because of the new ways of learning, it is now possible to offer micro-credentials as options for low-cost flexible learning. MIT has already introduced the MicroMasters programme which can prepare the learner for employment or further qualifications.

How will micro-credentials be recognised across institutions and national boundaries? COL has developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework that can promote recognition of prior learning and learner mobility.

How will we factor these developments into quality assurance? Quality Assurance has been implemented in structured contexts—how will it embrace the growing trend towards openness? How will QA and accreditation systems recognise new ways of teaching and learning? What changes will be needed in internal and external QA processes?

COL takes a holistic approach to promote cultures of quality. A culture of quality is really a culture of care. COL has developed QA tools at course, programme and institution levels.

The three course level tools cover pedagogy, formats for presentation and gender responsive materials.

COL developed a QA rubric for a blended learning programme with 47 quality elements which include student support, technology and assessment. Because of the consultative approach, 90% universities in Kenya have adopted the rubric.

At the institutional level, ten benchmarks have been identified. The self-review tool requires evidence that is captured in a radar chart and helps identify strengths and areas for improvement.

The benchmarking process involves (i) self study by a collaborative team (ii) review and validation by external experts, and (iii) preparation of an action plan and report to stakeholders.

What are the benefits of this process? The collaborative approach leads to wider ownership within the institution, external reviews focus on data and evidence and commitment of the leadership leads to the integration of quality distance and online learning.

COL's holistic approach has key implications for policy. One, there can be no quality without equity and inclusion. Two, digital literacy skills need to build for both teachers and learners. Three, quality needs to focus on learning outcomes rather than delivery modes. Four, QA agencies need to be nimble and agile to embrace emerging developments.

All these tools and resources are available at COL's OAsis.