

African Regional Approach for ODL Quality Assurance



Video Presentation

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It is a pleasure to be virtually present at this meeting to discuss Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning for the region. As the covid 19 pandemic forced institutions to pivot to distance learning almost overnight, online learning for many, became the only option. Access to technology—devices, connectivity and even electricity were a major barrier. For teachers, online teaching was an entirely new experience and most lacked the capacity to offer effective technology enabled learning. Students from resource-poor communities were further disadvantaged.

Two key issues emerged during time—quality and equity. Quality because ODL requires systematic planning and delivery—which was not possible due to the urgency of the situation. Equity because, as a recent study notes, more than 60% of the students in SSA were excluded from online learning. The first question to consider in framing a regional strategy is: how can the principles of equity be embedded in QA policies and processes to ensure that no one is left behind?

Open and distance learning is not new for many developing countries which established open universities to democratise higher education. In fact, Commonwealth countries have 31 open universities which cater to nearly five million students every year. Then there are dual mode institutions which offer campus and distance learning provision. India alone has over 200 such institutions and the numbers have been growing around the world, well before the pandemic struck.

Research shows that there is no significant difference between campus and distance learning. Yet ODL continues to be regarded as second-rate in many developing countries. For this reason, many ODL institutions have made extra efforts to demonstrate quality to their different stakeholders. For example, the Open University of Malaysia, got an ISO 9001: 2000 certification and is also accredited by the Malaysian National Accreditation Board. This reflects the attempt of an ODL institution to constantly improve its processes through internal and external quality assurance measures, in relation to national as well as international standards. Institutions such as IGNOU comply with standards set by the national Distance Education Council of India. Some institutions have developed their own QA policies such as the Open University of Sri Lanka. Here an open university has taken the lead in developing standards and quality measures that would be applicable to other providers of distance education in the country. The second question then for us to consider is: are there elements of these models that could work for our regional policy?

For institutions adopting dual-mode provision, it would be useful to have a clear policy on the use of ODL. It should be flexible enough to embrace a range of existing and emerging technologies and provide

for OER, MOOCs, AI, AR/VR. If you are a campus university wishing to develop a distance education policy, you need to ask certain questions. What are the reasons for going dual-mode and what you will do to achieve your goals? How will the faculty contribute—would they require training or additional incentives? How will quality courses be developed? Will OER be used? What kind of support will be provided to the distance learners? How will you ensure that the quality and standards are maintained for both campus and distance students? What systems do you need to put in place to cater to the large numbers and deal with the logistics of preparing and distributing study materials? The second step would be to develop rigorous QA Guidelines for ODL and align these with the National Qualifications Framework for credit mobility and recognition of qualifications. We believe 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 ODL being considered second rate. The Open University, UK is assessed like any other university by the Quality Assurance Agency. It is true that many open universities have a social mission and a more flexible delivery mode. But if the assessments are based on fitness for purpose, quality of courses, effective learner support, and student achievement, there is no need for separate QA regulations for ODL provision. The third step would be to train staff in the different aspects of effective distance learning delivery. Capacity building in course development, effective learner support and assessment techniques would be some areas of focus. All three steps, developing a policy, establishing a robust QA framework and building capacity, can be taken up simultaneously.

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 happened. This culture of care is really what we call a culture of quality. Prof Koul and I edited a book 'Towards a Culture of Quality' where we described this culture of quality as an institutional culture that promotes the introduction of an internal QA system where every staff member takes ownership; values capacity building for implementing QA; stresses accountability to stakeholders and focuses on learning outcomes. This was about 15 years ago. What has changed today?

The ultimate objective of QA is to ensure not just access to quality learning but also to student success that leads to opportunities for livelihoods. This means going beyond looking at completion and retention rates to supporting graduates to become employable—that is equipped with the skills that can lead to employment or entrepreneurship—in short, skills that prepare our students for the uncertain future that lies ahead.

Today we have access to so many resources in QA—toolkits, handbooks, guidelines. In fact, COL is a leader in QA for in ODL, TEL, OER and all these resources are available on our website. Please draw on these and on the expertise of our colleagues as you undertake this important task. With that let me wish the meeting every success.