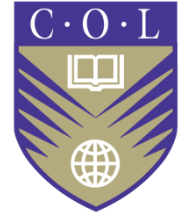


Quality Concerns in Distance and Digital Learning: Experiences of Different Countries and Institutions



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Title slide

Thank you for the invitation to speak at this International Conference on *Emerging Trends and Challenges in ODDBL*. Like my two colleagues who spoke earlier, I will reflect on Quality Concerns in Distance and Digital Learning: Experiences of Different Countries and Institutions.

Slide 2: Commonwealth of Learning

I am based at COL's HQ in Vancouver. For anyone here unfamiliar with COL, it is an IGO established by CHoGM in 1987 with a mission to increase access to educational opportunities by using ODL and appropriate technologies. We also have a regional centre here to support our work in India and more widely in the Asian region, which is very ably managed by my colleague Dr Shadrach, who is presiding over this session.

Slide 3: Outline

When two other leaders in the field have spoken before you on the same topic. You have to wonder what you can add. Given that my thinking is rooted in 33 years of experience in sub-Saharan Africa, I am going to begin by invoking the African storytelling tradition by telling you the story of my engagement with QA in ODDBL.

Slide 4:

COL is a good home for me as I have been working in ODDBL from the start of my career. After completing my initial qualifications in the UK, my first full-time teaching post was as a teacher at a public secondary school in Malawi (see staff top left). The school was unusual in that it had both a day and a night cohort. The night school provided afterhours classes for the students registered with the Malawi College of Distance Education. Quality concerns were ensuring that all students and teachers had copies of the study materials and the lack of any guidelines or tools for continuous formative assessment. However, the relationship was symbiotic – teaching in the day school meant we had a good grasp of the most common problem areas, so we knew what to focus on in the after-hours classes. On the other hand, the distance study materials were popular with both day-school teachers and learners due to their more careful scaffolding of the content. After Malawi, I moved to South Africa to work for an NGO called Promat Colleges (see staff bottom left). Promat offered an in-person matriculation pathway for underqualified teachers and learners so that they could access further professional development. The demand was higher than could be accommodated so we decided to start a correspondence college. As in Malawi, there was a symbiotic relationship between the in-person and distance modes. The day-school teachers developed the study materials and offered occasional in-person classes and assessment sessions but increasingly the study materials were adopted across all the in-person colleges and also became publications used by other providers, both within and outside of South Africa, becoming a third-stream income source. Promat subsequently moved into formal teacher education through a print-based and contact-supported model and so I was increasingly engaged with managing quality of study material, decentralised contact sessions, between contact session communications and the management of both formative and summative assessment. I increasingly looked to COL for guidelines related to quality assurance of these systems and processes. From Promat I moved to the South African Institute of Distance Education (see staff top right), now referred to simply as Saide, and became involved in co-developing guidelines and supporting capacity-building in these areas. Through Saide, I also became involved in the work of OER Africa (centre bottom) and a long-standing engagement with the University of South Africa (centre top) – first managing a teacher education programme, then supporting curriculum development, accreditation and review processes for two colleges and then as an adviser to the executive management – at each stage of that journey, the quality assurance issues expanded. After Saide I moved to the University of Pretoria (bottom right) to manage the distance education unit of the faculty of education. One of the new quality assurance issues here was ensuing equivalence across the in-person and distance versions of the same approved programme – which required two accreditation processes and approvals from the Council on Higher Education.

Slide 5: Purpose of Education

Of course, how one approaches issues of quality is influenced by one's understanding of the purpose. I have always liked the four key areas identified by the DeLors (1996) team, although given current circumstances one could wish that we had spent more time on the last issue! However, a more recent update suggested by Sobe (2021) would result in a slightly different perspective on what one would consider quality in relation to study resources, support, engagement and assessment.

Slide 6: CHE Notion of Quality

In 2001, South Africa established the Council on Higher Education to regulate and accredit all higher education provision, whether in-person or through ODL. The four pillars of quality assurance identified were fitness of purpose (are we doing the right things?), fitness for purpose (are we doing things in the right way?), value for money (for both Ministries providing subsidies and students paying fees) and social transformation (are we making a difference?).

Slide 7: NADEOSA Quality Criteria

Meanwhile, building on earlier work initiated by Saide, the National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning in South Africa (NADEOSA), had convened several workshops which led to the development and publication of a set of quality criteria for distance education provision in South Africa. Thirteen QA areas were identified and within each quality criterion several indicators of good practice were articulated. Because it was important that these should not be seen simply as checklists for conformity, case studies were developed to illustrate how the quality criteria might be interpreted. Through Saide's work, these quality criteria were widely disseminated both within South Africa, more widely in sub-Saharan Africa and even influenced the quality criteria developed for the Asian Association of Open Universities. Several problem areas were identified during this process in relation to concerns about finances (including the initial funding for development, the funding for reviewing, renewing and teaching out); programme development (and its alignment with national priorities); course design (including applicability to mode and target audience), assessment (formative, summative and authentic); learner support (moving from correspondence to blended and online provision); human resource strategy (especially employing, training, and supporting staff of quality to provide learner support and assessment feedback); and often inadequate monitoring and evaluation strategies geared to continuous improvement. In 2021, the criteria were updated to reflect growing use of digital and online provision. However, the same broad categories remained – as did the recurring challenges!

Slide 8: National, Regional and International Impact

In the period 2012-2014, in processes led by Saide, the NADEOSA community was consulted in the development of both national policy and accreditation guidelines. Both processes were informed by the NADEOSA quality criteria. Subsequently, the NADEOSA quality criteria were consulted widely at a regional and even international level. However, in other contexts, unfamiliarity of regulatory authorities or implementing staff with ODDBL may result in tensions around issues of quality provision (Pandey, 2024; Thurab-Nkhosi, 2025).

Slide 9: Joined COL

In 2019, I joined COL as Education Specialist for Open Schooling. COL maintains an open access repository of openly licensed resources. Last week when I checked, there were 4,380 resources that have the word 'quality' in their title or metadata and 1,893 which specifically mention 'quality assurance'. The three COL resources that particularly influenced me in the journey I outlined previously in South and Southern Africa are listed here. The last one resonated particularly: quality assurance is not a question of ticking boxes – it is about building a culture of people supporting other people to learn and achieve ...

COL does a lot of work with partners in developing policies and building capacity for quality ODDBL provision, including most recently a new partnership with the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) here in India.

Slide 10: External Recognition 1

There are, of course, other ways to ensure quality. One such way is to put things out in the open for anybody to review and comment on. One recent example is COL's micro-courses for success which have received multiple international awards. This was one of the outcomes achieved by my former colleague, Dr Sanjaya Mishra, who will be speaking later in the conference.

Slide 11: Pacific Open Courses

Another example is the Pacific Open Courses developed by COL and then repackaged and re-offered by the University of the South Pacific, other Pacific Partners, and even partners outside of the Pacific. They allow for multiple entry and exit points with different levels of recognition for achievement, through digital badges and/or partial or complete digital certification. COL recently received an OEGlobal Award for these courses.

Slide 12: Other QA practices

Quality assurance is a journey not a destination – we can always improve. Benchmarking, engaging with staff and students and keeping in mind the bigger picture are all helpful. But we have to commit to processes that allow appropriate data collection, analysis and review to close feedback loops into improved practice – and move away from compliance to culture.

Slide 13: Ecosystemic QA

We need not only to close QA feedback loops into improved practice at the programme level, but also to address inhibiting or enabling factors at institutional, national, regional or even international levels. We should build wisdom communities of QA practitioners, including the staff who do most of the data capturing and initial analysis ... (the photo shows the operational support team at COL).

Slide 14: References

There are quite a few active links that might be useful when you get a copy of this presentation. I am very open to further discussions about these issues after the event. Thank you to the organisers for making it possible for me to be here and thank you to you for listening.

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Slide 15: Thank you