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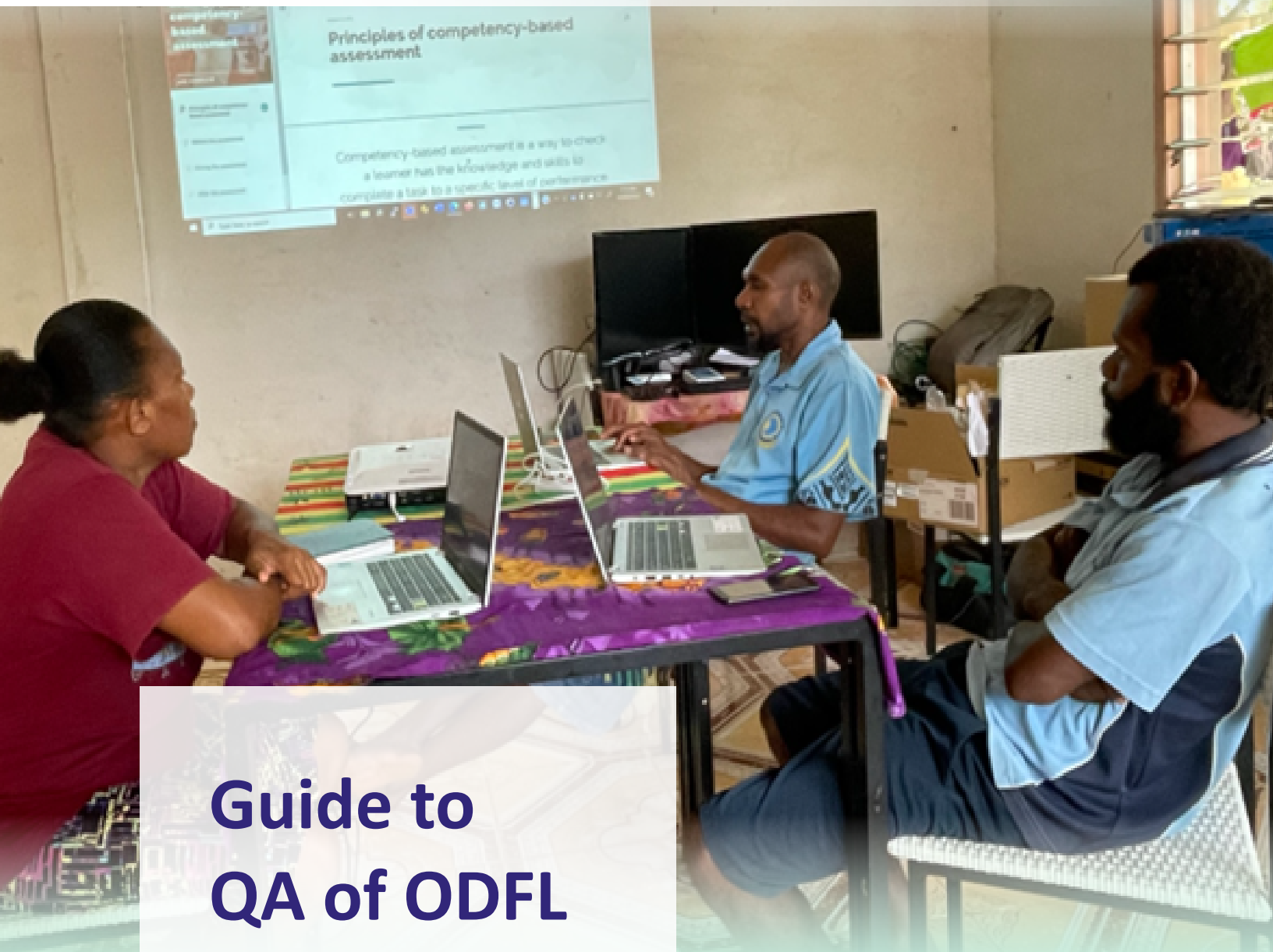

Guide to QA of ODFL Provision in the Pacific

Commonwealth of Learning

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of knowledge, resources and technologies in open learning and distance education.

Commonwealth of Learning, 2023

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Purpose of This Guide

This Guide is primarily meant for Open, Distance and Flexible Learning (ODFL) practitioners in the Pacific Island countries, although users in other contexts will find it equally valuable. The purpose of the guide is to support Ministry of Education officials and ODFL staff to roll out high quality distance education in their contexts. The guide is developed on the understanding that many people who work in ODFL have gone through conventional face-to-face education and therefore lack experience and expertise in this mode of delivery. At the same time, ODFL is increasingly gaining currency in many countries due to several factors. These factors include limited places in formal schools, low student retention that is coupled with high drop-out rates in conventional schools, mandatory requirements that act as barriers to participating in the formal school system, and high opportunity costs of attending school full time, especially for learners from low socio-economic backgrounds. The advent of technology is also enhancing delivery of quality ODFL, where such technology is appropriately used. Whilst expansion of ODFL has significantly increased participation in education, upholding the quality of provision cannot be overemphasised. This Guide specifically aims at achieving this goal; it highlights factors that affect the quality of ODFL provisioning.

The Guide draws from the quality assurance for ODFL course that was offered on the OERU Platform in early 2023. The course dealt with key aspects that affect the quality of ODFL provision, namely policy and planning, governance and management, funding and financial management, and technology infrastructure and management. Prior to offering this course, COL supported a series of workshops that were run in 2022 for the Pacific countries, which were aimed at building capacity amongst the participants on Open, Distance and Flexible Learning (ODFL). Amongst other things, the workshops dealt with what ODFL is, advantages of using this mode of provision, especially in the small Island Countries, and how best it can be managed. This Guide is anchored on the two initiatives highlighted above and addresses quality issues that surfaced during the engagements with participants. Although it does not cover all the aspects that were covered in the ODFL course and in the series of capacity building workshops, it covers pertinent aspects that surfaced during engagements with participants in the two initiatives. It is anticipated that a wide range of users like policy makers, education managers, and educators will find the Guide valuable in terms of enhancing their work in ODFL.

Why Worry about Quality in ODFL?

The quality of education has profound implications on both social and individual benefits to be derived from investment in education. Education is the most important single factor driving the economic development of a country. As more and more people use ODFL, it is important to ensure that the quality of delivery is enhanced. Besides, as highlighted above, providing quality guidelines is key in ODFL as many people are not familiar with this mode of provision, and therefore with what it takes to roll out quality education using this mode of provision.

It is also evident that where it is newly introduced, the public has somewhat negative perceptions of ODFL as a mode of provision. There is often the tendency to compare ODFL with the conventional system and to underrate the former. The onus therefore lies with ODFL providers to prove to the public that what they offer is equally credible if not better than what conventional institutions offer.

Paying particular attention to quality is one of the best ways of achieving this end. Implementing explicit quality assurance measures enables an ODFL provider to **improve** itself and to **prove** its worth to the public.

Beneficiaries of Quality Assurance

It is important to remember that quality assurance benefits every stakeholder in education. If your institution or national education system has sound quality assurance arrangements, students who go through the system easily enjoy recognition in society and in other education systems. Apart from getting value for money, they easily get credit transfer. At the same time, government, which is usually the major funder of education, benefits from its public investment in a system that is well quality assured. Where the education system has a robust quality assurance system, the public is guaranteed of relevance of products of the system in the workplace and in society in general. The individual institution also gains enhanced reputation if it is well quality assured. In many instances this helps attract financial support for the institution. So, quality assurance in education has many spill-over benefits. If well implemented at systemic level, it breeds a sound quality culture that every staff and every student observes and respects.

Topic 1: Understanding Quality and Quality Assurance in ODFL

Quality

The question people often ask is what is quality in education and who decides on it? Theoretical definitions of quality help us articulate what we mean by quality education. Harvey and Green, (1993, p. 11) gave conceptualisations of quality that have been universally adopted as the definitions of quality:

- as exceptional (excellence);
- as perfection;
- as fitness for purpose;
- as value for money;
- as transformational.

This guide does not go into the details of the above five conceptions. Theoretical definitions aside, even an ordinary person sometimes can be able to tell where there is poor quality of education by merely observing practice. Photographs A and B show two different classes in strikingly different learning environments. The learning experiences learners in these two environments go through are also different, so is the motivation to learn. There is a lot you can say about quality of learning in the two photographs in Figure 1.

Compare and contrast quality of learning in the environments depicted in the two photographs. In which environment would you prefer your child to learn and why?

Class A

Class B

Figure 1: Learning environments

Listening intently by David Stanley is licensed CC BY 2.0

Forester at school by Bureau of Land Management is licensed CC BY 2.0

Theoretical definitions aside, one can easily explain why there is good or poor quality in a give learning environment. One can also suggest what needs to improve to enhance the quality. Whilst many people may not be able to give a technical definition of quality, they nevertheless know what they want from educational institutions.

The two photographs depict learning in conventional face-to-face environments. The idea is just to illustrate what quality is. In so far as an ODFL provider is concerned, stakeholders external to the institution look at the instrumental function of the institution. Using its unique and unfamiliar mode of provision, does the institution meet what it was established to meet. The market, for instance, looks at the ability of the institution to produce graduates who are functional in the world of work. With learners distributed all over the country and hardly meeting their teachers and perhaps never setting their foot on the physical grounds of the institution, can the institution deliver credible education to its clients?

The following photograph shows an example of independent learning, which is typical of most distance learners. What are the factors that promote learning in such in such an environment? In your view what could be some of the limitations in the learning environment depicted?

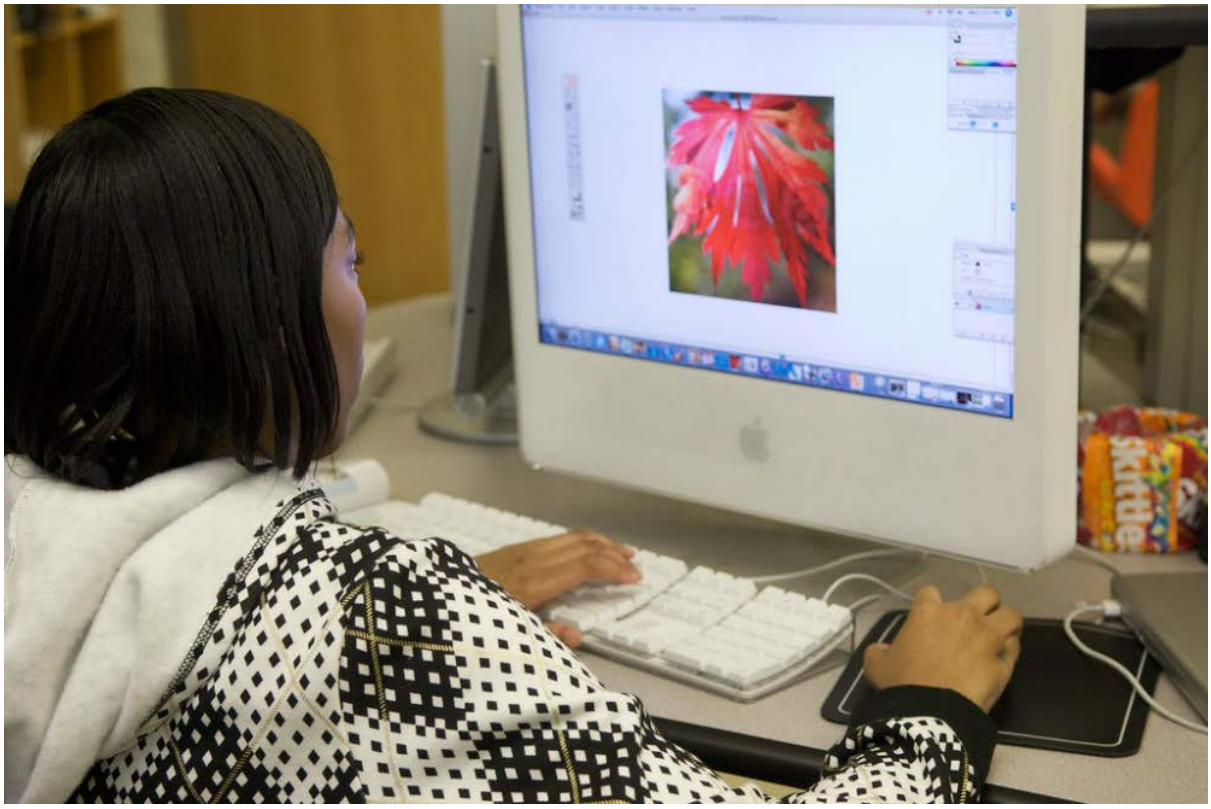


Figure 2: Distance learner

Student with computer by US Department of Education is licensed CC BY 2.0

The following may be some of the factors you thought about in answering the above two questions:

a) Factors promoting learning
   - Availability of reading resources
   - Access to technology, which may probably include internet. This implies further access to online resources.
   - Relaxed study environment – no disturbances in the environment
   - Active learning – as learner is writing something, possibly from what she found on the computer.
   - Learner engagement is evident.

b) Possible limitations
   - There could be no social interactions with others, if learner is not connected to internet.
   - Depending on learner preference, a study desk and chair maybe necessary. However, it may as be that the learner's preference to working away from a desk.

Think of your distance learners and the conditions under which they are likely to learn. How would you support them to experience the positive factors highlighted in (a) above?

Figure 3 below shows what the Open University (UK) considers to be good quality learning in distance learning – using local community and environmental resources. You will see that most of the learning aspects that are covered in the diagram are what we should aim to promote through distance learning. We need students to identify (social) capital in their communities, we need to motivate them to learn, even if they learn in isolated conditions, we need to stimulate their thinking to promote deep learning, and we also need to make both the learning and the assessment authentic. Drawing on local resources has great potential for promoting authentic learning – learners apply knowledge to solving real local problems. They interact with local people who confirm or question what they learn. In planning ODFL systems, it is important to be deliberate on how such attributes will be fostered into students.

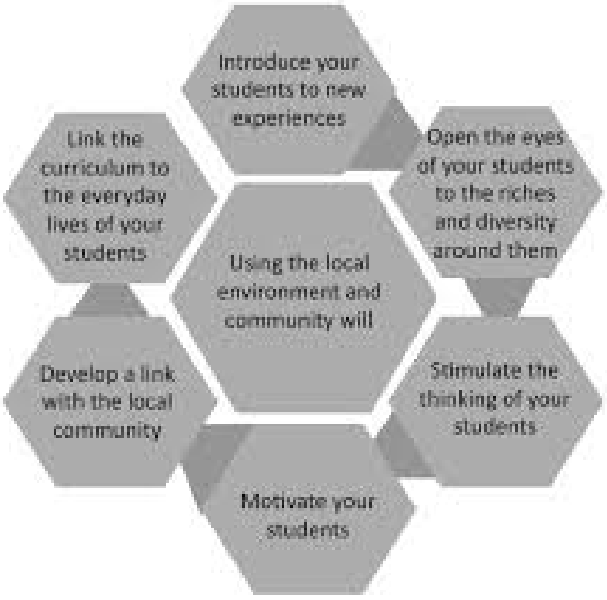


Figure 3: Using local community and environmental resources in learning

Source: OpenLearn Create: https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=64820&section=6 (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

In your context, how would you promote use of the local environment and community in distance learning?

We will explore the concept of quality distance learning in the next section of this guide, where we look at the components of quality in ODFL.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance refers to systems, plans and processes that are put in place to ensure that desired goals are achieved. It is a process that involves a collection of policies, procedures, and practices that are both internal and external to an institution, which are designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality. Unlike quality control, which comes at the end of a process to establish the fitness of purpose of a product, quality assurance takes place right from the beginning and is meant to ensure that no defects are produced in the system. It is a proactive rather than a reactive process, which assures both internal and external stakeholders of an institution that desired goals/aims (which are explicitly stated) will be met. It is important to note that quality assurance involves deliberate setting of goals to achieve and putting in place mechanisms that ensure that the institution achieves those goals. This is particularly important in education where one is dealing with people's lives and public resources. You cannot afford to have hundreds of students in an institution for a year or longer and realise in the end that most of them fail because you put poor support systems in place, or you offered a learning programme that was not accredited.

According to UNESCO, quality assurance is an all-embracing term that refers to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of an education system, institutions, or programmes. As a regulatory mechanism, quality assurance focuses on both accountability and improvement, providing information and judgments (not ranking) through an agreed upon and consistent process and well established criteria, (Visceanu et al., 2007:74).

Quality assurance should be integrated in every facet of ODFL provisioning – the design of the courses of study, quality of staff used, teaching and learning resources, learner support mechanisms, governance and management, assessment processes, and graduation and certification processes. Often, these are the areas which pose quality challenges in ODFL. The next unit of the guide deals with these areas.

Case Scenario 1

The Ministry of Education in Uzumba, a developing country with a sparsely distributed population is very particular about regulating the quality of education, including open schooling. It has guidelines on the requirements for the registration of schools, qualifications of teachers, a common curriculum package for implementation by all schools, core reading resources to support the curriculum, and even funding norms for the different school types. According to Ministry policy documents, the prime idea is to maximise student success rates. Schools follow the regulations to the best of their ability. Analysis of end of year results by the Ministry shows that most (and sometimes all) schools record pass rates that are above 95% - very impressive performance. Because of the high pass rates, learners easily get placement in universities and secure government grants. However, the majority of these students do not only underperform at university, they also dropout in their first year of university studies. Universities are worried about this trend and blame the schooling system. The Ministry of Education blames universities for the problem. Parents and students do not

understand why students who come out of high school with high passes underperform at university.

The blame game between the Ministry of Education/schools and universities led to the commissioning of an independent Committee of Inquiry. The committee examined schooling processes and procedures as well as university processes. Findings of the committee where that although the Ministry had quality regulations that were used in schools, there were no specific quality guidelines on school activities. For example, the actual teaching processes were not evaluated. Student assessment processes were not subjected to any form of quality assurance. The Ministry's understanding of quality assurance was limited to adherence to broad policy guidelines. The day-to-day activities of schools and teachers, which impact the actual learning were not monitored and there were no quality criteria on these activities. There were a lot of quality assurance gaps in both formative and summative assessment processes in schools. In fact, schools added marks to examination scores to register high pass rates. Apparently, the same practice was common with summative examinations at national level – examination officials added marks for candidates, and this resulted in exaggerated pass rates. The report showed that the results of school learners did not reflect the actual performance of learners.

Activity

1. How does the situation described in the above case scenario compare to your context?
2. Imagine you are part of the Committee of Inquiry that was involved in the case scenario above. Draft a set of recommendations that you would give to schools to address the problem highlighted above.

Topic 2: Key Components of Quality in ODFL

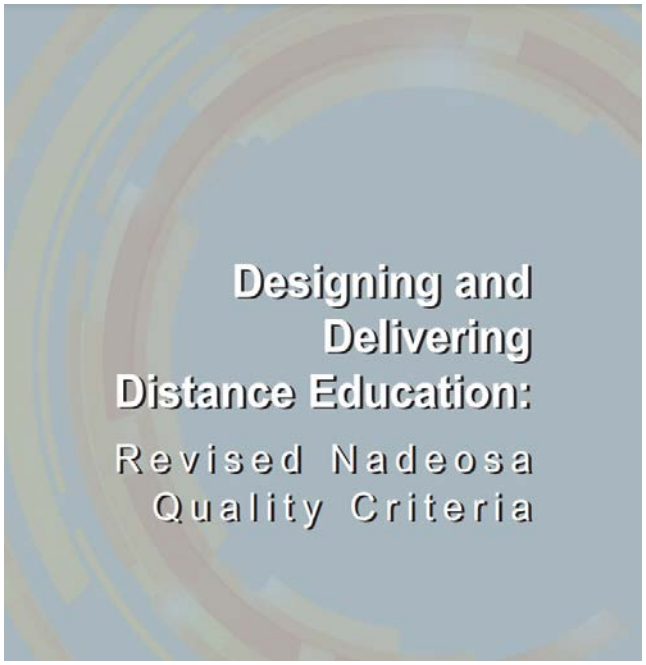
There are key elements of a distance education system that need careful quality assurance. First and foremost is how the provider confirms its readiness to provide distance education and its clarity on how learning is envisaged to take place within a distributed group of learners. This should be evident in the institution's mission and vision and given practical expression in its strategic plans, policies and practices. Some of the unique challenges of managing distance learning are that unlike in the conventional face-to-face learning environment, there is no control of the learning environment in distance education. Neither the providing institution nor the learning facilitator has control over time, place and pace of learning. Communication is mainly asynchronous and often quite a challenge for some learners. Often, there is a sense of learning in isolation, which leads to frustration. Learners lack regular communication with their teachers and with their peers. Direct access to the physical facilities of the institution like libraries and laboratories is limited. Thus, generally, providers face challenges not only in keeping track of each learner, but also in motivating them to keep learning.

Unless there are mechanisms that are deliberately put in place to overcome the above-mentioned challenges, quality is compromised in distance learning.

Reflection: Think of how you motivate learners in a conventional face-to-face setting. How would you replicate that in a distance education setting?

What Constitutes Quality in ODFL?

There are organisations that have given particular attention to quality distance education for years and have developed guidelines on what quality distance education entails. Nadeosa, with support from *Saide* is one such organisation. The popular Nadeosa Quality Criteria for Distance Education show pertinent aspects of ODFL that need quality assurance, and what one should look for to determine if such quality exists. These quality criteria were initially developed around 2004 and have since been revised in the wake of latest developments in ODFL. They cover 13 key areas that affect the quality of provision and around which quality standards are defined. To provide sufficient guidance on each quality criterion, a number of quality elements are scoped, which indicate specific aspects to be fulfilled to meet the quality criterion. The broad quality criteria are listed in the box below.



Nadeosa Quality Standards

1. Policy and Planning
2. Student Information
3. Programme Development
4. Course Design
5. Learning Materials development
6. Student Assessment
7. Student support
8. Human Resource Strategy
9. Management and administration
10. Collaborative relationships
11. Quality Assurance
12. Information dissemination
13. Results/ Provider Outcomes

https://www.nadeosa.org.za/documents/60dc67f2bbbb4.pdf

In this Guide, we will not look at each one of the 13 standards highlighted in the box above. You can access all the standards and their constituent elements here. We use the quality criterion on Student Support below to illustrate how the rest of the criteria are packaged and how they can be used to enhance quality.

Each Quality Criterion has an overarching criterion statement, which depicts what good practice entails. In the example below, the statement in the box above the table is the criterion statement on Learner Support. This statement is broken down into Quality Elements which define various aspects of the criterion. Although only six elements are given below, the criterion on Learner Support has 21 elements. The six given here are only for illustrative purposes.

Provision for commenting on each of the elements is made in the right column. In each instance, the evaluator looks for evidence of each of the elements and gives comments that can be positive or negative or both. These are very important as they give the reviewed institution useful feedback on gaps that need to be addressed and even strengths that should be consolidated. Note that these comments per quality element are different from overall evaluation of the Quality Criterion comments that come at the end of the criterion. The latter take into account performance on the entire Quality Criterion.

Some people choose to be more precise and indicate whether the criterion is **fully met**, **partially met** or **not met** at all in this last section. Whichever decision is made; it must be in line with the comments that are given for the individual quality elements. It is import though, to note that the quality elements do not necessarily have equal weighting. Some can be more important in terms of affecting the quality of provision than others. So, although most of the elements in a criterion can be met, the evaluation decision at the end can be negative (fails to meet criterion) if key elements are not met.

Student Support

Criterion
Students are provided with a wide range of support to ensure access and success. The provider places the student at the centre of all its business.

Quality Elements	**Reviewer's comments**
1. The provider encourages students to interact with one another through the creation of a "community of learning", particularly during the introductory phase of the course. This can be managed through online contact or by using a learning management system, social media, etc.	
2. Learning support is built into the design of the course materials.	
3. Students are carefully oriented to the digital skills they need to fully engage in the learning process	
4. The development of competence in the use of digital technologies is built into the high-level learning outcomes of the programme.	
5. In making decisions on student support mechanisms, expenses that will be incurred by students to access student support (for example, data costs for streaming video or downloading content; and travel time and expense for attendance at contact sessions) are considered in the design of the course, and adjustments made where necessary	
6. Facilitators are selected and trained for their role in mediating learning.	
Overall Evaluation of the Quality Criterion on Student Support	

Enhancing Quality of ODFL through Quality Criteria

Quality criteria can best enhance quality improvement if they are used for self-evaluation at institutional or department level on a regular basis. The common mistake made in many instances is that institutions only use quality criteria when an external evaluation is due. Only on such occasions do they look at the criteria and "use" them to conduct whitewash evaluation for purposes of compiling a self-evaluation report, which is a requirement for self-evaluation. The whole process is reduced to a compliance process rather than a self-

improvement endeavour. It is important for ODFL practitioners to review key aspects of delivery on a regular basis to institute continuous improvement. Figure 4 is a graphic of where quality criteria should be used for regular self-evaluation.

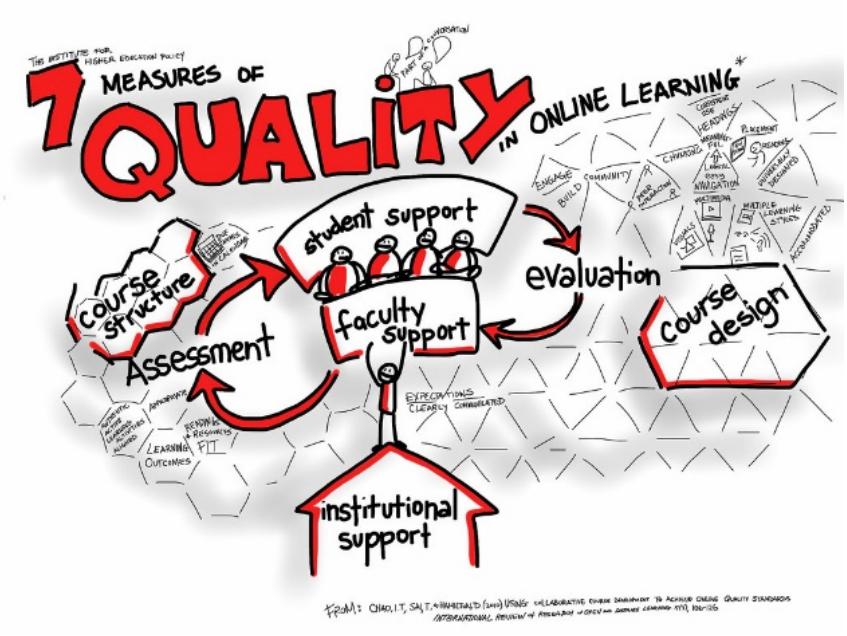


Figure 4: Key components of ODFL to be quality assured on a regular basis

Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/gforsythe/10173857405/in/photostream/

Licence: CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0)

Reflection: Think of aspects that pose quality challenges in your context. What additional components can you add to the infographic above?

It is only when an institution or a practitioner reflects on their particular context and identify factors that constrain quality that one can start thinking of mitigation measures. The provider should it take it upon itself to develop this culture without being driven by an external regular. The case study below shows why it is important to self-evaluate performance on an ongoing basis and implement corrective measures independent of external intervention.

Case Scenario 2

A team of quality inspectors is sent to an ODFL institution to review the quality of teaching and learning as prescribed in national regulations. On getting to the institution, the team of inspectors learn the following:

1. The institution's leadership is not aware of the applicable standards that should guide the internal quality assurance process because the leadership thinks that quality assurance is the responsibility of the regulator;
2. There is no dedicated person responsible for quality assurance in the institutions. No person has a job description touching on quality assurance;
3. Because of bullets 1 and 2, no budget is allocated for internal quality assurance activities
4. Also, there is no internal policy that guides the internal QA process;

5. Although always invited, the institution has never sent a representative to workshops that aim to build capacity in quality assurance in ODFL;
6. Given the above reasons, internal quality assurance is rarely done by the institution.

Considering that the regulator is extremely understaffed and with limited financial resources, all the 3,000 ODFL institutions in the country can't be quality audited at least once every two years as prescribed in the regulations. Thus, the quality of ODFL provisioning is highly compromised in the sector.

Activity

Imagine you oversee the education system under which the ODFL institution reported in the case scenario above operates, what recommendations would you make to improve quality at the institution?

Case Scenario 3

Success College is a registered ODFL provider in a developing country. It was established by a team of retired education practitioners to meet the high demand of education in the country, which the formal school system is failing to meet. Having worked in the education system for many years, the retired practitioners have good understanding of the national curriculum but have not had experience in developing learning materials for ODFL. Neither are they well versed with teaching in an ODFL environment. They ensured that they officially register their institution with the Ministry of Education before they enrolled students, which is what they understand by quality assurance. They also procured hard copy textbooks which are like what is used in the formal school system. They have a learning management system (LMS) where they communicate important messages to students and upload limited digital learning resources and assignments for students.

When they advertised the institution at the beginning of the year, there was overwhelming response mainly from young people who failed to pass their Matriculation qualification, which is a requirement for tertiary entry. Later in the year, a Ministry official visited the institution to confirm that the institution was coping with the student enrolment. He requested management to provide important records on enrolment by grade, geographical location of students, samples of learning materials used, a policy on learner support, course work marks, and staffing statistics. Management of the institution managed to provide enrolment figures by course. When it came to coursework marks, they could only account for just over half of the students. In a meeting between the official and management, it turned out that essential student data on where they were in the country was not captured. Both the official and management were also surprised to discover that whilst course work marks had been captured from tutors, no system of tracking which students had not submitted course work marks was in place. So, more than 40% of students did not have full course work marks. Institution management knew there were tutors who supported students but there were no explicit guidelines on how such students were to be supported. No evaluation was done of how well students were being supported. When analysis of coursework submission was done later, after the official had gone, the institution discovered that learners from a particular district had their marks missing. Most students in this remote district never accessed assignments that were on the LMS because they had no access to internet. Nobody at the headquarters was aware of this.

Scenario-based task

1. In your view, which of the Nadeosa quality criteria referred to above would you use to identify quality gaps at the institution?
2. What do you think are some of the possible reasons why students from one district had not submitted assignments? What recommendations would you give to Success College in light of the problem highlighted above?

Topic 3: Implementing Quality in ODFL

Internal Quality Assurance

As highlighted above, an ODFL institution should implement sound internal quality assurance systems if it is to enhance quality on an ongoing basis. In this section we look more closely at what internal quality assurance involves. Figure 5 below shows some of the ways in which you can implement internal quality assurance. Although it refers to higher education institutions, the processes that are given in the resource are equally applicable to open schooling. The full infographic is available here.

Figure 5: Enhancing Quality through IQA

Source: UNESCO-IIEP (2019) https://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/internal-quality-assurance-lever-change-4871

Internal quality assurance refers to the integrated systems, policies and processes used by an institution to manage the quality of its core functions of supporting effective learning and assessment, research, and community engagement. Internal quality assurance is a special type of monitoring of the educational activities of an institution to ensure that the desired goals are achieved. This is particularly important in ODFL where there is great student diversity and a wide range of environments some of which pose learning challenges. For your institution to maximise student success you need to monitor student performance through internal quality assurance processes. Unlike external quality assurance, this approach to quality enhancement is initiated and fully controlled within an institution. It takes place at various levels, ranging from the smallest academic unit like a department or even a module to the entire institution consisting of all faculties or schools or colleges, depending on the structure of the institution.

Internal quality assurance is primarily aimed at self-enlightenment – that is, furnishing internal stakeholders with useful information on where things are going well and where there are weaknesses that need to be addressed before it is too late. It involves conducting systematic self-reviews, using carefully designed guidelines and a set of quality criteria. In many instances, the criteria used in internal quality assurance are in line with what is used by the external quality assurance agency for external reviews.

In its internal quality assurance processes, a good ODFL institution goes beyond the expectations of the Ministry of Education. It pegs its quality very high, so it can achieve levels of excellence. Ideally, internal quality assurance activities of an institution are coordinated by the institutional quality assurance office. Depending on the size of the institution and the resources available, the Quality Assurance office can be a unit or department consisting of several people. For example, in big institutions the Quality Assurance Unit is headed by a Director who works with coordinators in other departments of the institution. However, in small institutions, only one person is usually seconded to the quality assurance office. In addition to human resources, financial resources need to be committed to the quality assurance office to facilitate implementation of quality assurance activities.

To coordinate quality assurance activities effectively, the Quality Assurance Unit needs to develop an institutional quality assurance policy and quality guidelines. It also needs to have contact persons or representatives from the various academic departments of the institution. Typical open schools normally operate through regional offices where there should be people who liaise with the Quality Assurance unit at headquarters. These coordinators provide an important communication channel between the Quality Assurance Unit and academic departments and regions.

One of the main functions of the Unit is to conduct training sessions on quality assurance in the institution. If there is sufficient capacity within the Unit, training can be done internally. If there is no sufficient capacity, the Unit can identify expertise from outside to come and do training. It always helps to be systematic about such training sessions if quality assurance capacity is to be built in the institution. Sporadic training sessions that are not followed up with practical trials tend to be ineffective.

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Source: https://www.picpedia.org/chalkboard/t/training.html

To be more systematic and allow flexibility for staff to participate in the training, you can develop a short online training course. People can do the course or parts of it as and when they need to. The course can be developed internally or by an external expert, depending on the capacity available.

The Unit needs to plan and coordinate self-reviews. It also needs to mobilize resources for quality assurance activities of the institution to run smoothly. If well implemented, internal quality assurance has immense potential to improve the quality of educational processes and to establish a quality culture in an institution.

Peer Review as an Essential Component of Self-improvement

Peer review is one of the mechanisms used by many organisations to improve performance. Governments, journals and human resource departments in reputable companies use the peer review mechanism to evaluate performance and institute improvements. In academia, peer reviews are used as a measure of the quality of publications realised by an institution or published in journals. A peer reviewed book is considered of better quality than a book that is not peer reviewed. Peer review is the evaluation of work by one or more people with similar

competencies as the producers of the work. It functions as a form of self-regulation by qualified members of a profession within the relevant field. As part of self-evaluation, an ODFL institution can invite colleagues from sister institutions to peer review its processes and provide feedback. The process is self-initiated and the results of the peer review process are used internally. Louw (2013) provides a useful summary of a peer-review process.

Case Scenario 4

There are two highly progressive open schools in Southern Africa, which have made significant impact in their societies over years. The countries are adjacent to each other, and they both have populations that are smaller than 3 million, yet geographically, they are vast. In these two countries, open schooling has played a major role in enhancing educational access for young people in the remote and sparsely populated areas of these vast countries, and in providing a second chance for learners who pass their matriculation examinations on the first attempt.

To enhance quality of provision on an ongoing basis, the two institutions went into a formal agreement of collaboration. Within this agreement, they signed a Memorandum of Agreement on quality assurance, which involves conducting systematic peer reviews of each other's processes. To implement the peer reviews effectively, the two institutions agreed on a set of simple –to- use quality assurance guidelines which are relevant to both contexts. They also agreed on how the peer reviews would be conducted, including resourcing the process.

Each institution conducts a site visit every two years, spends 3-5 days conducting the review process using the agreed quality standards. Usually, a carefully chosen team of about 5 people is involved. During the process the team observes practice, holds meetings with relevant people at the institution under review and looks at evidence of claims made in the self-evaluation report. At the end of the visit, the team compiles a peer review report with recommendations. These are handed over to the reviewed institution, which in turn, studies the report thoroughly. Recommendations made are observed. The reviewed institution develops improvement plans with timelines. The plan is implemented within specified timelines. Both institutions take review recommendations from the sister peer reviewer seriously. In the second round of reviews, the peer reviewers review progress made in implementing recommendations from the previous cycle.

They also make new recommendations based on the current review process. Thus, these iterative peer review cycles have resulted in profound improvement of quality in the two open schools. Today, they are flagship open schools in the region, if not on the whole continent.

Questions

1. The above case study brings out key elements of the peer review mechanism that help promote continuous quality improvement in open schooling. Identify and list some of these elements.
2. How feasible is it to implement such a peer review system in your context?

Feedback

In your response to the first question above, you may have included the following as key enablers of continuous quality improvement:

- Peer reviews encourage regular reflection on one's practice
- Peer reviews are more objective and therefore provide a more accurate picture of quality in an institution.
- Peer reviews help close the loop in the quality assurance process
- Peer reviews promote capacity building in quality assurance
- Peer reviews encourage support for quality assurance from institutional management.
- Peer reviews help attract resources to quality assurance initiatives in an institution.

More Case Studies

One of the major benefits of internal quality assurance is that it encourages an evidence-based dialogue on quality improvement among institutional stakeholders. It also promotes creativity in an institution, as individuals strive to overcome identified challenges. To appreciate the benefits of peer reviews and in addition to the Southern African case scenario given above, you may want to read through the experiences of case studies reported here, which are based on institutions in different countries.

Conducting Peer Review

Below are the steps you should follow when conducting peer reviews.

Planning the review

- Define institutional aspects to be reviewed
- Identify reviewer & provide TORs, including review dates
- Conduct self-evaluation & compile a self-evaluation report (SER)
- Send SER to reviewers in advance of their site visit
- Assemble evidence and put in files
- Compile a document map to for use by reviewers to locate documents in files.
- Check files for completeness
- Appoint coordinator who should be available all the time throughout the review, but not part of interviewees. Works in a separate room close to reviewers' room.

- Develop interview schedule with realistic time slots to be shared with peer reviewers

During site visit

- Panel meet and discuss process to follow. The chairperson allocates responsibilities panel members.
- Panel should stick to allocated times as much as possible. DON'T make people wait for long!!!!
- Make the site visit as unobtrusive as possible – let business continue as normal.
- Agree as panel team on decisions
- Request clarification of more evidence from coordinator where necessary
- Hold preliminary meeting with management before you leave

After site visit

- Compile peer review report
- Report to have commendations and recommendations
- Base everything on evidence provided
- Use appropriate (inoffensive) language

Improvement plans (developed by reviewed institution)

- Cover all recommendations
- Give timelines for implementation
- Allocate resources, including human.
- Monitor implementation
- Integrate medium to long-term improvement plans in strategic plans

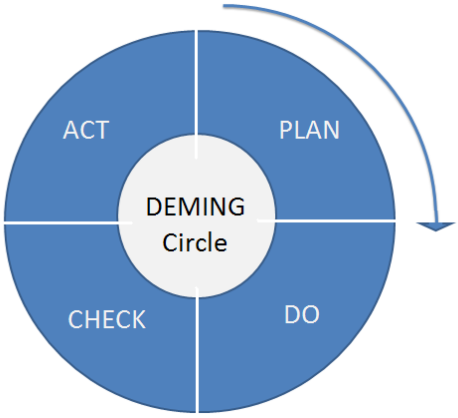
An institution identifies a sister institution to come and review its processes and systems and provide feedback. Normally, before the reviewing institution conducts the review, the reviewed institution conducts a self-review and compiles a self-evaluation report (SER). The self-evaluation is done based on a set of quality criteria that is used at the institution. Often, the same criteria are used nationally for external reviews. The peer reviewer will also use the same set of criteria when they conduct the peer review. The SER is sent to the reviewing institutions in advance. The reviewer studies the report before conducting a site visit to the reviewed institution. In reviewing the SER, the reviewers note pertinent aspects to pursue and verify during the visit. Reviewers also note evidence that should be produced to support claims made in the SER. It is normal practice that a team of 3 to 5 people led by one chairperson conducts the site visit. Before going on the site visit, they meet to share responsibilities during the review process.

Internal Quality Assurance – A self-improvement strategy

Note that it is important to close the loop in peer reviews – conduct self-evaluation, identify gaps, develop improvement plans, implement the plans, and evaluate to check progress. Internal quality assurance facilitates continuous improvement, which leads to excellence.

It makes Deming's Plan, Do, Check and Act (PDCA) improvement cycle (Feldman, 2023) implementable. PDCA is an iterative continuous improvement cycle which can only be

implemented if an organisation is a reflecting organisation, which draws lessons from its practice and constantly seeks to improve.



Plan: Institution plans rolling out its education and training programmes, based on contextual (needs) analysis.

Do: Institution pilots its plans, usually on a small- scale. At the same time, it collects monitoring data.

Check: Institution reviews the pilot, analyses the results, and draws lessons

Act: Institution takes action based on what is learned

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Deming_PDCA_cycle.PNG CC BY-SA 2.0 ZA

Figure 5: Deming Improvement Cycle

Activities

- Reflect on your organisation and state some of the factors that constrain and facilitate internal quality assurance.
- Identify an aspect of your institution and conduct a self-review using the Nadeosa quality criteria.
- Develop an improvement plan based on the self-evaluation.

Topic 4: Enhancing Quality through Policy

For ODFL to succeed, there needs to be a national policy that provides guidelines on provision. Policy provides an enabling environment for this mode of provision to thrive. It also demonstrates commitment of national leadership to mainstreaming distance education. In many countries where this mode of provision is new, the public is a bit sceptical about its credibility. Many people are hesitant to enrol their children with ODFL institutions in preference for the conventional schooling system. At the same time, there may be lack of sufficient regulatory instruments at national level to ensure that providers meet certain minimum requirements. Often, ODFL institutions are not given priority in terms of public funding. If there are no policy guidelines, distance education can be so poorly funded that students do without sufficient learning resources. This affects both enrolments and the quality of distance education provision. The case study below illustrates the importance of having policy on ODFL.

Policy for open and distance learning

Corporate author : Commonwealth of Learning [55]
Person as author : Perraton, Hilary [24], Lentell, Helen [2]
ISBN : 0-415-26307-7
Collation : 267 p.
Language : English
Year of publication : 2004
Type of document : book

Scenario Case 5

Sunland is one of the developing countries in the Pacific Island region with 24 inhabited islands scattered in the ocean. There are senior secondary schools (SSS) on Sunland that are scattered around 8 of the dispersed inhabited islands. Three of these SSS are run by the government while the other 5 are private schools that are run by church organisations. All SSS on Sunland are offering subjects using the compulsory Year 10 to Year 13 national curriculum through a conventional face-face mode. In terms of funding, the government provides all tuition fees to all students in government schools up to the end of their year 13 examination. These students also enjoy public funding for university education. Every end of year 13, which is matriculation year, the majority of students from government schools have higher achievement grades in all subjects and therefore get scholarship opportunities and placements to universities compared to their counterparts from the 5 church schools.

In 2014, some church groups opted to offer distance education through two of their secondary schools on two outer-islands. Therefore, they sought government's approval. The government approved the initiative but declined to provide financial support. This is because the government's budget only catered for the conventional face-face mainstreamed government schools. However, church groups sought other alternative sources of funding from communities and donors. This enables them to mobilise enough financial resources and technical support, including ICT infrastructure needed for the provision of distance education in the two ODFL schools. The church organisations also managed to recruit trained teachers for the two church schools. These teachers were fully trained on how to teach through the blended and online-mode from the national curriculum. Two years later, the two church

schools established on the outer-islands were fully operational and offered the national curriculum through distance education.

In 2018, during the principals' meeting of the 5 church schools, they discovered that their two church schools that offered distance education were among the top 5 schools in the Year 13 national examination and about 90% of their students had higher grades. There were high expectations for them to gain scholarship for university studies. This was a great milestone in the history for the church schools, something that had not been achieved before. However, an issue arose when government declined to fully fund all of the top year 13 students from the two open church schools. Instead, government decided to partially fund these students and encouraged them to apply for donor funding, which was obviously not easy to secure. Unfortunately, because the majority of the parents of these students were from very low education and income backgrounds, only about 20% of the top students from the two open schools were successful in securing donor scholarships. The rest couldn't enrol for university because they had no funding.

Activity

- What problems do you identify in the above case that could have been addressed by having a national policy that supports mainstreaming of distance education?
- In your view, should distance education students be publicly funded and why?
- Make an analysis of the distance education policy environment in your country. What are the main weaknesses policy gaps that constrain rolling out quality ODFL?

Scenario Case 6

Rise Open School and Success High School are two schools offering secondary school subjects in a developing country, Wonderland. As the name suggests, Rise is an open school and offers distance education. Success is a conventional face-to –face institution located in the same area as Rise. Both are public schools that roll out the national curriculum. There is a stipulated budget for Success High School from government, which is based on a defined funding formula and the school SGB strictly monitors expenditure. Policy caps fees payable by learners since the school enjoys government subsidy, including teacher salaries. In 2021 the school achieved 65% pass rate at Matriculation level, which is end of secondary school cycle. The majority of the graduates who passed secured places either at university or in other tertiary colleges in the country. Since most of the learners are from poor family backgrounds, they are fully funded by government for university education. However, university funding is in the form of a loan which students pay back when they finish their university studies.

In 2021, Rise Open School achieved a Matriculation pass rate of only 15%. There is no school governing body at the open school. Although the open school enjoys government funding, no particular funding formula is used and the school principal does not know in advance how much the school will receive from government in any one year. In 2020, the principal was surprised when he received about half the subsidy he had received in previous years. The explanation was that funds had been redirected towards managing the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, he had to engage only untrained teachers. Unlike Success High School where user fees are capped by government, Rise determines fees learners should pay. It raised

the fees in 2021 and most learners dropped out. This became an issue with local communities. A meeting was held and parents complained about low the pass rate, unaffordable fees, use of unqualified teachers, and poor learning resources which are used by learners. They also complained about inability of open school graduates to access university education, as local universities do not accept learners who go through distance education at secondary school.

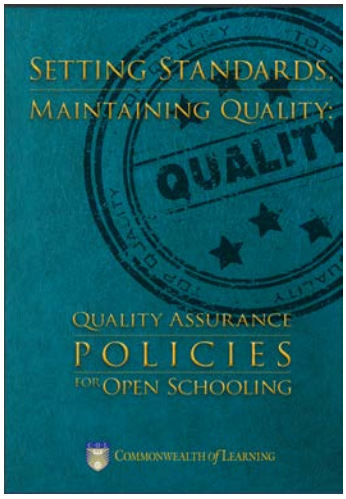
Activity

The Case Scenario clearly shows that government buys into the idea of distance education and also funds this mode of provision, though not in the same way it does conventional, face-to-face education. However, the case shows that there are a number of loopholes in the distance education policy in this country.

Identify at least three such policy loopholes in the national distance education policy and discuss how they can be addressed.

Quality Assurance Policy

The two cases above illustrate the importance of having a national policy to facilitate rolling out of quality ODFL. In addition to ODFL generally, it is also important to have a quality assurance policy at national as well as at institutional level. Quality assurance policy provides specific guidelines on what credible delivery entails and how it can be enhanced. Often, quality assurance policy also defines quality criteria to be used and sets minimum standards to be achieved by providers. In this Guide, we refer you to the wealth of resources the Commonwealth of Learning has developed over years on quality assurance policy. The example in the image below will give you insights on what quality assurance policy for open schools is all about and how it enhances quality of provision. You can access the full Quality Assurance Toolkit here.



The resource contains quality assurance policies for ten open schools in Africa and Asia. The objectives of developing the policies were to:

- provide guidance in developing high-quality, appropriate and flexible curriculum for all levels of open schooling to cater for learners who need any level of secondary education.
- provide benchmarks for the development of high-quality needs-based course materials that are suitable for the needs of local learners;
- enhance the development and implementation of an efficient system for assessing the learning performance of learners.
- provide AIOU stakeholders with guidance in instituting a culture of quality in the day-to-day operations of the Open School.

Source:https://oasis.col.org/colserver/api/core/bitstreams/36d2debd-d6f7-4cb1-8b7f-712f00b8f48d/content

Activity

Identify any one of the policies in the COL Toolkit referred to above. How does the policy compare to your institutional quality assurance policy (if there is one)? If you do not have a quality assurance policy in your institution, which aspects would you like to be in your institutional quality assurance policy and which ones would you prefer to be excluded? Also suggest aspects that are not covered in the policy you choose, which you would want to see added to your policy?

Topic 5: ICT Infrastructure and Quality

The advent of information and communication technology has provided an excellent opportunity for enhancing the quality of distance education. The disruptive nature of technology in education is noticeable in all modes of educational provision and at all levels of education. Many institutions now implement blended learning to varying extents. Technology has now placed educational institutions in a better position to accommodate students' individual learning needs. From learning management systems (LMS) to adaptive learning tools to videoconferencing, these technologies have changed how and where students learn. The pervasive use of technology in education was mainly noticed when COVID-19 struck. This pandemic shook the entire global community and pushed both sceptics and optimists of technology to embrace technology to sustain the education project. Even as many institutions drift back to pre-COVID learning practices, many of them have retained different forms of hybrid and blended learning. Hybrid learning is a combination of traditional face-to-face instruction with additional offline or distance learning techniques, such as experiential learning and digital course delivery, (World Wide Technology, 2020). Blended learning is a blend of offline and online instruction. It is important for a distance learning provider to ensure that there is a solid technology foundation if blended or hybrid learning is to succeed.

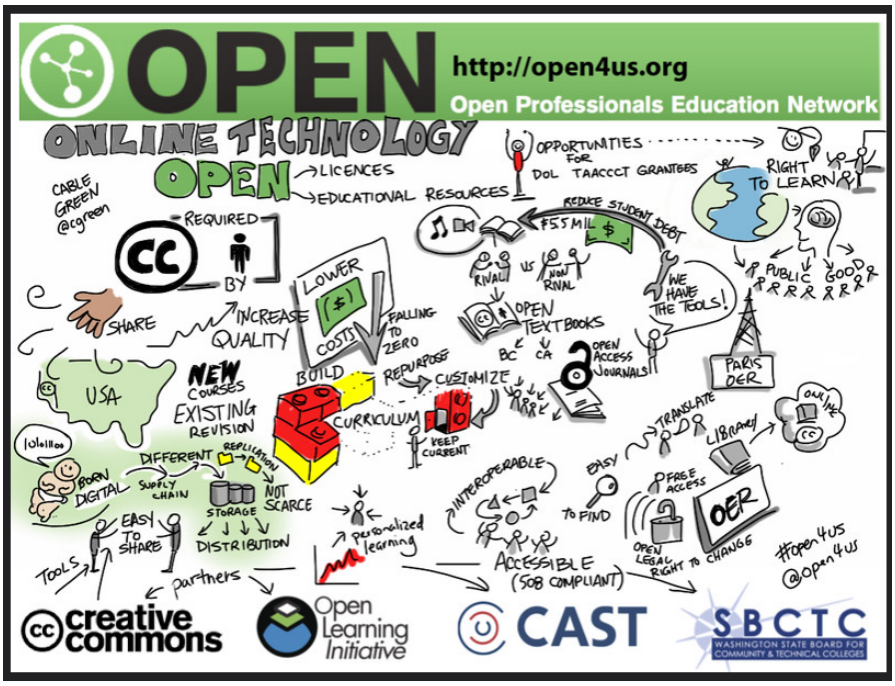


Figure 6: ICT Infrastructure and Quality

Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/gforsythe/9094358708/in/album-72157634241936529/lightbox/

Most of the students who participate in open schooling are the non-traditional type of students. These are students who attend college later in life, attend part-time, work full-time jobs and/or raise children while earning their degree, (World Wide Technology, 2020).

In many instances, most of these students also have limited technology competence. They need initial support to master the technological skills they need to learn effectively using the technology. Thus, inductions, manuals, and human support interventions are useful, especially at the beginning of their studies.

It is always useful for the provider to know the profile of students and what technologies they have access to. The case study below illustrates the all-important idea of knowing all the students enrolled in an institution and ensuring that although technology is mainstreamed in the delivery processes, unique cases are also catered for differently. Read through the case study and reflect on how the situation described therein compares to your context. Answer the few questions that come after the case study.

Scenario Case 7

Bright is a student registered with a distance education institution and has spent nearly one year studying with the institution. He lives in a remote village which is more than 400 km away from the institution's headquarters. At the orientation session that took place at the beginning of the year, he was informed that he does not need to come to the headquarters during the course of the year as "the institution will come to his doorsteps". Assignments and the associated feedback, important notices, and examinations would all be communicated to him. As the year progressed, Bright was increasingly getting anxious about not receiving any feedback on the assignments he had asked his uncle to post to the institution for him. The uncle had given him the postal slips though, so he was convinced the assignments were posted. As an enthusiastic student, Innocent continued working on his learning materials. In September, he was sent by his mother to the district town to look for a few items for use in the home. He met Precious, who was also registered with the same institution. Much to his surprise, he learnt that Precious was actually coming from writing her last end of year examination paper. When he told Precious that he didn't know that examinations were due and that he had not received any feedback on his assignments, he was told that everything was communicated in the Moodle Learning Management System and through emails. Innocent did not have any email address and had not accessed the LMS because he has no access to internet in his village. He had included all this information in his registration forms. He almost fainted when he realised that he had missed out a whole year of learning.

1. Bright's case shows:

- the importance of knowing the student profile in a distance education environment.
- the importance of using Learning Management Systems in distance education.
- that Learning Management Systems do not work in distance education.
- that it is not possible for distance education institutions to serve learners from remote areas.

2. From the case scenario, it is clear that the institution:

- Did not have sound student tracking systems.
- Required students to come to the headquarters every month.
- Did not place importance on assignment writing.

3. Bright missed communications from the institution because they were all put on the LMS. In a distance education environment, one way to avoid such miscommunication with students is to:

- use multi-channels of communications, including SMSs.
- employ as many part-time tutors as possible throughout the country.
- never invest in LMSs.
- make telephone calls to all students regularly.

If you use (or were to use) a LMS in your context, explain the challenges you face and suggest how you address some of these challenges.

Technology Tools to use in ODFL

In recent years, there has been a flurry of educational tools on the market. It is important for a provider to make informed choices of what tools to use and for which students. The context is always an important factor to consider as access to technology varies significantly from context to context.

What technology tools are most appropriate for your context?

Questions to consider

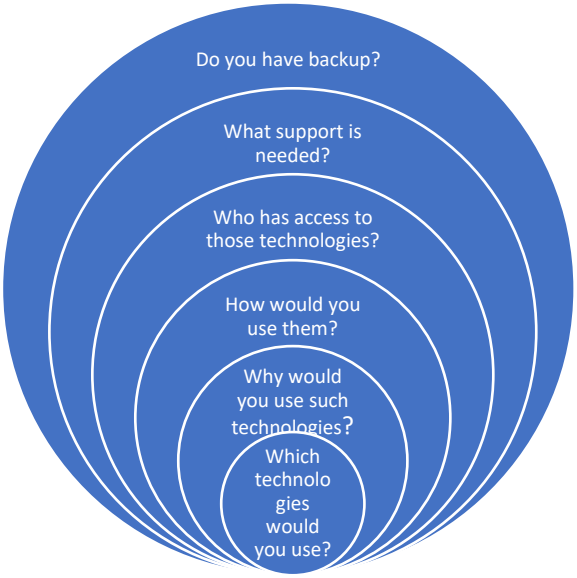


Figure 7: Ground Practice in Learning Theory

Essentially, you bring in technology to support certain forms of learning which are underpinned by your chosen pedagogical approach. Choice of the technology to use is informed by how you want you students to learn. Ideally, this should be underpinned by a sound theory of learning – constructivism, connectivism, etc. (See Tony Bates resource given below). The principle here is to be clear on why you choose to use certain types of technology and how you use them to meet your ends. Used badly, good technology on its own will not yield good results – it cannot make up for bad teaching.

Reflection

What learning theory (or theories) informs how you design learning?

The table below shows some of the affordances of technology in teaching and learning, if technology is used well. Take a few minutes to read the examples given in the left column and in the right column, write down the right types of technological tools you can use to promote the teaching and learning activities in the left column.

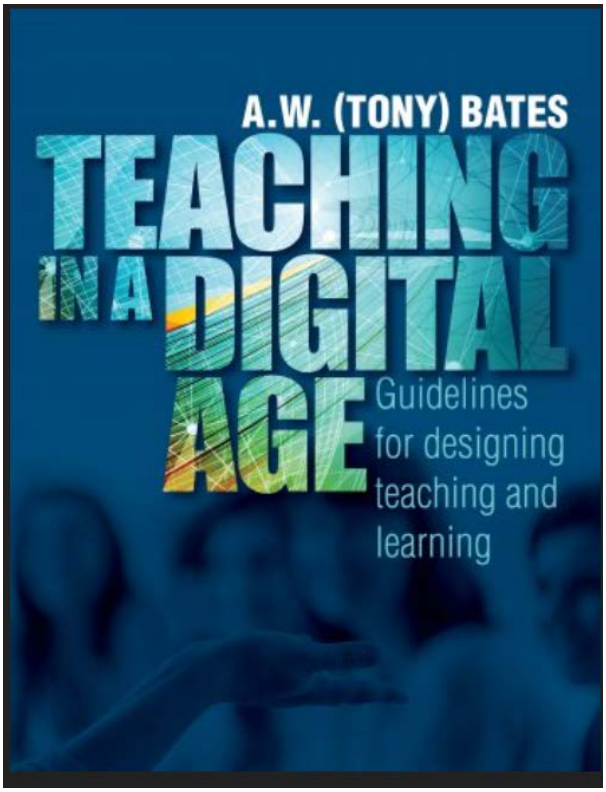
Think of more activities to add to the left column and write down the technological tools you can use.

Table 1: Affordances of technology in teaching and learning in ODFL

Teaching and Learning activity	Technologies
Promote student-teacher and student-student communication. This communication can be informational.	
Encourage social interaction - collaborative learning	
Provide learning content – reading resources, PowerPoint slides, videos, podcasts.	
Provide assignment feedback	
Synchronous engagement	
Train students to search for information independently	
Master basic technological skills	
Motivate students	
Promote experiential learning through simulations	
Track student performance	
To nudge students	

Guidelines in using technology in teaching and learning

Whilst it is generally agreed that technology adds value to teaching and learning, many practitioners need guidance on how to use such technology appropriately. You were advised to ground use of technology in sound learning theory above. Tony Bates, (2015) a prominent researcher on how to design teaching and learning using technology gives extremely useful hints on how to use technology to maximise learning gains. You are encouraged to read his seminal work on this subject which can be freely accessed here.



Source: https://opentextbc.ca/teachinginadigitalage/

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Structure of Book

Chapter 1: Fundamental Change in Education.

Chapter 2: The nature of knowledge and the implications for teaching.

Chapter 3: Methods of teaching: campus-focused.

Chapter 4: Methods of teaching with an online focus.

Chapter 5: MOOCs.

Chapter 6: Understanding technology in education.

Chapter 7: Pedagogical differences between media

Chapter 8: Choosing and using media in education: the SECTIONS model.

Chapter 9: Modes of delivery.

Chapter 10: Trends in open education.

Chapter 11: Ensuring quality teaching in a digital age.

Chapter 12: Supporting teachers and instructors in a digital age.

Scenario Case 8

Maria goes to Moonlight Open Learning College which has gone the technology route in delivering its secondary school curriculum. The College resorted to using Moodle for most of its processes, including providing reading materials and assignments to students. Unlike in the past when the delivery system was paper-based, all students are now required to upload their assignments on the LMS for marking. Tutors give feedback on assignments on the same platform. There are discussion forums where students are expected to interact with their peers. Students can also post questions and other queries for their tutors online. The Moodle assignment submission system is set up in such a way that once the due date is past, no student can submit assignments. The fees payment system is also automated and students pay into the College bank account online. Like the assignments, once the deadline is reached, students cannot make payments into the account using the online system. They also can't access College tests or examination papers if their fees are not paid.

Maria lives in a very remote area where connectivity is sometimes an issue. She however has discovered spots where connectivity is more stable, and she goes to those places whenever she wants to upload or download content from the LMS. In October 2022, she was late in submitting her last assignments because her mother suffered a stroke in September and was admitted in hospital. So, she spent most of her time visiting her mother and taking full responsibility for her siblings in the home. There were also hospital bills to be paid, which delayed payment for her fees. Two days before the cut-off date for assignments, she left the hospital where she had visited her mother in the afternoon to go and do her assignments. After spending the whole night awake, she managed to finish the outstanding assignments. It was on a Thursday night and her plans were to submit assignments the following Friday. She also planned to secure money on Friday to deposit into her

account so she could transfer into the College account before 16h00 on the Friday, which was the cut-off time for paying fees. Examinations were going to commence on the morning of the following Monday and as per College regulations, any student owing fees won't gain access to examination papers that are also online. In spite of the challenges she was facing, she was determined to meet deadlines for assignments as well as for settlement of her fees.

On Friday morning, she logged into the system to upload assignments. Although internet looked stable, the system couldn't upload her assignments. She tested other sites and could easily access content, she was sure there was a technical glitch with the College system. She tried to phone a colleague who was in the adjacent district but unfortunately the friend was not reachable. She tried again later in the day and there was no change, the assignments couldn't upload. She then resorted to paying fees from her account into the College bank account. At first she encountered challenges but after several trials, she managed to make an electronic deposit into the account – what a sigh of relief!! But the assignments were still outstanding. With only 30 minutes left before cut-off time, she decided to phone the College head office to explain her problem. Luckily, the call went through and she was told that the College system was down. Her problem was noted and she was going to be allowed to access the examination the following Monday.

Much to her dismay, when she tried to login to access the examination on the Monday, the system couldn't allow her. Each time she tried she got the message, "You cannot access the examination site because your fees for the semester are outstanding". This drove her mad since she had cleared her fees before the deadline the previous Friday and she had proof of payment. She tried to phone the College headquarters but no one answered her call. She missed her examinations. What a frustrating experience!!

When she raised the query later and the College investigated, it turned out that the problem actually lied with the bank. Any deposits made after 14h00 on a Friday can only appear in the College account after 08h00 the following Monday. Many students didn't have this information and in fact, Maria was not the only one who missed her examinations.

Questions

1. Imagine you plan ICT policies in your institution, what lessons do you draw from Maria's experience?
2. What guidelines would you put in place for your distance education students to avoid going through the experience Maria went through?
3. There is always heavy dependency on other parties in serving your distance education students. However, since students register with the providing institution, the latter takes full responsibility for the quality of services students enjoy. How do you ensure that your students are not short-changed by other parties you collaborate with in your school business?
4. In your context, identify stakeholders that you (would) work with in rolling out distance learning. For each stakeholder, list the potential risks that are involved and show how you can mitigate each of the risks.

Topic 6.1: Optional Readings

This section contains links to optional readings which you might find interesting. If you read any of these case studies or reports, reflect on what Quality Assurance issues are being addressed.

Pan-Pacific

A Baseline Study on Technology-Enabled Learning in the Commonwealth Pacific Island Countries: Report: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/1738

At-Risk Students: An Early Intervention System: https://doi.org/10.56059/pcf10.1292

e-Proctoring Exams at a Regional University during Covid-19: Understanding the Challenges: https://doi.org/10.56059/pcf10.8930

COL Review of Flexible Learning at the University of the South Pacific: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/1675

Improving the Efficacy of Mentorship with an Open Education Ecosystem: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/4065

The Integration of Multimedia for Online and Blended Learning at the University of the South Pacific: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/2499

Fiji

Building Educational/Academic Resilience through Digital Literacy: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/4451

Educational Interventions to Improve Student Readiness: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/4373

Institutional Surveys on Open Educational Resources at Fiji National University: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/4934

Kiribati

Open Education in Kiribati: Stakeholder Perception of the Quality of E-Learning Resources: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3331

Papua New Guinea

An Exploratory Case Study: The Sudden Introduction of Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) in an ODL Accounting Program. The University of Papua New Guinea Open College (UPNG OC) experience: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/2522

Evaluating learning objectives and expected student learning outcomes through the analysis of written examinations: A Case Study in the University of Papua New Guinea Open College: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/1811

Impact of Technology-Enabled Learning on Student Learning Experiences and Teacher Pedagogic Practices at The University of Papua New Guinea: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3886

Report on the Baseline Study of Technology-Enabled Learning at the University of Papua New Guinea: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3214

The Perception of Students About the Cost of Studying by Open and Distance Learning: Case of the University of Goroka: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/2556

Samoa

An Evaluation of the Usefulness and Ease of Use of the Aptus Within the Samoan Education Context: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/2819

Learning for Development from Within and Beyond the Reef: Early Implementations of Open Distance Learning and Use of Open Educational Resources (OER) for the Teaching of English in a Small Island State: https://doi.org/10.56059/jl4d.v3i3.171

Tonga

A Multimodal Education Response to the Resilience Challenge in Tonga: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/4384

Topic 6.2: Other Quality Assurance Guidelines

Developing Quality Blended Learning Courses: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3739

Guidelines for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of MOOCs: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/2362

Open and Distance Learning Quality Assurance in Commonwealth Universities: A Report and Recommendations for QA and Accreditation Agencies and Higher Education Institutions: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/2046

Quality and Equity in Digital Learning: Policy Brief: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3873

Quality Assurance Guidelines for Open Educational Resources: TIPS Framework: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/562

Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Selected Case Studies: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/102

Quality Assurance: Good Practices in ODL in Sub-Saharan Africa: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3132

Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Symposium Papers: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/493

Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/103

Quality Assurance of Blended and Online Learning: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/4484

Quality Assurance Rubric for Blended Learning: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3615

Quality Assurance Toolkit for Open Schools: http://hdl.handle.net/11599/107

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