

Quality Assurance for Open, Distance and eLearning: Issues for Developing Countries



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Introduction

I welcome the opportunity to address this important seminar on behalf of the Commonwealth of Learning, which is delighted to be associated with this exciting event. I have prepared these remarks with the help of my colleague Professor Asha Kanwar, who was the Commonwealth of Learning's Higher Education specialist before her recent appointment as our Vice-President. She has written extensively on quality assurance and has helped many countries and institutions to adopt a quality culture and set up quality assurance systems. I am very pleased that her successor as COL's Higher Education specialist, Dr Willie Clarke-Okah, is here with us and I invite you to introduce yourselves to him if you have not already done so.

Asha and I have taken the title: *Quality assurance for open, distance and eLearning: Issues for developing countries*. Our comments will draw on a recent book in COL's series *Perspectives on Distance Education* co-edited by Asha and Badri Koul. It looks closely at how institutions in developing countries are tackling quality issues and its title, *Towards a Culture of Quality*, is the underlying theme of our remarks. We commend the book to you.

I begin with the obvious question: what is quality? We define quality as 'fitness for purpose at minimum cost to society'. This may seem like an unsophisticated definition, but we cannot take either half of this statement for granted. Many countries are debating whether their tertiary education systems are indeed fit for purpose; asking whether they provide the education and training that students and society need. Developing countries should not waste scarce public resources on institutions that do not fulfil useful purposes.

Minimum cost to society has not been a big preoccupation for many universities. In the USA costs and tuition fees in tertiary education have risen faster than inflation for as long as anyone can remember. There and in other western countries universities have acquired a monumental function in addition to their core functions of teaching, research and service.

D. H. Lawrence, one of my favourite poets, wrote a poem about this monumental function:

Nottingham's New University

In Nottingham , that dismal town
where I went to school and college
they've built a new university
for a new dispensation of knowledge Built it most grand and cakeily
out of the noble loot
derived from shrewd cash-chemistry
by good Sir Jesse Boot

It goes on for five more verses and is a rather mean little poem. The University of Nottingham is a good university and I quote Lawrence simply because he is the only poet I know who has written about the monumental and commemorative function of universities.

Universities as monuments have their place. What better way can rich people dispose of their wealth than by investing in education? However, if the public is paying the bill and public funds are scarce, as they are in developing countries, then tertiary education must be expanded in ways that maximise fitness for purpose and minimise cost to society. Universities should not be monuments.

Expansion is the real and present challenge for tertiary education in developing countries. Pressures for expansion come from three sources. First, there is a huge disparity in Age Participation Rates in postsecondary education between the levels of 50% or more now considered the norm in OECD countries and rates of less than 10% in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The second pressure is to raise Age Participation Rates when the age cohort is growing rapidly because developing countries have young populations. The median age of the 53 countries of the Commonwealth is only 25 years.

Third, we are not concerned only with the conventional age cohort of tertiary education, the 18-23 year olds. In this era of lifelong learning people return regularly to postsecondary education, putting extra and different pressures on postsecondary institutions.

The scale of the challenge to tertiary education in the coming decades can be shown by applying the modest target of a 35 percent Age Participation Rate to the four billion people at the bottom of the world's economic pyramid. This would yield 150 million additional students, far more than today's global total. In summary, tens of millions of young adults in the developing world will be seeking postsecondary education in the coming years.

Tertiary Education in the 21st Century: an evolving profile

How can developing nations respond to this massive demand? Since those countries will soon account for the majority of enrolments in tertiary education worldwide, their answers to this question will effectively define the global profile of tertiary education in the 21st century.

By necessity, and in the spirit of fitness for purpose at minimum cost to society, developing countries will likely change the current profile of postsecondary education in three ways. First, private institutions operating for profit will play a much larger role than they currently do in developed countries. Second, all types of institutions, public, private for-profit and private not-for-profit, will conduct more and more of their activities by open, distance and eLearning. Third, and largely as a consequence of the growing numbers of for-profit providers and the increase in open, distance and eLearning, more postsecondary education will take place across national borders. Some students will stay at home but study with an institution based in another country.

We shall look at these three trends through the lens of our definition of quality.

Private, for-profit tertiary education

First then, what of the contribution of private, for-profit tertiary institutions? The International Finance Corporation of the World Bank is doing a great job helping countries and entrepreneurs to set up such institutions so our comments will be brief.

To be fit for purpose a for-profit institution must make a profit. To do so in a sustainable way it must attract students and continue to attract them. This means offering programmes that students perceive as useful.

For-profits are often accused of offering a narrow curriculum confined to Business Studies and Information Technology, but they cannot be accused of irrelevance to the labour market. Do for-profits minimise the cost to society? They certainly reduce the cost to the public purse, because their investment comes from private sources and their income comes largely from fees paid by individuals or their employers. This is not the place to enter the wider debate about private investment in education, which made even the World Bank twitchy until quite recently.

All education yields a blend of public and private benefits to students but the element of private benefit is relatively greater in tertiary education. For this reason the World Bank has authorised the International Finance Corporation to help get private money into tertiary education and to construct tuition fees regimes that balance profitability for the investors with accessibility for students. The IFC is excellent at constructing risk-sharing models which make a small investment go a long way in opening up more places for students.

Distance learning

The next feature in the global profile of 21st century higher education is a greater role for distance learning. Our title groups together open, distance and eLearning. Many learned treatises have been written on the differences between these types of learning but I shall keep it simple. Open learning means the

removal of barriers to learning. These may be admission pre-requisites, requirements for physical attendance in a particular time and place, possession of particular equipment and so on. Distance learning means that the learners spend much of their time separated in space from the teaching institution and its staff. There are clearly links between open and distance learning and they are often grouped together. Learning at a distance removes the barriers of space and time and makes learning more open. Distance learning is not necessarily open in other ways, such as being flexible about pre-requisites, although it often is. Similarly a conventional campus can do things to open up learning more widely without having to teach at a distance.

eLearning is a slippery word. Originally, which is not long ago, it meant learning at a computer screen and not much else. Call that 'pure' eLearning. But when people found that pure eLearning wasn't very popular with students and started adding other elements to the learning environment (such as books, for goodness sake!) they retained the term eLearning. Because pure eLearning was not as popular with students as its promoters expected, much energy has been devoted to the quality assurance of eLearning.

Now assuring quality is always a good thing, but we should remember that the disappointing reception for early forms of pure eLearning was not mainly due to lack of quality but to the weakness of the business model. Today eLearning is really just a sexier term for distance learning, or at least distance learning which has some elements of learning with a computer, the Internet or the Web.

We shall use the term distance learning to cover all of these approaches and subsume the quality assurance of eLearning within the overall quality assurance of distance education.

Distance learning has some significant inherent advantages if we consider that quality is fitness for purpose at minimum cost to society. Throughout history education has struggled to break out of the iron triangle defined by the three vectors of access, quality and cost. Ask ministers of education of developing countries - or developed countries for that matter - what they are trying to achieve and they will say that they want wide access to education of quality at low cost.

The problem, which the iron triangle expresses, is that with conventional methods this is difficult. Put more students in the classroom to increase access and people will accuse you of reducing quality. Provide better learning materials to improve quality and the cost will go up. Hire less qualified teachers to cut costs and both quality and access may nosedive. You get the picture.

The consequence of the iron triangle is that when we think about education our minds have developed an insidious link between quality and exclusivity. Even enlightened people like those of us here are guilty of this. We assume, almost instinctively, that we can't have quality education without excluding most people from it.

Distance learning is revolutionary because it allows us to reshape the iron triangle in a way that has eluded us throughout history. It allows us to increase access, improve quality and cut costs - all at the same time. This has never happened before in education. It is a revolution. Having revolutionised the relationship between quality, cost and access in other areas of life technology, through distance learning, is finally having an impact on education.

But note that I said 'it allows us'. It does not compel us. People can construct distance learning systems, and many have, without achieving these goals, without recasting the iron triangle in a revolutionary way. Much pure eLearning in rich countries has not increased access, has probably increased costs and may not have done much for quality. Earlier forms of correspondence education certainly did increase access and cut costs, but there were frequent questions about quality. However, since we argue that the ability to recast the triangle so as to increase access, improve quality and cut costs is an inherent feature of distance learning we ought to give an example.

I give the example of the UK Open University, which illustrates well how the triangle is transformed. The UK Open University inaugurated a new era in distance learning worldwide when it opened for business in 1971. It quickly became the largest university in the UK and today has some 200,000 students, 30,000 of them outside the UK. In the early days it attracted adults who had missed the opportunity of tertiary study when they were young. Today they are augmented by increasing numbers of conventional age students who choose this form of study instead of regular attendance on a campus. This phenomenon is occurring worldwide.

Open universities that had a rather narrow bell curve plot of enrolments against age now have a broader curve as more younger and older students are attracted to this form of learning. As well as extending access massively the Open University also cut costs. Cost comparisons commissioned by the government showed a cost per graduate that was 60-80% of the cost of a graduate from a conventional institution. But the most striking feature of the OU story is quality. Until recently the UK's quality assurance system included assessments of teaching quality by discipline. The newspapers ranked the overall quality of each university's teaching by aggregating its scores on these assessments.

The last time these aggregates were done the Open University ranked fifth out of one hundred universities, one above my own alma mater, Oxford University - a result which does not surprise me at all! Furthermore the UK government recently surveyed a sample of 170,000 students in all universities about their satisfaction with their university and what it offered them. In this assessment the Open University came out top; a remarkable result that is a powerful testimony to the quality of distance learning when it is done properly.

This example illustrates the capacity of distance learning to minimise cost to society while raising both quality and access. The fitness of distance learning for the purposes of the developing world is largely demonstrated by the way that they have adopted it. I take my own parish, the Commonwealth. In 1988, the year that the Commonwealth of Learning was created, there were ten Commonwealth open universities, including one in Africa and four in India. Today there are 23, including 4 in Africa and no less than 13 in India. Between them these 23 institutions enrol over 4 million students, a massive increase in access that is changing the profile of higher education. I

n India 24% of tertiary students are distance learners and the government wants to raise this to 40%. In South Africa a majority of black African tertiary students are distance learners. This meeting is about tertiary education, but I note that the big push now is to extend distance learning to the secondary school level through open schooling. Countries that are struggling to achieve Universal Primary Education will not be able to cope with the growing demand for conventional secondary schooling in the foreseeable future. Therefore many countries want to create or expand open schools. Interestingly, this is largely a

matter of South-South cooperation where India , which has 1.5 million youngsters in its open schooling system, is sharing its expertise with Africa .

Cross-border higher education

The third new feature in the global profile of 21st century tertiary education will be more education across national borders. The speakers who follow me, Stamenka Uvaliæ-Trumbiæ and Stéphan Vincent-Lancrin will major on this so we make only three points.

First, distance learning lends itself particularly well to cross-border education, and this will be increasingly true as connectivity and communications improve. Second, cross-border distance learning makes governments and quality assurance agencies nervous because it can be difficult to regulate. However, the evidence shows that a distance teaching institution in country A will not attract many students in country B unless it establishes some sort of physical presence there.

In our view the best type of presence, for reasons of both pragmatism and principle, is partnership with a local institution. Governments should make it easy for foreign distance education providers to establish a local presence if they do not want them to operate entirely under the radar!The third point is that today cross border tertiary education in the poorer developing countries is a negligible phenomenon in volume terms, but this may be about to change. The University of South Africa has initiated a major project in Ethiopia whilst India is encouraging its institutions to use Indian satellites to teach across Africa .

At present, however, numbers of cross-border students in developing countries are tiny. This gives developing countries time to react to the trend to cross-border provision with policy and regulatory arrangements. We hope that they will view cross-border education as a positive trend that could help them expand access to tertiary studies at low cost. The UNESCO/OECD Guidelines that Stamenka and Stéphan will talk about next are a valuable contribution to policy creation.

Quality assurance for distance learning

Everything that we have said so far suggests that distance learning will expand rapidly in developing countries the coming years. First, many of the growing numbers of private, for-profit providers will adopt distance learning methods.

Second, large-scale distance learning in public tertiary institutions continues to expand rapidly.

Third, distance learning will become a vehicle of choice for cross-border tertiary education.

This means that the quality assurance of distance learning will become a growing preoccupation in the years ahead. To simplify we distinguish four phases in the quality assurance of distance learning. Back in the 1970s, when modern multi-media distance learning was still fairly new, its chief quality goal was parity of esteem, which often meant adopting quality measures more suited to face-to-face teaching. In the 1980s, as distance learning gained confidence, its own intrinsic features came to be seen as legitimate parameters for assessing quality.

I shall come to those intrinsic features in moment. In the 1990s, with the rapid development of state quality assurance systems, distance learning and face-to-face institutions found themselves subject to similar external quality assessment systems. This was a good development because it emphasised that quality assurance for distance learning should be part of the overall quality assurance scheme for tertiary education and not some special add-on. The UK 's love affair with quality assurance and quality assessment in the 1990s was part of a wholesale reform of higher education.

I was then vice-chancellor of the Open University and we argued strongly - and successfully - that the Open University should be subject to the same QA systems as other tertiary institutions. This was good for the QA systems because it obliged them to design more generic approaches than they might have developed for face-to-face teaching institutions alone. It was also good for the Open University because it put us on the map with league tables like the one

I showed earlier and gave us some great moments. I have happy memories of the announcement that the Open University was the only university to score full marks for the quality of its programme in General Engineering. How did the QA system cope with a diversity of delivery modes? It did so by focusing on six generic aspects of tertiary education. These were:

- Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation
- Teaching, Learning and Assessment
- Student Progression and Achievement
- Student Support and Guidance
- Learning Resources
- Quality Management and Enhancement

One could, of course, divide up the tertiary education process differently. However, the key point we make here is that whatever the list, it is much easier to conduct quality assurance and assessment for distance learning than for face-to-face teaching.

This is because distance learning uses the well-tried industrial principles of division of labour and specialisation, operating more systematically and self-consciously than a campus operation. When the quality assessors came to the Open University it was very easy to show them the systems and the materials for each of these processes.

Pure eLearning is a particularly good example of a component of distance learning where it is easy to make everything explicit. This makes distance learning well adapted to the fourth phase in the evolution of quality assurance practice that we are now entering. In this decade the emphasis is less on compliance with external assessment mechanisms and more on the creation of a culture of quality. It is time to dust off the intrinsic measures of quality in distance learning that were first articulated in the 1980s. Some people try to make distance learning complicated but it is really very simple. Think of it as a student sitting on a three-legged stool.

She is supported in three ways. First, there must be appropriate learning materials. The economies of scale and the quality of scale inherent in media-based materials are a major reason for the revolution that allows distance learning to reshape the iron triangle. But materials by themselves are not enough. Students must also be supported by human beings. Good distance learning systems have arrangements for tutoring students. Because they involve people these have less potential for economies of scale, but they too can be carried out in a very systematic way that builds in quality. The third leg of the stool is logistics. Large distance education systems - and some have hundreds of thousands of students - present complex organisational challenges. If these are addressed professionally, however, the overall result can be very effective. Division of labour and specialisation are crucial to successful operation.

The Challenge for Developing Countries

How does all this play out for developing countries? The essential test for quality assurance arrangements there is whether the QA system itself meets our quality test of being 'fit for purpose at minimum cost to society'. Cost is a huge obstacle. I mentioned the UK government's love affair with quality assurance in the 1990s. Whatever the outcomes and benefits of the systems that love affair with QA generated they were hugely expensive, particularly in academic time.

They are far too expensive for use in developing countries where the academic staff are already hard pressed. Much the same stricture applies to the accreditation systems used in other rich countries. They may assure quality, but at great expense. What are the alternatives? The best alternative is to move towards a culture of quality. This also takes in the direction of two important goals that Mala Singh emphasised in her important address on Sunday, re-enfranchising the academic staff and making the commitment to improvement more than rhetorical.

The goal must be to evolve *Towards a Culture of Quality*, the title of the Commonwealth of Learning 's book that I mentioned earlier. The book quotes examples from developing countries. Let me share two of them. Kyambogo University, Uganda, has a teacher training programme by distance learning that strives for quality in an environment characterized by paucity of funds, lack of the required human resources and absence of infrastructure. They do not operate by the postulates of internal and/or external assessment; instead they judge quality as the care that the institution gives to its students.

For them the culture of quality is a function of attitude and ethos. They assure the quality of the training they provide by ensuring, in the first place, the quality of their study material and then they add to its value by the provision of learner support that is intimate and non-commercial in character, but highly satisfying for learners living in remote locations and abject situations.

The Indira Gandhi National Open University is the world's largest open university with over one million students. We give the example of its non-formal training programme designed to train the elected members of local councils, called *panchayats*. A sizeable percentage of these people are illiterate or neo-literate. Starting with meticulous planning, the project team conducts needs analyses, identifies the most relevant structural components of the programme, assigns content components to relevant media to effect a suitable media-mix and works out a suitable evaluation strategy.

In parallel, training is given to course writers, trainers, counsellors and other support personnel to ensure the effective implementation and sustainability of the programme. The programme reaches tens of thousands of people ranging from illiterates to degree holders. It builds on their diverse capabilities, imparts complex content and skills and is self-sustaining. These achievements are the criteria that define its quality and the programme has won international acclaim. These examples illustrate the first and core dimension in a culture of quality in distance learning, which is attention to study materials, instructional design, learner support, learner assessment and systemic research—all seen through the lens of the learner. We are back to our three-legged stool. The second requirement is a framework for the distance learning operation.

This systemic dimension includes state policy on quality assurance regimes; participatory governance arrangements that ensure wide commitment to quality assurance; competent institutional leadership and management; and planning based on monitoring and evaluation. The third resource dimension emphasises the need for academic and technical expertise, learning resources, infrastructure, institutional networking and appropriate technology.

We end with a question and a hypothesis. The question is how do we close the gap between the resource-intensive approach to quality assurance and accreditation based on external assessments, and approaches that develop cultures of quality less expensively? Part of the answer may lie in the growing eLearning component of distance learning and especially in the trend towards open educational resources, by which we mean open source software, open course content and tools. Traditional distance learning materials had a certain longevity that made it easier for external assessors to examine them.

However, eLearning components are by their nature dynamic and open educational resources are even more dynamic. The eLearning package that an assessor views today may have changed by tomorrow. An extreme analogy is the collaboratively developed encyclopaedia Wikipedia. In its first manifestation in 2000 as Nupedia this had a conventional multi-stage peer review system for entries and grew only very slowly. When it was opened up to worldwide collaboration as Wikipedia the number of entries exploded and today one entry or another is being revised every second. To assure quality in such a dynamic environment requires many administrators working in real time with powerful software tools. However, - and this is our hypothesis - it seems that a massive collaborative enterprise like Wikipedia becomes a self-organising system in which division of labour and specialisation happen spontaneously. These are, of course, two features that distinguish distance learning from classroom instruction.

Wikipedia is an extreme case but perhaps it illustrates the trend that is taking quality assurance systems towards a dynamic audit approach that continuously examines the ethos, practices and processes of institutions rather than a static assessment approach that reviews materials, systems and products. In the words of C. K. Prahalad: "It is advisable to follow not just best practices, but to develop next practices to blaze a trail and stay ahead of the pack!"

Conclusion

Our conclusions are simple. Rapid expansion in the developing world will change the profile of global tertiary education. Distance learning will play a role in this expansion because it fulfils the basic quality criterion of being fit for purpose at minimum cost to society. Quality assurance systems will also have to

meet this criterion. They can best do so by helping institutions evolve towards a culture of quality. This implies that the major challenge for quality assurance in the years ahead is capacity building at all levels.

Reference

Koul, B.N. and A. Kanwar (Eds.) (2006) *Towards a Culture of Quality*, Commonwealth of Learning , Vancouver