

# *Higher Education, Teacher Education, Distance Education: What is Quality and Who says so?*

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*National Assessment and Accreditation Council  
&  
Commonwealth of Learning*

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## *Introduction*

The Commonwealth of Learning is delighted to team up with the National Assessment and Accreditation Council to offer this two-part workshop on Materials Development for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. I was honoured to be present when NAAC celebrated its tenth anniversary last year and it is good to be back in Bangalore again. COL admires greatly what NAAC has accomplished in a relatively short time and congratulates Professor Prasad and all the staff on the leadership role they are playing in India. NAAC's impact is being felt around the world because of the thoughtful way in which it approaches quality assurance and assessment and because of the huge scale of its operation.

I congratulate Professor Prasad on his own role in international forums such as INQAAHE and the Asia Pacific Quality Network. In the world of quality assurance in higher education NAAC is now one of the main centres of action!

I am particularly pleased to be here with two of my distinguished COL colleagues who are both from India. Professor Mohan Menon, formerly of IGNOU and the National Open School, leads COL's work in school and teacher development. Professor Asha Kanwar, formerly of IGNOU and UNESCO leads our work on higher education. It is a special pleasure to be back in India with Professor Kanwar for the first time since she was appointed Vice-President of COL, a post she takes up on April 1st. She is the first Indian since the late Professor Ram Reddy to be Vice-President of COL and I congratulate her warmly.

COL is very proud of its ongoing link with NAAC to prepare materials to support institutional quality assurance and also to address the most crucial current issue that links school education and higher education worldwide, namely the education of teachers. If it is to achieve the goal of Universal Primary Education, let alone the broader agenda defined by the six goals of Dakar, the world must recruit, train and provide professional development for millions of teachers. It is a challenge of quantity and quality.

The challenge of quantity is breathtaking. Africa alone needs 5 million new teachers by 2015 and estimates for the whole world vary from 15 to 30 million. Conventional methods of teacher education in college and university classrooms simply cannot address the scale of the challenge. This, of course, is just one subset of the larger challenge of rapidly expanding higher education systems all over the developing world.

It seems that the forecast for 2020 of 120 million students worldwide will be hit well before that, maybe even by 2010. Malaysia, a relatively small country, plans to add one million tertiary students in the next 4 years. Many countries want to shift the Age Participation rate in Higher Education from less than 10% to over 40%.

The challenge of quality is just as great, for higher education generally and for teacher education. Quality schooling, whether carried out in classrooms or in open schools, requires quality teachers. Parents and children are quick to notice if teachers are not up to their task. If the opportunity cost of going to school is significant many children will simply stop attending if teaching is poor. Parents will cease to believe that education is the route to a better life and the drive to get all children to complete basic education will falter.

This would be a tragedy because an education of quality is the route to a better life. It is the ladder that leads to increasing freedom; and freedom, as Amartya Sen argues so persuasively, is the measure of development. And not only the measure of development but also the primary means of development because it is free people, freed by education and acting as free agents, that nurture the development of families, of communities and of nations.

So we have a challenge of quantity and a challenge of quality. COL is helping the governments of the Commonwealth to increase the quantity of teachers by showing how conventional teacher education institutions can become dual-mode institutions and greatly increase the scale of their operations. We also continue to foster the development of open universities, which have made a stellar contribution to the education and professional development of Commonwealth teachers for nearly half a century.

That work continues, but in these two days we shall focus on the quality side of the equation. When I was Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO I used to urge Ministers of Education not to think of quantity and quality as an either/or proposition, but rather as a both/and proposition. National education systems should develop in ways that constantly iterate between the concern to increase quantity and the challenge of improving quality.

I have entitled these remarks Higher Education, Teacher Education, Distance Education: What is it and Who says so? These workshops are about Material Development for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. So we are talking about higher education. But we are also taking advantage of this gathering to release the new publication Quality Indicators for Teacher Education so the issue of teacher education is on our minds as well. And because this event involves COL we are also addressing distance education.

So my first question is simply, can we take a common approach to quality assurance for higher education, teacher education and distance education or do we have to treat each one differently? I shall argue that there is a common approach that cuts across programmes and modes of delivery. We must not lose sight of this commonality of purpose that unites higher education even if, at the level of detail, we have to tailor our quality assurance systems slightly differently for different client groups and different delivery methods.

My second question, which I shall address briefly, is simply 'who says that the quality is good?' How will quality assurance systems cope with the steady expansion of higher education, not so much in numbers, but in diversity of provision? For example, the multiplication of private, for-profit providers is a significant new phenomenon.

## What is Quality?

Let me start with the basics. What is quality? My preferred definition of quality is simply: 'fitness for purpose at minimum cost to society'. The word I stress here is purpose. The more noble and ambitious our purpose; the greater is the challenge of quality that we set ourselves. If our purpose is banal we may achieve it easily. If we set ourselves exalted and inspiring goals then the task of ensuring quality will be harder. Those lofty and ambitious goals must relate to the outcomes of our work for our students.

An admirable feature of NAAC is that it has taken the trouble to define the core values which are the principal purposes of tertiary education in India, and the criteria under which quality will be assessed. It has even had the creativity to identify seven steps to quality higher education that can make up the acronym QUALITY! In other words, it has created a framework to guide its action.

Let us start with values. The NAAC has identified five core values for institutions of higher education, as goals of their activities. They are:

\* Contribution to National Development

- \* Fostering Global Competencies among Students
- \* Inculcating a Value-System in Students
- \* Promoting the Use of Technology
- \* Quest for Excellence

If other countries were to articulate a set of values for higher education they might choose them differently. However, I find it admirable that NAAC starts with the contribution to national development, which is surely important not just for a developing country but for any country. Higher education must yield public benefits as well as advantages to individuals.

NAAC follows this up with the purpose of fostering global competencies but then returns to the inculcation of a value-system - presumably an Indian value system in NAAC's case. Promoting the use of technology might not appear in every national list or purpose but the quest for excellence does seem to be one of the universal values of higher education - even though it may be more often talked about than vigorously pursued.

Those are the general purposes for higher education. Now look at these core values through the lens of Teacher Education. I believe that, as stated, they would be endorsed by most countries because they can be adapted to any national context. Most Ministries of Education would want their teachers trained within a framework of values like these.

Let us look now at the criteria that NAAC uses for assessing the quality of institutions and programmes. NAAC uses seven criteria:

- \*Curricular Aspects
- \*Teaching-Learning and Evaluation
- \*Research, Consultancy and Extension
- \*Infrastructure and Learning Resources
- \*Student Support and Progression
- \*Organisation and Management
- \*Healthy Practices

Let us compare these criteria with the six used by the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the 1990s. There is considerable similarity as you can see:

- Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation
- Teaching, Learning and Assessment
- Student Progression and Achievement
- Learning Resources

- Student Support and Guidance
- Quality Management and Enhancement

Most criteria use exactly the same words and those that do not mostly refer to similar activities. We may conclude from this that there is a considerable commonality of quality criteria between India and the UK. I am not suggesting that these criteria were developed independently. NAAC will have known about the UK criteria. Nevertheless in selecting criteria for the Indian context it must have found that the UK criteria required relatively little adaptation.

The group working with COL and NAAC to develop quality indicators for teacher education across the Commonwealth also had access to existing criteria but equally had to make judgements about their appropriateness. They came up with the following list:

- Curriculum Design and Planning
- Curriculum Transaction and Evaluation
- Student Support and Progression
- Research , Development and Extension
- Infrastructure and Learning Resources
- Organisation and Management

This seems to show that there is pretty wide agreement on the criteria for quality in higher education in general and teacher education in particular. But since the Commonwealth group was looking for criteria that would apply equally to face-to-face and distance education we must conclude that at the level of criteria for quality there is a high degree of commonality between higher education in general, teacher education in particular, whatever the mode of delivery.

I also promised to give you NAAC's seven steps to quality that make up the acronym quality. They are:

- \*Quest for excellence
- \*Understanding the concept
- \*Action-orientation
- \*Learner-centric approach
- \*Innovation for change
- \*Training to build competencies
- \*Year-round activity

Which is an ingenious construction and you can't argue with the importance of any of the elements, even if you might wish to add others.

You must be thinking that I have taken a long time to reach a conclusion that you may have regarded as obvious, namely that there are common criteria for quality that are widely applicable. However, it is a conclusion that is worth stressing because we are seeing a growth industry in applications of quality assurance to different manifestations of tertiary education. These applications do not always appreciate the commonalities and can easily end up not seeing the wood for the trees. I am simply making a plea that all quality assurance in higher education, teacher education and distance education start from these high level criteria.

Some of the attempts to ensure quality assurance for new manifestations of higher education are necessary and timely. For example the alarm caused in some quarters by the impact of globalisation on expanding cross-border education has led UNESCO to team up with the OECD and develop guidelines for Quality Assurance in Cross Border Higher Education. NAAC was involved in that process through Stella Antony's participation. These guidelines, which are now being adopted around the world, are an excellent example of an application of quality assurance that does place itself firmly within the high-level framework that I have outlined.

The UNESCO Guidelines emphasise the general truth that quality assurance in higher education is a matter for both providers and students and more widely, should involve all six key stakeholder groups: governments, higher education institutions, quality assurance bodies, qualifications recognition and credential evaluation bodies, students' bodies and professional bodies. UNESCO is now focusing on building QA capacity in support of the guidelines and is collecting and promoting training materials and tool-kits for this purpose. The materials that we are launching at this event are an excellent contribution to that work.

Another application that starts from the high-level framework is the quality indicators for teacher education that we are releasing at this meeting. We looked at their six criteria for quality a moment ago. Of course, in applying these general criteria to teacher education they had to go to a much greater level of specificity and detail. The team had to take each of the six criteria and apply it to the processes involved in teacher education. This led them to compile an initial list of quality indicators which was then refined and made operational by writing descriptors and attributes. The final list contains 75 indicators that cover 24 aspects of quality arising from the six general criteria and this is the basis of the Commonwealth Quality Indicator Package.

To make this concrete I give the example of Indicator #15 which relates to the criterion of Curriculum Transaction and Evaluation. The Indicator is that the institution emphasizes and the faculty members use an interactive and participatory approach in the transaction of the programme curriculum.

The Operational Definition of this is that the teacher educators employ an interactive and participatory approach in the teaching of theory and foundational courses. Explanations and justifications are

developed with the help of students and not 'taught' to them.

This Indicator is important because learning is a process of construction of knowledge and not one of receiving it from a person who knows. A learner finds it difficult to retain content that does not integrate meaningfully with his knowledge base. An Interactive and Participatory approach provides scope for removing the conceptual difficulties and misconceptions of students and creating a feeling of responsibility in learning. Evidence on which to make judgements about this indicator comes from the syllabus, classroom process, staff and students.

This example illustrates that a good quality assurance process delves deep into the specificities of the subject matter and the aims of a programme. My key point is that this delving deeper has started from six criteria of general applicability to higher education. This ensures that in looking at the trees we do not lose sight of the wood.

When quality assurance is approached in terms of delivery modes there is a greater danger of focusing on process at the expense of purpose. At the moment, for example, there is considerable activity around the issue of quality assurance in eLearning. This seems to be motivated by a view that the first wave of eLearning has been a disappointment because of poor quality. This may or may not be true. Certainly one of the most spectacular failures in eLearning, namely the winding up of the UK e-Universities project, was not a failure of quality but of business model. Likewise some pure eLearning projects may have failed because some learners do not - or at least did not - want pure eLearning, however good its quality.

We should, however, always rejoice when people concern themselves with quality. My argument is not against focusing on the quality of eLearning, but rather of the dangers of a focus that is too narrow and ignores the overall purpose - most especially the benefits to students.

Today we are beginning to hear talk about the quality assurance of a subset of eLearning, namely of the Open Educational Resources (OERS) which are developed, often collaboratively, so that they can be shared and adapted along the lines of Free/Libre Open Source Software. In this case I would argue that applying formal quality assurance is misguided. The purpose of OERS is to be shared and adapted, so two consequences follow. First, those who might want to share and re-use an OER will quickly make judgements about its fitness for purpose in their context. Second, since OERS are made to be adapted they are by definition in constant mutation and therefore difficult to put through a QA process.

This is not to argue against the development of guidelines of good practice for those who develop Open Educational Resources. I am simply saying that trying to attach a kite-mark of quality to something as transient and mutating as a re-usable learning object is illusory.

eLearning and learning objects are part of the wider reality that we know as open and distance learning and quality assurance should reflect that. Today nearly all universities are operating in dual mode; teaching both in the classroom and at a distance. It simply does not make sense to split quality assurance work in two, even though, within a unified approach, proper account must be taken of different programme requirements and different learning media.



In the 1990s it was theoretically possible to distinguish between open universities and campus universities for purposes of QA. During the UK higher education reforms of the early 1990s I remember arguing strongly - and I am glad to say, successfully, that such distinctions should not be made. As well as supporting the basic principle that the educational aims of all universities were similar, we were eager to have the quality of the UKOU assessed alongside that of the other universities because we were confident that we would show up well.

That proved to be the case and I always like to show this table of the ranking of the teaching quality of the OU after the common system for assessing the quality of teaching by subject had gone on for some years. I observe also that several subjects for which the UKOU received excellent ratings were disciplines with an important practical component, such as General Engineering, Music and Earth Sciences. This is important, because some governments and educationists are yet to be convinced that distance education can be used for practical and professional subjects, especially teacher education.

Whilst I am on the topic, let me also note the results of a recent survey of student satisfaction carried out with a sample of 170,000 students from all UK universities. The Open University came top of this survey. In other words students at the Open University are more satisfied with their experience and the service that they receive than those of any other British university.

## The Strengths of Distance Education

Why did the UK Open University emerge so well from the UK's processes of quality audit and teaching quality assessment?

The reasons lie in the structure of quality of distance education and the culture of quality within the institution. Let me deal first with the structure of quality is inherent in distance education. The institution's task is to create a culture of quality to develop that latent structure of quality.

The inherent structure of quality is there because the essence of distance education is to divide the experience of the learner into its component parts. In conventional classroom teaching each instructor is usually responsible for all aspects of the learning experience. She or he must design the curriculum or lesson, prepare any supporting learning material, teach the class and then assess student performance. This is a flexible and robust model but it does not lend itself to economies of scale. There are also separate services which look after registrarial and administrative functions.

The essence of distance learning is to disassemble the learning experience into its component parts, specialise in doing each of them competently, and then reassemble the learning experience so that it appears seamless to the student. Furthermore, this disassembly and reassembly must also include the administrative and registrarial functions, which are more closely integrated into the experience of the distance learner than that of the classroom learner.



Because they are obliged to disassemble the learning experience into its component parts and focus specifically on doing each well, distance teaching institutions have a natural advantage over face-to-face teaching institutions when facing quality assurance and assessment processes, which, as we saw in the six criteria that we looked at earlier, also look separately at the different components of the learning experience. Face-to-face teaching institutions tend to assume that because all the ingredients the learning experience are, in principle, present on the campus, they will assemble themselves spontaneously into a good experience as if by magic.

I am not saying that quality is automatic with distance teaching. Quality is never automatic. Institutions can ignore particular elements of the learning experience or do them badly. All I am saying is that by requiring us to distinguish each element of the learning process distance education gives us the opportunity, if we care to take it, to ensure quality in all areas of the operation.

During my career I have worked in seven universities in various jurisdictions. Among them the UKOU had by far the strongest culture of quality. This extended from the academic staff both full- and part-time, through the administrators right through to the packers in the warehouse. There was a palpable spirit of service to students.

Why was this? Partly it was the idealism that has persisted since the foundation of the UKOU. Partly it was the fact that much of the UKOU's work, notably the development of courses, is done in teams which have developed a strong culture of quality along several dimensions. Partly it was the very participative governance structure of the University, with strong involvement of students and tutors, which gave a widespread sense of ownership. I am sure there are other reasons too. All I can say is that it was a tremendous privilege to lead such a remarkably student-centred institution for eleven years.

These qualities are reproducible in other open universities. I do suspect, however, that such a culture is more difficult to reproduce in a dual-mode institution. That may be just my bias, although I did have the privilege of heading a dual-mode institution, Laurentian University in Ontario, for six years.

## Who says so?

Let me end with some comments on the second part of my title: who says so? Who says that the quality of higher education, teacher education or distance education is good? This may seem like a silly question to ask at NAAC which has a clear remit for quality assurance in Indian higher education. Or does it? If India is to expand from its current 7% age participation rate in higher education to the 40% or so that is the norm in developed countries there will be a huge proliferation in the number - and more importantly the type - of institutions.

India still seems to be making up its mind about the role of private, for-profit higher education but most developing countries have already decided that they simply will not be able to expand the system, with the resources available, without bringing in the private sector. Malaysia, for instance has a large part of its Ministry of Higher Education devoted to encouraging and regulating the private, for-profit sector,

although some would say that it should strive for even greater integration of the two sectors in Ministry operations.

I just said encourage and regulate - doesn't this sound like a contradiction? No, it is not. Earlier this month I took part in an international private investment forum on higher education. The World Bank organised it through its private sector arm, the International Finance Corporation. At that forum the representatives of the successful for-profit universities said that they like strong regulation of higher education because it keeps out the shoddy providers and helps private, for-profit higher education in general retain a high reputation for quality and service.

But who regulates quality? I suggest that all quality assurance or quality control in higher education must, in the end, emanate from government. Government is responsible for what happens on its territory and for protecting its citizens as consumers of higher education. It should also feel some responsibility for the international activities of all its providers, public or private, especially if the qualifications awarded purport to come from the home country.

Saying that quality assurance and regulation must emanate from government does not mean that government has to do the work directly. Most governments create semi-autonomous bodies, like NAAC, to implement QA policy. In some countries, like the USA, quality assurance and accreditation is done by regional associations of universities. Nevertheless, there are links to government and mechanisms through which it can intervene if the accreditation system loses credibility.

Although, or really because I have worked at UNESCO and COL, I do not think that an international intergovernmental body can have a credible quality assurance or accreditation function. Such a body can do excellent work, as UNESCO and the OECD have done, in creating QA guidelines in areas such as cross-border education. But these guidelines are recommendations about good practice for governments and institutions to act on - which takes us back to the key role of government.

The Quality Indicators for Teacher Education for the Commonwealth that we are releasing here are offered in exactly the same spirit.

If we agree that international intergovernmental organisations are not equipped to play judgemental roles, then, in answer to the question 'who accredits the accreditors', governments must get together to understand each other's practices.

It follows that I am sceptical of international membership associations of institutions that give themselves a quality assurance role that goes beyond advice and the sharing of good practice. Once they start giving kite-marks or any kind of accreditation we must ask by whose authority they do this. There are also the very practical risks of corruption and mutual back-scratching.

For example, although I am proud to be a former president of the International Council for Distance Education I worry about the role that ICDE now wants to give itself in awarding quality certificates, most especially when it tries to imply that this QA work is somehow being done by the authority of UNESCO

with which, like many hundreds of NGOs and associations, ICDE has a loose cooperation agreement.

The exception, that actually proves the rule, is the International Baccalaureate Organisation, an international NGO that has issues the world's most credible secondary school-leaving qualification, the IB diploma. But the IB is an exception because it is not a membership organisation of the IB schools, but an independent Swiss Foundation.

As I noted earlier, we are also seeing a plethora of attempts to conduct quality assurance on eLearning at national and international levels, in both the public and the private sector. This is good if it is aimed at improving practice by sharing good practice. However, when such processes lead to so-called accreditation or kite marks of quality we must ask two questions: first, by what authority do you do this; second, how independent is the QA body from the institution that it is reviewing?

Where does all this lead us? It must lead to the conclusion that governments must take a firm grip on this area and put in place QA frameworks that embrace the totality of higher education provision on its territory. It must embrace all types of institutions, public, private not-for-profit and private for-profit. It must also include all types of delivery methods. The time to put such structures in place is now, before the proliferation of provision starts to create difficulties.

South Africa is a good example of a country that has put in place a comprehensive framework for QA in higher education and has reaped benefits from doing so, transforming the free-for-all of the early 1990s to an orderly system with reasonable consumer protection.

However, intergovernmental bodies and international associations can play an important role in urging attention to quality assurance. My colleague and Vice-President designate, Dr Asha Kanwar, just came from a conference in Nairobi on QA in African Higher Education. The Communiqué called on UNESCO, COL, the ACU and the Association des Universités Francophones to work collaboratively to promote quality assurance in African higher education.

After hearing the first part of this presentation you will not be surprised when I suggest that all provision should be put within the same basic QA framework, such as the NAAC framework that I described earlier. Within that broad framework QA will need to be tailored to the specific features of particular institutions, but the framework should be common to all. Only in this way will we be able to give a clear answer to the question, what is quality in higher education, in any national jurisdiction. And when someone asks 'who says that this is a quality institution' we will be able identify a body that can speak with the authority of the government.

## Conclusion

I conclude by saying that COL places its own quality assurance work in just such a framework and is delighted to be associated with NAAC in its endeavours. Thank you for inviting me here. Finally, may I congratulate warmly all those who have worked on the Material for Quality Assurance that is the focus of

these workshops and the Quality Indicators for Teacher Education that we are releasing here? You have made a significant contribution to the cause of quality higher education.