

Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning in Asia: Policies and Practices

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Abstract

Open universities have emerged as an innovative pillar in the expansion of access to higher education participation, with single-mode distance education providers broadening access in many countries through economies of scale supported by large enrolments. These models raise questions about the quality of education provided. This paper reports on a comparative case study of quality assurance (QA) programs in distance education at open universities in Asia. Focusing on QA development and implementation in learner support services, the study explored QA policies, supporting management practices and structures, and the influence of internal and external environmental factors, as identified through thematic analysis of data from semi-structured interviews and policy documents. The results showed many similarities in QA for learner support at the selected ODL institutions. Their learner support services were determined to be responsive to government and external quality agencies, external cultural and language factors, and student feedback.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Open Distance Learning, Learners Support Services

1. Introduction

Open universities have emerged as an innovative pillar in the expansion of access to higher education participation, with single-mode distance education providers broadening access in many countries through economies of scale supported by large enrolments. These models raise questions about the quality of education provided. This study on a comparative case study of quality assurance (QA) programs in open and distance education at the open universities in Asia with the goal of understanding and learning from the ways in which these universities are working to achieve high-quality innovative distance education in their unique cultural contexts. Focusing on QA development and implementation in learner support services, the study will explore QA policies, supporting management practices and structures, and the influence of internal and external environmental factors, as identified through thematic analysis of data from semi-structured interviews and policy documents.

According to Guri-Rosenblit (2005), open and distance teaching institutions have mushroomed outside conventional universities, reflecting diverse clientele, programs, and funding models. The role of open universities as a path to obtaining academic qualifications, while also providing mass education in a country or region, is essential to their purpose and value.

The term quality assurance in distance education is generally understood to refer to policies, actions, systematic standards, and procedures designed to enhance quality and achieve predetermined quality criteria (Stella & Gnanam, 2004; Tait, 1997). Implementing quality assurance (QA) programs in distance education is challenging, partly because quality in this domain is difficult to define or standardize. Open higher education serves multiple stakeholders, involving relationships between and among faculty, learning material developers, tutors/instructors, learners, administrators, employers, government, and professional bodies. Integrating these diverse perspectives to make quality definitions and standards acceptable throughout the system is a complex and multi-faceted process.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) provides a QA model specifically for distance learning that provides standards and performance indicators for key performance areas (COL, 2009). A related QA framework from the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) sets out important guidelines for ten strategic issues in the distance education system (AAOU, 2010). In this framework, learners are supported by a range of opportunities for real two-way communication through the use of various forms of technology for tutoring at a distance: contact tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring, counselling, and peer support structures.

This study reviews QA in learner support areas based on these models because these organizations have had a significant influence on QA in the open universities in Asia involved in this research. It is particularly important to study quality assurance at these distance education institutions, since these institutions play such a vital role in regional development and innovation.

2. Research Objectives

The overall purpose of this study was to explore the development and implementation of QA at the open universities in Asia. This study reports on results related to institutional policies and the implementation of QA in learner support areas, documenting and comparing the institutions' QA approaches and implementation methods with the goal of advancing understanding of QA programs in open universities in the Asian context.

3. Literature Review

Open Distance Learning

The definition and scope of Open and Distance Learning and quality assurance will be addressed. ODL has evolved into or has become an integral component of post-secondary and tertiary education throughout the world. It has provided learners with opportunities of accessing educational pursuits without having to confront or grapple with the constraints and challenges of time, place and rigid programme entry requirements in a great way.

Additionally, it has benefited from the development of various technologies which are used to facilitate conventional and virtual teacher-learner interaction hence making the process more flexible and learner friendly. Coupled with the aforementioned, ODL has resulted in the almost exponential increases in students pursuing post-secondary and tertiary education across the world. However because of the increasing use of digital and online modalities in ODL there were the development of open universities and open campuses all over the world has contributed to this increase in a major way. Open and Distance Learning has been described as the most viable technique for augmenting educational access while contemporaneously enhancing the quality of education, advocating peer-to peer collaboration and providing the learners with a greater sense of autonomy and responsibility for their learning (Calvert, 2006).

Keegan (1990) describes ODL as learning facilitated by the use of various forms of technology designed to unite facilitator and learner who are separated by distance. It is also characterized by policies and practices that permit entry to learning with minimum barriers with respect to age, gender, or time constraints and with recognition of prior learning.

Specifically ODL refers to approaches to learning that concentrate on releasing learners from the constraints of time and place while providing flexible learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2002).

It is also conceptualized as a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, and educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers (UNISA, 2008).

Accordingly Keegan (2002), Mutual (2002); and Homan, Macpherson and Wilkinson (2005) suggest that ODL could be used to include distance education, distance teaching, online education, web-enabled education and distributed learning. In effect ODL is characterized by increased access to learning, flexibility of learning provision, student centeredness, more

emphasis on student support structures, carefully designed learning materials and enhanced course quality.

Quality Assurance

The rapid increase in ODL has given rise to concerns about quality. Consequently strategies and mechanisms aimed at regulating and ultimately improving the level and quality of service provided by these institutions have been initiated. Carley and Waldron (1984) state that quality assurance refers to planned, deliberate actions or activities initiated and effected with the intent/aim and purpose of maintaining and improving the quality of learning for participants.

Hartman (2002) defines quality assurance as a set of systematic procedures planned with the purpose of assessing programme activities by its stated objectives and outputs. Jung (2006) concurs but emphasises that the intention and purpose of quality assurance is also to maintain and improve the quality of learning rather than simply evaluating activities. Moreover Menon (2007) asserts that quality assurance is proactive rather than reactive in orientation in that it is designed to remove or restrict faults.

In addition, it could be argued that quality assurance is not only about devising procedures to be followed but is all inclusive because it affects all aspects of an institution's operations. Robinson (1993) is instructive in this instance through his assertion that quality assurance is also an attitude or ethos which determines every aspect in an institution's activity.

The main objective of quality assurance is to make sure that a product or service is fit for the market it serves. It consequently sets out to create reliable systems by anticipating problems and designing procedures to avoid or restrict errors and faults which may arise. Successful ODL needs an effective quality assurance system which must not only complement its orientation but improve standards as well. Kanwar's (2014) observation that there is need for appropriate quality assurance policies to ensure that the highest standards are attained is insightful.

An effective quality assurance system also includes systematic analyses of established principles designed to manage operational and academic chores or responsibilities in ODL agencies. It also comprises a wide variety of processes namely faculty performance and capability, student support services, teaching, learning and evaluation, and infrastructure and learning resources. The face/appearance of tertiary education has been affected by the development of ODL. New models of course management, library and learning resources which are enabled electronically together with audio, video, and text delivery formats constitute aspects of contemporary post-

secondary and tertiary education and training which are not accommodated by conventional quality assurance regulatory frameworks According to (World Bank Document, 2002). The values, standards, and criterion utilized in the assessment of quality in conventional campus-based programmes create confusion when the same is applied in ODL.

In sum quality in ODL implies a relationship or synergy between learning as a process and the demands, goals, standards and requirements initiated by stakeholders. It also includes quality of teaching, quality of academic and support staff, quality of student programmes, and quality of infrastructure. According to COL (1997) quality in ODL covers the physical products and pedagogical processes, product and delivery systems and philosophy. The definitions and scope of Open and Distance Learning and Quality Assurance were addressed in this Chapter. Additionally the objectives of both perspectives were discussed. The benefits learning Organizations derive from the practice of the philosophy of open learning together with those of quality assurance also comprised the contents of this chapter. The following title focused on the methodological procedures used in the study.

Quality Assurance Model in ODL

Brennan (1999) has suggested seven purposes of QA models in higher education: (1) ensuring accountability for public funds; (2) improving the quality of provision; (3) stimulating competition within and between institutions; (4) verifying the quality of new institutions; (5) assigning institutional status; (6) underwriting transfer of authority between the state and institutions; and (7) facilitating international comparisons.

In Asian countries, the common rationale behind the adoption of a QA system for ODL is to improve the quality of ODL provision. But in case of India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka where DE is publicly funded, QA is emphasized to ensure accountability for public funds. In Korea and China where private DE provision or e-learning provision by conventional universities is growing, QA also focuses on verifying the quality of new institutions and stimulating competition between DE institutions. Four basic QA approaches or models for DE exist in Asian countries: Accreditation, academic audits, performance-based funding and performance reporting.

Accreditation is a process of assessment and review of whether an institution (or programme) qualifies for a certain status or to be recognized or certified as meeting certain required standards.

The result of accreditation is whether an institution or programme either receives or does not receive accreditation. Accreditation for DE institutions or programmes takes place in China, India, Indonesia, Korea, and Sri Lanka.

Academic Audits focus on the processes that an institution conducts a critical self-analysis, and external review teams verifying the self-report, making recommendations for improvement, and monitoring progress. It asks: “how well are you doing what you say you are doing?” Academic audits use both quantitative and qualitative process performance indicators that are developed and collected at the institutional level or using standardized national performance indicators against which institutions are audited. In Asian DE, countries/territories like China, Korea, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka conduct periodic academic audits.

Performance-based funding ties public funding to performance of an institution or programmes. In the case of Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Korea, the outcomes of accreditation or academic audits are directly or indirectly linked to governments’ funding decisions.

Performance reporting refers to a QA approach that the reports of institutional performance are open to the public and submitted to governments and/or QA authorities. The reports provide valuable information for the public and policymakers to make decisions and they reflect the customer-oriented focus of DE provision. While most Asian countries make the reports public, some countries such as Sri Lanka and China either disclose only the final outcome on the status of accreditation or audits or share the reports within institutions and QA authorities. However, the trend of moving towards public disclosure of more information to the public is observed.

Regulatory framework

The Quality Assurance Toolkit for Distance Higher Education Institutions and Programmes offer the performance indicators for distance higher education institutions under six QA criteria. Summarizes key common six QA criteria in Asian countries: Programme Management; Programme Design and Development; Course Design and Development; Learning Infrastructure, Resource and Learner Support; Learner Assessment and Evaluation; and Innovative and Healthy Practices.

Criterion 1- Programme Management

The following aspects directly related to study programme management are assessed: organizational structure, governance and management procedures; strategic/action plan and implementation; management capacity and procedures; by-laws relating to examinations, disciplinary procedures, student unions; Codes of Conduct for staff and Charter for students; curriculum development and internal quality assurance mechanism and procedures; teaching and learning and assessment procedures; welfare mechanisms and procedures; national and international partnerships and national and international visibility; human resources profile, adequacy of teaching and learning facilities.

Criterion 2 - Programme Design and Development

Academic Programmes of study should reflect University/ HEI's mission, goals and objectives. They are offered according to needs analysis based on an audit of existing courses and programmes, market research, liaison with industry, national and regional priorities and according to approved procedures. Subject Benchmark Statements (SBS) and requirements of professional bodies act as valuable guide/external reference points when formulating a structure and content of a new degree programme. Curriculum is outcome driven and equips students with knowledge, skills and attitudes to succeed in the world of work and for lifelong learning.

Criterion 3 - Course/ Module Design and Development

Courses are components of a programme of study offered in consistence with the programme objectives to culminate in student attainment of ILOs of the respective course. Courses are designed according to approved policies and procedures of the Senate. Course curriculum is an interaction between aims and objectives, learning outcomes, content, teaching methods, and methods of assessment. The Faculty strives to improve courses to enhance learning outcomes and achievements of students through regular monitoring and review processes.

Criterion 4 –Learning Infrastructure, Resource and Learner Support

The teaching and learning process should be student-centred in keeping with outcome-based education (OBE). Faculty should match students' needs with multiple learning opportunities using teaching techniques to engage students actively in the learning process. This would ensure that students are successfully equipped with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values required after they exit. Teaching learning strategies, assessments and learning outcomes are closely

aligned so that they reinforce one another. Quality teaching is informed by feedback loops that provide measures of success and proactive measures to overcome difficulties that are identified.

Criterion 5 –Learner Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment is an essential feature of the teaching and learning process, is properly managed, and reflects institutional national and international standards. Evaluation is based on the stated programme objectives. The assessment method can be diagnostic, formative or summative. Student assessment approaches are documented for each course and programme offered, and assessment designed are valid, reliable and fair. The faculty demonstrates successful learner achievement by maintaining acceptable course completion rates and graduation rates in comparison to similar ODL programmes elsewhere.

Criterion 6 – Innovative and Healthy Practices

Innovative and Healthy practices are considered as practices which would lead to enhancement of quality of training and learning experience and the students' outlook. Use of ICT-platform to facilitate multi-mode delivery and student-centered learning; use of Open Educational Resources (OER) to complement undergraduate teaching; institutional mechanism to promote faculty engagement in research, innovation and postgraduate research, and its contribution to enhance quality of undergraduate training; faculty-industry linkages and use of work-based and industry placement as a part of learning for undergraduates; adoption of policy and practice of credit transfer mechanism; organizational arrangement to promote community and industry engagement/social mobilization programmes.

4. Methodology

Research Questions

The portion of the research reported on in this article, part of a broader investigation into QA in the universities, was guided by two main research questions:

1. What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas in the selected universities?
2. How are the selected universities implementing QA policies in learner support areas?

Research Approach

This study employed the case-study research methodology, which attempts to understand phenomena in the social world (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2012). It investigated and analysed the

universities' QA programs for the purpose of gaining insight and collective understanding of how these universities develop and implement QA policies, revealing key characteristics of the QA programs employed by each of the the universities.

Data Collection

The data sources for this case study consisted of interviews with key informants and institutional policy documents. Documentary analysis will be used primarily to answer the research questions about formal written QA policies, while interviews sought to build understanding of the knowledge and views of key people who developed and carried out these policies. The multiple data sources will allowed for findings and conclusions about policies, practices and procedures, and problems. Data analysis will be included the development of coding, conceptual categorization, and thematic grouping (Saldana, 2009). This phase involved identifying closely related codes by pointing out differences and similarities, underscoring underlying and recurrent concepts, grouping related concepts, and developing conceptual constructs.

5. Finding and Discussions

There exist different types of regulatory frameworks for QA in DE. As seen in Table 1, In China, India, Indonesia, Korea and Sri Lanka, the government directly regulates QA measures for DE institutions or programmes.

Table 1: QA agencies in selected Asian countries

Country	QA Agency	Note	Guidelines for DE	Resource
China	the Higher Education Department (HED) of MOE	Compulsory, every year	Yes	(QA Procedure)
India	The Distance Education Council (DEC)	Voluntary	Yes	DEC Handbook on Assessment and Accreditation of Open & Distance Learning Institutions (HAAODLI)
Indonesia	the National Accreditation Board of Higher Education (Badan Akreditasi Nasional Perguruan Tinggi or BAN-PT)	Voluntary	Yes	Accreditation Instrument for Distance Education Study Programmes
Korea	the Korean Council for	Compulsory,	Yes	Cyber University Evaluation

	University Education	every 5 years		Handbook (for self-evaluation)
Sri Lanka	the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC) of the UGC/Ministry of Education	Compulsory, every 5 years	Yes	Quality Assurance Toolkit for Distance Higher Education Institutions and Programmes

Accreditation and/or Academic audit approaches in DE/e-learning can be either mandatory or voluntary. Indonesia, and India, accreditation and audit are conducted on an institution's voluntary basis. In these countries, the outcomes of QA processes are not directly linked to government funding. However in case of India and Sri Lanka, special development funds or government scholarships are given only to accredited institutions. In other countries including China, and Korea accreditation and periodic audits are mandatory. In China, those online institutions which fail to pass the annual academic audit are not allowed to recruit students in the following year. In case of Korea, the outcomes of QA activities are directly linked to financial and administrative supports from the government.

The QA systems of selected Asian countries who have guideline for DE, adopt the following common methods:

Review based on pre-determined QA criteria: A set of QA standards and criteria determined by the government or the QA agency are applied to all institutions or programmes. In developing the standards and criteria, nation-wide consultations with DE experts are often sought.

Self-assessment (self-study; self-evaluation): The institution (or programme) undergoing the QA process is required to do a self-assessment and report on how it meets the pre-determined standards or criteria.

External review (peer review): A team of external peers constituted by the QA agency analyses the self-assessment report of the institution/programme and validates the claims made in the report, generally by visiting the institution.

Final decision by the QA/accreditation agency: Based on the results of the self-assessment and the external review, the QA agency makes the final decision.

Where there is a QA system for DE, QA criteria, guidelines or performance indicators both for self-assessment and external review are often specified covering input, process and output variables. In case of Sri Lanka, the Quality Assurance Toolkit for Distance Higher Education Institutions and Programmes offer the performance indicators for distance higher education institutions under six QA criteria and those criteria representing the various dimensions of DE practice. These performance indicators are designed to enable institutions to: 1) conduct a self-assessment of the performance of their processes in order to make necessary adjustments and changes for quality improvement; and 2) monitor the processes for continuous learning and ongoing improvement. Common Six criteria are: Programme Management; Programme Design and Development; Course Design and Development; Learning Infrastructure, Resource and Learner Support; Learner Assessment and Evaluation; and Innovative and Healthy Practices.

Table 2: Key QA criteria for DE in Selected Asian Countries

Criteria	Countries				
	China	India	Indonesia	Korea	Sri Lanka
1. Programme Management	√	√	√	√	√
2. Programme Design and Development	√	√	√	√	√
3. Course Design and Development	√	√	√	√	√
4. Learning Infrastructure, Resource and Learner Support	√	√	√	√	√
5. Learner Assessment and Evaluation	√	√	√	√	√
6. Innovative and Healthy Practices	√	√	√	√	√

This study has found that China, India, Indonesia, Korea and Sri Lanka share many similarities in their policies and implementation of quality assurance for learner support services. For example, the foundation of their QA programs each included the development of a detailed QA

manual, which served as important documents, guiding QA implementation throughout their institutions. Institutional QA policies and guidelines, with a strong focus on student needs and the development of learning skills, have also supported QA implementation, as have the universities' management systems, administrative structures, and academic and administrative staff. In particular, the universities' innovative approach to quality assurance centers and geographically distributed learning centers has played a strategic role in supporting the implementation of QA in learner support areas.

This process has confirmed for multiple stakeholders of these institutions that the education provided nationally to hundreds of thousands of learners is meeting their needs and those of their governments. China, India, Indonesia, Korea and Sri Lanka also share similarities in integrating QA into their learner support activities and processes. Closely aligned to Holmberg's (1995) theory, their learner support processes emphasize interaction and communication in order to promote student engagement and effective learning. Similarly, the recommendations of Gooley and Lockwood (2012) note the importance of peer connections, problem solving, and modeling behaviours and outcomes, all of which are present in the institutions studied here.

This study also confirms the importance of relationships between the implementation of QA in learner support areas and the universities' external environments. External factors identified as important influences on the implementation of QA programs include local culture and language, educational technology, governments, and external QA agencies. These findings are similar to Robinson's (1995) findings that effective learner support in open and distance education is heavily contingent on local circumstances. Thus, models of 'good practice' for learner support in developed countries with modern and different educational settings are not always appropriate for countries with different cultures. Finally, student involvement, particularly through regular feedback, is confirmed as a key to implementing and maintaining QA in academic and learner support services.

This case studies reveal interesting patterns in the ways QA approaches are implemented in unique and innovative ways in response to demands within each educational, institutional, social, cultural, and political setting. There are many differences and similarities with regard to QA systems in ODL between these countries in DE. However, they weakness and challenges than others, some have creativities, academic facilities, modern infrastructure and advanced mechanisms, good QA practices on various areas including QA modes, internal system and

external standards. Significantly some have reliable Research and Development Team in ODL. DE institutions in few countries have obtained international accreditations. Several online education colleges in China and Indonesia have obtained ISO 9001. Some are working on QA process to fulfill to obtain ISO 9001.

The level of QA policy integration in an overall national QA in higher education policy framework varies across the countries examined. The experience of these countries at different stages of QA system development shows that the QA purpose, methods and instruments are tailored to each country's particular circumstances. But at the same time, it reveals that there are some commonalities that connect these different QA efforts of all countries examined including: positioning QA in the pursuit of public accountability and self-improvement of DE institutions, considering distinctive features of DE in QA frameworks, linking QA results to direct or indirect funding, levels of autonomy or other supports, adopting both internal and external assessments, and making QA results public.

Recommendations

All nations should have QA in DE as an integral part of broader national, regional and international QA frameworks. In a cross-border DE context, learners can be distributed anywhere and education can be delivered to them wherever they are. In the not too far future, learners can take some part of their course from one university, and some part of their course from another university, and some part of their course from a different university within their own nation or beyond the nation. To protect learners from the risks of low quality programmes and education of limited national and international validity, QA policies in DE in a nation should be linked to the broader national, regional and international QA frameworks.

At Large, dedicated, distance education providers understand best the systems that make ODL different from contact delivery. However, both good practices and the environment are constantly changing, so distance education providers must commit themselves to the following: conducting continual research into their practices; updating their policies and procedures based on this research; benchmarking nationally and internationally to establish good practice; using a variety of quality standards to give multiple perspectives on their own systems and processes; and becoming learning organizations by promoting the quality culture in the institutions as well as all nations.

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