

Strengthening the Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms in Open and Distance Learning Systems

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INTRODUCTION

The term quality is a difficult concept to define. The concept is easily misconstrued because of its rather nebulous characteristics. While many people have a fair idea as to what they construe the quality of a phenomenon or an object to be, they find it difficult to define the term. Dictionaries define quality as degree of *excellence*. This suggests that quality is not some kind of fixed, immutable target or destination that may be attained merely by striving sufficiently hard, but a dynamic or moving target whose attainment at each point in time is facilitated by a set of strategies that are themselves also dynamic (Ekhuaguer, 2006).

In industrial organizations, where the assembly line production format is popular, control measures are used by managers to ascertain and sustain the credibility and standard of the product being released into the market. According to Duncan (1978) there are two types of control measures for goal attainment—feedback control and preventive control. While the feedback control is based on the information from the end-users of a product regarding the performance of the product, after they must have obtained and made use of it; preventive control relies on preventive planning to minimize variance or deviation in the production process. Quality assurance is a component of the preventive control mechanisms which involves ensuring that all intermediate products in production process conform as much as possible to specifications. It is believed that the lack of variance in intermediate products guarantees final product quality, all things being equal.

In the past, quality issues were not among the major concerns of educational institutions, because the excellence of formal training and knowledge was taken for granted. At that time, educational institutions focused more on ensuring that their offerings are of certain universally predetermined standards. These standards, formally referred to as Academic Standards are normally

identified by features such as the depth of content and duration of a course of study; the transactional treatment received by learners at a given period of time, which is defined by classroom teaching, tutorials and the practical sessions that learners are exposed in the course of their training; and a standard norm of evaluating learning achievements, through assignments and end-of-term examinations. These standards had characterized educational systems for centuries and it is regarded as a common denominator of all that is necessary in all educational institutions.

However, as the global environments enlarged and educational institutions expanded in size and numbers, there arose the need for benchmarking the value of the instructional content given to (clients) or seekers of knowledge. Thus, different quality assurance agencies were put in place in many countries of the world to ascertain the credibility of educational programmes on offer in all institutions of learning - conventional, distance including online. Many of these external quality assurance mechanisms have been somewhat effective in setting bench marks and minimum academic standards below which all relevant institutions are not expected to fall. The implementation of quality assurance procedures in educational organizations according to Broadfoot (1994) in Afemikhe (2004), involves defining appropriate criteria, accreditation of institutions, visits of verifiers and use of assessment panels. Moderation of examination questions and scripts also forms part of the quality assurance process as it seeks to reduce sources of errors. Harlem (1994) identified two levels of moderation and these are: adjusting assessment outcomes to improve fairness, and putting in place processes of arriving at fair assessment. These factors point out the roles which are played by the external quality assurance and accreditation agencies within national and international boundaries. According to Barney Pityana, Vice Chancellor of UNISA, external quality assurance begins with accreditation as a service

provider for distance higher education programmes which government through possibly a Higher Education Commission or another independence system or mechanism. However Daniels (2006) observed that no quality assurance system should be transplanted from one institution to another across organizational, social and cultural boundaries. The development must be home grown from its context.

The evolution of open and distance learning systems which are generally designed to provide equitable access to high quality education for all who have been denied access by the rigid operations of the conventional systems of education, has led to a greater degree of emphasis on systemic credibility on the entire education system. This underscores the importance of quality in open and distance learning in all ramifications. The general acceptance and adoption of the open and distance system has been largely influenced by increased enrolment rates, which is a result of population explosion; the changing social characteristics of learners, which created the imperative for continuing lifelong education; as well as, the convergence of information and communication technologies in education and training. However, quality issues by whatever connotation: quality control, quality management, total quality management, quality assurance or culture of quality has become paramount in open and distance learning globally. This is informed on one hand, by the extant perception of distance education as a second rate or second best educational approach (Valentine, 2002). On the other hand, all [educational] institutions have the responsibility to ensure that a high quality service is being offered to its [clients] learners. A third rationale for the emphasis on quality issues in open and distance learning is the industrial character of the system. As with all industrial systems, mechanisms are always instituted for sustaining the credibility and standard of the products issued to the customers. Thus, in order to establish a 'parity of esteem' with the face-to-face educational system, and to indicate its greater efficiency, distance education practitioners have the obligation of justifying the ambitious claim that all fields of knowledge and all levels of education can be taught effectively via the distance learning system.

Though, the conventional education system also faces the challenge of quality assurance, this challenge is accentuated in distance education, because of its wider jurisdiction, heterogeneous student profile

and the fact that there are limited face-to-face contact between instructors and learners. The challenge to establish the relevance and efficiency of the certificates and degrees earned through the open learning system therefore remains pervasive throughout the lifespan of the institution and/or the recipients of the awards.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Open learning and distance education tends to have a wider public presence, because its resources are available for all to access and assess, therefore it faces the demand for greater social accountability than the conventional system. Within the framework of their stated aims and objectives ODL institutions have had to confront the all important issue of quality assurance in all aspects of its educational programmes. However, programme implementation may not meet its catalogued description and this may lead to the failure of the programmes to achieve the goals for which they were designed, no matter how laudable it is. Since goal attainment is paramount to any organization, the internal quality assurance mechanisms put in place would be a way of ensuring goal attainment. As stated earlier distance education faces a stigma of inferiority, therefore quality should be a self-serving imperative for distance education institutions. Open and distance learning institutions have to assure the integrity of their qualifications in order to gain the confidence of policy makers, employers of labour as well as prospective learners. This is only possible if the institutions are able to deploy very effective and sustainable internal quality assurance mechanisms for establishing the excellence of its services and products.

Quality assurance conceptualized in this paper involves everybody. Its attainment is consequent upon the community of students, teachers, support staff and managers with each contributing to and striving for continued improvement. Quality Assurance practices are designed to ensure that products and services are of appropriate quality. Though, it has been indicated that elements of quality assurance is noticeable in distance learning programmes, there is still a lot to be done, because the extant quality assurance processes are still dominated by external quality control and accrediting agencies. This leads to an over-reliance on external qual-

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