

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. The Rise of Open and Distance Learning

The need for nations to increase the quantity and quality of human resources through education will undoubtedly place continued pressure on the demand for open and distance learning (ODL). Additional factor that operates frequently in transitioning countries is the rapid increase of population. Southeast Asian's search for a cost effective and efficient way to provide access to education for all at all levels will further make more demands on ODL models (Jegade & Shive, 2001).

Furthermore, the advancement of information and communication technology have brought the vision of a global knowledge society more closer to everybody. Within the context of global knowledge society, open and distance learning is a powerful tool to many countries and in many settings, especially higher education. By making learning possible anytime and anywhere, ODL is creating a new educational systems that eliminate boundaries of geography, jurisdiction, and time, while integrating academic and real world concerns and giving studens more extensive and affordable choices. The potentials of ODL has not only extended to distance education system, but also to face-to-face conventional education. The contribution of ODL to the improvement of learning quality within face-to-face conventional education has been studied by many scholars in the field. Furthermore, the present ODL has been significantly explored by private and cross-border providers as well as governments to offer lifelong learning in both formal and non-formal education.

Open learning is characterized by an openness of a learning situation for any students (without age limitation, prior knowledge constraints,, etc.) to engage in a learning process through various strategies and techniques using a variety of media. Open learning also indicates the flexibility of a student to take any learning path, and obtain an evaluation and feedback of its progress at any point of his/her learning. Open learning can be practiced in both conventional as well as distance education setting. On the other hand, distance learning is characterized by a learning situation in which teacher and learner are physically separated across time and space. This may be due to the inability or unwillingness of the learner to attend classes at a designated site—or, as a corollary to this, students may not be able to accommodate themselves to the fixed scheduling required for on-site classes due to social and economical constraints. Open and distance learning has provided the capacity for

educational institutions to offer flexible, accessible and cost effective educational programs across time and space while ensuring educational equity, encompassing both characteristics of open learning as well as distance learning.

The non formal form of open and distance learning in Southeast Asia was started in the 1950s, through the form of correspondence education. In Thailand, the baby boom era was started in the early 1950s, and the government was concentrating its efforts into providing access to primary education for those children. Furthermore, the scarcity of teachers for primary education was driving the Thai government to employ a massive teacher training system via distance education. Meanwhile, Indonesia in the late 1950s was struggling to establish its own education system and to provide primary education for a very dispersed population, thus correspondence teacher training was selected as an answer to the need for large scale teacher training.

Other Southeast Asian countries, such as Malaysia and Philippines did not start their distance education system until the 1980s, when they had to provide access to higher education, as their standard of living and economic conditions were improving rapidly. The growing concerns and interests among Southeast Asian countries in exploring open learning and distance education as an alternative education system was marked by the establishment of SEAMOLEC – Southeast Asian Ministries of Education Organization Regional Open Learning Center in 1997, a center for capacity building, research and development in open learning and distance education under the auspices of SEAMEO. SEAMOLEC has the vision to be a center of expertise in open and distance learning and carries the mission to assist SEAMEO member countries in identifying educational problems and finding alternative solutions for sustainable human resource development through the dissemination and effective use of ODL. In such, SEAMOLEC is involved in capacity building activities for individual educators, education institutions, as well as countries and international development agencies who is interested in adopting ODL as a strategic method of education.

Starting right after the economic recession in 1990s up to the present, open and distance education become the “buzz” word in Southeast Asia, since it is seen as the most feasible, inexpensive, and “easy” mode of education which can open up access to education for many students. This is due to, among other, the speedy development of information and communication technology, which has revolutionized the practice of education in many Southeast Asian countries. Some institutions, which have access to the high technology, claim that they are offering distance education through the so-called an e-learning venture.

B. ICT-based Open and Distance Learning

ICT-based open and distance learning has impacted higher education operation in many Southeast Asian countries. It has created alternative models of teaching and learning, new job descriptions for faculty, and new types of providers of higher education. Virtual programs are springing and being offered on conventional campuses, computer-mediated instruction is now being provided in many lecture halls as well as websites, and distributed learning (virtual as well as physical learning) is being practiced by many higher education institutions.

The ICT-based distance education has indeed offered remarkable opportunity for many governments to overcome the issue of disparity of quality academic staff. With many higher education institutions participating in ICT-based open and distance education, the limited number of quality academic staff available in one university can be shared by many other universities in the country and or transnationally. This phenomenon has given a push toward the so-called transborder education through the means of ICT-based open and distance learning mode.

Transborder education is a common term employed to depict educational process that takes place in situations where the teacher, student, programme, institution/provider or course materials cross national jurisdictional borders. Transborder education may include higher education by public/private and not-for-profit/for-profit providers. It encompasses a wide range of modalities, in a continuum from face-to-face (taking various forms such as students travelling abroad and campuses abroad) to distance learning (using a range of technologies including e-learning).

The growth of transborder education has been indicated by many countries around the world, especially using ODL technologies to enlarge their course, program, and degree offerings, and to import and export education programs and services across nations. Exchanges are taking place, and creating new partnership and opportunities in learning, and enriching the global capacity building and cultural exchange. The United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom are known as major exporters of higher education, especially through ICT-based ODL. Singapore has been serving as one of the education markets for Southeast Asian countries, employing ODL for transborder purposes.

C. The Quest for Quality ODL

The rise of ODL, the emerging practices of ICT-based learning (in conventional as well as ODL settings), and the popular trend of transborder education have put higher demand on the quality of education from stakeholders and the public at large. The demand for quality education has also been increasing with the emergence of global lifelong learning movement in which the new lifelong learners opt for ODL to enable them to study while still meeting their social and professional responsibilities. Within all those situation and condition, the quality of ODL becomes a priority for everybody, i.e., the students as the users of the educational services (or the recipient), the stakeholders who provide policy, regulations, and/or funding for the operation of educational services, and the academic community within the education world itself. Combined with transborder education, proliferation of new higher education providers, and increased web-based delivery of higher education, the quality of ODL is thus challenged futhermore.

In some countries, the national frameworks for quality assurance and accreditation has taken into account the practice of ODL, while in many countries quality assurance in ODL remains a challenge. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive frameworks for coordinating various ODL initiatives at the national as well as international level, leaving ODL mode to be outside most of quality assurance and accreditation frameworks. This makes students and other stakeholders vulnerable to low-quality provision and disreputable providers of ODL, and more true in the form of transborder education.

As a systematic internal review of educational programmes to ensure that acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being maintained, quality assurance in open and distance education is considerably a complex and daunting task. According to UNESCO, quality assurance in open and distance learning is integrally linked to quality assurance of higher education in general. Nevertheless, there are some distinctive characteristics of open and distance learning that link to the change in the teaching/learning process, delivery mechanism, and system dynamics due to its “open” and “distance” factors. Thus, there is a substantive need for a unique framework of quality assurance in open and distance learning.

D. A Framework for QA in ODL

This guideline is written to respond to the need for enhanced understanding on the concept of ODL, its roles and functions, and its quality assurance concerns, especially in higher education setting. In particular, this guideline addresses stakeholders in ODL community in Southeast Asian, i.e., governments of Southeast Asian countries, donor agencies, higher education providers, and public at large. The guideline covers general elaboration on the development of open and distance learning in higher education in Southeast Asia, quality assurance in open and distance learning, and indicators, process, and practices of quality assurance in open and distance learning in Southeast Asia.

This guideline is systematically developed into seven chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the ODL, its trends and development as influenced by the many factors, i.e., the advancement of ICT, the rapid increase of population, the global movement of lifelong learning and education for all, and transborder education, and the rationale for intensifying pressure on demand for quality and quality assurance in ODL.

The second chapter elaborates on the pedagogical aspects of ODL. The general and well-known concepts and characteristics of ODL is discussed, also its evolutionary trends up to the present state of development of ICT-based ODL. Furthermore, pedagogical elements of ODL and e-learning are also described in the second chapters. In general, the second chapter is intended to provide the description of the terminologies, definitions, and theoretical framework underlying the guidelines.

The third chapter provides a summary on the current picture of ODL in Southeast Asia describe by country members, especially focusing on the objective and nature of ODL establishment, government policy and regulation, and the situation and issues of quality assurance in ODL in Southeast Asia. Further, the fourth chapter focuses on framing quality assurance in ODL in general. It includes the definition of quality assurance and its components, the frame for quality assurance in ODL based on the characteristics of ODL, and also quality assurance frame for ODL in the form of transborder education.

The fifth chapter focuses on the quality assurance indicators in ODL, includes principles, providers, program, resources, and recipient. It is expected that this chapter will provide a common or general set of indicators of ODL as a frame of thought for those thinking, initiating, designing, implementing, and evaluating ODL system. The sixth chapter discusses the process of quality assurance in ODL. Derived from the industrial model, the quality

assurance process in ODL poses distinctive methods as to internally as well as externally driven, at different time and for different purposes, i.e., formative and summative evaluation. The seventh chapter provides elaboration on quality assurance as practiced and implemented by various ODL institutions. It specifically describes the institutional framework in which the quality assurance is being implemented, the organizational structures of the quality assurance effort, and the institutional policy and regulation regarding the quality assurance in particular institution.

It is expected that the elaboration provided in this guideline will give a framework for quality assurance in many ODL institutions. It will further provide an adequate elaboration on many aspects to consider in assuring the quality of ODL. Thus provides a clearer picture of ODL and the assurance of its quality for stakeholders and many interested parties.

This guideline can be expanded and elaborated further by any country or institution based on needs to control, develop, and assure quality in ODL practices. Within the framework of SEAMOLEC's mission to assist Southeast Asian countries in providing services for effective use of open and distance learning, the guideline provides a common perspective among Southeast Asian countries for the purpose of assessing, designing, developing, implementing, evaluating, and researching ODL, as well as assuring quality in the practices of ODL. This guideline will be disseminated by SEAMOLEC to the eleven SEAMEO member countries for the purpose of guiding the implementation of QA in ODL for any member country.

E. Remarks

The growth of ODL has considerably altered the conventional perceptions on teaching and learning process in many countries. In higher education setting, it alters the conventional faculty role, minimizing face-to-face contact with students, the previously belief on curriculum design and development, and the long-held teaching and learning tradition. Augmented by the growth of ICT-based ODL, it alters what many people and governments mean by "higher education institution", transforming lecture halls with chat room, campuses with the virtual space, and communities of learning with the borderless networks of cyberspace. An ODL institution no longer needs to be bound in physical space and time, it can exist anywhere virtually. Electronic access encourages and supports more mobile student behavior, allowing students to attend more than one institution either serially or simultaneously, online or onsite. The degree, traditionally the culmination of a distinctive

institutional-based experience, is coming to represent a different type of learning experience from various learning resources and transferrable across border.

The academic as well as the administrative challenges posed by open and distance learning are profound. They have the potential to disrupt basic quality expectations within the academic community and stakeholders, thus throwing quality of education into disarray. Keeping the fundamental values of ODL intact will sustain and enhance the quality of the academic work of ODL institutions and strengthen its relationship with government through continued demonstration of its quality in many educational aspects. This guideline offers a framework for many parties involved in open and distance learning to acquire enhanced understanding on ODL and its quality assurance issues, as to enlighten and diminish the profound challenges posed by (misunderstanding of) the growth of ODL.