

CHAPTER IV

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

A. Distance Learning and the Globalized Society

Distance learning is increasingly being looked to by many institutions as an economical way of expanding their activities, widening opportunities for students around the world. As proposed by Otto Peters in 1967, distance study is a rationalized method (involving the division of labor) of providing knowledge which, as a result of applying the principles of industrial organization as well as the extensive use of technology, facilitates the reproduction of objective teaching activity in any numbers, allows a large number of students to participate in university study simultaneously, regardless of their place of residence and occupation. (Peters, 1994)

The globalization phenomenon together with the development of the World Wide Web accelerated the growth of distance learning opportunities to an unprecedented level in the 1990s. Globalization, described as ‘the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values and ideas across borders’ affects each country in a different way due to each nation’s individual history, traditions, cultures, resources and priorities. (Knight, J. and H. DeWit, 1997). Globalization is a multifaceted process with economic, social, political and cultural implications for higher education. It poses new challenges at a time when nation-states are no longer the sole providers of higher education and the academic community no longer holds the monopoly on decision-making in education. Such challenges not only address issues of access, equity, funding and quality but also those of national sovereignty, cultural diversity, poverty and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2004)

For both developed and developing countries, in the context of globalization and knowledge economies, higher education in its knowledge producing and disseminating function, is recognized as an essential driving force for national development. At the same time, in its universality and international dimensions, higher education can be seen as both an actor and reactor to the phenomenon of globalization. (UNESCO (2004).

Debates on the opportunities and challenges posed by globalization to higher education are apparent. However, the potential impact of globalization on higher

education provides both opportunities and challenges, depending on the priorities, policies, resources, strengths and weaknesses of countries. At the centre of the debate lies the issue of *quality assurance* and the need to provide consumer protection from non-reputable providers or ‘diploma mills’. The value of the qualifications offered and their acceptance by the labor market are additional concerns for students, employers, the public and the education community itself. (UNESCO, 2004)

It is impossible to discuss the impact of globalization on higher education without referring to the internationalization of higher education. These two terms are often mistakenly used interchangeably. *Globalization* is presented as a phenomenon which is having an impact on higher education and *internationalization* is interpreted as one of the ways in which higher education is responding to the opportunities and challenges of globalization. Consequently, internationalization includes a broad range of elements such as curriculum, teaching/learning, research, institutional agreements, student/faculty mobility, development cooperation and many more.

Globalization and recent developments in the international delivery of higher education have generated a number of new terms such as ‘borderless’ and ‘cross border’ education. ‘Borderless’ education refers to the blurring of conceptual, disciplinary and geographic borders traditionally inherent to higher education. ‘Borderless’ acknowledges the disappearance of borders while the other term actually emphasizes the existence of borders. Both approaches reflect the reality of current practices of higher education. In this period of unprecedented growth in distance learning and e-learning, geographic borders would appear to be of little consequence. Yet, borders gain increased importance when the focus turns to regulatory responsibility, especially related to quality, access and funding. Therefore, while full recognition is given to the existence and importance of borderless education, the notion of education moving across national jurisdictional borders is salient to this discussion and the term ‘cross border’ will be used.

The emergence of cross border higher education provision and trade in education services bring education within the realm of the market and which may seriously affect the capacity of the state to regulate higher education within a public policy perspective. UNESCO’s position, related to transborder education, is that higher education in a globalize society should assure equity of access and respect cultural diversity as well as

national sovereignty. UNESCO, in addition, is committed to assuring the quality of global provision of higher education in an increasingly diverse higher education arena and raising the awareness of stakeholders, especially students, on emerging issues in this field. Thus, the most important challenges for UNESCO member states, and especially for the developing countries, lie in the challenge to guarantee quality, to preserve national culture and identity, to ensure that governments set national policy objectives for higher education, and to assure equity of access to higher education.

B. Quality Assurance and Transborder Education

The ever-increasing competition for students and calls for improved ease of access have driven institutions to create innovative approaches to course delivery methods and degree requirements. The emergence of new forms of distance learning based on new information and communication technologies; in particular, those supported by the Internet and using the World Wide Web, have significant pedagogical, economic and organizational implications (UNESCO 2002).

Technology is changing the methods by which education is delivered. Students enrolled in distance learning, particularly those programs using telecommunications technology, can have almost the same instructional contact and interaction as students in traditional settings (Galusha 1998). However, learning is both social and private, and that higher order learning requires reflection and knowledge construction, which are key elements for quality assurance in online learning (Alley & Jankar, 2001), though, measures of learning and of quality are elusive and often controversial in higher education (Oblinger, Barone, Hawkins, 2001, p. 19).

According to "The World Declaration on Higher Education", article 11 (in UNESCO website, 2001) *quality* in higher education is a multidimensional concept, which should embrace all its functions and activities, i.e: teaching and academic program, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, faculties, equipment, services the community and the academic environment. Quality also requires that higher education should be characterized by its international dimension, i.e.: exchange of knowledge, interactive networking, mobility of teachers and students, and international research projects, while taking into account the national cultural values and circumstances.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation in its glossary for *International Quality Review* states that quality refers to "fitness of purpose—meeting or conforming to generally accepted standards..." and that *quality assurance* is a "planned and systematic review... of an institution or program to determine that acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being maintained and enhanced" (CHEA, 2001). Or, *quality assurance* is a general term that includes evaluation as well as all other mechanisms through which the quality of higher education is assessed and evaluated ([http://www.unesco.org/education/studying abroad/what-is.html](http://www.unesco.org/education/studying%20abroad/what-is.html)). The National Unions of Students of Europe in "*European Student Handbook on Quality Assurance in Higher Education*" define quality assurance as the means by which an institution can guarantee with confidence and certainty, that the standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and enhanced..

All educational provision should be of good quality. However, the new pedagogical approach and the supportive networked technology in Distance Learning (DL) raise new quality questions. Without well elaborated *quality assurance system* of the ODL provision and process, and especially of network based Open and Distance Learning (e-ODL), it is difficult to get a good reputation for e-ODL.

A quality assurance system (QAS) consists of the policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced. According to Kefalas, Retalis, Stamatis, & Theodoros (2003), quality assurance system is applied to the courses and degrees offered, and the learning content; the staff; technology; learning methods and services; and the organizational and managerial structure.

A QAS uses 5 specific quality attributes that apply to the aforementioned QAS elements, which are:

- **availability**, e.g. as the technological platform or the administrative staff, is there when it is needed and whether it delivers the defined services to the agreed service level;
- **usability**, e.g. whether staff & customers are able to carry out specific tasks effectively, efficiently and with satisfaction;
- **learning effectiveness**, e.g. appropriateness of the learning material to learning styles, state-of-the art content, aesthetics, clarity of objectives, etc;

- **performance**, e.g. institution's ability to perform tasks within certain constraints in time and resources;
- **security**, e.g. ability to respond to a threat, protection of intellectual property right and personal details; and
- **potential for change**, e.g. institution's ability to retain or increase its values as an enterprise.

Thus, the QAS is called to check the following quality criteria (Kefalas, et.al):

- curricular learning effectiveness (availability, appropriateness to learning styles, state-of-the art content, clarity of objectives, etc);
- academic staff teaching, research and development achievements;
- flexibility of organization allowing credit transfer, interdisciplinary, studying within the framework of various programs or institutions;
- usability of infrastructure and availability of adequate equipment (e.g. ISO standard);
- protection (security) of personal data;
- accountability with regard to the use of human and material resources;
- positive feedback from the students and responsiveness to their suggestions, proposals, and critique;
- positive feedback and support from stakeholders and labour-market needs;
- international scientific competitiveness;
- promising strategic planning with respect to international policies; and
- the capacity for change.

QA systems, irrespectively of mode of delivery, should be able to demonstrate that:

- learning outcomes have been set at the appropriate level and clearly communicated to the students;
- content and design of the curriculum and the teaching methodologies employed are effective in enabling the student to achieve the outcomes in terms of both the acquisition of knowledge and the development of related practical skills and abilities; and

- assessment is appropriately designed and rigorously administered to measure the achievement of the outcomes.

In addition to internal quality management of institutions/providers, external quality assurance and accreditation systems have been adopted in more than 60 countries. Quality assurance and accreditation bodies are responsible for assessing the quality of higher education provision. The existing systems of quality assurance and accreditation often vary from country to country and sometimes within the countries themselves. Some have governmental bodies for quality assurance and accreditation, and others have non-governmental bodies.

Furthermore, some differences exist in the terminologies used, the definition of 'quality', the purpose and function of the system including its link to the funding of students, institutions or programs, the methodologies used in quality assurance and accreditation, the scope and function of the responsible body or unit, and the voluntary or compulsory nature of participation. While respecting this diversity, a coordinated effort among the bodies of both sending and receiving countries is needed at both the regional and global levels, in order to tackle the challenges raised by the growth of cross-border provision of higher education, especially in its new forms (Kefalas, Retalis, Stamatis, & Theodoros (2003).

UNESCO (2005), in this context, recommended that quality assurance and accreditation bodies should:

1. Ensure that their quality assurance and accreditation arrangements include cross-border education provision in its various modes. This can mean giving attention to assessment guidelines, ensuring that standards and processes are transparent, consistent and appropriate to take account of the shape and scope of the national higher education system, and adaptability to changes and developments in cross-border provision.
2. Sustain and strengthen the existing regional and international networks or establish regional networks in regions that do not already have one. These networks can serve as platforms to exchange information and good practice, disseminate knowledge, increase the understanding of international developments

- and challenges as well as to improve the professional expertise of their staff and quality assessors.
3. Establish links to strengthen the collaboration between the bodies of the sending country and the receiving country and enhance the mutual understanding of different systems of quality assurance and accreditation. This may facilitate the process of assuring the quality of programs delivered across borders and institutions operating across borders while respecting the quality assurance and accreditation systems of the receiving countries.
 4. Provide accurate and easily accessible information on the assessment standards, procedures, and effects of the quality assurance mechanisms on the funding of students, institutions or programs where applicable as well as the results of the assessment.
 5. Apply the principles reflected in current international documents on cross-border higher education such as the UNESCO/Council of Europe 'Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education';
 6. Reach mutual recognition agreements with other bodies on the basis of trust in and understanding of each other's professional practice, develop systems of internal quality assurance and regularly undergo external evaluations, making full use of competencies of stakeholders. Where feasible, consider undertaking experiments in international evaluation or peer reviews of quality assurance and accreditation bodies;
 7. Consider adoption of procedures for the international composition of peer review panels, international benchmarking of standards, criteria and assessment procedures and undertake joint assessment projects to increase the comparability of evaluation activities of different quality assurance and accreditation bodies.

C. Quality Assurance in Online Distance learning

System design, program design and delivery, student development and support, student communication and representation, and student assessment all raise particular questions for institutions about the ways in which they 'manage' teaching and learning to ensure that the quality of provision and security of academic standards are as they need to

be. Thus, institutions need to check the soundness of their arrangements for these aspects when the programs of study are offered through distance learning

Many of the functions of an online university are similar to those found in a traditional on-campus setting, and they need to be monitored and evaluated in much the same way (Karin Sixl-Daniell, Jeremy B. Williams, & Amy Wong, ..). Hence, the successful implementation of quality assurance processes in an online environment requires the same management commitment as in a traditional university setting (Zhao, 2003). There is little debate, for instance, that the quality of course delivery influences the quality of learning which, in turn, permits the identification of criteria for quality delivery (Hunt, 1998). In the online setting, therefore, it becomes a question of getting appropriate quality assurance processes in place and administering them correctly (Mayes, 2001).

Issues of concern for both on-campus and online delivery of courses include, for example, content and pedagogy, assessment practices, and faculty performance. The major challenge for the online university, however, is the maintenance of high standards across these functions in an environment characterized by a complex community of students and faculty spanning multiple time zones, cultures, nationalities and varying levels of technological capability and availability (Karin Sixl-Daniell, Jeremy B. Williams, & Amy Wong, ..).

The **Institute for Higher Educational Policy (IHEP)** lists the following key benchmarks for the quality e-ODL:

- Institutional Support
- Course development
- Teaching/Learning
- Course Structure
- Student Support
- Faculty Support
- Evaluation and Assessment

Due to the variety of pedagogical, administrative, organizational, technical, and managerial policies of e-ODL institutions, Kefalas et.al (2003) suggested a list of questions for discussion that will eventually lead to choosing and application a QA

system for e-ODL programs. The questions can be classified into the following categories:

General:

Is there a significant difference between traditional mode and e-ODL mode in terms of quality criteria?

Administrative Level:

Is there a clear Mission Statement?

Is there a viable Strategic Plan?

Is there a provision for termination?

Is there an effective and clear Administrative Structure?

Is there a clear allocation of tasks in the Administrative staff?

Are there any admissions criteria?

Who is responsible for conflict resolution?

Programme Design level:

Is the program designed according to some commonly accepted criteria?

Is there a consultation of professional bodies that affect the decisions made for the curriculum?

What are the overall aims and objectives of the program?

What are the overall learning outcomes of the program?

What is the degree awarded?

Is there a provision for those who will complete part of the program?

What are the regulations leading to the award of the degree?

How does the program compare to traditional mode of delivery equivalent programs?

Course Design Level:

Is there a commonly accepted credit system?

How do courses relate to other courses of the program?

Is there a clear structure in the content of each course?

Is there a clear separation between course elements?

Are there contradictory designs between various courses?

How does a course design compare to traditional mode of delivery

equivalent course design?

Course Delivery:

Is there a commonly accepted policy on the method of ODL course delivery?

What is the process of selecting methods of delivery?

Do these methods effectively and efficiently exploit information technologies?

How easy or difficult is to follow the selected method?

Does the method of delivery contribute to the fulfillment of learning objectives?

Are there clear instructions for students concerning method of delivery?

Course Assessment:

Is there a commonly accepted policy on the method of ODL course assessment?

Is there a commonly accepted marking scheme?

What are the individual parts of assessment in each course?

What is the process of selecting the appropriate assessment?

Does assessment contribute to the fulfillment of learning objectives?

Does assessment correspond to workload (credits)?

Are there specific marking criteria for each individual piece of assessment?

Is the student informed about the assessment criteria and marking scheme?

Is there provision for timely feedback? What is the form of feedback?

Are there clear examination procedures?

Are there effective ways in place to identify impersonation and plagiarism?

Students:

Is there a commonly accepted policy on keeping student records?

Is there a policy regarding privacy and security of personal data?

Are students well informed about the ENU, admissions criteria, award of degree, program, courses, exam procedures, regulations, etc?

Do students get the appropriate support for course content and technological infrastructure?

Do students get the appropriate services in technology required? Is there provision for this support to be continuous?

How do student get support for autonomous learning?

Do student get the appropriate service from the administration?

Do student receive advising and encouragement?

Is there provision for student representation?

Is there a complaint or appeal mechanism in place?

Is there a mechanism for student evaluation of courses and programme?

How is the progress of students monitored?

Staff:

Is there a commonly accepted staff recruitment policy?

Is there a commonly accepted staff development policy?

Is there a commonly accepted staff appraisal policy?

What are the criteria, characteristics and profile of academic staff selected to deliver ODL courses?

What are the criteria characteristics and profile of technical staff selected to support ODL course delivery?

Is there provision for continuous staff training?

How is staff evaluated?

Is there a provision for training of new staff?

How is staff encouraged to improve own teaching, research and scholarship?

Other Resources:

What are the technical resources required for e-ODL?

Is there a commonly accepted platform for e-ODL?

What kind of Library resources can be utilized?

Do the selection and use of e-Libraries comply with copyright legislation?

Are the selected resources easy and effective to use?

Review:

Are there sufficient processes and procedures for review of program,

courses etc?

Is there a self-assessment review in place?

Is there any possibility for external review?

How is best practice disseminated within the institution, among staff etc.?

How would the student feedback be incorporated in the review?

How would the market feedback be incorporated in the review?

What are the procedures of applying modifications?

How often a review should be contacted?

Are there any provisions for changing the organization structure?

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