

CHAPTER VI

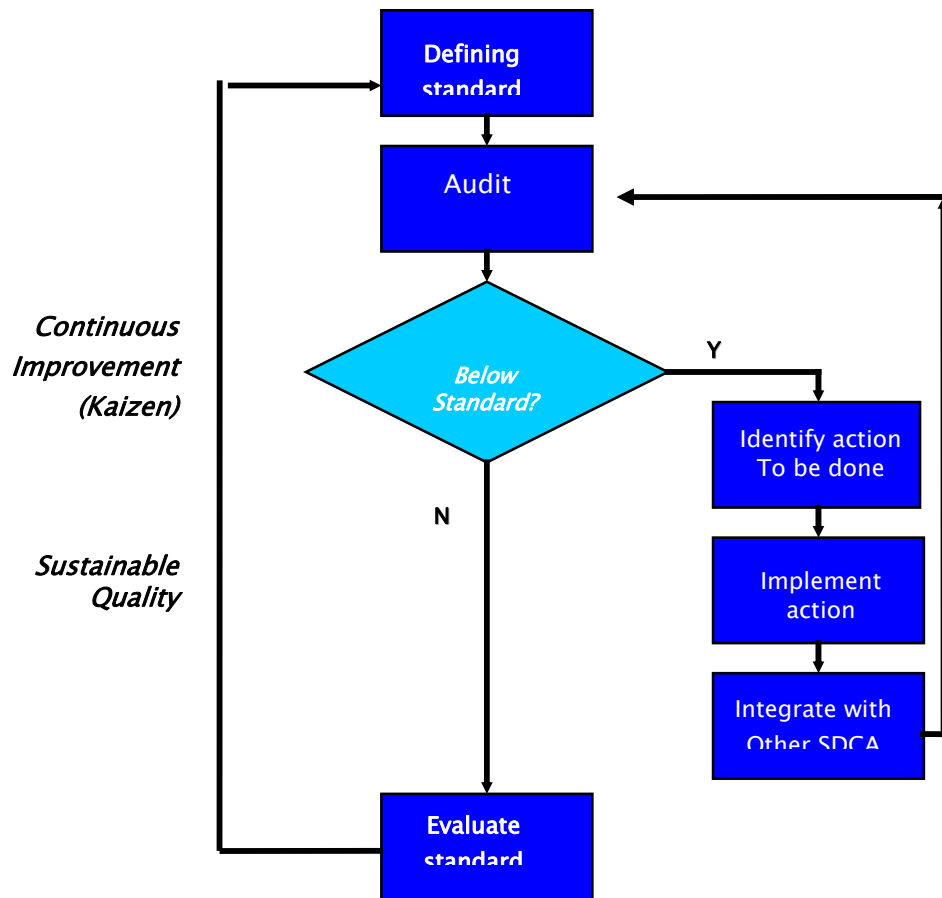
QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESS

IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

The previous chapters of this document have defined rigorously the Quality Assurance System in ODL as well as the strategic objectives to be achieved by implementing such assurance system. As it was stated, the primary objectives of the QA activities are two folds, i.e. for external accountability and self-improvement. It becomes obviously apparent that QA is not something that can be added on after the fact, rather it should be systematically planned and programmed. Its effectiveness will critically depend on the process and methods used for its implementation.

In this chapter we will describe succinctly the process and methods for the implementation of the Quality Assurance in ODL. In addition, it will also touch upon parties involved in the process.

Like a normally encountered process in QA, the process of QA in ODL will consist of a close cycle of quality improvement, which comprises the following schematic processes:



The process will start by defining the standards based on which audit will then be carried out. The standards will be represented in the forms of indicators, as already described in the previous chapter of this document. The audit activity will determine whether the predefined standards are met or not. Based on the audit results, the quality improvement program will identify and thus formulate actions to be done taking into account resources or other constraints, and then followed by the implementation of such actions. Even after the standards have been fulfilled, the quality improvement will still be needed. In this case, the predetermined standards shall be improved.

The implementation of an audit activity will require two types of inputs. The intrinsic inputs of audit activity include, among other, the availability of standards, SOP, manuals, and systems. Whilst the extrinsic inputs imposed to the ODL system include regulation, national curriculum, national standards, etc.

Since ODL is basically a distributed learning across time and space, process audit will inevitably take time and will be distributed in nature, thus it cannot be depended only on questionnaire and printed data, but have to be “felt” and immersed within the process itself. Sometimes un-obtrusive data collection method (incognito, participatory approach) is needed.

Due to the complexity of the audit process, the activity will have to be properly managed and would require a proper organizational setting and support. There is also a need to constantly evaluate the audit process for further improvement. The audit process will have to cover the ODL in a systemic approach that is to include input, process, output as well as outcome of the ODL. However, there is a need of a scheme to limit which indicator selected to indicate (or represent) the quality of ODL.

There will be two types of audit, internal and external audits. The internal audit activity is carried out by internal auditor appointed by and report to the top management. The external audit involves external auditor, which may act at the request of the ODL institution or of the external stakeholder such as the government. An accreditation process carried out by an independent agency can also be categorized as the external audit activity. An audit activity is formally ended with some exit review program, where the auditor and the auditee review the audit results for clarification, based on which the auditor develop its final audit report.

As described above, the output of the audit activity will have to be followed up by the quality improvement activity. Depending upon the audit results, the management of the ODL institution in question has to devise a concrete program to rectify any gap between the expected and the actual condition. Such program will be implemented by the relevant officials within the ODL institution organization. The evaluation and improvement of standards are usually conducted taking into account internal needs as well as external requirements.

A variety of QA methods are observed in the ODL, which cover both internally driven activities and externally imposed programs. Here are listed some of the popular practices for the internally driven programs:

- a. Offering internal training and professional development opportunities. Quality improvement will undeniably require endless actions to improve professionalism

- of faculty and staff. The most prevalent method for achieving such improvement is through providing training and professional development opportunities to faculty and staff, including part time tutors.
- b. Involvement in international training workshops and conferences. As the higher education becomes a global and universal issue, development training should go beyond internal or national scope. Attending scientific meeting in an international forum is deemed necessary for faculty to keep abreast with the state of the art development of science and technology. Likewise, best practices in ODL are normally found and shared by more advanced and established ODL providers which are foreign to many institutions.
 - c. Evaluation and monitoring staff performance. Assuring quality in ODL will inevitably require rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the performance of faculty and staff who are involved in providing the ODL service. This action is essential in measuring the gap between the expected and the actual performance based on which needed actions for improvement will be developed.
 - d. Specifying steps in the course of development process. The internal quality assurance system during the development of courses/programmes and materials shall be well integrated into the whole operation of most ODL institutions. Such integration is usually stipulated in the quality manual of the institution.
 - e. Reviewing learner assessment: The quality assurance procedure during assessment and examinations development should be well laid out for every course. One of the good practices in this aspect is the establishment of board for examination and assessment. The responsibility of this board shall include the development of procedure for the production of examination paper, marking guidelines, the awarding of course results and other related matters.
 - f. Inviting external reviewers and experts. Whilst the abovementioned procedures are normally embedded in the internal quality assurance system, the evaluation involving external reviewers and experts is also essential in QA of ODL. In some countries, such evaluation is carried out by an independent agency or in the form of accreditation.

- g. Soliciting feedbacks from external stakeholders. Since the quality is defined as the extent to which the products meets the stakeholders' satisfaction, it is paramountly important that there is a mechanism put in place to solicit feedbacks from the external stakeholders particularly the employers, the alumni and the government. Such feedbacks shall be used as an input for quality improvement. Carrying out tracer study for alumni is one of the good practices employed by institutions for soliciting feedbacks from their alumni.
- h. Course evaluation by students has been related closely to the quality of instruction in many ODL institutions. The direct course evaluation by students is considered important, as not to be misled by the assumption that good learning as indicated by good or high exam achievement does not necessarily reflect good course, especially in ODL, where students can learn from many available resources within the environment. Further, the quality of courses in ODL must always be monitored to ascertain that they are meeting agreed standards, and to aid course revision and improvement by identifying shortfalls and strengths as perceived by users, i.e., in this case are students who are geographically scattered.
- i. Institutional Research. It is the research effort of an ODL academic institution directed to the solution of its own problems and to the enhancement of its own performance in delivering open and distance learning. For institutional research, the ODL institution is the client, and the problems are those that arise within the university in the execution of its primary function, i.e., delivering open and distance learning. The aims of institutional research largely determined by a requirement to be responsive to needs as they arise in the ODL institution. Thus, the proliferation of quality institutional research conducted by any ODL institution can be a measure of the quality assurance of the institution.
- j. Documentation. The implementation of ODL consists of a large number of processes (sometimes called business processes). In order to ensure that such processes are implemented in compliance to the written procedures, sufficient level of documentation is needed. The ISO in its motto stipulated that "One has to do what is written, and has to write what is done". Documentation is important to keep a written record on whatever activities or process that have been done.

Externally imposed activity is usually in the form of accreditation by an independent agency or publication of reports as per the requirement of government regulation. Accreditation is a process of external quality review used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and higher education programs for quality assurance and quality improvement (CHEA). The accreditation may take two forms, program- or course- or institution-based accreditation. Unfortunately, however, there has been very limited reference on accreditation system for open and distance learning program or institution. In this regard, special instruments suitable for ODL should be devised and employed since the ones usually used for conventional setting may not be appropriate. Nevertheless, an accreditation process usually involves the following activities:

1. Preparation and self-evaluation

The ODL provider institutions must first prepare materials that demonstrate the institution's accomplishments. The institution must also create a written report of its accomplishment according to the standards set by the accreditations. The aforementioned materials or reports are to be submitted to the accreditation body.

2. Desk review by peers

In this step, a panel of peers or assessors conducts an intensive review of the prepared material, written report, and the general workings of the ODL institution under consideration to find out its accreditation status.

3. Visit and examination

Most accreditation organization also gathers a visiting team that visits the institution. The primary objective of the site evaluation is to evaluate the conformity between the written document and the actual condition and realities, and to draw a final judgment on the accreditation status.

4. Judgment action made by accreditation organization

The accreditation organizations call upon their commissions to review the steps and confirm or deny accreditation status of the institution under inspection.

5. Continuous review

After accepting accreditation status, the ODL granting institution agrees to undergo a periodical review such as every few years or sometimes every five years. An institution is usually required to go through all the steps of the accreditations process

each time it is reviewed. The periodic review is supposed to ensure that the institution maintains the required minimum standard.

In some countries, institutions offering higher education are obligated by law to present their reports for public consumption. Such reports shall include information on the institution overall being covering academic, finance, and management. This reporting activity can also be considered as a form of assuring quality of the institution under consideration.

The above discussion clearly indicates that the QA process in ODL will involve at least four major parties, namely the regulator, providers, and QA agencies, and stakeholders. The government will normally play its role as a regulator. The regulator will define policy pertaining to quality system of ODL to be applied across the sector. An independent QA agency or accrediting body shall develop the Quality Assurance System to be implemented nationwide which is derived from the quality policy set forth by the regulator. Such agency will subsequently implement the system following the abovementioned process.

As stated before, a QA process ought to be internally motivated. Much of the methods discussed above are initiated and implemented by the providers. Institutions offering ODL programs shall put in place an internal quality assurance system and implement the system internally. In developing the internal system, the institution shall refer to the system established by the QA agency. Community at large will contribute to the quality improvement process by providing relevant inputs or feedback to the regulator, QA agencies or providers of ODL.