

## CHAPTER 10

---

# QUALITY ASSURANCE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION—TOWARDS A CULTURE OF QUALITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, UNITED KINGDOM (OUUK)

*Roger Mills*

### ABSTRACT

*This case study provides an outline of the approach to quality assurance of one of the major open and distance teaching institutions in the world. It documents the university's approach to this crucial but complex area and raises key issues about the relationship between national quality assurance requirements and those of individual institutions. Staff attitudes towards quality assurance requirements are examined, and the importance of staff development and support as a key element of quality assurance is emphasised as is the centrality of the process of reflective practice. Finally, the impact on quality assurance processes of eTeaching and eLearning in the university is considered.*

### 1. BACKGROUND

#### *1.1 Institutional profile*

The Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK) ([www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk)) is a large institution teaching around 20 percent of all part-time higher education students in the UK. Its headquarters are at Milton Keynes, a city of some 250,000 population, located 50 miles north-west of London, equidistant between Oxford and Cambridge. The Open University (OU) has 10 regional centres in England in addition to Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish centres.

It was established in 1969 to provide supported open learning opportunities for students to study on a part-time basis whilst continuing with other commitments. It is “open to people, places, methods and ideas and promotes educational opportunity and social justice by providing high quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. Through academic research, pedagogic innovation and

collaborative partnership it seeks to be a world leader in the design, content and delivery of supported open and distance learning” (OUUK mission statement).

The Open University is the United Kingdom’s only university dedicated solely to distance learning. It has around 150,000 undergraduate and more than 30,000 postgraduate students, nearly all of whom are studying part-time. Ten thousand of its students have disabilities. It is *open*: for most courses, no previous qualifications are required to study, and although students usually have to be aged 18 when their course starts, there is no upper age limit. A third of its UK undergraduate students have entry qualifications lower than those normally demanded by other UK universities.

Around 70 per cent of undergraduate students are in full-time employment and more than 50,000 students are sponsored by their employers for their studies. Most OU courses are available throughout Europe. Some of them are available in many other parts of the world, and more than 25,000 OU students live outside the UK.

## *1.2 The national context*

The Open University is a product of its environment. The UK is a highly populated country with relatively high literacy rates (although there are surprisingly low levels in some parts of the country), good transport and telecommunication links. Although an increasing number of Open University students have high-quality and high-speed Internet connections, many still do not. Transport to study centres is good in major centres of population but less good in rural areas, where it can take half a day or more to travel to a day school. Students living on the Shetland Islands—an extreme case—may have to travel for up to three days to attend a day school or tutorial in Edinburgh.

The link with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) at the start and the evolution of the Open University/BBC partnership has been a source of envy for many other institutions not only because of the access in early days to BBC expertise and equipment, but also for the huge spin-off of publicity for the university. Although direct teaching through broadcast television and radio no longer takes place, the university is involved in many high-quality and high-profile public service educational programmes which bring great credit to the BBC and the university.

There are now 117 higher education institutions in the UK, all but one of which receive some funding from the government and are required to subscribe to the quality assurance precepts of the national Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which operates on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council and, through it, the government and the taxpayer (see [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)).

Many other universities now offer particular programmes “at a distance” but these are a small part of their total offerings. The focus of such work tends to be on Master’s level courses offered both in the UK and overseas; for example, the University of Leicester has a well-known and respected Department of Museum Studies which offers a distance taught Diploma and Master’s qualifications. In response to these developments, the QAA has produced guidelines for the assurance of the quality of the distance education programmes.

## 2. QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES

### 2.1 *Academic and business issues*

Distance learning is a complex business which has significant operational as well as academic challenges. Peters (2001), in his seminal work, described it as an industrialised model, Rumble (2000) has discussed the lessons from service management for distance education, and Paul (1990) has examined the implications of open learning for management and quality assurance approaches. This characteristic of distance learning has led the Open University to consider business models of quality assurance alongside the academic models required of all universities. In 1991, the university considered but eventually rejected the Total Quality Management approach to quality assurance and, in 1994, opted for a UK government approach known as Investors in People (IiP) (see Mills & Paul 1995). Although it was unsuccessful in achieving this Kitemark accreditation as an institution, several departments, e.g., the Planning Office and the Northern Region, have since achieved IiP status. The main reason for lack of overall institutional accreditation was a mismatch between the way in which academics operated and business management approaches.

### 2.2 *The public nature of distance education*

The Open University, as is the case with many other open and distance teaching institutions, teaches and supports its students in a very *public* manner.

In 1971 when the OU first started teaching, it was viewed with considerable suspicion because of the unique combination of an *open admissions policy* and the *distance mode*. It was thus absolutely critical that its teaching materials, its administrative systems and its learner support could stand up to scrutiny by its students (who were adults over the age of 21), by the rest of the higher education sector and by the government (acting on behalf of the taxpayer).

The high profile of the university led naturally to a prime concern for processes which would ensure consistency and quality in its products and services. Key stakeholders in the quality of teaching and learning are the students and potential students of the university, the funding councils which provide a substantial percentage of the income on behalf of the government, which in turn represents the taxpayer, the national UK Quality Assurance Agency and the university itself as it seeks to maintain and improve its teaching and learning and its services to students.

The OU has thus from the outset developed robust internal quality processes as well as been accountable to external agencies.

### 2.3 *The national framework for academic quality and standards*

As is the case with all UK higher education institutions, the OUUK has to operate within a national “quality framework” for qualifications. The framework is published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education ([www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)) and provides guidance on the titles and structures of awards that may be offered within the UK higher education system. Of particular importance for all universities is the QAA’s *Code of Practice* for assuring the quality and standards of higher education, which is an authoritative reference

point for the Open University, which either links its QA mechanisms directly to the code or makes explicit the reason for departing from the code because of the unique nature of Open University structures and business. In addition, the QAA:

- Provides subject benchmarks which are designed to make explicit the general academic characteristics and standards of honours degrees in the UK
- Requires a programme specification which sets out the learning outcomes of programmes in terms of the knowledge, understanding and skills students will be expected to have on completion, and, of course, the programme assessment strategy needs to demonstrate how such outcomes are tested
- Operates institutional reviews every six years since 1992 (OUUK in 1992, 1998 and 2004) and has assessed the quality of teaching and learning in 25 subjects across all UK higher education institutions

In 2004, the *Sunday Times University Guide* pointed out that “Just four institutions—Cambridge, Loughborough, York and the London School of Economics—have a better teaching record than the OU. In key areas of the Government’s peer-led quality assessment through the QAA, such as General Engineering, Chemistry and Geography the OU was awarded the maximum possible score, out-performing Oxford and Cambridge and Imperial College, London.”

The most recent developments in national quality assurance have involved a much “lighter” process, and in its report *Outcomes from Institutional Audit—2005*, the QAA recommends further development in a number of areas for all institutions, including:

- Internal approval of new programmes with a particular focus on annual monitoring
- The way in which institutions work with external examiners and use their reports

The last institutional audit of the OUUK can be accessed from the QAA Web site ([www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)), and it will be of interest to readers to note its major findings and the language used to convey them: “As a result of its investigations the audit team’s view of the University is that: broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University’s current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of awards.” This is the highest level of confidence the audit process allows.

The team went on to identify areas of good practice, notably:

- The way in which the University monitors the security of its academic standards
- The systematic and comprehensive collection and use of feedback from students
- The arrangements for appointing, monitoring and supporting its part-time Associate Lecturers
- The proactive stance taken by the university in giving academic guidance and support to students

With the development of new procedures for institutional audit and subject audit trailing, the subject-based evaluation of the quality of materials and services has been passed to the university, and this gives it more responsibility for monitoring its own systems in the future.

Clark (2003) notes that “the word ‘Quality’ in higher education has been subject to an active debate for at least 10 years and has often been used in ways that blur the distinction between the two terms ‘quality’ and ‘standard.’” He defines quality (and so does the Open University) as “the attribute of a process or product that assures that it is *‘fit for*

*purpose.*” This means that whether a product (e.g., an academic text) or a process (e.g., a tutorial) is of “high quality” is a judgement relative to the purpose for which the product or process is created or used. It is important to keep this definition in mind as this case study develops.

In order to maintain such a success, it is clear that the university’s internal processes need to be robust and effective. It does this in two main ways—through its governance structure and through internal review.

## ***2.4 University governance***

The university is in the process of simplifying its approach to decision-making partly in response to the recommendations of the 2004 audit with the current Senate (which comprises all academic staff and others) and Academic Board being replaced by an Academic Governing Body with some 150 members, the Student Policy Board and the Learning and Teaching Board being replaced by a Student Learning and Support Board and the Quality and Standards Board being replaced by a Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee at lower than board level which would provide the key source of assurance on quality to the Academic Governing Body (Internal Academic Board paper 2005).

## ***2.5 Internal review***

All courses, programmes and awards are subject to internal review processes throughout their lifespans, and services to students are also reviewed annually. This internal review is supported by a range of monitoring processes including:

- Student recruitment, retention, performance and progress
- Student satisfaction with awards, courses and services
- External assessors, external examiners and external advisors
- Feedback from course team members, regional staff and tutors
- Monitoring of the quality of teaching and assessment of tutor marked assignments

Regional Centres are required by Student Services to carry out an annual review of their key activities and share the outcomes with each other. Key areas include the provision of information, advice and guidance in the context of course choice, learning skills and careers, support and advice for students with disabilities, and provision of appropriate operational and other resources in relation to examinations and assessment.

## **3. SPECIFIC QUALITY ASSURANCE ACTIVITIES**

It has been crucial for the OU to engage with the challenges posed by teaching large numbers of students at a distance and gaining a high level of academic credibility in a suspicious market. The processes developed to provide appropriate quality assurance systems have produced challenges both to institutional procedures and to staff engagement.

This case study thus addresses and comments on the processes of quality assurance and standard setting in the university and does so from four interrelated perspectives: a) materials production and the quality of teaching and learning, including assessment, b) learner support including tutoring, c) administrative and operational systems

underpinning the core activities of teaching and learning, and d) the role of staff in the delivery of quality processes. Although the OUUK is a research-active university, the issues of quality assurance in research activities are not addressed here.

### ***3.1 Materials and pedagogy***

One of the key areas the OU had to address was the quality of its materials which provide the main teaching resources for students and which are open to public scrutiny. It did so by pioneering the *team approach* to the development of courses. This involves peer-group review of content and design of materials that are subject to a process of collective constructive criticism and development. The course team involves not only subject specialists but also instructional designers, media specialists and specialists in tutoring, which increasingly implies tutoring online as well as face-to-face and by correspondence.

The Open University has, as part of its mission, a commitment to exploit new media for the improvement of its teaching and learning. The experience and expertise of software engineers and multimedia designers is being integrated with academic expertise with the aim of ensuring “the most professional scrutiny of the quality of distance learning materials and methods to be found anywhere in the world of Higher Education” (OU Teaching and Learning Strategy 2004–2008: 18).

The materials are also subject to reviews at each stage of the drafting process by an External Assessor who is usually a peer expert from a conventional university and through the results of any developmental testing with students that may have taken place.

A key role is also played in most course production by professional editors, copyright experts, designers, illustrators, photographers, audio-visual, multimedia and software staff. There are formal university-level procedures for the approval of courses and awards that come into play at the point a course is conceived, and there is annual monitoring at course level with a more extensive internal review after the first presentation, in course mid-life and before any extension or remake. These reviews are undertaken by the academic units themselves and involve some degree of externality—an important element of “internal review.”

#### ***3.1.1 Assessment***

Many distance educators would support the claim that assessment drives learning (Morgan & O’Reilly 2002), and this is certainly the case in the Open University. A particular challenge for the OU has been to develop robust assessment procedures and processes and to put in place appropriate monitoring and standards.

Course teams are responsible for developing an assessment strategy as the course is being prepared. Assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process and plays a key part in assuring quality and standards. Now that UK higher education is based on the assessment of learning outcomes (skills, knowledge and understanding), it is critical that each part of a course has explicit statements on such outcomes.

The University’s assessment strategy and minimum requirements for a degree are described in “Code of Practice for Student Assessment (2004).” The assessment strategy for a new course is submitted to the Assessment Policy Committee, normally two years before the course begins, and requires the course team to specify, among others:

- The number and relative weighting of assignments
- Student feedback levels on computer-marked assignments

- Examination type
- Any deviation from the standard closed-book examination
- Projects/dissertations

### 3.1.2 *Quality of assignment marking*

The monitoring of assignments is central to the university's quality assurance processes. It has two primary objectives:

- To ensure that grades given by different tutors are consistent with each other and the intentions of the course's Examination and Assessment Board
- To ensure the *fitness for purpose* of the tutor's correspondence teaching

Various statistical aids are provided to course teams and regional staff to enable them to compare the grading profile of an individual tutor with the average grading offered by all tutors and also to trace situations where tutors are late in their marking.

All courses have external examiners who work with internal members of Examination and Assessment Boards to provide external scrutiny of its assessment methods and processes and to provide direct experience of relevant standards in other universities.

### 3.1.3 *Quality assurance of examinations*

This is clearly a crucial aspect of all QA processes. The OUUK is particularly vigilant to ensure high quality of the examination assessment strategy and that the processes surrounding examinations—e.g., security and delivery of question papers, invigilation during examinations, standardisation of marking and dealing with appeals—are rigorous.

## 3.2 *Tutoring*

A particular challenge to teaching large numbers of students at a distance is the quality of tutorial support. One of the key aspects of learner support in the Open University is the role played by its 8000 part-time tutors. These staff members are the "human face" of the university and are able to get to know their students as individuals because the university operates a tutor-student ratio of around 1:25. Associate Lecturers bring into the university their own experience, whether it is from other universities, colleges, schools or the work of business and public service, and they add to the diversity of the Open University and are the core of its major teaching principle, that of "supported open learning."

Large numbers of tutors create the need to ensure quality and consistency across the university, which operates both across the UK and increasingly within the rest of Europe. Thus tutors are carefully selected, trained and monitored thoroughly to ensure consistency of the quality and level of teaching and assessment.

The university's staff development programme for its tutors has been established for many years and is recognised as the gold standard for the support of part-time tutors in higher education in the UK. The new contract for tutors, introduced in 2003, was a move towards treating them as equal professionals, and integrated with this is a payment for up to 2 days per annum of training and development. New tutors are paired with peer mentors with whom they can discuss their work and arrange mutual attendance at each other's tutorials.

Correspondence teaching and assignment grading quality are monitored by photocopying scripts to be examined by staff appointed as monitors. Increasingly, monitoring can be undertaken electronically where assignments are submitted in this mode and the extent of

plagiarism can be determined more easily by the use of software detection. As always, the question of who monitors the monitors remains unresolved!

While many systems are in place to ensure a level of consistency and quality of tutorial support, challenges still remain, as with any university, in terms of the monitoring of individual communications with students, turnaround times for individual e-mails and so on. This is particularly the case as the OU's tutors work from their own homes.

### ***3.2.1 Student support and guidance***

The quality framework for student support and guidance is influenced by external quality requirements and by the University's own review and developmental work.

The goal is to offer a support and guidance service which is consistent across the University and which is responsive to the needs of individual learners in the context of their course and geographical location. (OUUK Framework for Student Support and Guidance 2002)

One of the challenges for assuring quality of guidance and counselling is that of being sure that there is appropriate quality in one-to-one interactions. Many OU staff have undertaken programmes leading to National Vocational Qualifications in Customer Care and in Guidance and Counselling. The process of obtaining such qualifications involves the construction of a portfolio that supports through comments from customers and clients, claims that the university provides effective and appropriate professional advice.

The Open University Regional Student Services and the Careers Service have received the Matrix Quality Standard hallmark for the provision of Information, Advice and Guidance. This standard emphasises the vital importance of impartial and independent advice to students and potential students and can sometimes sit uneasily with drives to increase student numbers!

### ***3.2.2 Data collection***

Data are collected regularly on student demographics, progress and progression rates and satisfaction, and the aim is to achieve an overall rating of 80 percent or higher of students expressing satisfaction with the support and services they receive.

In 2005, a new system will be introduced (Developing Associate Lecturer Feedback) which will systematically enable students to provide feedback on the support received from their individual Associate Lecturers. This information will be used to provide personalised feedback for staff development and provide the university with evidence of the quality and value of Associate Lecturer support.

## ***3.3 Administrative and operational processes***

Although often neglected, administrative and operational processes are keys to successful distance education.

The university is moving towards setting standards for basic processes such as response to e-mails and telephone calls, dispatch of materials and handling of assignments. The establishment of a Customer Relationship Management System, which involves the recording of interactions between staff and students, is an example of how business practices are increasingly found to be useful in educational settings. Much of the work in this area is being led by Student Services.

### *3.4 Role of the academic staff*

It may be an obvious point to make, but it needs to be reiterated that it is the staff who ultimately ensure that quality and standards are at the level required by the institution and by a national framework.

The processes above provide the framework within which the staff operate. The OUUK has and is extremely fortunate in continuing to recruit highly able and motivated professional staff who, for the most part, join the institution because they believe in its mission of social justice. The careful selection, induction, development and support of staff constitute a key aspect of quality assurance that applies to all categories and particularly those in leadership roles.

## **4. THE IMPACT OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (ICTS) ON QUALITY ASSURANCE**

The impact of ICTs in open and distance education has been both positive and negative.

To begin with the negatives: there is a danger that the ability to offer courses and qualifications online is leading to a reversal of the long-fought battle for credibility of distance education. In the past some providers of correspondence education were rightly criticised for their commercial approach and lack of student support. The economics of distance education not subsidised by governments meant that there was no incentive to retain students on a course once it had started, especially when students committed their fee payment upfront.

The phenomenal increase in the use of the *World Wide Web* over the past few years has seen a growth of what, at the very least, seems to be unscrupulous ventures, with very little quality assurance and very little concern for student progress and retention. Unfortunately, this is not simply restricted to unknown organisations trying to make money! The ability to put a course online is also encouraging what Bates (2004) has termed the “Lone Ranger” approach to teaching, in which an individual academic devises a course which is taught online. Where is the course team and quality assurance here?

On the other hand, the advent of online teaching has not meant that the existing frameworks or strategies for quality assurance and standards have had to be changed in principle, although there are new processes in terms of materials production, learner support and administrative procedures.

Dealing with the latter first, new standards are being introduced to ensure that students are clear about what they can expect with regard to responses to e-mail enquiries, both from their tutors and from student support services. New technologies make it easier to monitor standards and targets; for instance, the frequency of tutors logging on to key Web sites or contributing to key Web sites or electronic conferences.

In terms of materials production, the quality of teaching online or through DVDs and CD-ROMs is subject to exactly the same peer and specialist criticism and review as print. “The media product aspect of quality can be evaluated by comparison of the use made by the University’s eLearning media with uses made of the same media by other organisations. Design, look-and-feel, navigational efficiency and ease, degree of integration of media with each other are all evaluated and as needed improved” (*The e-Learning Policy of the Open University 2005*).

Instead of simply ensuring that mailing systems are effective, the onus is now on the university to keep its electronic systems up and running such that students can access materials and advice 24/7/365.

Where tutoring is online, staff tutors are able to “visit” tutorials “virtually,” but the principle is exactly the same as that on which physical visits are made to face-to-face tutorials, with constructive feedback being provided to help tutors improve their skills in teaching online.

## 5. WHY BE CONCERNED WITH QUALITY ASSURANCE AND LESSONS LEARNT?

For many years in UK higher education, there has been a steady murmur about the time-consuming nature of the QAA’s quality assurance procedures, both for institutional audit and the audits of teaching and research. However, external audit can be of great help to institutional managers as a point of reference. The institutional staff have to be supportive as there is an impact on the reputation of the institution and of the staff themselves. Internally in the Open University, the need to follow quality assurance practices for external audit is accepted (by most staff) and is understood to be an essential part of work.

The new approach to QA currently being introduced operates with a far lighter touch and puts far more responsibility onto institutions to demonstrate they have the procedures in place to assure the quality (fitness for purpose) and the standards (objective, measurable outcomes). The move to more internal review and self-assessment has its own difficulties, especially when externality, from different units within the university or from outside the university, is seen as a helpful checking device.

An example of this was the establishment in 1998 of Internal Review within the regions of the Open University. Here regions agreed to report openly on their activities and achievements in a common public, Web-based format on an annual basis. As ever, questions arose: *Why are we doing this? We don’t have the time; who is going to read it? It’s just going through the motions. Students would prefer us to be answering their queries rather than completing bureaucratic paper work, etc.* Nevertheless, this process was introduced and was found to be valuable by managers and by some staff.

The original plan was to introduce “internal externality” by having members of staff from different regions contributing to the annual reporting process. However, staff never really felt comfortable with this and it was not implemented. Similarly, faculties and schools have resisted the involvement of colleagues from other areas, although in the case of courses and programmes, there is the standard policy of external assessors and examiners mentioned above.

Many staff in the Open University subscribe to the principle of individual reflective practice as the key element of quality assurance. Regional staff have produced a highly effective and well-used toolkit “How Do I Know I Am Doing a Good Job?”, which the staff can use with their students to get immediate feedback on their work without involving the line manager.

In general, institutions do have to address the issue about the time-consuming nature of quality processes. It is not acceptable for staff to complain that they “don’t have the

time” even though they accept that reflective practice is at the core of good teaching and learning.

In conclusion, it is clear that quality assurance cannot be imposed; it must be owned by staff, who in turn must see clearly the relevance of QA processes in relation to their own reflective practice. Over the past 10 years, at a national level in the UK, this lesson has been taken on by the QAA. Its approach now is much lighter than, and as such is more readily accepted than, the previously perceived heavy-handedness.

The Open University’s new and simplified approach to governance puts the onus on the academic faculties and other delivery units to manage their own approach to quality assurance, with the new Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee providing advice to a wide range of other bodies on quality requirements.

## 6. TOWARDS A CULTURE OF QUALITY

It is generally agreed that the Open University UK has a culture of quality, and in conclusion it is worth trying to trace how this has developed over the years.

It is clear that different factors have been influential at different times, and the interplay between leadership, systems and staff commitment, in the context of a now well-developed national system of QA, have all played their part.

### 6.1 *Early leadership*

When Jenny Lee (the Minister for the Arts in the 1969 Labour Government) took up the challenge of making operational the Prime Minister’s (Harold Wilson) vision of an open university, she made it clear from the outset that this was to be a “proper” university with full research and teaching responsibilities at all levels. This statement in itself set the tone for the university, which then attracted many academics as a result of its core values of social justice.

Lord Perry of Walton (the founding Vice-Chancellor) was himself an eminent academic and Vice-Principal of Edinburgh University. One of the reasons he left Edinburgh to take up this challenge was because of what he considered to be the very low level of the quality of teaching in the university sector at that time and his determination to do something about it. So from the beginning, there was a total commitment to the quality of teaching.

### 6.2 *The public nature of the university’s teaching and a focus on pedagogy*

This point has been mentioned earlier but it cannot be emphasised too strongly that the fact that the Open University’s teaching materials were to be publicly available, through bookshops as well as to students directly, and that TV and radio programmes were broadcast on open channels, meant that great care was needed to ensure that they reflected well on the university. The course team approach, developed at the very beginning, was integral to the early approaches to quality assurance and helped to make sure that the university was “bomb-proof” from attacks by its political opponents. In the early years, the university was viewed with deep suspicion by politicians and other prominent figures, one of whom referred to the concept as “blithering nonsense.”

### *6.3 The students*

Another key factor in those early days was that the students were over 21 and a large number of them were teachers. This ensured that staff designing the student and tutorial services were kept on their toes by the customers who were keen to learn, demanding in their requirements and many of whom had experience which matched if not exceeded that of their tutors.

### *6.4 The staff*

In the early days many staff joined the university because they were attracted to its mission and because they saw that it had the potential to break the mould of higher education with its openness and its emphasis on high-quality teaching. In many ways, this still applies today; many of those applying for both full-time roles and part-time roles across a wide range of levels and functions cite the mission of the university as one of the reasons why they wish to join.

### *6.5 Links between the regions and the centre*

The critical importance of knowing what students and tutors thought of the materials and the services of the university was identified at an early stage. One way of ensuring this link was the creation of faculty posts based in the regions, known as Staff Tutors. These staff had responsibility to the Regional Director for the recruitment, selection, support and monitoring of the part-time tutors and for liaising with their faculty course-writing colleagues at the centre.

### *6.6 Systems*

As the university developed, systems came to have a crucial role in quality assurance. With so many students, over 100,000 by this time, it was critical to have robust systems for assessment, for dealing with complaints and for obtaining feedback from students and staff as well as many other processes to ensure that students received services that they had come to expect from major commercial organisations.

### *6.7 The middle years*

In the 1980s, there was a growing external consensus that the university's teaching was excellent. This recognition meant that the staff of the university received the unusual accolade of being acknowledged to be good and ground-breaking teachers, using their access to multi-media opportunities to the maximum. This meant that people wanted to come and work for the institution, and it was able to recruit the brightest, most committed and able university teachers. So in a very real sense, quality assurance became embedded in everything the university did.

At this time, the then Vice-Chancellor, John Horlock, took the decision to strengthen the professoriate in the university and to insist that professors take a leading role in supporting and developing staff; an important contribution to QA.

By the mid 1980s, the university was once again under scrutiny by a fairly hostile government, and this built a powerful determination within the university staff at all levels to fight for what they now recognised as being one of the great educational developments of the twentieth century.

## 6.8 *The later years*

In the 1990s, the university looked at a range of quality assurance models (see reference to Investors in People, earlier) but it became clear that the developing national quality assurance systems for higher education were now the drivers of the way in which the university should approach its QA. The achievements of the university in all aspects of the quality of its teaching and student support were recognised increasingly as external quality reports of all institutions were made available publicly and it could be seen through league tables that the OU was at the very top in terms of the quality of its teaching and learning.

This has boosted morale within the university and stimulated a renewed effort to ensure that the culture of quality, first established by Walter Perry in 1969, is still strong and evolving in the early part of the twenty-first century.

## REFERENCES

- Bates, Tony. (February 2004). *Keynote Speech*. International Council for Distance Education, World Conference, Hong Kong.
- Clark, P.M. (2003). "Quality in the Digital Age." In A. Szucs, E. Wagner & C. Tsolakidis (Eds.) *The Quality Dialogue – Integrating Quality Cultures in Flexible, Distance and e-Learning*. Proceedings of the 2003 European Distance Education Network Annual Conference, Rhodes, Greece. pp. 1–6.
- "Code of Practice for Student Assessment (2004)." *Open University UK Policy Documents for Students*. Retrieved from [www3.open.ac.uk/our-student-policies](http://www3.open.ac.uk/our-student-policies)
- "How Do I Know I Am Doing A Good Job?" *Open University Teaching Toolkit*. (1998). Milton Keynes: Open University Student Services.
- Leading the Learning Revolution: The e-Learning Policy of the Open University* (2005). Internal Document. Milton Keynes: The Open University.
- Mills, R. & Paul, R. (1995). "Investing in Our People: Staff Development Needs in Fast Changing Times." In D. Sewart (Ed.) *One World, Many Voices, Quality in Open and Distance Education*. Cambridge: The Open University Press.
- Morgan, C. & O'Reilly, M. (2002). *Assessing Open and Distance Learners*. London, England: Kogan Page.
- Open University UK Internal Academic Board Paper on Governance* (2005). Milton Keynes: The Open University.
- Open University UK Mission Statement*. Milton Keynes: The Open University. Retrieved from [www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk)
- Open University UK Teaching and Learning Strategy (2004–2008)*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.
- Outcomes from Institutional Audit* (2005). In *The London Times*, Tuesday, May 10, 2005, Public Agenda, p. 8. Retrieved from [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/default.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/default.asp)

Paul, R. (1990). *Open Learning and Open Management: Leadership and Integrity in Distance Education*. London, England: Kogan Page.

Peters, O. (2001). *Learning and Teaching in Distance Education: Analysis and Interpretation from an International Perspective*. London, England: Kogan Page.

*Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice for Distance Learning*. Retrieved from [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/distanceLearning/default.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/distanceLearning/default.asp)

*Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Codes of Practice*: Retrieved from [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp)

Rumble, G. (2000). "Student Support in Distance Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Learning from Service Management." *Distance Education*, 21, 2: 216–235.

*The Open University UK: Framework for Student Support and Guidance* (2002). Milton Keynes: The Open University.