

CHAPTER 4

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE AFRICAN VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the major issues confronting the successful adoption and sustained use of online learning in higher education within the African Virtual University with reference to its own quality assurance context vis-à-vis that of the donor institution(s). It is argued that the four main issues which universities must deal with to achieve the maximum potential of online learning technologies are the establishment of cost-effective practices, the achievement and maintenance of quality in online learning/delivery, ensuring access and equity in the delivery of programmes, and establishing practices which can enable online learning to be sustained and to grow as mainstream activities within the process of university teaching and learning. While these issues are suggested as discrete entities, it is recognised that there is considerable overlap in the influencing factors and in the strategies and processes by which they can be overcome.

In addition, the case describes and provides exemplars of a number of strategies for dealing with the issues in ways which provide the means to support and sustain quality online learning programmes within universities and also in the broader educational context. These include the development of proactive programmes to improve teacher expertise in the design, development and delivery of online teaching, the use of programmes to support and maintain student readiness, the need to provide adequate technology infrastructure to support the programmes, and the use of strategies supporting the design and development of online programmes based on the customisation and reuse of learning objects.

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 The genesis of the African Virtual University (AVU)

This case study discusses the quality assurance process in the African Virtual University (AVU), which was established in 1997 as a World Bank project. With its headquarters at Nairobi, Kenya, it has a Regional Office at Dakar, Senegal. The AVU is not a university

in the traditional sense of the word. It is an educational institution that is a part of a network and works with and supports initiatives in African partner institutions to make use of open, distance, and electronic learning (ODEL) methodologies in teaching and learning at the tertiary level. In the process, the AVU takes cognizance of progressive developments taking place in African universities to increase access to their demand driven programmes by making use of different modes of distance education, open learning and electronic learning.

When the African Virtual University (AVU) was established, its focus was on brokering content from reputable and established European and North American institutions and then passing on the content to African students through various forms of electronic media, one of which was a one-way asynchronous video conferencing format. In this context, the World Bank in particular and eventually other donors, principally the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK, were convinced that African higher education and training institutions such as the AVU could take advantage of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) and make quality programmes from Europe and North America available to a large number of African students at low cost. ICTs were seen as a more cost-effective way of increasing participation rates in African higher education and training.

Further, at that time, the AVU was also seen as an education and training vehicle that could be used to bridge the digital divide between the north and the south. Additionally, the approach was viewed as a very cost-effective way of delivering content to African students through Learning Centres that were established throughout the continent under what became popularly known as the lead partner university (LPU) model, which provided for a network of selected francophone and anglophone African universities. Such LPUs included, for example, the University of Dar es Salaam, Addis Ababa University and the Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis in Senegal. The major content providers were, and still are, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) and Laval University in Canada for francophone African countries and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) and Curtin University from Australia for selected anglophone universities. These foreign institutions produce the content that is then taught to African students using a combination of residential and distance education methodologies. The limitations of this model in terms of scalability¹ can be found in the small number of undergraduate students that the AVU has been able to train since its inception in 1997. The quality of the externally brokered programmes, however, still remains world class.

This delivery approach faced a number of challenges, of which the main ones were and still are:

- Programme conceptualisation, design and development that did not include tutors and academic policy-makers, planners and managers from African universities
- A governance model of the lead partner university model that was eventually challenged by the majority of the participating universities and users, especially in terms of its framework of capacity development and the contextualisation of courses
- Lack of scalability of foreign programmes to disadvantaged groups of African students due to high fees and unmet technological demands
- Problematic delivery and pedagogy models that relied heavily on an expensive technology platform and became labor intensive and therefore costly and difficult to

¹ Scalability refers to the ability of the program to admit more students beyond the numbers agreed upon in the legal Agreement among the external partner institution, the AVU and the African partner institution.

implement, necessitating pedagogical and programmatic changes midstream which affected the quality of programmes and had a deleterious impact on learners

- Inadequate student-support systems, especially in terms of learning-management systems, that did not adequately take into account the institutional, national, educational and technological contexts of the learning environments in Africa
- An educational approach that was supply driven in terms of content origination rather than based on the demands of African students and universities
- Insufficient financial resources and cumbersome procurement procedures that made it difficult to scale the programmes and make the AVU nimble and agile in terms of responding to the needs of African institutions
- Weak ICT infrastructure and costly equipment on the African continent and inadequate bandwidth and connectivity which affected the delivery of content from Australia and Canada
- Lack of local ownership and incorporation of the visions and the strategic objectives of African universities into the documentation and the processes of higher education and training
- The fact that the distance teaching and learning model was problematic as it was based on an assumption that the ICT infrastructure in Africa would be amenable to particular technological teaching and learning platforms

While acknowledging the merits of eLearning and computer-mediated instruction and learning within the current model, it became evident that the AVU would not survive if it continued on the same path because the model was not flexible, scalable and cost-effective.

1.2 The new path: A deviation from the original plan

The focus of the AVU is now to be *a part of a network of African universities* geared towards enhancing institutional capacity by supporting African universities through selective transfer of knowledge and technical know-how from its African and international partners. The AVU takes cognizance of the fact that the participating African institutions themselves are part of other networks. The aim of the AVU now is to enhance these communities of practice so as to bring to the surface, challenge and interrogate the prevailing mental models, and to foster more systematic patterns of thinking regarding distributed, blended or mixed modes of teaching and learning in the African tertiary education and training environment. In the process, quality assurance frameworks of the external partner institutions are being modified and contextualised to suit the prevailing circumstance in African universities. This process, being put into effect across borders, is managed by teams from Australia, Canada and the local African counterparts in meetings and workshops.

In this schema, the vision and mission of the AVU is to work with African institutions for the development of intellectual capital and quality assurance mechanisms for ODeL methodologies and continually to shape the future of delivering higher education and training in Africa in an affordable, equitable, scalable, flexible, cost-effective and sustainable manner by using different delivery methodologies and quality assurance frameworks. One key approach in the AVU's overall strategy is the *In-Country Strategy* which, among other things, intends to develop local and institutional forms and frameworks of quality assurance. This strategy is the AVU's road map for creating new strategic options for the AVU and showing how it can add value to education and quality

assurance activities already taking place in African universities which are aiming at increasing equitable access to quality higher education.

The In-Country Strategy is the AVU's approach that will be used first to contextualise the existing programmes from Australia and Canada and develop quality assurance and quality control mechanisms and then to scale up programmes where universities have excess demand and limited supply. Further, the AVU works for localising quality programmes that are currently constrained by lack of human, financial and material resources. In some of the local partner institutions, quality assurance frameworks have not been fully developed as they have in some of the Australian and Canadian universities. Capacity enhancement in quality assurance, quality control, assessment, accreditation, certification and examinations will permeate all the activities of the In-Country Strategy as far as localisation of foreign and existing programmes is concerned. Key areas where quality assurance mechanisms will be developed jointly by the consortiums of African institutions will include the following:

1. Assessment and examinations of programmes from across the borders and different institutions
2. Curriculum planning, development and evaluation in ODeL
3. Materials development and how to digitize content
4. Delivery and technology platforms that are relevant to African educational and technological conditions
5. Choice of learning management systems and enterprise resource planning systems germane to ODeL
6. Governance models that assist in conceptualising and the setting up and location of virtual campuses in traditional and residential institutions and in open or dual-mode universities
7. Business management, auditing systems, financial management, human resources and funding strategies for ODeL initiatives
8. Personal and professional development in ODeL for academics, policy-makers and technicians in the consortiums of anglophone and francophone African institutions
9. Project development, management and evaluation in ODeL
10. Basic and applied research in ODeL

In this formulation, inter-institutional support for quality assurance will take the form of more formal curriculum contextualisation consortia in anglophone and francophone Africa. Within these communities of practice, this is the best collaborative way of making use of regional expertise and experiences in quality assurance mechanisms, frameworks, procedures and regulations.

2. QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE AVU

For us, quality assurance in our activities takes the form of a clearly articulated and systematic process of managing and accessing academic inputs from the external provider institution and the local African university. The goal is to ensure that the output is acceptable, qualitywise, to the stakeholder.

Here we focus on quality assurance in relation to the programmes the AVU is brokering from an Australian institution, namely the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT).

It is an excellent case of how an institution from Australia is working within an African institution to deliver first-class programmes and at the same time working with local academics and managers to develop a very comprehensive quality assurance mechanism for programmes taught through a combination of virtual and online teaching and learning methodologies. The monitoring of the teaching and learning process covers a wide area in quality assurance, including the scope of confidence levels, external reference points, qualification frameworks, review mechanisms for assessment, audits, visits and what we regard as programme coordinating committee meetings, quality control of outputs such as reports, performance indicators and other arrangements that are put in place to support the quality assurance process. All the current programmes in the AVU have established frameworks for quality assurance mechanisms and procedures.

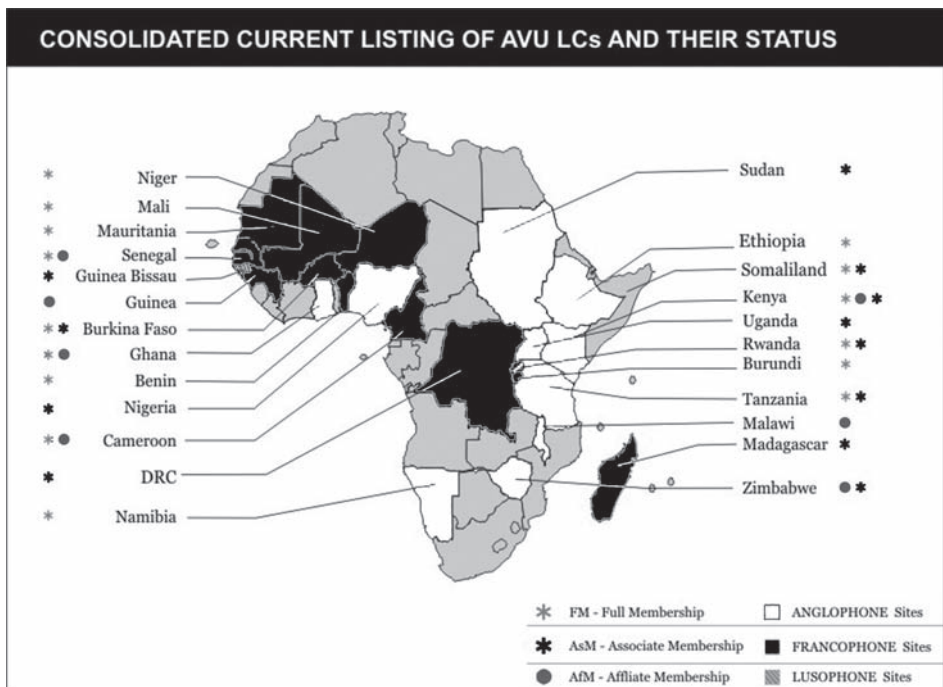
The quality assurance mechanisms that we intend to discuss here pertain to the computer science program that is offered in a number of anglophone universities in Africa. In fact one of the main benefits of the externally brokered programmes in the AVU network is that African institutions are able to learn different methods of quality assurance from well-established and experienced universities in Australia and Canada. The programmes are delivered to African students through a network of Learning Centres located in selected African universities. At the moment the AVU is offering certificate, diploma, and degree programmes to a number of students at Learning Centres (see the map for their actual spread) throughout the continent

The advantage that the current AVU quality assurance system has is that the donor Australian institution has tried and tested quality assurance mechanisms and frameworks that it brings to the African higher education environment. In other words, the system already has access to an international brand in the form of an Australian degree programme. Therefore, the AVU can boast of international standards, networking and benchmarking on the African continent as far as the quality assurance/control of its existing programmes is concerned. Quality assurance in this regard then is a set of activities that the institution abroad undertakes to ensure that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or service it is offering in African institutions.

In the AVU framework, quality assurance takes place at different levels which include:

- At the Australian institution (faculty and department levels)
- At the African institution (such as the University of Dar es Salaam)
- At the AVU Learning Centre at a partner institution, which will now be termed an ODeL Centre
- Among the lecturers and facilitators at the local African institution

Recognition, accreditation and validation of the programmes are done at all these levels of the AVU network to ensure that the product the student eventually gets at the end of the training programme is of a superior quality. In both Australia and Africa, we have professional bodies that are being involved in the process of quality assurance for these programmes. The review mechanisms, site visits and audits that are conducted by the Australian institution are probably some of the best mechanisms of quality assurance and examine all aspects of the programmes, including the content of disciplines themselves, as is attested to by students in various evaluations that are done by the Australian institution.



RMIT, like several other Australian universities, delivers many of its education programmes by a mixed mode with face-to-face teaching enhanced by independent modes of learning. Many of these enhancements are based on the use of Web technologies with a growing reliance on any of the robust technologies which are simple for students to use and easy for academics to adopt and integrate in ways which can enrich students' learning. This calls for assessing and assuring the quality of the courseware produced using these technologies. In addition, the delivery modes being used are assessed continually by the RMIT, the AVU, the Learning Centres, the students and the African partner institutions.

3. RMIT POLICY: QUALITY IN EDUCATIONAL DESIGN AND PRODUCTION

RMIT has an institution-wide quality assurance system related to aspects of educational design for distance and online courses. All courses, no matter how minor the online component, are signed off at faculty level by each faculty's Director of Teaching Quality (DoTQ). For this sign-off to be effected, there has to be evidence of clear educational design and planning. The distance and online approval process basically asks the faculty to show evidence of reasonable educational planning before their subjects become "live" on the distributed learning system (DLS). The DoTQs check that the faculty has considered the design features of an online system, thought about the overall rationale for the course in question and complied with the basic publishing standards (including copyright matters).

The coherence between the Course Guide and the online presentation is a key criterion in this process. This is a minimal educational requirement and simply requires an assessment of that coherence. RMIT scrutinizes the Course Guide, which includes the

usual information relating to course details, learning outcomes, planned student learning experiences, assessment and study programme and an online checklist to determine the quality of the programme as a whole. A checklist for this process is shown in the table below.

SECTION A: EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND DESIGN OF ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS	
TOPIC	SOME EXAMPLES TO CONSIDER
Learner-learner/ learner-teacher interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online tutorial sessions • Feedback on practical work • Continuous evaluation form • Team assignments workspace • Moderated discussion forums
Learner self-assessment/ feedback on learning progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A current collection of assessment materials and supporting documentation • Samples of previous assignments/project work (with documented student permission) • A collection of past/recent exams and sample tests (where appropriate) • Self-help quizzes (for formative assessment purposes) • Provision for electronic submission of assignment work • Publishing work for peer review
Study programme management/ study skills support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct access to the related approved Course Guide • A current timetable/timeline related to outlining face-to-face tutorials, lectures, lab/field work and online activities (with times, dates and location details) • Online learning activities clearly described/linked to curriculum outcomes • Current contact details of lecturers, teachers and tutors • A structured collection of Frequently Asked Questions and/or Glossary • Lecture outlines • Laboratory notes • News announcements
Resource-based/ problem-based learning environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A structured collection of learning resources • Clear links to related library resources and databases • A structured and validated collection of annotated WWW links • Multimedia simulations

SECTION B: ONLINE LEARNING RESOURCE PUBLISHING STANDARDS

To be completed if the course contains a structured collection of online learning resources when the guidelines for the following areas are addressed:

- RMIT intellectual property and copyright (online)
- RMIT “identifiability”
- Web site and interface design
- Accessibility

At RMIT all distance and online courses need to demonstrate additional quality processes which include:

- **Evidence of peer review.** The process of being open to feedback and scrutiny is essential in any scholarly activity and the key activity (teaching) is in that category. A report of the decisions made at peer review sessions is required.
- **Evidence of forward thinking through an evaluation plan.** The evaluation plan is a requirement to indicate how important ongoing quality improvement is. While collecting evidence about the success of one’s teaching and how much students are learning ought to be a natural process, in reality evaluation is rarely carried out rigorously. This part of the policy requests a brief document outlining what evaluation strategies are to be used while the course is being taught to students.

4. DEVELOPING PROCESSES TO ENACT THE POLICY AT AVU

4.1 *Evidence of educational design*

As stated above, this evidence is needed for all distance and online courses. RMIT uses two mechanisms to support this quality criterion.

- The first is the production of exemplars. Here the growing number of developed distance and online courses is being used to provide examples for the faculty to use. As these courses have professional educational design and production input, the documentation of Course Guides is often more complete. One area that RMIT continuously tries to improve in the quality of Course Guides is in the realm of graduate capabilities or attributes. How does one course relate to other courses? How does the design of each course contribute to the desired graduate capabilities? The progressive building up of quality Course Guides and matching examples of distance and online courses is a priority need.
- The second mechanism used, which is linked to the first, is the process of reviewing all DLS courses by review teams—one for each faculty consisting of faculty staff and staff from Learning Technology Services. A checklist similar to that in the table above is used for this review. The sorts of issues on which the review team provides feedback are:
 - Clarity in linking resources and activities to learning outcomes
 - Flexibility in catering for diverse groups of students
 - Linkage to strategic priorities, e.g., internationalisation, work-integrated learning
 - Links to activities and not just the provision of resources

4.2 *Carrying out peer reviews*

RMIT provides a range of optional frameworks for this process which is extremely valuable as a staff development exercise. Basically, the staff gather in a computer lab, spend time going through partially or nearly developed distance and online courses, make comments and then have an open discussion. Most peer reviews are held over one to two hours and use the following set of criteria:

- Students undertaking the learning activities (including assessment) are likely to achieve the course's learning outcomes.
- The course's learning outcomes incorporate relevant graduate capabilities, i.e., such capabilities are explicitly incorporated into learning activities and assessed (e.g., the theme and process of reflection activated by feedback among the students).
- The skills, knowledge and experiences of the students commencing the course have been considered when developing the learning activities, assessments and resources.
- The course meets the needs, wants and circumstances of the diversity of the anticipated students (including student access and equity issues in relation to computers).
- The course, including the online components, is sensitive to the local language and culture of the students (including English language proficiency).
- The course can actively encourage and support student interest, interaction and engagement.
- The assessment activities (including criteria) clearly gauge the student capability or competency related to the desired learning outcomes.
- The course ensures that students are aware of the expected nature and standards of assessable work.
- The course provides opportunities for timely and constructive feedback on learning to students throughout the course.
- At all times students know what activities and tasks to undertake.
- At all times students know what standards are expected and how to get learning support.
- Students can readily locate and access all resources when needed as well as readily submit material to peers or the relevant teaching team.
- Students are aware of the type of assistance available at any stage during learning and can quickly resolve common issues.
- Students are readily able to provide feedback to the teaching team throughout the course.
- The teaching and learning activities are selected and developed to maintain or enhance the expected benefits versus costs, including the ongoing costs of teaching and assessing in the course.
- All online materials conform to the RMIT Online Publishing Standards.

4.3 *Developing formal evaluation plans*

Each department and group at RMIT produces an annual student feedback plan but, as in most universities, the evaluation is focused mostly on measures of student satisfaction and, therefore, a learning-centred evaluation is undertaken. The strategies used for this process include:

- Survey of all students about access to computers, basic computer skills and experience in learning online

- Ongoing discussion boards to allow students opportunities to air their views, which are reviewed regularly by the Course Coordinator
- Regular course team meetings to get an overview of the issues arising
- Regular survey of students' perceptions of online learning activities, access to and use of online resources and relationship to other parts of the courses
- Focus groups, e.g., about the structure of online courses (ease of use, functionality, etc.), online communication issues, etc
- Detailed discussion of assessment results to provide evidence of the areas of courses that students can master and the areas that they find challenging
- Programme team meetings reviewing issues across first semester courses
- Compilation of the final report indicating recommended changes for next iteration

5. IS THE NETWORK ACHIEVING QUALITY OUTCOMES IN ITS ONLINE COURSES?

5.1 *Multi-level efforts to achieve tangible quality outcomes*

In quality assurance plans, there is always a danger of excessive focusing on processes and ignoring, or not paying enough attention to, the subject matter being taught. Is RMIT really making headway? Is the online quality assurance policy resulting in better quality online learning environments? These are critical questions as far as quality assurance across borders is concerned. As far as these programmes are concerned, the donors themselves have conducted evaluations and audits, on their own, in relation to the following:

- The inputs to the planning, design and implementation of teaching and learning programmes
- The retention, completion and pass rates
- The learner support, especially the role of the Digital Library that is managed by the AVU
- The learning platform WebCT with which most African students have had to contend
- The processes at the Learning Centres and the African partner institutions
- The outcomes of the AVU/RMIT programmes especially in terms of impact on development
- The analysis of the cost implications of the programmes

Within the AVU, we have also managed to examine quality assurance from a perspective that critically examines the following:

- The technological context in a country, especially the ICT infrastructure and policies
- The educational context in a university, especially exposure to modern methods of teaching and student support services
- Access to teaching and learning materials for staff and students, especially opportunities for interactivity in learning by students
- The flexibility in managing academic programmes by the local university, the Learning Centres and the RMIT itself

- Feedback mechanisms in the university and the Learning Centres
- The technological context in a university
- Training of university staff in the use of open, distance and electronic learning methodologies
- The technological readiness of the student
- Availability of other teaching and learning resources that are very scarce in the developing world

RMIT is cautiously optimistic and satisfied with the processes that have been designed. Some of the indicators that give optimism include the following:

- The need to consider quality assurance issues for courses in relation to programme level design and management is now more widely accepted.
- There is a much clearer idea of how to document and report on design issues to all stakeholders.
- There is little intellectual resistance to the need for evidence of the planning process (including copyright and intellectual property sign-off).
- The response of the staff at workshops and discussions has been largely positive.
- The response and engagement of the staff at peer review sessions has been positive.

5.2 Ensuring quality in online programmes in Africa: The challenges

The major challenges to quality assurance in online programmes in Africa will continue to include the following:

- Negative perceptions about distance education
- Unavailability of a robust ICT infrastructure
- High costs of bandwidth and connectivity
- Development of effective quality assurance mechanisms and systems
- The establishment of academic standards that are acceptable to all the institutions concerned
- The maintenance of quality and standards in programme design, development, implementation and evaluation
- Development of programmes that are “self contained” so that students do not need to rely on traditional methods or materials such as printed books

The biggest challenge will continue to be the development of quality and cost-effective programmes that are flexible and scalable, because the way the external programmes were designed allowed very little room for scalability

5.3 The lessons learnt

Our experiences with quality assurance in programmes that are brokered from overseas have shown that there is a need for a gestation period within the African institutions. What we have experienced, as far as the African partner institutions are concerned, is that there is a willingness to adopt quality assurance frameworks from overseas. We have also noticed, however, that those African institutions that do not have mature systems of quality assurance are more likely to adopt foreign systems of quality assurance.

The established African universities are more likely to resist the imposition of external quality assurance mechanisms. As a result of this situation, the AVU and its African and non-African partner institutions have now developed a homegrown approach to quality assurance. The approach takes place at the following levels:

1. External partner institution
2. African partner institution
3. A combination of the external partner institution, the African partner institution and the AVU

In this scenario, focus has been on teaching and learning, student assessment and examinations, learner support, the role of facilitators, the quality of learning resources, governance structures in the partner institution, the technology infrastructure and the teaching and learning management systems, and the relevance of the programmes within the African continent. In the process, the system has enabled our quality assurance mechanism and frameworks to satisfy the learner and our internal and external stakeholders. Like any other academic endeavour, more research within the African institutions is required to understand fully how to implement better quality assurance system, frameworks and procedures within the African context.

6. TOWARDS A CULTURE OF QUALITY

The AVU case provides unique insights regarding the problems and promises accompanying the efforts to build a culture of quality in ODeL in situations characterised by complex diversity and lack of resources—anglophone versus francophone educational systems on the one hand and diverse institutional cultures on the other, both against the backdrop of a quality culture being imported from a developed continent by a developing one that lacks the required technological infrastructure, human resources and funding. This complexity is further enhanced as the case pertains to the latest models of ODeL, i.e., virtual transactions, so heavily technology dependent.

In a virtual network like the one operated by the AVU, quality assurance among different institutions that have a tradition of very localised quality assurance frameworks is very challenging to put in place. To promote a culture of quality in such a situation, of the various prerequisites that the African higher education institutions must fulfil, the more significant ones appear to be:

- A thorough appreciation of learners' circumstances, needs and abilities with a view to overcoming the issues of access and equity
- Consensus with regard to the content, processes and outcomes of quality assurance legislation and mechanisms among the participating institutions to work for gradual convergence in perceptions leading to a corresponding convergence in quality concerns and practices
- Affordable, available and sustainable ICTs—equipment, human resources, maintenance costs, dependable supply of electricity, bandwidth and connectivity
- Affordable, user-friendly and sustainable educational platforms

With these prerequisites in place, “collaboration” may be the most significant factor in the process of promoting and establishing a culture of quality in ODeL operations in Africa. Decentralisation of processes is essential for strengthening this culture, but conscious efforts for quality operations at departmental and individual levels will not be forthcoming unless the academic and the administrative communities concerned are

motivated and come to an understanding with regard to the meaning, process and purpose of such a culture, for the sole reason that the system has cross-border applications and hence cross-border educational and financial implications. Collaboration, cross-institutional, cross-border and cross-continental, therefore, forms the foundation (at the level of ideology) for a culture of quality in ODeL in African higher education.

At the operational level, keeping in view the lack of infrastructure and resources, innovative models of management are required, as workable combinations of technologies and rational operational compromises required to build communities of quality practices cannot be forged by traditional management systems. This brings us to the factor of leadership, imaginative as well as pragmatic, which alone can build such communities.

Borrowing from Wenger (2003), to achieve this goal of building a community of practice in quality assurance for ODeL, the AVU is committed to “the authentic and supranational development of an infrastructure of imagination” as far as ODeL quality assurance mechanisms are concerned. Such an infrastructure will include virtual and physical facilities for orientation, reflection and exploration as envisaged in the AVU’s Research and Innovation Facility (RIF) when we deal with issues of quality assurance on our own. As Wenger (2003) argues, the orientation of the RIF will be in the location of researchers in the African higher education and training landscape so that they truly constitute a community of practice. We are also concerned with their virtual and physical locations in time and space and their increased use of electronic means of communication and sharing knowledge in ODeL. Furthermore, the RIF will enhance the virtual and physical locations of researchers in order to explain findings and research problems of quality assurance in ODeL as a networked community of practitioners on the African continent. Additionally, there is a need to deconstruct power hierarchies among African universities and academics/researchers as far as quality assurance is concerned in single and blended modes of teaching and learning that are flexible, cost-effective and efficient. This is essential so as to allow the vertical and horizontal articulation of credits by African students so that the African higher education landscape can begin to allow free/flexible movement of students across African universities, starting with those in our network. This has been a problem among African universities because we do not have access to any mutually agreed-upon cross-national quality assurance frameworks, mechanisms, procedures and processes. The RIF is intended to assist in the deconstruction of such academic hierarchies that currently exist in the African academy.

Further, the RIF will also spearhead iterative activities that are reflective, such as facilities for comparisons in research, retreats, conversations, sabbaticals and other breaks in the rhythm of intellectual discourse practices that are germane to quality assurance. It will also encourage exploration of ideas such as opportunities for trying things out, envisioning possible futures and possible trajectories, creating alternative scenarios in research on quality assurance for ODeL and pushing research boundaries, and developing simulations of what can work in African initiatives in ODeL on how to maintain the quality of existing and future programmes. The RIF for the AVU will be pivotal in building a reflexive, transformative and emancipating educational discourse for the development of authentic, original, and indigenous African communities of practice and local virtual and physical infrastructures for learning and teaching that benefit the entire network as far as quality assurance is concerned (Wenger 2003: 237).

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