

EPILOGUE

TOWARDS A CULTURE OF QUALITY IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING: PRESENT POSSIBILITIES

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1. INTRODUCTION

We closed the Prologue with an invitation to you to a fare of interesting experiences pertaining to quality assurance in ODL. While seeking answers to your questions in the cases presented in this volume, you will have drawn your conclusions and gained some insights. As promised then, here in the Epilogue we present some of the trends and inferences, and it should be enlightening as well as instructive to compare/contrast your conclusions with ours. In case they are convergent, we will have reason to believe that both the conceptualisation and the practices of quality assurance in ODL are reaching maturity. If, contrarily, they are divergent and/or conflicting, we will have identified issues to be resolved through further research and exploration. In either case, the ODL enterprise stands to gain.

2. QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ODL

Some 35 years ago, when the British Open University started its operations, there was no discussion on *quality assurance* in either education in general or ODL in particular. The term that reflected the then-contemporary concerns was *standards*, which invariably referred to a) the depth and extent of the content of a course of study, b) the transactional treatment it received at a given level in a given period of time and c) a standard norm for evaluating learner achievement. Always under pressure to establish credibility, ODL systems aligned themselves with the then-existing notion of standards. It might be worth reflecting on what those standards in face-to-face education were. Were there any benchmarks for classroom teaching? Where is quality assurance in ODL today vis-à-vis where it was about 35 years ago? Let us briefly trace the developments in the process of quality assurance in ODL corresponding to its phenomenal growth as outlined in the Prologue.

2.1 *Classical approach to quality assurance in ODL*

Until recently, the terms *quality* and *standards* in education were not defined explicitly. It was possible to recognise quality without having to define it. However, traditionally, a few criteria have been used to designate institutions and/or their operations as either standard or sub-standard. First, the traditional benchmarks for a quality institution of higher education were adequate infrastructure and well-qualified and experienced faculty. Second, an institution was required to prescribe and ensure commonly recognised entrance standards and duration of studies for its various courses and programmes. Third, an institution needed to prescribe curricular content and an evaluation scheme for each course/programme. Last, it required a prescribed scheme for the educational transaction (such as x number of lectures, y number of tutorials, z number of practicals, etc.) to complete a course/programme successfully. All this ensured that the institution was imparting education of a good standard. This has been and generally continues to be the convention in face-to-face education.

Against these criteria, when the question of standards came up in relation to open distance education during the late 1960s and the 1970s, a new set of additional criteria was identified to reflect quality in them. The first and the most significant of these was, and continues to be, the process of course preparation together with the quality of the study materials thus prepared. The second concern was the provision made for the learning/teaching transaction, which incorporated feedback and interactivity in the guise of counselling, tutorials, assignments, etc. The third important concern was the usability of ODL for the subject concerned (for example, notwithstanding the innovation of experimental kits sent to the learner's home, ODL was considered unsuitable for teaching sciences in many parts of the world). These criteria formed the backbone of quality assurance in ODL from its very inception.

The major *uneasy* difference between the two systems lay in their different and differing transactions—the extent of *contact* between the teacher and the taught as well as the levels of *socialisation*, sharing of experiences and *visible involvement* in the process of learning. Today, however, there is a view that the importance of *interaction* is overrated; and therefore, it is enough to maintain balance between the content and interaction, of which the quality rather than the quantity should concern us. The other cause of *uneasiness* is the *flexible entrance qualifications* provision, which demonstrates that, in the case of open systems, exit behaviour has precedence over entry requirements. Many face-to-face institutions are highly selective and enrol the best students, an input measure often not available to ODL institutions operating on principles of open access. This uneasiness continues to accompany ODL operations, in differing measures, in the developing world even today.

2.2 *Beyond the classical approach*

By the 1980s, ODL theoreticians and practitioners, while giving due credence to reasonable quality concerns and criteria as espoused within conventional norms, had enriched their experience with ODL and thus mustered enough courage to discard earlier inhibitions and become more definitive about the components of quality assurance patently specific to ODL.

Process-based *systemic concerns*: The processes that came to be assessed and evaluated are those of curriculum design; course preparation including instructional design, developmental testing and peer review; assignment handling and turnaround time for feedback; course delivery including student support services; student evaluation and

programme evaluation; and overall monitoring of the entire system, including its cost-efficiency and effectiveness. The conclusions drawn from such an assessment came to be used for improving the existing processes progressively. The link between the assessment and the corresponding improvement became cyclic, consequent upon which the system improved with every passing year.

Values-based philosophical concerns: On the social plank, one of the major arguments for ODL has been its ability to increase access to education together with facilitating equity in an area which has all along been a preserve for the elite. Questions such as “Is the ODL programme under consideration reasonably sensitive to these social concerns?” became critical in rating the strengths of a programme. Yet another question came up with the changing social, political and economic environment all over the world, as the changing needs and expectations of learners highlighted the arrival of the *new learner* questioning the relevance of many a traditional course. Are ODL programmes socially relevant; do they meet the needs and expectations of the new learners? As a new system, has ODL impacted the educational system in any significant way, and so, too, the social and economic systems? ODL operations came to be assessed against these questions and their quality rated accordingly.

Transaction-based pedagogic/androgogic concerns: All educational and training transactions (inputs-outputs) pertain to diverse combinations of cognitive, psychomotor and affective elements. Transactions in ODL operations too came to be assessed in terms of these very elements (thereby assigning still higher quality value to curriculum construction and instructional design in ODL), but not necessarily using the same norms and techniques as are well established in the face-to-face system. For example, in ODL systems, question papers may be derived from question banks, on-demand examinations may be a norm, some of the experiments may be conducted at home, and no two students may have the same value for all the tutorials provided.

As you can see from the above outline of the three major concerns, quality in ODL came to be measured on the basis of criteria, which go beyond those of qualified and experienced faculty and/or infrastructure. In addition to these developments, growing concerns about the funding-accreditation links in higher education prompted many developed countries to come up with quality assurance protocols addressing both the conventional and the distance learning modes. Many of them appeared in the 1990s, thus making it the decade of quality assurance. Consequently, *internal* and *external* assessments of the products and processes gained currency as a standard quality assurance strategy.

These practices and their outcomes, however, were being overtaken by events almost simultaneously, though more visibly during the 1990s, as eLearning entered the field with multimedia packages and the allied high-tech possibilities. Towards the end of the last century, work began on *learning objects* and *instructional management systems*. Corresponding to these latest developments, the first five years of the present decade have seen developed countries making rapid strides in educational technology and working out new directions for their quality assurance mechanisms, but by and large most of the institutions in the developing world are yet to harness the new possibilities created by *repositories of learning objects* and *instructional management systems*.

In the three decades that we have reviewed, there has been a visible tension between the notions of *educational standards* on the one hand and *quality assurance* on the other (Harvey et al. 1992 and Harvey & Green 1993). While it would seem that *quality assurance* emerged as the favoured notion for practical purposes, *standards*, as objective measurable outcomes, are gaining ground again. The industrial and market orientation

for the assessment of educational enterprise seemingly helped in reducing the popular prejudice against ODL, as both the face-to-face and distance modes of education began to be scrutinised and assessed in one and the same way. In many developed countries in the West, where an accredited ODL course is as good as an accredited face-to-face course, the *mode* of education has ceased to be a deciding factor in judging its *standards* as well as *quality*. What matters is what is done under each *mode*. In particular, the quality of the transaction is seen reflected in the *products*, the *processes* and now also the *outcomes* (levels of learners' learning, competence and satisfaction, employability of graduates vis-à-vis the perceptions of employers and the long-term socio-educational impact) of a system, rather than in the system (or its nomenclature) itself. Most of the *developing* world, however, continues to labour under the burden of tradition!

3. THE CASE STUDIES

Let us look at the twelve cases against this backdrop and attempt to arrive at some generalisations that could help policy-makers as well as field practitioners in promoting the *culture of quality* in their respective contexts. Of the twelve cases, four are from developed countries and the remaining eight from the developing ones.

The first four cases (from AVU, BOCODOL, IGNOU and KYU) pertain to *new operations*, as the activities described are the recent experiences of the work teams¹ involved. The second set of four cases (from NTI, OUHK, UWIDEC and YCMOU) pertain to *well-established institutions* striving to re-engineer their institutional settings by consolidating their achievements, improving their infrastructure and safeguarding their financial base with their respective quality assurance protocols clearly in focus. The last four cases (from OUUK, SOTA, UoG and USQ) pertain to institutions in developed countries engaged partly in consolidating their gains in their respective quality assurance practices and partly in improving the existing infrastructure and overall operational systems by harnessing contemporary ICTs for both extending and improving the quality of their reach and course offerings.

Regarding the levels of education, the volume covers the school level (BOCODOL and SOTA), the vocational level (YCMOU), teacher education (KYU and NTI), non-formal education (IGNOU) and higher education including research and professional education (AVU, OUHK, OUUK, UoG, USQ and UWIDEC).

3.1 ODL ground realities: Some general observations

Though not highlighted specifically, the case studies lead us to consider the following issues (adapted from Koul 2005) which influence quality assurance efforts in ODL across the Commonwealth.

1. Pressure for enhanced services from different constituents of the state and the society is increasing and *the institution of education* is hard pressed, for want of funds and other resources, to make adjustments to meet these pressures.
2. Demand for expanding access to higher education programmes and for programmes that are relevant to the employment market and labour force is increasing exponentially.

¹ BOCODOL, KYU and AVU are newly established institutions. Though IGNOU was established in 1985, the IGNOU case presented here pertains to a non-formal programme, normally not an IGNOU concern, a first-time experience for the work team concerned.

3. ICT infrastructure is uneven, and the related human resources and expertise differ from country to country and among different institutions and social groups within the same country. Therefore, the greater the dependence on ICTs, the greater the inequity in access. Consequently, an inequitable educational dispensation is emerging across the board.
4. Existence of and access to ICTs does not ensure their effective utilisation. In addition to adequate infrastructure, we also need enabling legislation and policy frameworks, trained personnel and an accommodating mindset.
5. Access to technology remains costly and limited in developing countries, as in most cases the ICT providers are well-entrenched monopolies.
6. A lack of the required national and regional capacity for promoting and implementing ODL operations leads to increasing dependency on developed countries and diploma mills.
7. Growth in the number and diversity of provider institutions causes variations in costs and the quality of programmes being offered. This points to the need for accreditation bodies to put in place mechanisms for protecting the interests of learners, which in turn points to the changing role of the national governments and the regional bodies concerned.
8. In many developing countries, the quality and effectiveness of ODL remains suspect among the academics as well as the employers/society.
9. It is not unusual for academics in dual-mode institutions to resist the development and integration of ODL programmes with on-campus courses/programmes, as making inputs in this area is seen as an “add-on” to their routine responsibilities. Lack of training in and aversion to the use of technology is the other reason for this resistance.
10. In many dual-mode institutions, the existing financial management, faculty and support staff are geared to working in and for the traditional on-campus course delivery. Switching over to the new system requires institution-wide and fundamental changes. Reverse cases, now in evidence, require similar flexibility for accommodating the face-to-face operations effectively.
11. Overall the characteristic features of didactic transactions are changing significantly. This necessitates a reorientation of learners, academics, educational administrators and the providers of student support services.

3.2 Factors that contribute to quality assurance practices: Main inferences

Driven by ICTs, ODL has been and is changing its profile rapidly, but the change is not uniform. ODL is not one and the same operation everywhere, nor even at any two institutions in the same country. Quality assurance concerns, protocols and practices, therefore, appear to be context specific. The data available in the cases in this volume make it possible for us to move beyond these concerns. It appears reasonable to look at quality assurance, especially in the context of *quality as a culture*, along three dimensions—the core dimension, the systemic dimension and the resource dimension.

The core dimension pertains to those factors that were identified in the second generation ODL operations. Their quality constitutes the foundation of quality assurance, whatever the context or generation of ODL that we may consider. This *dimension* pertains to learner-centricity (pointing to the importance of learning, not teaching, as a quality

measure) and capacity-building (training/preparing academics and administrators to manage that shift). For both, research is a pre-requisite.

1. These factors are *course materials and instructional design*, the *teaching-learning transaction (including learner evaluation practices)* and *learner support services*, and they stand out uniformly in almost all the cases presented here. In particular, the cases that fall within the framework of second-generation operations have associated their quality assurance practices with these very three factors. (See BOCODOL, IGNOU, KYU, NTI, OUUK, UoG and YCMOU cases.)
2. Learner support services need to be based on a thorough understanding of learners' circumstance, their abilities and requirements. This leads us to consider *research* as an allied core factor. Dynamic research activities are required not only for ascertaining the ground realities in relation to learners, but also for identifying what is required for capacity-building, how a course on offer fares, what may improve reflexivity within the institution and many other issues that need to be understood and analysed before solutions are worked out. (See AVU, IGNOU, OUHK, OUUK, SOTA and YCMOU cases.)

The systemic dimension pertains to those factors that constitute the system of ODL at the institutional as well as the national level. Their importance became obvious progressively as we moved beyond the second generation ODL operations. This *dimension* pertains to the initiation and introduction of quality assurance mechanisms, internal as well as external, the symbiotic relationship between the two and the management of both the mechanisms and the relationship.

3. *The state* appears to be a major factor in the process of introducing, promoting and sustaining quality assurance regimes in ODL as well as any other type of dispensation in both the developed and the developing countries. (See AVU, BOCODOL, IGNOU, KYU, NTI, OUHK, OUUK, SOTA, UoG and USQ cases.)
4. The second most significant systemic factor contributing to quality assurance processes is *institutional leadership*, especially in the initial stages, when the institution is being set up and also when a particular programme is being conceived and developed. (See BOCODOL, IGNOU, NTI, OUUK, SOTA and USQ cases.)
5. The third systemic factor is *institutional commitment*, which appears to be essentially a function of leadership. It manifests itself in the form of objects, practices and attitudes. The objects we refer to are institutional mission statements, vision papers or simply institutional aims and objectives as well as quality assurance policies and procedures which provide a direction and a path for the workforce. Practices such as adherence to state legislation through institutional procedures and their meticulous implementation, careful staff selection, staff sensitisation and capacity-building programmes, delegation of powers and assignment of corresponding responsibility to field operatives making them own the products and processes, efficient monitoring systems and appreciation for talent, innovation and tangible outputs not only constitute in themselves but also promote a culture of quality. The required attitude is seen in zero tolerance for inertia, inefficiency and indifference. It takes time to build institutional commitment. The leadership needs to be imaginative, patient and persistent to forge it. (See AVU, BOCODOL, KYU, NTI, OUHK, OUUK, SOTA, UoG, USQ, UWIDEC and YCMOU cases.)
6. The fourth systemic factor is *innovative management*. ODL institutions are of many grains and hues—no single model of management can suit them all. But there appear to be a few basics that should define their contours fairly clearly.

Flexibility for making rational compromises and decentralising programme management, pragmatism for integrating sub-systems (especially in dual-mode institutions) and employing variable technologies for cost-efficiency and operational effectiveness, sagacity for promoting inclusive democratic and participatory management and/or isolating sick components for their overhaul, foresight for perceiving promising innovations, and integrity for eliminating distractions and negative forces are some of the features required of every ODL management unit. (See AVU, IGNOU, KYU, NTI, OUHK, OUUK, SOTA and USQ cases.)

7. The fifth systemic factor is the quality of *long- as well as short-term planning* and the execution of plans. Meticulous plans coupled with pragmatic execution contribute to the quality of products, processes and outcomes. Both the plans and the execution strategies must allow room for variations in relation to risks and the needed process modifications. (See AVU, IGNOU, SOTA, USQ, UWIDEC and YCMOU cases.)
8. The existence of *quality-assurance mechanisms* that are integrated into institutional processes is the sixth systemic factor that we consider here. One such mechanism could be a quality assurance unit responsible for the related protocols (see the YCMOU case). Other mechanisms with similar objectives could be in the form of institutional *central units* for ODL that, in part, take care of ODL quality assurance requirements (see UoG and USQ cases). (For other approaches, see AVU, NTI, OUHK, OUUK and SOTA cases.)

The *resource dimension* has always been important, but with the advent of the fourth and the fifth generation ODL operations, the significance of resources has touched new heights. With its generic meaning, resources include technology, technical and academic expertise, learning resources and physical infrastructure. This *dimension* pertains to the pivotal factors that make changes and the management of changes possible and durable.

9. *Contemporary ICTs* have opened immense possibilities, but their availability is not uniform. Developed countries consider ICT applications and the related infrastructure a crucial factor in the process of ODL quality enhancement and show no hesitation in investing therein. (See OUUK, SOTA, UoG and USQ cases.) Some other institutions (see BOCODOL, NTI, OUHK, UWIDEC and YCMOU cases) are at different levels of development in this regard. What benefits they may reap and how is yet to be seen. One unique case is that of AVU, which has brought the fourth generation ODL operations to Africa. This case outlines the difficulties being faced in grafting high-tech applications into a resource-starved environment. The fifth generation ODL is entirely technology dependent and therefore resource intensive. It appears to be out of reach (at least for the time being) for developing countries, though, as noted above, some of them are pushing for the fourth generation systems.
10. *The academic fraternity*, the soul of the enterprise, involved in ODL operations, needs to move out of the traditional garb and accept multiple responsibilities, especially those in dual-mode institutions, undergo training and retraining as new technologies come to aid educational dispensation, innovate to meet diverse learning needs and be ready to meet students at any time and anywhere through any technology. (See AVU, BOCODOL, IGNOU, NTI, OUUK, USQ and UWIDEC cases.)

4. TOWARDS A QUALITY CULTURE: HOW TO REACH THERE?

The debate on and the quest for a quality culture in ODL will continue with the persistent rise in the social demand and value of education, developments in technology and epoch-making changes in educational thought—today, societies look up to education for economic development and quality of life, new technologies are creating *digital natives* with significantly different learning techniques, and the conventional experiential and constructivist ways of learning are questioned in view of the new learning paradigm of *connectivism* (Prensky 2005). Having scanned samples of contemporary quality-assurance practices, we have been able to identify the crucial factors that promise the flowering of a quality culture. As there is sufficient agreement on the significance of these factors in institutional settings (for rounded-up technical details, see the last section in the OUUK and YCMOU cases), it should not be difficult to outline a roadmap that may help us in reaching our goal of a quality culture in ODL.

The *state* is a major promoter of any cultural shift in educational dispensation. Progressive legislation, provision of adequate funding and monitoring have to be provided by the state. If the state is half-hearted in its approach to ODL, as is the case with some developing countries, the ODL system established will neither lead to nor constitute a culture of quality. This emphasis on state participation is clear from the OUUK, UoG and USQ cases. Governments need to revisit their policies pertaining to educational planning and financing, and put such *policies in place as not only promote but also necessitate the creation of a quality culture in ODL*. In addition, the telecommunications sector needs to be liberalised, and relevant *enabling policies favouring ICT applications in ODL* need to be put in place; for example, such applications may be subsidised in developing countries.

At the institutional level, *leadership* is the most significant engine of change, development and quality assurance. Leadership, especially at the initial stages of the development of an institution or a programme, has significant implications for a host of related micro-factors such as the quality of the overall management and that of the staff, their expertise and attitude.

- a) *Transparency* in operational and financial management lays the foundation of mutual trust among the components of the institution. The culture of such a trust allows honest and constructive criticism to flourish, which in turn creates a sense of belonging among all the cadres, as everything said and done is believed to be for the betterment of the institution and not seen to hurt or denigrate anybody.
- b) *Decentralisation* of both the formulation and the execution of policies promotes participatory management, which strengthens the sense of ownership among all the different levels of personnel for all that goes in the name of the institution.
- c) *Institutional commitment* is an aggregate of the commitments of those who make up the institution. Incompetent and unimaginative leadership cannot secure institutional commitment, even if it secures individuals' commitments on the basis of personal loyalty. Competent leadership does not depend on, nor look for, personal loyalty. It identifies staff strictly on the basis of the requirements of the institution; values, appreciates and acknowledges contributions, big as well as small, of all the members of staff; builds their confidence to make them proactive and helps them to reach their optimal levels of performance, leading to a culture of commitment so essential for quality assurance.
- d) *Proactive and innovative management*, necessitated by the present-day socio-educational dynamics, too, depends on the leadership. Creation of comfort zones

for the workforce to perform optimally, seen as a panacea for institutional growth, does not appear to suit the dual deluge of demand for socially relevant education and the innovations in ICT applications across the globe and the rate at which these applications are woven with pedagogy. Invariably, ODL institutions find themselves in a continual state of crisis, making it necessary for the leadership not only to resolve the immediate crises, but also to be ever ready to face new ones as they tumble one upon the other continually. In ODL systems, therefore, policies have to feed crisis management, not comfort zones.

- e) To incorporate the above factors into institutional processes successfully, no leadership can depend entirely on introspection, textbook knowledge or borrowed research findings. Investments have to be made in *institution-specific systemic research* to inform institutional policies, practices and products.
- f) Investments have to be made in *ICT applications* as well. However daunting it may appear in the developing countries, the need for harnessing technology not only for institutional management, archiving and exchange of information and the management of students, pedagogy and student support services, but also for extending institutional reach beyond the state and national boundaries cannot be overemphasised.
- g) *Innovations* in policy frameworks, administrative processes, curricular and instructional design and technology applications have enhanced versatility and utility of ODL systems significantly. However, there are areas of concern which do not display any visible impact of innovations; for example, the content and the process of learner assessment has not changed in any appreciable measure—by and large, we continue testing learners for their memory and levels of information/knowledge. Though curricular innovations emphasise the social relevance of ODL programmes and courses, there is hardly any corresponding development in the design of assessment tools to test learners' creativity, problem-solving skills or competence in the application of their learning. The broader the canvas of innovations, the brighter the prospects of quality assurance.

Above all institutional leadership must have a humane approach, for ODL deals with human beings as the basic raw material. It should put in place policies and mechanisms to take care of issues like human diversity, gender, etc. In this regard, it is worth speculating as to what may be the outcome of female leadership in ODL, as the task is essentially that of nurturing human beings. Unfortunately, at present there are not enough women in leadership roles in ODL to look for dependable inferences. Further, institutions need to revisit their missions and reorganise their operations, keeping in view the varied applications of technology, human resource requirements and market forces. Learners and educators need to be reoriented for the emerging technology-enhanced didactic transaction. This may require overhauling the existing systems of lower-level education as well. Overall, it appears that ODL management will be better off if it takes a corporate stance and the workforce, especially the academics, functions like a corporate community.

At the international, regional and national levels, *cross-institutional collaboration* is emerging as a meaningful driver of quality assurance initiatives and systems. The AVU and OUHK cases show how the imported protocols, though resented by the local personnel initially, need to be given a local habitation for purposeful continuity. Provision needs to be made for national, regional and international accreditation systems in order to foster the practice of collaboration. In particular, the international systems will facilitate cross-border and trans-modal offerings, whereby not only will cross-cultural and multinational curricula find encouragement, but also capacity will be built among

the partners equitably. Indeed international collaboration, including that in systemic research, promises not only to optimise resources by enlarging the scope and reach of the open educational resources movement, but also to facilitate diverse glimpses of quality and thus become the stimuli for raising the levels of products and services at all the institutions concerned. However, we need to reflect on the implications of international collaboration for the context specificity of ODL operations.

Though quality-assurance initiatives and operations are seemingly context specific, there is a strong indication that the *major factors contributing to quality* in ODL across the Commonwealth are not disparate but enjoy uniform acceptance across the institutions. Context seems to work as a limiting agent affecting the choice of the components of these factors and the actual modus operandi used. Thus, while the same factor may be addressed at different places, the context gives it different location-specific manifestations. For example, while USQ addresses learner support by using high-tech applications, KYU is addressing the same concern by adopting a *culture of care*, as the required technology is not available to them. In concrete terms, the two operations are context specific and quite different from one another, but essentially the quality factor being addressed is the same—*learner support*. In addition to the universality of the factors responsible for a quality culture, the other linking factor is *the contemporary ICTs*. As seen in the fifth generation ODL systems, ICTs integrate pedagogy with technology and make education a truly global enterprise. If study modules made up of good-quality educational assets, originating from a single institution or a consortium of institutions, are made available anywhere in the world at any time, there will be no dearth of takers. If these very assets are capable of being integrated in different ways and can be reused through the processes of disaggregating and repurposing supported by trans-modal delivery systems, we will have moved towards addressing the challenge of educational deprivation. One of the significant implications of this possibility is that *delivery modes* will not be significant any more; it will be the educational products, processes and outcomes that will decide the quality of the enterprise. Unbridled enthusiasm, however, can be counter-productive. Every programme will not command a world market nor have universal relevance. The need for specific local programmes will continue. Thus, it appears reasonable to think of at least two distinct sets of quality protocols—one that has universal applicability for global operations and the other that has relevance for local operations; neither is more significant than the other. Accordingly, while recognising the local context and working for it, we should aim at international standards, which should not be ignored in any case whatsoever, whatever the contextual realities. Here then, we may *define quality in ODL broadly as comprising those of its attributes that not only promise but also provide opportunities for a better quality of life for its takers, whatever their social context, and the communities/societies they work in and contribute to.*

The above roadmap in view, how do we define a culture of quality in ODL? In her survey of mega-universities, Insung Jung (2005) concludes that “A quality culture can be defined as an institutional culture that promotes the introduction of an internal QA system, values the capacity-building for implementing QA arrangements, stresses the link between the internal QA system and accountability to the public at the national and international levels, and focuses on learning rather than teaching.”

The four characteristics of institutional culture identified above are clear reflections of our conclusions detailed in subsection 3.2 above. Accountability to the public, however, lies outside the institutional domain, as it invariably includes agents external to the institution concerned. Though they do serve a purpose in the initial stages, their prolonged dominance over the internal systems amounts to regimentation, which is an antithesis of a naturally flourishing culture. For a quality culture to pervade

the educational enterprise globally, regimentation through external processes has to make way for a more comprehensive and completely owned internal quality regimen. Fortunately, there are indications that we are moving away from external quality assurance processes to comprehensive internal quality regimes. (See the last paragraph in the USQ case, the *culture of care* in the KYU case, the routines in the UoG case, the criteria for evaluation in the IGNOU case and the compulsions of localising external quality protocols in the AVU and OUHK cases.) The presence of internal mechanisms such as quality assurance units or departments, however, is not necessarily indicative of the existence of a quality culture. So long as they serve as watchdogs, quality control or quality assurance units do not constitute a culture of quality. In the long term, *quality culture* cannot be a function of external processes, nor even that of internal cells, unless those involved in the enterprise work purposely to achieve it.

Culture is a way of life shared willingly by all the members of a social group in a way that, while drawing from it purposefully, they nurture it with commitment and diligence. It cannot exist, much less grow, if the members of the group pull in different directions or work under various compulsions. And so it is with the culture of quality—it has to be shared and owned by all the concerned, with all their efforts focused on planned outcomes. In the ultimate analysis, it is the proactive, conscientious and well-trained workforce of different cadres working together willingly and purposefully for a common goal that establishes a culture of quality. In the case of ODL, external or internal quality assurance agents/bodies, collaboration, institutional leadership, state interventions and ample resources are only the possible props that promise such a culture, while it is the workforce that actually establishes it. As excellence, the hallmark of quality, is born of its longing for itself, the institutional quest for excellence is the foundation that a quality culture can be built on.

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