

CHAPTER 7

QUALITY ASSURANCE SURVEY OF MEGA UNIVERSITIES

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CHAPTER SUMMARY

Mega universities (i.e. those with over 100,000 students) are among the most important providers of distance education worldwide and are increasingly using ICT-based learning. Until recently they placed more emphasis on widening access than assuring quality, but now they recognise quality assurance as a key issue that needs to be addressed not only within individual universities but also jointly and in the global context. At the same time QA frameworks are at an early and therefore crucial stage of development. This chapter reports on a recent survey to examine and compare QA practices in mega universities and draws certain important lessons for the mega universities in the future development of effective QA policies. Where lifelong learning is referred to, this is understood as a process that people undertake to acquire knowledge, skills, and values needed for personal and occupational development throughout their lifetimes; often linked to adult learning.

BACKGROUND

Over the past few decades, there has been a noticeable growth in distance education (DE) around the world. More than 10 mega universities have been developed to meet the increasing educational needs of adults and lifelong learners.¹ A mega university is defined as “a distance teaching institution with over 100,000 active students in degree-level courses” (Daniel, 1996: 29). Some mega universities such as Anadolu University in Turkey and China Central Radio and TV University in China have over 500,000 active students. Considering the high level of student enrolment, the mega universities are becoming “very important for the future of higher education (HE) all over the world” (Daniel, 1998), including HE as part of lifelong learning.

In parallel with the development of mega universities, cross-border DE has grown. For example, universities in Australia, UK, USA, and Canada have actively exported their DE programmes to other parts of the world. China, Hong Kong (China), India, Malaysia and Singapore in the Asia-Pacific region have been among major importers of those

programmes. However, among those importers, Hong Kong (China), India and Malaysia have also exported their programmes to other countries such as Bangladesh, China, Indonesia and Sri Lanka (Jung, 2004a).

Moreover, many conventional DE institutions have begun to introduce information and communication technology (ICT) mainly as supplementary modes of instruction. Some institutions including a few mega universities have created e-learning programmes. Examples include the e-MBA programme of the Anadolu University in Turkey, the online Lifelong Education Graduate School at the Korea National Open University in Korea, the online MBA of the Athabasca University in Canada. Besides these institutions, for-profit e-learning providers have appeared in the DE market. In the Asia-Pacific region, main providers of e-learning include Thomson Learning, Apollo International and UNext.

These trends challenge the existing quality assurance (QA) frameworks of DE, which have focused more on widening access than on assuring quality, and often do not address for-profit and cross-border education. Especially in the context of growing globalisation in distance education, there has been an urgent need for international initiatives to review quality assurance mechanisms of DE for higher education at the national and institutional level, discuss new challenges of a changing DE environment, and build a capacity for QA to enhance the quality provision in a globalised higher education market. QA in mega universities is considered to be especially important since those mega universities provide higher education to millions of students around the world with collaboration or in competition with for-profit or cross-border providers.

Recently, several studies have attempted to evaluate QA systems of DE for higher education at the national or institutional level and discuss issues related to QA with the emergence of virtual universities or e-learning programmes (for example, Jung, 2004a; 2004b; UNESCO, 2003; and OECD, 1999). Moreover, international organisations such as UNESCO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL), OECD and World Bank have suggested QA guidelines for distance education and/or cross border higher education.² These studies reveal that the QA frameworks of DE in a globalised context are still in the early stages of development. The studies also indicate the need for investigating a wide range of QA practices in different contexts of distance education and discussing QA matters in depth at the international level.

SURVEY OVERVIEW

The present chapter aims to report the results of a survey³ on QA practices in mega universities, discuss the convergence and diversity of those QA practices, and draw policy considerations for other distance education institutions. Even though the terms for quality assurance in distance education vary across mega universities, in this report, the terms are used as defined below.⁴

Objectives of the survey

There were two practical reasons for conducting the survey. The first related to the 2003 World Summit of Mega Universities on Innovation and Collaboration – Joint Action for the Future of Distance Education (Shanghai, China, 6-7 November 2003), which raised the need for information sharing on QA systems in the mega universities. This survey was a follow-up action requested by the mega universities at the Summit. The second was to report QA practices and issues in the mega universities at the Second Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualification

(Paris, France, 28-29 June 2004) in pursuit of empowering participants for informed decision-making and providing an opportunity for capacity building for quality assurance to enhance the quality provision in an internationalised DE market.

Key aspects of the survey included QA organisation, QA policies, QA methods, objectives of QA activities, QA areas and criteria, QA system for imported/exporting distance education programmes, QA system for e-learning, and link to national QA frameworks for distance education.

Participants in the survey

The survey, conducted between May and early June 2004, was sent out to the presidents (or vice-chancellors) and/or the heads of QA units in 11 mega universities in different regions. Those 11 mega universities included the Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU, Pakistan); the Anadolu University (Anadolu, Turkey); the China Central Radio and TV University (CCRTVU, China); the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU, India); the Universitas Terbuka (UT, Indonesia); the Korea National Open University (KNOU, Korea); the Payame Noor University (Iran); the Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU, Thailand); the Open University (OU, UK); the University of South Africa (South Africa); and the Shanghi TV University (SHTVU, China). Table 7.1 shows profiles of nine mega universities that responded to the survey questionnaire.

Table 7.1: Profiles of the Nine Mega Universities Participating in the Survey

INSTITUTION	YEAR OF ESTABLISHMENT	NUMBER OF DE STUDENTS	NUMBER OF ACADEMIC STAFF		NUMBER OF ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF
			FULL-TIME	PART-TIME	
AIOU (Pakistan)	1974	456,126	145	23,000 (<i>tutors</i>)	1,426
Anadolu (Turkey)	1958 (1982 named Anadolu)	884,081	1,729	653 (<i>tutors</i>) 300 (<i>lecturers</i>)	1,763
CCRTVU (China)	1979	2,300,000	52,600	31,500 (<i>tutors</i>)	16,500
IGNOU (India)	1985	1,013,631	339	35	1,337
KNOU (Korea)	1972	196,402	271	108 (<i>tutors</i>)	546
OU (UK)	1969	203,744	1,169	7,995 (<i>Associate lecturers</i>)	1,434 (<i>Academic-related staff</i>) 2,139 (<i>Secretarial, clerical, and technical staff</i>)
SHTVU (China)	1960	101,218	<i>Info. Not Given</i>	<i>Info. Not Given</i>	<i>Info. Not Given</i>
STOU (Thailand)	1978	181,372	375	<i>Info. Not Given</i>	904
UT (Indonesia)	1984	222,068	762	3,600 (<i>tutors</i>)	730

SURVEY RESULTS

QA structures and policies

To assure the quality of its services, an institution as a whole must have a set of policies and structures to direct organisational activities. The mega universities surveyed have different types and levels of organisational structures and policies on QA.

QA organisational structures

QA organisational structures in the mega universities can be categorised into three types: a centralised QA structure, a collective QA structure, and a dispersed QA structure. The following is a discussion of the different types of QA organisations in nine mega universities.

A centralised QA structure: Several mega universities have set up a centralised total quality management system to co-ordinate and oversee the implementation of QA activities university-wide based on policies and guidelines formulated by QA-related boards or committees. Those centralised units are operated based on university revenue. Examples include UT (Indonesia)'s QA Centre, STOU (Thailand)'s Educational QA Co-ordinating Centre, AIOU (Pakistan)'s Research and Evaluation Centre, and OU (UK)'s QA team and a Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching.

A collective QA structure: A QA system of some universities has been set and run by the boards, the councils, and/or the committees rather than an independent QA unit in administration. Each body has distinctive roles in different stages of QA processes or in different areas of QA activities. At IGNOU (India), School Boards, Planning Committee, and Academic Council are responsible for overseeing QA policies and implementations. At Anadolu (Turkey), University Senate, University Executive Board, Academic Advisory Board, Course Accreditation and Review Committee, and Instructional Design Committee play a significant role in QA and accreditation.

A dispersed QA structure: There are mega universities where QA is a part of the responsibilities of one or more related administration offices. At CCRTVU (China), units responsible for assuring quality of distance education include the Educational Administration Division, the Centre of Learning Support Service, the Centre of Examination, and the Academic Assessment Office. KNOU (Korea) has a QA system where quality is not a specified responsibility of any particular post or office, rather it is a responsibility of all related offices and academic divisions. SHTVU (China) assigns QA responsibilities to the Department of Teaching Affairs, but specific QA activities are assigned to all related units of the university.

QA policies and regulations

QA policies and regulations have been set in all the institutions surveyed. However, the degree of elaboration in those policies and regulations and the level of integration with the general university policy framework and the national QA framework vary across the institutions.

Complying with national standards: Three institutions have developed their QA policies and regulations in compliance with the national guidelines. For example, the QA policies and regulations at IGNOU are in conformity with the QA guidelines determined by the national QA agency, the Distance Education Council (DEC) of India. Anadolu's distance education programmes and courses comply with the standards and requirements of the Informatics National Committee. And OUUK's Qualifications Framework is consistent with the national "Frameworks for Qualifications in Higher Education and Credit Guidelines for HE Qualifications."

Developing own QA policies: Whereas, in some cases where the national QA framework for DE provides rather general guidelines or there is no national QA framework specifically for DE institutions, institutions have developed their own QA policies and regulations. Such examples include STOU, UT, AIOU, KNOU, CCRTVU, and SHTVU.

Examples of elaborated QA policies: As for the level of specification in QA policies and regulations, OUUK and UT provide good examples of an elaborated system. OUUK has developed the *Guide to Quality and Standards in the Open University* that provides a guide to the structural and procedural arrangements for internal quality assurance. This document aims to embed QA into OU's organisational structure, staff roles and process design, but yet allow flexible adaptations by each unit. UT has adopted the AAOU Quality Assurance Framework to develop the "Quality Assurance System for Universitas Terbuka". This new quality assurance system encompasses nine components and 107 quality criteria or statements of best practices. Each criterion is further delineated into indicators and methods of achievement. In addition, UT has developed 112 work manuals based on its quality system, outlining QA systems, procedures and assessment criteria. The manuals are used consistently by all the members of UT in carrying out their daily responsibilities, assessment forms were developed to monitor and assess tasks performed by individual staff, to support self-assessment of each unit, to record processes and outputs of the tasks, to identify problems, and to offer solutions.

QA objectives and methods

The survey shows that quality assurance in most mega universities has similar objectives, but is assessed by a variety of instruments and methods.

Objectives of QA activities

For most institutions, the predominant objectives of internal QA activities are self-improvement and accountability to the society in general and to the National QA authority in specific. Thus, the internal QA results are used both for self-improvement and/or external evaluation.

Accountability to society and QA authority: Heavy involvement of external experts is often observed in some cases where the primary objective of QA is accountability. IGNOU, being appraised by the Open and Distance Education Assessment and Accreditation Board of DEC at intervals of 5 years, integrates the prescribed norms and standards set by DEC in its internal QA system, and evaluates implementation of those norms and standards constantly with the help from external reviewers. An important driver in all the QA activities is external in nature at OUUK where QA results are used for the basis of public funding decisions. UT's external assessment has involved experts from the Directorate General of Higher Education on a semester basis, as well as from the National Accreditation Board of Higher Education on a three- to four-year basis.

Self-improvement: Feedback from internal and external reviewers and students are used to improve the quality of courses, programmes, materials and services of most of the distance teaching universities surveyed. IGNOU keeps all the records of discussions of various committees and experts to ensure that the recommendations of the committees and experts are incorporated in improving key aspects of its courses, programmes and services. AIOU puts a great emphasis on feedback surveys. The results of the surveys are used to improve quality of distance teaching and learning at AIOU. UT uses feedback and inputs from various sources including the top management for continuous improvement. At Anadolu, formal feedback is collected from teaching evaluation surveys and student questionnaires and the results from the feedback are used to improve its distance education. KNOU uses the results of student evaluation and expert opinions to improve the quality of its textbooks.

QA methods

A variety of QA methods are observed in the mega universities. The popular methods of QA include providing a wide range of opportunities for training workshops, conducting evaluation research, introducing internal review processes, and inviting external audits and assessments. In some cases, detailed guidelines or directions for assessing quality in selected key areas of distance education at the course and programme level are also provided.

Offering internal training and professional development opportunities: The most prevalent method of QA is to provide training and professional development opportunities to faculty and staff, including part-time tutors. The clearest examples are shown in several cases. OUUK specifies initial induction and training, and continuous staff development opportunities for its salaried staff, academic staff and associate lecturers in the “Guide to Quality and Standards”. Formal training sessions, workshops, resources, moderated online courses and seminars are offered. SHTVU has offered a series of training courses to its young instructors, academic staff, and part-time lecturers covering topics in course development and learner support. Each institution at UT sets out personnel development programmes to equip its staff with competencies for effective task performance. IGNOU also provides orientation programmes for course writers, tutors, and counselors. Similarly, KNOU and AIOU organise a series of workshops on course development for teachers.

Involvement in international training workshops and conferences: Some mega universities go beyond internal training activities. For example, UT (Indonesia) has sent a selected number of its staff to a three month training workshop in the Netherlands in co-operation with the Netherlands’ International Development Agency (NUFFIC) and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) and other various international conferences, workshops and training sessions on QA. International organisations such as UNESCO and COL have provided online training manuals and face-to-face training opportunities to distance educators.

Evaluating and monitoring staff performance: Evaluation and monitoring of staff performance is another method to ensure the quality of distance education. AIOU monitors routine duties of its staff and also prepares a formal Annual Confidential Report that includes evaluation of staff performance by each section head in charge. CCRTVU uses feedback from teachers and students to assess the quality of courses and teaching activities. KNOU evaluates tutor performance based on students’ evaluation of their services and tutorials. OUUK implements a period of probation to all staff joining the university. During the period, the head of each unit is required to carefully and continually monitor the work of probationers. The “Manual of Personnel Policies and Procedures” specify job evaluation policy and procedure of salaried staff and the “Associate Lecturer Handbook” clarifies appraisal system for associate lecturers. UT’s evaluation system is rather extensive. It requests each unit to undertake self-assessment and self-monitoring. A university-wide quality audit team, then, visits all units and regional centres to assess their performance. The top management of the university is also involved in this evaluation process and examines the quality assurance report and provides feedback to all units.

Specifying steps in the course development process: The internal quality assurance system during the development of courses/programmes and materials is well integrated into the whole operations of most distance teaching universities. AIOU adopts a course team approach and a system for QA during the course design and development. CCRTVU

plans and produces its conventional DE courses, online courses, and materials following a standardised QA process to ensure the quality. Similarly, IGNOU introduces step-by-step course development processes and engages experts from all over the nation for the design and development of its courses and programmes, ensuring the quality of its teaching and learning materials. OUUK provides the Course Management Guide and adopts the course team approach in approving and developing courses. At UT, the course development process begins from an idea of programme development followed by a market survey or needs analysis. UT has specified a process of development and review of its courses. KNOU develops its textbooks employing a course team approach. Each course team consists of KNOU faculty, external content experts, distance education specialists, and textbook designers. Students' evaluation is sought as well. Anadolu assures the quality of its courses through the Instructional Design Committee. The Committee decides on a team of experts for the development of each course and facilitates communication among content experts, lecturers and students.

Reviewing learner assessment: The quality assurance procedure during assessment and examinations development is well laid out in a few distance teaching universities. OUUK operates an Examination and Assessment Board for every course. This board is responsible for the production of the examination paper, marking guidelines, the awarding of course results and other related matters. OU's assessment framework complies with the national Quality Assurance Agency's Code of Practice for Assessment of Students. At IGNOU, a marking scheme is prepared and made available to all examiners to avoid inter-examiner variability. AIOU reviews the process of student evaluation and makes suggestions for improvement. AIOU gathers evidence of course effectiveness from students and has developed a built-in mechanism of continuous course improvement. The Research and Evaluation Centre of AIOU carries out regular course evaluation studies.

Inviting external reviewers and experts: Involvement of external reviewers or/and experts during course development and material production is also a popular method of assuring the quality in most of the mega universities surveyed. KNOU, AIOU, IGNOU, UT, and STOU invite external experts in their QA processes. AIOU invites external experts during its formative or summative studies or feedback surveys. CCRTVU involves external experts, professors from national universities, and persons in charge of e-colleges to review its quality of programmes, courses, tutoring, and other services. OUUK seeks the three main external inputs to QA processes: the External Assessor for course in development, the External Examiner for examination at course level, and the External Advisor appointed at award level.

QA areas and criteria

The mega universities surveyed have developed QA criteria for key areas of distance education.

Key QA areas

OUUK and UT provide detailed criteria for each of their QA key areas. Most of the mega universities tend to have more detailed criteria especially for QA areas such as Programme/Course Design and Development, Learner Supports, and Assessment. These areas are more directly related to student learning. AIOU, IGNOU, SHTVU, and KNOU put a great emphasis on QA in the areas of course/materials production and student support services. Table 7.2 below summarises the key QA areas of the mega universities surveyed.

Table 7.2: Key QA Areas

UNIVERSITY	KEY QA AREAS
AIOU (Pakistan)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Courses and their effectiveness • Tutorial support system • Assessment system • Student problems • Methods of course production • Cost effectiveness of courses • Outcome of courses and programmes • Servicing/Operational departments • Administration
Anadolu (Turkey)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic and professional enhancements of programmes and courses (specifics not given)
IGNOU (India)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs and objectives of the programme • Content and level of the programme • Duration of the programme • Language of the course material • Presentation of the content • Transforming the content into distance format • Delivery of the programme • Assessment of students
CCRTVU (China)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy and planning • Course design and development • Learner support services • Learner assessment • Media and technology • Unified requirements
KNOU (Korea)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learner support services • Tutorials • e-Learning • Textbook development • Broadcasting programme development
OU (UK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (The Guide to Quality and Standards covers eight fact sheets) • Institutional management of quality and standards • Framework for academic quality and standards • Internal review • Assessment and awards • Collaborative awards • Student support and guidance • Staff • Accountability to stakeholders

SHTVU (China)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching • Teaching affairs • Academic staff • Course design and development (texts and books, online courses) • Students (learning resources, online courses, digital libraries, telephone, e-mail, BBS, i-class teaching platform) • Media for learning (Internet, VOD, Video, Audio, Telephone, etc.) • Study centres
STOU (Thailand)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No specific information given
UT (Indonesia)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy and planning • Human resource provision and development • Management and administration • Learners • Programme design and development • Course design and development • Learner support • Learner assessment • Media for learning

QA criteria

Detailed QA criteria are provided for several of the mega universities surveyed. For example, IGNOU lists QA criteria for developing DE materials in self-instruction mode. All materials to be transformed in the self-instructional mode have to meet the criteria of self explanatory, self contained, self directed, self-motivating, self-evaluating, and self-learning. The faculty members are requested to transform the content into distance mode and ensuring that the unit structure is followed: 1) introduction, 2) objectives, 3) content exposition, 4) revision questions, 5) in-text questions, 6) summary, 7) terminal exercises, 8) supplementary material, 9) assignments, 10) suggested readings/reference materials, 11) learning activities and 12) key words.

KNOU puts an emphasis both on content and instructional design of the materials. QA criteria for the content include: appropriateness of objectives, specification of objectives, accuracy and recency of the content and clear organisation of the content. QA criteria for instructional design include: appropriateness of teaching-learning strategies, effectiveness of utilising multimedia, appropriateness of screen interface, and convenience of course management. Other institutions have also devised similar detailed QA criteria for course development.

QA criteria during the delivery of DE programmes have been reported in a few cases including UT, OUUK and IGNOU. One example can be found at IGNOU. IGNOU has suggested QA criteria such as timely dispatch of course materials, training of tutors and

counselors in providing support to students, timely delivery of multimedia packages to study centres, regular tutorials and counseling sessions, timely feedback on assignments, timely response to student queries, feedback to students on their performance and progress and facilitation of peer group interaction.

OUUK provides detailed QA criteria for services to students in regional centres. All the regional centres need to carry out an annual review of key activities: course choice, enrolment and fees, careers guidance, outreach and promotion, preparation, induction and learning skills development, student progress and retention, special needs, examinations and assessment, and exceptions and complaints. The findings of these reviews are shared between regions. Other activities, managed centrally or regionally, are reviewed on an ad hoc basis from time to time. Examples include: support for students with disabilities, the promotion of equal opportunities, marketing and collaborative provision (OUUK, 2004).

QA for new challenges

It appears that the quality assurance of the cross-border operations and e-learning practices is still in the initial stages of development in most of the mega universities. However, the institutions seem to recognise the need for special attention to QA systems for those new challenges.

QA for cross-border activities

From the survey data, one can conclude that there has been no need for most of the mega universities to develop a comprehensive QA system for both imported and exporting distance education programmes. Only two mega universities reported the existence of the QA system for cross-border programmes.

Guidelines for exporting programmes: IGNOU, being an exporter of its DE programmes, has set QA guidelines for exporting programmes. First, the credibility of partner institutions is reviewed in collaboration with Indian High Commissions and Embassies abroad. Second, IGNOU approves local tutors and counselors appointed by the partner institutions based on their curriculum vitae. Those approved tutors and counselors receive training sessions on student support services from IGNOU faculty. Finally, the examination scripts are marked centrally by IGNOU to provide reliability of student assessment.

A comprehensive QA framework for export and import: OU specifies the arrangements for managing curriculum partnerships and collaborative provision in its Guide to Quality and Standards. As indicated in the Guide, the “Curriculum Partnerships Committee is responsible for all regulatory and procedural matters relating to curriculum partnerships and for their approval subject to approval by Curriculum and Awards Board at later stage”. Operational Toolkit Series and Operational Fact Sheets are developed by the Curriculum Partnerships Advisory Service and provide advice, guidance and other information on curriculum partnership arrangements to all units of OU. These arrangements include both export and import.

Other examples: Some other institutions such as AIOU, Anadolu and KNOU offer DE programmes for own citizens living in different countries. For example, AIOU collaborates with the Commonwealth of Learning and national open universities of India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to offer COL Executive MBA/MPA programme. Anadolu

offers its programmes to Turkish citizens living in Europe and the programmes are produced under the similar QA guidelines with domestic programmes. KNOU allows ethnic Korean overseas to enroll in its DE programmes and provides its DE materials to ethnic Korean residents in China.

QA for e-learning

A separated QA system for e-learning has not been developed in most of the institutions investigated. Instead, most cases adopt the same QA criteria as they use in QA for conventional DE to assess and manage the quality of e-learning programmes or courses.

KNOU, however, has developed more detailed criteria to monitor the quality of its e-learning courses and services. Besides its conventional DE courses, KNOU has offered 60 online courses on the Web. Three QA measures are taken during the development and delivery of e-learning courses. First, before developing any e-learning course, a review team, consisting of content experts and design experts, will evaluate the appropriateness of e-learning development and objectives, accuracy of the contents, and structure of the contents. Second, the review team, once a certain course is accepted as an e-learning course, will assess its pedagogical strategies, multimedia components, user interface and course management functions. Third, two formal evaluation sessions will be administered during the development process. The e-learning site under development will be open to the public and the review team to be monitored. Comments from the public (including students) and the experts will be collected and used to improve the e-learning course.

Whereas KNOU has developed totally online courses, AIOU has adopted a QA process in developing multimedia contents for its courses. Even though some universities such as OUUK, CCRTVU, and SHTVU are actively incorporating e-learning components in their DE programmes, no specific QA measures for e-learning components have been provided. Anadolu University offers an e-MBA programme and is working on the details of a QA system for e-learning.

Links to national QA framework

Internal QA systems of most of the institutions surveyed have been linked to the national QA framework either for DE or for HE in general.

Developing national QA framework for DE

Turkey and India have a separate committee or agency for assuring and managing the quality of DE.

Anadolu reports that its QA system complies with the standards and requirements of the national QA body for distance education, that is, the Informatics National Committee (www.ii.metu.edu.tr/EMK/enfyoneng.htm). This committee is a sub-committee of the Higher Education Council which oversees the quality of higher education in Turkey.

IGNOU follows the standards and guidelines for quality assurance determined by the national QA agency for DE, that is, the Distance Education Council (DEC: www.ignou.ac.in/dec). The faculty of IGNOU has worked very closely with this Council in developing the standards and guidelines in DE.

Adopting national QA framework for HE

Other countries adopt the QA system for higher education (HE) to oversee and monitor the quality of DE institutions. OUUK's QA system is closely linked to the national QA framework for universities and colleges. OUUK is subject to at least three forms of external assessment undertaken by the Funding Councils and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Three kinds include assessments of: 1) subjects or teaching, 2) research, and 3) institutional performance and management. The first two are undertaken by the Funding Council for England, the last by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

UT programmes are accredited by the National Accreditation Board of Higher Education and have been assessed by the Directorate General of Higher Education using the "QA Guideline for Higher Education". In the near future, however, a new "Government Regulation on Distance Education" will be established and applied to the assessment of distance education programmes in Indonesia.

Other distance teaching universities such as CCRTVU, SHTVU, STOU and KNOU are also evaluated by the national QA body for HE. Separate evaluation criteria for assessing the quality of DE have not been reported in these cases.

Complying with international QA framework

Besides a close link to the national QA framework, UT is developing QA systems to acquire ISO certification. UT is also in the process of seeking international accreditation and quality certification from the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE).

CONCLUSION

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 survey results show that a quality culture has been emerging, if not fully integrated, in the mega universities investigated. All the mega universities have developed and implemented QA standards and procedures in key areas of distance education activities and at least four mega universities surveyed have institutionalised a central QA unit and thus sought the development of a more systematic and coherent quality culture. Another indicator for the emergence of a quality culture is capacity building efforts made by the institutions. At least half of the mega universities have provided continuous staff development opportunities to their academic and administrative staff in pursuit of quality improvement. It is found that international organisations such as UNESCO, COL, OECD and World Bank have provided useful QA guidelines and resources for distance educators. Moreover, most of the institutions have shown an aspiration of obtaining national recognition as a high quality DE provider. Some have gone beyond national level accreditation and recognition and pursued international recognition such as ISO certification for their services.

The survey also shows that there exists a variety of QA systems of distance education even though the globalisation and competitiveness of higher education and the development of technology have brought distance teaching universities closer together in terms of developing a common quality culture. The level of QA policy integration in an overall university policy framework varies across the mega universities. Some

mega universities apply a set of standards and criteria that are predetermined by the institution or by the national quality assurance agency to evaluate and monitor key areas of distance education, whereas other institutions provide only general guidelines for QA and leave room for the internal and external review teams or individual units to make QA judgments. Some mechanisms for assuring quality of distance education adopt rigorous internal QA measures, whereas in systems where the accountability concern does not dominate, the QA system is less centralised and the primary objective is self-improvement of institutions. Even though core areas – such as course and programme development and delivery – for QA are similar in most mega universities, some QA areas draw more attention than others. In some institutions, assessment of staff performance and tutoring services is emphasised, whereas in other institutions, learner assessment or monitoring of e-learning courses gets more attention.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

As indicated above, one of the purposes of this survey is to share one's QA information with other distance education institutions. Each institution can learn from the others. Although the survey itself does not suggest context-sensitive QA strategies for each institution, QA policy directions can be drawn from the QA experiences of the mega universities surveyed.

- ***Addressing the challenges of cross-border and e-learning activities***

The survey results show that the mega universities have often focused exclusively on assuring the quality of their own programmes and services delivered in their country. Increased cross-border distance education and e-learning activities present challenges for the existing QA policies. Moreover, the emergence of for-profit e-learning providers is also pressing on the existing QA structure of distance education institutions. There is a need to address the challenges of expanded cross-border and for-profit e-learning providers in reviewing the existing QA policies or establishing new QA policies in all distance education institutions.

- ***Linking internal QA policies to broader QA frameworks***

In a cross-border distance education context, learners can be distributed anywhere and education can be delivered to them wherever they are. In the not too distant future, people will be able to take one part of their course from one university, another part of their course from a second university, and yet another part of their course from a different university, either within their own country or abroad. To protect students from the risks of low quality programmes and education of limited national and international validity, QA policies of a distance education institution should be linked to the national and international QA frameworks.

- ***Developing a comprehensive QA structure***

Mega universities around the world are serving millions of adult students. In the future, distance education will certainly dominate the post-secondary arena and continuing education market of the professional development. There will be more and more requests to validate the credentials of distance education institutions and the quality of programmes and services in those institutions. To meet the demand for QA by its own students, a distance education institution needs to develop a more coherent and comprehensive QA organisational structure to co-ordinate and oversee the institution's various QA activities.

- ***Assessing quality of students' learning***

Even though more and more DE institutions are incorporating assessment of learning in their QA mechanisms, internal QA efforts in DE institutions have been focusing mostly on course and material development. There is a need to extend the internal quality audit to other areas such as learning outcomes and experience of learners. One can start by aligning four elements of DE: learning objectives, teaching and learning methods and technology use, learning outcome assessment, and learning experiences. DE institutions need to routinely assess the quality of distance learning based on the evidence of student achievement.

- ***Paying attention to performance indicators***

As seen in the survey, some DE institutions have developed performance indicators so that they can monitor their performance against organisational objectives and key principles of their plan. In the context of globalisation, international comparative indicators are becoming indispensable (Fielden & Abercromby, 2001). Distance education is not outside of this trend. DE institutions should pay more attention to the importance of performance indicators in meeting the needs of an international society.

- ***Engaging in international activities related to QA issues***

QA in distance education is not an institutional or a national issue anymore because distance education reaches beyond local and regional boundaries and new forms of DE provision are increasing. Distance education in a globalised context requires new QA mechanisms because the existing ones do not address the challenges of recent DE markets. There have been international debates on QA issues in distance education. As a result, several international guidelines, conventions and best practices have been developed and reported (see Note 2). However, we still need to ask whether these international efforts are sufficient to meet the need for commonly accepted conventions and standards of quality distance education. The key to successful quality assurance activities in the future lies in distance education institutions' commitment to international debates and international decision-making processes related to QA issues.

RELEVANT INTERNET SITES

The Commonwealth of Learning, Start-up guides and training resources

www.col.org/resources/startupguides/

This site provides an overview of open and distance learning and a series of training handbooks on planning and implementing open and distance learning.

The Commonwealth of Learning, Perspectives on distance education: Quality assurance in higher education – selected case studies

www.col.org/10th/about/images/QA.doc

This document, edited by Alan Tait, introduces seven case studies of quality assurance practices in distance education institutions. Many elements of quality assurance systems are discussed in the case studies.

The Distance Education Clearinghouse

www.uwex.edu/disted/

This portal site brings together distance education information from different resources. Terminologies and concepts, research papers, policies and guidelines, related Web links and news updates are listed.

The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning (IRRODL)

www.irrodl.org/

IRRODL, published by Athabasca University in Canada, is a free online journal aiming to disseminate scholarly knowledge in open and distance learning theories and practices to distance educators worldwide.

OECD/US Forum, Trends and models in international quality assurance and accreditation in higher education in relation to trade in education services

www.oecd.org/dataoecd/51/29/2088479.pdf

This document, based on the discussions during the OECD/US forum on trade in education services, introduces four possible models for quality assurance arrangements that can contribute to transnational higher education services.

UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education

<http://www.unesco.org/education/amg/guidelines>

This document is a draft of UNESCO/OECD guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education, resulting from three previous drafting meetings.

UNESCO, Higher Education Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Knowledge Base

<http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/>

[ev.php-URL_ID=22306&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=22306&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

This site links to the cross-regional ODL Knowledge Base project which is set up to support decision-makers and practitioners in more effective policy planning, development and management of ODL in higher education.

UNESCO, The Virtual University and e-Learning

www.unesco.org/iiep/virtualuniversity/

This site contains the information of virtual university and e-learning cases worldwide. There are three sections in the Web site: Web publication, forum, and relevant links.

World Bank, The Global Distance Education Net (Global DistEdNet)

www1.worldbank.org/disted/

This is a knowledge base in open and distance education to help distance educators obtain information from research and practices.

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Notes

1. Daniel (1996) listed some 11 mega universities: Anadolu University (Turkey), China Central Radio and TV University (China), Indra Gandhi National Open University (India), Universitas Terbuka (Indonesia), Korea National Open University (Korea), Payame Noor University (Iran), Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (Thailand), National Distance Learning Centre (Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance, France), Open University (UK), National Distance Learning University (Spain), and University of South Africa (South Africa). During UNESCO's 2003 World Summit of Mega Universities held in China, Allama Iqbal Open University (Pakistan), M.P.Bhoj (Open) University (India) and four more Chinese regional Radio and TV universities were also listed as mega universities.

2. QA initiatives or publications by international organisations include:

- UNESCO Guidelines on responsible partnerships between cross-border higher education, business and society
http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=21934&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
- UNESCO/OECD guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education
http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=29228&URL_DO=DO_PRINTPAGE&URL_SECTION=201.html
- UNESCO Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Knowledge Base project
http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=22306&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
- Handbooks for practitioners in open and distance learning (ODL)
<http://col.org/resources/startupguides/>
- Perspectives on Distance Education: Quality assurance in higher education – selected case studies
www.col.org/10th/about/images/QA.doc
- Policy for Open and Distance Learning
- OECD Forum on Trade in Education Services – Trends and models in international quality assurance and accreditation in higher education in relation to trade in education services
www.oecd.org/dataoecd/51/29/2088479.pdf
- The Global Distance EducationNet (Global DistEdNet)
www1.worldbank.org/disted/

3. The survey also gathered QA information on five other distance teaching institutions: Open University Hong Kong (Hong Kong, China), Open University Malaysia (Malaysia), Monash University (Australia), Athabasca University (Canada) and Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul - PUCRS (Brazil). However, for the purposes of this chapter, the survey results on these five institutions were not included.

4. In the survey, QA is defined as “planned activities carried out with the intent and purpose of maintaining and improving the quality of learning rather than simply evaluating activities” (Jung, 2004b: 6). And DE is defined as a form of education whereby students may complete all or part of their course of study in a geographical location apart from the education provider or the teacher. DE used in this survey includes three modes: a conventional mode of distance education in which printed materials, audio and video (or radio and TV), and/or face-to-face tutorials are used, an e-learning mode in which the Internet is used as the main delivery means of instruction and interaction, and a mixed mode that incorporates conventional media with the Internet.

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