

## CHAPTER 8

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# THE HIGHER EDUCATION OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING KNOWLEDGE BASE

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### SUMMARY

This article provides an overview of the UNESCO Higher Education Open and Distance Learning Knowledge Base (HEODLKB) project. This project was set up to support informed decision-making through information and tools for policy planning, development and management of open and distance learning (ODL) in higher education. The main focus of this project has been the development of decision support tools for quality assurance of distance higher education. This chapter provides background on the quality assurance of distance higher education and an overview of the decision-support tool in this area developed by the project. The chapter concludes with some policy considerations drawn from the experience gained through this project.

### PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Higher Education Open and Distance Learning Knowledge Base (HEODLKB) addresses the growing interest in the use of open and distance learning to extend access to higher education in developing countries. This project responds to the need for better understanding on how open and distance learning functions, and addresses concerns regarding the quality of education provided through ODL. In particular it aims to provide decision makers with access to information that will assist them in ensuring that the policy, planning and management of ODL are conducted appropriately and efficiently.

Concretely, this UNESCO project<sup>1</sup> aims to make available regional databases on open and distance higher education in Africa, Asia and the Pacific and in the Community of Independent States (CIS) and Baltic States. These databases are linked to a search tool on the main UNESCO site for the project ([www.unesco.odl/unesco](http://www.unesco.odl/unesco)) through The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) Knowledge Finder. In addition, UNESCO is developing a decision-support tool (DST) that provides key questions concerning quality

assurance of ODL. This DST will be linked to the three regional databases to provide further background to the issues it addresses at the regional level.

The project aims to support developing countries in elaborating robust national quality assurance systems for ODL. It responds to the rise in demand for enrolments, often in frameworks characterised by decreasing state funding for higher education. This situation is particularly accentuated in developing countries (see Chapter 1), making access to lifelong learning opportunities of quality increasingly urgent.

In this project the definition of lifelong learning is similar to that of open learning, namely: policies and practices that permit entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender or time constraints and with the recognition of prior learning. Distance education is defined as learning mediated through technology (e.g. radio, TV, Internet) or with the support of printed material.

## **GLOBALISATION AND QUALITY DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION**

Ensuring lifelong learning opportunities is becoming critical as individuals need to continually update their skills in an increasingly globalised knowledge society. Furthermore, in developing countries the growing demand for enrolments means that governments have to turn to innovative options to meet these challenges. The quality of distance education becomes a priority as new lifelong learners opt for distance education so that they can study while still meeting their social and professional responsibilities. New challenges to quality higher education arising from the impact of globalisation<sup>2</sup> include the proliferation of new providers, cross-border provision<sup>3</sup> and increased electronic delivery of higher education.<sup>4</sup>

Quality assurance is the systematic internal review of educational programmes to ensure that acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being maintained.<sup>5</sup> UNESCO recognises that quality assurance of distance higher education is integrally linked to quality assurance of higher education in general. It is understood that there are specificities of distance education linked to the change in the learning/teaching dynamic due to the ‘distance’ factor.

Middlehurst (2001) provides a concise typology of the variables that should be considered when measuring the quality of new providers of higher education — new types of providers and provision, delivery modes, media, location, curricula and content as well as qualifications and outcomes. Middlehurst highlights the complexity of ODL provisions in this framework by stressing that these provisions not only cross boundaries of space and time in their educational provision, often using information and communication technologies (ICTs), but that institutions offering ODL may be cross-border providers and/or cross organisational or sectoral boundaries (e.g. tertiary level courses provided by private companies in fields such as computer programming).

One example of the challenges of assuring distance higher education would be the issue of learner support. Specifically, in distance education the learner is separated from the instructor and other learners in space and often in time. Unless learning is taking place live in a virtual classroom, the learner is unable to ask for clarifications on the subject matter by engaging directly with the instructor and/or other learners, as would be possible in a traditional classroom environment. Interactions are often made

through ICTs (e.g. by phone, fax and/or Internet) and/or by fixing specific tutoring times and places. The managing of these processes is an important element in ensuring the quality of the learning experience provided. This project aims to provide support for meeting these challenges and others related to the provision of quality distance higher education.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE HEODLKB PROJECT**

The Higher Education Open and Distance Learning Knowledge Base was established to provide decision-makers and practitioners with ready access to information and tools that will assist them in more effective policy, planning and management of ODL in higher education programmes.

The project was established as part of UNESCO's Cross-Cutting Theme (CCT) initiative launched by the Director General of UNESCO in 2001. The CCT initiative aimed at fostering intersectoral action pertaining to two cross-cutting themes of UNESCO's Medium Term Strategy for 2001-2006: (1) the eradication of poverty, especially extreme poverty; (2) the contribution of ICTs to the development of education, science and culture and the construction of a knowledge society. In this framework, the Director-General introduced an innovative strategy of earmarking a certain amount of regular programme resources for CCT projects. These projects were selected on the basis of a competitive bidding process at the Secretariat level, involving Headquarters and Field Offices. These projects aimed to make closer linkages between strategic objectives and to test innovative approaches and delivery modalities in various areas. The projects were chosen through an evaluation carried out by UNESCO's College of Assistant Director-Generals in 2001. After an initial funding period of one UNESCO biennium (2002-2003), funding to continue this project has been requested and awarded twice (in 2003 and 2005) through the same competitive process for the 2004-2005 and 2006-2007 biennium.

This project is linked to the cross-cutting theme<sup>6</sup> "the contribution of ICTs to the development of education and the construction of a knowledge society". It is part of the main strategic thrust of UNESCO to promote empowerment and participation in the emerging knowledge society through equitable access, capacity building and sharing of knowledge. The main strategic objective addressed by this project is that of "promoting experimentation, innovation and the diffusion and sharing of information and best practices as well as policy dialogue in education" (UNESCO Medium Term Strategy 2001-2007<sup>7</sup>).

The team for this project was established during the first bidding process cycle (2001) mentioned above. The lead unit for the project, the Division of Higher Education, working closely with the Communications Sector, contacted and initiated the establishment of the project team. The project team members were solicited for their expertise in higher education and/or ICTs. As a result of these consultations, a multi-disciplinary team, covering three UNESCO regions and with expertise in higher education and ICTs, was established. In order to anchor the project solidly in the regions and to act as a catalyst for international co-operation, Field partners were encouraged to involve regional institutions with ODL expertise in the implementation of the project. As a result of this strategy, the South Africa Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) in Braamfontein, South Africa and the Malaysian Open University in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, became implementing partners in the Africa Region and the Asia and the Pacific Region respectively. The Communications and Information Sector of UNESCO assured the technical development of the knowledge base. The International Institute for

Educational Planning has been responsible for the evaluation of the project. The Division of Higher Education, UNESCO Education Sector has been responsible for the content development of the knowledge base and the management of the project.

In addition, contacts with COL were established to make synergies with the Global Distance Education Network (GDENet) project managed by COL and the World Bank. As part of the co-operation with COL, the project has incorporated the COL Knowledge Finder tool as a search mechanism for the project. Furthermore, the HEODLKB project has developed a common taxonomy with the GDENet project in order to facilitate the sharing of resources between the two projects.

The project team met three times since 2002 to clarify the project objectives and activities, and to plan future activities. It also held several telephone meetings and bilateral meetings among project team members. Furthermore an external evaluator for the project was contracted at the end of the first project phase. Project planning was based on the evaluation of the first project phase and the monitoring and evaluation strategy of the second project phase. These interactions proved to be very important for clarifying project activities and goals, and ensuring coherence in the different regional activities.

In 2002, the project carried out a needs analysis of the existing ODL decision-making resources and priority information needs in the target regions. The results of this analysis highlighted the need for information on quality assurance of ODL that responded to region-specific needs.

The first project phase (2002-2003) identified the regional implementing partners and clarified the role of information processing tools that could be useful to reach the project objectives. The primary focus of the first phase of the project was the technical development of the DST. During this first phase, the project examined existing computerised information resources on ODL and reviewed potential knowledge management applications for policy-makers. It looked at a range of software systems that could be developed for supporting users in extracting, organising and managing relevant information on ODL. From this exercise a first prototype was developed with contents focusing on quality assurance of distance higher education. This tool was tested at the Training Workshop for Policy Makers on the Open and Distance Learning and Expert System (Shanghai, China, November 2003). This event was organised by UNESCO Bangkok, a member of the Project Team, and hosted by the Shanghai TV University. Participants included policy-makers at the institutional and governmental level from 18 countries in the Asia and Pacific Region. The participants found the prototype too prescriptive and called for support that focused more closely on their region-specific needs with links to the regional databases. In addition the need for user-friendliness was highlighted.

An important step for the project was to make a clear distinction between the two different roles of ICTs for education: (1) to support decision-making in education; (2) to deliver educational content. Once this distinction was explicitly made, the responsibility for the development of the DST was split between the Educational and Communication and Information specialists.

In the second phase of the project (2004-2005), the project team decided that the DST would be tied integrally to the regional information databases. The technical and content aspects of the DST were completely separately in the second phase. For the technical development, the prototype was revised taking into account the recommendations of the Shanghai 2003 evaluation. This technical development was undertaken by the implementing partner in the Africa Region, SAIDE. The content aspect of the DST was

developed by the Division of Higher Education through a contract with Universitas Terbuka in Indonesia and in consultation with 12 experts representing all project regions who formed an Ad Hoc Virtual Advisory Group (the “virtual” quality of this group was mainly that the consultation was held entirely by e-mail).

In the development of the contents, the Quality Assurance Center of Universitas Terbuka was requested to provide a draft questionnaire on quality assurance of higher education provided by ODL. The Ad Hoc Virtual Advisory Group was requested to review the questionnaire draft. The members of this Advisory Group received a draft of this questionnaire for comments. Each Advisory Group member was requested to send their comments and/or modifications to this draft in writing to UNESCO. UNESCO provided these inputs to the contractor, Universitas Terbuka, for the modification of the final questionnaire text.

The contents will be inserted in the online model of the DST under preparation by SAIDE. The DST will be tested in workshops held in the regions. Through these workshops, the contents of the questionnaire may be modified to better fit regional needs as necessary.

In the online version of the DST, the user will enter an online user-interface that will direct him or her through the questions, and make links to region-specific information on each topic that is available in the regional databases. This DST will be made available free of charge on the main project site at [www.unesco.org/odl](http://www.unesco.org/odl).

## QUALITY ASSURANCE QUESTIONNAIRE

The final questionnaire was based on 12 components for consideration: policy and planning; human resources; internal management; budget and funding; learners; programme design and curriculum development; course design and development; learner support; media for learning; learner assessment; research and community service; and graduates and alumni. Each component included indicators, key questions, background, definitions and weighting for the key questions. The component headed “Media for learning” is given below as an example.

- *Component “Media for learning”*: Media for learning in ODL should include these variables: a variety of media used to deliver learning material; training in the use of media for staff and students; and research and development in the use of new technology. The distance education institution should ensure that a variety of media are used to facilitate student learning processes and to meet the learners’ needs effectively.
- *Variable*: A variety of media used to deliver learning material
- *Indicator*: The variety of media to deliver learning, namely through print, electronic and network
- *Key question*: Does the institution use media and technology to match the content, enhance and extend the learning and suit the learner’s characteristics, learning needs and circumstances?
- *Background/definition*: A variety of media for distance learning students should be used to enhance students’ learning process, considering the characteristics of the content of the learning material and the students’ learning styles. Media and technology should be employed to match the content, enhance and extend the learning and suit the learner’s characteristics, learning needs and circumstances.

A system of weighting of the key questions was applied. This weighting system, which was provided in the original 2002 prototype of the DST, aimed to provide priorities in decision-making for the user. Its use will be further evaluated in the testing phase of the DST.

The contents of the DST are currently being incorporated into the online version of the tool. Once the online version is operational, it will be tested in the regions through regional workshops. When the DST is available online, users will be able to access the questionnaire through the project Web site or on CD-ROM. The user will be able to evaluate a programme of distance higher education by going through the DST questions. Should the user require further information on a particular point, he or she would be able to search the regional databases through the search tool linking the DST to the regional databases.

The key components provided in this questionnaire reflect the findings of the study of quality assurance mechanisms in cross-border higher education (Jung, Chapter 7). It is important to note that the objective of the DST is to support a quality culture — the identification and development of quality criteria, valuing capacity building and stressing links between internal quality assurance systems and accountability to the public at the national and international levels (Jung, Chapter 7). The project also recognises the heterogeneity of quality assurance systems that are possible for distance higher education. The DST provides an array of components that users may emphasise in varying degrees depending on their particular needs.

The main objective of this tool is to provide guidance on key areas for evaluating the quality of distance higher education. It is by no means a “one size fits all” model, but proposes means for decision-makers to access resources to evaluate national and institutional specific situations.

## **CONCLUSION**

This project has provided an inter-regional and inter-disciplinary solution to support quality distance higher education. It illustrated the importance of using ICTs for education both to extend access to educational provision and to support informed policy-making.

Three issues are highlighted from this project experience: methodologies for addressing education and ICTs; the challenges and benefits of collaboration across regions and disciplines; and the benefits of tapping into existing regional resources for regional answers.

With regard to links between education and ICTs, it is important to clarify the role of education and that of informatics to ensure that priority is given to providing an educational response to the educational issue. Namely it is important to underscore that ICTs are being used to assist educational specialists with education problems. In the case of the project, it was clear that the informatics solution foreseen, the DST, which is simple and user-friendly, was more valuable because more users were interested in using it. While it appears redundant, it is important to keep in mind that as technology advances quickly, tools that are sophisticated technologically but too hard for users to use will not be as effective.

Inter-regional and inter-disciplinary collaboration are very important but requires focus and commitment. Dialogue is essential to ensure a common understanding of the priorities of this educational response and the necessary contribution of team members in view of their area of specialisation.

Finally, it is important to highlight the value of building on existing regional information resources and expertise. The project has shown that a great deal of expertise and information is being developed in the project regions in this field. In addition, through this project, experts in the regions have been identified and invited to contribute to this process. Links between regions for the development of the DST have also proven very effective. In the development of information tools, the project has adopted the strategy of favouring linking and consolidating existing resources rather than producing new resources. This support and enhancement of regional expertise and information is a valuable project outcome.

The challenges of an increasingly globalised higher education arena brings with it the need for enhanced collaboration between regions and disciplines. This collaboration, in the area of education and ICTs, may aid in delivering education, organising information on education or administering educational delivery. This project has built on the potential of this interdisciplinary and inter-regional collaboration for meeting these challenges.

## **POLICY CONSIDERATIONS**

- ***Clarity on the role of ICTs for Education***

ICTs serve a dual role in supporting both learning and policy planning. In the development of educational tools, it is the needs of the users that should be given priority rather than the possibilities of technological support. In the first phase of this project, the technological aspects of the DST development took precedence, while in the evaluation of this aspect of the project it was found that the target users were more concerned with the user-friendliness and adaptability of the tool than with its technological advantages.

- ***Need for dialogue and multi-disciplinary approaches to providing ICT solutions to educational challenges***

The increasing use of ICTs in education highlights the need for multi-disciplinary teams that bring together experts in both education and informatics. These groups use different vocabularies and have different priorities – a situation that created certain challenges in the initial stage of the project. Dialogue is therefore essential to bridge the gap and to establish agreement on the common goal of the project, while also understanding the role that each specialist must play in reaching the goal.

- ***Recognising the dynamic nature of ODL***

ODL is a rapidly expanding field where new developments are happening very quickly. A static tool for policy-making would become quickly outdated. At the same time, regional needs in this area vary widely owing to several factors such as variations in educational demand and differing degrees of access to ICTs. The HEODLKB project, recognising this challenge, has aimed to involve partners active in the ODL field in their respective regions in the implementation of the project. In the development of the DST, high priority has been given to its adaptability and its sensitivity to regional information needs.

## RELEVANT INTERNET SITES

### **Higher Education Open and Distance Learning Knowledge Base**

*www.unesco.org/odl*

Main project site for the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Knowledge Base project. This project was set up to support decision-makers and practitioners with ready access to information and tools that will assist them in more effective policy planning, development and management of ODL in higher education programmes. This cross-regional project focuses on quality provision of ODL in higher education. This site provides links to the regional information sites in Africa, Asia and the Pacific and CIS and the Baltic states

### **UNESCO Global Forum on Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications**

*www.unesco.org/education/higher\_education/global\_forum/main*

The Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications responds to the growing demands of the international community to have UNESCO proactive in the debates around borderless higher education and trade in higher education within frameworks such as the GATS, as well as the related key issues of quality and recognition. The Global Forum reflects UNESCO's mission to respond to the ethical challenges of globalisation. The objective of the Global Forum is to provide a platform for dialogue between international frameworks dealing with quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications.

### **UNESCO/OECD guidelines on “Quality provision in cross-border higher education”**

*www.unesco.org/education/amq/guidelines*

The Guidelines aim to support and encourage international co-operation and enhance the understanding of the importance of quality provision in cross-border higher education. The purposes of the Guidelines are to protect students and other stakeholders from low-quality provision and disreputable providers, as well as to encourage the development of quality cross-border higher education that meets human, social, economic and cultural needs. UNESCO and OECD have been asked by their respective constituencies to work on the development of such guidelines according to the resolution of the 32nd session of the General Conference of UNESCO, October 2003, and to the decisions taken at the OECD/CERI Governing Board meeting, October 2003.

### **GDENet Site**

*www.col.org/disted/*

The Global Distance Education Network (GDENet) is a knowledge guide to distance education designed to help distance education practitioners who are interested in using distance education for human development. The Network consists of six Internet sites located around the world.

### **Commonwealth of Learning**

*www.col.org/*

Open and Distance Learning for Development: The Commonwealth of Learning is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning/distance education knowledge, resources and technologies. COL is helping developing nations improve access to quality education and training.

## REFERENCES

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The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). (2002). *Accreditation and Assurance Quality in Distance Learning*. CHEA Monograph Series 2002, Number 1. Washington, DC, USA.

## Notes

1. This project is co-ordinated by the UNESCO Division of Higher Education at UNESCO Headquarters and builds on collaboration with the UNESCO Sector for Communications and Information and the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning for its management. It is implemented through UNESCO Field Offices in Bangkok and Harare and the UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education in Moscow.
2. This project is one response of UNESCO to meet the challenges of globalisation on higher education. Other responses include the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on quality provision of cross-border higher education and the UNESCO Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications.
3. Cross-border providers are higher education institutions that are based in a country other than the one where they are providing higher education. Often these higher education institutions operate outside the national higher education system in the country where they are providing higher education.
4. In the recent drafting process for the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for quality cross-border higher education, a main concern highlighted by UNESCO Member States was the quality of higher education offered through electronic delivery.
5. The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) defines Quality Assurance as “the planned and systematic review process of an institution or [programme] to determine that acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being maintained and enhanced. This usually includes expectations that mechanisms of quality control are in place and effective”.
6. 31C/4 UNESCO Medium-Term Strategy available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001254/125434e.pdf>.
7. Approved 31C/4 UNESCO Medium-Term Strategy 2002-2007 available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001254/125434e.pdf>.

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