Quality Assurance of Distance Education:
Lessons Emerging from Regional Initiatives
Paper Prepared for UNESCO by Neil Butcher

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to present a brief analysis of efforts across the different UNESCO regions to assure the quality of distance education (DE). To achieve this, the document presents a brief overview of quality assurance in DE, before outlining some of the key regional quality assurance (QA) processes in education (with a focus on the extent to which they incorporated distance education. The paper uses this as a springboard for a more detailed analysis of quality assurance frameworks designed specifically for DE, and concludes by presenting a set of lessons emerging from that analysis.

2. Quality Assurance in Distance Education

As with all educational enterprises, an ongoing concern of distance education institutions and practitioners has been the requirement to assure quality of delivery. As Koul notes, ‘he jargon of QA has entered the lexicon of the common practitioner of open and distance learning (ODL) and even resource-poor institutions have set up some mechanisms for assuring quality, however rudimentary'. There have been several, often complementary motivations behind such efforts, ranging from requirements to meet the demands of national legislation or regulations and the need to ‘prove’ that quality of distance education is comparable to face-to-face education through to internal management attempts to enhance quality of service to learners and create self-improving organizational systems.

As Tait notes,

The quality assurance system attempts to define, in consultation with the user, what services should be provided to the user. It involves the accurate analysis of what needs to be done, with information broken down in what can seem an exhaustive fashion. The quality assurance system then finds ways of monitoring and evaluating that analysis, and builds in procedures with users and providers for continuously seeking to improve practice. Embedded in the practice of quality assurance is the notion that expertise is widely distributed in the organization; that is, that not only the higher levels of management understand what should be done. In fact for many it is those working closest to the “customer” who best understands his or her needs. Efforts to assure quality in education have been implemented at institutional and national levels.

Quality assurance systems have been set up at institutional and national levels, both in education generally and specifically for distance education delivery. A study by the European Commission undertaken in 1993 identified five common elements of quality

---


assurance in higher education, which are relevant for distance education practice as well. These are:
1) The existence at the supra-national level of a managing agent for the quality assurance system, who should be independent and responsible for managing the system at a meta-level;
2) The importance of a mechanism of self-evaluation, so that academics feel they own the system;
3) The connected importance of peer review, and site visits by external experts accepted as unbiased specialists in the field;
4) The importance of reporting in such a way as to facilitate development and improvement rather than judging or ranking; and
5) Relationships between outcomes of a quality review system and funding, which it is suggested should not be direct and rigid as this will lead to a ‘compliance culture’ rather than a real interest in quality assurance.3

QA practice in distance education around the world has exhibited all of the above elements in different ways. A key consideration, however, at a national level has been whether to integrate quality assurance of distance education into mainstream systems or keep it distinct. A thought process about how to tackle this challenge is illustrated clearly in the considerations of the National Association of Distance Education Organizations of South Africa (NADEOSA), which provides the following overview of distance education QA in that country:

*Current thinking on the question about whether or not to integrate quality assurance processes for distance education into those for all education is that, as far as possible, distance education concerns should be infused into criteria for the audit of all institutions and accreditation of all programmes. There is considerable overlap between criteria for quality distance education, and generic criteria for all educational programmes, and there is little point in proliferating criteria unnecessarily. As a result, the Higher Education Quality Committee has consulted the distance education community and infused distance education concerns into both its Criteria for Institutional Audit and Criteria for Programme Accreditation. For example, Criterion Eight of the Criteria for Institutional Audit reads ‘Clear and efficient systems and procedures are in place for the design and approval of new programmes, courses and modules. The requirements are consistently applied and regularly monitored’. Distance education additions are as follows: ‘In the case of distance learning programmes, tested systems, technologies and support arrangements for materials development and delivery for distance learning’.4*

That report goes on to note, however, that ‘it is clear from recent research that in South Africa at least, while the distinction may be blurring, distance and face-to-face education are not converging. There is still a distinct role for distance education and the requirements for successful delivery need to be spelt out so that distance education can fulfil this role properly’. On this basis, NADEOSA produced a separate, detailed set of quality criteria for distance education on behalf of its members. Similar debates between integration and separation appear across many countries.

---
3. Moving QA to the Regional Level

This tension between integration of QA into mainstream systems and maintenance of discrete QA frameworks for DE is finding its way into regional debates about QA, as different regions around the world are placing growing emphasis on creation of QA frameworks and processes at a regional level. The drive towards greater regional collaboration around the world is well summarized in a report on harmonization of higher education released by the African Union:

Globalization in education has led to a marked increase in mobility of people, programmes and institutions across national borders. There has also been a marked increase in participation of the private sector in provision of higher education. Several new programmes have been established, including short courses leading to certificates, diploma courses, and distance and virtual education programmes. Cross-border provision has also increased in type and scope. Some national institutions have begun to use ICT for teaching, learning, information management, and dissemination purposes, while many cross-border providers have adopted ICT as their main mode of programme delivery...As a consequence of these developments, the portability of qualifications in higher education is becoming an issue of concern to all countries. Expansion of cross-border provision has the potential to introduce innovations and greater efficiency in management, but it also poses challenges to quality assurance, accreditation, and recognition of qualifications and programmes of study, while simultaneously subjecting public institutions to fierce competition. Likewise, use of ICT for programme delivery and increasing expansion in private sector provision of higher education have the potential to increase access and efficiency in programme delivery. However, without a proper regulatory framework in place, they also carry the risk of compromising quality, equity, and programme diversity, especially when the driving motivation is cost-saving and/or profit maximization. In several countries, these new initiatives do not fulfill minimal conditions required at a national and/or regional level for accreditation of higher education programmes and institutions and quality assurance. The global response to these and related economic challenges of globalization has been greater regional and international cooperation, partnership and integration. This provides an important rationale for harmonization efforts, which are able to focus on fostering more effective partnership and integration.5

Given these realities, when considering regional efforts to assure quality of distance education, it is useful to begin by considering how various regional efforts that seek to respond to the challenges outlined above have approached QA in general and DE specifically. The summaries below are not comprehensive, but rather seek to illustrate different approaches in different regions.

3.1. The Bologna Process

In the 1999 Bologna Declaration, the European Ministers of Education committed themselves to establish the European Higher Education Area by 2010. In 2001, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) were invited to the European Ministers of Education meeting in Prague to establish a common framework of reference for quality assurance, which would directly work towards the establishment of the European quality assurance framework by 2010. In 2003, the Ministers recommended that ENQA contribute even more directly to the European quality assurance process, and the ENQA

received a double mandate to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance agencies and to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance. In the Bergen meeting of May 2005, the European Ministers of Education adopted the ‘Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area’ drafted by the ENQA. The Ministers committed themselves to introducing the proposed model for peer review of quality assurance agencies on a national basis. These guidelines do not make specific reference to distance education, and only mention that quality assurance is expected to include distance education as a mode of delivery.⁶

3.2. HE Quality Assurance in Africa

The African Union (AU) has identified quality assurance as one of the key focus areas of higher education in its Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa. In addressing this focus area, the AU was involved in developing the African Higher Education Quality Rating Mechanism. Whilst not specifically targeting distance education, the rating mechanism drew on quality criteria for distance education and on-line modes of delivery.

The Association of Africa Universities (AAU) has, as one of its projects, a Quality Assurance Support Programme for African Higher Education. The objective of the project is to lay a foundation for institutionalized QA mechanisms within tertiary institutions, national quality assurance and accreditation agencies, and an eventual regional network for coordination of cross-border protocols and specialized capacity building in quality assurance. There are three main components of this programme:

- Support member universities of the AAU in developing internal quality assurance mechanisms, through training courses, seminars and workshops.
- Support existing and emerging Quality Assurance/Accreditation Agencies for the development of capable external evaluation and monitoring systems within national higher education systems.
- Development and implementation of a Regional Framework on Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in Africa, based on the Arusha Convention, as an instrument to enhance inter-university collaboration and student mobility.⁷

Although not explicitly targeting DE, the project could also apply to quality assurance of DE.

In 2007 the AAU also embarked on developing an African Quality Assurance Network for Higher Education (AfriQAN). It is unclear what progress has been made with regard to establishing the network, although the website includes an area where interested parties can place their details on a database (the aim being to organize a formal African Quality Assurance Network). Documentation around AfriQAN does not make any specific reference to distance education.

In the SADC Region, the process of establishing a regional qualifications framework – the SADC Qualifications Framework (SADCQF) – has been initiated. The vision for the SADCQF is to be a ‘regional framework that is a driving force for regional integration, quality assurance and global competitiveness of education and training systems in SADC Member states’. Presently, the framework has been developed in concept only. The focus of SADCQF is not only on higher education, as it encompasses school education as well. It is not clear whether distance education is specifically covered in this framework.

3.3. Arab Network for Quality Assurance for Higher Education (ANQAHE)

The goals of the Arab Network for Quality Assurance for Higher Education (ANQAHE) are to support and enhance QA organizations in the Arab region, and to develop the human resources and establish a mechanism of cooperation in the field of quality assurance in higher education in the Arab region. Whilst the network has conducted some activities such as running workshops, its efforts do not appear to be directed specifically towards distance education.

3.4. Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN)

The Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), whose mission is to improve the quality of education, serves as an umbrella body for QA agencies in higher education in the Asia Pacific region? It is involved several projects that are of common interest among members, and facilitates work in these areas by sharing responsibilities among the participating agencies. One project targets DE and e-learning quality assurance, focusing on:
• Sharing information on the latest QA systems of DE/e-learning with the QA agencies in the region;
• Creating a matrix of DE/e-learning qualities to understand the multidimensionality and multiple perspectives of DE/e-learning among the QA agencies in the region;
• Promoting the development and improvement of DE/e-learning QA in each QA agency in the region.
The project appears to have started in 2005, but it was not possible to determine where the project currently stands in terms of realizing its targets.

3.5. Conclusion

As the above summaries illustrate, regional QA processes are gaining significant momentum around the world, although the extent to which these processes consider or incorporate QA of distance education is highly variable, but generally very limited. Likewise, at the global level, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) has developed Guidelines for Good Practice in Quality Assurance but these do

---

not make specific reference to DE. In general, therefore, it seems that additional DE-specific focus is likely to be required within these emerging regional and global frameworks, if they are to compensate sufficiently for the specific needs of DE. In this light, there are some emerging regional frameworks designed specifically for DE that justify further investigation. In addition, some of the frameworks for QA of DE developed at national level are also of interest, so a selection of national QA frameworks for DE are included in the analysis below, presented alphabetically by region. Due to the constraints of this study, only documents that were in English were considered during the review.

4. QA Frameworks for DE

4.1. Africa

As has been noted, the Quality Rating Mechanism developed for higher education by the African Union does take account of distance education and e-learning to a certain extent. However, there is no continent-wide framework focused specifically on QA of DE for the region. The African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) has set up a Working Group on Quality Assurance and Accreditation, however, which has – as one of its objectives to establish such mechanisms for the continent. The ACDE currently envisages establishing a Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency, which will have the following terms of reference:

- Create an enabling platform for driving a rigorous quality promotion and development programme for ODL in Africa;
- Improve public confidence and enhance the understanding of the efficacy of ODL by upholding the principles of transparency and accountability through the quality assurance systems and practices;
- Build quality assurance capacity systemically at institutional and individual level through professional training and certification;
- Develop protocols, policies and a repertoire of instruments and tools to inform the code of conduct, criteria and standards for quality ODL provisioning in Africa;
- Ensure a phased and systematic implementation of various quality assurance processes, programme audits and reviews, accreditation and credit transfer systems based on voluntary participation;
- Constitute an international reference group, together with an ACDE-QAAA expert advisory group for the purposes of promoting collaboration, engendering proficiency and critical benchmarking within a global quality assurance environment;
- Conduct, promote, and actively disseminate research outputs to continuously inform and improve practice in ODL quality assurance;
- Undertake periodic self-appraisal and external performance audit using ACDE-QAAA expert advisory group and international reference group with a view to effecting continuous improvement;
- Contribute to the further development of national and regional ODL quality assurance systems on the continent.

However, this Agency is currently still in the planning phases.
As a consequence, QA of DE is operational primarily at the national level. The most well developed QA framework for DE in this region is a set of quality criteria prepared by the National Association of Distance Education Organizations of South Africa, which are thus outlined in more detail below.

4.1.1. NADEOSA Quality Criteria

NADEOSA’s Quality Criteria for Distance Education have emerged from documents produced in 1996 and 1998, through research initially undertaken for the South African Department of Education. They are a product of ongoing consultation over several years, which was regarded as important both to ensure that the criteria would be accurate and comprehensive and that those who needed to use them would have ownership and shared understanding of them. Their purpose is threefold: first, to provide a guiding framework for ongoing institutional QA activities of NADEOSA members; second, to demonstrate commitment by NADEOSA and its members to QA; and, third, to provide inputs from NADEOSA into national QA frameworks, in an effort to ensure that the needs and requirements of DE are incorporated into those frameworks.

The framework and approach of the NADEOSA Quality Criteria was influenced by both national developments and international best practice. As the document points out, *There were cautions about the role of standards – it was felt that they should encourage a process of continuous quality improvement, rather than merely prescribe a minimum. This could best be achieved through stimulating internal quality assurance processes in which institutions would evaluate themselves and set their own quality improvement agenda. Bureaucratic control according to set minimum standards, it was felt, would undermine the real goal, the internal drive to quality. In the South African [Department of Education] document [of 1996], this understanding was expressed as follows: ‘Standards for education should not (as legislation tends to do) merely prescribe a minimum, but give scope for continuous quality improvement’.*

The NADEOSA Quality Criteria currently contain 13 criteria: 1. Policy and Planning; 2. Learners; 3. Programme Development; 4. Course Design; 5. Course Materials; 6. Assessment; 7. Learner Support; 8. Human Resource Strategy; 9. Management and Administration; 10. Collaborative Relationships; 11. Quality Assurance; 12. Information Dissemination; and 13. Results). Each Criterion Statement is accompanied by a series of statements of elements of the Criterion, intended to amplify understanding of how to interpret the criterion. So, for example, the Criterion on Programme Development reads: *Programmes are flexible and designed with national needs as well as the needs of prospective learners and employers in mind; their form and structure encourage access and are responsive to changing environments; learning and assessment methods are appropriate to the purpose and outcomes of the programmes.*

The 24 elements for this Criterion are organized under the headings Programme Planning, Programme Approval, Programme Curriculum, Admissions and Learner Support, Accreditation, Articulation and Flexibility, and Quality Assurance. Examples of elements include:

- From Programme Planning - The programme is developed in terms of a needs analysis based on an audit of existing courses and programmes, market research, liaison (where

---

11 Welch, T. & Glennie, G. Undated. ‘An Overview of quality Assurance in Distance Education in South Africa’, in Welch, T., & Reed, Y. Undated. *Designing and Delivering Distance Education: Quality Criteria and Case Studies from South Africa.* p. 8.
appropriate) with industry and professions, national and regional priorities, and the needs of the learners.

• From Programme Approval – Where programmes are exported, procedures are established for reviewing legal programme approval requirements and also requirements under local law in respect of relevant matters including consumer protection, copyright, employment, packaging and postal despatch.

• From Admissions and Learner Support – Care is taken that learners admitted to programmes which require the use of technology have sufficient access to that technology to make it possible for them to succeed in the programme.

• From Quality Assurance – Should a decision be taken to discontinue the programme, due attention is given to meeting the provider’s commitments to the learners registered on the programme.\(^\text{12}\)

In total, for the 13 criteria, there are 212 elements articulated.

The Quality Criteria are not binding in any respect, although NADEOSA does report on successes that have come from the development of its criteria, within and beyond South Africa. It notes, for example, that Namibia is developing an approach to QA of DE that is based on the Quality Criteria, while also highlighting that the Asian Association of open Universities used NADEOSA’s quality criteria to develop its own framework (see below). They are used extensively by institutions within South Africa, as well as having been consulted by quality assurance agencies such as the Council on Higher Education’s Higher Education Quality Committee.

In its document, however, NADEOSA reflects on the difficulties with criteria as follows:

\textit{One difficulty is that they can never be comprehensive enough. Even if a decision is reached to go with a fixed set of criteria, the elements of each of the criteria can be elaborated as new perspectives on practice emerge through research, evaluation, or changes in technology. In the current set of NADEOSA Quality Criteria, there are thirteen criteria with 212 individual elements. Doubtless, if more minds were applied to the process, a further 100 or so could be added. A second difficulty is that stating the criteria in detail does not mean that there is a shared understanding of how they are to guide practice.}\(^\text{13}\)

In an effort to overcome these weaknesses, NADEOSA has added two additional features to its Quality Criteria publication:

• It has selected and highlighted criteria and elements that it believes reflect the most pressing current concerns in DE practice in South Africa, in an effort to prioritize those which it considers most important. In doing this, it has elaborated on the reasons for selecting those criteria and elements, in an effort to assist users with interpretation and understanding of the statements.

• It has prepared a series of case studies, which give practical expression to the criteria and illustrate their use and value. The intention in this regard is to encourage good practice, and give users of the criteria additional insights to prevent the criteria being interpreted in a reductionist fashion.

4.2. Arab States

No QA frameworks specifically targeting DE were found in the Arab States region. As Mohamed notes:

\(^{12}\) ibid. pp. 23-25.

\(^{13}\) ibid. p. 18.
Arab states are falling short of ensuring quality distance higher education programs. More worrisome is the persistence of this state of affairs, the inevitable consequences of which include poor programs and unrecognized credentials. Four parties can take part in enhancing the quality assurance and accreditation of distance higher education programs in Arab countries: international organizations, regional organizations, AOU [Arab Open University] and SVU [Syrian Virtual University], and academics...The Arab region encompasses a reasonable number of regional and sub-regional organizations which can take meaningful steps toward enforcement in this domain, such as the Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND), the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD), the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS), and the Association of Arab Universities. These organizations can strengthen Arab cooperation by establishing a pan-Arab accreditation agency that would have the responsibility of securing the quality of distance education region wide. Furthermore, they should have active roles in sustaining the Arab Network for Open and Distance Education (ANODED), which requires multi-faceted support to be able to achieve its mission.  

### 4.3. Asia-Pacific Region

A study commissioned by UNESCO, Bangkok in 2005 observed the following about QA of DE in Asia and the Pacific:

- Many ODL institutions have implemented QA measures throughout their ODL practices including student services and tutoring, course development, staff evaluation, and student assessment.
- Some ODL institutions have obtained accreditation from outside of their own country to achieve an international recognition and improve their market value.
- Most institutions have introduced ICT-based programmes and services in pursuit of quality improvement and expansion. In some institutions, the use of ICT in distance teaching and learning is no longer considered an experimental work.
- The cases presented in this paper will provide valuable help for those ODL institutions which are in search of benchmarks. Nevertheless, the study also shows that we are not yet at the stage where attention to QA is covering all parts of our ODL activities. And in quite a few cases, innovative approaches have touched only a small portion of ODL students and staff. Moreover, cross-border educational activities are still at the margins in most ODL institutions, and gender-related innovations have not been reported in any of the survey replies. For further development of quality ODL in the AP region, much still needs to be done.
- It is necessary to develop a holistic QA strategy and strong QA frameworks to improve quality of ODL practices as a whole.
- In addition, re-conceptualization of the role of an ODL provider in cross-border higher education market is also necessary for future development of ODL in the AP region.

India’s Distance Education Council developed norms for ensuring quality in an ODL system. It identified seven key areas as requirements for ensuring quality of teaching and learning in the ODL system: organizational structure, planning and development of academic

---


programmes, design of self-learning materials, student admission, learner support services, learner assessment and evaluation, and the use of ICT.\textsuperscript{16}

In addition, at least two regional QA frameworks for distance education have been developed in the Asia-Pacific Region. Information on these is presented below.

4.3.1. **SEAMOLEC: Assuring Quality in Open and Distance Learning System**

The South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization Centre (SEAMOLEC) is a Centre of expertise in open and distance learning for SEAMEO member countries. As one of its tasks, it has produced a QA guideline for stakeholders in the DE community in South East Asia. This guideline provides background on the development of DE in the sub-region, and presents a series of indicators, processes, and practices of QA for DE in South East Asia. It was written in response to a need for enhanced understanding of the concept of open and distance learning, its roles and functions, and its QA concerns.

SEAMOLEC places QA of DE within a broader context of QA in education generally, noting that, irrespective of mode of delivery, QA systems should be able to demonstrate that:

- Learning outcomes have been set at the appropriate level and clearly communicated to the students;
- Content and design of the curriculum and the teaching methodologies employed are effective in enabling the student to achieve the outcomes in terms of both the acquisition of knowledge and the development of related practical skills and abilities; and
- Assessment is appropriately designed and rigorously administered to measure the achievement of the outcomes.\textsuperscript{17}

It then goes on to provide a series of indicators under the following headings: 1. Providing Institution; 2. Programme; 3. Resources; and 4. Recipients. So, for example, under the Heading of Providing Institution, there are two indicators: 1) The appropriateness of the ODL programme to the mission of the providing institution; and 2) The level of commitment of the providing institution.

Each indicator is accompanied by a detailed narrative explanation of best practice, which is intended to assist readers with interpreting and applying the indicator. There are 49 indicators in total.

The Guideline also includes an additional chapter on QA process, which provides guidance regarding QA implementation. The point of departure of this overview is that QA needs to be systematically planned and programmed, rather than being added at the end of a process. This guide includes descriptions of internal QA processes, as well as externally imposed activities (such as those imposed by an accreditation agency). It also includes a detailed overview of QA practices at DE institutions in the sub-region, reporting on their key quality assurance areas and criteria.

\textsuperscript{16} Distance Education Council. (n.d.). Norms for Ensuring Quality in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) System. Retrieved December 4, 2008, from www.dec.ac.in/Norms%20for%20ODL%5B1%5D.doc

\textsuperscript{17} ibid. p. 5 (chapter IV).
Finally, the guide includes a proposal for a regional QA structure and process, intended to:

a) Provide assistance to the national quality assurance agency in the member countries in implementing the guidelines to their respective context; and

b) Coordinate collaborative activities among member countries in developing and implementing quality assurance for cross border ODL.

It is proposed that this work be overseen by the SEAMEO Governing Board and SEAMOLEC, working with peers from member countries as appropriate. SEAMOLEC notes that conducting of assessment by this regional structure would be voluntary or mandatory, depending on national regulations, and that such assessments would ideally be undertaken through the relevant national QA agency. It recommends that each member country should put in place an organization to carry out the QA function for DE programmes or institutions. It is unclear what progress has been made with implementation of these recommendations, either at national or regional level.

According to SEAMOLEC,

This guideline can be expanded and elaborated further by any country or institution based on needs to control, develop, and assure quality in ODL practices. Within the framework of SEAMOLEC’s mission to assist Southeast Asian countries in providing services for effective use of open and distance learning, the guideline provides a common perspective among Southeast Asian countries for the purpose of assessing, designing, developing, implementing, evaluating, and researching ODL, as well as assuring quality in the practices of ODL. This guideline will be disseminated by SEAMOLEC to the eleven SEAMEO member countries for the purpose of guiding the implementation of QA in ODL for any member country.  

4.3.2. Asian Association of Open Universities

The Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) has prepared a framework for developing a quality assurance culture within a dedicated distance education institution. This document was prepared as part of a project jointly organized by the AAOU and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). According to the draft framework document,

The aim...is to develop a framework to assist distance education institutions in Asia to formalise their own efforts in ensuring quality in their educational provision; and to enhance that quality on a continual basis...While most dedicated distance education institutions have similar organisational and operational characteristics no two are sufficiently alike to enable the quality assurance (QA) system of one to be simply transferred to another. Reviewing the approaches to QA adopted by one institution is certainly valuable and the sharing of experiences is to be encouraged. Some countries and regions have adopted a central set of guidelines for local institutions to comply to or to be used for comparison. In conceiving this project the AAOU executive wanted a more generic structure that institutions could use as a starting point in their own development of a QA culture. The desired structure should not be prescriptive, but instead should direct an institution towards those areas and issues that have commonly concerned those who have been responsible for establishing QA systems in the past. The project team has not attempted to prepare a comprehensive list since this is likely to have made the framework too large and user unfriendly. Instead the team has tried to concentrate on the central issues that should apply to most institutions. It is envisaged that the framework will provide the initial starting point for an institution intending to formalise its approach to quality. Those assigned with the responsibility of establishing the institution’s QA system should feel free to drop or amend those elements of the framework that are not

---

Quality Assurance of Distance Education: Lessons Emerging from Regional Initiatives

relevant to its own situation as well as to add others that reflect its specific context and organisation.19

As is acknowledged, the framework presented in this document is closely modelled on that developed in South Africa (and ultimately published as NADEOSA’s Quality Criteria. Thus, it includes a number of criterion statements, organized under the following headings: Policy and Planning; Human Resource Provision and Development; Management and Administration; Learners; Programme Design and Development; Course Design and Development; Learner Support; Learner Assessment; and Media for Learning. For example, Learner Assessment includes the following statements:

• Assessment is an essential feature of the teaching and learning process, is properly managed, and reflects external standards.
• Assessment is integral to every learning and teaching strategy adopted, and includes formative as well as summative processes.
• Self-assessment should be extensively used throughout a course to enable independent learners to gauge and adjust their progress.
• Where appropriate, assessment involves a measurement of the achievement of outcomes.
• Assessment information (including learning outcomes and targets, as well as assessment procedures and dates) is provided when introducing new courses or modules or topics.
• Progression within and between courses and modules is clearly explained and available.
• There are systems of profiling and recording so that learners can receive detailed and accurate feedback on their progress/performance.
• There is an appeals system to allow learners to query the grades/marks awarded and the feedback provided.
• The processes and results of assessment, where appropriate, fulfil the requirements of institutional policy and any accreditation bodies.
• External stakeholders can find out easily what the learners have achieved on completion of a course or programme.
• Mechanisms are established to ensure that standards applied to assessment at the course level are comparable to those applied to equivalent courses elsewhere.
• Appropriate measures are in place to ensure the integrity of work submitted for assessment.
• Learners must be informed about the different roles played by assessment in the teaching and learning strategies for the course.
• The extent and timing of assessment matches its links to the progression of students through the course.
• The assessment strategy includes effective procedures for moderation and selection of evaluators.
• Detailed guides should be provided to all tutors, which clearly state the expected responses to questions, the range of acceptable solutions, and how marks/grades are to be awarded. Procedures should also exist to ensure that these tutors have applied the same standards.20

20 Ibid. p. 8.
It has not been possible to find further information on implementation and use of this framework since its development.

### 4.4. Europe and North America

In this region, many documents have been produced outlining QA frameworks for DE of different kinds. Examples of such documents include:

- Canada’s Community Association for Community Education (CACE) and its partners sponsored a project to create quality guidelines for online education and training in Canada. Part of this process appears to have involved stakeholders providing input into the draft guidelines through completing a workbook. A review of the workbook revealed that the following areas were covered: Outcomes (including a focus on acquired content skills and knowledge, necessary learning skills, credits or credentials, and return on investment of the learner’s time, finances and energy); quality processes and practices (including a focus on student management, learning management, communications facilities, human resources, program management); and quality input and resources (including a focus on the intended learning outcomes, curriculum content, teaching and learning materials, learning technologies, technical design for learning materials and delivery methods, personnel, learning resources, program plans and budget, regular review and evaluation, product/service information for potential students, advertising, recruiting and admissions information). The workbook indicates that after the consultation, the guidelines will be used as the basis for a consumer’s guide to e-learning. It is not clear whether such a guide has been developed yet.\(^21\)

- Jia Frydenberg in 2002 summarized the then current published quality standards in the United States of America (USA), and organized them into a nine-cell matrix. The nine standards covered were institutional commitment, technology, student services, instructional design and course development, instruction and instructors, delivery, finances, regulatory and legal compliance, and programme evaluation.

- The Institute for Higher Education Policy, based in the USA, conducted a study reviewing existing benchmarks for distance learning, and considered whether these benchmarks were applicable to Internet-based education. The study outlined 24 benchmarks for success in Internet-based DE, which were divided into seven categories of quality measures used on campuses around the USA at that time. These are institutional support, course development, teaching/learning, course structure, student support, faculty support, and evaluation and assessment benchmarks.\(^22\)

- A 2006 paper by Mariasingam and Hanna on *Benchmarking Quality in Online Degree Programs* highlighted that current available frameworks provide general guidelines for creating programs of high quality, but they are not specific enough to be of high value in comprehensively organizing and ensuring a quality online degree programme. They highlight the need for a solid and comprehensive framework for benchmarking quality of online degree programmes for future programme growth and expansion. The authors

---


\(^22\) The Institute for Higher Education Policy. (2000). Quality on the Line - Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education. Retrieved from [http://www2.nea.org/he/about/he/images/Quality.pdf](http://www2.nea.org/he/about/he/images/Quality.pdf).
propose a comprehensive and utilitarian programme improvement model, and the model’s core concepts, structure, and focus are discussed. They provide examples of areas appropriate for the development of benchmarks of quality at the institutional level (level of organizational commitment, financial levels of support for online degree programs, and whether or not the institution has in place planning processes that incorporate complex and challenging issues the institution faces in the external environment); the programme level (inputs, processes, and support requirements); and course level (standards for technology, instructional design, and learner interactions). Benchmarks would include assessment of inputs, processes, and performance outcomes. The authors also suggest five concrete steps that can be taken in implementing an effective QA process: defining the quality criteria and benchmarks for the programme including the perspectives of all stakeholders; defining specific actions to take in developing and offering the programme to meet the quality criteria and benchmarks; establishing monitoring and review systems for periodic review to ensure that the actions defined are implemented and functioning as intended; creating an institutional system, including a self-assessment process, to determine whether the steps mentioned above are implemented and functioning as intended; and including a process to take appropriate actions to correct any deficiencies that the self-assessment process might reveal. The authors highlight that these systems and processes could be an important area for further research.

- The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, based in the USA, produced a paper on Quality Issues in Distance Education, which provides some guidelines for quality on DE. The following areas are covered: mission, students, faculty, curriculum and learning issues, instructional resources, intellectual contributions, business and institutional relationships. It also provides a list of questions that students may wish to pose to DE providers.

- The North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) produced a set of quality guidelines – National Standards for Online Course Quality. The guidelines cover the following areas: online course content, instructional design, technology, student assessment, course management and evaluation, and 21st century skills.

- The American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC) has listed its distance education guidelines in the ADEC Guiding Principles for Distance Learning (2003). The following principles are covered: designing for active and effective learning; supporting the needs of learners; developing and maintaining the technological and human infrastructure; and sustaining administrative and organizational commitment.

- The Working Group of the Indiana Partnership for Statewide Education (IPSE) identified the need for a set of distance learning guiding principles. They developed a document - Guiding Principles for Faculty in Distance Learning – which provides a set of guiding principles that define good practice and a clear benchmark for faculty as they pursue

---


activities in distance learning. The guidelines cover the following areas: course design; programme design; faculty development; course evaluation; assessment of student outcomes; copyright; ownership; delivery methods; student support services; library resources; support for faculty development and training; technical support; faculty workload, compensation, and rewards; and state approval and regional accreditation.  

- A Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications project – Balancing Quality and Access – led to the development of the ‘Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs’. The project was designed to foster an interstate environment that encourages the electronic provision of quality HE programmes across state lines. The principles were designed to be sufficiently flexible to cover a range of programmes from graduate degrees to certificates, and address programs rather than individual courses. The following areas are covered: curriculum and instruction; role and mission; faculty support; resources for learning; students and student Services; commitment to support; and evaluation and assessment.

- The American Council on Education (ACE) has organized its quality assessment criteria for distance learning in its document Distance Learning Evaluation Guide under the following seven groups: Learning Design, Learning Objectives and Outcomes, Learning Materials, Technology, Learner Support, Organizational Commitment, Subject Matter/Content of Course (Module or Programme).

In addition, there are two further frameworks worth describing in more detail:

### 4.4.1. The EADTU E-xcellence Manual

The European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) has developed a comprehensive manual on quality assurance for e-learning in higher education through a two-year project entitled E-xcellence, undertaken under the auspices of EADTU and involving a pool of experts from 12 European institutions with a stake in e-learning developments. The purpose of the manual generated through the project is to provide a set of benchmarks, quality criteria, and notes for guidance against which e-learning programmes and their support systems can be judged. Thus, it functions primarily as a reference tool for assessment or review of e-learning programmes, but is also imagined as a resource that might help with development and/or improvement of e-learning programmes. The resource has been released under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial-No Derivative Works 2.5 Licence, which facilitates copying and re-use, but unfortunately prevents interested users from customizing the Manual to suit different contextual needs. For this study, it was only possible to find an electronic version of the Manual, broken into discrete HTML pages, rather than a printable version of the entire manual.

According to its website,

*It has not been the intention of the project to interfere in any way with existing systems of quality assurance, and this manual is not a comprehensive guide to QA procedures even in*

---


the context of ‘pure’ e-learning provision. It is assumed that institutions and regulatory bodies will have a defined set of processes which provide for the development, monitoring, evaluation and enhancement of HE provision. This manual offers a supplementary tool which may be used with these QA processes to allow the consideration of e-learning developments as a specific feature. An important aspect of the E-xcellence project is that it offers a European-wide standard, independent of particular institutional or national systems, and with guidance to educational improvement.30

The manual is organized into six sections: 1. Strategic Management; 2. Curriculum Design, 3. Course Design; 4. Course Delivery; 5. Staff Support; and 6. Student Support. Each section follows a similar format setting out benchmarks, critical factors, performance indicators, and assessors’ notes. Indicators have also been generated ‘at excellence level’ in an effort to differentiate between achieving good performance and excelling in different areas.

Thus, for example, the section on course delivery includes the following benchmarks:

- The technical infrastructure maintaining the e-learning system should be fit for purpose and support both academic and administrative functions. Technical specification should be based on a survey of stakeholder requirements and involve realistic estimates of system usage and development.
- The reliability and security of the delivery system should have been rigorously tested beforehand and appropriate measures should be in place for system recovery in the event of failure or breakdown.
- Appropriate provision needs to be made for system maintenance, monitoring and review of performance against the standards set and against improvements as these become available.
- The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) should be appropriate for the pedagogical model adopted and for the requirements of all users. It should be integrated with the institution’s management information system as far as possible.
- The VLE should provide information and services to all users in a logical, consistent and reliable way. All users should be confident that the VLE’s systems for communication and provision of information are secure, reliable and, where appropriate, private.
- Materials and information accessible through the VLE should be regularly monitored, reviewed and updated. The responsibility for this should be clearly defined and those responsible provided with appropriate and secure access to the system to enable revision and updating to occur.31

It then contains more detailed benchmarks and indicators (including indicators of excellence) covering Technical Infrastructure and the Virtual Learning Environment.

4.4.2. QAA Guidelines on Quality Assurance of Distance Learning

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the United Kingdom is responsible for checking how universities maintain their own academic standards and quality. It reviews and reports on how they meet their responsibilities, identifies good practice, and makes recommendation for improvement. It also publishes guidelines to help institutions develop effective systems to ensure that students have the best learning experience. QAA is an independent body funded by subscriptions from universities and colleges of higher education, and through contracts with the main higher education funding bodies.

In 1999, the QAA produced Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Distance Learning. According to the QAA website,

*These guidelines offer advice on assuring the quality and academic standards of higher education programmes of study provided through distance learning...The guidelines have been produced at the request of the distance learning community in the United Kingdom, which has recognised not only that the continued development of this form of higher education and its worldwide acceptance depend upon rigorous quality assurance, but also that there are many areas in which the usual ways of doing things for 'on-campus' provision are not necessarily appropriate in the context of distance learning.*

The guidelines were developed with the assistance of a working group initially convened in 1997 by the former Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), and continued by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). They build on generic Guidelines on quality assurance produced by the HEQC in 1996 and on institutional quality audit reports, undertaken in the first instance by the HEQC and latterly by QAA.

In 2004, the QAA undertook a revision of its overall code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. This code of practice is intended to help higher education institutions to meet their responsibilities for assurance of academic standards and quality, by proving a framework within which they can consider the effectiveness of their individual approaches to a range of activities. As part of this process, it incorporated a section on collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning), which incorporates a revision of the guidelines on the quality assurance of distance learning produced in 1999.

The section on flexible and distributed learning covers approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment that:

• Do not require a student’s place of study to be physically located within the institution (the awarding institution) whose academic award is being sought through successful completion of the programme of study;
• Do not assume that a student’s programme of study is necessarily delivered directly by the awarding institution;
• Do not assume that a student is necessarily directly supported by staff of the awarding institution;
• Do not assume that a student is routinely working with other students; and
• Do not necessarily require assessment of a student’s achievement to take place at the location of the awarding institution.

The guidelines on flexible and distributed learning provide a set of guiding statements (eight in total) covering issues of delivery, learner support, and assessment of students. So, for example, under learner support, one of the guidelines reads:

*Students should have access to:*

---


• A schedule for any learner support available to them through timetabled activities, for example tutorial sessions or web-based conferences;
• Clear and up to date information about the learning support available to them locally and remotely for their FDL programme or elements of study;
• Documents that set out their own responsibilities as learners, and the commitments of the awarding institution and the support provider (if appropriate) for the support of an FDL programme or element of study.  

The guidelines are accompanied by narrative explanations that provide further detail on each of the guidelines. As the guidelines on flexible and distributed learning are part of a broader code of practice on higher education in general, it is assumed that they would be read within the broader context of the overall code of practice. This code of practice includes sections on:
1) Postgraduate research programmes;
2) Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning);
3) Students with disabilities;
4) External examining;
5) Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters;
6) Assessment of students;
7) Programme design, approval, monitoring and review;
8) Career education, information and guidance;
9) Placement learning; and
10) Recruitment and admissions.

4.5. Latin America and the Caribbean

The vehicle for QA of DE in Latin American and the Caribbean is CAL-ED, the Institute for Quality in Distance Higher Education in America and the Caribbean. The mission of CAL-ED is to contribute to improving distance higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean, and it sees its function as being to advise mainly on the self-evaluation process of DE programmes, where this advice is required. CAL-ED is running a Virtual Centre for Establishing Quality Standards for Distance Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, which was suggested by the Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo (BID) at meeting held in 2000 to analyse the state of distance education in the region. It was agreed that the project should be managed by the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja (UTPL).

The objective of the Virtual Centre was the development of the basis for an accreditation system of and quality standards for distance higher education programs in Latin America and the Caribbean (Virtual Center), and carrying out a preliminary assessment of this basis through studies and pilot tests. The objectives of this exercise were twofold:
• To promote the idea that higher education institutions can successfully improve, carry out and manage distance education programmes based on information technology, and
• To contribute to the capacity of governments to regulate, assess and accredit their distance education programmes.

---

34 ibid.
36 ibid. p. 4.
The creation of standards within this framework was achieved by undertaking analysis of a representative sample of distance higher education courses available in the region. Different approaches were explored to creating a model of quality standards, with modifications made as appropriate to create the final model for the Virtual Centre. In addition to this conceptual model, an online system was created to enable participating universities, educational authorities, and researchers to have ready access to an electronic version of the evaluation model. The online tool also makes provision for users to share comments while using the tool, in an effort to create a richer online environment.

At a conceptual level, the Virtual Centre defines a set of criteria, organized according to the following headings:

**Facilitating Processes:**
1) Leadership and Management Style
2) Policy and Strategy
3) Staff Development
4) Resources and Alliances
5) Audience and Educational Processes

**Results:**
6) Results of the Students and Educational Processes
7) Results of Staff Development
8) Social Results
9) Overall Results

For each of these criterion headings, multiple sub-criteria have been generated (28 in total across the model) and objectives have then been defined for each sub-criterion (78 in total across all sub-criteria). So, for example, the criterion on Results of the Students and Educational Processes includes the following sub-criteria and objectives:

6.a.- Measuring the Satisfaction-level of the Addressees and the Educational Processes
   6.a.1.- Measure periodically the satisfaction level of students and other external clients regarding the program
   6.a.2.- Inform students and other external clients about the obtained results on the basis of the used satisfaction-level measurements
   6.a.3.- Systematically compare the students `and other external clients` satisfaction level with regards the program with the satisfaction level of other students and external clients participating in other programs of the Institution and in other similar programs of other institutions
   6.a.4.- Deal with areas in need according to the tendency demonstrated by the obtained results in the previous assessments

6.b.- Measurements of Performance and Achievement
   6.b.1.- Measure periodically the students `and other external clients` performance in the program
   6.b.2.- Inform students and other external clients about the performance results
   6.b.3.- Compare the performance of the students and other external clients of the program with the performance of other students of and external clients participating in other programs of the Institution or other similar programs of other institutions
Each Criterion, Sub-Criterion, and Standard can be weighted to enable a score to be generated that can provide a quantitative assessment of the performance of an institution using the Virtual Centre.

Within this framework, the Virtual Centre then generates grids that include, for each objective, the following columns:

- Standards for each objective.
- Indicators for each standard.
- Informants for each indicator.
- Sources/Data for each indicator).
- Place/Department where the Sources/Data can be located.
- Techniques and Instruments to be used to gather data.
- Codes (to be allocated to each documentary source of data).
- An assessment scale, comprising two sub-columns. The first one reflects the score that the institution has established for each standard. The second one will include the score been obtained during the self-evaluation, expressed as a percentage. This is then automatically transformed into its relevant value by the Virtual Centre in relation to the score assigned to the standard.
- A column for recording proposals for improvement.

A sample grid appears as follows:

---

### Table 1  CAL-ED Virtual Centre Sample Grid\(^{38}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Source / Data</th>
<th>Place/ Department</th>
<th>Techniques and instruments</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Assessment scale</th>
<th>Suggestions or improvement proposals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.a.1.a</td>
<td>The students’ and other external clients’ satisfaction level is assessed with regards to meeting their initial expectations with regards to the program</td>
<td>People in charge of the program Processes and Statistics</td>
<td>Result Report: - Interview with the Students (Annex 1) – attach the analysis of the survey - Interview with the Students (Annex 1) – attach the analysis of the survey</td>
<td>UEA Processes and Statistics</td>
<td>Survey/ Questionnaire</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

38 *Ibid.* p. 6 (Criterion 6).
As the above example illustrates, the grids are accompanied, where relevant, by tools designed to facilitate the evaluation process. It is worth noting that this is envisaged as a self-evaluation process, in order to facilitate honest responses to questions, an important requirement of any tool attempting to quantify progress made against a set of defined criteria of this kind.

According to an overview document prepared in 2006, the intention was to establish a protocol describing the process to be followed in using the Virtual Centre, following which the tool would be applied in a self-evaluation process. The document notes intent to generate a final report on completion of this process. It has not been possible to determine what progress was subsequently made in completing this testing exercise of the Virtual Centre.

4.6. Commonwealth of Learning Performance Indicators

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an inter-governmental organization based in Vancouver, Canada, that was 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. COL is the world’s only intergovernmental organization dedicated solely to promoting and delivering distance education and open learning, and is the only official Commonwealth agency located outside Britain.

Operating across regions, COL has developed a series of resources on quality assurance in distance education, which are gathered together in a micro-website on quality assurance (see [http://www.col.org/colweb/site/pid/4225](http://www.col.org/colweb/site/pid/4225)). The organization notes that:

> The COL Quality Assurance micro-site has been designed to provide a single, convenient access point to existing resources in quality assurance in open and distance learning (ODL). We hope that it will be of particular use to institutions, researchers and governments seeking to establish benchmarks for quality provision and to all those who are interested in devising effective systems for the review and evaluation of ODL programmes. For ease of reference, the site is divided into topic-based sections with links to websites and other resources relevant to each topic that are available without subscription on-line...As the field of ODL is changing rapidly with advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs), we cannot hope to cover all existing resources. However, by providing links to the websites of important players in the field of quality assurance and ODL, we hope to provide a means of keeping abreast of the latest thinking in the field.39

As part of this site, COL has several documents that it has produced, which provide an overview of QA issues in DE. The first is a six-page Knowledge Series guide called Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning. This document provides an introductory overview of QA issues, highlights the organizational differences that QA in ODL must tackle, and then provides the following framework of issues that QA frameworks must cover:

- **General philosophy:** Policy and mission statements, ethos and culture of the organization, mottos, attitudes of staff and levels of staff commitment.

• **Products**: Learning materials, courses, resources, media, outputs (progression and retention rates, number of graduates), assessment outcomes (pass rates, standards of performance).

• **Services**: Registration and advisory services, tutoring, counselling, feedback and guidance on learning, support for learner progress, provision and management of study centres and resources, customer service, ICT help desks, responsiveness to issues.

• **Support processes**: Delivery systems, record keeping, scheduling, electronic backup, warehousing and stock control, QA procedures.\(^4^0\)

The guide goes on to discuss differences between QA implementation in a new institution compared to an existing institution, and then highlights various consideration in QA of aspects of DE such as curriculum and instruction, staff support, student support, and student outcomes. It also introduces issues regarding implementation of QA, well as presenting two brief institutional QA case studies.

From this basic overview, the COL site provides access to relevant QA resources from other organizations (including UNESCO) and from DE institutions around the world (noting, however, that QA procedures of individual universities are generally not available for public access). It also provides access to additional COL resources, including:


• Abrious, D. *Strategic Issues in Single- and Dual-mode Distance Education: The Organizational Blending of Two Canadian Distance Universities* (2006).


In addition to the above, COL has also produced a comprehensive set of Performance Indicators for institutions. In common with other QA framework, this set of performance indicators is organized according to a set of criteria, as follows: 1. Vision, Mission, and Planning; 2. Management, Organizational Culture, and Leadership; 3. The Learners; 4. Human Resource Development; 5. Programme Design and Development; 6. Course Design and Development; 7. Learner Support and Progression; 8. Learner Assessment and Evaluation; 9. Learning Infrastructure and Resources; and 10. Research, Consultancy, and Extension Services.

For each criterion, there is a statement of scope, which fleshes out an understanding of what is covered by the Criterion. For example, the Statement of Scope for Management, Organization, and Leadership reads:

*The institution should shoulder the responsibility of inculcating a desirable value system in all its constituents. The institution has clear and effective communication channels and has efficient resource management and administration systems that enable the institution to achieve its objectives. The institution is financially sound and can make reliable educational*

provision. In addition to using technology as a learning resource, the institution should manage its activities in a technology-enabled way for effective institutional functioning.\(^{41}\)

For each criterion, there is then a series of Criteria Standards (130 in total across all criteria). For each Criterion Standard, Performance Indicators are defined, as well as Sources of Evidence where the Performance Indicator can be measured. Finally, the grids in this document include a set of measures, ranging from ‘Fails to meet criterion’ to ‘Excellent’. An example of the first Criterion Standard for the Criterion on Management, Organizational Culture, and Leadership illustrates how this looks in practice:

**Table 2**  
Sample COL Performance Indicator Grid\(^ {42} \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria Standards</th>
<th>Performance Indicators</th>
<th>Sources of Evidence</th>
<th>Measure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 2.1. The organizational structure of the institution is appropriate for its operations. | 2.1.1. The institution has an organization chart with specified units and positions appropriate to its functions. | Organization chart, Corporate/Strategic Plan, policy manuals, handbook, planning implementation policy/framework; documented internal delegation of powers, websites. | 0. Fails to meet criterion  
1. Unsatisfactory  
2. Marginal  
3. Good  
4. Excellent  
0 1 2 3 4 0 0 0 0 0 |
| 2.1.2. The institution employs sufficient, appropriately qualified administrative, academic and technical staff to handle various specialized tasks and activities. | Human resource plan, Corporate/Strategic Plan, staff recruitment, promotion and development policy documents; cadre provision documents. | 0 1 2 3 4 0 0 0 0 0 |
| 2.1.3. The governance structure provides for collegial decision making and oversight of institutional activities and ensures the overall quality of the institutional provisions. | Organogram, Corporate/Strategic Plan, policy manuals, handbook, planning/implementation policy/framework; documented internal delegations of powers and authority, websites, human resource plans, documented performance review and systems, efficiency of reporting and consequential action. | 0 1 2 3 4 0 0 0 0 0 |

The document presenting these Performance Indicators was not accompanied by any narrative, so it is not clear what the intended purpose of this tool is, although it appears to provide a preliminary template that institutions could adapt and deploy within their institutions. It is unclear from this document whether the intention is to use the Measure column to generate some kind of score for the institution to help it – or another evaluating agency – to measure its performance quantitatively, but the format used would support such a scoring approach.

---


\(^{42}\) *ibid*. pp. 11-12.
4.7. UNESCO HE ODL Knowledge Base

The UNESCO HE ODL Knowledge Base project 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 HE programmes. The project aims to make available regional databases on ODL HE 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 through the COL Knowledge Finder. In addition, UNESCO is developing a decision-support tool (DST) that provides key questions concerning QA of ODL. This DST will be linked to the regional databases to provide further background to the issues it addresses at the regional level.

The main objective of the DST is to provide guidance on key areas for evaluating the quality of distance higher education. It focuses on the identification and development of quality criteria, valuing capacity building and stressing links between internal quality assurance systems and accountability to the public at national and international levels. It is also not a “one size fits all” model, but proposes means for decision-makers to access resources to evaluate national and institutional specific situations. The DST provides an array of components that users may emphasize in varying degrees depending on their particular needs. It is based on twelve components covering: 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 includes indicators, key questions, background, definitions and weighting for the key questions.43

5. Emerging Trends

Based on the reviews above, clear trends emerge when considering and comparing the different frameworks that have been developed. These are summarized below:

1) QA in DE at both national and regional levels has been disproportionately focused on higher education activities. Although the research exercise could not confirm this, anecdotal evidence suggests that this mirrors similar trends in overall regional initiatives in QA of education. This might be because learners enrol in educational programmes from countries other than their country of residence predominantly in the higher education sector. Nevertheless, as interest grows in use of distance education methods in other educational sectors, the focus might need to be broadened. In particular, there may be good reason to place stronger emphasis on QA frameworks that take specific account of the requirements of open schooling, especially in developing countries where open schools are increasingly used to deal with constraints in mainstream secondary schooling systems.

2) The **approach to structuring QA frameworks for DE is fairly common** across all of the analysed frameworks, with an organizing structure based on broad areas of DE practice. Although the precise areas used in different frameworks are unique to each, there are common themes in all of them, focused on areas such Institutional Parameters, Programme and Course Design and Development, Learners, Learner Support, Assessment, and so on. In general, all frameworks begin defining quality by presenting brief statements that seek to capture a preferred state of practice in the relevant area. Each framework uses some or other device to then provide further detail on how to interpret the statement, whether by providing additional sub-statements (called, for example, sub-criteria, elements, objectives, standards, and so on) and, in some instances, a further level of sub-statement. Most frameworks also include additional narrative explanations of some kind to explain further what is meant by the statements and how they might be interpreted and used to assure quality.

3) Despite similarities, there are **two broad categories into which the frameworks fit**. Most of the frameworks are simply guiding documents, intended to provide input and support to institutions and national QA agencies to their own QA processes. A few, however (notably the CAL-ED Virtual Centre, COL’s Performance Indicators, and UNESCO’s Decision Support Tool) take the process a few steps further to enable quantitative analysis to be completed using the tool. COL’s Performance Indicators simply make provision for responses to each Indicator to be placed on a scale, but the other two include full functionality for criteria to be weighted and the results of self-evaluation to be scored and to generate a final ‘total’. There are differences of opinion regarding the value of an approach that seeks to quantify responses to QA frameworks. Some people feel that this is a reductionist approach, and encourages ‘dishonest’ answers by users in an effort to increase scores. Others, however, argue that – used correctly – scoring can provide a useful, if simplistic, way to interpret results of QA and can also facilitate comparison between QA processes of different programmes and institutions.

4) Looking across the frameworks, it seems clear that – with a minimum of effort in running online searches – **any institutional provider or national QA agency can readily find a wealth of information on QA of DE**. Although the frameworks are of variable depth and quality, between them they provide a comprehensive picture of the issues that need to be considered in QA of DE, also taking into account the impact of recent technological developments on DE delivery. From this perspective, the frameworks reviewed provide a thorough and high quality store of information on QA matters in DE, all of which either is or soon will be available free of charge online.

5) All of the QA frameworks found for distance education were **intended primarily for self-evaluation purposes** and to inform other QA processes. While some (notably, the QAA and NADEOSA frameworks) have fed into formal national HE accreditation and quality management structures and processes, none contains any legal or regulatory requirement for institutional adherence. Particularly at the regional level, this is unsurprising, as establishing legal/regulatory requirements for institutions to adhere to regional policies is notoriously complex and time-consuming, as Bologna and similar processes are demonstrating, and can sometimes have negative unintended consequences. More importantly, though, most of the frameworks are based on a
philosophy that the greatest contribution they can make is to provide guidance and support to institutions that wish to engage in their own internal QA processes, as this creates a stronger sense of ownership of the guidelines when used and commitment to use them to improve quality, rather than to create false impressions about levels of quality. The general impression created by the frameworks is that attempts to impose them on institutions would encourage misrepresentation, reductionist thinking, and resistance, which would be counter to their underlying logic of improving quality.

6) Some regional processes – notably in Asia-Pacific and Africa – incorporate the idea of creating a regional agency responsible for QA issues in DE. In the Asia-Pacific region, proposals were generated for such agencies some years ago, but it has not been possible to find any evidence in this research exercise of progress made with implementation of such a regional agency. In Africa, the work is currently in planning phases as of early 2009. Thus, while such developments are of potential interest, it is not yet possible to explore or determine how they would operate and with what mandate, how they would be sustained, or what effect they would have in practice. Nevertheless, the trend to move from regional frameworks towards regional agencies providing services of different kinds may be worth tracking in future.

7) Also, at a regional level, there seemed to be little evidence of integration of regional QA of DE frameworks into regional processes focused on harmonization of higher education (although this was admittedly not a specific area of analysis of this research, so cannot be confirmed). Further exploration of how such QA of DE frameworks might feed into broader regional processes of harmonization of higher education.

8) In the spaces where information on the frameworks was stored (particularly online locations), it was difficult to find much evidence of how the frameworks had been applied and used by institutions or national QA agencies, and what, if any, impact they have had on changing DE practice for the better. There is some anecdotal evidence of improvements resulting from institutional engagement with the frameworks, but this is limited and, where it was found, generally not objective. Thus, it is hard to determine what the objective basis has been for ongoing investment in developing such frameworks. This observation should not be taken to imply that they contain no value. On the contrary, as has been noted above, on the face of it, these appear to be very useful and generally thorough frameworks. However, it does suggest a need to conduct further research to understand how they are used and integrated into institutional and national QA processes, and to determine how and in what ways this has led to improvements in quality. In addition, a specific research theme worth pursuing might be to assess the specific merit of including scoring systems in such QA frameworks.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

As the above analysis has demonstrated, there has been significant work undertaken around the world to develop frameworks for QA of distance education, both at national and regional levels. These processes have generated a wealth of intellectual capital that can be
harnessed in future institutional, national, regional, or global efforts to improve the quality of distance education delivery.

Having noted this, there are certain key trends that emerge from review of these frameworks, which have been outlined in the previous section. Based on these, the following recommendations might be useful in taking forward discussion on the role of regional frameworks for QA of DE:

1) Explore the possibility of either broadening existing frameworks – or creating new ones – to cover educational sub-sectors other than higher education more comprehensively and specifically.
2) Where it has not yet happened, initiate interactions between the custodians of the QA of DE frameworks reviewed in this document (and any other relevant similar frameworks not included in the review) and those responsible for coordinating regional efforts to harmonize higher education, in an effort to ensure clear and relevant integration of DE QA issues in those regional harmonization strategies.
3) Follow up with relevant agencies to determine what progress, if any, has been made with establishing regional agencies to take responsibility for QA of DE. This follow-up could usefully be used as a basis for undertaking global research to determine how proposed, nascent, or existing regional agencies will or are:
   a) Securing a political mandate at a national and institutional level (and ensuring that such a mandate is binding, where relevant);
   b) Interacting with other regional QA and harmonization efforts in education;
   c) Continuing to develop QA of DE frameworks for their region;
   d) Encouraging and facilitating use of their frameworks;
   e) Assessing and researching the impact that use of their frameworks is having on the quality of DE practice;
   f) Providing other support services to national agencies and DE providers;
   g) Ensuring their financial sustainability.
4) Conduct research on how regional and national QA of DE frameworks have been harnessed by relevant institutional, national, and regional agencies and what impact this has had, if any, on the quality of DE practices. To be of value, such research would have to extend beyond cursory solicitation of inputs and opinions from research subjects in an effort to seek to provide an objective assessment of this impact. This could be done by combining initial surveys to assess use with detailed case studies to explore use and impact.
References


Braimoh, D., & Lekoko, R. The Need for Policy Framework in Maintaining Quality in Open and Distance Education Programmes in Southern Africa. Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education—TOJDE, 6(4).


Distance Education Council. Norms for Ensuring Quality in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) System. Retrieved December 4, 2008, from www.dec.ac.in/Norms%20for%20ODL%5B1%5D.doc.

Distance Education in Asia: The Background. Retrieved December 4, 2008, from www.egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/25994/1/Unit-1.pdf.


Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Quality in Distance Higher Education. (2006). Developing and Implementing CAL-ED.


