Theme 6: Quality Assurance in Distance Education Research

The theme of research on quality assurance in a distance education context is of critical importance to scholars of distance education. In this section, viewpoints on ethics in distance education supervision and research-based quality assurance approaches are explored, while ethical issues surrounding online-based research are investigated.

Chapter 21:

Enhancing Quality in Distance Education through Research-Based Quality Assurance Approaches

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Introduction

Like in many other parts of the developing world, sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed phenomenal growth in distance education provision over the last two decades. COVID-19 has also accelerated this trend as almost all higher education institutions resorted to remote teaching and learning. Due to its comparative cost-effectiveness and potential to broaden access and address the high demand for higher education, distance education has been the most attractive mode of provision to private higher education providers, which are also on the increase. Almost all higher education institutions offer some form of distance education today, with most having established a unit or centre for distance education. This development was evident in many institutions even long before the onset of COVID-19. Increased distance education provision is also characterised not only by more diversified programmes of study but also by a more diverse range of learners. Expansion of higher education has seen increased participation in universities by people from disadvantaged backgrounds. An added phenomenon to this mix is more use of technology in the teaching and learning processes. Online technologies are becoming more integrated into traditional teaching and learning in both distance and face-to-face institutions.

The mainstreaming of modern Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) has influenced an emerging pedagogy in higher education, which is relatively novel to both students and teachers. Whilst this development is positive, it does not come without its own challenges in the higher education system, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. The higher education terrain is in a state of flux and its trajectory is as unclear as it is unsettling for many stakeholders, including the public. Ulrich Teichler, one of the prominent scholars in higher education, argues that the rapid changes taking

place in the higher education sector pose a number of major challenges (Teichler 2009). These include the threat to quality, lack of relevance of education provided, erosion of the social good of higher education, and poor transmission of lifelong learning skills. The same scholar also argues that while the changes offer a number of exciting opportunities, there is also a danger of missed opportunities and false dawns. Part of the concerns about higher education lies in the new forms of delivery that are technology driven, like online and blended learning. Given the predominance of technology-enhanced learning that has been exacerbated by COVID-19, institutions cannot afford to ignore public concerns about the quality of delivery in higher education. It yet has to be demonstrated, particularly in the African context, that the new forms of delivery support rather than reduce the value and quality of higher education qualifications.

One of the major concerns about increased enrolments in higher education, more use of technology, remote teaching and learning is the quality of provision. Traditionally, a university is considered a special institution that plays a key role in delivering the knowledge requirements for development (Cloete et al. 2011). Through their active engagement in teaching, research, innovation, and outreach services, universities are responsible for building and nurturing the intellectual capital of a society. In the developing world in particular this is the main motivation for investing in expanding access through open and disctane e-learning (OdeL). This is only possible if robust quality assurance processes are maintained amidst all these changes taking place in the system. While universities assumed better quality when they were serving a small elite, institutions in today's massified higher education systems are under tremendous pressure to change and adapt (Martin 2018). To maintain their esteemed place in society, universities should put the quality assurance agenda at the centre of all their endeavours (Ayoo, Tamrat, and Kuria 2020).

This chapter argues that the current environment offers universities a good opportunity to rethink their quality assurance practices in distance education so they can demonstrate their worth even under conditions of stress. The environment in which most universities currently operate is both trying and stressful—exponential enrolments amidst severe cuts in funding, wider diversity of the student clientele system, greater participation of students from disadvantaged family and community backgrounds, and natural disasters like COVID-19. The chapter draws from Commonwealth of Learning (COL) supported work in Southern Africa and proposes quality assurance methodologies and practices that are grounded in research to leverage the quality of higher education provision. It proffers that research should guide quality assurance approaches that are used in different institutional contexts and demonstrate the benefits they yield over time. The main contribution of this chapter lies in the proposal it makes to adopt 'illuminative' quality

assurance approaches in ODeL where research and quality assurance form two sides of the same coin. Additional to the research component in quality assurance, it has the potential to enact vibrant institutions and a vibrant academy that improve both practice and theory on an ongoing basis, irrespective of mode of provision.

The chapter starts with a brief overview of quality assurance in higher education and makes the point that investment in quality assurance should lead to measurable improvements in students' learning gains. It gives the example of a case study that illustrates how the results of internal quality assurance undertakings can be measured to facilitate continuous improvement. Through this case study, the chapter makes a strong case for research-based quality assurance processes in ODeL institutions and in higher education generally. It argues that it is only through such an approach to quality assurance that stakeholders internal to an institution can take ownership of quality assurance, can account for investment in quality enhancement activities of an institution, and can improve quality in a systematic manner. The chapter argues for the regular and innovative use of quality criteria by academic units in a university.

Quality assurance in the African University

For many years, higher education institutions subscribed to the notion of explicit and transparent quality assurance approaches. As Tadesse notes, quality assurance '...is also accepted as a daily reality at individual institutions. The problem is that there's no evidence to show any widespread qualitative change in classroom practices or students' learning experiences' (Tadesse 2016: 2). Quality assurance in higher education has mainly been associated with a combination of external and internal quality reviews/evaluations. The former has largely been driven and controlled by external agencies that oversee quality of higher education provision at national level. Internal quality evaluations are controlled and driven within an institution. Unfortunately, such self-evaluations have not been effectively institutionalised in many distance education universities in Africa although it is a requirement by external quality assurance agencies. As Tamrat (2012) notes, external quality assurance is a mechanism through which quality assurance bodies check if the systems and procedures of an institution are properly functioning and meet acceptable standards. These institutional procedures include self-evaluation arrangements that are used to uphold quality in an institution. The missing gap in external quality assurance is that the process is a meta-evaluation of the quality of an institution rather than evaluation of the actual quality itself. Vlaseanu,

Grunberg, and Parlea (2007) aptly capture the role of external quality assurance when they assert that normally external quality assurance focuses on the system for achieving good quality and not at the quality itself.

Internal quality assurance consists of policies, systems, and processes that an institution implements to ensure that it achieves its goals. As highlighted above, often this is what external quality assurance agencies expect and try to enforce in institutions. Traditionally, such internal processes include peer review of practices like examination systems, laying down requirements for staff recruitment, strict programme/course development standards, and regular auditing of provision of library and laboratory resources. A lot of these processes become some kind of procedural culture in most institutions—the normal path to walk. As a result, they tend to be implemented in a somewhat technicist fashion, where approval is based mainly on account of the procedures followed, and no attempt is made to follow up and measure the subsequent results of such time-consuming and expensive undertakings. At the same time, little attention is paid to the rigour of the processes and the results they yield. A study by Zavale, Santos, and Dias (2016) indicated that the main challenges of implementing an internal quality assurance system in an African HEI are associated with linking QA to decision making and to a funding strategy, training human resources, and allocating funds for the system to operate and to be sustainable. This obviously limits the benefits of such internal quality assurance activities because results of such undertakings are not used for planning purposes. This defeats the whole purpose of conducting such self-evaluation processes.

Measuring the returns of quality assurance

There is general consensus in the literature that internal quality assurance brings about institutional improvement (Mavil 2013; Ayoo et al 2020; Machumu and Kisanga 2014). What is not clear is how much value quality assurance adds to educational practices that impinge directly on student learning gains. Given the costs and time involved in conducting internal quality assurance, we need evidence to show that these processes yield measurable returns. In this chapter I propose that implementation of quality assurance should be accompanied by research which seeks to show the benefits of internal quality assurance processes in institutions in terms of improvements of delivery processes generally and of increased learning gains in particular. For example, what improvements in course/programme design; in student support mechanisms; and in students' knowledge, skills,

and innovation result from investments in the quality assurance undertakings of an institution. At the same time, such research should inform quality assurance approaches most suitable for particular contexts, given the wide variations and complexities of institutions. National quality assurance frameworks need to be nuanced to fit particular institutions for them to be effective. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work. Research-based approaches to quality assurance are well in line with arguments for cost-benefit analysis of educational innovations, an economics notion that is premised on justifying educational interventions on the measurable returns they yield. This is notwithstanding the obvious complexities of measuring the hidden social and individual returns of educational investments.

The sections that follow exemplify a typical example of the type of research that can be conducted where internal quality assurance is implemented to inform where improvements are needed and whether investment in internal quality assurance actually results in improvements. It also demonstrates how academics can tinker with existing quality criteria to improve their practice and to keep the criteria up to date.

The case of Southern Africa

Through support from the Commonwealth of Learning, a community of practice (CoP) for quality enhancement was constituted amongst selected Southern African universities in 2018. Seven universities each from a different country in the region participated in the study. For purposes of protecting personal information about the universities and countries that were involved, the names of the institutions will remain anonymous in this publication. However, it is worthwhile to mention that there was a mixture of dedicated distance education and dual mode institutions amongst the selected CoP institutions.

The aim of the study was to demonstrate how quality criteria can be used at institutional level as instruments for measuring quality improvement. The idea was to demonstrate how criteria can be used to check on whether the quality of an institution is improving as internal quality assurance processes are implemented as an internally rather than an externally driven process. In this publication, this approach is referred to as an illuminative quality assurance approach.

Methodology

An initial workshop was convened for seven representatives from the seven project institutions. This workshop was a follow-up of a larger workshop that had been held the previous year, which was attended by at least two members from each project country, including one person from each national quality assurance agency. The initial workshop had developed a set of quality guidelines for ODeL in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. The set of guidelines was deemed to be comprehensive and contextually relevant since it was developed by practitioners in ODeL in the region and adopted by CoL.

The purpose of the second workshop was to review the guidelines, with a view to refining them. Participants were also inducted on how to use the quality criteria in their institutions. This was in preparation for a pilot process which was going to be done by participants in their institutions. The piloting process was going to involve:

- identifying a programme to evaluate and people to support with the piloting process
- inducting people to do the piloting of the guidelines
- conducting a self-review process using the guidelines
- compiling a report on findings to be shared at the CoP meeting

After the workshop, participants went back to their institutions to pilot the quality guidelines. They were free to choose any programme of study to pilot and to find colleagues in their institutions who were keen to have their programme used for the piloting project. For the most part, participants supported academic units to evaluate their programmes themselves, using the set of quality standards. One month was allowed for the piloting process and the instrument consisted of the following seven quality guidelines:

- programme design
- learner support systems
- materials development
- student assessment
- infrastructure and facilities
- staffing
- open and distance education systems and structures

Key questions that guided the piloting process were:

- Which of the proposed guidelines were frequently selected for piloting and thus perceived most relevant by selected institutions?
- What are the strongest and weakest areas in terms of quality assurance in the current ODL provisions in the region?
- What lessons can be learned from the pilot experience?
- How can the guidelines be improved so they can bring maximum benefits to institutions?

As highlighted above, participants compiled reports on their findings, which they presented at a feedback workshop also organised by the COL.

Results of the pilot

The guidelines instrument[1] was structured in such a way that for each quality standard, there were several quality criteria to be considered, provision for recording evidence of performance, and assigning some rating score. Guidelines for rating quality criteria were provided. At the end of each quality standard, there was provision for summarising strengths identified within the quality standard, areas that needed improvement, recommendations based on observations, and an average rating score for the standard. Thus, apart from the quantitative score, the instrument also collected qualitative data that are valuable for improvement purposes.

Relative importance of the QA guidelines

Some institutions did not pilot all the standards in the instrument, possibly due to the limited amount of time given for the piloting process. Based on the courses they chose to use for the piloting, they prioritised some quality standards over others. As Table 1 below shows, all the seven institutions piloted *Programme and Course Design* and *Infrastructure and Facilities.* This was followed by *Learner Support* which was piloted by six institutions, *Staffing and Materials Development* was

1 Known as the Regional Community of Practice (CoP) QA Guidelines in Open and Distance eLearning

piloted by five institutions, *Student Assessment* by four, and *Open and Distance Learning Systems and Structures* by only two institutions. Although it is assumed that the choice of quality standard to pilot was an indicator of the importance an institution placed in that area, there may be many other factors which influenced that choice. Generally, CoP participants attributed this choice mainly to the importance that was placed by academics on the different quality domains. In this chapter, domains refer to areas of operation on which the quality standards were developed, like programme development, learner support, or assessment. Reports from project participants suggested that ODeL institutions prioritise certain domains over others. Consequently, they tend to pay more attention to those domains better than to others. Specific domains that were mentioned in the discussions were course design, materials development, and qualifications of staff. The danger with such practice is that there is a high risk of missing the all-important conception of distance education as a system. Weaknesses in some elements of the system obviously impact negatively on the entire system and therefore reduces its efficacy. Sound ODeL provisioning needs to have all the elements strengthened and the importance of tightening quality assurance bolts in the entire system cannot be overemphasised.

Self-scoring of performance against quality criteria

The following table shows rating scores for the courses that were piloted in the seven universities. It is worth noting that working with the project participants, academics conducted the self-evaluation, and the scores in the table below are self-reported scores.

Table 1: Identified strengths and weaknesses in the reviewed courses

Quality assurance guideline	Institution self-assessment scores (%)							Average score
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
Programme and Course Design	73	90	70	73	73	51	63	70
Infrastructure and Facilities	67	50	93	30	73.3	40	63	59
Learner Support	67	70	53	57	43.3	40	-	55
Materials Development	60	47	80	63	70	-	-	64
Student Assessment	50	67	75	57	-	-	53	60
Staffing	53	47	70	73	72.7	-	-	63
Open and Distance Education Systems and Structures	60	-	-	-	-	49	-	55
Average	61	53	63	50	20	26	26	61

Table 1 shows how institutions rated themselves. For example, *Programme and Course Design* was rated highest by institutions and has an average score of 70. However, in that quality domain, one can see that institution F scored only 51 per cent and therefore is not doing so well. In the average column, one can also see that *Learner Suppor*t has an average of only 55 per cent, so does *Open and Distance Education Systems and Structures*, although only two institutions reported data on the latter (discussed below). The data can also show patterns obtaining in a single institution across all the quality standards. The importance of collecting such data through internal quality assurance processes is that an institution or academic unit can see useful patterns at a glance, which can guide in planning improvement interventions timely enough. If conducted across different courses/ programmes or across different departments, one can have a good comparison of performance across the different entities.

It, however, needs to be emphasised that quantitative data as reported in Table 1 is not sufficient for improvement purposes. Whilst it is important in terms of flagging where problems lie, it needs to be supported by qualitative data which give more insights on the patterns that are showing. The

CoP quality assurance instrument encouraged the collection of qualitative data as well. Some of it was general, some was linked directly to specific quality standards. Table 2 below reports qualitative data that was collected during the piloting which was linked to specific quality standards. The data are pertinent in pointing at quality domains that need priority attention.

Table 2: Weaknesses identified for each quality standard

Quality assurance standard	Identified weaknesses
Programme and Course Design	Poor programme articulation in terms of body of knowledge involved No or poorly stated learning outcomes Programme rationale not explicitly stated Programmes do not promote entrepreneurship
Infrastructure and Facilities	Students not supported to effectively utilise the availed facilities Expansion of facilities and services not in tandem with growing student population No partnerships with industry to facilitate development of infrastructure and facilities Lack of enough office space and infrastructure to execute duties effectively
Learner support	Students with special needs not adequately accommodated Lack of accurate profile of students to facilitate appropriate support for students with different needs
Materials development	Poor learning materials that do not support independent learning Lack of variety of learning materials for use by students
Student Assessment	Lack of student access to course outlines Limited moderation of assessment Lack of diversity in assessment types Limited student authentication control for online assessment
Staffing	Lack of training in ODeL mode of delivery Insufficient staff to serve large student numbers
Open and Distance Education Systems and Structures	The two institutions that piloted this quality standard didn't provide any qualitative data

The weaknesses highlighted for each quality standard in Table 2 did not necessarily come from all the institutions. Some weaknesses are more applicable to some institutions than to others, but the data give a general picture of shortcomings identified across the project institutions.

The piloting process also revealed a lot of good practice happening in some of the institutions. In this publication, areas that need improvement were prioritised over the strengths that were identified. This is mainly because these were emphasised as well in the project, mainly to inform participant institutions on what needed to improve. However, below are listed some of the strengths to give the reader some idea of some of the positive practices that were identified:

- Involvement of teamwork in programme/course development
- System of programme approval before it is implemented, however, most programmes offered through distance in dual mode institutions are not appropriately redesigned for distance
- External examination processes
- Increasing awareness of the requirements of national quality assurance agencies

What emerged from the piloting?

The piloting sought to address the four questions that were highlighted in the methodology section of this chapter. In this section, important insights that emerged from the piloting are reported in accordance with the four guiding questions.

Guidelines frequently piloted

Programme and course design, and infrastructure and facilities were piloted by the seven project institutions. Institutions place greatest importance on these two areas, since without programmes or courses there cannot be any students. These aspects, especially programme/course design also attract the greatest attention of national quality assurance agencies, and this encourages institutions to pay particular attention to this aspect of delivery. For some reason open and distance education systems and structures was the least piloted. This may be due to the complexity of the quality standard involved. As highlighted above, there are many factors that might have affected the choice to pilot a quality standard. Unfortunately, this aspect was not investigated through the study.

Although institutions scored the quality standard on programme/course design highly, they also highlighted a number of weaknesses on that quality standard. As highlighted in Table 2 above, these weaknesses include poorly stated learning outcomes for the courses reviewed, not well articulated rationale for courses, and courses and programmes that do not promote entrepreneurship. The last aspect is increasingly becoming an integral aspect of quality of programmes of study as higher education institutions try to address the problem of graduate unemployment. In a study that was commissioned by the UK's Quality Assurance Agency on student expectations and perceptions of higher education, student expectations for employability were one of the areas that came out prominently as a priority expectation (Mulhern 2013). The report showed that students want more support for their employability, focusing on processes, information about employment, development opportunities including internships, placements, and work experience. Although institutions may take care of traditional design aspects, if higher education programmes do not impart employability skills and knowledge, the quality of the programmes remains compromised.

In a study that was conducted to provide baseline information on the overall QA situation in higher education institutions in Africa, it was found out that bachelor's and master's level programmes received the greatest attention in terms of institutional internal quality assurance systems. However, programme design and approval of academic programmes received only 61 per cent attention (Ayoo, Tamrat, and Kuria 2020). This seems to show that although institutions give attention to academic programmes, they do not seem to pay sufficient attention to the design aspects of programmes. This suggests the need for internal quality assurance to pay more careful attention to the actual design of academic programmes.

Lessons from the pilot

Several lessons emerged from piloting the quality assurance guidelines. One of the key lessons that came out of the process is that institutions can be more objective when they do reviews for their own internal purposes, without necessarily reporting to an external agency. In this study, they scored themselves low where they thought they were doing badly. This is the kind of objectivity that is needed in self-evaluation for self-improvement. Apart from enlightening internal stakeholders on the levels of quality in the various aspects of institutional delivery, the piloting clearly demonstrated how quality criteria can be effectively used to collect useful data that lead to planning for self-improvement. Using quality criteria as a general guide for systematically researching the status of

quality in an institution has immense potential for quality enhancement. Data analytics on various quality criteria help show clear trends in terms of what is going well and where there are quality gaps in an institution. However, for this approach to work, academics need to be well trained in how to collect relevant data using quality criteria. Correct interpretation of quality criteria, identification of appropriate evidence, and careful analysis of data in order to draw sound conclusions are essential aspects that call for some level of expertise and experience.

Evidence from the piloting shows that in many institutions distance education pedagogies still need to improve. Little attention is paid to putting in place systems and structures that are appropriate for distance education delivery. Efficient registration systems for students in different locations in the country, procedures for ensuring timely provision of learning materials, systems for turnaround of assignment feedback, and accessing of digital learning resources and other university services remotely by students are some of the essential components of provision that require appropriate systems to be put in place. Structures and systems that are in place for conventional face-to-face students are not necessarily appropriate for a distance learner.

Sharing the findings through the CoP provided an important learning forum that inspires institutions to keep striving for quality. When the project participants reconvened to share findings and their experiences of the pilot exercise, the exchange process was very rich and highly insightful. Experiences shared ranged from how programmes/courses that were used for the piloting were selected, how academics were enticed into participating in the piloting process, interpretation of some of the quality standards, and types of evidence that can go with the different quality criteria. It was apparent that this experience motivated project participants to conducting such self-reviews in their institutions on a more regular basis. A lot of suggestions for improvement also came out of the sharing and engagement. The whole notion of peer reviews came out very strongly as one of the best ways of enhancing the quality of distance education provision in institutions.

Improvement of guidelines

The piloting process was also aimed at identifying any weaknesses in the quality criteria with a view to improve them. In designing the criteria, the project team was informed by the experiences of the team members and the universities they came from in terms of implementing distance education. These experiences however varied, depending on where people worked. The main aspect where improvement was suggested is the technology aspect. Given that many institutions are making

increasing use of technology like learning management systems (LMSs), the project team suggested infusing technology-related elements in most of the criteria. Thus, aspects like student support, materials development, and assessment processes needed to be revised to reflect the dominance of technology that characterises practice.

One of the main challenges faced in using quality criteria for self-reviews relates to the kind of evidence that should be provided. People with little or no experience in conducting self-reviews struggle to figure out what constitutes relevant evidence for claims that are made in self-evaluation reports. As a way of helping users understand what constitutes evidence, the team suggested giving one example for each of the quality criteria in the instrument.

A whole list of suggestions for improving the quality guidelines was compiled for use after the workshop. This led to a process of refining the guidelines after the workshop. What this process demonstrated was that it doesn't matter how well an institution develops and refines its quality standards and the type of expertise used in doing so; it is only when the criteria are used by other people that gaps can be identified. These gaps range from difficulties in interpreting the criteria, which is often due to poor phrasing of the quality criteria and omission of salient elements of delivery that require attention in terms of quality enhancement.

Lessons from the CoP experience

The main purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how systematic research-based internal quality assurance processes can help improve the quality of an institution. Using quality criteria, which are a common feature in most higher education quality assurance frameworks, baseline data can be collected at course, programme, departmental, or institutional level. Investments in quality enhancement can be implemented over a period of time, based on the results of the baseline data. Another round of reviews can then be undertaken to measure changes that will have taken place because of quality enhancement investments made. This assumes a typical pre- and post-test measurement design, which can be highly illuminative of changes that internal quality assurance brings about in an institution. Through this approach, an institution can rationally defend the value of whatever investments it makes in quality assurance. At the same time, the institution understands whether its quality is improving or not in specific areas of delivery. Thus, in addition to fostering a quality culture in an institution, this practice demystifies quality assurance practices like accreditation and audits.

Conclusion

This chapter acknowledges the role of both external and internal quality assurance in higher education, particularly in ODeL. It acknowledges the expansion of access to higher education, which has largely been achieved through ODeL. It argues that such expansion should be matched by concomitant improvements in the quality of provision, which can only be achieved through implementing research-based quality assurance processes. In this regard, the role of research is vital in demonstrating whether investment in quality assurance yields any significant improvements in the learning gains in particular and in the quality of graduates in general. Implementing quality assurance without paying attention to the resultant outcomes does not put higher education institutions in a position where they can rationally defend these expensive undertakings. Neither does it show the comparative benefits of drawing on the affordances of technology to address access, quality, and equality, which are the key pillars of ODeL. Effective quality assurance should be accompanied by research that informs institutions on best approaches that are responsive to contextual imperatives and benefits that are derived from investments in such undertakings.

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