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**Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning: Strategies and
Approaches from the Perspective of Open University Malaysia**

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**QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING:
STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA**

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Abstract

Over the last several decades, higher education in many countries has been significantly transformed; with various new institutions established and many novel academic programmes now on offer. This is a common worldwide development; reflecting the universal focus on higher education as a national investment for economic progress and building human capital. This rapid growth and expansion are accompanied by an equal concern for quality, particularly in an environment where private higher education entities, including open universities and open and distance learning (ODL) institutions, are becoming prominent providers of learning opportunities for the masses. In this regard, ensuring quality is critical, as ODL has become synonymous with educating working adults – individuals who, as members of a nation's labour force, are instrumental to national development. Additionally, the increasing influence of information and communication technology (ICT) on educational practices has also called for more rigorous and stringent quality assurance (QA) systems and procedures. QA is important as a means to establish standards and accountability; ensure learner satisfaction; and enhance institutional image and prestige. As Malaysia's premier open university, Open University Malaysia's (OUM) understanding of QA stems from a holistic institutional approach that emphasises learner-centredness. This keynote address will discuss the strategies and approaches that OUM has adopted to create a QA system that complies with existing national guidelines, while exploring the development of a quality concept that is suited to the unique nature of ODL. This paper will also discuss how benchmarking and adopting best practices can contribute to a more well-rounded approach that can benefit open universities and other higher education institutions across the region.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the decades leading to the new millennium, many countries experienced a transformation in higher education systems, where increased participation and enrolment was seen as a critical element to accompany economic development that can lead to growth and progress. By 2020, the Asia-Pacific region, home to Malaysia, Indonesia as well as China and the Philippines, is anticipated to record the highest enrolment numbers globally, with a projected 100 million higher education learners; a figure expected to double by 2035 (Calderon, 2012). In fact, within the next 20 years, China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines will be in the top-20 list of countries with the highest number of learners worldwide (Calderon, *ibid.*).

This is a result of a process that encouraged corporatisation, diversification and massification; leading to the setting up of new colleges and universities, many of which are labelled private or for-profit providers. The private higher education sector thrived and cemented itself as a major player, and many new faculties and academic programmes related to current industry demands were introduced.

In the late 1970s up to the 2000s, Asia's open and distance learning (ODL) scene began to flourish as well. This was a time that witnessed the establishment and expansion of many of the region's now-prominent open universities, including India's Indira Gandhi National Open University; Indonesia's Universitas Terbuka; and Thailand's Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University.

Today, open universities and other ODL institutions are considered key providers of higher education, especially for working adults. By leveraging on the various innovations in information and communication technology (ICT), many have created e-learning and online platforms that have enabled working adults to enrol into formal academic programmes that are conducted on a part-time basis, without forcing them to leave their day-jobs. The influence of ODL has thus become increasingly marked, and should not be estranged from discussions relating to economic growth and national development.

This is where the importance of quality assurance (QA) is seen as particularly pronounced. The rapid expansion of higher education, while certainly bringing many positive outcomes, also carries certain risks, thus creating a questionable environment that must be monitored and controlled. This concern is what has made QA a global trend in higher education, and is now a widely accepted national and institutional responsibility. Consequently, close to half of all countries worldwide have created some form of QA mechanism (International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), n.d.).

QA is a means for maintaining standards, ensuring accountability and learner satisfaction as well as enhancing institutional image and prestige. Different countries and institutions have opted for various QA approaches, although it is clear that the universal key point aim in any QA exercise is to provide the best quality education possible. Every institution's internal approach needs to outline policies and mechanisms that can help to examine whether or not it is fulfilling its own purposes, as well as its vision and mission statements. At the same time, external measures, whether voluntary or compulsory, through accreditation, approval or audit exercises, can help to assess the operations of an institution or the relevant features of its programmes to determine whether or not they meet agreed standards.

Many countries have established a national QA body, and there are numerous global and regional networks that monitor and disseminate the relevant information. Examples of these networks include the International Network of QA Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), European Association for QA in Higher Education (ENQA), Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), ASEAN QA Network (AQAN) and Arab Network for QA in Higher Education (ANQAHE). Collectively, many of these networks are also part of the Global Initiative on QA Capacity (GIQAC), an outfit under the World Bank that aims to harmonise QA practices across all the participating regional networks. This global endeavour is indicative of the growing role of international or cross-border QA in the higher education arena.

ODL-specific QA is less conspicuous, as discussions concerning QA explicit to ODL are fairly recent. That being said, awareness is certainly growing, thanks to global organisations like the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), which has actively developed various guidelines, modules and performance indicators for consumption by open universities and distance education institutions. The IIEP, an outfit under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, has also provided support through relevant research projects that include modules for distance education programmes.

In Malaysia, QA in higher education is under the purview of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), a statutory body whose main role is to provide the main reference point for criteria and standards for national qualifications. As a private higher education institution in Malaysia, Open University Malaysia (OUM) is required to comply with the requirements set by the MQA. However, it has also developed its own internal QA strategies and approaches. This paper will introduce OUM as Malaysia's premier open university, explain its QA strategies and approaches as well as discuss how benchmarking and adopting best practices can contribute to a more well-rounded approach that can benefit open universities and other higher education institutions across the region.

2. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

Inspired by the idea of democratising education, OUM was established on 10 August 2000 as the seventh private university in Malaysia. It owes its unique status to two distinctive features: one, as the country's first full-fledged ODL institution; and two, its ownership by a consortium of 11 of Malaysia's public universities. This is a unique higher education model; because albeit OUM is owned by the consortium, it operates as an independent higher education institution under Malaysia's Private Higher

Education Institutions Act (1996). The concept that higher education should be made available and accessible to anyone who seeks it is encapsulated in the University's motto of "University for All". It is further demonstrated in OUM's delivery approach, which involves leveraging on ICT, e-learning and online platforms to create a blended pedagogy that is especially suitable for working adults, who need to juggle multiple personal and professional obligations while pursuing higher studies.

OUM's teaching and learning system focuses on learner-centredness. Learner satisfaction and learner-related outcomes are instilled in every process, services and facilities designed to help learners excel. This is reflected in the University's blended pedagogy which combines self-managed learning, face-to-face tutorials and online learning. The online learning component is complemented by various electronic learning materials, including CD-based multimedia courseware, iBooks, iTutorials, video lectures (called iLectures), iRadio (an Internet radio station) learning segments, audiobooks as well as digital modules in various formats. These are incorporated in the University's e-learning platform (called my Virtual Learning Environment, or myVLE), and are accessible to the learners at any time that is convenient to them. Unlike conventional brick-and-mortar universities, the ODL approach encourages learners to study independently at their own convenience, thus lending a flexibility that is especially suited to the needs of working adults.

Since its first intake of 753 learners in 2001, OUM has cumulatively enrolled about 130,000 learners and produced about 55,000 graduates. 95% of its learners are working adults, and almost half are in-service teachers who are enrolled in various Education and Teachership programmes under a teacher upgrading scheme overseen by Malaysia's Ministry of Education. OUM has successfully broadened its nationwide reach, not only through its use of ICT, but also through its network of 37 learning centres in all major locations throughout Malaysia.

OUM has also been able to stamp its mark in the international arena. OUM's internationalisation approach involves locating all its activities and operations overseas through partnerships with various international partners. In general, all these partnerships allow a partner institution to operate as one of OUM's overseas learning centre. Whilst each foreign institutions is able to enrol learners, conduct all its teaching and learning activities independently, OUM is responsible for providing learning materials, setting assessment questions, endorsing marking schemes, assessment results and when necessary, teaching staff as well.

Most of the programmes offered by OUM's international partners are related to Business Administration and Information Technology. To date, OUM has achieved a cumulative international enrolment reaching about 6,000 and current international graduates numbered at almost 700. The University has forged partnerships with the following international partners:

- Accra Institute of Technology, Ghana;
- Arab Open University, Bahrain;
- Eszterházy Károly College, Hungary;

- Graduate School of Management, Sri Lanka;
- Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, Vietnam;
- IDM, Sri Lanka;
- International Institute of Health Sciences; Sri Lanka;
- Mogadishu University, Somalia;
- NIEC School of Business Management Trust, Zambia;
- SIMAD University, Somalia;
- University of Science and Technology, Yemen; and
- Villa College, the Maldives.

3. OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA'S STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

The quality of Malaysian higher education is assured by the MQA. Its predecessor, the National Accreditation Board (LAN), was founded in 1997 and the MQA succeeded its position as a new entity in 2007. The MQA oversees quality standards and criteria, accreditation and recognition for all public and private higher institutions.

At present, the concept of ODL-specific QA is still nascent. From a national standpoint, MQA's Code of Practice for ODL, published in 2011, is the first distinctive guideline for open universities and ODL institutions in Malaysia. It is a significant indicator that ODL is becoming more influential and accepted in Malaysian higher education. Guidelines have also been developed for the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL): a mechanism for identifying, documenting and assessing knowledge, skills and attitudes to determine the extent to which an individual has achieved the desired learning outcomes for access to a particular academic programme. The recognition of APEL is another substantial milestone in ODL, as it is mainly linked to open or flexible entry systems used by open universities for providing admission or allowing credit transfer to working adults who do not have the required basic educational background for a particular academic programme.

In addition to complying with the rules and regulations set by the MQA, which is a compulsory external QA measure, OUM has also developed internal quality approaches, which are reflected in a quality management system that revolves around the concept that all programmes and services, including curricula, modules, learning materials and assessment methods, need to be of a high quality to match approved programmes and services from well-established higher education institutions. At the same time, all programmes and services must always be delivered in a timely manner. To achieve this, all departments employ standard operating procedures (SOPs) that must conform to various international standards and benchmarked against the industry's best.

The focus on quality is tied to the University's mindfulness of increasing competition from other ODL providers in Malaysia, as well as state-owned, dual-mode universities that dabble in ODL provision to add to their full-time, on-campus programmes. To stand out in this competitive crowd, OUM has set in

place a university-wide implementation of total quality management, which takes into account continuous improvement in the provision of quality products and services to learners as well as ensuring that all products and services meet stakeholders' expectations and requirements. Thus, quality awareness and culture are made an important component in staff training. Similarly, internal and external QA processes are kept in place via the relevant planning, implementation, monitoring and review processes that are implemented by the Institute of Quality, Research and Innovation (IQRI).

The IQRI is secretariat to the Quality, Research and Innovation Council (QRIC), which spearheads all QA and quality enhancement initiatives. It is chaired by the President/Vice-Chancellor, and comprises the top management of the University. The IQRI's other roles include advising various departments/faculties regarding quality issues such as the development and review of SOPs of core processes. In general, OUM's internal QA system complements and facilitates external QA processes, while external QA standards and indicators, such as those provided by the MQA, are used to drive the transformation of core internal processes and structures, as well as provide institutional focus on areas for continuous assessment and improvement.

While the MQA has already provided guidelines that aim to monitor performance in teaching and learning, obtain approval and accreditation for academic programmes, OUM's learner-centred concept is particularly crucial in its internal quality-related initiatives. Espousing learner-centredness with QA means realising that the value and relevance of QA in various core processes are absolutely crucial for achieving the University's outcomes, which is to ensure learners can successfully complete their studies and are satisfied with the learning experience. This QA-driven, learner-centred strategy is evident in the fact that the University's four learner support centres, i.e. the Centre for Student Management (CSM), the Centre for Instructional Design and Technology (CiDT), the Registry and the Digital Library, have received the Malaysian Standards MS ISO 9001:2008 certification. Additionally, internal quality audits are conducted periodically by selected staff who have been given the appropriate training. In-house workshops are also organised to build staff capacity in other areas of QA.

Quality enhancement is also focused on other areas, such as learning material design and development. This indicates the importance of leveraging on ICT as part of the University's quality philosophy, particularly because e-learning is a main component of the ODL delivery system. As the University's in-house development unit, CiDT is responsible for producing these learning materials, including print modules and multimedia content such as web-based modules, learning objects, iTutorials, video lectures, audio modules and learning segments for iRadio. These learning materials constantly undergo quality checks as part of their enhancement and improvement measures. New learning materials are constantly in development as well, the most recent being the OUM App, which allows for learning materials to be viewed using mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones. Again, this relates to the concept of learner-centredness, where the best possible learning materials are developed with the aim to create the most enriching learning experience for the learners.

Since 2009, OUM has also conducted self-reviews using the COL Performance Indicators for Distance Higher Education Institutions. The Performance Indicators examines ten criteria, i.e. vision, mission and

planning; management, organisational culture, and leadership; learners; human resource development; programme design and development; course design and development; learner support and progression; learner assessment and evaluation; learning infrastructure and resources; and research, consultancy and extension services. In addition to the requirements stipulated by the MQA, all these quality indicators are used to gauge the University's own performance and are valuable in ensuring the University meets stakeholders' expectations.

A critical aspect in ODL provision that necessitates QA is learner attrition. Attrition – where learners drop out without completing their studies – is a common problem faced by many open universities. At average rates reaching 40 to 50 percent, it is an issue that is considerably more serious than conventional campus-based universities. OUM has been able to maintain attrition levels to about 20 percent annually by focusing on learners' success in completing an academic programme. Some of the most important initiatives related to retaining learners are the role of CSM, which administers all matters pertaining to the provision of learner services; strong infrastructure support through nationwide learning centres; and extensive training for tutors and facilitators to ensure that they are fully equipped to teach in an ODL environment. Amongst the retention programmes under CSM include learning skills and examination preparatory workshops, counselling and guidance services and an online helpdesk known as electronic Customer Relationship Management (e-CRM).

Representing the University's most important stakeholders, learners' feedback remains an important factor in quality improvement. The annual learner satisfaction survey conducted by CSM has revealed many positive outcomes from focusing on learner-centredness in the day-to-day management of operations. This survey, which is a retention initiative, aims to seek learners' feedback with regards to learner services, reflection on their learning experiences. It is also used as a tool for OUM to benchmark and develop indicators that will allow the University to identify its external reputation. In addition to OUM's low attrition rates, a majority of employers have stated in the survey that OUM graduates have what it takes to compete in today's industry.

The focus on the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching and learning is another important aspect as well. The Institute for Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA) was specially established to manage four critical areas related to teaching and learning, i.e. programme delivery, e-learning, course accreditation, and assessment. It oversees all aspects of tutoring, whether face-to-face or online, as well as Flexible Entry and APEL, course credits and quality of assessment, assignments and examinations with the aim of improving effectiveness of learning. Through the management of said critical areas, ITLA has an immensely important role to play in contributing to producing quality graduates.

At the same time, OUM makes a conscious effort to keep abreast with the developments in ODL and higher education, especially in the area of content development and delivery methods. As an ODL institution that leverages on ICT, OUM strives to understand and adopt, where possible, novel innovations such as open educational resources (OER), massive open online courses (MOOCs), mobile applications (or apps), and social media. Through designated units like CiDT, OUM frequently explores these innovations, and has launched several initiatives, including the ones mentioned earlier. Global

initiatives like MOOCs, which represent freely distributed online courses by established institutions like Stanford and Harvard, also provide the opportunity to learn and adopt new ideas in higher education. While Malaysia may not yet be ready to embrace MOOCs in their entirety, much can be gleaned from this initiative, especially in terms of high-quality course materials and curriculum design.

It is necessary to reiterate that learner-centredness is a quality element that is supported by the University's vision, i.e. "to be the leading provider of flexible learning", as well as its espousal of shared values that aim to strengthen all internal processes, especially with regards to teaching and learning. These five shared values – integrity, professionalism, innovativeness, caring and teamwork – are constantly inculcated in all processes and services. Additionally, OUM is a champion of lifelong learning; having actively contributed to the preparation of the Blueprint on Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia (2011-2020) – an initiative under the Ministry of Higher Education to cement lifelong learning as not only an essential part of the education system, but also as the third pillar in human capital development, after the school and tertiary education sub-systems.

4. BENCHMARKING AND ADOPTING BEST PRACTICES: ADDING VALUE TO QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As has been iterated earlier, higher education QA is a relatively nascent concern that has emerged only in the wake of significant reforms in the higher education landscape. In addition to changes at the national level, increasing cross-border activities have also triggered the need for international QA strategies. The QA practices from established institutions, from the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and Japan, are often seen as exemplary and have contributed immensely to the broad understanding and importance of QA, especially in the context of education as a tradable service under the World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). Many institutions, including OUM and other open universities, have much to gain from benchmarking against the practices of these established institutions. Learning from the experiences of others can thus be an opportunity to improve academic calibre and institutional prestige, thus demonstrating that QA can go beyond compliance and fulfilling requirements.

For Malaysia, which has only had relatively recent developments in QA, the most straightforward lesson to be learned is the inculcation of a new attitude towards QA in higher education. This should not only be at a national level, but institutionally as well. For QA to be truly effective and to make tangible impact on higher education, there has to be a clear appreciation for academic standards and regulatory processes that can be universally enforced and followed. Well-developed QA systems directly influence stakeholder perception, even outside the respective countries. This is evident in countries like the UK and Japan that, with their high academic standards and excellent positions in world standings, represent the apex of quality education – a level of quality that we should all strive for.

In this sense, the MQA has an immensely important role to play in Malaysia. Through its function as the country's main authority in higher educational QA, the MQA can also take the lead role in steering institutions to undertake the appropriate measures and improve on focus areas that it has already outlined. Under its Code of Practice for Programme Accreditation (COPPA), programmes and institutions under assessment must provide evidence for nine focus areas, i.e.: vision, mission, educational goals and learning outcomes; curriculum design and delivery; assessment of students; student selection and support services; academic staff; educational resources; programme monitoring and review; leadership, governance and administration; and lastly, continual quality improvement.

For open universities like OUM, the recently published Code of Practice for ODL certainly augurs well for the continued recognition of the role of open universities in the democratisation of education as well as for further refinements specific to this approach in higher education. In this regard, standards and measures that specifically apply to the needs of ODL institutions will certainly be useful. These must take into account the unique ODL delivery system, pedagogy and ICT facilities such as online resources and support tools.

At the regional level, along with many other international frameworks that are already available, the QA Framework released by the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) can also serve as a useful guideline for Asian ODL institutions as the document consolidates statements of best practices for ten specified criteria aimed to be utilised as a value-adding tool to existing QA systems. For OUM, this can complement the existing internal and external QA measures as well as the COL Performance Indicators. In making this Framework an open resource, it reflects the open nature of ODL and the importance of sharing and exchange for universal benefits in higher education.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

QA is a necessary and crucial element in higher education, as it is a means to ascertain that processes and operations in teaching, learning, academic matters, facilities and learner support, are on par with set standards. Over the last several decades, with the advent of ICT and the many reforms that have affected the higher education landscape, the issue of quality has become increasingly important; having received institutional, national and regional attention in the form of internal initiatives, national QA authorities, and regional frameworks and guidelines.

Malaysian higher education institutions need to comply with the requirements set by the country's national QA body, i.e. the MQA, which has been actively managing the various aspects of local QA. The release of a Code of Practice specifically for ODL recognises the increasingly important role that open universities play in the national higher education context.

As Malaysia's premier ODL institution, OUM has developed its own approach and strategies to internal QA that are based on institutional focus on learner-centredness. Driven by the University's vision statement, its shared values and this learner centred focus, its quality strategy prioritises learner

retention and success by striving to meet their various teaching and learning necessities and demands. OUM also takes into account both internal and external measures to ensure that relevant standards are met while providing room for further enhancement and improvement.

Learning from others through benchmarking is a useful means to see what has proven successful in other institutions and environments, thus providing the opportunity to adopt best practices and improve institutional performance. This is particularly useful for developing countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as others in the Asian region. At this juncture, the first and most crucial step is to inculcate a new attitude towards QA in higher education, where not only can it be leveraged on to ensure accountability, but also to enhance institutional image and prestige. If properly outlined and realised, ODL-specific QA measures can help to ensure that ODL institutions and open universities can continue to play a significant role in higher education development.

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