India-Canada International Conference on Open and Flexible Distance Learning
SNDT Women's University, Mumbai, India
20-22 February 2013

Quality Assurance in Open and Flexible Distance Learning:
A Malaysian Perspective

Professor Emeritus Anuwar Ali
President/Vice-Chancellor
Open University Malaysia

Quality Assurance in Open and Flexible Distance Learning:
A Malaysian Perspective
Professor Emeritus Anuwar Ali
President/Vice-Chancellor, Open University Malaysia

Abstract

The urgent drive towards human capital development has often focused on the role of higher education institutions in providing the knowledge and skills necessary for economic progress. This growing spotlight on higher education has been accompanied by an equal concern for quality, especially in an environment where private higher education, such as through open and flexible distance learning (OFDL), is becoming increasingly prominent as the major access point of learning opportunities for the masses, in particular, working adults who have the greatest potential to contribute to economic progress. Quality assurance (QA) measures are essential as rapid advances in information and communication technology (ICT) have significantly transformed teaching and learning to create a sophisticated, borderless and global educational environment that has erased various traditional boundaries in higher education. While this has resulted in many benefits for today's learners, it is important to look to QA as a means to maintain standards, ensure learner satisfaction, ensure accountability and even enhance institutional image and prestige. Although there are diverse QA approaches in higher education, a common thread exists where all countries and institutions aim to provide the best quality education possible. This is reflected in the gaining importance of benchmarking and best practices as well as adhering to national and international guidelines that take into account various aspects of education provision, from course objectives to curriculum design, monitoring, review, institutional leadership as well as continuous improvement. This paper will discuss the broad QA approach in Malaysian higher education, with specific focus to OFDL and open universities. This paper will also illustrate QA from the perspective of Open University Malaysia (OUM). As the country's premier open university, OUM has employed its own unique approach to QA that will hopefully contribute to a more well-rounded QA system in Malaysian higher education, specifically in OFDL; and in general, to potentially create an impact on similar institutions in other countries in the Asian region.

317 words

Quality Assurance in Open and Flexible Distance Learning: A Malaysian Perspective

1. INTRODUCTION

Human capital development has been widely acknowledged as one of the main strategies for economic progress in a highly competitive and borderless world. Higher education (HE) institutions – including open and flexible distance learning (OFDL) institutions (more commonly described as open and distance learning, ODL) and open universities – play an important role in this agenda, as creating learning opportunities for the masses is critical to ensure the success of any human capital development initiative. Central to this effort is the role of working adults, who in recent years have shown an interest in continuing education and lifelong learning for personal fulfilment or career advancement. For working adults to continue learning has a direct impact on a nation's capacity for progress. Open universities, through career-oriented and industry-relevant academic programmes specifically designed to cater to the needs of working adults, have certainly made an impact in this regard.

In recent years, developments in HE across the globe have seen a dramatic increase in the number of university learners at various levels of study, as well as the number of HE institutions established. Information and communication technology (ICT) has proven to be a key enabler in OFDL, especially in transforming teaching and learning to create a far more accessible and sophisticated educational environment. Furthermore, in many countries across Asia and other regions, private institutions often outnumber public universities. This has involved the massification and diversification of both institutions and academic programmes; and both of which necessitates a more stringently regulated environment. These developments have led to a growing concern for quality.

Many countries now look to quality assurance bodies (QA) to provide the means for maintaining standards, ensuring accountability and learner satisfaction as well as enhancing institutional image and prestige. Different countries and institutions have opted for different QA approaches, although it is clear that the universal key point in any QA exercise is to provide the best quality education possible.

Many national HE systems now commonly comprise an internal accreditation or QA body, and there are also numerous global and regional networks that monitor and disseminate the relevant information. Examples of these networks include the International Network of QA Agencies in HE (INQAAHE), European Association for QA in HE (ENQA), Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), ASEAN QA Network (AQAN) and Arab Network for QA in HE (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 clearly indicative of the growing

role of QA and internationalisation in the HE arena. OFDL-specific QA is less conspicuous, as discussions concerning QA are fairly recent. That being said, awareness is certainly growing, thanks to global organisations like the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), which has actively championed this theme by developing various guidelines, modules and performance indicators for consumption by open universities and distance education institutions.

In Malaysia, QA in HE is under the purview by 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. Since the establishment of the MQA in 2007, understanding of QA in Malaysian HE has improved, particularly among private institutions in the country. This paper will discuss QA practices in Malaysia, what mechanisms are in place for open universities and ODL practitioners as well as the more explicit look at the QA approach employed by Malaysia's first open university, Open University Malaysia (OUM).

2. QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICES IN MALAYSIA

The quality of Malaysian HE is assured by the MQA. Its predecessor, the National Accreditation Board (LAN) was founded in 1997 the MQA succeeded its position as a new entity in 2007. The MQA merges LAN and the Quality Assurance Division (QAD) of the Ministry of HE (MOHE). Today, it oversees quality standards and criteria, accreditation and recognition for all public and private HE institutions. While policies on HE are governed by the MOHE and the National HE Council, MQA's main responsibility is to implement standards and quality criteria as prescribed in the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF).

As a QA body, the functions of the MQA are (MQA, n.d.):
1. To implement the MQF as a reference point for all Malaysian qualifications;
2. To develop standards and all other relevant instruments as national references for the conferment of awards with the co-operation of stakeholders;
3. To quality assure HE institutions and programmes;
4. To accredit courses that fulfil set criteria and standards;
5. To facilitate the recognition and articulation of qualifications; and
6. To maintain the Malaysian Qualifications Register (MQR).

The MQF classifies qualifications based on a set of nationally agreed and internationally benchmarked criteria. These include academic levels, learning outcomes and learner academic load. The MQF forms the basis for Malaysian higher educational QA and acts as the reference point for all the relevant criteria and standards for national qualifications. It also integrates all national qualifications and provides pathways to systematically link one qualification with another (MQA, *ibid.*). Accreditation is generally imposed by agencies such as the Public Services Department (PSD). As such, private institutions in Malaysia

commonly seek accreditation by the MQA. Standards for accreditation cover five critical areas, i.e. type of programme; objectives and outcomes; quality of curriculum and assessment; academic and support staff; and facilities, resources and quality management systems. Once accredited, these programmes are then entered into the MQR.

Before the consolidation of LAN and the QAD as the MQA, public HE institutions were directly regulated by the QAD, which dealt with the quality of academic programmes in the public system and also managed ISO-related certification for every public institution. As such, many public universities had established designated units (commonly a Quality Management Unit) to manage institutional QA according to guidelines provided by the QAD and MOHE. In general, programmes offered by all public HE institutions that have been approved by the PSD prior to MQA's establishment are also now included in the MQR. Today, the MQA is the sole QA and accreditation body for both public and private HE institutions in Malaysia.

Since 2007, the MQA has developed various guidelines and standards (available on its web portal) to serve as reference points for all Malaysian HE institutions. These include the Codes of Practice for Institutional Audit (COPIA), for Programme Accreditation (COPPA) and for Open and Distance Learning. The MQA has also published guidelines to good practices for assessment, curriculum design and delivery as well as programme standards for various fields of study, including Computing, Creative Multimedia, Law, Syariah, Art and Design and even Islamic Finance.

The Code of Practice for Open and Distance Learning, published in 2011, is the first distinctive guideline for open universities and open and distance learning (ODL) institutions in Malaysia. This document represents a unique QA mechanism for ODL programmes based on the criteria outlined in the COPPA. It is a significant indicator that ODL is becoming more influential and accepted in Malaysian HE. Guidelines have also been developed for the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL): a mechanism for identifying, documenting and assessing an individual's knowledge, skills and attitudes to determine the extent to which he/she 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 requisites for a particular academic programme.

To date, five ODL institutions have been established in Malaysia, i.e. OUM, Asia e-University (AeU), Wawasan Open University (WOU), International Centre for Education in Islamic Finance (INCEIF) and Al-Madinah International University (MEDIU). Of these institutions, four were set up after 2005, demonstrating how novel the ODL movement is in the country and thus, how significant QA will be for its continued growth. The unique recognition of APEL as a component in ODL-specific QA can also be considered a milestone as ODL

institutions commonly employ an open or flexible entry system for non-traditional applicants who do not have the typical academic credentials. The MQA's Guideline to Good Practices for APEL provides a structured approach whereby ODL institutions can admit such non-traditional applicants, award credits for work-based or experiential learning, while at the same time, eliminate the issue of duplication of learning.

With regards to rating systems, the MQA has also developed the Rating System for HE Institutions in Malaysia (or SETARA) in 2009 (MQA, 2012). SETARA is the first of its kind in the country; and measures the performance of undergraduate teaching and learning in universities and university colleges in Malaysia. The SETARA rates institutions based on six Tiers, with Tier One identified as Weak and Tier Six as Outstanding. OUM was recently ranked as Tier Five (Excellent) in the 2011 SETARA exercise. Another rating system called the Malaysian Quality Evaluation System for Private Colleges (MyQuest) was introduced in 2011. MyQuest is an instrument to evaluate private colleges in Malaysia in terms of the quality of students, programmes, graduates, resources and governance (MOHE, 2012). Through MyQuest, private colleges are rated as excellent, good, or weak, and also rated from one star (Poor) to six stars (Excellent).

These two rating systems will hopefully serve as a reliable reference for potential students in their selection of institutions and programmes of study offered by various institutions in Malaysia. Collectively, these developments bode well for QA in its broad sense, as well as within the unique sphere of OFDL.

3. OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA'S QUALITY ASSURANCE APPROACH

At OUM, the Quality, Research, and Innovation Council (QRIC) spearheads all QA and quality enhancement initiatives. It is chaired by the President/Vice-Chancellor, and comprises the top management of the University. The secretariat to the council is the University's Institute of Quality, Research and Innovation (IQRI). Quality management at OUM revolves around the concept that all its programmes and services, including curricula, learning modules, electronic learning materials and assessment methods, need to be of a high quality to match approved programmes and services from well-established HE institutions, while at the same time ensuring that they are always 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.

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 IQRI.

The IQRI's other roles include providing consultancy services to 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.

With specific reference to teaching and learning, OUM abides by the QA processes that have been outlined by the MQA, for reasons that include monitoring performance, as well as to improve processes and to obtain approval and accreditation for its academic programmes. A central concept that drives OUM's concern for QA is learner-centredness. 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 approach 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. Continuous QA occurs through internal quality audits that are conducted periodically by selected staff who have been given training in conducting audits. Additionally, in-house workshops are also organised to build staff capacity in other areas of QA.

Quality enhancement is also focused on other areas of educational provision, such as the development of complementary learning materials. This indicates the importance of leveraging on ICT as part of the QA measure, particularly because e-learning is a main component of the ODL delivery system. The CiDT, the University's in-house development unit, 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 OUM's Internet radio known as iRadio. These learning materials constantly undergo quality checks as part of their enhancement and improvement measures. New learning materials are constantly being developed by skilled personnel and subject-matter experts to add variety to those currently available. 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 HE 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.

Another important aspect of QA at OUM is learner retention. It is common for ODL institutions to experience a learner attrition rate of about 40 to 50 percent – figures that are considerably higher than conventional campus-based universities. To ensure that learners can successfully complete an academic programme is a mark of quality for the institution, and OUM has been able to maintain attrition levels to about 20 percent annually: a level that is comparatively low compared to other open universities in Asia. A major part of the quality measure in this endeavour is the role of the CSM, which administers all matters pertaining to the provision of learner services. Amongst its retention programmes are learning skills and examination preparatory workshops, counselling and guidance services and an online helpdesk known as electronic Customer Relationship Management (e-CRM). Other quality measures include good premises at the national level, where OUM currently has 33 learning centres at all major locations nationwide with excellent infrastructure support. Additionally, OUM also provides extensive training for its tutors and facilitators to ensure that they are fully equipped and suited to teach in an ODL environment.

4. LEARNING FROM THE BEST

For countries in a developing region like Asia, where achieving a developed status is usually one of the main national targets, QA in HE is a relatively nascent concern that has risen only in the wake of massive changes and reforms in the HE landscape itself. In addition to internal developments, increasing cross-border and international activities will also compel the need for QA strategies to align with the best international standards; particularly the practices of more advanced countries like the United Kingdom, Australia and Japan that are actively involved in regulating trade in education through the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). Theirs can be considered some of HE's best in QA, and many institutions, including OUM and other open universities, can learn much by benchmarking against their practices. Learning from the best can be an important strategy in upholding and enhancing academic calibre, where QA goes beyond the mere understanding that compliance is mandated by law.

For Malaysia, the most straightforward lesson to be had from the best practices of its foreign counterparts is the inculcation of a new attitude towards QA. This should not only be at a national level, but internally as well. For QA to be truly effective and to make

tangible improvements in HE, there has to be a real respect for academic standards and strict regulatory processes that can be enforced and will be adhered to by all the relevant parties. Well-developed QA systems directly influence stakeholder perception, even outside the respective countries. This is evident with 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 the 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 OFDL's role in the democratisation of education as well as for further refinements specific to this approach in HE. Because ODL institutions are still relatively a minority in Malaysia, it must be realised that standards and measures that apply need to be developed beyond the traditional notions of HE. Thus, QA for OFDL must take into account its unique delivery system, pedagogy and ICT facilities such as online resources and support tools. Universitas Terbuka Indonesia and India's own Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) are some examples of ODL institutions that have made considerable progress in developing ODL-specific QA systems, and these can perhaps pave the way for other such institutions in the region to follow suit.

Similarly, the recently released Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) QA Framework 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 (available online at http://www.aaou.net/resources), it reflects the open nature of ODL as well as its flexibility, particularly in integrating new innovations such as open educational resources (OER) into QA.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

QA and regulation are necessary in higher educational QA as measures to ascertain core processes of university operations, such as teaching and learning, academic matters,

facilities and learner support, are on par with set standards. Over the last several decades, it is becoming increasingly clear that quality is a major concern in HE; evident in the growing number of national QA bodies as well as international networks and region-wide frameworks such as the one developed by the AAOU.

Like many other countries in Asia, Malaysia's HE institutions need to gain approval and accreditation from a national QA body, i.e. the MQA, which has been the main authority for the quality of Malaysian HE since 2007. Not only does the MQA manage quality issues for regular public and private institutions, a separate Code of Practice has also been developed for ODL, thus recognising the increasingly important role open universities play in the national as well as global contexts.

OUM, Malaysia's premier ODL institution, has developed its own unique approach to QA that is based on a learner-centred focus that prioritises the learners' successful and enriching learning experience. This approach takes into account both internal and external quality measures, thus ensuring that relevant standards are met while providing opportunity for further enhancement within the institution.

As QA is considered the means to maintain standards, ensure learner satisfaction, ensure accountability and even enhance institutional image and prestige, it is important to look for opportunities to learn and improve. One such platform is benchmarking, where institutions can learn from the best practices of other counterparts, and is particularly crucial for a developing country like Malaysia, in a developing region like Asia. Thus, for Malaysia, the foremost step in strengthening educational methods by adopting international best practices is to create a new attitude towards QA where not only general QA for HE needs to be enhanced, but ODL-specific measures need to be properly outlined and implemented. This can certainly go a long way in ensuring that open universities in the country can progress and be recognised for their increasingly important role in the democratisation of education as well as in contributing to the nation's human capital development.

REFERENCES

Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) (2012). *Guidelines to Good Practices: Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning.* Accessed December 27, 2012, from http://www.mqa.gov.my/portal2012/garispanduan/APEL/GGP%20APEL%20%28English%20version%29.pdf

Ministry of Higher Education (2011). *MyQuest 2010/2011.* Accessed December 27, 2012, from http://jpt.mohe.gov.my/PENGUMUMAN/MyQuest2010_2011.pdf

MQA (2011). *Code of Practice for Open and Distance Learning.* Accessed December 27, 2012 from http://www.mqa.gov.my/portal2012/garispanduan/GGP%20ODL%20%28July2012%29.pdf

MQA (2012). *SETARA: 2011 Rating System for Malaysian Higher Education Institutions.* Accessed December 27, 2012, from http://www.mqa.gov.my/portal2012/SETARA11/SETARA%20%2711%20ADVERTORIAL%20BI.pdf

MQA (n.d.). *MQA at a Glance.* Accessed December 27, 2012, from http://www.mqa.gov.my/