

## Quality and Quality Assurance in Open Distance Learning (ODL) Discourse: Trends, Challenges and Perspectives

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**ABSTRACT** Quality assurance in higher education is a global concern. With the increasing acceptance of Open Distance Learning (ODL) as widening access to higher education in the developed and developing countries, research suggests that it has become increasingly crucial that quality assurance process is developed and maintained if the ODL provision is to be relevant and more functional that the products recognized the conventional higher education in emerging open learning environment. Accordingly, this article does not only seek to contribute to the global discourse in the promotion of quality assurance, it explores trends, challenges and perspectives in quality assurance in ODL. Drawing from Moscovici's social representations theory and Schon's reflective practice, we argue quality assurance as an ideology and a reflective practice.

### INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance in higher education has received considerable attention of late – it has gained serious attention among stakeholders, such as employers of graduates and funding institutions. Ntshoe and Letseka (2010: 60) note that the quality and quality assurance movements have become highly contested issues in the advent of new managerialism in higher education. Quality assurance is one of the main issues examined by modern scholars and practitioners who operate on the international education and resources market. With the increasing acceptance of Open Distance Learning (ODL) as widening access to higher education in the developed and developing countries, research suggests that it has become increasingly crucial that quality assurance processes are developed and maintained if the ODL provision is to be relevant and more functional.

In the context of ODL, quality is best defined as fitness for purpose in combination with exceptional high standards, perfection and consistency, value for money, and transformation capabilities. Quality assurance ought to cover areas such as curriculum design, content and delivery organization; teaching, learning and assessment; etc. Drawing from Moscovici's social representations theory and Schon's reflective practice, this article (1) conceptualises the constructs "quality" and "quality assurance"; (2). It investigates the trends and challenges in

quality assurance in ODL; (3) sketches quality perspectives for ODL; (4) argues quality assurance as an ideology; and (5) examines quality assurance as reflective practice.

### CONCEPTUALISING "QUALITY" AND "QUALITY ASSURANCE"

The question of what is "quality" and "quality assurance" had been asked and answered in a philosophical sphere globally over the decades. However, the concepts "quality" and "quality assurance" are broadly perceived. "Quality, like "freedom" or "justice", is an elusive concept, instinctively understood but difficult to articulate. For Olakulehin (2009: 1916), the term quality is a difficult concept to define. The concept is easily misconstrued because of its rather nebulous characteristics. As observed by Tripathi and Jeevan (2009: 46), quality can be defined as the embodiment of the essential nature of a person, collective object, action, process or organization. Most scholars see quality in education as a combination of: exceptional high standards; perfection and consistency; fitness for purpose; value for money; transformation capabilities; and product of planning, monitoring, control and coordination.

During 1980–1990, the word 'quality' and its related concepts, tools and goals, gained more and more prominence and diffusion in almost all sectors of organized social life (Vaira 2007). In addition, it is embedded in the reductionist an-

thropology linked to market ideology and rhetoric with its view of social networks in terms of client–supplier relationship, where the former has interests, demands and needs that the latter must fulfill and satisfy at best. The reductionist view, in the end, is a general model of social actors and social relationships basically grounded on an instrumental and materialistic view (Vaira 2007). Of late, quality has been defined in many ways including zero defects, excellence, transformation/empowerment, value for money, and fitness for purpose (Thurab-Nkhosi and Marshall 2006:102). Also, “notions of quality are evolving or merging” as the higher education environment changes, in particular as “new forms of provision in higher education such as online or eLearning and cross-border or transnational education” prompt the need for change.

Literature suggests that quality has both absolute and relative connotations. The concept of absoluteness in quality props up the morale of the higher education system at the delivery end i.e. institutional, and at the receiving end i.e. students. The greatest challenge for trying to define quality in curriculum design, content and delivery organization; teaching, learning and assessment remains a relative experience. In line with this, Jung and Latchem (2007: 237) note that quality in ODL can have different meanings for governments, employers, institutional managers, faculty members and researchers. Governments may require assurance of the socio-economic benefits, institutions may be more concerned about quality of their management, courses, delivery, learner support, assessment systems and completion and graduation rates and teachers and researchers may be more interested in the nature, depth and extent of the learning (Jung and Latchem 2007: 237). Different stakeholders may also disagree on criteria and standards. Institutions may claim high academic standards in their programmes and high qualifications in their staff, while employers complain that courses fail to meet the labour market needs.

Quite often, the concept “quality” is used interchangeably with the concept “quality assurance”. Quality assurance is a means of producing defect-and fault free products; and refers to actions, processes through which quality is maintained and developed, and through the quality policy these core processes are made visible and expressed (Holma and Junes 2006: 6). In addition to this, quality assurance does not mere-

ly mean a set of procedures to be followed—it is also an attitude or ethos which influences every aspect in an organisation’s activity. In other words, commitment to quality ought to be a part of an organisation’s culture.

Quality assurance is the mechanism put in place to guarantee that the education is “fit for purpose” i.e., is good. It is used in a general sense to include audit, evaluation, accreditation, and other review processes and elements (Gift, Leo-Rhynie and Moniquette 2006: 126). Belawati and Zuhairi (2007: 2) contend that quality assurance has been defined as “systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by higher education institutions and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives, and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements”. It facilitates recognition of the standards of awards, serves public accountability purposes, helps inform student choice, contributes to improved teaching learning and administrative processes, and helps disseminate best practices with the goal of leading to overall improvement of higher education systems. In general, the term quality assurance refers to a process of defining and fulfilling a set of quality standards consistently and continuously with the goal of satisfying all consumers, producers, and the other stakeholders (Belawati and Zuhairi 2007: 2). It concerns, protocols and practices – it appears to be context specific.

### **Trends and Challenges in Quality Assurance in ODL**

Much has been discussed about the pedagogy of ODL. Little, if any, discussion seems to have taken place about fluid nature of quality and quality assurance in ODL setting. Globally, quality assurance has been the subject of much debate in higher education over the past three decades and universities have been subject to both external assessments of teaching quality focused on particular subjects and external academic audits, which address the workings of universities as a whole. With the increasing recognition of ODL as a tool of widening access to higher education globally, it has become increasingly necessary that quality assurance processes are developed and maintained if the ODL provision is to be relevant and recognized as complementary to conventional higher education.

Quality assurance in teaching institutions is not new. It has its origins in the manufacturing industry and the military. The industrialised and distributed nature of educational systems in ODL has facilitated the recent development of quality assurance systems. However, these systems have represented less *quality assurance* and more *quality control* in the old fashioned industrial sense of the word, in their overall tendency to check on performance after it has been completed, rather than to build in a commitment to meet the needs of users and continuously improve (Tait 1997: 1).

A large volume of research notes that while quality assurance or quality has been accepted institutionally in higher education, to apply same to learning construct is another matter. In addition to this, a lot of the resistance in the past has been brought about by academics' sincere belief that they were already implementing quality in what they were doing and that they know best what quality is to be implemented, where and when. Furthermore, the academics of course have ensured that their lectures, tutorials, continuous assessments are of a high standard and their final examinations are of a level that they are proud to compare with any other examination articles in the same discipline anywhere. Those who are in the know have ensured these and they are the subject matter experts. Quality assurance frameworks for ODL in a globalized context are still in the early stages of development. Hence, studies indicate the need for investigating a wide range of quality assurance practices in different contexts of ODL and discussing quality assurance matters in depth at the international level.

Literature suggests that the more recent use of and emphasis on the label, "*quality assurance*", can be attributed to factors such as the following:

- ♦ governments' interest in return on public investment in education relative to other areas of expenditure;
- ♦ the assertion that education and training is essential to economic recovery, growth, and competitiveness;
- ♦ the assertion that the institutions responsible for education in the recent past have failed in their mission to meet demand because of ivory tower or anti-business attitudes; and
- ♦ insistence that education costs should be reduced and educational organisations made more accountable.

Globally, the need to assure quality assurance in higher education is a statutory mandate in most governments and a driving force to reform higher education. Just to mention a few, for example, in South Africa, the initiative to quality assure higher education was first proposed by the report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) in 1996, and later taken up in the Education White Paper 3 of 1997 and proclaimed as law in the Higher Education Act (No. 102 of 1997). In Uganda, the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) was established under the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001 to, inter alia regulate and guide the establishment and management of institutions of higher learning; and regulate the quality of higher education, equate qualifications and advise government on higher education issues. In Portugal, quality assurance of higher education has been based on the Higher Education Evaluation Act 1994. This act was closely developed in cooperation with the Conference of Rectors of Public Universities (CRUP) and forms the backbone of what is widely termed "the contractual model". Quality assurance in Thailand is carried out under Chapter 6 of the National Education Act B.E.2542 (Act 1999).

Most scholars see quality assurance as a way to rank universities at the national level and can have an impact on the competition between universities. On the other hand, it is a process to gather information about the level of higher education in the countries which will allow governments to design a proper and accurate improvement plan for higher education. With emergence of globalization, cross border education, mobilization of students and labour market cannot be accomplished without a transparent system of quality assurance in higher education in countries. This calls for a need of a quality assurance system in higher education to enhance and improve student learning; and to ensure that the higher education institutions are compatible with the national or regional or international standards. Hence, quality assurance practice plays a pivotal role to upgrade any country.

### Quality Perspectives for ODL

The quest for quality assurance in higher education is inextricably bound up with the processes and impact of globalization. For example, a plethora of literature suggests the rise in initial-

tives aimed at promoting the internationalization and globalization of higher education, in particular the rapid development of cross-border higher education, have underlined an urgent need to establish robust frameworks for quality assurance and the recognition of qualifications. Quality assurance issues have become more important with the increased mobility of students, academic staff, as well as higher education providers resulting from the globalization of higher education. Flowing from this, in recent years, a considerable number of higher education institutions have also shown interest in establishing monitoring mechanisms as part of an overall strategy for making informed decisions about planning the quality of education.

Quality issues and quality assurance are matters of growing interest in higher education – the crisis in higher education is first and foremost a crisis of quality. For example, the University of South Africa (Unisa) hosted a Stakeholders Forum under the auspices of the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) in Pretoria in February 2008. Pityana (2009: 11) contends that the Forum saw participants reach consensus on the need to address and to shape meaningful collaboration among African distance education institutions, and to establish a quality assurance and accreditation agency for Africa.

The question of *quality* is one of the most significant research areas in ODL. The educationists, policy makers and practitioners have always emphasized the “quality factor”; worldwide too, the stakeholders have placed high expectations on the educational systems and compelled institutions to produce higher quality products, services, processes and students. The governments also want high levels of accountability from their publicly funded educational institutions (Tripathi and Jeevan 2009: 46). In the context of education, “quality” has been placed high on the agenda of educational leaders, policy makers, and practitioners, and is in line with consumers’ ever increasing demand for quality education (Belawati and Zuhairi 2007: 2). In many countries, stakeholders have been placing high expectations on their educational systems, compelling institutions to produce higher quality products, services, processes, and by extension, students and graduates.

On one hand, governments have also been seeking increased levels of accountability from their publicly funded educational institutions. Faced with the globalization of the world economy, coupled with associated challenges of pro-

ducing high-caliber human resources needed to effectively participate in the global economy, national stakeholders have voiced serious concerns about the ‘quality’ of their educational provisions to ensure their competitiveness (Belawati and Zuhairi 2007: 2). On the other hand, literature suggests that the quality assurance has become a challenge for regulatory agencies especially in those higher education institutions, which operate their programmes in dual mode i.e. formal and distance learning. Thus, it is clearly imperative that educational institutions continuously improve the quality of their educational provision within frameworks that are consistent with the emergent paradigm, for example, reflective and reflexive practice.

From a sociological point of view, ODL is an instrument of social transformation. As observed by Gandhe (2009), this transformation cannot come about without high quality of the system and what the system offers. Given that it is difficult to define quality, in ODL system, quality is best defined as fitness for purpose in combination with exceptional high standards, perfection and consistency, value for money, and transformation capabilities. Quality assurance must cover areas such as curriculum design, content and delivery organization; teaching, learning and assessment; etc.

In the light of these, successful ODL requires a proper quality assurance system, which must match with its nature. The quality assurance system of ODL must have a systematic review of established standards to manage operational and academic tasks (Rashid 2010: 341). In addition, the quality assurance system has a very critical role to drive out the programmes’ efficiency regarding the learning outcomes and objectives that are accomplished or not. The quality assurance framework for ODL has a wide range of processes, which include faculty capability, their professional development and student support services with their outcomes. Quality assurance as “practice” is intended to improve or maintain service delivery in the public sector. Thus, it calls for a significant reorganisation of the staff’s roles and responsibilities in order to incorporate monitoring tasks.

### Quality Assurance as an Ideology

An ideology is a set of ideas that constitutes one’s goals, expectations, and actions; and can be thought of as a comprehensive vision, as a way of looking at things (compare worldview),

as in common sense and several philosophical tendencies, or a set of ideas proposed by the dominant class of a society to all members of this society (a “received consciousness” or product of socialization (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology>)). It is a theory, or set of beliefs or principles, especially one on which a political system, party or organization is based. The concept “ideology” was first coined by the philosopher Destutt de Tracy to refer to a “science of ideas” which he hoped would reveal people’s unconscious habits of mind. Recently, it now tends to refer to those very habits of mind - beliefs, assumptions, expectations, etc. - which are superimposed on the world in order to give it structure and meaning and which then serve to direct our political or social activities.

A plethora of literature suggests that an ideology is the creation of some identifiable group (political, cultural, and economic) for the purpose of spreading or maintaining its perspective on reality among themselves and others. In effect, an ideology creates the assumption that this dominance is natural and desirable. The main purpose behind an ideology is to offer either change in society, or adherence to a set of ideals where conformity already exists, through a normative thought process. Ideologies are systems of abstract thought applied to public matters and thus make this concept central to politics. Implicitly every political or economic tendency entails an ideology whether or not it is propounded as an explicit system of thought. It is how society sees things.

As an instrument of social reproduction, ideology manipulates language by starting with accepted cores of meaning, which are the progressively elided or otherwise changed. In line with this, Barnett (2003: 95) sees quality as an ideology focusing its attention on dimensions of academic life that are expressions of the ideology. The filling out of the ideology, its realization in practice, not surprisingly, takes the contours of its driving interests. Quality is not neutral. It is not independent of wider socio-economic interests. It stands as a proxy for these interests, which in turn, it masks (Barnett 2003: 95). Accordingly, ideologies organize social group attitudes consisting of schematically organized general opinions about relevant social issues. Depending on its position, each group will select from the general cultural repertoire of social norms and values those that optimally realize its

goals and interests and will use these values as building blocks for its group ideologies (Van Dijk 1985).

The very notions of “quality” and “quality assurance” have an important dimension of social representation. Social Representations theory, originally developed by Serge Moscovici, is certainly one of the more controversial concepts in contemporary social psychology (Voelklein and Howarth 2005). Social Representation theory attempts to understand the manner in which scientific thought becomes “common sense” within the mass, through its diffusion and representation to and through a public. Social representations are defined for groups, viz., as being shared by (the minds of) social group members. A social representation is understood as the collective elaboration “of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating” (Moscovici 1963: 251). Moscovici (1973) described social representation as:

*“systems of values, ideas and practices with a two-fold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; secondly, to enable communication to take place amongst members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history”.*

Quality assurance is a social construction. In Social Representations theory, representations are primarily cognitive phenomena (although they are sometimes considered as cultural objects) which enable people to make sense of the world. The collective nature of this sense-making is taken to enable intra-group communication and to provide a technical definition of the boundaries of social groups (Potter and Edwards 1999). Through other social representations, such as attitudes and socio-cultural knowledge, ideologies also influence this specific knowledge and beliefs of individual language users. These personal cognitions, represented in mental models of concrete events and situations (including communicative situations), in turn control discourse of quality assurance theory and practice.

Against this backdrop, quality assurance is a social construction, social reproduction and a social representation. It is compatible with the emergent paradigm and fits through the lens of

Social Representations framework. Among others, it builds a collection of the main ideas and debates on social representations; advances the discourses within Social Representations framework; fosters a community of scholars, researchers and higher education institutions working in social representations.

### Quality Assurance as Reflective Practice

ODL is a complex and evolving business which has significant operational as well as academic challenges. For this reason, assuring and enhancing quality of teaching and learning in ODL institutions is currently a major concern. The belief in quality assurance is fundamental, and is currently a high agenda item for the government, industry and commerce alike. It is in this ever changing environment that academics find themselves and it is this increased accountability which makes reflective practice something beyond (Davis 2003: 244). Central to this article is the assumption that a reflective practice is an integral part of quality assurance. Reflection is a key factor in improving the quality teaching and learning. In its various forms, reflection, encompasses multiplicity and its aim should always be learning transformations.

Reflective practice is very a very old concept – it has an extensive history as far back as the Greek philosophers. It is about: the awareness of the knowledge we use, and how we can improve our action in real time; how our minds work and how we use and create theories in practical situations; invisible and visible, tacit and explicit, blindness and sight; and flexibility, adaptation and effectiveness. Also, reflective practice is about the relation between action and thinking; the kind of thinking that shapes our actions – before, during and after the action; and deals with the interaction between practice, reflection, thinking, learning and performance.

Central to reflective practice is the assumption that the quality of our actions is not independent of the thinking we are able to do before and in the process of the action. Reid (1993: 305) sees reflection as a process of reviewing an experience of practice in order to describe, analyse, evaluate and so inform learning about practice. Reflective practice is something more than thoughtful practice. It is that form of practice that seeks to problematise many situations of professional performance so that they can become potential learning situations and so the practitioners can continue to learn, grow and develop in and through practice (Jarvis 1992: 180).

Reflective practice is a mode that integrates or links thought and action with reflection. It involves thinking about and critically analyzing one's actions with the goal of improving one's professional practice (Imel 1992:8). David Kolb created the most famous learning cycle to incorporate reflection as a key process. According to Kolb (1984) reflecting is an essential element of learning. The major concordance between Kolb's learning cycle and the reflective practice is that learning and experience is intended to be transformative. Learning is seen as the creation of knowledge through the 'transformation of experience' (Kolb 1984: 41). The Kolb's theory maintains that learning is a dialectic and cyclical process consisting of four stages: experience, observation and reflection, abstract reconceptualisation, and experimentation. Concrete Experience provides a basis for Reflective Observation. These observations can be distilled in to Abstract Concepts, which are then Actively tested with Experimentation. Concrete Experience of the experiments start over the Learning Cycle (see Kolb 1984: 21).

Flowing from this, experiential learning theorists, among others, including Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget, maintain that learning begins with experience, and specifically problematic experience. Reflective practice, then, integrating theory and practice, thought and action, is, as Schon (1987: 31) described, a "dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skillful". Schon's work has an historical foundation in a tradition of learning supported by Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget, each of whom advocated that learning is dependent upon the integration of experience with reflection and of theory with practice (Imel 1992: 2). Schon maintained that the stage is set for reflection when "knowing-in-action"—the sort of knowledge that professionals come to depend on to perform their work spontaneously—produces an unexpected outcome or surprise. This surprise can lead to one of two kinds of reflection: reflection on action, which occurs either following or by interrupting the activity, or reflection in action, which occurs during (without interrupting) the activity by thinking about how to reshape the activity while it is underway (Imel 1992: 2).

Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck (1994: 3) note that the critical part of reflective practice is that it requires a commitment to learning from experience and from evidence, rather than to learning certain 'recipes' for action. Even if you start with recipes, they need to be explored and analysed

for their underlying assumptions and effects as you gain in confidence. This process of critical enquiry should be reflexive, that is responsive to your own needs and the context in which you work, but also critical of the existing educational provision and ideology (including your own). The analysis involves not just your own practice, but also the social, moral and political context for that practice (Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck 1994: 3).

In the light of the above quality assurance does not imply an expectation of perfection but rather an expectation of a commitment to improve. Quality assurance is an incremental process involving continuous development along with the development of ODL institutions. Kolb's Learning Cycle and reflective practice framework could be considered pivotal in adult learning and development. The model of reflective practice could be to student learning as well as to teaching arguing that the teacher's role is to facilitate the development of students as reflective practitioners of their subject. Reflective framework of teaching and learning is not only the most valid distinguishing feature but also the key to an understanding of how the two can be usefully related in practice. Reflective practice can be used to identify problems, action research can seek to provide solutions.

### CONCLUSION

Quality has become a matter of major importance for higher education institutions generally, but particularly so for institutions involved in open and distance learning (ODL). The growing concern with quality in higher education has led institutions to look for ways of managing quality processes. Hence, the growing concern with quality in higher education has led institutions to look for ways of managing quality processes quality assurance makes it possible, albeit imperfectly, to measure progress, improve programs and practice, and focus efforts and resources.

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