



## QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: AN EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH

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### Summary

*Increasing access to education and consequent rapid expansion of open and distance learning as a viable alternative pose a challenge to ensuring quality to develop stakeholders' confidence. Prescriptive off-the-self quality assurance policy is not an ideal option for the distance education institutions that are at embryonic stage of development. Given the challenges for capacity building including low level of quality culture, institutions at their early stage of development should adopt an evolutionary approach to integrate elements of quality assurance along with the development of system, process and procedures.*

*During its establishment, the University of Papua New Guinea Open College did not introduce a prescriptive quality assurance policy as the main focus was on capacity building in respect of organization and development, administration, staff development, course design and materials development, support services along with the establishment of study centres, assessment and feedback etc. However, the leadership of the College ensures the integration of the elements of quality criteria and indicators with the introduction of system, process, and procedures. Subsequent development and implementation of a quality assurance policy was successful because the staff were familiar with the elements of quality assurance, and they owned it through active participation in its development.*

### Introduction

Distance education have seen extraordinary growth in the last decade owing to the increasing demand for education and training and rapid development of information super highway. While well-established single mode ODL institutions are expanding beyond their national boundaries and becoming global resource centres, newer players are emerging at both national and global level. Many single mode institutions have embraced dual mode delivery of programs in order to harness the opportunities for increasing demand for places and to augment their income in the wake of shrinking public funds. Each of these ODL institutions passionately trying to convince the academics, stakeholders, and public in general about their supremacy over the others. The wave of growth of the ODL although washed away the skepticism about its quality, professionals still believe that same-time, same place interaction is central to the

success of learning experience (Twigg, 2001; Muirhead, 2000). While academic debate will continue on the learning experience in both modes, the ODL providers have promoted quality assurance as an important tool for building public confidence. There are quality assurance frameworks and transnational qualification frameworks developed nationally and internationally to guide and regulate ODL programs and institutions. Emerging trend has been to develop quality assurance toolkits (Mishra, 2006) to guide institutions to develop their quality assurance policies. National regulating authorities, professional bodies and ODL providers developed these policies and frameworks based on the inference drawn by them with respect to potential learners (Deshmuk, 2005). As a result, quality assurance policies and frameworks are more prescriptive based on perceptions rather than evolutionary based on learner experience.

A specific quality assurance strategy is not universally adoptable (Olojede, 2008) because distance education 'outfit' varies widely from institution to institution and one country to another. As a result, the pace of development and process of maintenance of quality assurance on open and distance learning must be flexible (Granger and Gulliver, 1995) to the extent of practices without prescriptions.

Quality is an incremental process (Daniel, 2005) involving continuous development along with the development of ODL institutions. Hopkin (2003) suggests the evolution of quality assurance at three different stages of ODL institutional development: embryonic, evolving, and matured stages. He further argues for development and implementation of quality assurance policies in accordance of the stages of institutional development.

Prescriptive quality assurance policy is more or less influence by the quality assurance and/or accreditation frameworks to meet the requirement of the accreditation body. Similarly, use of quality assurance toolkits and/or well-developed policies is susceptible to an ambitious quality assurance policy covering all stages of development while the institution may be at early stage of development. Therefore, a suitable and practicable quality assurance policy would evolve with the stages of institutional development in order to ensure the consideration of the learner and practitioners' experience. 'There is no single definitive or foolproof method of ensuring quality, especially in the context of distance education' (Upot, 2005). It is necessary to consider different forms and criteria for quality assurance to suit different educational function (Middlehurst, 2001). Thus, it is imperative to formulate quality assurance policy along with the implementation of various functions of the ODL institution rather than developing a quality assurance policy before hand.

An ODL institution and more profoundly a new institution thus may not have a well-documented quality assurance policy, as the institutions may have concentrated on its establishment, capacity building, designing, and implementing systems process and procedures. What is required essentially is to keep the quality concept in mind while developing and implementing systems, process, and procedures. The University of Papua New Guinea Open College did not formulate a quality assurance policy during its establishment period but the quality assurance evolved along with its development. The formulation of quality assurance policy takes place at later stage of its establishment based on the learners and institutional experience.

## **Context**

Papua New Guinea is the largest island country in Oceania, occupying the eastern half of the island of New Guinea and numerous offshore islands. It is one of the most diverse countries on Earth, with over 850 indigenous languages and at least as many traditional societies, out

of a population of just under 6 million. It is also one of the most rural, with only about 18 per cent of its people living in urban centres. The country is also one of the worlds least explored, culturally and geographically, and many undiscovered species of plants and animals are thought to exist in the interior of PNG.

In Papua New Guinea the colonial administration education system and church run education system that started in 1940s continued until the national education system was established in 1970s with approximately 1050 institutions, 9060 teachers, and 254,000 students. By 2003, the system had grown to 4000 elementary schools, 3300 primary schools, 170 secondary schools, and 140 vocational schools that employing 33,000 teachers (NDOE, 2004). The current education reforms began in 1994, which focused on the structure first followed by the outcome based curriculum. The education reform aims to expand access to school at all levels, reduce dropout, upgrade quality and relevance of the curriculum; and improve the cost efficiency of the system.

During the last decade, higher education in Papua New Guinea has been left in perilous state. The participation rate of tertiary age population has been less than 2 percent. On demand, about 10,000 Grade 12 school leavers and equivalent seek admission in higher education institutions. On the supply side, face-to-face higher education institutions including five universities have a capacity of 4,000-5,000 annual in-takes. The increasing demand for higher education and national needs for the development of human capital led the development of ODL programs.

The University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) became a dual mode institution along with the establishment of UPNG Open College in 2001. It offers undergraduate, and post graduate programs through face-to face and distance mode through a network of study centres. The schools are responsible for the development of tertiary level courses and providing academic support while the Open College (OC) provides technical, administrative, and logistic and support services for development and delivery of programs through its network of study centres. OC mandate also includes the development and delivery of pre-tertiary courses, professional education and provision of community based education and information. Course enrolment increased from 3400 in 2002 to 21,000 in 2008.

## **Evolving Quality Assurance**

The absence of a comprehensive quality assurance policy and culture within the UPNG has connotation with the OC not having a quality assurance policy along with its establishment. A quality assurance policy at the beginning of the establishment of the OC could be a futile exercise due to lack of quality culture within the parent organization and lack of quality commitment across the organization. In absence of a prescribed quality assurance policy, the management of the OC ensured that policies, process, and procedures of developing and delivering programs apply best practices with full commitment of staff to their best ability. Qualitative aspects were embodied at all level of operations in the form of system development and implementation, instruction and documentation.

Evolution of quality assurance (Hopkin's, 2003) during embryonic stage of development require political commitment and planning, setting of organizational structure, awareness and advocacy, capacity building in staff development and training, infrastructure development, development of process and procedures, design and development of materials, assessment system, establishment of study centre, student support system and feedback and internal and external review. A close examination of the development of OC reveals the presence of quality assurance including criteria and indicators, which was integrated with the system, process, and procedures.

The establishment of the OC and development of the ODL program form the part of explicit strategy of the University Strategic Plan (2000-2004) and commitment of the higher authority of the University. The open and distance learning model was developed and articulated by the internal stakeholders and specialists and approved by the University Council demonstrating political commitment. The model was developed by a team of professionals headed by a specialist based on international best practices (Lockwood, 1998). The main features of the Model are:

- Schools retain academic responsibility for developing and delivering courses;
- Open College facilitates and provides technical and logistical support for distance teaching and learning;
- Open Campuses at five regional strategic locations including their cluster of study centres provide various support services to students;
- Open College provides instructional support services for developing course materials;
- Delivery of learning materials in print, on-line, and electronic form.
- Traditional face-to-face tutorials replaced by online and web based learning;
- and
- Development of high quality course materials which are user friendly, culturally sensitive and facilitate deep learning.

The Open College Management formulated a Strategic Business Plan (2001-2005) which charted the direction of the OC for five years and guided leaders, managers and staff at large towards common goals.

An organizational structure was developed and implemented with three functional divisions absorbing several key sub-systems such as, planning policy and administration, program development, course design and materials development, student support services including infrastructure and the management of study centres, assessment and evaluation. The Open College Operational Manual recorded system, process, and procedures of the operation and management of the College including study centres. Among others, the Manual includes clearly defined process, tasks and roles of administrative units, groups and individuals and their connectivity.

The initial emphasis was the capacity building in developing course materials and providing support services through recruiting potential and committed staff, training of instructional designers, course writers, desktop publishers, managers and support services staff. A major challenge was to motivate the academic staff to change their mindset from traditional to open and distance learning. The OC initially concentrated on motivational aspects by conducting workshops and holding consultative meetings with academics involving the Vice Chancellor and senior management staff and specialists. Academic staff attended series of training and workshops and acquired skills and knowledge to develop course writing and providing student support services. Similar training was conducted for managers and support staff to ensure provision of student administration and support services.

For benchmarking, the OC forged a partnership with Charles Stuart University (CSU) to provide support for course materials development. Headed by a distance education specialist, the course writers from CSU and UPNG, instructional designers and other technical staff developed about forty-five units of course materials. An instructional design manual known as style manual and a course writer's manual were produced to guide the course materials development.

Study centres were established with infrastructure facilities such as computer laboratories with wide area network, study corals, and tutorial rooms, manned by a director and support staff to make support services available to students' at their door steps.

Involvement of a panel of experts, subject specialists, and stakeholders assure the quality of program to fit in its purpose. The system involves reference groups both internal and external to ensure the program serves the interests of the target groups and appropriate for learning process. The system requires approval of the School Academic Board as well as the University Academic Senate, which ensure quality of programs and courses. The system requires periodical review of the program to assure its relevance and standard.

Course development involves subject specialists, instructional designers, media experts. Each members of the group is responsible for respective areas such as contents, presentation style, use of languages, social and cultural contexts, appropriate media for facilitating learning etc. The process requires attendance of intensive training by the course writers to ensure that they understand the needs of distance learner. The course development manual including style manual sets the techniques, procedure, and process for developing and reviewing materials. Materials developed are subject to third party review before finalizing. The course materials production and distribution are closely monitored for ensuring flawless timely delivery of materials to students.

The system ensures programs of study, component modules, and course materials are monitored, reviewed and subject to re-approval periodically. The review system also ensures that the content of learning materials remains current, relevant, user friendly and enhances forms of assessment in the light of findings from students' feedback.

The program delivery management ensures dissemination of adequate information on admission, administration, courses, support services examination, assessment etc. to ensure that potential students make well informed decision. Study Centre Directors and their staff are trained to conduct orientation program and to provide appropriate information for course selection. Although OC emphasizes the appointment of quality tutors, and monitors their performance, the system is yet to ensure the provision of learning opportunities, which gives the students a fair and reasonable chance of achieving academic standards. As the first point of contact, Study Centre Directors are explicitly responsible for ensuring student support services and promoting autonomous learning so that students take responsibility of their own development.

The OC adapted a stringent assessment system and procedures to demonstrate credibility of the program publicly. The system requires change of assignment in each semester. The on-campus lecturers mark assignments although turn around time needs substantial improvement. Final examination are conducted along with the on-campus students using common exam papers and same lecturer marks the exam papers for both on and off campus students.

## **Conclusion**

The OC quality assurance policy was not designed and then implemented, but rather evolved along with the development of the institution. OC quality assurance refers to the standard and quality initiatives that were taken and introduced along with the development of systems, processes, and procedures, as well as resulting from emerging needs. The OC leadership was one of the important contributing factors in ensuring quality at all levels of OC operations without documenting a comprehensive quality assurance policy. However, it would remain a risk for ODL institution not having a quality assurance policy if leadership is not committed to guide and ensure the same and more profoundly when parent institution does not pursue quality assurance with vigor.

The newly recruited staff who had little knowledge and skills about the ODL were heavily involved in acquiring such knowledge and skills and implementing the system, process, and procedures. It would be counterproductive to further overload them to implement a comprehensive quality assurance policy. Development of the quality assurance policy at a later stage of ODL institutional development ensures active participation of the managers, staff at all levels, and integration of their experience with best practices elsewhere. The homegrown quality assurance policy thus ensures the ownership of the policy and commitment of the staff for its implementation, as they are familiar with the quality assurance criteria and indicators.

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