Chapter 7
A Critical Investigation of Quality Assurance in Open Distance E-Learning

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ABSTRACT

Quality assurance has become critical to Open Distance Learning (ODL) worldwide. Yet the ODL environment is marked by cultural hegemony. An elite group of individuals strategically dominate the educational arena in order to advance the supremacy of gender, race and socioeconomic status. This chapter highlights a divide between theory and practice. The e-learning paradigm, known as Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) creates opportunities for practitioners and students with respect to accessibility, flexibility, and cost. But it also creates challenges for quality assurance. Most ODeL texts do not treat quality assurance as discourse, power and cultural hegemony. Policymakers tend to assume that students have similar learning needs. This chapter (1) explores quality assurance; (2) it sketches Unisa's shift to ODeL; (3) argues a case for quality assurance as a practice of hegemony; (4) critiques quality assurance as an Ideological State Apparatus; and (5) proposes a reengineering of quality assurance within alternative frameworks.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The idea of *quality e*ducation is centuries old. Of late, it has become top priority on the agenda of many educational institutions worldwide. As Frazer (2005:9) writes, "the 1990s may become known as 'the decade of quality', in the same way that efficiency was a major theme during the 1980s". In industry, commerce, government and now in higher education the word 'quality' is on everyone's lips: 'quality control', 'quality circles', 'total quality management', 'quality assurance', etc. while much has been written about quality education, it is worthwhile noting that the context for determining quality has historically been limited by the purpose of education and the population for whom formal education was provided. Since the 1990s, quality assurance has become a critical element in the educational discourses globally. It is evident from the literature that quality assurance discourses play an important role in shaping higher educational practices. Particularly, it has become an integral part of the higher educational system and the day-to-day practice of ODeL practitioners in many countries around the world. However, the environment in which ODeL operates is not free from cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony is marked by an *elite* group of individuals who strategically dominate the educational arena with the aim of perpetuating the ideology of the supremacy of gender, race and socioeconomic status.

In the traditional paradigm, quality assurance attributes are linked to contact hours, library holdings, and physical attendance. At a philosophical level, quality assurance in the traditional paradigm is trapped in the "fixed iron triangle". Among others, traditionally, the notion of *quality* in higher education has been associated with meritocracy; with belonging to a small, privileged, and exceptional class. With the increasing acceptance of ODeL for expanded access to higher education, it is critical that quality assurance processes are developed and maintained for ODeL provision to be relevant and more functional that the products recognized the conventional higher education in emerging open learning environment.

Within this context, ODeL in the 21st century presents challenges to quality assurance, as a social construct and a policy imperative, that were unimaginable just a quarter century ago. While the e-learning paradigm creates great opportunities for both practitioners and students in terms of *accessibility*, *flexibility*, and *cost*, it also creates challenges for quality assurance. One of the most noticeable gaps in many texts on ODeL is failure to see quality assurance as discourse, power and cultural hegemony. One possibility is to unpack quality assurance within e-learning context through Gramsci's, Foucault's and Althusser's lenses. Quite often, policymakers and practitioners assume that students have the same learning needs – they use a

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