

Chapter 2

Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

Today, open and distance-learning universities are regarded as a groundbreaking option to expand access to higher education. Economies of scale supported by a large number of enrolments have fueled the growth of open and distance learning institutions (ODLIs) across the globe. At the same time, many have raised serious concerns about the quality of education provided by ODLIs. This chapter presents a comparative case analysis of quality assurance (QA) programs in distance education at two large open and distance learning universities in Pakistan. The study explored QA policies and their implementation in the context of management practices and structures and internal and external environmental factors.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, many countries consider open universities an important component of their strategy to increase opportunities of higher education for students. The ODLIs have flourished due to their large and diverse student body, programs, and sources of funding (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005). Tait (2008) argues that ODLIs are instruments of development and their role as a provider of academic qualifications is essential to their purpose and value.

Coombs and Ahmad (1974) define distance education as an organized systematic educational activity to provide selected types of learning. This activity is carried on outside the framework of formal system. According to (Keegan, 1996), distance education has some fundamentals elements. The teachers are separated from the students and teaching practices are influenced by the central integrated organization. Distance education heavily dependent on the use of media and two-way communication. There could be occasional meetings between teachers and students. Nekongo-Nielsen (2006) claims that education remains critical socio-economic development. Open and distance education is a powerful tool to pro-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3438-0.ch002

vide educated and trained workforce and help create a knowledge-based economy (Darojat, Nilson, & Kaufman, 2015; Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

Socio-economic development is a significant pillar of human capital development in any society. Development of higher education and its perceived role in the overall development of a nation is closely related to this human capital development. Higher education can play a critical role in transforming a nation into a knowledge-based and innovation-led society. The higher education systems in South Asia are very diverse but face similar constraints and challenges. These systems are facing increased demand for access due to the expanded youth population and rising expectations. However, these systems are unable to meet this demand due to underfunding which is generally a continued problem. Many South Asian countries are facing problems of quality of university education and graduate unemployment. Many South Asian countries have adopted an ambitious higher education reform agenda incorporating areas such as state funding, private sector involvement, academic leadership, governance and curriculum development. It is expected that completion of this agenda will result in higher level of human capital development harnessed within a sustainable and equitable framework. Although highly diverse in history, politics, culture and socio-economic development, South Asian countries nevertheless share a common aspiration insofar as education and human capital development are concerned. Recently, South Asian countries have witnessed a rapid expansion of higher education and actively reforming their higher education system to expedite their own respective economic development. Many South Asian countries have targeted ODL as an important instrument to achieve this goal (Anuwar, 2008).

Despite their strategic importance for expanding access to higher education, ODLIs share many challenges with conventional institutions. There is scarcity of human resources and providing services to the students is challenging (Rena, 2007). It is difficult to continue support the learning infrastructures and provide technical and logistics support to tutors and students (Rashid & Rashid, 2012; Hoosen & Butcher, 2012; Inglis, 2003; Arinto, 2016). Some studies claim that due to these challenges the quality and standards of education of ODLIs have significantly suffered (Hughes, 2012; Davies, Howell, & Petrie, 2010; Savenye & Robinson, 2001; Stella & Gnanam, 2004; Arinto, 2016). Some studies (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Arinto, 2016) argue that striking a balance between access and quality of education is very challenging for ODLIs.

QA for open and distance higher education is one of the main concerns among institutions and stakeholders today. While societies are evolving from post-industrial age to information age, distance and open education is evolving as well. This evolution has brought serious challenges of providing various provisions to maintain quality standards in open and distance education. For instance, interactive communication among students and teachers is now a significant theme in today's ODLIs. It is within this 'access to education' paradigm that QA has become one of the fundamental aspects in planning and managing ODLIs. QA initiatives in ODLIs can help to address these challenges. These initiatives can help establish best practices and develop standards of quality to assess open and distance education (Davies et al., 2010). Over the past few years, there has been significant growth of QA activities aimed towards improving higher education on institutional, national, regional, and global levels. Still, limited research is available that educational administrator and practitioners can use while applying QA in education (Hughes, 2012). As a result, quality of distance education remains an area where academic QA agencies lack knowledge (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). This situation and the possible vital role ODLIs can play in national development and innovation warrants a study that research QA at university-level ODLIs (Darojat, Nilson, & Kaufman, 2015).

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