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**QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: THE CASE
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI**

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The introduction of structural adjustment programmes in Kenya in 1986 and the liberalization policies of the 1990's led to unprecedented change in the business environment. Organizations were forced to adopt a strategic approach to managing their affairs in order to survive in an increasingly competitive environment. The triggers of change included globalization; demand for value by customers and market competition. While the effects of change were more obvious in the private sector, public sector organizations like the University of Nairobi, which for a long time relied on government grants, had to be either self-sustaining or perish.

To generate additional income, one strategy was to enhance the existing Open and Distance Learning programmes by admitting self-sponsored students who attend evening and weekend classes – referred to as module II students and those who learn through distance learning methods – refereed to as module III students. The University of Nairobi has about 25,000 students its ODL programmes. This new type of customer made new demands related to quality of the programmes, learning and physical environment and general services. In 2003 the new NARC government elected on the platform of economic performance adopted a business approach to management in the public sector. As a result, the Vice Chancellors of public universities were selected competitively and signed performance contracts with the government. These developments necessitated a culture change with a quality assurance orientation.

To meet this expectations from its customers and the government, the University of Nairobi developed a five year strategic plan from 2005-2010 and a new vision and mission which is to become a world class African University. Staff training and development was seen as an appropriate start to sensitize all employees and this is being cascaded down to the lowest level employees. The introduction and implementation of performance appraisals and the launch of the ISO 9001:2001 standard are some of the strategies that have been put in motion to realize the University's vision.

With this background in mind, the School of Continuing and Distance Education which offers programmes through distance learning is faced with the challenge of

providing quality service to its customers, firstly to meet the high standards set by the University and secondly, to satisfy the unique needs of its traditional clientele – the distance learning students. While quality assurance has always been factored into ODL programmes, it has gained a more prominent position due to the changing organizational environment. Recent concepts like Total Quality Management (TQM) and ISO 9000 standards have elevated it to a general philosophy that pervades the whole organization.

Quality assurance is a product of planning, monitoring, control and coordination, hence it needs to be built into a project or programme at the time of design and not at the end. In ODL, quality assurance covers various aspects such as the quality of the product which includes courses, study materials, number of graduates, examination pass rates or achievement of intended skills, equivalent results in public examinations or conventional system. Secondly, it also covers the quality of the process involved, for example, learning and teaching processes such as tutoring, assessing written work and providing feedback, monitoring the work of tutors, record keeping and general coordination. Thirdly, is the quality of the production or delivery systems such as course and print production, warehousing and stock control and material distribution. Lastly, are the administration and management processes such as policy statements, attitudes of staff, management and training of staff, images and messages presented to the public, for example, leaflets, brochures and posters.

These sets of activities in ODL do not function in isolation but are essential parts of one operation and are dependent on one another. They all affect the quality of the learning experience for the learner – the customer. The interdependence of the activities in practice is evident, for example, if materials are of excellent quality but do not reach the learner when needed then the whole programme fails to be effective. Secondly, if the e-learning material is of high quality and imaginatively produced, they would still be irrelevant to the learner if they were inaccessible due to lack of internet connectivity as is often the case in developing countries.

It is obvious, therefore, that quality assurance is located in different aspects of an organization's activities. Achieving quality in distance learning means achieving agreed or identified standards in each of the aspects stated above. Ways of judging quality will differ according to the aspect being examined. It is easy to find indicators for some than for others. For example, it is easier to measure survival rates than quality of face to face teaching.

Policy and practical issues in quality assurance in open and distance learning at UON

The University of Nairobi has been conducting open and distance learning programmes since 1967 with the inception of the teachers correspondence course. These has evolved over time and the School of Continuing and Distance Education in collaboration with the

newly launched Center for Open and Distance Learning (CODL) is spearheading the conversion of University programmes into open and distance learning modes. The objective is to widen access by offering programmes through module I (regular face to face mainly for high school leavers on government scholarship), Module II (evening and weekend self-sponsored students who are mainly employed or those who could not make the cut off for government scholarship) and Module III (distance learners who use study materials and only come to the university for limited face to face contact).

Regarding the Module II and Module III learners, the policy and practical issues of concern in quality assurance revolve around the following activities:

i)   Student output/graduates – this is measured in terms of completion rate or drop out rate. The B.Ed (Arts and Science) programme, has had a rising completion rate which is now about 80%. This is attributed to image of the distance learning programme at the University which is perceived by the public to be of a higher quality especially because of the study materials which other institutions have not been able to develop.

ii)   Student recruitment – minimum entry requirements are set by senate and conform to those of other programmes within the University. As such ODL students are not perceived as under qualified.

iii)   Student evaluation/assessment – The process of student evaluation is follows the laid out University procedure. However, for the distance learning programmes, additional quality assurance measures have been added because of the large number of students and the general nature of the delivery method. For example, tutors are required to set examinations in pairs at the beginning of the semester so the content examined in the regular exam and the special exam do not deviate markedly. Secondly setting two sets of exams saves time because the tutors are part time and are not easy to get them to set an exam on short notice. Thus each programme has an examination bank. On invigilation, while the University recommends a ration of 1:50, the DE programmes use 1:30 to avoid problems like impersonation and sometimes the examination rooms are congested. Examinations are subjected to internal and external moderation and marking schemes are a must because as in all DE programmes the team approach to marking is used. In the SCDE, a central marking system was introduced three years as a quality assurance measure. The tutors mark from a central venue within a specified time and subject coordinators supervise the marking and moderate the work of the various markers.

iv)   Teaching/tutoring – qualifications of the part time tutors conform to University standards and majority are drawn from similar internal programmes or other universities.

v)   Study materials – The development of study materials is subjected to a quality control process which begins with the selection of writers based on their areas of specialization. Those teaching similar subjects are recruited and trained in the skills of distance education writing. The materials are subjected to editing, reviewing, and proofreading before mass production.

vi)   Leaner support services – The University of Nairobi has 10 regional campuses within the country to provide support services to the distance learners. Each

campus has a fulltime resident lecturer, an administrative assistant, a clerk and a typist. The centers provide library services and internet; they receive, dispatch and return student assignments, they receive student fees, coordinate field work e.g. teaching practice and act as examination centers.

vii) Administrative subsystem – This conforms to the University academic structures with the College principal, Dean and Heads of Departments. All academic issues pass through the Faculty Board and College Academic which act as quality assurance bodies before they are passed on to Deans Committee and Senate. The administrative activities include management of student records using the student management information system (SMIS), financing, staffing, organizing, direction, planning, coordination.

viii) Strategic plans – The SCDE strategic plan is organizational driven and is monitored through quarterly reports. The vision, mission, core values and objectives are set out as performance guidelines. Performance targets are set per quarter and reviewed. The indicators are student enrollments, income generated, number of researches and publications.

ix) Staff training and development – This involves cascading of University wide performance management and culture change. Main themes have been teamwork and performance management. Indicators are number of trainings, for whom and actual behaviour change at work e.g. number of complaints by customers (students)

x) Performance appraisal and evaluation – This is an annual event designed to evaluate individual performance by the University and by customers. Effective in improving teaching and staff performance

xi) Research and dissemination – Seven Faculty staff are undertaking research in ODL at PhD and Masters levels. A Masters in Distance Education was launched in October 2006 and the first group of 20 students admitted. The objective is to develop a critical mass of people with professional qualifications in ODL. UON supports the studies through research grants. A journal is to be launched soon to disseminate the research in ODL.

xii) Linkages – The SCDE has established linkages with AVU to offer teacher education in science and ICT. The TE center has been established at the College of Eduaction and External Studies. Other linkages are with Commonwealth Youth Progarmme (CYP) and Department of Adult Education. These affiliates have helped to promote quality assurance.

xiii) Financial management – University of Nairobi Enterprises Services Ltd. (UNES) a subsidiary company of the University supports the ODL programmes by managing its finances and providing capital development funds. They pay direct service providers and purchase equipment. This reduces bureaucracy and increases staff motivation through the 35% : 65% ratio adopted by UON to compensate DSP in module II programmes.

Challenges facing implementation of quality assurance in ODL at UON

i) Resistance to change – attitude, work ethics, competence and training in ODL. University policy of rotating administrative staff wastes experience gained in ODL as it cannot be applied elsewhere

ii) Competition for resources – income generated goes to a common pool hence not easy to get equipment or money for capital development eg review of units, printing machines etc

iii) Space – residential sessions are not factored in the university wide time table, hence the school has to hire space from other institutions such as TTC and high schools. These do not have suitable facilities for university students. Compromises quality as students have no access to libraries, computer etc.

iv) Students – most are working adults who have little time to produce high quality work. Failure rate is high and resits and retakes are higher than in the regular programmes. Customers are not serious about quality expectations.

v) Dual mode system – some policies and practices are designed for the conventional programmes, hence unsuitable for ODL

vi) ICT infrastructure and conversion of materials into e-learning format as part of learner support is hampered by narrow bandwidth, low readiness in the adoption of ICT by both lecturers and students.