QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES AND e-ODL

Petros Kefalas[1]
(kefalas@city.academic.gr)

Symeon Retalis[2]
(retal@cs.ucy.ac.cy)

Demosthenes Stamatis[1]
(demos@it.teithe.gr)

Kargidis Theodoros[1]
(kargidis@mkt.teithe.gr)

[1] Technological Educational Institute of Thessaloniki, Greece
[2] University of Cyprus

Abstract

This paper aims to initiate preliminary discussion among researchers and practitioners on the Quality Assurance (QA) systems that are appropriate to be applied in network based Open and Distance Learning (e-ODL). We discuss the barriers, towards applying such a system and we list a number of resources for acquiring useful information on the current state of QA in e-ODL. Finally, we include a number of questions, which we believe that an institution should answer prior to apply a QA system.

1. What is a Quality Assurance system?

All educational provision should be of good quality. However, the new pedagogical approach and the supportive networked technology in Distance Learning (DL) raise new quality questions. Without well elaborated quality management of the ODL provision and process– and especially of network based Open and Distance Learning (e-ODL) – it is difficult to get a good reputation for e-ODL. In the lifelong learning sector, like any other educational sector, prospective learners, employees, decision and policy makers, all need clear information about the quality of courses, programmes and the qualifications that will be acquired. E-ODL providers/institutions also need to have a clear quality assurance policy based on well defined frameworks and methods for review. Institutional review addresses the ultimate responsibility for the management of quality and standards that rests with the institution as a whole. Moreover, the missing quality assurance management is certainly one of the reasons for which governments are reluctant to establish appropriate legislative basis for e-ODL. The aim of this paper is to initiate preliminary discussion among researchers and practitioners on the Quality Assurance (QA) systems that are appropriate to be applied in e-ODL in particular.

A Quality assurance system (QAS) consists of the policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced. Quality assurance system is applied to:
- the courses and degrees offered and the learning content,
- the staff
- technology,
- learning methods and
- services
- the organizational and managerial structure

A QAS uses 5 specific quality attributes, as shown in Figure 1, that apply to the aforementioned QAS elements:
- availability (e.g. as the technological platform (or the administrative staff) is there when it is needed and whether it delivers the defined services to the agreed service level)
- usability (e.g. whether staff & customers are able to carry out specific tasks effectively, efficiently and with satisfaction)
- learning effectiveness (e.g. appropriateness of the learning material to learning styles, state-of-the art content, aesthetics, clarity of objectives, etc)

- performance (e.g. institution's ability to perform tasks within certain constraints in time and resources)
- security (e.g ability to respond to a threat, protection of intellectual property right and personal details)
- potential for change (e.g. institution's ability to retain of increase its values to an enterprise)
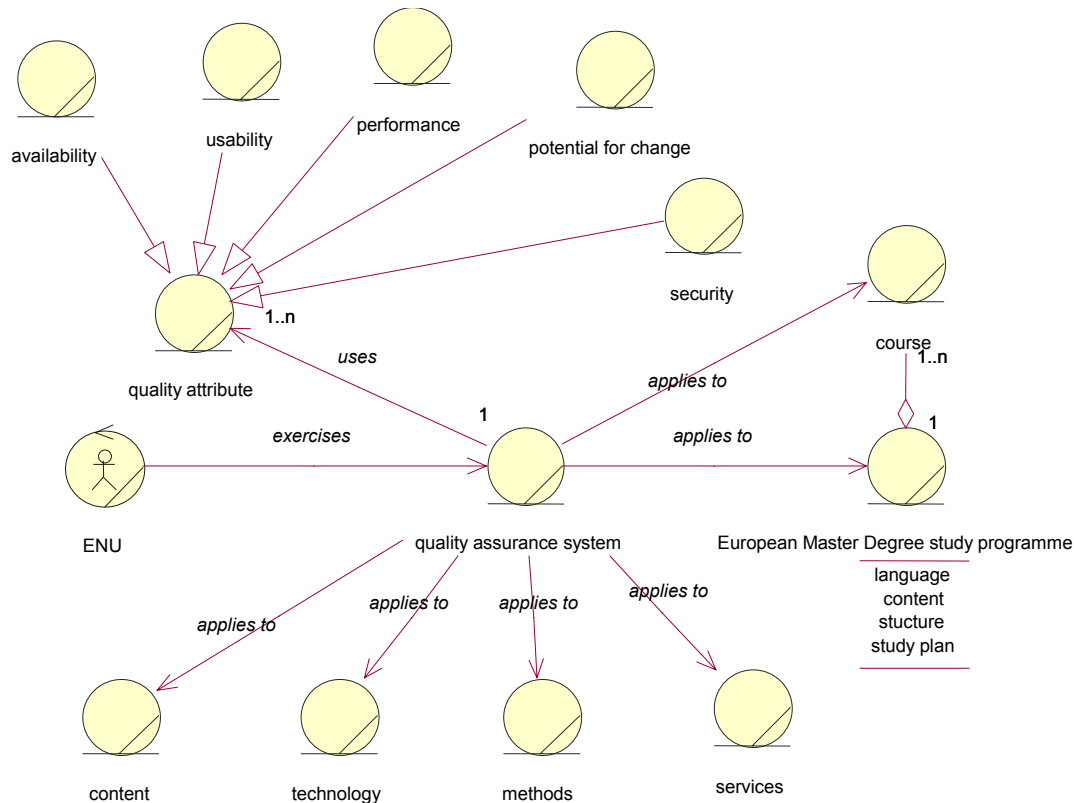
Figure 1. The ENU QAS

Thus the QAS is called to check the following quality criteria:

- curricular learning effectiveness (availability, appropriateness to learning styles, state-of-the art content, clarity of objectives, etc)
- academic staff teaching, research and development achievements
- flexibility of organisation allowing credit transfer, interdisciplinarity, studying within the framework of various programmes or institutions;
- usability of infrastructure and availability of adequate equipment (e.g. ISO standard)
- protection (security) of personal data
- accountability with regard to the use of human and material resources
- positive feedback from the students and responsiveness to their suggestions, proposals, and critique;
- positive feedback and support from stakeholders and labour-market needs
- international scientific competitiveness;
- promising strategic planning with respect to international policies
- the capacity for change

So the question that need to be asked is how to measure the quality criteria and with which toolkits? ENU QAS should give an answer to this question!

2. Barriers in implementing QAS

The main obstacles in implementing a QAS are:
- the incompatibility of assessment and QA systems between institutions and countries in Europe.
- the lack of a generally accepted QA system in Europe for traditional mode of delivery
- the lack of a generally accepted QA system in Europe for eODL mode of delivery
- the lack of a generally accepted QA system in Europe for joint programmes, i.e. developed by more than one institution.

In terms of a diagrammatical sketch, a proposal for a QA system could the one illustrated in Figure 2:
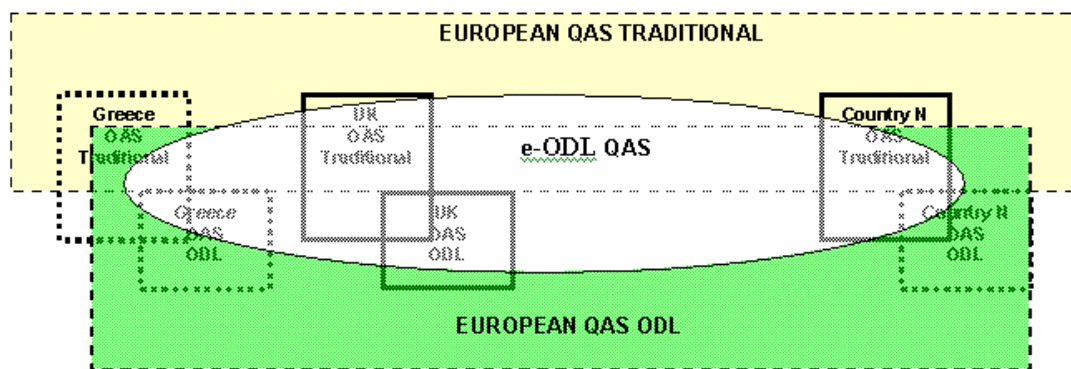
Figure 2. A proposal for a European QAS for e-ODL

The problem is that some of the QA systems (those in dotted line boxes) in the above diagram do not exist. The e-ODL QA should make sure that it is flexible enough to stretch and get in line with those QA which will arise in the future either at National or European level.

Related to the above is the acceptance of ECTS as the main credit system at European Level, which removes another barrier towards QA, which is the incompatibility of course design.

3. Brief Overview of QA Systems

A useful overview of QA can be found in [2]. QA systems, irrespectively of mode of delivery should be able to demonstrate that:
- Learning outcomes have been set at the appropriate level and clearly communicated to the students
- Content and design of the curriculum and the teaching methodologies employed are effective in enabling the student to achieve the outcomes in terms of both the acquisition of knowledge and the development of related practical skills and abilities
- Assessment is appropriately designed and rigorously administered to measure the achievement of the outcomes

It is also mentioned that essential components of a quality course are:
- Clearly defined and achievable learning objectives
- Relevant, scholarly and up to date curriculum content
- Well designed teaching and learning materials
- Well supported total learning package

- Sound technical design
- Appropriate and necessary personnel support
- Provision of access to additional learning resources
- Planned resource provision
- Outline overview and evaluation cycle.

In Europe, some countries have established QA guidelines for their institutions. For example, in the UK, there are two bodies; the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODLQC).

The QAA lists the guidelines on QA of DL as follows [9]:
- System design
- Establishment of Academic Standards and Quality in Programme design, Approval and Review Process
- Assurance of Quality and Standards in the management of Programme delivery
- Student Development and Support
- Student Communication and Representation
- Student Assessment

The ODLQC [8] categorises the criteria for QA (and possibly accreditation) as follows:
- Course Objectives and Outcomes
- Course Contents
- Publicity and Recruitment
- Admission Procedures
- Learning Support
- Open Learning Centers
- Learner Welfare
- Provider Organisation
- Joint Provision
- Accreditation

At European level, there are no specific attempts to define QA criteria and measures for e-ODL. We could mention the effort of CRE and EUA on:
- Accreditation schemes for Higher Education in Europe [3]
- Survey on Master Degrees and Joint Degrees in Europe [4]
respectively.

In the US and other countries, the situation is much alike in Europe, although the scope of DL has already been integrated in some bodies that issue guidelines for QA. For example, the Institute for Higher Educational Policy (IHEP) lists the following key benchmarks for the quality e-ODL [12]:
- Institutional Support
- Course development
- Teaching / Learning
- Course Structure
- Student Support
- Faculty Support
- Evaluation and Assessment

In the US alone, many different bodies are established, each one of which represents a group of Universities and Colleges, such as Southern Association of Schools and Colleges (SACS), Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) etc. A short review on the current state in US, including all those bodies can be found in [7]. The report states the best practices and the criteria for QA:

- Curriculum and Instruction: Learning and Content, Interactions, Assessment/measurement, Tools and Media
- Learning Support Systems and Services
- Faculty and faculty Support
- Library and Learning Services
- Student Services and Information
- Programme Planning, Evaluation and Assessment

4. Issues for Discussion when applying a QAS at European Level

This section includes a list of questions for discussion that will eventually lead to choosing and application a QA system for e-ODL programmes. In many of the questions posed below, there is a demand of uniform and commonly accepted policy among institutions (worldwide if possible). This does not necessarily imply uniformity in practice. We believe that the most important issue in convergence is to interpret "uniform" as "non-contradicting". This issue mainly arises due to the variety of pedagogical, administrational, organizational, technical, managerial, etc. policies of e-ODL institutions Europe wide.

The questions can be classified into the following categories:

General:
- Is there a significant difference between traditional mode and e-ODL mode in terms of quality criteria?

Administrative Level:
- Is there a clear Mission Statement?
- Is there a viable Strategic Plan?
- Is there a provision for termination?
- Is there an effective and clear Administrative Structure?
- Is there a clear allocation of tasks in the Administrative staff?
- Is there a provision for compatibility with legislation in all EU countries involved?
- Are there any admissions criteria?
- Who is responsible for conflict resolution?

Programme Design level:
- Is the programme designed according to some commonly accepted criteria?
- Is there a consultation of professional bodies that affect the decisions made for the curriculum?
- What are the overall aims and objectives of the programme?
- What are the overall learning outcomes of the programme?
- What is the degree awarded?
- Is there a provision for those who will complete part of the programme?
- What are the regulations leading to the award of the degree?
- How does the programme compare to traditional mode of delivery equivalent programmes?

Course Design Level:
- Is there a commonly accepted credit system?
- How do courses relate to other courses of the programme?
- Is there a clear structure in the content of each course?
- Is there a clear separation between course elements?
- Are there contradictory designs between various courses?

- How does a course design compare to traditional mode of delivery equivalent course design?

Course Delivery:
- Is there a commonly accepted policy on the method of ODL course delivery?
- What is the process of selecting methods of delivery?
- Do these methods effectively and efficiently exploit information technologies?
- How easy or difficult is to follow the selected method?
- Does the method of delivery contribute to the fulfillment of learning objectives?
- Are there clear instructions for students concerning method of delivery?

Course Assessment:
- Is there a commonly accepted policy on the method of ODL course assessment?
- Is there a commonly accepted marking scheme?
- What are the individual parts of assessment in each course?
- What is the process of selecting the appropriate assessment?
- Does assessment contribute to the fulfillment of learning objectives?
- Does assessment correspond to workload (credits)?
- Are there specific marking criteria for each individual piece of assessment?
- Is the student informed about the assessment criteria and marking scheme?
- Is there provision for timely feedback? What is the form of feedback?
- Are there clear examination procedures?
- Are there effective ways in place to identify impersonation and plagiarism?

Students:
- Is there a commonly accepted policy on keeping student records?
- Is there a policy regarding privacy and security of personal data?
- Are students well informed about the ENU, admissions criteria, award of degree, programme, courses, exam procedures, regulations, etc?
- Do students get the appropriate support for course content and technological infrastructure?
- Do students get the appropriate services in technology required? Is there provision for this support to be continuous?
- How do student get support for autonomous learning?
- Do student get the appropriate service from the administration?
- Do student receive advising and encouragement?
- Is there provision for student representation?
- Is there a complaint or appeal mechanism in place?
- Is there a mechanism for student evaluation of courses and programme?
- How is the progress of students monitored?

Staff:
- Is there a commonly accepted staff recruitment policy?
- Is there a commonly accepted staff development policy?
- Is there a commonly accepted staff appraisal policy?
- What are the criteria, characteristics and profile of academic staff selected to deliver ODL courses?
- What are the criteria characteristics and profile of technical staff selected to support ODL course delivery?
- Is there provision for continuous staff training?
- How is staff evaluated?
- Is there a provision for training of new staff?
- How is staff encouraged to improve own teaching, research and scholarship?

Other Resources:
- What are the technical resources required for eODL?
- Is there a commonly accepted platform for eODL?
- What kind of Library resources can be utilized?
- Do the selection and use of eLibraries comply with copyright legislation?
- Are the selected resources easy and effective to use?

Review:
- Are there sufficient processes and procedures for review of programme, courses etc?
- Is there a self-assessment review in place?
- Is there any possibility for external review?
- How is best practice disseminated within the institution, among staff etc.?
- How would the student feedback be incorporated in the review?
- How would the market feedback be incorporated in the review?
- What are the procedures of applying modifications?
- How often a review should be contacted?
- Are there any provisions for changing the organization structure?

Acknowledgements

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