

QUALITY ASSURANCE AT OPEN UNIVERSITY OF MAURITIUS

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1. What Quality Assurance measures were adopted and implemented when the University was established in 2012?

Since its inception in July 2012, Open University of Mauritius (OU) has offered nearly all its courses on blended mode. Only a small number of courses are offered on full-time mode. Blended learning is very special as it combines the time-bound on-site learning with distance learning which provides the learner the freedom to learn at his/her own pace, place and time. Thus, learning is split into on-site lectures, distance-learning phases and on-site examinations.

The quality in blended learning is a multilayer issue. According to Varlamis and Apostolakis (2010)¹, a typical blended learning course has four layers: the pedagogical layer; a technical layer; a social layer; and finally an organisational axis. Therefore, the scope of Quality Assurance at OU is broader. OU's Quality Assurance Framework influences the activities undertaken by the student during the learning process, the learning environment provided by OU, and all the related processes.

Consequently, the quality of on-site teaching depends on the quality of the teaching environment, the quality of the delivery in the class, the support given to students on-site and other facilities such as computer labs. The quality of the distance learning depends on the quality of the e-learning platform, the quality of the distance learning materials, the quality of the e-library and the quality of the support given to learners using phone, email, social media, and other technologies. Moreover, the quality of the assessment and evaluation methods used to assess the competences of the learners remains at the heart of the processes at OU.

Quality of the Institution

In line with its endeavour to provide the best learning experience to all its learners, OU embarked on the adoption of the ISO system since the first day of its inception. It became the first ISO-Certified tertiary education institution in Mauritius on 3 July 2015. External auditors regularly visit OU for audits. This certification has helped to enhance the trust of students in OU. It has helped students to feel reassured that OU will abide

¹ Varlamis, S. and Apostolakis, I. (2010) "A Framework for the Quality Assurance of Blended E-Learning Communities", *KES 2010, Part III, LNAI 6278*, pp. 23–32, Springer-Verlag, Berlin Heidelberg.

by the standards when delivering the programmes, and in administering of student affairs. Indeed, OU leaves no stone unturned to satisfy the students' needs. Consequently, students recommend OU to their friends and colleagues.

Quality of Administration

The ISO certification defines the procedures used by Administration. In line with the ISO procedures, a step-by-step process is used at all levels of administration, including the admission and registration of students, the production, control and storage of documents including examination papers and certificates, the management of change, communication to learners, the provision of support to students, handling of queries and complaints, the arrangement of face-to-face sessions and examinations, and the delivery of feedback.

Quality and Availability of Resources

OU ensures both the quality and availability of the necessary resources including computers and computer labs, video and audio recording studios, information and communication technologies, printing and photocopying facilities, well-equipped classrooms having air conditioners, projectors, screen, and laptops, sufficient number of competent tutors (who must hold at least a Master's degree) to deliver the face-to-face sessions, well-trained Programme Managers to provide support to students, adequate number of administrative staff, and sufficient funds.

The quality of the learning materials is the lifeblood of successful blended learning. OU uses all the aspects of instructional design in order to ensure maximum student engagement. Therefore, the materials are developed by a group of experts having a significant number of years of teaching experience. All the materials are reviewed by an independent group of moderators.

The purpose of the learning materials and how the students must use them are clearly explained so that a student can use them without the help of a tutor. The panel of experts involved in the development of the materials also ensure that resources are current and that there is proper referencing. The authors are careful in making the distinction between compulsory and optional materials.

Sufficient learning activities with appropriate feedback are also included. The time taken to complete the activity is also indicated. All these elements ensure that learners interact with the materials. Appropriate links to open educational resources as well as to audio and video materials available on OU's e-learning platform or on other sites are also included.

All resource persons of OU understand that the students must be able to navigate throughout the programme document and learning materials in a simple, logical, consistent, effective and efficient way. The design enhances readability and minimises distractions.

OU does not only organise regular training for students on how to access the technologies and tools such as the e-learning platform and e-library but it also provides pre-recorded videos illustrating each step explicitly to all students on the day of induction. OU ensures that the student does not feel isolated. Consequently, all the materials, course instructions and support are easily accessible.

Since 2013, all the learners enrolled on our programmes are given the opportunity to check their dissertation, thesis or published papers for similarity index before submitting final with the Turnitin report. Turnitin is an essential software which allows to check whether dissertation, manual, assignment or paper is original, thus preventing plagiarism. OU's policy accepts a similarity index of 20% for learners' work.

Quality of Programmes

The quality of a course should be seen from the views of the providers, the learners, the regulatory bodies like the Tertiary Education Commission, and other stakeholders such as employers. In line with the findings of Jung and Latchem (2007)², the same quality criteria cannot be applied to both blended learning and traditional programmes.

Therefore, OU has prepared its own procedures.

² Jung, I. and Latchem, C. (2007) "Assuring Quality in Asian Open and Distance Learning." *In: Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 22 (3), pp. 235–350.

The programme document, including the syllabus, is prepared by full-time academics who also ensure that the curriculum is rigorous, rewarding, real, rich in thinking, revealing, and reflective.

All the programme documents are deliberated at an Advisory Committee comprising academics from other universities, representatives of the Tertiary Education Commission, Mauritius Qualifications Authority, and employers. It is vital that the employability of OU's graduates is enhanced after they complete the course. The views of the External Examiners are also sought.

What distinguishes the curriculum of a blended learning programme to that of a conventional programme is its structure. First of all, the programme document is written explicitly and simply so that an independent learner can use it easily. The learning objectives are measurable and consistent with the course-level objectives.

The types of assessment are selected carefully to measure the stated learning objectives and are consistent with course activities and resources. The course grading policy is stated clearly in the programme document. Specific and descriptive criteria are provided for the evaluation of students' work and participation and are tied to the course grading policy. Moreover, the assessment tools are sufficiently sequenced, varied, provide multiple opportunities for a student to measure his/her performance and reflect the academic achievement of the students.

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OU collects feedback regularly from the students and tutors. The feedback is used for the continuous improvement of OU's processes.

What guided the decision to include the specific measures/mechanisms/policies?

The Open University started operations in 2012. Its operations are guided by statutory and regulatory requirements as well as directives from various authorities, namely the Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research (MoE), Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), Ministry of Civil Service Affairs (MoCS), Pay Research Bureau (PRB) and Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED). In addition, OU has set up the appropriate mechanism to ensure adequate control over its activities and process by implementing a Quality Management System based on ISO 9001.

All these measures have enabled the Open University to start operation within defined quality assured parameters where control, sustained monitoring and improvements have become embedded in the natural process in OU's daily activities.

The **Open University of Mauritius Act of 2010**. This act establishes among others the following:

- The Objects, the Functions and Powers of the institution.
- The Administration which comprises the constitution of the OU Board, its functions and powers and the various committees under its purview.
- The Academic and Management Structure, namely the Academic Council which has inter alia the control and general regulation of teaching, examination and research, transfer of credits to learners, maintaining of appropriate standards and discipline among learners.
- The Officers of the University namely the positions, responsibilities as well as the posts they would fulfill.
- The Final provisions and Accounts indicating the instruments required for a sound financial management of the institution.
- The Statutes, Regulations and Rules which provide for the constitution, powers and duties and the procedure at meetings of the various instances of the institution, namely the Planning and Monitoring Committee, The Finance Committee and The Human Resource Committee.

The statutes also make provisions for:

- Partnership and Collaboration with other local and foreign institutions.
- Holding of Convocation ceremonies.
- Setting up of Divisions, Institutes, Schools, Centers and other academic supporting Units.
- The manner of appointment and the term and conditions of academic and general staff.

Rules and Regulations include:

- Admission of learners.
- Course of study.
- Admission criteria.
- Conduct of examinations.
- Exemption in the admission process.
- Appointment of examining bodies and examiners.
- Equivalence of examinations and qualifications for admission.
- Assessment, evaluation and grading of learner's performance.
- Award of degrees and other qualifications
- The fees to be charged by the institution

Quality Assurance measures are further supported through application of mandatory internal and external directives set by the:

- **Tertiary Education Commission (TEC)** which is the apex body overseeing the functioning of all tertiary education institutions in Mauritius. The TEC has as objects to promote, plan, develop and coordinate post-secondary education in Mauritius and to implement an overarching regulatory framework to achieve high international quality. TEC Guidelines specify the parameters for:
 - Programme accreditation,
 - Guidelines for establishment of a Quality Assurance System and
 - Guidelines for preparation of a strategic plan.

As a stepping-stone to Quality Assurance, Quality Culture at the University was instilled through the setting up of a Quality Management System to include all the Divisions and Units of OU. Thus, the implementation and adoption of a Quality initiative was done through:

- **ISO 9001:2008** Quality Management System which sets out the processes and objectives for all activities at all levels of the organisation. A Certification Body, namely the Mauritius Standards Bureau, conducts yearly quality audits to ensure that the objectives set at the various levels and functions of the institution are being met.

To ensure that the right level of service is effectively and efficiently addressed, OU which is a public University acting under the aegis of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research, adheres to the recommendations of the PRB.

- **Pay Research Bureau (PRB).** The Open University adheres to the Pay and Grading Structures set out by the PRB. The Bureau makes recommendations on organisation structures and conditions of employment to render them more efficient and effective so that institutions can deliver on their mandates successfully. The PRB sets out the:
 - **Schemes of Service:** It is a legal document that contains important information such as the title of the grade, salary, qualifications, experience and the duties of each staff in the organisation.
 - **Human Resource Planning** is a mechanism recommended by the Bureau to determine the number and types of employees institutions need to meet their mandate by way of a Human Resource Plan to assist Management to resolve Human Resource issues. Institutions should mandatorily carry out a Human Resource Planning exercise to ensure the right size of Human Resources with the right qualifications to effectively meet the requirements of their mandate.
 - **Training and Development.** The Bureau lays much emphasis on continuous training and development of employees to ensure upgrading of knowledge, upskilling and acquisition of new skills and competencies for continuous improvement in service delivery. To this end, organisations are called upon to increase attention to learning and development of employees and to build their required capacity to deliver on their mandates.

OU adheres to the requirements of the Civil Service Affairs and Administrative Reforms in implementing a PMS. This performance management tool ensures that the performance level of officers of the institution is regularly monitored.

- **Performance Management System (PMS)** is to enhance performance at all levels by focusing on key areas of activity/services to be delivered which are identified through strategic planning processes. It establishes clear links between organisational development, the delivery of quality services and the development of employees at work. It also purports to create a common bond of ownership among all employees as well as an environment where all individuals are developed, motivated and inspired to deliver a quality performance.

OU adheres strictly to the guidelines set in the Financial Management Manual (FMM). Sound management of financial resources are ensured through a framework laid out in the FMM.

- **Financial Management Manual (FMM)**. The aim of this manual is to provide the framework for effective financial management. It is designed to improve the quality of service provided by enhancing the ability of the institution to achieve its objectives of implementing Government policies and programmes economically, efficiently and effectively.
 - General Financial Procedures
 - Supplies Management
 - Internal Control and Internal Audit Principles and Practice
 - Departmental Instructions
 - Systems and Procedures
 - Legal Framework
 - Staffing Structure and Responsibilities
 - Revenue Management
 - Management Accounting
 - Project Accounting and Management

2. Since 2012, what actions have been taken addressing QA at OU?

- a. Can you describe why these actions were taken?**

- b. When did you set up the ISO 9001 QMS?**
- c. What were the new elements introduced?**
- d. What is your analysis of the implementation of the ISO 9001 system?**

ISO 9001 processes were introduced throughout OU since 2014 and the organisation was certified in 2015. Prior to this, OU was acquainted with ISO processes but only the printing section of the University was ISO-certified. In 2014, the whole staff of OU was trained on ISO 9001:2008 standards and internal quality audit practices. Processes and Quality Objectives were developed and addressed in the Quality Policy manual for all Divisions and Units of the University. Yearly, 2nd party audits were conducted to assess the compliance to set objectives as well as improvements made. All processes in the University being carefully documented, led to proper organisation of Units/Divisions. A process approach to Quality is prevalent throughout the University, thus leading to effective use of resources.

Since regular audits and management review meetings are required as per ISO standards, all Units/Divisions have the responsibility to ensure consistent outputs/quality of services. This has also led to continuous improvement in the organisation and also to accountability of officers within each Unit/Division.

There is also better record and tracking of customer complaints, hence better monitoring and improvement in internal effectiveness and improvement in customer satisfaction level.

Moreover, ISO processes became a marketing advantage for OU since it is the only public university which is ISO-Certified.

Furthermore, since its inception, OU had undergone a series of external quality audits conducted by the TEC, QAA and MSB. Though the QAA audit was commissioned by the MoE in its wake to weed off non-compliant and underperforming institutions, the TEC ensured through its Quality Exercise of 2015 that OU was set on the right track and proposed a few recommendations for improvement which the management of OU has addressed. Having gone through the different audits, OU has been able to fine-tune its QA measures to offer better service to its stakeholders, especially its learners.

- Previously QA issues were dealt with at the level of each Unit/Division. Now, a Quality Assurance Division has been set up to look after all QA measures.

- In 2017, the COL assisted OU in implementing its QA System throughout the University. This was made possible with the expert advice of a consultant from COL, Prof. Tichatonga Nhundu who assisted in preparing the Self Evaluation Report, drafting the policies to address the gap analysis in meeting the strategic objectives of the Strategic Plan 2017-2025 and working out the Action Plan, Implementation Plan and the Monitoring and Evaluation Plan.
- In March 2018, OU went through its first Quality Audit conducted by the TEC.

b. What specific actions have been taken following the workshops with Prof. Tichatonga Nhundu last year?

The policy document on Quality Assurance worked out by Prof. Tichatonga Nhundu in consultation with Heads of Divisions/Units was sent for board approval and communicated to staff throughout the organisation. The Implementation Plan for the Quality Assurance Policy has been circulated to Heads of Divisions/Units for implementation as from July 2018.

3. What are the main challenges that OU faces in implementing best practices in QA for ODL?

The main challenge faced by OU in all its activities is budget constraints. A number of challenges for implementing best practices in Quality Assurance is thus related to the budget constraints. One of these challenges is the implementation of the Strategic Plan 2017-2025. Various measures regarding the setting up of Units/Departments, positioning of the University in the region, enhancement of the evaluation and assessment mechanism, launching of courses, support to learners, development of marketing strategies, staff development, ICT and building facilities, development of partnerships and collaborations have been included in the Strategic Plan. However, implementation of these measures is dependent on the financing.

Moreover, OU is facing challenges to work towards its vision to ‘become one of the best open universities in the world’. To become one of the best, OU should be prepared to provide more support to the increasing number of learners. Firstly, OU should align its admission policy in terms of the number of learners. The admissions process and resources should be broadened to include subject readiness assessment, workload assessment, readiness for ODL,

career counselling as well as a reference system for learners who need assistance with personal matters. Furthermore, OU will have to develop a dedicated student support strategy to cater for the increasing number of learners it is targeting. OU also needs to develop a system to track learners during the duration of their course. Follow-up is needed for learners who do not re-register for subsequent semesters or do not attend exams. Finally, OU should also establish an alumni relations office.

OU currently does not have a dedicated and appropriately resourced instructional design/learning design unit. The design, production and delivery processes may be affected as OU increasingly moves to digital and online content. The review of programmes is not currently done in a systematic and cyclical way, which should be the case to ensure continued suitability of courses.

OU also requires continuous investment in modern ICT infrastructure, website, learner platform and software to ensure quality service to learners since the University offers courses in ODL mode. OU has to seek technology driven solutions to enrich and support the learning journey of learners with particular attention to the needs of part-time learners who cannot necessarily attend face-to-face tutorials. Moreover, technology should be enhanced to ensure that internal processes are digital rather than manual. Measures are also required regarding backup of information, particularly sensitive information. Investment in dedicated servers, preferably in different locations, to ensure security of information is much required.

The existing building space is in need of renovation. Moreover, to cater for its existing learners and the increase in number of learners targeted in the future, OU will need additional proper building infrastructure.

Investment is needed to have a competent and productive workforce. Staff are currently trained, to the extent possible, based on resources and funds available. However, training in Quality Assurance rolled out throughout the University and including staff at all levels is required to implement best practices in ODL. Staffing of the Quality Assurance Division with trained staff in Quality Assurance in Higher Education is a challenge since expertise in Quality Assurance in Higher Education is scarce in Mauritius and staff have limited opportunities for exposure. The key position in the Quality Assurance Division (Director Quality Assurance) remains vacant. Additionally, OU also faces constraints regarding human resources that are beyond the control of the organisation (e.g. schemes of service). This

impedes on the activities of the University. Moreover, being a public institution, recruitment involves a lot of bureaucracy which leads to delays in filling the vacant posts.

Since Quality Assurance requires commitment from all levels within the institution to implement best practices, it is often a challenge to get involvement at all levels. While there is clear direction from the leadership level of the organisation, it is a challenge to get solid commitment at other levels. Quality Assurance within the organisation is often perceived as additional work and there is, in some cases, resistance to change from time-worn and conventional practices to adopt best practices which fit today's reality.

4. What would help address or overcome these challenges?

The challenge can be addressed by seeking ways of funding to overcome the budget constraints. OU will have to seek other ways to generate income rather than relying on the government grants. Funding to implement the Strategic Plan will put OU in a better position to implement best practices in Quality Assurance.

Staffing the Quality Assurance Division to provide support to other Units/Sections and providing opportunities for training and exposure in Quality Assurance to staff throughout the organisation will help OU to implement best practices in Quality Assurance.

Moreover, with the policy document on Quality Assurance being approved as an official document, all staff will have to imperatively work towards these policies. Since the policy document has set specific objectives for key activities at the University, implementation of the policies will address some of the Quality Assurance issues.

5. What are some of the main facilitators of QA adoption and implementation at OU? In other words, which internal or external factors have helped OU to move forward with Quality Assurance measures?

At OU, there is commitment at leadership level regarding Quality Assurance. Therefore, there is always the support of management to implement Quality Assurance measures. This has led to the organisation of workshops and the Quality Assurance policy document has been approved for implementation.

Furthermore, the ISO 9001 certification is a base for the development of Quality Assurance measures since quality culture was already prevailing in the organisation.

The external factor affecting Quality Assurance at the University is the requirements by the regulatory body. OU is subject to Quality Assurance audit every 5 years by the regulatory body and has to work upon the recommendations made by the auditing panel. Therefore, it has become imperative that OU develop and implement quality assurance measures.

Another external factor is the forthcoming Higher Education Act which will significantly impact Quality Assurance in the higher education sector. Quality Assurance will be of utmost importance and implementation of Quality Assurance measures will become compulsory. The Higher Education Act has provision for a Quality Assurance Authority whose specific agenda will be ensuring Quality Assurance in line with international standards, enhancing Quality Assurance mechanisms, and promoting good practices.

6. What do you envision are the next crucial steps in QA implementation at OU? Why are these next steps important?

A very crucial step is the filling of key posts at the University – Director of Academic Affairs Division, Director of Quality Assurance Division, Director ICT- and strengthening of the human resource capacity in Quality Assurance. Without the key positions being filled, and the lack of human resources, implementation of Quality Assurance will continue to be a challenge. Focus on staff engagement is equally important as research proves that higher employee engagement has a direct effect on service delivery and quality. Therefore, without empowering and engaging staff, progress in Quality Assurance implementation will be difficult.

Investment in technology is crucial for OU since the University wants to be technology-driven and without technology the provision of courses in ODL mode will be compromised and the existence of OU itself will be threatened.

Investment in infrastructure and logistics facilities is also of utmost importance since the building at the Open University Curepipe Campus cannot be used for long. It is imperative that a new building for OU be set up to provide conducive facilities to learners.

Lastly, all of the above measures require important investment, and the next crucial step is to find alternative ways of funding since the government grant for the institution has decreased considerably. Without adequate budget, implementation of QA at OU can be compromised at various levels.