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INTRODUCTION

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

Alan Tait

This collection of case studies reflects and, in turn, will reinforce the widespread development of quality assurance in open and distance learning (ODL) around the world. Despite the variety of cultures and histories in industrialised and industrialising countries, it is clear that quality assurance has established itself widely as a framework of ideas and practices within which the management of open and distance learning takes place. The World Conference of the International Council of Distance Education (ICDE) on this subject in 1995, and the 48 papers explicitly contributing to its discussion (Sewart 1995), in addition to other recent conferences on the theme (Atkinson, McBeath, and Meacham 1991; Tait 1993a) indicate how central to the agendas of practitioners and academics the issue of quality assurance has become. It is in this light that the Commonwealth of Learning and the ICDE have set up a Research Group on Quality Assurance, of which the publication by Deshpande and Mugridge (1994) represented the first fruit. This collection of case studies takes forward the COL/ICDE project by focusing more closely on open and distance learning, making available a range of case studies from Germany, Norway, Israel, India, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, and Canada, representing countries varied in social, economic, and indeed educational structures. In their variety, the case studies demonstrate the widespread nature of development and, at the same time, the importance of context, an issue discussed further in this introduction.

Many elements of quality control and assurance systems have been practised from the early days of modern open and distance learning; for example, producing learning materials (Lewis 1989; Freeman 1991), monitoring correspondence teaching, and visiting tutors in study centres to endeavour to rule out bad practice (Tait 1993b). The industrialised and distributed nature of educational systems in open and distance learning has facilitated the recent development of quality assurance systems. However, these systems have represented less *quality assurance* and more *quality control* in the old fashioned industrial sense of the word, in their overall tendency to check on performance after it has been completed, rather than to build in a commitment to meet the needs of users and continuously improve. It is also clear that, within education as a whole, open and distance learning is by no means alone, nor necessarily in the vanguard in the implementation of quality assurance practices. Quality assurance is developing in all educational sectors, and a wide range of publications attest to this, both in the critical

examination of ideas (Barnett 1992) and the more functional "how to do it" publications (Sallis 1993). There is also pertinent literature in the field of health care (Whittington and Ellis 1993). This introduction does not attempt to provide an up-to-date bibliography of the field of quality assurance, although that task could be usefully undertaken.

In summary, the quality assurance system attempts to define, in consultation with the user, what services should be provided to the user. It involves the accurate analysis of what needs to be done, with information broken down in what can seem an exhaustive fashion. The quality assurance system then finds ways of monitoring and evaluating that analysis, and builds in procedures with users and providers for continuously seeking to improve practice. Embedded in the practice of quality assurance is the notion that expertise is widely distributed in the organisation; that is, that not only the higher levels of management understand what should be done. In fact for many it is those working closest to the "customer" who best understand his or her needs.

The immediate users are often termed *customers* in quality assurance jargon, not necessarily to denote a purchaser-supplier relationship, but to denote the reasonableness of the user's expectation that he or she will receive what is needed and agreed. The user includes not only those receiving a service outside the institution or organisation (for example, the student), but also different sections of the university internally; that is, the examinations department in receiving an agreed service from the computer centre is its "customer". Equally, the course team provides a service to the examinations department, who become "customers". As quality assurance processes spread throughout the organisation, and as the commitment to continuous improvement developed through teams becomes a widely accepted practice, the objective changes to total quality management (TQM).

What is the down side? Quality assurance brings considerable culture change to an organisation. Quality assurance may diminish some areas of professional autonomy: first, in that students are taken to have enhanced status as "customers"; and second, in that educational professionals may not be accustomed to having to account for their actions. Quality assurance is also time-consuming, and in its techno-rational approach to the excitement of learning and teaching can seem bureaucratic and stifling. It can, if abused, be employed as a managerial weapon to enforce subservience and have the effect of reducing creativity and independence of thought, particularly damaging in the educational sphere. Within higher education in the United Kingdom over the last decade, universities have moved from professional autonomy, which was least subject to enquiry (Trow 1994: 29), to one of the most demanding external structures of quality assurance, which directly affects funding, and has led some authors to view academics within the system as losing the right to the term *profession* as they become members of an "academic proletariat" (Barnett and Middlehurst 1993: 126).

In many countries, however, students are required to pay an increasing proportion of the costs of their study and will no longer behave in a subservient manner, accepting poor service or care from university teachers and administrators (if they ever should have done). If a modern distance teaching organisation is not to produce more drop-outs than

graduates, or to lose students to competing institutions, then quality assurance will form an important element in its methods of work.

This collection of case studies aims to demonstrate that it would be of value to learn more about modern quality assurance systems for distance education in an international context, with a view to embedding developments within any new institution. While the concepts can be learned from the literature relatively easily, and case studies of practice elsewhere are of considerable help, no quality assurance system can be transplanted from one institution to another across organisational, social, and cultural boundaries. The development must be home-grown, recognising its context.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

This introduction attempts to give weight to the social and cultural complexity both of education and of the institutions in which it is organised. For some writers on quality assurance and open and distance learning this complexity is not acknowledged. Simplified notions are drawn from the business sector and uncritically applied in the educational context, and ignore the complexity and indeed contradictory demands in some cases of the various stakeholders: students, academic and professional interest groups, research funders and practitioners, government, employers, society at large, and future generations. For example, Murgatroyd, writing from a North American background on quality assurance and open and distance learning, asserts that misunderstandings can be swept away when *quality* is simply defined "in terms of 'fitness for use' where value of 'use' is determined by students and those who seek to use their competencies for some specific purpose" (Murgatroyd 1996: 9). He continues with assertions such as "Quality has nothing much to do with resources" and "Quality is measurable not abstract" (ibid.: 9-10). These assertions deny that there is anything to discuss and appear to support a version of managerialism that is out of place in more thoughtful approaches to organisational change in any context. As Perraton (1995: 180) has commented in criticism of those he terms the "new quantifiers", and in questioning the ends of those who misuse education:

Fitness of purpose may usefully force us to ask questions about special ends about the nature of our audience as well as the style of our teaching, for example - but takes us down a further regression in asking "whose fitness?" and "what purpose"?

It is not only evident that purposes are varied and, in some cases in conflict, it is right that the educational domain should remain one in which ideological conflict in quality assurance is acknowledged and indeed studied (Lentell and Murphy 1992). Failure to recognise the contested nature of quality assurance will result in ideology dominating academic exchange, with quality assurance serving as a mechanism to diminish and marginalise debate about institutional purpose, even when individual freedom to teach freely within the subject is protected. It is clear that the adoption of quality assurance in the most thoughtful and productive way will acknowledge its contested nature and

recognise the need to achieve a balance among some of the contradictory elements, and to recognise the compromise that such a balance necessarily represents.

The European Commission, for example, provides in its discussion of quality assurance a valuable context of university traditions in Europe, namely, on the one hand, the Humboldtian and Napoleonic Tradition (more generally known as the *continental model* with its emphasis on state control), and the British Tradition, which until the recent past had more power and autonomy vested in institutions themselves. The 1993 study, however, is able to find within this differentiated picture common patterns of development in the field of quality assurance in higher education, in particular in France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Five common elements are identified:

- the existence at the supranational level of a managing agent for the quality assurance system, who should be independent and responsible for managing the system at a meta-level;
- the importance of a mechanism of self-evaluation, so that academics feel they own the system;
- the connected importance of peer review, and site visits by external experts accepted as unbiased specialists in the field;
- the importance of reporting in such a way as to facilitate development and improvement rather than judging or ranking; and
- relationships between outcomes of a quality review system and funding, which it is suggested should not be direct and rigid as this will lead to a "compliance culture" rather than a real interest in quality assurance.

(Commission of the European Communities, Education, Training, Youth 1993: 20-24)

Although the study is now somewhat outdated on the situation in the United Kingdom (where many of the warnings offered in this study have been ignored in the new mechanisms of the Higher Education Funding Council), it is offered here as a way of informing readers of the considerable work that has taken place in education as a whole, acknowledging the complexity of the environment in which quality assurance for open and distance learning has to be thought through.

Any "off the shelf" solution from the latest management book or passing consultant will not provide such background. While their simple remedies may seem superficially attractive, in the form of instant programmes that can be globally applied, such approaches are unlikely to do anything but give quality assurance a bad name.

THE CASE STUDIES

The seven case studies serve to introduce the reader to a wide range of current issues as well as practices. Hans-Peter Baumeister of the German Institute for Research on Distance Education sets out the Ways in which, within European and international discussions of quality assurance in university level distance education, Germany is relatively excluded because of the particular social and intellectual history of that

country. As we look to the ICDE and COL to assist in different ways with international networking and development, the case study acts as a useful reminder of the privileging effect of the English language as distance education becomes more international (Tait 1994: 92) and, more importantly, the extent to which open universities in the Commonwealth share terms and values, and may in many cases have received substantial consultancy from the United Kingdom Open University and thus structures and systems. Any consideration of quality assurance in open and distance learning in an international context, however, must remember that what Baumeister terms the "Anglo-American educational environment" does not represent the whole picture.

From Norway, Ingeborg Bo sets out a system of quality assurance in a national context which, while derived from the specific social, historical, and indeed geographical context of a "long country with high mountains and deep valleys, and with its population widely distributed", might serve in her view as applicable not only to distance education institutions in Norway, but also to providers elsewhere. Of interest in the Norwegian case is the fact that the government decided that correspondence education (as it was then termed) should develop in the private schools where it had been pioneered, and that accordingly national Legislation governed aspects of quality, for consumer protection in particular, from as early as 1948. Recent developments have seen quality assurance become more sophisticated in scope, covering more than course material and aiming to assure learner support and delivery in addition. Responsibilities were pushed downwards to the institutions, in particular on a collaborative basis through the Norwegian Association for Distance Education (NADE), the organisation in which all distance teaching organisations receiving government funding are members. Bo also draws out the effects of internationalisation and globalisation in the educational market, and identifies how important quality assurance will be in an environment in which learners have choices, see themselves as customers as much as students, and will increasingly demand evidence of the quality procedures of the purchase they are making.

Sara Guri-Rozenblit from the Open University of Israel (OUI) reveals some aspects of the complexity of institutional and cultural factors in her case study. Although the United Kingdom Open University was influential in the establishment of the OUI, its academic autonomy was embedded in an academic culture more like that of Spain or Germany. The small number of central faculty, however, meant that quality assurance had to engage with the fact that external academics on contracts would outnumber internal course writers. The reliance on a small academic faculty has also thrown responsibility for the management of tutoring, including assignment and examination setting, onto junior academic staff.

Badri N. Koul notes in the Indian context, as other authors do elsewhere, the role that the poor reputation of distance education plays, and the importance therefore for institutions to not only assure quality but to be seen to assure quality. The historical sketch of the development of higher education in India, and in particular the dangers when institutions operates on a market basis, ignoring any regulation by national bodies, are reminiscent of the parallel situation in unreformed correspondence education in Western Europe. Three Indian universities are examined in detail in this case study, of which one alone, Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, has explicit provision for quality

assurance in its plan of management both in terms of structure and in its plans to set in place a total quality management system in the university. Koul identifies in the context of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, his own institution, the importance of training and professional development focused within a quality assurance framework.

Tim O'Shea and Anne Downes, from the United Kingdom Open University, argue that the external framework imposed in the British context in recent years by the Higher Education Funding Council has demanded the communication of existing quality assurance procedures to the outside world, rather than their invention. In the authors' view a commitment to quality has always been "an intrinsic part of the academic professionalism of our staff", but they acknowledge that balancing a commitment to diversity and creativity has been difficult to balance with the need to satisfy the demands of a national system in which the United Kingdom Open University is but one, albeit unique, institution. The British case study outlines the quality assurance procedures for both curriculum design and teaching and learning (that is, student support), which represent continuity over more than 25 years, as well as the more recent creation of a small number of dedicated roles in the quality assurance domain.

From the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong (OLIHK), Michael Robertshaw is able to describe an institution that has managed the change from primarily external to internal mechanisms for quality assurance. The history of OLIHK is bound up in the external dimension in particular. In 1989 the planners of the OLIHK met representatives of the British Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), a natural Arrangement given Hong Kong's status as a Crown colony. However, by 1990, Hong Kong had established its own body, the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA), which in the external peer Visitation Tradition of the CNAA made regular visits to the OLI. Robertshaw debates the factors that contribute to strengths and weaknesses in the process of external review, and goes on to describe the development of internal procedures at the OLIHK. These most recently include a dedicated quality improvement team, who have specific responsibility for reviewing quality across the institution.

The University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada, provides a library service for distance education students. Kate Seaborne from Distance Education Services at that university examines the informal approach to quality that exists in the library services operation and analyses the steps that would be necessary to convert these to a formal, structured, and documented quality assurance system. The case study provides an interesting example of an operation that is clearly committed to quality without having a formal system, and of the organisational steps necessary for conversion. In this way it will be of interest to colleagues in a range of institutions. The balance between cost and benefit in moving towards a formal system is debated at the conclusion of Seaborne's case study, an issue which many readers are no doubt facing at the present.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Reviewing the issues that these case studies reveal creates an agenda of issues for

consideration in the creation or development of approaches to quality assurance, which can be summarised as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Alternatives for consideration in creation of quality assurance systems in open and distance learning

external imposition through legislation or other “enforcement” mechanism	internally generated development
technicist non-problematic approach	acceptance of complexity, values, and dissent within educational environment
costs of formal QA systems	benefits of formal QA systems
dedicated institutional QA structure	integrated within existing management structure
adoption of “bought in” system	development within cultural environment of organisation and society
comprehensive “total” QA system	piecemeal development within separate areas
institutional independence	potential for inter-institutional collaboration

Table 1 suggests opposites or alternatives, but in reality a continuum will be found within which an individual institution can analyse its present position, construct a matrix, and plan a path.

To conclude, this introduction has attempted to establish, by describing these seven case studies of quality assurance in open and distance learning that:

- quality assurance is no longer an option in modern open and distance learning;
- quality assurance represents at the same time a range of contested values about the nature of quality and the legitimate interests of stakeholders and management, which need to be addressed and discussed;
- international case studies represent essential material for study in the context of globalised practice, but institutional solutions will be particular and individual; and
- trends towards the convergence of methodologies in education, breaking down the barriers between distance and conventional education, are evident in the quality assurance field, where practitioners from both sectors can valuably learn alongside each other.

It only remains to recommend the substance of the book to readers.

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