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Managing Quality Assurance in ODeL: ensuring that the learning materials are of good quality

Issue at-hand

Given the popularity of ODeL and its high costs for governments, students and their parents, it is important to ensure its quality as an increasing number of actors in both public and the private sectors are now getting involved as providers. Quality assurance is defined as *“a process in the entire operations involved in the implementation of distance education programmes. It involves the management that supports distance education, the courseware materials, academic, technical and pastoral support services provided to the learners”* (Odumbe and Misiko, 2016).

In a paper submitted to the 2016 3rd International Conference of African Virtual University held in Nairobi, Kenya on 6-7 July 2016, Odumbe and Misiko (2016) described the *quality assurance practices for instructional materials development* at the Centre for Open and Distance Learning in collaboration with internal Schools and Faculties at the University of Nairobi.

Policy Recommendation: (i) it is important to support the training and facilitation of writers of instructional materials with examples of self-instructional materials; (ii) the experience of unpacking the syllabus or course description has improved the lecturers understanding of the syllabus or course description; (iii) Writers realize that the strategies used in ODeL materials can be used in improving their teaching notes

Odumbe and Misko (2016) carried out a study of the quality assurance system put in place by the Centre for Open and Distance Learning in collaboration with internal Schools and Faculties at the University of Nairobi.

The Centre has a Quality Assurance System in place to ensure that the expected quality in its products as instructional materials, tutorial support services and expected learning outcomes students are achieved. The quality refers to use of best teaching – learning practices that compensate for the absence of the teacher in enabling learning to take place.

The quality assurance system involves the following actors and processes:

- ✓ *Instructional designer* who manages the systematic processes of developing the instructional materials;
- ✓ The *writers* who are responsible for the adequacy and quality of content and its presentation;
- ✓ Content *reviewers* to ascertain the accuracy and adequacy of content developed by the writer in relation to the syllabus;
- ✓ Language *editors* for correct use of language in the presentations.
- ✓ *Piloting or pretesting* draft instructional materials on students for their suitability as effective teaching materials and the feedback obtained is shared with the writer for necessary action
- ✓ *Bench marking* its courseware with best practices from the Commonwealth of Learning.

The existence of the Centre for Open and Distance Learning is by itself a major policy decision towards ensuring that quality assurance is a major concern for the University of Nairobi as an institution that offers ODeL. As an academic unit in the University of Nairobi, it is assigned the mission of developing and managing the implementation of Open Distance and e-Learning programmes in collaboration with conventional academic units of the University of Nairobi.

In terms of its operation, the Centre works with the Faculty staff in the development of courseware/self-instructional materials, production of the courseware in print and e-Learning forms, managing the delivery and providing learner support services for quality university education.

Effectiveness of the ODeL programmes

Odumbe and Misiko (2016) report on the effectiveness of the quality assurance system put in place by providing evidence of its outcomes through the *modules, acceptance of the modules by internal collaborating schools, learners performance in examinations, demonstrated capacity of the writers in subsequent writing assignments and improved completion time for modules.*

- The first major Quality Assurance result is the **consistency in the format of the modules produced through collaboration with the internal Schools.**

- The 2nd outcome of the quality of the modules is their **capability of teaching to bring the desired change in knowledge, skills or performance of the target group that use them.** From the analysis of the distribution by the degrees classification of the distance students in the Bachelor of Education (Science) at the School of Continuing and Distance Education who use the materials developed by the Centre compares very well with that of the Bachelor of Education (Science) learner in the conventional modes of delivery using largely face to face at the School of Education (see table below).

Table I: Performance in Bachelor of Education (Science) by Open and Distance e-learning and Bachelor of Education (Science)by Face to face

MODE OF DELIVERY	1 ST CLASS HON		UPPER 2 ND CLASS HON		LOWER 2 ND CLASS HON.		PASS		TOTAL
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	
FACE TO FACE MODE	26	5%	276	54%	200	39%	12	2%	514
ODL MODE	5	3%	72	42%	85	50%	9	5%	171
BOTH MODES	31	4.5%	348	51%	285	41.6	21	3%	685

- The 3rd outcome is that **quality distance education materials help in the expansion of higher education without compromising quality because the modules are written by qualified staff** with experience in teaching the specific courses in the internal departments.
- The 4th evidence of the quality of self-instructional materials is **from the demand of these modules by the regular students in similar programmes.** The students prefer the modules to text books as academic resource for their courses. The lecturers also use their modules for teaching regular students.

Recommendations

- Quality assurance is at the core of the success of ODeL and its sustainability will depend on it. It is therefore paramount that the experience of the Centre for Open and Distance Learning of the University of Nairobi be replicated as best practice throughout Kenya and the rest of Africa.
- It is also important to add to the quality assurance the other dimensions left out by the Centre for Open and Distance Learning such as *the management of distance education (support system and logistics), the academic and technical and support services provided to the learners.*

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