Quality Considerations for AVU ODeL Programs

Issue at-hand

With the increased advances and access to ICT university leaders and government policymakers view open and distance learning as a viable strategy for increasing student access and at the same time balancing the costs for higher education using these technologies. However, many national regulatory agencies and accrediting commissions worldwide see this growth of open and distance learning and the massive influx of for-profit educational providers entering the market as a serious threat to the quality of higher education (Commonwealth of Learning, 2009). AVU has been at the forefront of leveraging ICT to expand access to higher education through ODeL programs, and the concern for quality has been a driving factor for the AVU since its inception. In the second phase of the AVU multinational project, it undertook an initiative to update the quality assurance framework for its programs.

What is Quality?

The concept of quality has many facets in higher education. Accrediting commissions and national regulatory agencies focus on institutional quality indicators to ensure the institution meets the minimum quality standards for teaching, research, and support missions of a university. Institutional accreditation also ensures that universities have the essential infrastructures (libraries, facilities, computing, financial, technology, etc.) to meets it mission. Specialized accrediting agencies target specific programs such as business, engineering, nursing, medicine, education, health professions and others to ensure rigorous standards of academic quality. Despite the essential roles globally that accrediting commissions and national regulatory agencies play in ensuring quality in higher education, the reality is they are primarily the gatekeepers and/or oversight agencies for compliance with normative benchmarking standards. Indeed, maintaining and sustaining quality at any university is the responsibility of
the institutions and its members. This is precisely why two fundamental principles of accreditation and regulatory oversight are common across the globe: 1) a peer view process; and 2) a rigorous institutional and program self-study to document, validate and demonstrate quality compliance at minimum acceptable standards of compliance.

The development of a quality assurance framework (QAF) for the AVU ODeL programs was undertaken in consultation with member countries and the network of partner universities. Based on lessons learned from the first phase of the AVU Multinational project, instead of developing a QAF for each program, the framework sought to develop guidelines that would cater for existing and future programs. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL 2009) Toolkit provided the foundation for stakeholder consultation and development of the guidelines based on the following 6 quality criteria:

1: Institutional Policies and Mission

The mission, policies and procedures of the Institution needs to reflect its commitment to distance learning and its distance learning initiatives. The Institution must have administrative policies and procedures, appropriately qualified personnel, efficient management and administrative capacity, physical facilities, financial stability and resources adequate for the proper operation of the Institution and the discharge of its obligations to all its students.

2. Program Design and Development

Programs are designed and developed to meet the needs of learners, employers and society and to encourage access to quality education. Assessment methods need to effectively test and measure students’ achievement of the stated learning outcomes of the programs.

3. Course Design and Development

A course is a component of a broader program of study. The course content needs to be underpinned by research. The course material needs to clearly present objectives and learning outcomes, content, approaches to teaching-learning and assessment and learner support. There is an identified process of development and review of courses.

4. Learning Infrastructure and Resources

The institution needs to have adequate and appropriate infrastructure facilities to conduct quality academic programs through distance education. The institution uses technological innovations in educational transactions for enriching the learning experiences it provides to students and manages the institution in a technology enabled way for effective institutional functioning.

5: Learner Support and Progression
Learners need to be supported by the provision of a range of opportunities for tutoring at a distance through the use of various forms of technology. Contact tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring, counseling, and the stimulation of peer support structures to facilitate their holistic progression.

6: Learner Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment needs to be an essential feature of the teaching and learning process, be properly managed, and reflect institutional, national and international standards. The institution needs to publish its academic grading policy and apply it with fairness and consistency. Evaluation is to be based on the stated program objectives.

Policy recommendations

The AVU held consultative workshops with the Advisory Committee mainly comprised of deputy-vice chancellors academic from the partner universities, and with representatives of National Regulatory Authorities for the different countries presented. The following are some of the recommendations for implementation that were derived from the consultations:

i) the need to identify the common needs of all the countries and come up with a shared definition of quality assurance;

ii) the need for partner institutions to establish a quality assurance unit at their respective universities;

iii) the need to develop methods and practices that are appropriate for the African context and not to always adopt foreign interventions;

iv) the need for training to implement and adopt the QA framework, and the need for training and buy-in from teachers and involvement of students;

v) the need for the involvement of governments/national regulatory authorities throughout the process of implementation;

vi) the need to clarify the role of the partner university structures in evaluation and approval, as well as articulating the role of the AVU in this process.

Conclusion

The development of an effective QAF must be built on stakeholder collaboration to ensure that open and distance learning programs and services reflect the highest standards of academic and service quality. Resources such as the COL toolkit for ensuring quality in ODeL programs provide a point of reference for collaboration amongst stakeholders from diverse contexts and language backgrounds such as the ones in the AVU network. The toolkit also provides broad enough criteria that allow for developing guidelines that are flexible and adaptable to differing contexts of use.
References


For more information, please visit AVU’s Website: http://www.avu.org/avuweb/en/