Quality models in online and open education around the globe: State of the art and recommendations

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Executive Summary

Goals and Project Outcomes

The global Higher Educational landscape is in a period of dramatic change. Although it is too early to say whether these changes will be disruptive, revolutionary or merely evolutionary, a significant driver of change has been the dramatic rise in the use and availability of new educational technology. More specifically the growth of the Internet is challenging conventional modes of delivery and helping to extend access to higher education beyond traditional campus-based learners. In recent years, the demand for “online learning”, whether called open, distance, flexible, or e-learning, has grown exponentially in response to this new environment. Likewise, has the rise of opening up education movement, and the growing development with Open Educational Resources (OER) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), and the entire unbundling approach in education. Increased internationalisation, widening recruitment and upscaling of reaching students are other drivers. Hence, how, where and when students learn, how institutions structure programmes and services, and how these services are structured are global challenges. Improving quality of student experiences is more than ever extremely important.

This quality standard study has been undertaken on behalf of The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), a global membership organisation in the field of open and distance education, and in formal consultative relations with UNESCO. The study has been conducted by research team coordinated by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU). EADTU is Europe’s leading institutional association in online, open and flexible higher education, and is at the heart of the modernisation agenda of European universities.

The objectives for the study are to establish an overview and analysis of the global situation with regard to existing relevant standards and guidelines for open, distance, flexible, and online education, including e-learning, encompassing the fundamental notion of students as active participants in an engaging learning experience. The ICDE Quality Standard Study 2014 will provide a comprehensive baseline study on international quality standards on open and distance learning to underpin further international work by ICDE on quality in open and distance learning e.g. actions in collaboration with members, as well as with UNESCO and OECD. The report will serve as guidelines for communication, dissemination and valorisation activity on quality standards in open and distance learning with stakeholders.

The study was carried out as desk studies by the researchers, in close collaboration with the international Research Advisory Group, ICDE and the ICDE SCOP presidency. The data gathering strategy aimed to cover quality standard models, and the discourse on quality in open, distance, flexible and online education, including e-learning in all continents trying to show similarities and distinctions due to culture, languages and maturity of developing quality. The detailed reviews focused on documents available in English with some use of online translation tools to access documents in other languages. The strategy aimed likewise to identify a quality spectrum, e.g. certification, accreditation, benchmarking, labelling as a frame of reference. The intention was also to address the quality spectrum at macro, meso, and micro levels. However, those quality standard models described deeper here in the report are mainly at macro and meso level as the literature on impact of quality of individuals’ practice is diffuse. The intention was
also to present the variety of available international quality systems, according to maturity and purpose for measuring and/or enhancing quality in e-learning for institutions and quality assurance bodies.

**Lessons Learned**

The review of international quality standard models illustrates that there are many existing schemes and models for quality assurance of open, distance, flexible and online education, including e-learning. They share many common features and many are designed to offer flexibility for institutions to adapt to suit national and institutional contexts. The most common structure encountered presents criteria for performance in aspects of institutional management, curriculum design student support and other elements of educational provision, further subdivision into performance indicators and indications of sources of evidence. The most general categorisation of activities is Management (Institutional strategy, visions, and resourcing) Products (processes of curriculum and module development) and Services (student, and staff support, information resources etc.). Differences between the models reviewed lie in the grouping of criteria and the granularity of the detail applied at the performance indicator levels rather than the inherent approach to quality assurance. Some models apply numerical scoring criteria with target performance levels others rely on more subjective assessment of performance. There are models that require performance assessment of 20-30 items others in excess of 100. The originators of the models have each made judgements on the trade-off between generality and specificity in the breakdown of activity to be reviewed. Many are designed to integrate with national systems for quality assurance of Higher Education that are based on peer review and interrogation of institutional self-assessment documents.

More than forty quality standards models or guidelines from organisations were reviewed. Table 1 below summarises features of the most well-known and most used reproduced from the report, and they are categorised by their functions and uses:

Certification/Label is interpreted as a level of recognition granted by the body originating the quality model, award of the certificate/label will follow some form of review and may be accompanied by a requirement that the reviewed institution commits to an improvement plan and later renewal of certification. The originating bodies have various statuses ranging from semi-formal interest groups to international representative bodies.

Benchmarking is a process of comparison of institutional performance with that of others, allocation to the benchmarking group indicates that either the originating organisation operates a benchmarking service or there is evidence of the model having been used in benchmarking exercises.

Accreditation is interpreted as a form of mandatory certification or licensing of institutions and/or their programmes that grants access to national financial support or recognition of awards for employment purposes. Accreditation is a process operated by formal agencies, such as Ministries of Education, Quality Assurance Agencies and Professional Bodies.
Some of the documents reviewed are designed to solely fulfil advisory purposes offering structured guidance to the issues associated with open, distance and online education but not presenting processes of evaluation or performance measurement (Advisory framework).

The table shows that there is evidence of models being used for multiple purposes and in some instances of the models and codes developed for Certification/Labelling purposes being formally or informally adopted within national Accreditation processes. There is no shortage of core resource for institutions or agencies seeking to formulate to Quality Assurance of Open, Online and Distance and education.

There are, understandably, more limited sources relating in the areas of OER and particularly MOOCs. Some of those that have been reviewed may be considered as derivatives or subsets of earlier systems applicable to open, distance and online education, extracting and modifying appropriate criteria from the spectrum of Management, Product and Service categories.

Table 1 Most Used Quality Model (From Table 1 in Ossiannilsson, Williams, Camilleri and Brown 2015). The name of the quality model is written in bold and italic then follows the governing organisation, first the abbreviation and then the full name spelled out in brackets. In case the organisation doesn’t have a special model, the organisation is just written with the name.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Model</th>
<th>Certification</th>
<th>Benchmarking</th>
<th>Accreditation</th>
<th>Advisory Framework</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACDE (the African Council for Distance Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency)</td>
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<td>ACODE (the Australasian Council of Open, Distance and e-Learning)</td>
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<td>AVU (the African Virtual University)</td>
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<td>CALED (the Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Quality in Distance Education)</td>
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<td>CHEA (the Council for Higher Education Accreditation), US</td>
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<td><strong>E-xcellence</strong> EADTU (the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities), NL</td>
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<td>OpenupEd</td>
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<th>Organization/Model</th>
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<td>EADTU (the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities), NL</td>
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<td>UNIQUEc EFQUEL (the European Foundation for Quality in e-learning), BE</td>
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<td>ECB Check EFQUEL (the European Foundation for Quality in e-Learning). From Dec 2014 GIZ (Deutche Gesellschafter International Zuzammenarbeit), DE</td>
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<td>The eLearning guidelines (eLg)</td>
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<td>Ako Aotearoa, developed by Tertiary Education Commission, led by AUT University and Massey University, New Zealand</td>
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<td>The E-Learning Maturity Model (eMM)</td>
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<td>New Zealand Ministry of Education Tertiary E-Learning Research Fund</td>
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<td>E-learning Quality Model (ELQ)</td>
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<td>NAHE (The Swedish National Agency for Higher education)</td>
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<td>Epprobate The Learning Agency Network (LANETO e V), DE</td>
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<td>Khan eight-dimensional e-learning framework</td>
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<td>Badrul Khan</td>
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<td>The OLC Quality Scorecard</td>
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<td>Online Learning Consortium, (former Sloan-C), US</td>
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<td>OER TIPS The Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA)</td>
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<td>Pick&amp;Mix Matic Media, SERO Consulting Ltd, UK</td>
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The review indicates that concepts of quality can be applied at Macro (National/international) Meso (institutional) and Micro (individual practice) levels with the formal models reviewed addressing the issues at Macro and Meso levels. Less evidence has been found of performance standards at the Micro level, but no doubt this will exist within staff development and performance management criteria of those institutions that are engaged in quality assurance of their open, distance and online education programmes.

The report explores the concept of the development of maturity in quality assurance processes at both institutional and national levels through a progression from quality assurance applied to ensure compliance with fixed standards and norms to quality assurance as mechanism for improvement and enhancement and enhancement of provision. The distance education sector with its dependence on development of teaching materials, management of scalable systems of student support, etc., has in many instances, better developed quality assurance processes than institutions operating traditional campus/classroom provision. As conventional institutions and their accrediting agencies seek to adapt to the challenges of integrating e-learning and online provision within their quality assurance processes, they have much to gain by exchange of experience and approach with the Distance Education sector.

An extensive selection of quality standard models has been reviewed and analysed. Each one was developed for specific purposes, in different contexts, and in different times. It is neither possible nor appropriate to recommend one before another, as a selection very much depends on institutional context, aim, and maturity. However, the research study identified characteristics, which needs to be addressed for quality assurance and quality enhancement. Those can be summarised as below:

- **Multifaceted** – e.g. systems use a multiplicity of measures for quality, and will often consider strategy, policy, infrastructure, processes, outputs and more so as to come to a well-rounded view of holistic quality.
- **Dynamic** – e.g. flexibility is built in to systems, to accommodate for rapid-changes in technology, as well as social norms. For this reason, they rarely refer to specific technological measures, and rather concentrate on the services provided to users through that technology.
- **Mainstreamed** – e.g. while all the quality tools surveyed aim at high-level quality improvement, this is intended to trickle down throughout the institution and be used as a tool for reflective practice by individual members of staff in their daily work.
- **Representative** – e.g. quality systems seek to balance the perspectives and demands of various interested stakeholders, including students, staff, enterprise, government and society at large.
- **Multifunctional** – e.g. most systems serve a triple function of instilling a quality culture within an institution, providing a roadmap for future improvement, as well as serving as a label of quality for outside perspectives.

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Recommendations to Stakeholders

From the research study, a set of recommendations were formulated, together with proposed actions for stakeholders. The recommendations are:

1. Mainstream e-learning quality into traditional institutional quality assurance;
2. Support the contextualisation of quality systems;
3. Support professional development, in particular through documentation of best practice and exchange of information;
4. Communicate and promote general principles;
5. Assist institutions in designing a personalised quality management system;
6. Address unbundling and the emergence of non-traditional educational providers;
7. Address quality issues around credentialisation through qualifications frameworks;
8. Support knowledge transfer from open and distance learning to traditional quality systems;
9. Support quality assurance audits and benchmarking exercises in the field of online, open, flexible, e-learning and distance education;
10. Encourage, facilitate and support research and scholarship in the field of quality; and
11. Encourage, facilitate and support implementing quality assurance related to new modes of teaching.

From the research study, a set of proposals to ICDE was also suggested, which related to the above mentioned recommendations.

Summarising the survey, analysis and recommendations:

- There is an extremely large variety of quality tools catering to many audiences and needs.
- There is no significant gap in terms of analysis of institutional systems, which would require a new scheme to be developed.
- In the case of recognition and unbundling, which are not e-learning specific, there are definite deficiencies with scope for further developments.
- All the quality systems suffer certain deficiencies (lack of universal applicability, unclear which maturity levels they are best for, widely divergent quality of reviews and of advice given, challenges to respond to change, etc.)
- There is a role for ICDE working with other international organisations in the following main areas, all of which are critical:
  - providing a register of effective quality systems, and a guide to members on which are appropriate for their context and purpose
  - addressing common issues around training, best practice sharing, localisation, etc., for providers of quality systems
  - working with international organisations to ensure a harmonised regulatory environment
  - working with international agencies to ensure student engagement in determining quality standards