



Editorial

Improving Quality and Student Support in Asian ODL

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We continue to be concerned with improving the quality in open learning, and this is achieved through building in student interactivities and through adding on student support services. We still do not have a simple definition of what constitutes quality, or quality assurance. Several quality assurance frameworks have been proposed in recent years - and these often stretching to 20 or 30 pages listing simply every possible aspect. Of much more concern to us is that instituting one or more or all of these components of quality have not yet been demonstrated through rigorous research to improve the achieved learning by a student. Accordingly the research field is wide open at the moment. We need more research into what exactly is quality, and which aspect has been found to improve learning.

In this Issue we have a few Papers that look into student support aiming to improve overall quality. Most of the Papers though are still presenting the technical reforms of zweckrationalität that were the theme of the previous Issue 9.1 here. These are related to improving quality, as was explained in our Editorial previously on the evolution cycles <http://www.AsianJDE.org/2011v9.1.Editorial.pdf>. For example in this Issue we have research on designing a Study Guidebook - which is more technical than value-added, but has clear deep intention to comfort and support the student through careful counselling and guidance. So such technical

reforms are introduced with the view of then improving the quality deriving later on after and produced by the innovation. The technical zweckrationalität research of v9.1 leads naturally into the theme of this Issue v9.2, and we hope that the readers can see that the Papers in this Issue are less technical than those earlier and are more closely involved with reaching the student / improving the zweckrationalität value-added quality aspects.

The frameworks for quality assurance, published so far, generally give haphazard lists of categories of all the aspects that the respective authors can come up with at the time, often drawing from older published lists and extending these wherever possible. What we need is a comprehensive scaffold.

This will require determining at the outset a complete overview of all the stakeholders concerned with quality. For example parents and prospective students have quite different perspectives on what constitutes quality. They consider financial stability, social reputation, and future employability as leading factors of quality assurance. Few if any institutions yet bother with later employability - other than report the percentage of students who get employed immediately after graduation. Not all colleges even do this, yet the trend is starting to catch on. For many in on-the-job vocational training, in many adult education and continuing professional development courses, the students are already in full-time

employment. Nonetheless they may engage such study in order to promote their vocational mobility – to gain promotion (vertical mobility), or to find a different employer perhaps moving from the countryside to the city where they can get higher salary for doing the same job (horizontal mobility). For parents a longer-term view is often the main factor. They may be hoping and investing their life-savings in the student in order that five or ten years after graduation their child has a comfortable well-paid job with good house and quality of life. In an interesting paper, Gaba (2007) found that one reason for students to pursue graduate studies was to improve their marriage prospects : a person with high education may reasonably expect to find a well-educated or well-connected partner who can provide a better future. There are very few reports indeed on quality assurance surveying the opinions of parents. In the current financial crisis, parents or other funding agents can well be expected to have some influence.

We also need to be clear why we want to improve quality. A leading goal deriving from improving quality is to reduce student drop-out rates. Certainly if students are disappointed with their experiences, then they are at risk to dropping out. The institution and tutors are therefore somewhat justified in keeping the student 'satisfied', but must stay aware that student satisfaction is related to continuing, and NOT to achieved learning. In an objective controlled study, Boling & Robinson (1999, p.170) found that there was some considerable trade-off (an inverse correlation) between distance students' satisfaction and the actual quality of learning achieved. In open lifelong learning, adults drop into / return to studying not usually for certification. In any case the examinations may be overly stressful to old-aged persons. So they tend to not take the examination, and do not mind being classified as dropping out – which is fairly meaningless to them. Indeed many young adults taking open learning courses are concurrently enrolled at a convention university, so do not want or need to sit the open college's examinations. Having many

more students dropping in and dropping out, in our view, is a sign of maturity in lifelong education provision. We need to do some more research to construct a better more-accurate interpretation of the real meaning of 'drop-out'.

Catering to their learning styles can help to keep students happy, and technology can help to provide the necessary flexibility for offering different routes to suit different learning styles. Some authors (for example Sempebwa, 2007) suggest that open educational e-resources should take into account student learning styles. This was indeed fashionable ten years ago in the late 1990s. However no research findings have yet been published to indicate that learning styles influences achieved improved quality of learning. So while catering to a student's learning style and offering different routes for all the various learning styles might have external face validity for inducing student satisfaction, the institution here should be aware there is no expected benefit in learning.

The leading reason for us to improve quality must be the achieved quality of learning - and this more so than attrition or student satisfaction. Much more research into quality assurance is welcomed.

In this Issue the Papers refer to technical support to help students, and other ways for improving quality. In the first Paper by Osuji, course design is reviewed to show how the course can better suit different student cognitive styles.

The next two Papers cover retention and student satisfaction. As discussed above, student satisfaction is well recognized as influencing continuing to study and reducing attrition.

The next Paper by Watto reports on the study guidebooks produced by the UK Open University and by Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad. The literature review here is very good, and points out the contents to be included in any guidebook. This will be useful to every open university. Study guidebooks can help bring the student from being an outsider to becoming an insider, to understand what is the role of the good student. Guidebooks are often used as one credit introductions to studying for new

students, and include various examples and scaffolds for the student. Academic writing is a good candidate for using study guidebooks as they can include all the models and examples visually that students will need to follow.

The following Paper is by Ding & Boody. They write about the need for improvements by the radio and television universities in China. Actually these are currently being reformed as the national Open University of China, and many of the points raised will be of interest. A student being asked if she was studying to become a TV announcer or broadcaster must surely encapsulate the essence of past public misconceptions about the CRTVU System in China.

In the next Paper Bose describes teaching and counselling as the two roles of the tutor. He concludes that both roles are important to reduce student attrition. This Paper highlights the shortcomings of current counseling training programmes, and will be of interest to all readers. The next Paper is by Shelley & Ferdousi. Open and distance education has been used for HIV education and for diverse subjects. Here Shelley & Ferdousi look at how it is used to prevent marriage by immature girls.

We complete this Issue with a Special Focus Report on ODL in Assam State. In India – as in Asia – we cannot easily average the conditions to know what is best. We have to look at individual case studies which highlight the specific conditions in each place. The reader can then draw from case studies those points that share fittingness to ones own context, rather than

use an average. India has a huge number of higher education institutions (it is the third largest system in the world), yet this can serve only 9% of those at traditional college ages. So the growing open and distance education market aims to cater to those at traditional 18-22 years old as well as lifelong and continuing adult education. It is hardly surprising then that some well-known western colleges are looking seriously at setting up branch campuses there. Assam State however is one of the poorest in India, so it is hardly attractive for foreign colleges looking to get rich. It is however a fertile region for the new modern open learning mode being explored in rural China, and similar to the 3LFarmers model.

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