Convergence and Diversity of Quality Assurance Systems in Distance Education for Higher Education

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Abstract
In the context of growing globalization in distance education, there is an urgent need for international initiatives to review quality assurance (QA) mechanisms of distance education for higher education at the national and institutional level, discuss new challenges of a changing distance education environment, and build a capacity for quality assurance to enhance the quality provision in a globalized higher education market.

This paper reports the results of a survey conducted between May and early June 2004. The survey was designed to collect data on several key aspects of an internal quality assurance system of distance teaching institutions, discuss similarities and differences found in the data, and provide an opportunity for capacity building for quality assurance to enhance the quality provision in distance education. Nine mega distance teaching universities and 6 other institutions responded to the survey. The survey results show that there exists

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a variety of QA systems of distance education even though the globalization and competitiveness of higher education and the development of technology have brought distance teaching universities closer together in terms of developing a common quality culture.

Key words: distance education, quality assurance, quality in higher education, higher education, mega university

I. Introduction

During the 1970s and 1980s, many countries and territories around the world established distance education (DE) institutions or programs at the higher education level to meet the educational needs of a variety of groups of people such as working adults, teachers, and housewives (Jung, 2004). Moreover, over the last few decades, a number of mega universities have been developed. A mega university is defined as "a distance teaching institution with over 100,000 active students in degree-level courses" (Daniel, 1996, p.29). Considering the high number of student enrollment, the mega universities are becoming "very important for the future of higher education all over the world" (Daniel, 1998).

Most of these distance teaching universities or distance education programs have delivered education using printed materials, audio and video cassettes, radio and TV, and face-to-face tutorials. However, with the development of information and communication technology (ICT), many conventional distance education institutions have begun to
introduce ICT mainly as supplementary modes of instruction. But some institutions including a few mega universities have created e-learning programs. Examples include the e-MBA program of the Anadolu University in Turkey, the online Lifelong Education Graduate School at the Korea National Open University in Korea, and the online MBA of the Athabasca University in Canada. Besides these e-learning graduate programs, several distance teaching institutions have incorporated e-learning components in their existing programs. Online tutoring and online discussion groups are popular among those e-learning components.

In the past ten years or so there has been a noticeable surge in the export and import of educational services around the world (Jegede, 2001; Leong, 2003). Distance education including e-learning is one of the many all manifestations of the current trend and has been steadily gaining ground (D’Antoni, 2003). For example, universities in Australia, UK, USA, and Canada have more actively exported their distance education programs including e-learning to other parts of the world. China, Hong Kong (China), India, Malaysia and Singapore in the Asia-Pacific region have been among major importers of those programs. However, among those importers, Hong Kong (China), India and Malaysia have also exported their programs to other countries such as Bangladesh, China, Indonesia and Sri Lanka (Jung, 2004).

In the context of growing globalization in distance education, there is an urgent need for international initiatives to review quality assurance (QA) mechanisms of distance education for higher education at the national and institutional level, discuss new challenges of a changing
distance education environment, and build a capacity for quality assurance to enhance the quality provision in a globalized higher education market (Stella, 2004; Zuhairi, Pribadi, & Muzammil, 2003). Capacity building for quality assurance in mega universities is especially important since those mega universities provide higher education to millions of students around the world.

Recently, several studies have attempted to evaluate quality assurance and accreditation systems of distance education for higher education at the national or institutional level and discuss issues related to quality assurance with the emergence of virtual universities or e-learning programs (for example, Jung, 2004; UNESCO Asia Pacific Regional Bureau for Education; UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, 2003 and OECD Institutional Experiences of Quality Assessment in Higher Education, 2001). These studies reveal that the quality assurance frameworks of distance education in a globalized context are still in the early stages of development. The reports also indicate the need for investigating a wide range of QA practices in different contexts of distance education. The present study aims to provide data on several key aspects of QA practices in distance education and discuss the convergence and diversity of the QA practices. Those key aspects included QA unit, QA policies, QA methods, Use of QA results, QA areas and criteria, QA system for imported/exporting DE programs, QA system for e-learning, and Link to national QA framework for DE.

Two major limitations of this survey need to be recognized. First, the survey was conducted in a short period of time. This time constraint prevented the author
from including more DE institutions worldwide in the survey. And the institutions participating in this survey could have provided more detailed information on their QA arrangements if more time had been permitted. Second, each institution may approach or define QA differently within its own social and educational context. The definition used in this study* may have been somewhat different from a institution’s own understanding.

II. Analysis of Survey Results

A. Profile of Institutions

The survey, conducted between May and early June 2004, was sent out to the presidents (or vice-chancellors) and/or the heads of QA units in 11 mega universities and 6 DE institutions in different regions. Nine mega universities and 6 other DE institutions responded to the survey. Table 1 shows profiles of those institutions.

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* Quality assurance (QA) was defined as planned activities carried out with the intent and purpose of maintaining and improving the quality of learning rather than simply evaluating activities in this survey.
Table 1. Profiles of DE institutions Surveyed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Year of Establishment</th>
<th>Number of DE Students</th>
<th>Number of Academic Staff</th>
<th>Number of Administrative Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Parttime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIOU (Pakistan)</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>456,126</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>23,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anadolu (Turkey)</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>884,081</td>
<td>1,729</td>
<td>653 (tutors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1982 named as Anadolu)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCRTVU (China)</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>2,300,006</td>
<td>52,600</td>
<td>31,500 (tutors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IGNOU (India)</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>1,013,631</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNOU (Korea)</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>196,402</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>108 (tutors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OU (UK)</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>203,744</td>
<td>1,169</td>
<td>7,996 (Associate lecturers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STOU (Thailand)</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>181,372</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>Info. Not Given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UT (Indonesia)</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>222,006</td>
<td>762</td>
<td>3,600 (tutors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athabasca (Canada)</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>26,091</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monash*</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>51,926 (all modes)</td>
<td>2,729</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8,483 (DE model)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUHK (Hong Kong, China)</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>22,263 (Hong Kong)</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>921 (tutors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3,006 (Mainland China)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUM (Malaysia)</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>22,043</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1,572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS World Campus** (USA)</td>
<td>1998 (ONLINE) 1990 (DE)</td>
<td>10,100</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUCRS Virtual (Brazil)**</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>5,016</td>
<td>14 professors</td>
<td>62 monitors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Monash is a dual mode university. Academic and administrative staff work for both modes - on-and off-campus - of education.

** The Penn State University (PSU), USA is a campus-based university with a DE division called the World Campus. The majority of the World Campus faculty are part-time instructors for the World Campus, but full-time PSU faculty members.

*** PUCRS, Brazil, is a campus-based university which has a DE Unit, known as PUCRS Virtual. The survey includes information on the PUCRS Virtual A total number of students (on-campus and DE students): 33,334, a number of professors: 1,913
B. QA Unit

QA organizational structures in the mega universities and the selected DE institutions can be categorized into three types (Table 2).

A centralized total QA system: There are universities that have set up a centralized total quality management system to coordinate and oversee the implementation of QA activities university-wide based on policies and guidelines formulated by QA-related boards or committees. Those centralized units are operated based on university revenue. Examples include:

- UT (Indonesia)’s QA Centre,
- OUM (Malaysia)’s Centre for Quality Management and Research & Innovation,
- STOU (Thailand)’s Educational QA Coordinating Centre,
- Athabasca’s Office of Institutional Studies,
- AIOU’s Research and Evaluation Centre
- Monash University (Australia)’s Centre for Higher Education Quality, and Centre for Learning and Teaching Support (Each of the two units is involved with different aspects of QA)
- OU (UK)’s QA team and a Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, and
- OUHK (China)’s a QA coordinator

A collective QA system: A QA system of some universities is set and run by the boards, the councils, and/or the committees rather than an independent QA unit in administration. Each body has distinctive roles in different stages of QA processes or in different areas of QA activities.
At IGNOU (India), School Boards, Planning Committee, and Academic Council are responsible for overseeing QA policies and implementations.

At Anadolu (Turkey), University Senate, University Executive Board, Academic Advisory Board, Course Accreditation and Review Committee, and Instructional Design Committee play a significant role in QA and accreditation.

A dispersed QA system: There are universities where QA is a part of responsibilities of one or more related administration offices. Some examples include:

- At CCRIVU, units responsible for assuring quality of distance education include the Educational Administration Division, the Center of Learning Support Service, the Center of Examination, and the Academic Assessment Office.
- KNOU (Korea) has a QA system where quality is not a specified responsibility of any particular post or office, rather it is a responsibility of all related offices and academic divisions.
- At PS World Campus, the academic departments of PSU are responsible for academic quality assurance. Whereas, the Quality and Planning Unit of the World Campus is responsible for monitoring and improving internal process quality and the Academic Program Planning Unit of the World Campus oversees several types of evaluation including faculty and student satisfaction with DE programs, drop-out surveys, and end-of-course surveys.
- PUCRS Virtual is collaborating with other units in the University to manage and oversee the quality of DE courses and support services.
C. QA Policies and Regulations

QA policies and regulations have been set in all the institutions surveyed. However, the degree of elaboration in those policies and regulations, and the level of integration with the general university policy framework and the national QA framework vary across the institutions.

- The QA policies and regulations at IGNOU are in conformity with the QA guidelines determined by the national QA agency, the Distance Education Council (DEC) of India.
- OUM’s policies comply with the national quality system of Private Distance Education.
- Anadolu’s distance education programs and courses comply with the standards and requirements of the Informatics National Committee.
- OUUK’s Qualifications Framework is consistent with the national Frameworks for Qualifications in Higher Education and Credit Guidelines for HE Qualifications.

In some cases where the national QA framework for DE provides rather general guidelines or there is no national QA framework specifically for DE institutions, institutions have developed own their QA policies and regulations. Such examples include AIOU, Athabasca, KNOU, OUHK, CCRTVU, SHTVU, PUCRS Virtual, and PS World Campus.

As for the level of specification in QA policies and regulations, OUUK, UT and Athabasca provide good examples of an elaborated system.

- OUUK has developed the “Guide to Quality and Standards in the Open University” that provides a guide to the structural and procedural arrangements
for internal quality assurance.

• UT has adopted the AAOU Quality Assurance Framework to develop the "Quality Assurance System for Universitas Terbuka". This new quality assurance system encompasses nine components and 107 quality criteria or statements of best practices. Each criterion is further delineated into indicators and methods of achievement.

• Athabasca has developed the "Program Review Policy" to "provide a context, and to identify the responsibility for, a regular review cycle of the University's programs." Athabasca's programs are normally reviewed at least every six years, or more frequently.

D. QA Methods

A variety of QA methods are observed in the distance teaching universities (See Table 3). Some common methods include providing a wide range of opportunities for training workshops, conducting evaluation research, introducing internal review processes, and inviting external audits and assessments. Detailed guidelines or directions for assessing quality in selected key areas of distance education at the course and program level are also provided by many(some, most) programs.

Training and professional development: The clearest examples of providing training opportunities are shown in several cases.

• OUUK specifies initial induction and training, and continuous staff development opportunities for its salaried staff, academic staff, and associate lecturers in the "Guide to Quality and Standards". Formal training
sessions, workshops, resources, moderated online courses, and seminars are offered.

- IGNOU, AIOU, SHTVU, and OUM provide orientation programs or a series of training courses for course writers, tutors, and/or counselors.
- PS World Campus offers the professional development program focusing on pedagogical, administrative, and technical issues to provide learning opportunities for faculty and staff to support and improve online DE courses. Two online training courses, seminars, Faculty Think Tank, and technical training events have been offered.
- PUCRS Virtual (Brazil) developed the “Pedagogic Architecture” to provide a competency based guideline to its staff.

**Evaluation and monitoring of staff performance.**

Evaluation and monitoring of staff performance is another method to ensure the quality of distance education. Examples include:

- AIOU monitors routine duties of its staff and also prepares a formal Annual Confidential Report that includes evaluation of staff performance by each section head in charge.
- KNOU evaluates performance of tutors based on students’ evaluation of their services and tutorials.
- At OUUK, the "Manual of Personnel Policies and Procedures" specifies the job evaluation policy and procedure of salaried staff and the "Associate Lecturer Handbook" clarifies appraisal system for associate lecturers.
- Athabasca conducts the annual individual performance assessments for academic and professional staff.
QA in course development: The internal quality assurance system during the development of courses/programs and materials is well integrated into the whole operation of most distance teaching universities. Two examples are selected to illustrate QA measures in course development.

• OUUK provides the Course Management Guide and adopts the course team approach in approving and developing courses. The course team carries the academic responsibility for ensuring the quality of each course. All course teams are required to nominate an External Course Assessor for external assessment of course design, the effectiveness of teaching materials, and other related issues. All the OUUK courses are subject to annual monitoring and a more intensive review process during their three year life.

• At OUHK and UT, the course development process begins from an idea of program development followed by a market survey or needs analysis. During the whole process of course development at OUHK which could take between 12 to 24 months, several quality assessment steps are taken. Those steps include the external course assessment, internal validation, examinations by Senate, tutor and external examiners, and students' feedback.

QA in learner assessment: The quality assurance procedure during assessment and examinations development is well laid out in a few distance teaching universities.

• OUUK operates an Examination and Assessment Board for every course. This board is responsible for the production of the examination paper, marking guidelines, the award of course results, and other related matters.
Athabasca University specifies and implements the learning outcomes assessment plan and process.
AIOU reviews the process of student evaluation and makes suggestions for improvement.
The Monash University provides detailed procedures for assuring the quality of assessment and evaluation.
At IGNOU, a marking scheme is prepared and made available to all examiners to avoid inter-examiner variability. OUM uses external resources to mark student answer scripts.

**Inviting external experts:** Involvement of external reviewers or experts during course development and material production is also a common method of assuring the quality in most of the distance teaching universities surveyed. As mentioned above, KNOU, AIOU, IGNOU, UT, STOU, OUM, OUHK, Athabasca, and Monash invite external experts in their QA processes.

**E. Use of QA Results**

For most institutions, the predominant objectives of internal QA activities are self-improvement and accountability to the society in general and to the National QA authority in specific. Thus, the internal QA results are used for self-improvement and/or external evaluation.

**Accountability:** Heavy involvement of external experts is often observed in some cases where the primary objective of QA is accountability. Examples include:

- IGNOU, being appraised by the Open and Distance Education Assessment and Accreditation Board of DEC at intervals of 5 years, integrates the prescribed norms
and standards set by DEC in its internal QA system, and evaluates implementation of those norms and standards constantly with the help from external reviewers.

• An important motivating factor in all the QA activities is external in nature at OUUK where QA results are used for the basis of public funding decision.
• UT’s external assessment has involved experts from the Directorate General of Higher Education on a semester basis, as well as from the National Accreditation Board of Higher Education on a 3 to 4 year basis.
• OUM, seeking ISO 9001:2000 certification for some of its service divisions, recruits external experts within and outside of Malaysia for developing and delivering each course.
• Athabasca, seeking accreditation with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education* in USA, is engaged in an extensive self-study and invites experts from the United States. A comprehensive learning outcomes assessment plan and summary of institutional assessment activities are under development.

**Self-improvement:** Feedback from internal and external reviewers and students are used to improve the quality of courses, programs, materials and services of most of the distance teaching universities surveyed. Two selected examples are:

• IGNOU keeps all the records of discussions of various committees and experts to ensure that the recommendations of the committees and experts are

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* Athabasca achieved a status of Candidate for Accreditation by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, USA, in 2002.
incorporated in improving key aspects of its courses, programs, and services.

- PS World Campus conducts student surveys of satisfaction with programs and perceived learning outcomes, faculty satisfaction surveys, drop-out surveys, and the end-of-course surveys periodically. The results of these surveys are shared internally and with the academic departments and faculty members as the basis for improvement.

**F. QA Areas and Criteria**

The universities surveyed have developed QA criteria for key areas of distance education. OUUK, UT and OUM provide detailed criteria for each of these key areas. Most of the universities tend to have more detailed criteria especially for Program/Course Design and Development, Learner Supports, and Assessment. These areas are more directly related to student learning. Monash has devised a set of QA criteria and monitoring procedures especially for course/materials development and student services. Similarly, AIOU, IGNOU, SHTVU, and KNOU put a great emphasis on QA in the areas of course/materials production and student support services. OUHK’s five principle areas for QA include new program development, ongoing program review, new course development, ongoing review of course presentation, and learner assessment. Table 2 below summarizes the key QA areas of the distance teaching universities surveyed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>QA Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIOU (Pakistan)</td>
<td>◦ Courses and their effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Tutorial support</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Student problems</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Methods of course production</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Cost effectiveness of courses</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Outcome of courses and programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Servicing/Operational departments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anadolu (Turkey)</td>
<td>◦ Academic and professional enhancements of programs and courses (specified not given)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IGNOU (India)</td>
<td>◦ Needs and objectives of the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Content and level of the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Duration of the program</td>
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<td></td>
<td>◦ Language of the course material</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Presentation of the content</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Transforming the content into distance format</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Delivery of the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Assessment of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCRTVU (China)</td>
<td>◦ Policy and Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Course design and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Learner support services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Learner assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Media and technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Unified requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNU (Korea)</td>
<td>◦ Learner support services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Tutorials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ e-Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Textbook development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Broadcasting program development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OU (UK)</td>
<td>◦ Institutional management of quality and standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Framework for academic quality and standards</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Internal review</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Assessment and awards</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Collaborative awards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Student support and guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Accountability to stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHITVU (China)</td>
<td>◦ Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Teaching affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Academic staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Course design and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Media for learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◦ Study centers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STOU (Thailand)</td>
<td>◦ Not specified</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### UT (Indonesia)
- Policy and planning
- Human resource provision and development
- Management and administration
- Learners
- Program/course design and development
- Learner support
- Learner assessment
- Media

### Athabasca (Canada)
- Openness
- Flexibility
- Quality/Courses, Programs and Student Support Services
- Organization and people
- Provincial, national, and international positioning
- Fiscal health

### Monash (Australia)
- Content
- Academic support
- Assessment and marking
- Administrative function
- Liaison

### OUHK (Hong Kong, China)
- New program development
- Ongoing program review
- New course development
- Ongoing review of course presentation
- Learner assessment

### OUM (Malaysia)
- Policy
- Planning
- Human resource provision
- Course design and development
- Learner support services
- Learner assessment
- Media and technology
- Other (delivery systems, record keeping, scheduling)

### PS World Campus (USA)
- In the process of developing and implementing specific performance metrics

### PUCRS Virtual (Brazil)
- Administration, pedagogic architecture, technologies and support services.

### G. QA System for Imported/Exporting DE Programs

From the survey data, one can conclude that there has been no need for most of the distance teaching universities to develop a comprehensive QA system for both imported and exporting distance education programs. There are, however,

*These areas are included in the Targets and Measures of the “Strategic University Plan.”*
some exceptions (Table 3).

- IGNOU has set QA guidelines for exporting programs. First, the credibility of partner institutions will be reviewed in collaboration with Indian High commissions and Embassies abroad. Second, IGNOU approves local tutors and counselors appointed by the partner institutions based on their curriculum vita. Those approved tutors and counselors receive training sessions on student support services from IGNOU faculty. Finally, the examination scripts are marked centrally by IGNOU to provide reliability of student assessment.

- OU specifies the arrangements for managing curriculum partnerships and collaborative provision in its Guide to Quality and Standards as follows the "Curriculum Partnerships Committee is responsible for all regulatory and procedural matters relating to curriculum partnerships and for their approval subject to approval by Curriculum and Awards Board at later stage". Operational Toolkit Series and Operational Fact Sheets are developed by the Curriculum Partnerships Advisory Service and provide advice, guidance and other information on curriculum partnership arrangements to all units of OU. These arrangements hold true for both exported and imported DE programs.

- Athabasca has specific guidelines and procedures in its policy on Strategic Partnerships. This policy also includes assessments for various risks involved in strategic partnerships and international activities. Characteristics of a Strategic Partnership include: objectives which are seek to extend and or broaden the activities of the University beyond its normal business; mutually beneficial to the parties; outline
measurable outputs; contain details on the responsibilities and contributions of each partner; typically cover a pre-defined period of time; components vary depending on the business category and the needs of the parties.

- Consistent with the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee's "Provision of Education For International Students: Code of Practice and Guidelines for Australian Universities", Monash's Off-Shore QA Committee approves all courses, new and existing, offered off-shore. QA criteria for off-shore (exporting) courses include: details of Monash provider and partner(s), structure, content and delivery of the course, admissions requirements for students, human resources to support the course, teaching approaches and assessment, facilities, course management and evaluation, marketing the course, and financial resources and contract arrangements.

Table 3. QA System for Imported/Exporting Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>QA system for imported DE programs</th>
<th>QA system for exporting DE programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IGNOU (India)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>QA guidelines for exporting programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OU (UK)</td>
<td>QA standards and procedures for curriculum partnerships and collaborative provision</td>
<td>QA standards and procedures for curriculum partnerships and collaborative provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athabasca (Canada)</td>
<td>Policy on Strategic Partnerships</td>
<td>Policy on Strategic Partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monash (Australia)</td>
<td>Information Not Given</td>
<td>QA criteria for off-shore courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUHK (Hong Kong, China)</td>
<td>No internal review of imported course materials; but use materials produced by accredited institutions</td>
<td>Information Not Given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS World Campus (USA)</td>
<td>QA standards and procedures for shared programs</td>
<td>QA standards and procedures for shared programs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
H. QA System for E-Learning

A separated QA system for e-learning has not been developed in most of the institutions investigated. Instead, most cases adopt the same QA criteria as they use in QA for conventional DE to assess and manage the quality of e-learning programs or courses.

- KNOU, however, has developed more detailed criteria to monitor the quality of its e-learning courses and services. Besides its conventional DE courses, KNOU has offered 60 online courses on the Web. Three QA measures are taken during the development and delivery of e-learning courses. First, before developing any e-learning course, a review team, consisting of content experts and design experts, evaluate the appropriateness of e-learning development and objectives, accuracy of the contents, and structure of the contents. Second, the review team, once a certain course is accepted as an e-learning course, assesses its pedagogical strategies, multimedia components, user interface, and course management functions. Third, two formal evaluation sessions are administered during the development process. The e-learning site under development will be open to the public and the review team to be monitored. Comments from the public (including students) and the experts are collected and used to improve the e-learning course.

- Whereas KNOU has developed totally online courses, OUM has integrated e-learning components into its conventional courses and thus introduced different QA measures for these e-learning components. At Monash the Educational Design Group is located within its
Centre for Learning and Teaching Support. This Group specifically assists with the evaluation of e-learning design. AIUO has adopted QA process in developing multimedia contents for its courses.

Even though some universities such as OUUK, PUCRS Virtual, Athabasca, CCRTVU, and SHTVU are actively incorporating e-learning components in their DE programs, no specific QA measures for e-learning components have been provided.

I. Link to National QA Framework for DE

Internal QA systems of most of the institutions surveyed have been linked to the national QA framework either for DE or for HE in general (See Table 4).

A separate national QA framework for DE: Turkey and India have a separate committee or agency for assuring and managing the quality of DE.

- Anadolu reports that its QA system complies with the standards and requirements of the national QA body for distance education, that is, the Informatics National Committee (http://euclid.ii.metu.edu.tr/EMK). This committee is a sub-committee of the Higher Education Council which oversees the quality of higher education in Turkey.
- IGNOU follows the standards and guidelines for quality assurance determined by the national QA agency for DE, that is, the Distance Education Council (DEC: http://www.ignou.ac.in/dec). The faculty of IGNOU has worked very closely with this Council in developing the standards and guidelines in DE.
A national QA framework for HE: Other countries such as UK, Indonesia, Malaysia adopt the QA system for higher education to oversee and monitor the quality of DE institutions. In some cases such as OUM and PS World Campus, separate sets of QA guidelines for DE programs are applied in assessing the quality of DE.

- OUUK’s QA system is closely linked to the national QA framework for universities and colleges. OUUK is subject to at least three forms of external assessment undertaken by the Funding Councils and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. The three kinds of assessment include assessments of: 1) subjects or teaching, 2) research, and 3) institutional performance and management.

- UT programs are accredited by the National Accreditation Board of Higher Education and have been assessed by the Directorate General of Higher Education using the "QA Guideline for Higher Education".

- Similarly, OUM, accredited by the National Accreditation Board, have been evaluated by the national QA standards for private DE set by the Department of Private Education of Ministry of Education, the body constantly monitoring the quality of every private institution in Malaysia.

- PS World Campus is periodically evaluated by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. This Association has adopted QA guidelines relating specifically to DE programs.

- Other distance teaching universities such as CCRTVU, SHTVU, STOU, OUHK, KNOU, and Monash are also evaluated by the national QA body for HE. Separate evaluation criteria for assessing the quality for DE have not been reported in these cases.
International QA framework: Besides a close link to the national QA framework, Monash has obtained ISO9001 certification. UT and OUM are developing QA systems to acquire ISO certification. UT is also in the process of seeking international accreditation and quality certification from the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE). Athabasca is working towards obtaining accreditation with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education in the USA.

III. Discussions

A. Convergence of a Quality Culture

The present survey reveals that a quality culture has been emerging, if not fully integrated, in the mega universities and other DE institutions investigated. A quality culture can be defined as an institutional culture which promotes the introduction of an internal QA system, values the capacity building for implementing QA arrangements, stresses the link between the internal QA system and accountability to the public at the national and international levels, and focuses on learning rather than teaching.

· Implementation of QA standards and procedures: A majority of the institutions have developed and implemented QA standards and procedures in key areas of DE activities (See Table 2). Half of the DE institutions surveyed have institutionalized a central QA unit and thus sought the development of a more systematic and coherent quality culture.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>National QA Body for HE</th>
<th>Other features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIOU (Pakistan)</td>
<td>Information not given</td>
<td>Information not given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anadolu (Turkey)</td>
<td>Informatics National Committee (a subcommittee of Higher Education Council)</td>
<td>A separate QA body for DE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCRTVU (China)</td>
<td>Higher Education Division of Ministry of Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IGNOU (India)</td>
<td>Distance Education Council</td>
<td>A separate QA body for DE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNOU (Korea)</td>
<td>Korean Council for University Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OU (UK)</td>
<td>Funding Councils and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHTVU (China)</td>
<td>Higher Education Division of Ministry of Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STOU (Thailand)</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UT (Indonesia)</td>
<td>Directorate General of Higher Education of Ministry of National Education</td>
<td>“Government Regulation on Distance Education” will be established; Towards ISO and ICDE certifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athabasca (Canada)</td>
<td>QA Council in Alberta</td>
<td>Towards accreditation with Middle States Commission on Higher Education, USA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monash (Australia)</td>
<td>Australian Universities Quality Agency</td>
<td>Obtain ISO9001 certification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUHK (Hong Kong, China)</td>
<td>Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUM (Malaysia)</td>
<td>Department of Private Education of Ministry of Education</td>
<td>Separate sets of QA criteria for DE applied; Towards ISO9001:2000 certification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS World Campus (USA)</td>
<td>Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools</td>
<td>Separate sets of QA criteria for DE applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUCRS Virtual (Brazil)</td>
<td>Brazilian Ministry of Education (Distance Education Act)</td>
<td>Also recognized by National Counselors of Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
· **Capacity building efforts:** Another indicator for the emergence of a quality culture is the capacity-building efforts made by the institutions. At least half of the institutions surveyed have provided continuous staff development opportunities to their academic and administrative staff in pursuit of quality improvement. Inviting external experts at various stages of DE provision in a majority of the DE institutions surveyed is also one kind of capacity-building efforts.

· **Links to external/international QA framework:** A quality can be defined as excellence. Most DE institutions have shown an aspiration of obtaining national recognition as a high quality DE provider. Some have gone beyond the national level accreditation and recognition and pursued international recognition such as ISO certification or accreditation from other countries.

· **Shift from teaching to learning:** The survey data show that there is a substantial shift in QA emphasis from teaching (input) to learning (output). Most DE universities have gathered evidence, through the use of feedback from students, internal and external reviews, analysis of learner assessment and benchmarks, to optimize students’ learning and identify appropriate teaching strategies to obtain best learning results.

**B. Diversity of Systems in Quality Assurance**

The survey shows that there exists a variety of QA systems of distance education even though the globalization of higher education and the development of technology have
brought distance teaching universities closer together in terms of developing a common quality culture.

- **Level of QA policy integration**: While the DE institutions share a quality culture in general, the level of QA policy integration in an overall university policy framework varies across the institutions. In some institutions where the internal QA system is closely linked to the national QA framework, internal QA policies comply with the national QA standards and procedures, and are well integrated into the general university policy and performance framework, as in the case of OUUK and UT. QA results are often used for staff evaluation and promotion. However, in some other cases, QA policies are established only at the unit level, not at the institutional level, and thus not firmly integrated into the larger university policy and performance framework.

- **QA standards and criteria**: Some DE institutions apply a set of standards and criteria which are pre-determined by the institution or the national quality assurance agency to evaluate and monitor key areas of distance education. Those institutions tend to have a more centralized QA system than others. Other institutions provide only general guidelines or areas for QA and leave room for internal and external review teams or individual units within the institution to make QA judgments.

- **Centralized vs dispersed QA**: Some mechanisms for assuring quality of distance education adopt a rigorous internal QA structure. Foremost among these can be
found in those institutions such as OUUK, Monash, UT, and IGNOU where periodical accreditation is required and/or funding of DE universities is done through external assessments and audits. In these cases, a more centralized QA system is in place and the predominant objective of QA is toward more accountability of institutions. In systems where the accountability concern does not dominate, the QA system is less centralized and the primary objective is self-improvement of institutions, as in the case of CCRTVU, AIOU, KNOU, PUCRS Virtual, and SHTVU.

**Focus Areas of QA:** In most institutions, QA arrangements focus on course and program development and delivery. Performance assessment of tutors and staff members is also emphasized in many cases even though performance indicators are not specified except in a few cases. In some cases, QA in learner assessments is highlighted. A few cases gather students’ feedback on courses, programs, support services, and materials. Views of different stakeholders are also sought as in the case of OUUK. These data indicate that the culture of evidence that emphasizes what students have learned rather than what an institution has provided is beginning to emerge in a limited context.

**IV. Conclusions**

In the context of distance education, seeking measures to assure high quality is a relatively new phenomenon. More focus has been given to widening access (Bradley &
Yates, 2000; Perraton & Lentell, 2003). But the environment has changed. The higher education market including DE is becoming more competitive and globalized. New types of technologies challenge the way DE institutions teach. Some DE institutions are facing decreasing enrollments and revenues while costs and competition for students are increasing. QA is now perceived as a key factor for widening access to higher education. QA can also be perceived as an important factor for mutual confidence throughout distance education institutions in a globalized society. The survey itself does not suggest context-sensitive QA strategies for each DE institution. However, some future directions can be drawn from QA experiences of the DE institutions surveyed.

**Focus on students’ learning:** Even though more and more DE institutions are incorporating assessment of learning in their QA mechanisms, internal QA efforts in DE institutions have been focusing mostly on course and material development. There is a need to extend the internal quality audit to other areas such as learning outcomes and experience of learners (Kim & Jung, 2002). One can start by aligning four elements of DE - learning objectives, teaching and learning methods and technology use, learning outcome assessment, and learning experiences. DE institutions need to routinely assess the quality of distance learning on evidence of student achievement.

**Attention to performance indicators:** As seen in the survey, some DE institutions have developed performance indicators so that they can monitor their performance against organizational objectives and key principles of their plan. In the context of globalization, international comparative indicators are becoming indispensable (Fielden & Abercromby,
2001). Distance education is not outside of this trend. DE institutions should pay more attention to the importance of performance indicators in meeting the needs of an international society.

**Emphasis on lifelong learning culture:** Visions and mission statements of most DE institutions include the creation of lifelong learning society. In order to contribute to the creation of a lifelong learning society, DE institutions need to develop and monitor a climate of lifelong learning amongst their own staff and students. The details of a regulatory QA framework will indeed facilitate DE institutions which are themselves lifelong learning organizations.
References


List of Abbreviations

AAOU: Asian Association of Open Universities
AIOU: Allama Iqbal Open University (Pakistan)
Anadolu: Anadolu University (Turkey)
Athabasca: Athabasca University (Canada)
CCRTVU: China Central Radio and TV University (China)
DE: distance education
HE: higher education
ICT: information and communication technology
IGNOU: Indira Gandhi National Open University (India)
KNOU: Korea National Open University (Korea)
Monash: Monash University (Australia)
OUHK: Open University (Hong Kong, China)
OUM: Open University Malaysia (Malaysia)
OUUK: Open University (UK)
PS World Campus: Penn State University (PSU) World Campus, USA
PUCRS: Pontific al Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil)
QA: quality assurance
SHTVU: Shanghi TV University (China)
STOU: Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (Thailand)
UT: Universitas Terbuka or Indonesian Open Learning University (Indonesia)