

## Best Practices Standards for Quality Assurance of Open Distance eLearning

<sup>1</sup>Dr Esther Njiro and <sup>2</sup>Ms Liana Griesel

<sup>1</sup>Quality Assurance Specialist  
Department of Strategic Planning and Quality Assurance  
O.R Tambo Building 9 Room 18  
<sup>2</sup>Executive Director  
Department of Planning & Quality assurance (DPQA).

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### Abstract

This paper set out to review best practices for quality assurance (QA) and explore the multiple ways and various purposes of defining standards with a desire to make sense of quality standards within a participatory quality culture in open-distance eLearning (ODeL) higher education institutions (HEIs). Concerns are that despite the rapid growth of distant education (DE), the metrics used for evaluating quality standards for learner-centred instructional and delivery continue to be limited. ODeL standard development and the learning management system (LMS) have not captured the eLearning quality enhancing perspectives. Best practices require quality actors/institutions agreeing to link standards to QA. Learner-centered teaching focuses on use of various relevant media in open distance learning (ODL) or ODeL. Emerging technologies include various types of media: print, audio, video, telephone, computer-based and mobile hand-held devices that have improved communication systems by synchronising learning delivery processes in ODeL systems. This paper highlights best practices in standard development that encourage multi-stakeholder involvement particularly academics the primary quality implementers. Self-assessment of learning, teaching, quality improvement and innovative learner-centred ODeL standard development by academics are recommended.

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**Keywords:** standards, criteria, quality assurance, best practices, ODeL

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### INTRODUCTION

The Internet has impacted and forever changed higher education institutions (HEIs) in many ways, including instructional materials and the delivery of learning in DE. Learner-centered teaching focuses on what students are learning and how they acquire such knowledge through various relevant media. Technologies related to the Internet, World Wide Web and information communication technologies (ICTs) have changed education to a service delivered over global networks with a promise of being accessible to anybody, anywhere and anytime (Titlestad et.al. 2015). Concerns over quality standards and assurance of information available to ODeL students have been expressed. Harman (1998:346), an Australian educationist, commented on the trend as follows:

Wherever you go, managers of higher education systems and institutions today, are concerned about quality and how to put in place appropriate quality assurance mechanisms, while ministers, bureaucrats, employees and business interests are all increasingly concerned about the outputs of higher education institutions and the suitability of graduates to meet workplace needs.

Open education resources (OER) based on the idea that knowledge is a public good to be shared, used,

and reused (O'Reilly, 2007) have exacerbated the issues. Challenges are: to develop standards to ensure QA of the freely available OERs; enhance institutional quality culture (QC); and provide efficient operations for competitiveness in many ODeL institutions. How to determine the type of high quality standards for teaching and learning in an ODeL delivery mode that meets external and internal QA evidence-based procedures are other challenges. Metrics used for evaluating quality of online instructions, and all the OERs to which students are accessible are limited. Best practices to enhance quality delivery of ODeL and transform it from being teacher/instructional dependent while opening access to adequate and high quality learning information are the focus of this paper.

### PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this paper was to seek best practices for quality standard development by reviewing multiple ways of defining standards within a participatory quality culture in ODeL institutions. Standards and quality are complex terms whose constructs are prone to various interpretations, dimensions and meanings (Harvey, 2006 & the often-cited older version Harvey & Green, 1993). Quality was defined as exceptional, purposeful, accountable and transformational and each institution has to be clear about the quality notions that their standards are

built upon or aimed at. At University of South Africa (Unisa) standards are seen as meeting a minimum of set criteria. Quality teaching for example has been frequently linked to student satisfaction standards and the question is whether these could measure competence and skills. The implications for setting, changing or raising the respective standards differ substantially within institutions. This paper searched for best practices of setting standards at distance education (DE), ODL, online learning and ODeL institutions (there is no universal name for the eLearning institutions) to inform and add value to quality processes of Department of Planning and Quality Assurance (DPQA) at Unisa.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a review of existing literature using various search engines beginning with a broad search in Google Scholar, followed by a narrower search in educational databases, including, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and SAGE. DPQA librarian assisted in general library search. Sorting loads of articles to extract relevant information was this author's task. The author also identified both peer-reviewed journal articles and publications from professional organizations, such the European University Association, Commonwealth of Learning and the DPQA reports all specializing on quality assurance matters. The following topics are the content of this paper:

- Introduction
- Operation definition of concepts
- Problems with quality standards
- Existing standards for evaluating quality at Unisa
- QA best practices for standards of online programs
- STOU example
- Quality standards issues and concerns
- Lessons from STOU and other online institutions
- QA Model
- Discussion and conclusions

## Operational Definition of Concepts

Quality Assurance (QA) is the planned and systematic review process of an institution or programme to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being met, maintained and enhanced (Hayward, 2012:58). The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)(2004:20) described QA as the systematic, structured and continuous attention to maintenance and improvement of quality. Standards are the indicators of the level of requirements and conditions that must be met by institutions or programmes to be accredited or certified by a quality assurance or accrediting agency. These involve expectations about quality, attainment, effectiveness,

financial viability, outcomes, and sustainability (Hayward, 2012:58).

All standards have a normative function to provide consistent scales and measures, regulate actions, set limits or facilitate comparisons (Lueger, and Vettori, 2008). Standards may be handled in two ways: as fixed parameters which do not give much leeway to the actors involved; or they can be addressed as adaptable concepts which react sensitively to changes of their base of reference. The two authors caution that extra consideration should be paid to the political aspects involved if standards are mainly used to assist central management to control and steer processes. There are cases of upper/lower limit standards or standards with a broad range of tolerance which users have to be aware of. In this paper standards are defined as levels of achievement that can be qualitatively or quantitatively measured.

Increased demand for standards as guidelines for QA is a global phenomenon as pressure, competitiveness of successful graduates in HEIs increases. Standards and benchmarks are important as they gauge improvements and accountability in HEIs. Every nation and its university graduates are competing in an environment shaped by its own local and national needs. It is imperative that educators, policy makers and academics strive to set appropriate standards to suit their contexts. As institutions enhance the quality of their activities through the systematic introduction of internal mechanisms, they use standards that have a direct correlation to external QA processes. Quality standards have undisputed importance within all types of QA systems in higher education.

## Defining Quality

Quality as stakeholder-relative term is not a unitary concept, rather an elusive, slippery and multi-dimensional concept difficult to define. Because of its vagueness quality has a double-edged potential in that firstly, it is conducive to meeting the needs and interests of various internal and external stakeholders and secondly, it renders the concept of quality difficult to operationalize, because of its vagueness and imprecision (Bering, et al., 2010). Each institution has to seek its own practical approach acknowledging the relative nature of quality to its stakeholders. The context and the particular assurance mechanisms associated with quality, such as assessment, audit, and accreditation are dominant.

Traditionally quality was perceived as a mechanism used to anticipate and avoid faults or mistakes. A pragmatic stakeholders approach is more likely to foster a culture of QA as ongoing improvement, particularly within the dynamic, diverse, and unpredictable context of HEIs.

### Defining Quality Assurance (QA)

While quality is subjected to multiple narratives and perspectives, QA seems to be both achievable and implementable. As a methodology QA is used to judge the achievement of organizational aims and objectives. International codes of best practice in higher education quality assurance state the following purpose for QA:

- To safeguard and promote public confidence in the quality of higher education.
- To assist institutions enhance the quality of their provisions.
- To improve the quality of academic programs for students and other beneficiaries of higher education (ASEAN, 2004).

QA also clarifies processes and outcomes to ensure transparency, encourage quality culture of improvements and provide a measure of accountability for investment of public and private funding. Internal and external QA generates reliable public information helpful to potential students, employers, parents, governments and informs quality assurance agencies such as Council for Higher Education (CHE).

QA internal processes are periodic monitoring, reviews of learning programmes in line with internal learning management system (LMS), policies and procedures. QA strategy is to ensure that academic adapt and own a culture of implementing continuous quality enhancement in teaching and learning programmes, assessments, awards and making these processes publicly available.

### Problem with Quality Standards

Substantial criticism surrounding the use standards as guidelines and best practices to measure quality have been raised (Hathaway, 2009). There are those who say that standards are biased towards an individual respondent's views as they tend to depend on the judgments of each respondent. The quantitative methods used to gather data tend to elicit opinions that agree with the epistemological perspective of an institution (Scanlan, 2003). Another weakness is that standards focus attention on accreditation agencies' agendas, interests, and areas of expertise. The standards benchmarks are created by those whose instructional principles are derived from traditional face to face institutional backgrounds (Mandernach, Donnelly, Dailey & Schulte, 2005). Piña and Bohn (2014:32) found that most learning management systems (LMSs) are not able to capture the observed behaviour elicited by the following questions in an online course:

- Has the instructor logged in at least an average of every other day and what they do in the computer?
- Has the instructor posted more than a biography or contact info?
- Has the instructor posted announcements at least weekly?
- Is there evidence that the instructor answers student inquiries in two days or less?
- Does the instructor participate in discussion forums where appropriate?
- Does the instructor provide feedback on assignments?

### Existing Standards for Evaluating Quality at Unisa

In South Africa, QA operates under the auspices of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) which is a sub-committee of the CHE. The HEQC was established by the Higher Education Act of 1997 and is responsible for QA in South Africa's HEIs. HEQC promotes quality in HEIs; audits quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions HEIs and ensures accreditation of HEIs' academic programmes. As a public HEI, Unisa is accountable to both internal and external stakeholders, and to the quality agencies outside the university to whom reporting is made, namely:

- Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC)
- Council for Higher Education (CHE)
- South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (DSPQA, 2015).

Unisa a leading, mega ODL University is committed to achieve its quality aims expressed through the implementation of the quality management and assurance policy the integrated quality management and assurance framework (IQMAF). This policy obliges institutions to provide transparent monitoring and evaluation of their services and offerings to all their stakeholders on a regular basis in order to address areas in need of redevelopment and improvement.

The portfolio of QA at Unisa reports directly to the Vice-Principal: institutional development, who also chairs the institutional body that oversees QA, namely the professional, administrative and academic quality assurance committee (PAAQAC). DQQA and the Bureau of Market Research (BMR) designed a comprehensive university quality evaluation instrument (UQEI) to monitor, review and promote quality at Unisa (DSPQA, 2015). Student learning experience at Unisa what is evaluated on the basis of an integrated set of ODL standards and criteria (Annual quality report 2011; Mabuza, 2013; DSPQA, 2015).

### Unisa Standards for Evaluating Teaching and Learning

Unisa is a mega university with extensive workforce and numerous policies, procedures and processes. UQEI breaks these down into steps representing different stakeholders. Evaluating the quality of its teaching and learning practices and its concomitant

support services are based on a multi faceted approach that includes relevant stakeholders across three dimensions. These three dimensions represent the “life-cycle” of a module from planning through to the delivery of a quality student learning experience practices are as follows:

- Dimension 1: Planning, resource allocation and quality management
- Dimension 2: Design and development of learning material
- Dimension 3: Delivery of a quality student learning experience

UQEI comprises a set of criteria and standards to obtain an integrated stakeholder perspective of the quality of the services to all students. The UQEI adheres closely to the criteria set by the HEQC for deliberate attempt to translate the different criteria into standards reflecting Unisa’s context. The standards are envisaged developmental rather than rigid instruments of regulating compliance. Unisa’s unique processes are broken down into steps representing the tasks of different stakeholders in enabling a quality learning experience for the student, which forms the nucleus of the UQEI. The evaluation is done by firstly taking an integrated stakeholder perspective, then accounting for the dimensions, criteria and standards facilitating quality teaching and learning.

There are about 42 criteria and 634 quality standards (DSPQA, 2015). Some generic standards occur in all instruments while other standards are stakeholder specific. The UQEI triangulate different dimensions and stakeholder groups. Specific web-enabled measurement instruments were designed for the 51 stakeholder groups. Stakeholders were invited to indicate their level of adherence to quality standards on a five point Likert scale agreement (DSPQA, 2015). UQEI focuses on strategies that enable quality student –centred learning experience.

### **Problems with UQEI**

A major challenge is that many students and academics lack capacity to engage with online technologies and as result the response rate to UQEI is very low and statistically insignificant. Many academics grapple with QA web-based information and communication restricting active involvement and understanding of UQEI purpose and other ODeL processes of delivery (Mabuza, 2014, Jung et.al. 2013).

Raising standards implies quality improvement and the use of the terms quality management has unfortunately linked QA to managerial and control approach which is usually resisted by academics. This has been an overt approach in higher education where quality has been seen as the maintenance and improvement of standards (Harvey & Green,

1993:20). A best practice would be to refer to QA as quality care a concept that stimulates fruitful debate and enhances culture of caring for quality (Berings, et.al. 2010). LMS at Unisa has not been updated to capture ODeL quality standards.

### **QA Best Practices for Assessing Online Programs**

Institutional inability to implement external and internal QA standards for ODeL has been a major challenge requiring search for best practices (Shelton & Isernhagen, n.d.). These two authors’ review cited the Sloan Consortium (Sloan C), an organization dedicated to improving the quality of online education. Sloan C expounded on Five Pillars of Quality Online Education as building blocks for quality online learning namely: learning effectiveness; access; student satisfaction; faculty satisfaction; and cost-effectiveness (Lorenzo & Moore, 2002). Wang (2006:269-274) elaborated on these as follows:

- **Learning effectiveness (LE):** demonstrates that learners who complete an online program receive education that represents the distinctive quality of the institution. The goal is for online learning to be equivalent to or better than learning through the institution’s other delivery modes (traditional face-to-face, classroom-based instruction) p.266.
- **Access:** provides the means for all qualified and motivated students to complete courses, degrees or programs in their disciplines of choice. Access includes support in: academics, tutoring, advising and library administrative (e.g., financial aid and disability support); and technical (e.g., hardware reliability, and help desk) p. 266.
- **Student satisfaction (SS)** reflects the effectiveness of all aspects of the educational experience. The goal is that all students who complete a course express satisfaction with course rigor and fairness, with professor and peer interaction, and with support services.
- **Faculty satisfaction (FS)** indicates that instructors find the online teaching experience personally rewarding and professionally beneficial. Personal factors contributing to FS include opportunities to extend interactive learning communities to new populations of students, to conduct and publish research related to online program modality, and to achieve recognition and collegiality. Institutional factors associated to FS include support, rewards, and institutional study/research p.267.
- **Cost effectiveness (CE)** enables institutions to offer their best educational value to learners in the same manner as on-campus ones. The goal is to control costs so that tuition is

affordable yet sufficient to meet development and maintenance costs, and to provide a return on investment in startup and infrastructure p.268.

The Best Practices developed by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC, 2000) comprise five components that address a particular area of institutional activity relevant to DE (Wang 2006:268-269).

- Institutional context and commitment include consistency of the online program with the institution's role and mission; its budgetary and policy commitment; the adequacy of technical and physical plant facilities; reasonable technical support for faculty and students; appropriate internal organizational structure which enables the development, coordination, support, and oversight of the online program; and meeting the legal and regulatory requirements.
- Curriculum and instruction to constitute assurance that each program of study results in collegiate level learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the degree or certificate awarded by the institute; full participation of academically qualified persons in the decisions concerning program curricula and oversight; implementation of a coherent plan for students to access all courses necessary to complete the program; appropriate interaction between instructor and students and among students; and consortia or out-sourcing standards.
- Faculty support addresses issues of faculty workload; compensation; evaluation; ownership of intellectual property resulting from the program; on-going technical support and training; and support for course design and management.
- Student support comprises institutional commitment (administrative, financial and technical) to a time period sufficient for all admitted students to complete the program; proper communication with students regarding enrollment standard, technical competency, curriculum design, time frame, cost, payment and refund policies; adequate services provided in the areas of library, bookstore, academic advising, financial aid, tutoring, career counseling and placement, and ongoing technical support and training.
- Evaluation and assessment- consist of documenting assessment of student achievement conducted in each course and at the completion of the program by comparing student performance to intended

learning outcomes; assuring the integrity of student work; securing personal information in the conduct of assessment and dissemination of results; carrying out ongoing self-evaluations pertinent to program improvement, more effective use of technology to improve pedagogy, student achievement of intended outcomes, improved retention rates, effective use of resources, and enhanced services to its internal and external constituencies.

### **Sukhothai Thammathir at Open University (STOU)Thailand**

According to Jung, Wong, &Belawati (2013:3-24) there is no QA system specifically designed for DE institutions and Sukhothai Thammathir at Open University (STOU) is the only university in Thailand that teaches solely via DE. STOU is subject to the external QA evaluation instruments and standards designed primarily for other HEIs in Thailand but with increased benchmarking from distance teaching universities in other countries. Efforts are currently underway to cooperatively develop a system of QA more suitable for STOU's open and distance learning environment.

### **Quality Assurance at STOU**

The QA process in STOU addresses the following:

- Developing curricula that comply with the Ministry of Education's Thailand Qualification Framework (TQF) of higher education;
- Implementing the concept of systematic courses in the form of block courses of six credits, each combining theory with practical experience such as assigned activities, work-based practical experience, pre-study and post-study evaluation and final examinations;
- Appointing a course production and administration team (CPAT) for each course to plan, prepare and produce course materials, and teach and evaluate the classes;
- Providing an information system allowing students to study on their own through the integration of printed core materials and supplementary media accessible to all students, such as video, audio, and electronic resources; and
- Providing supplementary media through interactive distance learning activities, radio and television broadcasts, computer-assisted instruction, e-learning, tutorial sessions, e-seminars, teleconference, and real and virtual practical experience programs.

For all of the above conditions, two dimensions of QA are implemented at STOU: internal and external QA. These processes are carried out according to the

Thai Ministry of Education guidelines, as detailed below.

**Internal QA at STOU**

Officers taking responsibility for the internal QA at STOU operate at two levels: university and individual school levels. At the university level, qualified experts from within and outside the University have the duty to set QA policies and directions, and to oversee the institution’s QA system. In each of the 12 Schools, a committee is set up to implement the procedures and regulations of the

QA system laid out by the University. There is also the QA Coordination Center, which coordinates quality issues in all departments of the University (Jung, Wong, &Belawati, 2013).

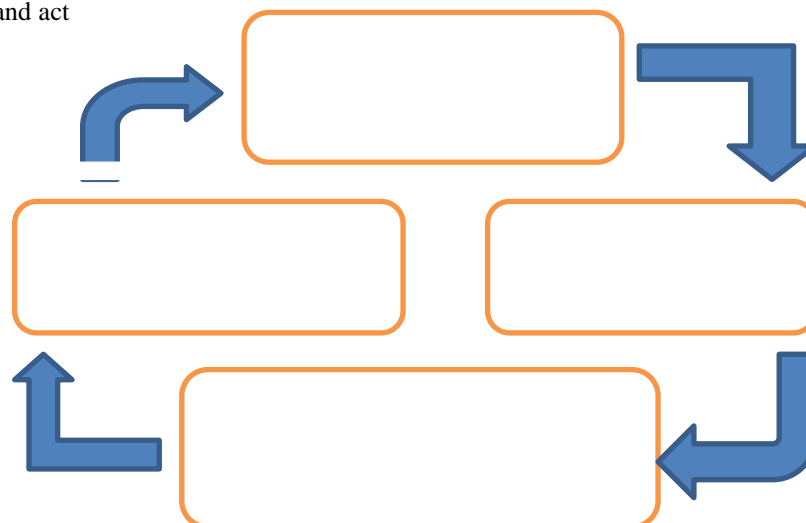
All QA processes and procedures at STOU are laid out in a “QA Calendar” in each academic year. The calendar is sent out to each unit in the University ahead of time to be used in their annual operational planning. All processes are divided into four main steps, as shown in the boxes below:

**Box 1 on Plan, Do, Check and Act**

<p><b>1. Plan: Establish department standards for engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold a meeting to clarify the QA framework.</li> <li>• Introduce QA concepts to the staff involved.</li> <li>• Create a training program for educational quality assessors.</li> <li>• Collect educational QA information and disseminate the information via the University’s website and the QA Management Information System.</li> <li>• The schools and supporting agencies verify the information.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Do : Plan, perform, and report engagements</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The schools and supporting agencies conduct QA in accordance with the standards and quality indicators that are set up for each academic year.</li> <li>• Each school and administrative unit creates a self-assessment report (SAR) for evaluation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Check: Verify department standards are met or exceeded</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The schools and supporting agencies send the self- assessment reviews (SARs) and lists of people with specialized knowledge of QA to the University’s QA Coordination Centre.</li> <li>• A list of QA assessors is submitted to the University QA evaluation committee.</li> <li>• The QA Coordination Center issues invitations to QA assessors and nominates a QA evaluation committee for each unit.</li> <li>• The committee evaluates the internal quality of every School and administrative unit.</li> <li>• The QA Coordination Center collects all information about QA and evaluation results from the schools and supporting agencies to undertake a university-level SAR.</li> <li>• Assessors are nominated and invited by the university QA Evaluation Committee.</li> <li>• The university’s educational quality is evaluated by the university QA evaluation committee.</li> <li>• Submit the annual university QA report for the internal QA to the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) and submit the annual university QA report for the external QA to the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4 Act: provide coaching and take action</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold a meeting or seminar for knowledge-sharing within the internal educational QA committee.</li> <li>• Each unit director studies the evaluation results and suggestions from the internal educational QA Committee and from the University to develop a QA enhancement plan, plan operational improvement, adjust the strategic plan or annual action plan, or make quality development projects for the next academic year.</li> </ul>

Figure one bellow depicts the plan, do, check and act in a cycle

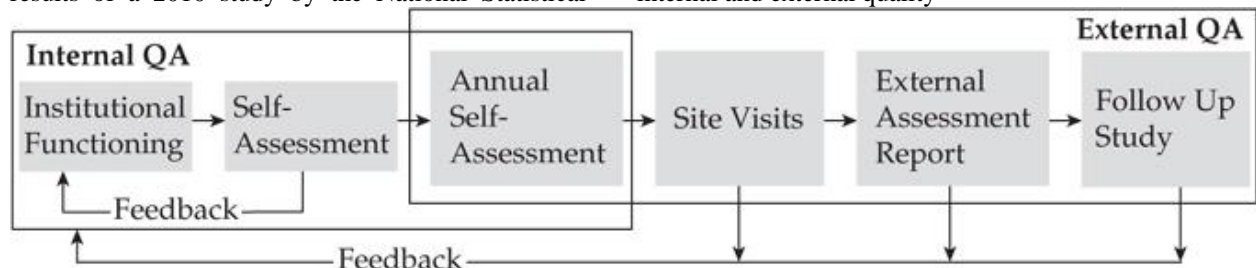
Figure 1 Plan do, check and act



Source: The Institute of Internal Auditors’ (IIA, 2014:5)

Overall, this QA system significantly benefits STOU by attesting to the quality of DE, including curricula, subject offerings, services for students, and the graduates themselves. This was confirmed by the results of a 2010 study by the National Statistical

Office of Thailand, in which 95 percent of employers and other supervisors were satisfied with the quality of STOU graduates. Integrating internal and external QA is shown by figure 2 below: Figure 2 Integrated internal and external quality



Source: Office of the Higher Education Commission (2010, p. 17).

STOU places a high priority on QA in its education and management by applying policies that include the following:

- Developing an education QA system that is consistent with existing internal working procedures in order to maintain the University’s educational standards according to the system of standards, rules, and guidelines for quality control, quality evaluation, and QA laid-down by the educational QA Committee;
- Supporting 12 schools, offices, institutes, centers and other divisions within STOU to improve the quality of their services by establishing related committees or working groups on issues of quality;
- Promoting and supporting the participation of public and private external agencies in the university’s quality assessment process in order to consistently develop and make adjustments to educational quality at STOU;
- Supporting the participation of faculty, staff and students in the QA processes, and promoting an awareness of all parties regarding their responsibilities in fostering the quality;
- Encouraging public relations and dissemination of information on the university’s educational QA activities.

To implement these QA policies, STOU has:

- Appointed educational QA committee made up of qualified experts from both inside and outside the University. It is responsible for setting policy, making decisions, and overseeing QA in the University so that it complies with the goals and standards of STOU and the country;
- Appointed QA working groups for schools, offices, institutes, centers, and supporting agencies. Each QA working group is responsible for planning and executing QA within their respective divisions in accordance with the aims and standards of the University and the country;

- Established the QA coordination center which is similar to a university-level body like DPQA responsible for planning and coordinating with internal and external agencies to enable each agency to conduct their work according to the goals or standards of the University and the country;
- Adopted the “PDCA” (Plan–Do–Check–Act) process as the principal mechanism for addressing each QA indicator and integrated internal and external QA indicators;
- Established and maintained a common QA database set, developed and maintained to act as a central source of information for QA. The QA management information system database is used in QA activities, such as planning, decision-making, and preparing online QA assessments;
- Developed the STOU QA manual that integrates the national, internal, and external QA indicators into the STOU’s internal system so that every section of the University is able to carry out QA under the same standards. The manual also has a calendar showing the QA activities that every unit of the university must conduct;
- Shared best practices in a process of best practice sharing that is implemented through comparative studies of QA at open universities in other countries, such as the Unisa, Universit as Terbuka (Indonesia), Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) (India), and the Korea National Open University. STOU is also able to share results that have proven successful in internal university units through a regular knowledge management process in the University, so that these findings can be used for continual development of STOU’s QA system;
- Operated a QA warning system whereby the university communicates important QA indicators via a QA warning system in a regular report with related units of the University. Each unit is required to operate

under this system in order to make a 6-9 month QA report in accordance with its annual work plan; and

- Awarded high-quality results. Every year, there is an award given to units that demonstrate high-quality work, in order to encourage all units to work for positive QA results.

During these QA processes, the University Council plays an integral role, especially in QA policy and strategy formulation, supervision of QA activities and follow-ups of QA evaluations.

### **Quality Standards Issues and Concerns**

Overall, STOU's QA system is effective in helping the institution maintain its standing as a provider of quality higher education in Thailand. Nevertheless Jung et.al (2013) identified three main challenges in both internal and external QA systems.

Firstly, the QA standards and indicators used by the OHEC (STOU's internal QA unit) and the ONESQA (the external QA agency) are not always consistent. This is a significant obstacle, as the discrepancies force STOU to adjust its QA plan to fit with the criteria laid out by the ONESQA indicators. Being required to adhere to indicators designed for conventional universities can be impractical and time-consuming for an open university.

Secondly, some QA indicators specified by the ONESQA for conventional universities are inapplicable in the context of DE institutions. For example, one indicator for assessing the quality of a bachelor's program is to determine whether its graduates start a job or are self-employed within one year after the graduation. But in case of STOU, where over 95 percent of students are already employed, this indicator does not show the quality of its program. Instead, graduates' application of their knowledge to their work or daily life may be a more suitable indicator for STOU. The indicator on the library, instructional media, and the learning environment is also difficult for STOU to apply. An indicator stating that each university shall assess learner satisfaction in teaching and learning quality and instructional support elements for every subject in each semester is not suitable for a distance learning institution like STOU, where only selected bachelor's level courses include extra face-to-face instruction, and most students are self-learners.

Finally, STOU's QA system requires extensive coordination between every unit in the University, since it is designed to provide shared services for a harmonized management of all tasks. The 12 Schools focus mainly on academic content, while the supporting agencies work to support the schools' operation.

### **Lessons Unisa can learn from STOU and other online institutions**

Although Unisa has contributed to STOU's excellence there are important lessons to be learned especially how STOU has been successful in developing and implementing an effective QA system (Jung et.al 2013). STOU's QA case provides several lessons for other DE providers as follows:

- A QA system should integrate both internal and external QA requirements, and reflect the unique features of distance teaching and eLearning.
- It needs to include QA measures for developing high-quality DE programs and materials that are adaptable to formal, non-formal and informal education, covering a wide range of target groups. In providing these three types of education through DE, STOU fulfills a different role than conventional universities with clear classification of students by year, so QA measures need to reflect this difference.
- Standardized QA measures should be developed and applied to DE programs, especially for underprivileged target groups such as detainees, the disabled, and the elderly. QA measures focused on these learners will further the pursuit of such policy goals.
- A centralized QA unit that oversees an institution's overall QA activities should be in place in order to maximize institutional QA efforts effectively and efficiently. This unit can help facilitate unified, information-based institutional planning that can be easily followed and overseen.
- A QA manual that encompasses all QA standards and indicators in a consistent manner contributes to standardizing the QA activities of all members.

### **Model for QA**

Making the goals and standards clearer improves various interactions of students as they understand goals, criteria and standards for QA and are encouraged to work hard and achieve them. Their learning outcomes are bound to be better when the standards to measure their learning are explicit.

To develop high quality standards there has to be a strong commitment by the executive; accessible technological infrastructure; student services; instructional design and course development; instruction and instructors; program delivery; financial health; legal and regulatory compliance; and program evaluation. Making the expected learning outcomes more explicit to support and enhance procedures for credit transfer and the recognition of student learning across courses, while also underpinning greater student independence within

flexible and self-paced learning environments. A model illustrating sound processes for defining and monitoring academic standards to directly support the

quality of teaching and learning is shown by figure 4 below:

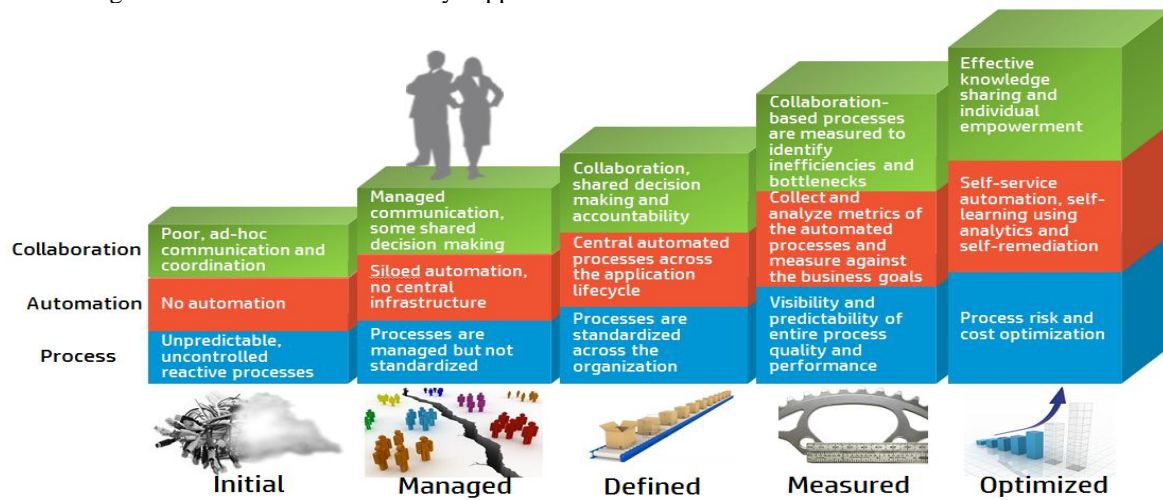


Figure 4. QA model

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The best practices cited in this paper could serve as a baseline for institutions seeking QA in the five key areas clearly identified by Wang (2006:274) of: (1) institutional commitment (for example., administrative leadership and support, technical infrastructure, and budget priority); (2) curriculum and instructional development like team approach in course design, ongoing course evaluation, and applying online learning pedagogy; (3) faculty support (e.g., faculty development, ongoing technical support, and institutional rewards); (4) student support (e.g., full range of academic and administrative support services, interaction with faculty and peers, and technical support); and (5) learning outcome assessment (e.g., learning outcome assessment (summative and aptitude) and learning process assessment (formative and authentic))

The quality culture approach in STOU Thailand demonstrates the power of using multiple internal and external stakeholders, underlining the fact that a quality culture cannot be implemented from above. A strong leadership is necessary for starting and promoting the process to start with necessitating a relationship of top-down and bottom-up ideas (or different management ideologies) that may be a major challenge to ODeL institutions. Participative quality culture is never homogeneous since it reflects the complexity of the interactions and interpretations of various the culture(s) and sub-cultural differences. What is needed is to develop a strategy that enables academics to basically understand central management as a function for supporting the other institutional actors develop their potentials. A framework of standard development lead to more flexibility and inspire innovation instead of

streamlining and homogenising individual efforts and thus losing much needed social acceptance.

The last word echoes other scholars to say that best practices are only a work in progress as practitioners and theorists continue their efforts to explore new avenues to assess quality of online programmes, more examples of best practices will continue to emerge.

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