A Provider Survey on the Quality of Distance and E-Learning in Asia*

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Abtract

Quality and quality assurance of distance and e-learning have become important concerns of providers, stakeholders and students. This paper reports the results of a provider survey on the quality of distance and e-learning in Asian institutions. The survey is intended to collect information about distance and e-learning institutions in Asia relating to institution's profile, teaching and learning, QA mechanisms including procedures, methods and criteria, and accreditation and quality certification. A survey method was used to collect data from providers of distance and e-learning institutions throughout Asia, and twenty six institutions responded to the survey conducted in 2010. Responding institutions represent different types of institutions and student profiles, large open universities and small-scale providers, public and private, as well as single-mode and dual mode institutions. Findings of the research indicated that distance and e-learning institutions share common spirit in quality assurance despite their varieties in their approaches, methods, processes, criteria, indicators, and so forth. Asian institutions also share commonalities in terms of their distance education principles and approaches, despite their varieties in terms of teaching and learning methods, use of information and communication technology, and the extent in the use of e-learning systems. These findings will be useful as benchmarking among distance and e-learning institutions in Asia and of importance to institutions as feedbacks for continuous improvement. Moreover, it will be of interests to policymakers and quality assurance managers as baseline for enhancement of their quality assurance practices.

Introduction

This report presents research findings on quality assurance (QA) models in ICT supported distance education (DE) in formal, informal and non-formal settings. A Provider Survey instrument has been used to collect information about ICT-based DE institutions in Asia relating to institution's profile, teaching and learning, and QA mechanisms including procedures, methods and criteria, and accreditation and quality certification. The information collected relates the following aspects of quality assurance mechanism, institution's profile, and teaching and learning. A survey reserach method was used in this research, involving sending out survey instrument to over 40 DE institutions throughout Asia. Eventually 26 distance and e-learning institutions responded, and the data was further analysed. This paper focuses on quality assurance aspects of the survey and presents brief general description responding institutions' profiles as background information.

Quality Assurance

The Provider Survey instrument attepts to reveal various aspects of quality assurance (QA) implementation in DE and e-learning institutions in Asia. The survey on QA specifically addresses the following issues.

- National or regional QA agencies, policies and procedures apply to the governance and operations of your institution/organization.
- What quality and quality assurance (QA) mean in the organization/institution.
- Formal QA policy.
- Formal QA Unit or Office in the institution/organization?.
- The **external** QA system used in the institution/organization.
- The **internal** QA system used in your institution/organization.
- How how the internal QA system is related to the external QA/audit/accreditation system.
- How the organization uses the internal and external QA results.
- Main challenges faced by the institution in implementing QA in regard to distance education and e-learning.
- Specific QA procedures and standards for e-learning (on- and/or off-campus).
- Attempts made to compare your distance education or e-learning processes and outcomes with those of conventional education and training.

The analysis and results of the survey collected from the responding institutions are presented in the following description.

QA agencies, policies and procedures. Each country has developed its own national QA agency, and to some extent have established policies, procedures of quality assurance system applied to higher, distance and e-learning institutions. The national QA policies and system govern and regulate the operations of such institutions. Most of the agencies have been established and allocated funding by their goverments. DE and e-learning institutions and programs are subjected by periodic quality reviewes conducted by the governemnt. Each country has different names for their respective QA agencies, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Quality Assurance Agencies in Asian Countries

No	Country	Quality Assurance Agency	Reporting to
1.	Malaysia	Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA)	Ministry of Higher Education
2.	China	Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications	Government of Hong Kong, China
3.	Indonesia	National Accreditation Agency for Higher Education	Ministry of National Higher Education
4.	Israel	Israeli Council for Higher Education	N/A
5.	India	Distance Educatio Council	N/A
6.	Japan	National Institute for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation (NIAD-UE).	N/A
7.	Nepal	University Grants Commission of Nepal	Ministry of Education
8.	Mongolia	Mongolian National Council for Education Accreditation (MNCEA)	N/A
9.	Singapore	Council for Private Education	Ministry of Education
10.	China	Ministry of Education; ISO 9000	N/A
11.	Pakistan	Quality Assurance Agency	Higher Education

No	Country	Quality Assurance Agency	Reporting to
			Commission
12.	Vietnam	Assessment Center	Ministry of Education and Training
13.	Korea	Korea Education Information Center, Korean Labor Competency Development Center	N/A

What quality and QA mean. Asian DE and e-learning institutions responding to the survey share common beliefs that quality and QA has high values in their organisation, and that they work out ways of assuring quality to meet the satisfactions of stakeholders and students. However, institutions also see quality and QA differently, depending on the needs of stakeholders, their priorities and perceptions. Despite differences in the meaning of quality and QA, they share common important key words relating to quality, such as continuous improvement, quality culture and standards. DE and e-learning institutions in Asia view QA differently. Some see it as a comprehensive continuous improvement effort in terms of inputs, process, outputs and outcome, and others see it as effort to maintain, reach or comply with standards externally set, normally by their governments or quality agencies. Good QA system is generally referred to the understanding and effort to meet customers' and stakeholders' satisfactions of distance and e-learning programs and courses. QA effort is applied at planning and implementation stages to ensure quality outputs. The role of leadership is important and people participation throughout the QA process and effort is important so that everyone in the organisation shares common awareness, understanding and spirit of QA.

Formal QA policy. Overall, large DE and e-learning institutions in Asia have formal QA policy. Smaller institutions, and institutions with small DE and e-learning operations stated that there is no formal QA policy, despite the fact that they try to implement QA systems for their DE and e-learning programs and courses. Large open univerity systems have formal QA policies, implementing TQM and attempting to meet stakeholders' and customers' satisfaction. Large DE and e-learning institutions offer programs and courses with a large number of students and they are subjected to quality reviews. Formal QA policies are seen as effective means of meeting the needs of students and stakeholders. A formal QA policy is seen as effective means of ensuring quality improvement. It focuses the institution's effort in allocating resources for improving the quality of teaching and learning process, products and services that meet students' expectations, and maintaining standards set by the national quality agency. QA involves careful monitoring, evauation and audits. Roles of people in QA is vital as they are the ones who make quality assurance and improvement happen.

Formal QA Unit or Office and its functions. DE and e-learning institutions in Asia vary in terms of the establishment of a fornal QA Unit or Office, depending on size and priorities of the institution. Despite the different names of the QA units and lines of reporting, these units share common functions to ensure quality. Responsibilities of the units may vary, but they generally include duties relating to standardisation, benchmarking, establishemnt of procedures, and audits to assure quality of DE products, processes and services.

External QA system. DE institutions in Asia employ external QA system, that has been developed and available for international agencies with specific interests in DE. They vary in terms of processes, methods, criteria/standards, performance indicators, manuals or handbook, and other features.

- ***External QA process.*** QA has been established as an internal process that involves external assessment. The QA processes involves external asssessment to meet certain criteria set by accrediting organisation, such as ISO 9001 for quality management system, national accreditation agency and other quality reviewers. External QA is used as benchmarking and for the purpose of external quality reviews, and it can cover programs as well as courses.

- ***External QA methods***. DE and e-learning institutions throughout Asia apply a wide range of detail QA methods. But generally , the QA methods can be categorised into benchmarking against externally set standards, documentation, self-assessment, accreditation or quality reviews, and follow up of recommendations. Feedbacks are also collected from internal staff members and management as well as and externally from students and stakeholders for further follow-up improvement.

- ***External QA criteria/standards.*** Several external QA criteria and standards have been used by Asian DE and e-learning institutions, including ISO 9001 standards, national accreditation standards, and international best practices in ODL. In terms of national accreditation standard, the QA criteria may slightly vary.

- ***External QA performance indicators.*** Asian DE and e-learning institutions comply with externally set standards, such as those by MQA in Malaysia, HKCAAVQ in Hong Kong China, and BAN-PT in Indonesia. Panels from external agencies conduct visits and review DE institutions in terms qualitative and quantitative indicators. Performance indicators cover areas such as products, services, and administrative system.

- ***External QA manuals or handbook.*** Most DE and e-learning institutions in Asia have developed policy on quality together with the prescribed guidelines, documented manuals, procedures and forms. Management and staff within the institution generally have easy access online as well as on paper formats. Governments, through their Education Ministries, have also published guidelines, criteria and standards for quality assurance system in higher education as well as manuals for accreditation based on study programs. These dosuments are generally published in their respective national languages or English where English is used as official language. Smaller institutions have work in progress on the development of QA manuals and procedures, or referring to an established DE and e-learning institution.

- ***Other features.*** An interesting statement is made by a Malaysian institution, in which, there seems to be "an obvious and serious source of increasing frustration" due to the fact that members of accreditation Panels come from conventional institutions. These Panels appear to have very little basic knowledge of ODL systems. The quality of the Panels performance is also often a source of concerned. These common problems also occur in Indonesia, in which professors from the face-to-face higher education institutions have strong influence on the development of accreditation instruents and all assessors come from the face-to-face institutions with very little and even no understanding of the philosophy and principles of ODL and how ODL works.

Internal QA system. DE institutions in Asia also employ external QA system, referring to adopting benchmark and good practices worldwide. They also vary in terms of processes, methods, criteria/standards, performance indicators, manuals or handbook, and other features.

- ***Internal QA processes.*** QA processes in Asian DE and e-learning institutions share common practices despite the fact that they vary sligtly in terms of implementation, and these include such processes as assessment, monitoring, and review of programs and courses, feedback consultation with stakeholders and employers, management, reports and self-assessment, such as in OU Malaysia. Generally , QA processes attempt to improve and monitor key performance such as corporate culture, products, assessments, services, and support systems. Student surveys and peer review of learning materials are also conducted as part of the internal QA system. Policies and approaches towards quality are implemented through the development of protocols and standard operating procedures.

- ***Internal QA methods.*** Different QA methods are used, and the methods also share commonalities QA methods, including the use of **balanced scorecard** system, evaluation of academic programmes, surveys to get feedbacks on products and services, internal audits, and self review. The QA methods are implemented to cover areas such as (1) program development and review, (2) course development and approval, (3) assessment of student outcomes, and (4) learner support mechanism, as in OU Hong Kong. The internal QA methods also involve the implementation Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA) cycle to ensure continuous improvement. Expert evaluation is also used to improve the quality of learning materials, assessments, and other services. Evaluation is conducted at at course, program, institution levels on various aspects of DE and e-learning services. Surveys have also been conducted to students, external experts, and professors. For example, student surveys are conducted to get feedacks on learning materials, performance of instructors, learning activity components, interaction, and so forth. The external expert evaluation is conducted on aspects relating to contextualization, instruction design, interaction, learner activity, environment set up, and so forth.

- ***Internal QA criteria/standards.*** DE and e-learning institutions in Asia have developed its own QA system referring to externally set criteria and standards, such as ISO 9001 standards, and the national standards. An internal QA system has been set up using qualitative as well as qualitative measures at program as well as course levels, involving peer, external and stakeholder reviews. Evaluation criteria at program level is broad in nature, covering aspects such as academic value, compatibility and articulation with existing programmes, market analysis, enrolment projection, etc. Evaluation criteria at course level is detail specific, including guidelines for the number of contact hours and assignments for different levels and credit loadings, threshold settings for continuous assessment, examination and overall course score, analysis of tutor's grading standard and consistency, reviews by external examiners, etc. Criteria and standards are defined in QA policy and translated into operational and annual plans with supporting resources necessary for quality improvement. There is also a link between QA and performance appraisal and balanced scorecard system to assess achievement of targets by units and the overall institution, as well as evaluation against appropriate national and international benchmarks and criteria/standards.

- ***Internal QA performance indicators.*** Asian DE and e-learning institutions have adopted performance indicators already developed by their governments as well as ODL agency, such as the Commonwealth of Learning. Reviews have been coomonly used in developing new programs and validating existing programs. Quality targets are also stated in the institution's plans. Programs and activities are developed based on the achievement of stated performance indicators. Evaluating performance against indicators is developed tutor staff ratio, staff involvement in research, access to digital library, and students' performance, etc.

- ***Internal QA manuals or handbook.*** Asian DE and e-learning institutions have developed their own huidelines, manuals, procedures and forms for their own internal QA system. QA manuals and procedures are developed and used by units and individuals to ensure that activities are consistently performed, and measurable targets can be achieved according to plans. QA manuals are written in their respective national langauages, and are for use for quality assurance of comprehensive aspects of ODL. Some institutions, however, are still documenting their QA manuals, adopting to existing good practices in ODL.

- ***Other features.*** The QA system, as reported by UT, allows for continuous improvement, which can be done through follow up of audit findings, research findings, as well as users' needs for system improvement. For OU Japan, being the sole open university in Japan, it is imperative to implement a QA system, although at this stage, its QA system has not been fully consistently implemented yet.

How internal QA system is related to the external QA/audit/accreditation system. The findings of this study describe how internal QA system relates to external one in terms of link between internal and external QA system, and who has access to the **internal and external** findings and recommendations.

- ***Link between internal and external QA system.*** Asian DE and e-learning institution see obvious links between internal and external QA systems. The internal QA system generally complements and facilitates external QA processes. External QA standards and indicators are used to drive transformation of core internal processes and structures, and institutional focus on areas for continuous assessment and quality improvement. The internal QA system has been developed using criteria and standards set externally, and it is developed is based on accepted QA criteria, standards and good practice. Good internal QA system with reference to external QA system ensures external regulatory compliance.

- ***Access to internal findings and recommendations.*** Generally top and middle management have acces to internal findings and recommendations of quality audits and reviews for quality improvements. Relevant academic and other staff members concerned can also access the findings and recommendations. Establishing a quality culture is seen as effort which calls for a collective commitment by all staff to professional excellence. Asian DE and e-learning institutions have the views that the responsibility for quality lies with each individual and group within the institution. Internal audit findings are shared by relevant units for continuous improvement of both system and performance. Review meetings are conducted periodically to ensure effective implementation of the system, where problems are addressed carefully, constraints are taken care of, and defects are anticipated and prevented.

- *Access to the external findings and recommendations.* External findings and recommendations are generally accessible by all management and staff of most Asian open and distance learning. The management generally have access to external findings, and these findings and recommendations are also to some extent open to relevant staff for follow up and improvement.

Use of internal and external QA results. Both internal and external QA results are used to determine extent to which mission and quality objectives are fulfilled and for decision-making on quality improvement of products, services, processes, and eventually leading to improved performance of the institution. Follow-ups of QA findings by institutions vary, but they generally attempt to achieve quality improvement.

Challenges in implementing QA. There are challenges in implementing QA identified in this survey. Appointment of External Review Committee members with knowledge and experience in DE and e-learning is one main challenge as this will result in biased quality assessment. There is also a further challenge that the External QA indicators are not inclusive in nature and scope and do not take into account peculiar characteristics of ODL institutions. Some DE institutions still have to convince relevant national authorities to develop an external QA framework or standards that cater effectively to DE institution characteristics. There is also a new challenge to address quality of e-learning. Updating of courses is also a challenge as the development of written courses takes time up to between two to five years. There is also a challenge of shortage of well qualified and trained manpower. In dual mode DE system, where there is a mix of face to face, distance and e- learning, the objectives and principles that guide quality assurance measures are the same for various modes of programme delivery. Modifications may be required in certain aspects of implementation such as the design of learning activities for DE and e- learning. Furthermore, there is a challenge of improving awareness among faculty members and administration that the QA process needs to be implemented for quality distance education and e-learning. In smaller DE system, there is also the challenge of technology, expertise, awareness, funding and support from governments.

Specific QA procedures and standards for e-learning. DE institutions throughout Asia vary in terms of specific QA procedures and standards for e-learning. Some institutions have more advanced stages of e-learning practice than others. But generally, all DE and e- learning institutions have also developed QA procedures and standards and e-learning. Some institutions are primarily using the DL QA system for e-learning courses with necessary adaptations.

Attempts to compare DE or e-learning processes and outcomes with conventional education and training. DE institutions in Asia vary in attempts to compare DE or e-learning with the face-to-face education. In Malaysia, foe instance, similar instrument is used to submit data although some items do not fit characteristics of DE, but in the final results, DE institutions were not rated alongside the traditional ones. Some institutions do comparison of graduates of both face to face and distance learning, as e-learning is intended to enhance face-to-face teaching through a blended learning. In OU Israel, the content and structure of courses resemble courses offered at campus universities. Other institutions simply do not di comparison, as there is no need to do it.

Brief Summary Profiles of Distance and e-Learning Providers in Asia

There are 26 distance and e-learning providers in Asia responding to the survey questionnaire, the oldest was established in 1949 and the newest in 2010, as seen in Table 2. The scope of services of the institutions is national, and only one provider (Symbiosis of India) stated it serves international and regional as well as national provider. Almost all of them are formal and non-profit universities. The Education Department of Industrial and Commercial Bank of China stated that it is an informal institution, while AIOU stated as non-formal institution. Providers stated as for profit institutions are ICA Nepal and OU China. The providers consist of 11 public institutions (OUHK, Beijing Jiaotong, Education Department of Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, UT, OU Israel, Ewha Womasn University Korea, VU Pakistan, MUST Mongolia, AIOU Pakistan, OUChina, Hanoi OU), and 7 private institutions (OU Malaysia, Symbiosis India, HKU SPACE, OU Japan, Singapore Management university, Wawasan OU Malaysia, Samsung SDS Korea). Other institutions did not provide answers.

Table 2. Respondents of Distance and e-Learning Providers in Asia

No	Institution	Country	Founded
1.	University of Hong Kong School of Professional and Continuing Education (HKU SPACE)	China	1956
2.	Open University of China	China	1978
3.	Education Department of Industrial and Commercial Bank of China Joint Stock Company	China	1984
4.	Open University of Hong Kong	China	1989
5.	Beijing Jiaotong University Remote and Continue to Educate the College	China	2000
6.	Peking University School of Distance Learning for Medical Education	China	2000
7.	Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning	India	2001
8.	Universitas Terbuka	Indonesia	1984
9.	Open University of Israel	Israel	1974
10.	Kumamoto University	Japan	1949
11.	Open University of Japan	Japan	1983
12.	Waseda e-school (School of Human Sciences), Waseda University	Japan	2003
13.	Not to be disclosed institution	Japan	2007
14.	Not to be disclosed institution	Japan	2010
15.	Institute for Teaching and Learning, Ewha Womans University	Korea	1969
16.	Samsung SDS Multicampus	Korea	1997
17.	Korea Education Broadcast System	Korea	2000
18.	Open University Malaysia	Malaysia	2000
19.	Wawasan Open University	Malaysia	2007
20.	Mongolian University Science and Technology (MUST) Computer Science and Management School	Mongolia	1992
21.	International Centre for Academics	Nepal	1997
22.	Allama Iqbal Open University	Pakistan	1974
23.	Virtual University of Pakistan	Pakistan	2002
24.	Singapore Management University	Singapore	2005
25.	Ho Chi Minh City Open University	Vietnam	1990
26.	Hanoi Open University	Vietnam	1993

Regarding the source of funding, most of the respondents rely on tuition fees and government subsidies, or company funding. For some institutions, the only source of funding is tuition fees (OU Hong Kong, OU Malaysia, Peking Universty China, OU Israel, OU Japan, ICA Nepal), or only government funding (OU China). For Singapore Management University, the funding also come from Party and endowment funds. The number of regional, local or study centers varied from 0 (Symbiosis India) to 183 (Virtual University of Pakistan). There is possibility that number of regional centers is correlated with number of students.

Regarding the number of students, there are three mega universities as respondents (UT Indonesia, Allama Iqbal OU Pakaistan, and OU China), while the smallest number of student is International Center for Acdemics , Nepal with 410 students. Composition of female and male students is generally considered balanced (half and half), with slight difference, except for Ewha Womans University Korea with 100% female, Peking University with 93.35% female. On the other hand, there are also institutions with dominant male students, namely Virtual University of Pakistan (79% male) and Samsung SDS Korea (78% male).

Concerning geography of students, almost all are within the country except for a few percentage (less than 10%) for some institutions (HKU SPACE, Virtual University of Pakistan, ICA Nepal, Symbiosis India, and AIOU Pakistan). Levels or degree programs offered generally a combination of undergraduate, graduate, and non degree programs. The exception is for Ho Chi Minh City University Vietnam, in which 100% of its students are undergraduates, and Symbiosis India in which 100% of its students are graduates. Age composition among distance and e- learners in Asia is varied. The common being that the age range is between 25-30 and 31-40 years olds. This is common in distance and e- learning institutions around the world including Asia. But it seems that some Asian distanc and e-learning providers catered the younger students 21 to 24 years olds (Symbiosis India, HKU SPACE China, Singapore Management University, Virtual University of Pakistan, AIOU Pakistan, and OUChina). MUST in Mongolia is catering for even younger students, in which around 96% of its students are less than 21 years old. Older ODL students usually are already employed. The findings about employement status confirmed it. ODL students in Asia are dominantly employed (above 70%), except for MUST Mongolia students (only 3% employed), and AIOU Pakistan students (51.6% employed). Type of employement or students' profession is varied. Most of them are professionals, entrepreneurs, and other, while UT's students' professions are mostly teachers in primary and secondary schools.

Regarding the academic and administrative staffs, the condition is varied. The academic faculty staffs mostly rely on full-time staffs compared to part-time staffs. The exceptions are for Peking University China, Jiaotong University China, OU Japan, and IAC Nepal, which rely more on part-time faculty staffs. Instructors or tutors vary and not all DE providers answered the questions. Some institutions stated that the institutions rely more on part-time instructors and tutors, such as HKU SPACE China, Wawasan OU Malaysia, Singapore Management University, UT Indonesia, and AIOUPakistan. In contrast, OU Hong Kong relies on full-time tutors, and no part-time tutors. For administrative staffs, the number for full-time staffs are higher than the part-time staffs, except in Peking University China. In AIOU Pakistan, there are a lot of contractual, daily wages staffs which number are higher than the full-time staffs. In addition, there are also a number of contract staffs and media technology staffs such as course writers, course reviewers, instructional designers, multimedia developers, ICT specialist, programmers, and graphic designers.

Concerning ICT infrastructure and equipment, almost all organization stated that 100% of academic staff and administrative staff are provided with computers. On the other hand, video conferencing facilities on the learning centers are quite a few, depending on the number of learning centers. Not all providers have equipped their learning centers with video conference facilities. However, all of the respondents are connected through the internet, from the dial up, narrow to wide broadband. Almost all of them also have a secure network, and the level of security is from adequate to high. The use of the computer also encompasses the learning process. Almost all of the providers are using some kind of learning management system (LMS). The type of LMS used is varied, from the locally developed program to the open source program such as Moodle.

Conclusion

The provider survey on quality of distance and e-learning in Asia has provided new insights into how distance and e-learning institutions in Asia and operate to reach wider audiences. The survey indicates the diversity of institutions and clients served by Asian distance and e-learning institutions. Despite the diversities of institution's profiles, clients, adn teaching aldn learning strategies, institutions share common spirit and effort in emplementing QA system that ensures provision of quality distance and e-learning to their students. The survey has provided benchmarking information on how distance and e-learning institutions operate and how they can learn from each others for continuous improvement.