

**REPORT FROM THE ICDE
QUALITY NETWORK:**

**GLOBAL QUALITY
PERSPECTIVES ON
OPEN, FLEXIBLE
AND DISTANCE
LEARNING 2021**

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PREFACE

The ICDE Quality Network was first established in November 2016 through the appointment of regional Focal Points on Quality by the ICDE Board. The quality network gives advice and collects knowledge on the latest developments of quality work related to open, flexible and distance education within their institutions and regions, and represent institutional members of ICDE. Prof. Emeritus Alan Tait from the Open University UK has held the position as Chair for the Quality Network since its beginning and gives valuable support to the network. The mandate for the Quality Network for the period 2021-2022 has been developed in collaboration with the Chair and is aligned with the ICDE Strategic Plan 2021-2024 and ICDE Activity Plan 2021-2022.

2021 has been another productive year for the ICDE Quality Network. Two new regional Focal Points were appointed: Prof. Moustafa Hassan, Vice-Chancellor for International Cooperation from Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University in Dubai, and Dr. Rajni Chand, Director for Centre for Flexible Learning at the University of South Pacific in Fiji.

The ICDE Quality Network held a workshop during the 34th Annual Conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities – AAOU in June. The workshop titled: “Quality Assurance of Open, Flexible and Distance Education – a global perspective” focused on how ICDE through its members supports educators in developing and delivering quality open, flexible and distance education especially in the context of crises and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ICDE Quality Network also hosted two panel sessions during the [ICDE Virtual Global Conference Week 2021 in October](#). The scope of the discussion was “Innovation in Quality for Open, Flexible and Distance Learning”, where the Focal Points presented perspectives on the topic from their respective regions.

The network is also responsible for producing this report that captures regional experiences felt during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic and, builds on contributions made to the above-mentioned events.

On behalf of ICDE, I would like to thank all the Quality Focal Points for contributing to this report through their expertise, regional networks and practical experience, and for their invaluable support to ICDE and the global community of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning. I would also like to acknowledge, with my deepest appreciation, our Chair, Professor Emeritus Alan Tait, who has moderated meeting, workshops and panel discussions, and also provided a thematic introduction to the regional chapters of this publication.

We hope the report will be insightful and informative to educational stakeholders from all parts of the world. We look forward to developing new activities and outputs related to quality enhancement of open, flexible and distance learning through the ICDE Quality Network and extended learning communities.

Oslo, March 2022

Torunn Gjelsvik
ICDE Secretary General

THEMATIC INTRODUCTION

Alan Tait

Chair ICDE Quality Network

The ICDE Quality Network, now in its sixth year of work, maps the development of Quality Assurance in the field of open, flexible and distance learning in all world regions. This report summarises our analysis of developments in the last 18 months, and in particular the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic 2020-2021 in accelerating the inclusion of online elements in so many Higher Education institutions in all parts of the world, together with the need for revised understandings of Quality Assurance to support this transition. We now stand at a critical point in evaluating the extent to which post-pandemic we carry forward these new practices and understandings, and the extent to which at least some Higher Education institutions will want to retreat, as soon as we are able, to the pre COVID practices of 2019.

Preamble

The development of digitally supported methods for learning, teaching and institutional management has been in process of rapid development in Higher Education for more than 20 years in almost all countries. The COVID-19 pandemic which closed campuses across the world in 2020 further initiated remote teaching off-campus as a crisis measure for almost all students in Higher Education and has radically accelerated practice and understanding of online learning or e-learning, in ways that are reported as beneficial in some contexts (McKenzie n.d.). The emergency response of remote teaching has however also raised questions of quality in learning, teaching and student support, and has created an agenda for change and professional development for all education sectors. In particular the remote learning developed in crisis mode at COVID lockdown unwittingly carried forward many assumptions and practices of campus teaching, in particular the lecture, which are less effective in online environments. They also were often not able to include student to student interaction or the support services for students which were expected. Online learning has also over the recent period developed specific practices that are based on rethinking learning and teaching in the light of the possibilities offered by digital technologies, and now can valuably feed back into the emerging blended solutions in the post COVID crisis world of campus-based Higher Education.

The field of digital Higher Education

There are a wide number of terms that dominate the field of digital Higher Education, all of which include the introduction and integration of digital resources and communications in a wide variety of ways. The European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) adopts Bates' taxonomy:

- **Distance education courses.** Distance education courses are those where no classes are held on campus – all instruction is conducted at a distance. Distance education courses may use a variety of delivery methods, such as video/audio conferencing and those which are internet- or print-based.
- **Online courses.** A form of distance education where the primary delivery mechanism is the internet. These could be delivered synchronously or asynchronously. All instruction is conducted at a distance.

- **Synchronous online courses.** Courses where students and an instructor participate at the same time, but at separate locations other than an institutional campus. These courses may be delivered by video conferencing, web conferencing, audioconferencing, etc.
- **Asynchronous courses.** Courses where students are not required to participate in sessions at the same time as the instructor. These may be print-based courses or online courses using a learning management system, for instance.
- **Online programmes.** A fully creditable programme that can be completed entirely by taking online courses, without the need for any on-campus classes. These could be delivered synchronously or asynchronously.
- **Blended/hybrid courses.** These are courses designed to combine both online and face-to-face teaching in any combination.

Other forms of distance and online education include:

- **OER** (open educational resources). Materials that are offered freely for use by teacher and learners, i.e. without charge and with few or no restrictions on the way in which the material may be adapted and reused.
- **MOOCs** (massive open online courses). Online courses that are designed for large numbers of participants, often offered for free and without any entry qualifications. They are distinguished from OERs in that they offer a full course experience and content that is not usually free to reuse.'

(ENQA n.d. p4).

All these approaches are relevant to the future of Higher Education globally and make the continued study and analysis of Quality Assurance practice all the more important, as the World Region reports in this publication make clear. Educational institutions whether campus-based or online are as an outcome of the emergency use of remote learning in one form or another better able to select the online learning approach from within this range of forms of online and digital Higher Education, and their choice will be led primarily by analysis of:

- audience needs and capability
- technology infrastructure available to the institution and to the student
- preferred pedagogy for the specific programme of study
- available expertise from academic and professional staff in the HEI
- the Higher Education Institution strategy for development of its digital practice
- external drivers such as government strategy for Higher Education and associated funding, and employer priorities

Some audiences will have greater confidence in their digital capabilities, and may study entirely happily online, while others may need the familiarity of campus presence for at least a part of their study. Equally the ambition of the digital Higher Education strategy in a Higher Education institution may be constrained by student and staff competence, technology infrastructure and its costs, as well as digital reach especially in rural regions. Some programmes may have practical, or laboratory needs that can only be met on campus, while others have learned to develop online practice of a surprising range of skills in online environments. It is also worth observing that an increasing number of professional areas demand online skills that can be developed most effectively in online learning environments. Underpinning these choices lies the level of experience and capability in academic and professional staff, which will need support and development.

The COVID-19 pandemic and online teaching

The challenge which the COVID-19 pandemic has demanded for reform and innovation in Higher Education has been widely accompanied by a set of imperatives about a more inclusive approach to audiences for Higher Education, in order to enhance individual, social and economic futures. Greater diversity of students brings the concomitant necessity of innovation in learning and teaching, which digital technology supported learning can drive. Digital Higher Education whether completely off-campus or including some campus-based support can underpin national policy efforts to increase participation in Higher Education in terms of:

- Part time programmes at undergraduate and post-graduate levels
- Adult learners with work and family responsibilities
- Under-represented communities
- Under-represented geographical regions
- Lifelong learning
- Micro-credentials (the award of credit for small amounts of learning which can be accumulated, often in the context of continuing professional development)

Online and digital Higher Education are therefore now increasingly seen as positive and progressive enhancements in Higher Education, and the concomitant necessary innovation in pedagogy, student support and Quality Assurance can feed back positively into Higher Education systems as a whole, all of which will now use some elements of digital learning. The enhanced access in both the types of students and the range of programmes can enhance how society manages its rapidly changing needs in terms of skills and knowledge, as well as the engagement of an aging population in socially and economically productive activity that is stimulated and supported by Higher Education.

The new digital practices in Higher Education around the world, and the increased understanding of the importance of Digital Higher Education, as evidenced in the World Region reports, should therefore be seen as central to the ways in which a range of challenges can be managed, such as demographic transition to an aging society; open economies in a competitive globalised world; and the inclusion and engagement of a wider and wider proportion of citizenship.

However, the development of adequate Quality Assurance systems to support digital Higher Education has not accompanied these recent changes, a challenge noted by Bacsich as long ago as 2015 (SEQUENT 2015, p5), and despite significant progress such as the E-Excellence scheme pioneered by EADTU (EADTU 2021), has continued to be the case throughout the more recent emergency remote teaching caused by the lockdown of campuses during the COVID-19 pandemic 2019-2020. While guidelines for quality assurance for digital Higher Education are not conceived as separate and distinct from those for the Higher Education system as a whole, as described by The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015), the work of the ICDE Quality Network continues to seek to identify those that need to be addressed within the specific features of technology supported and online learning and teaching.

Our work has been developed with knowledge of major international Quality Assurance systems for online learning around the world, of which there are more than 40 (Ossiannilsson et al. 2015). It also has to be acknowledged that Quality Assurance in education as a whole, including online and digital Higher Education, is a contested field, in both subjective and objective dimensions. The major areas of contention have included the shift from input to output measures of quality, and the embedding of teaching quality as well as research reputation as core to the overall quality standards and reputation of a Higher Education Institution. These

shifts have represented major change in recognising students as legitimate and core stakeholders in the contemporary university, and their success as the central purpose of teaching and student support. In the subjective dimension, as noted in a number of World Region reports, Quality Assurance in the field of online and digital Higher Education also acts to sustain its reputation for quality of learning and teaching, the student learning experience, and qualifications gained, where uninformed opinion or vested interests assert their inferior nature simply by virtue of their taking place off-campus with innovative methods and new audiences.

It is now possible to adopt the position that after more than 30 years of the digital revolution we cannot conceive of any programmes of study that do not deploy for the benefits of both learning and teaching at least some digitally supported methods, and that the work of the ICDE Quality Network will be of value to the Higher Education sector as a whole, including programmes of study that are campus-based.

Online and digital Higher Education can be used as a mode for a single course or for an entire qualification and can be used to provide flexibility between campus-based and online modes for students whose changing circumstances demand different modes of study. MOOCs are increasingly being incorporated into mainstream campus-based teaching. Online and Digital Higher Education should therefore no longer be seen as a deficit model for those who cannot attend classic campus face to face teaching, but as a positive and progressive enhancement in the interests of students and potential students, teachers, the HEI, and the size and shape of the Higher Education system and its national scientific and cultural contribution.

Assessment

Assessment in online and digital Higher Education merits a note in its own right. The transition to hybrid or online programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged classic summative assessment approaches that have until recently existed in many Higher Education institutions, as they simply have not been able to hold conventional face to face examinations. Paradoxically the pandemic has positively required rethinking and innovation in the field of assessment, driving the development of a learning outcomes approach, with relevant skills as well as knowledge, and supporting learning as well as summative judgement of performance. The development of assessment strategies in future are now better placed to be redesigned to mirror the learning outcomes intended to be achieved and, include assessment of a formative as well as a summative nature, during the course as well as at the end. The assessment tasks will need in some cases to be reformed to include skills as well as knowledge, to be collaborative as well as individually based, and will need to assure academic integrity. It is certainly necessary to create assessment environments which protect against cheating in online programmes, which has increased in a range of Higher Education environments (see report on an adaptive trust-based e-assessment system for learning, TeSLA 2019). Digitally supported assessment should in the future if effectively redesigned be experienced by students as engaging and authentic; to support student progress and success; and to be trusted by society and employers as delivering universally recognised qualifications.

Quality assurance in the digital world

The Quality Assurance system for the hybrid and online learning programmes in Higher Education will need to be embedded in institution-wide Quality Assurance systems including those that govern campus-based programmes. They will however need specific elements to capture the learning and teaching experience in digital Higher Education, at the same time as being seen as integral to the Higher Education programmes as a whole and not separate from

the mainstream. It will be essential to ensure that the voices of online students in digital Higher Education are included in surveys that contribute so much to Quality Assurance systems at institutional as well as national levels (see the Danish Student Survey for example <https://studerende.au.dk/en/student-survey>). Indeed, the building of Quality Assurance for hybrid and online learning, because of its learner centred nature, and its advanced and progressive use of data, should be able to contribute to the reform and enhancement of quality assurance as a whole in Higher Education (see EUA DELT report 2021 for the summary analysis of 20 instruments for institutional reflection on digitally enhanced learning and teaching; Volungeviciene et al.2021)

The issues set out in all their variety in the reports from world regions make up the major contemporary agenda for Quality Assurance for online and digital Higher Education that operates at institutional and national systemic levels. Quality assurance in this new world has of course major elements of continuity with the past. It still seeks to:

- Assure the quality of the learning and teaching, and the award of credit and qualification;
- Through relevant data, and feedback from students, teachers and other stakeholders such as professional associations and employers, provide evidence for the quality enhancement of the programmes of study;
- Assure stakeholders such as government, professional associations, employers, and students that the qualifications gained are recognised and robust.

Conclusion

The continued work of the ICDE Quality Network represented here in the 7 reports from world regions make clear how the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the breakdown of sectoral boundaries in terms of Quality Assurance between campus-based and online learning institutions. The reform and development of Quality Assurance systems for a hybrid institution that now works in online and blended modes is a valuable process in itself, and will enhance institutional capacity and understanding as to how quality is to be defined and implemented. While there are valuable sources which can assist in such a development phase, such as guidelines found in the EADTU system for quality assurance in online learning E-Excellence (EADTU 2021), Higher Education institutions and Ministries of Education new to online and digital Higher Education will, we hope, be supported with this report in building their own new approaches.

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AFRICA REGION

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Introduction

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic that ravaged the whole region during this period, the Africa region was still focused on keeping to the mandate of Distance learning as regards flexibility, accessibility, enhanced learning and quality assurance to learners. Coupled with the closure of institutions, emphasis in most African ODL (Open and Distance Learning) institutions shifted from face to face to virtual learning, especially as regards facilitation and online course materials. However, this was not without challenges, especially in institutions having large student enrolment with quite a large number located in remote areas, disadvantaged with power supply and internet connectivity. Nevertheless, the period brought to the limelight the need for staff members to be skilled and equipped in the virtual learning environment. To this effect, various workshops and trainings were organized at the regional and institutional levels that attracted participants from the region. The highlights of the activities of the period are summarized below:

ACDE – QAAA Pre-conference Workshop

The African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) held a pre-conference training on quality assurance on the 27th September 2021. The Workshop was Under the Patronage of the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC). It was designed to familiarize participants with the ACDE-QAAA Quality Assurance Toolkit. Individuals who wish to be listed by the ACDE had to undergo a 3-day intensive training on quality assessments and audits in higher education and be certified. Certified Institutions were to be listed and, also use the ACDE Certified Mark.

The objectives of the workshop were to:

- Provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on trends in higher education generally and in ODL in particular;
- Identify challenges faced in higher education in Africa and how institutions can respond to them;
- Familiarize participants with the ACDE-QAAA Toolkit and how it can be used to enhance quality; and
- Enhance capacity of participants to deliver high quality Open, Distance and eLearning (ODeL) programmes. The workshop had 41 participants from Africa higher institutions of learning.

ACETEL Capacity Building Workshops in 2021

The Africa Centre of Excellence on Technology Enhanced Learning (ACETEL) under the skill based short course programme, aimed at bridging ICT gaps in the region, conducted some capacity building workshops/Trainings in the following areas:

Regional Workshops

- **Python Programming 1:** Python being an interpreted, interactive, object-oriented programming language can easily be understood by beginners. This programming language supports multiple programming paradigms beyond object-oriented programming, such as procedural and functional programming. It supported new programmers in the academics to improve their programming capacity. This was conducted at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology Kumasi 14th – 19th June 2021.
- **Machine Learning:** This was conducted in partnership with the Laweh Open University Accra, Ghana from June 14th to 19th June 2021. The workshop was an introductory aspect of machine learning that helped participants explain what Data, Information and Knowledge is and support them differentiate between Algorithms, Analytical and Numerical Approaches to problems solving. This helped set the stage for deeper understanding of machine learning to those that might want to go further.
- **Online and Blended Learning:** This workshop was virtual and conducted in partnership with Digital Science and Technology Network (DSTN) 26th – 28th October 2021. The workshop provided a rich overview of the fundamentals of online and blended learning, enabled lecturers set up a Virtual Learning Environment, supported lecturers develop and deliver an effective online course, strengthened the capacities of the lecturers to effectively facilitate their courses online by utilizing synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods, and assisted the university staff to provide effective and quality learner support services to students

National Trainings

The Center, in partnership with CISCO, organized the following trainings at national level:

- **Python Programming (II)** see explanation above.
- **Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA 1)** CCNA is an information technology certification from Cisco Systems. The CCNA certification is an associate-level Cisco Career Certification. The CCNA certification validates the participants' ability to have what it takes to navigate the ever-changing landscape of IT. These training were virtual and made use of CISCO resources. The participants were however, facilitated once a week with opportunity for hands-on skill practicals provided at the ACETEL CISCO Academy.
- **Orientation Workshop for Students and Faculty.** The Centre conducted a four-day Orientation Workshop for students from 1st – 4th March 2021. This enabled students and facilitators familiarise themselves with the Learning Management System (LMS) and understand what it takes to learn in an ODL Institution like the National Open University of Nigeria
- **Workshop on examination proctoring system.** The Centre in collaboration with the Directorate of Examination and assessment conducted a one-day workshop to support students learn how to engage the examination environment using proctor.

Report on Training on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) at National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

1. Special Quality Assurance Training (SQAT)

A total of 158 staff members participated in the SQAT VLE program which was made mandatory to all full-time academic faculties. A total of 35 facilitators were involved in training and grading activities. The Management of the University was included to enable them not only to develop VLE courseware, but also acquire the competencies necessary to validate their management of an ODL institution. The key competencies acquired included:

- Hosting of website for the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)
- Hosting of MOODLE with the default theme changed to a customized format
- Layout for an online course to include timetable, lesson note, video of lesson, discussion forum, tests and quizzes, and comprehensive examinations
- Creating and embedding an instruction video that is of good quality, conversational and easy to understand by weak students
- Set up of effective discussion forums
- Grading of students' online work
- Creating live zoom facilitation sessions
- Learner support basics

2. The Special Open and Distance Learning Training (SODLT-A)

This second segment of the VLE training was targeted at 732 senior non-teaching staff of the University. The purpose of the training was to familiarize them with a VLE in an ODL institution and enable them to communicate competencies and understanding of the inner mechanism of an ODL institution. The title of the program was "Setting Up and Managing E-Learning Platform for Quality University Education." The objectives were to strengthen the capacity of NOUN Administrative staff to:

- Support the delivery of courses to have significant improvement in the quality of NOUN graduates in a way that the graduates become the most sought after in Nigeria
- Support the NOUN academic staff to deliver the best ODL programs in Africa
- Produce master trainers for NOUN that will train all Nigerian universities and the entire school system in delivering quality ODL as stimulated by the COVID-19 environment

The competencies and skills taught were:

- Setting up of a virtual library for e-books, e-journals, videos, and others
- Developing welcome videos in the VLE
- Development of lesson videos
- Daily layout of online learning activities to include weekly timetable, lesson notes, discussion forum, quizzes, weekly tests, and comprehensive examinations
- Conduct of live zoom lessons
- Conduct of chat sessions
- Good learner support practices
- Setup of question back

- Assessing the log of students' activities
- Developing interactive and visually appealing elements

3. The Special Open and Distance Learning Training (SODLT-B)

The third and final training cycle was for what are considered 'junior staff' in the Nigerian civil service structure. These are not academicians, but the lockdown provided an opportunity to increase their awareness of what an Open and Distance Learning institution is, and how it can operate in absence of in-person tutoring. The training was a one-week intensive training held virtually. A total of 1,405 participants connected and participated across 81 study centres in the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, although only 1,333 finished the course enough to be evaluated. The training program had 24/7 engagement with the course resources, six facilitators, and 60 grading support staff participated in training and grading activities.

The objective of the program was to strengthen the capacity of NOUN Administrative staff to:

- Support the delivery of courses that is expected to lead to significant improvement in the quality of NOUN graduates and that they are the most sought after in Nigeria
- Support NOUN academic staff to deliver the best ODL programs in Africa and,
- Produce master trainers for NOUN that will train other Nigerian universities and the entire school system in delivering quality ODL a stimulated by the COVID-19 pandemic

The training course content included:

- The principles of Open and Distance Learning
- Meaning of common words and terminologies used in NOUN and ODL systems
- Walkthrough of the NOUN Virtual Learning Environment
- History, law, structure and operations of NOUN
- Details of the journey of a NOUN student from admission to graduation
- The role of CONTISS 1 to 6 Administrative Staff in making NOUN the best ODL university in Africa
- End of course examination

To participants are mainly junior staff members, most of the presentation were brought down to the level of the participants.

Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance Learning (RETRIDOL) Activities in 2021

With the COVID-19 that led to the closure of institutions and face to face learning, most conventional institutions in Nigeria suddenly sought the assistance of COL-RETRIDOL to assist in training their faculty members in the ODL mode. The training was to fulfil the requirement of the accreditation body to ensure quality delivery. The National Open University also had to retrain their faculty staff members in the quality and innovative virtual mode. Some of these training workshops ran by the Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance Learning (RETRIDOL), in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) include the following:

1. Workshop on the Transformation to Dual-Mode Delivery for Higher Education in Ghana was held from the 15th-17th June 2021. The aim of the workshop was to build the capacity of the participants on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) material development, use of Open Educational Resources (OER), and support services for learners in ODL to help their institutions for a full transition to dual-mode delivery. It was well attended with 22 Participants from 7 different institutions from Ghana.
2. Workshop on Development of Course Materials for Open and Distance Learning in South-East Nigeria, Africa was held from 17th – 20th August 2021. The major objective of the workshop was to build the capacity of participants on how to develop course materials for open and distance learning. This would enable the institutes/centres in the conventional institutions to develop course material to fulfil the accreditation requirement and obtain a licence to offer programmes via distance learning. There were 40 participants from two institutions in Nigeria.
3. RETRIDOL/COL workshop on overview of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) & Course Material Development for another conventional university was held from 4th – 7th May 2021. The main objective was to get the faculty members in the Distance learning centre of the university trained in the distance learning mode before seeking approval from the accreditation body - National Universities Commission (NUC). There were 28 faculty members trained in the institution.
4. Workshop on Instructional Design for Distance Learning Institute, was held in University of Lagos from 28th – 30th September 2021. The main objective of the workshop was to train the academic staff on Instructional Design. This workshop became necessary for the Institute to improve on their content, structural design, and their level of interactivity with learners. There were 30 participants trained.
5. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) had an Orientation Workshop for Academic Staffs and Study Centre Directors (Virtual Mode) from the 24th – 28th May 2021. 400 participants were trained. The objectives of the workshop were:
 - To bring participants up-to-date with the latest innovations in the world of Open and Distance Learning (ODL).
 - To enlighten them on the ODL system operated in NOUN.
 - To educate the participants on why the University chose the system it is operating.
 - How to improve on the lapses noticed in the system.
6. Workshop on Design, Development, and Adaptation of Course Materials for Distance, Online and Blended Learning, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto was held December

6th – 9th 2021. The overarching objective of the workshop was to develop participants' knowledge and skills in designing, developing and adapting content for distance, online, and blended learning modes. There were 67 participants in the workshop.

7. Open and Distance Learning Skill Development Workshop was held from October 4th – 7th 2021 on Igbinedion University in Africa. This workshop aimed to provide staff and management of Igbinedion University, Okada an overview of what distance learning in a dual-mode institution entails and equip them with the requisite skills, knowledge and attitudes essential to successfully transition to a dual-mode university. There were 51 participants from the conventional University
8. RETRIDOL/COL Workshop on Quality Assurance Mechanisms for Dual-Mode Universities in Nigeria was held from the 14th – 16th December 2021. The objectives of the workshop were to:
 - Reflect on trends in higher education generally, and in ODL in particular;
 - Discuss sustainable approaches to Quality Assurance (QA);
 - Identify existing Quality Assurance arrangements and strategies in participating institutions and highlight any existing gaps;
 - Investigate basic concepts of quality, quality assurance, and standards in Higher Education with consideration for ODL contexts, including eLearning;
 - Identify and explain roles of different stakeholders in Higher Education Quality enhancement including the national regulatory body (NUC);
 - Acquaint participants with quality assurance frameworks, standards and performance indicators of three (3) toolkits and how they can be used to assess and enhance quality in dual- mode contexts;
 - Familiarise participants with QA framework and policy, and internal QA mechanisms to improve OdeL operations and programmes;
 - Enhance the capacity of participants to deliver high quality Open, Distance and eLearning (OdeL) programmes. There were 18 institutions with 45 participants in attendance.

Conclusion

From the various workshop organised at the regional and institutional levels highlighted above, it is glaring that the faculty members have really been exposed to the rudiments of enthroning quality assurance in the distance learning system. But despite the success stories on training in the virtual learning environment, the swift movement to virtual classrooms in most African

countries has brought about various challenges. These include: lack of training of some staff members, inadequate human and material resources and infrastructure. The unstable internet connectivity has also really impaired the implementation of quality delivery within the ODL system.

The Region as it is today, is getting more and more confronted with the need to depend on ODL to contend with the world crisis. This is because, besides the challenges of COVID-19, the entire region has continuously been engulfed with crises like wars and other forms of human security challenges. All these are making ODL more attractive every day, with the accompanying need for quality assurance. It is an obvious fact that no country is insulated from these realities. Therefore, countries all over must develop the human resources, physical infrastructure and monitoring mechanism to key into mode of ODL without losing quality.

MIDDLE EAST REGION

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Benchmarking Framework and Data Set for Online, Open, Smart and Technology-enhanced Higher Education

Background

Before the COVID 19 pandemic disrupted education in an unprecedented manner in 2020, ten online universities and associations initiated a work to establish a common understanding of the quality criteria that are particularly relevant to and reflective of the uniqueness of technology-enhanced technology higher education. On 25 February 2019, the participating associations and online universities signed the Declaration of Support for establishing the consortium for Benchmarking Framework and Data Set in Dubai, U.A.E. Currently, the number of universities and associations has reached eighteen institutions. The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) became an official partner of the Consortium in May 2021.

While the initiative was launched by Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University in Dubai, the consortium's membership is not limited to the Middle East region; rather, it includes universities and associations from 5 continents. Being a non-profit initiative of a global nature strengthens the consortium's activities as the final product is not geared towards one geographic region or a specific community.

Development and Testing

In July 2020, the founding members established a technical committee to develop the benchmarking framework criteria and indicators. Each founding member nominated one or several experts to represent their respective organizations. The technical committee used a group consensus technique (Delphi method) to reach a consensus among participating experts that reduces the effect of dominant experts on their peers. During the process, HBMSU assumed responsibility for analyzing and presenting the results of each round using descriptive statistics and content validity index for each item.

Three rounds had been conducted, resulting in high content validity index scores for most indicators. The final set included 39 indicators belonging to 6 dimensions:

1. Teaching and Learning
2. Learner Services
3. Technology Environment
4. Outcome and Impact on Society,
5. Diversity and Inclusiveness
6. Organizational Aspects.

For each indicator, the evaluator should describe the evidence of achievement and the data sources that can be used to verify the achievement. The presidents of participating universities and associations approved the final benchmarking framework dimensions and criteria in February 2021.



A pilot implementation was conducted by five universities between 31 March 2021 and 30 June 2021. The pilot study examined the face validity and reliability of the framework indicators using real data. Participating universities were given the opportunity to comment on the applicability of the indicator to the institution and provide recommendations for improving the measurement of the indicators. Data collection templates, including calculated fields and graphs, were used to collect and present data. Based on the results of the pilot implementation, two indicators were found ambiguous and were removed from the final set. Furthermore, guidelines were developed to guide each indicator's data collection, including rubrics for assigning indicator score, unit of measure, relevant data sources, and refined lists of evidence.

Benchmarking Framework Website

To enhance the visibility of the consortium and facilitate the benchmarking process among participating universities, HBMSU developed [a dedicated website](#) that will act as the first stop for all up-to-date information about the consortium and benchmarking activities. The members-only section of the website, will facilitate data collection, presentation, comparison among members, and comparison over time. The discussion section is dedicated to collaborative work among members on the strategies for performance improvement of participating institutions.

The current members of the Benchmarking Framework include higher education institutions and associations across multiple regions and are as follows (per February 2022):

- Universita Telematica Internazionale UNINETTUNO (Italy)
- Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University (United Arab Emirates)
- European Association of Distance Teaching Universities – EADTU

- Commonwealth of Learning – CoL
- Association of Arab Universities – AArU
- Asian Association of Open Universities – AAOU
- Asia eUniversity (Malaysia)
- Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – ANQAHE
- Open Polytechnic (New Zealand)
- The Open University of China
- UNESCO-ICHEI – International Centre for Higher Education Innovation
- UNISA (South Africa)
- Western Caspian University (Azerbaijan)
- Maseno University (Kenya)
- Tecnológico de Monterrey (Mexico)
- UniRede (Brazil)

Following the launch of the final version of the benchmarking and its website on 10 January 2022, the implementation phase will begin. There will be one cycle of data collection per year where participating universities will enter data on 37 indicators in Q1 using the built-in tools within the benchmarking website.

Conclusion

While the benchmarking consortium started in the Middle East before COVID-19 hit, its work became more relevant during the pandemic, with more universities being forced to shift from conventional face-to-face to online education. The benchmarking framework is an important milestone as it allows participating universities to use comparative analysis for evaluating their performance across critical dimensions relevant to online, open, and technology-enhanced higher education.

The consortium is open and free to join for all interested higher education institutions, associations, and quality assurance agencies globally. Contact details and instructions on how to join can be accessed through the [dedicated website](#).

The international representation of members from across the globe will enhance the applicability of the framework in all regions and ensure continuous updating to keep the framework's relevance. Using a dedicated website for data entry and analysis will enhance resource use efficiency and allow for more dedicated time for improvement. The discussion functionality of the website will keep experts connected and focused on achieving improvement related to different indicators.

ASIA REGION

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Introduction

Along with the strategic objectives stated in ICDE Activity Plan 2021-2022, ICDE has continued to support the United Nations 2030 Agenda for sustainable development focusing on the fourth goal, i.e., “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. Thus, during 2021 some activities have been conducted in the Asian region to embody the ICDE Activity Plan with its following strategic objectives under the supervision of the ICDE Focal Point on Quality in Asia Region. The position of the Focal Point on Quality for the Asian region as being the President of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) has enabled some programs in relation to educational quality in Asia regions to be in line with the AAOU agendas, and it has given some benefits to support the embodiment of objectives as stated in the ICDE Strategic Plan 2021-2024, i.e.:

- 1) increasing the impact of ICDE’s advocacy regarding Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning (OFDL),
- 2) extending the global reach of ICDE membership to underrepresented regions, sectors, and stakeholders as well as underrepresented and disadvantaged learner populations,
- 3) maximizing the relevance and value of ICDE to its members through the prioritized areas of quality, OER, and innovation in education, and
- 4) ensuring the long-term sustainability of ICDE.

Some resources were obtained from reports of collaborative research among the ICDE members in the Asian Region as well as the dissemination of the research results in webinars or conferences.

The impact and growth of open, online, blended and flexible learning

Scale of Growth

The impact of the growth of open, online, blended, and flexible learning has impacted another stakeholder economically in a positive way. More specifically, according to Zenius, one of the startup companies for interactive live online courses in Indonesia, the user of online course platforms in Indonesia, has significantly increased 12x year on year to more than 15,7 million users per quarter II since the year 2020. This shows how learners are still keen to study amidst the disruptive pandemic that has occurred for the past two years, and on the bright side, this has benefitted the e-learning market growth.

Perceived Issues of Quality

As presented in the ICDE Virtual Global Conference Week in October 2021, the Focal Point on Quality for the Asian region has promoted the importance of quality in all aspects of education to ICDE members in Asia. This has obtained positive responses from other ICDE members (*who are of the AAOU members simultaneously*), such as Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), Open University of China (OUC), Open University of Malaysia (OUM), and Universitas Terbuka (UT), in which they conducted meetings, seminars, or conferences in 2021 with the themes closely related to the issues of quality.

Some various strategies and innovations have been implemented by these institutions. First, STOU as one of the active AAOU members organized an internal meeting under the management of the Educational Quality Assurance Coordinating Center with the purpose of creating guidelines for the STOU administrators and staff regarding how to write documents for each quality assurance item. Second, UPOU conducted seminar workshops as a part of the UPOU Sustainable Institution Building for Open Learning (SIBOL) Program. Mentoring and technical support were provided to state colleges and universities (SUCs) that are interested in offering online training programs for teachers on online, blended, or remote learning. From this workshop, the participating institutions were expected to create course designs, multimedia material developments, learner supports, program management, and quality assurance in online and blended learning. Third, OUM also gave big supports to ICDE focal point for the Asian region by conducting a webinar on “Sustaining Quality Assurance Amidst Pandemic Covid-19 via BCMS”. From this webinar, participants gained knowledge of how to maintain quality assurance, especially during the pandemic. Moreover, some other benefits from this webinar can be applied both in the educational sectors and non-educational sectors. Fourth, in April 2021 OUC conducted the first working meeting of the Quality Assurance Committee of the OUC involving 44 branches with the purposes of reviewing the preparation plans in teaching standards, condition guarantee, teaching supervision, and evaluation & appraisal. As the result, three tasks were emphasized to be carried out by the participants, namely 1) teaching team construction based on the network, 2) support services for online learning, and 3) examination pattern reform.

These meetings or events are in line with the programs of AAOU’s Quality Accreditation Taskforce that were established in 2017 with some experts of the AAOU members that are currently expanded by UT, Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), Open University of Japan (OUJ), University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK), and University of the Philippines. The task force is currently focusing on accreditation system for quality assurance of technology-mediated education in times of openness in the digital age consisting of three phases, namely 1) feasibility study on offering open education accreditation services, 2) developing an accreditation instrument for institutional level accreditation, and 3) improving the instrument, process development, briefing universities for the pilot run, conducting pilot run/simulation, and relevant training for the individuals to be identified as part of the team who will do the accreditation.

Furthermore, the agreement stated that there are four levels of accreditation in terms of open distance learning, distance education, technology-mediated education, and technology-enhanced education, i.e., 1) awareness, 2) application/use, 3) use and creation, and 4) use, creation, and sharing.

Assessment and Examinations

In terms of the implementation of the examinations, some institutions have eliminated the face-to-face implementation of the exams. As an example, UT issued a new policy, namely “Course Assignments” that were given to students who did not have access to either online tutorials or web-based tutorials. This policy got positive responses from the regional offices and the students. Students who experienced geographical and Internet access constraints during the Covid-19 period were given this mode of assignment. It was massively used by 529,805 students per course in 2021 and will remain as part of UT's learning support post-covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Take Home Exam or THE was carried out to reduce direct interaction and preventing the transmission of the Covid-19 virus. In order to meet the quality standards, there are some criteria to be considered by THE writers in developing THE.

Reputation of Open, Online, Blended, and Flexible Learning

In Indonesia particularly, UT has another way of promoting open, online, blended, and flexible learning through a consortium of the Indonesia Cyber Education Institute, or ICE Institute. It is a gallery of courses that can be taken and transferred by students using blockchain technology. It is an online learning centre for many universities and online learning providers accredited by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. Prof. Ir. Nizam, M.Sc., Ph.D., the Director-General of Higher Education, inaugurated the ICE Institute virtually on 28 July 2021.

ICE Institute is expected to be able to develop and implement the Independent Learning program for all. It provides a variety of online courses from many universities under the partnership in a consortium scheme and with other online learning providers throughout Indonesia and overseas. The consortium of the ICE Institute is under the management of 14 founding institutions in which Universitas Terbuka is appointed as the consortium chair. The office is located in Tangerang Selatan, Indonesia. To present quality courses, the ICE Institute collaborates with several well-known public and private universities in Indonesia and international institutions providing online courses, such as University of Indonesia (UI), Pelita Harapan University (UPH), Universitas Terbuka (UT), Gadjah Mada University (UGM), Bina Nusantara (Binus University), Jakarta State University (UNJ), Atmajaya Catholic University (UAJY), IPB University, Pradita University, Institut Teknologi Sepuluh November (ITS), Surakarta State University (UNS), Telkom University, Diponegoro University, and the Association of Indonesian Business and Economics Faculties (AFEBI). Besides, some online learning providers are also in collaboration with ICE Institute such as EdX, Regional English Language Office (RELO) US Embassy Jakarta, Asian Development Bank, Kalibrr, and Microsoft.

As of October 2021, there are 181 online courses from 14 top Indonesian higher education institutions and 1420 courses from leading international universities under the edX consortium. ICE Institute will also help meeting the needs of lifelong learners through the provision of quality learning systems and content that can be accessed anytime and anywhere.

Access and Inclusion

Both the position as the ICDE Focal Point on Quality in the Asian region as well as the President of the AAOU have given more opportunities to explore the educational development in Asia.

During the Post Covid-19 era in 2021, three webinar series from the AAOU titled “StudentSpirations” were conducted in October, November, and December 2021 focusing on students’ online learning experiences, educators, and distance teaching universities (DTUs) in terms of student attrition, employability, and inclusive education. The following table includes the details of the webinar series.

Table 1. The AAOU Webinar Series “StudentSpiration”

Date	Theme/Issues	Moderator	Speakers
8 th October 2021	Student Attrition (How students survive with ODL experiences)	Dr. Astri J. Suhandoko (Lecturer at UT Indonesia)	1. Dr. Benjamina G. Flor (Professor at UPOU) 2. Ruth Kirana (Co-founder and CEO of Megana School; Alumni of UT) 3. Ngabdul Khalim (Managing Director, Proofreader, Editor at ENGLISH++ Startup; Alumni of UT)
17 th November 2021	Employability (Are distance learning alumni as good as F2F university alumni?)	Ethel Joan Atienza (Learning Management and Implementation at SEAMEO – INNOTECH, Philippines)	1. Prof. Cengiz Hakan Aydin (Professor at Communication Science Program, Anadolu University, Turkey) 2. Kamran Mir (Assistant Director IT, Alumni of AIOU Pakistan) 3. Angelina Jong (President of Sarawak Physiotherapy Association; Alumni of WOU Malaysia)
21 st December 2021	Inclusive Education (How has “Education for All” been optimally implemented for all types of learners?)	Dr. Dewi A. Sapuan (Assoc. Prof. at organizational Behaviour, Director of Teaching and Learning – WOU Malaysia)	1. Sikdam Gayo (Blind Student of UT Indonesia) 2. Reem Syarif (Transgender Student of AIOU Pakistan) 3. Mr. Kanapathippilai Keetheswaran (Lecturer in Special Needs Education – OUSL Sri Lanka)

Sources:

StudentSpiration #1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tB-BAADtmc>

StudentSpiration #2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbYib7m-Xyc>

StudentSpiration #3: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hs59CG_aWRA

Particularly, on the third webinar, the AAOU was collaborating with the Indonesian Rector Forum or Forum Rektor Indonesia (FRI) in which the Chairperson of FRI, Prof. Panut Mulyono, who is the Rector of Gajah Mada University Yogyakarta, Indonesia was invited to deliver an opening and welcoming speech.

Acceleration of Digital Transition

In the Post Covid-19 Era, distance teaching universities (DTUs) have to focus on how to optimize their capabilities in integrating technology into instructional deliveries. During the pandemic that has yet to alleviate in Indonesia, it does not diminish the vigor of the higher education institutions to continue to improve their understanding and dissemination of the knowledge of the system, technology, and management of distance learning programs for all lecturers, students, and the public in general. UT, for example, conducted Knowledge Sharing Forum (KSF) done virtually in a webinar mode through Microsoft Teams covering several topics regarding Open, Online, and Distance Learning and broadcasted through UT TV. Up to the middle of July 2021, UT has conducted twenty series of KSF.

Transforming instructional design is also important to modify or to find new ways of student learning services in addressing the learning crisis and bringing about a set of solutions previously considered difficult to implement. This must be in line with the availability of training for synchronous literacy skills for face-to-face teachers & students after the Covid-19 pandemic, including training on online learning strategies, methods, and techniques that need to be provided. Furthermore, the design has to consider supporting student engagement and flexibility. Online learning should be designed based on instructional design principles combined with instructional components to engage students in the learning process.

The partnership between ICDE and AAOU has also been maintained through some collaborations. In 2021, ICDE contributed to the 34th AAOU Conference hosted by the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) in two one-and-a-half-hour webinar workshops. The first workshop titled 'Implementing the UNESCO OER Recommendation – how to amplify capacity building initiatives for various regional contexts?' The panelists were Ms. Zeynep Varoglu, Programme Specialist from UNESCO, Dr. Sanjaya Mishra, Education Specialist from Commonwealth of Learning, and Dr. Jacques Dang, Tecnology Director HEC Paris, and Dr. Wayne Mackintosh, Director of OER Foundation.

Furthermore, the second workshop was titled 'Quality Assurance of Open, Flexible, and Distance Education – A Global Perspective'. There were four panelists who are the ICDE Focal Points on Quality, i.e., Prof. Ojat Darajat from Asia Region, Prof. Moustafa Hassan from Arab Region, Mr. George Ubachs from European Region, and Dr. Yaping Gao from North America. The panelists discussed the acceleration and upscaling during and after the pandemic towards more flexible and digitally supported programs of study, and the implications for the development of innovative approaches to quality from their own region. The Secretary-General of the ICDE, Ms. Torunn Gjelsvik, and Prof. Alan Tait, the Chair of the ICDE Quality Network from Open University UK, were the moderators for both workshops

The assessment of new perspectives on quality for the open, online, and flexible learning in Asia for the future

There are lessons learned from Covid-19 Outbreak. First, technology supports the quality of education but cannot replace the work of teachers. Second, online student assessment has become one of the important aspects to be concerned about, and student engagement is strategically important to support their success. During the pandemic, students inevitably learned how to enhance their own skills more independently in relation to cognitive competence, such as elaborating some ideas from the reading activities, stating their opinions or arguments with sufficient and relevant explanations, and optimizing the use of the learning management system (LMS) to motivate and facilitate their autonomous learning activities.

As a reflection, governments as well as educators and students elaborated on aspects to be prepared for living in the new normal era by focusing on students' success in their learning process. The use of online technology must be increased to widen the accessibility and increase the quality of education including learning materials, learning activities, and partnerships with other universities. It is important to put the strategic priority on open learning for every university. Additionally, schools and universities have to conduct students' and teachers' training/knowledge upgrading on online learning, both capacity building, and e-learning helpdesk. Training on capacity building for instance, training on online learning, distance education management, online learning facilitators, and online evaluation, while e-learning helpdesk includes the development of multimedia-based content and the use of a learning management system.

There is a high demand for enhancing internet literacy skills. However, educators and students should not only learn and improve the internet literacy but in facing the new normal and Industrial Era 4.0, they have to enhance the new literacy, i.e., data literacy, technology literacy, human literacy, and lifelong learner and also 6C's characters, which are collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, communication, computational thinking, and compassion. Furthermore, the commitment to increasing access has been another key to students' success. Educational institutions need to develop and diversify infrastructure, increase collaboration, and provide flexible learning pathways. Moreover, educational institutions must create a more agile and flexible system for digital pedagogy and develop low-tech innovations to give learning opportunities to students who are disadvantaged.

EUROPE REGION

George Ubachs, Managing Director, EADTU

Innovation in Quality for Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (Europe)

Introduction

Quality assurance systems must align with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015). Due to the growing importance of e-learning, EADTU, ENQA and leading universities have risen to the challenge of developing specific guidelines that operationalize the most relevant ESG standards for application in digital education. EADTU also updated the E-xcellence manual and instrument for blended and distance learning in parallel to this. This recognized the relevance of a multi-stakeholder and multi-level approach, in which different levels interact with each other.

Now, during the COVID crisis, new challenges arise. In degree education, synchronous hybrid, blended and online distance education are massively adopted in the mainstream. In continuous education and professional development, online micro credentials are set up in collaboration with external stakeholders such as private and public companies, regions and cities. In addition, open education through MOOCs leads to specific micro credentials in the Common Micro Credential Framework. In the context of European developments, 41 university alliances, initiated by the European Commission, work together on joint courses and curricula with physical, blended or virtual mobility. This should give 50% of the students the chance of an international learning experience.

All this is leading to a transformation of the European universities, which the European Commission and national governments are now giving direction and shape. This has implications for the internal and external quality assurance of education, which should lead to better quality and more robust maturity.

Quality in Digital Higher Education

The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (ESG, 2015) regard quality as “primarily a result of the interaction between teachers, students and the institutional learning environment. Quality assurance ensures that “the content of programmes, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for purpose” focusing on “all activities within the continuous improvement cycle of higher education institutions, regardless of the field of study or place of delivery. Improvement relates to quality assurance and quality enhancement”.

Universities are now consolidating digital pedagogies for mainstream education, while rethinking and expanding continuing education, professional development and open education provisions.

At the policy level, both the EU and national governments support digital education offerings in a lifelong learning perspective. The European University Alliances (EUI) are regarded by the

European Commission as a priority and spearhead for innovation, international collaboration and mobility, supported by digital education.

a) University-level Developments

The COVID crisis has shifted universities European wide in adopting online modes of teaching. Three main approaches were observed and appear to be continuing (Pieters et al, 2021).

- Synchronous hybrid learning: based on institutions that have in common that both on-site or 'here' students and remote or 'there' students are included simultaneously (synchronous hybrid learning, Raes, 2019).
- Blended learning: based on a course design with a deliberate combination of online and offline learning activities (Goeman et al. 2018); Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Garrison & Vaughan, 2013; Laurillard, 2012, 2015).
- Online distance learning: based on a course design with a continuous physical separation between teacher and student, synchronous and asynchronous (Martin, Sun, Westine, 2019; Castro, Tumibay, 2019).

All three approaches are currently offered in three course programmes by EADTU's DigiTeL Pro Strategic Partnership ([Professional Development for Digital Teaching and Learning](#)). It brings together excellent groups of experts from universities, well-known for research and innovation in digital education and having developed good practices in digital solutions during the Corona crisis.

Also, various challenges will also be encountered with regard to methods of e-assessment (TESLA, 2019) and future applications of artificial intelligence, impacting on all three approaches..

b) The development of micro credentials

In Europe, people need to constantly update their knowledge, skills and competences to fill the gap between their education and training and the demands of a rapidly changing labor market. The COVID-19 crisis has led to rapid growth in demand for short, tailor-made learning opportunities. This demand for new forms of learning has led to a corresponding increase in interest in 'micro credentials' that certify the outcomes of these small learning experiences. This demand is expected to continue during the recovery from the pandemic and in the years to come.

The EU Council of Ministers of Education will adopt a proposal of the European Commission to implement a micro credential framework as soon as possible. Member States are invited to submit a plan within 12 months "setting out the corresponding measures to be taken at national level to support the achievement of the objectives of the Recommendation by 2025". 'Micro credential' means "the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards. Courses leading to micro credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labor market needs. Micro credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable. They may be standalone or combined into larger credentials. They are

underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity" (European Commission, 2021).

Frontrunner universities already exploited the potential of digital education in CEPD because it is scalable, accessible and inclusive and flexible. Others were organizing MOOC-based micro credentials as a tool for CEPD, delivered by MOOC platforms. In relation to this, the European MOOC Consortium recently published the related Policy Recommendations adopted in the closing EMC-LM Policy Forum 15 December 2021([Link](#)) on behalf of MOOC platforms, universities, sectors and enterprises, public employment services, and national and European governmental level.

When this proposal for a Council Recommendation is approved, Member States should implement this Recommendation as soon as possible and submit a plan by (insert date 12 months after adoption by Council) setting out the corresponding measures to be taken at national level to support the achievement of the objectives of the Recommendation by 2025.

c) The European Universities Initiative (EUI)

European University Alliances are one of the flagship initiatives of the EU's European Education Area with the ambition to build the European university of the future, "promote European values and identity" and "improve the quality and competitiveness of European higher education". (European Commission, 2018). Within these alliances, different cooperation models are explored that are based on a common long-term mission and strategy. Joint degree, micro credential programs and staff and student mobility are at the heart of current EUI projects.

These partnerships create new challenges in the digitization of higher education, even more challenged by the COVID-crisis.

Implications for Quality Assurance

Each of these developments, adopting online modes of teaching, introducing micro credentials and building alliances of collaboration are innovating higher education at university and policy levels. These developments have consequently also a direct effect on internal and external quality assurance. Universities, quality assurance agencies, enterprises and governments, European and national level, need to explore and share quality related issues and come to common grounds for anticipated new and adapted approaches.

EADTU is at the forefront of innovative approaches to digital education and has planned a review of E-xcellence, taking into account new teaching and learning approaches in mainstream education, micro credentials and international education and mobility. ENQA has set up a working group to investigate how quality assurance for micro credentials can be achieved. The Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO) is developing a quality assurance approach for European Universities Alliances on behalf of the Flemish community and together with other quality assurance agencies and ministries.

Quality assurance is therefore central to these new developments in European higher education.

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LATIN AMERICA REGION

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Quality in Distance and Online Education: Vision from Latin America

What are the most recent developments in different regions in the understanding and practice of Quality for online and flexible programs?

With regards to education, it has been pointed out that flexibility should be one of the characteristics of virtual education and that it should be focused on competencies and the interdependence between knowledge and know-how, thus orienting the student's capacity to make decisions.

Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ibero-America and the Caribbean have had to adopt changes in their educational systems in order to guarantee quality education.

Among the quality practices that HEIs have developed or implemented and that are mentioned in the book, *Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior en Latinoamérica y el Caribe, en tiempos de COVID-19: visión de las Instituciones de Educación Superior (2021)* we can mention the following:

- 1) *Educational platforms* have been *implemented* in the teaching field.

The Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP) had to adapt 100% to the online modality, prioritizing the undergraduate level, for which the institutional platform **Paideia PUCP** (Moodle) was selected as the virtual institutional learning environment to maintain academic activities.

Another situation that arose was the suspension of face-to-face academic activities, where teachers were forced to become users of technological tools to interact with students at a distance.

The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) has developed a service portal called *Virtual Campus*, specifically for teachers, where they can enrich their teaching activity through academic recommendations, educational content, guidance on the use of ICTs, technical advise and training.

- 2) *Development and implementation of virtual laboratories*

The Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja (UTPL), whose educational model of the distance learning modality – MAD – has served as a reference for the adaptation of the face-to-face modality to virtuality, has developed to facilitate the training of students in the case of pre-professional practices, to carry them out through a *virtual world*. For the students of Law, a courtroom was created and, for the students of Business Administration a staff designed to perform in real time, certain functions of a Public Relations department.

The Instituto Universitario de Ciencias de la Salud-Fundación H.A. Barceló (IUCS), having experience in EaD, implemented an Academic Continuity Plan based on four dimensions: the organizational dimension, which involves planning and student follow-up; the linking dimension, which includes communication, relational and otherness; the teaching proposal, which involves conceptual management, didactic transposition, participation and dialogue; and the dimension of the evaluation proposal, which must be adapted to the new teaching proposal. In parallel, ad hoc groups were developed to support the monitoring of the development of distance classes.

3) *Creation, development and implementation of educational and curricular models*

The Fundación Universitaria del Área Andina de Colombia developed the proposal "*Augmented Teaching and Learning Model*", focused on student learning.

Another approach is the *integral evaluation model for a Distance Education System MEI-SEaD* of the Central University of Venezuela, a mechanism for the management of evaluation from a pedagogical and technological vision. This concept was developed due to the absence of an integral evaluation mechanism from the perspective of students, and teaching coordinations of virtual learning environments at the undergraduate and graduate levels in distance, hybrid or support to face-to-face subjects.

4) *Quality practices developed as a function of research and linkage*

Virtual mobility agreements

The Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia-UNED of Spain favors the international projection of its university community, always with a special emphasis on Latin American countries, participating in mobility programs and supporting the creation of new physical and virtual mobility programs. The main objectives of UNED through virtual mobility have to do with: consolidation of internationalization, promotion of international dissemination and outreach, promotion of the internationalization of research and knowledge transfer and strengthening of international cooperation, public, scientific and cultural diplomacy.

On the other hand, the Universidad de Ciencias Aplicadas y Ambientales (U.D.C.A.) of Colombia has complemented its virtual and distance study modalities through virtual mobility, prism classes, conferences and seminars and COIL accompaniment programs, in accordance with the challenges of the local, national and global environment.

Networking with different foreign institutions and/or organizations

The Universidad Nacional de Quilmes of Argentina has agreements with the Association of Universities of the Montevideo Group (AUGM); UDUAL; CONAHEC; the Ibero-American

Network of Universities TELESCOPI; the International Cooperation Network of National Universities (RedCIUN); and the Argentine Forum for International Education (FAE).

In the case of Bolivia, the Universidad Privada de Santa Cruz de la Sierra-UPSA has signed an agreement with Coursera for its academic community to access free MOOC courses offered by this educational platform. Coursera opened courses in 2020 at no cost for countries where the pandemic had the greatest impact.

In Ecuador, the Universidad Católica de Cuenca took the necessary steps to join international organizations such as CALED, AIESAD and the Latin American Network of Dual Universities or Duale Hochschule Latinoamérica (DHLA).

International Training Program in Research Culture

The University Foundation of the Andean Area (AREANDINA) of Colombia through its international visibility and positioning indexes has managed to position AREANDINA through favourable spaces and tools for the formation of professionals and global citizens.

National and international projects

HEIs promote active participation in international projects, with the aim of contributing to the transformation of their environment and the construction of a society that responds to the regional and global challenges of the digital era. In the case of the National University of Quilmes in Argentina, it has been promoting active participation in networks, international projects, and international fairs.

How can the expertise of educational institutions that specialize in online and distance learning be developed in partnership with on-campus institutions that wish to improve the quality of their blended and online programs in the future?

The challenge of the pandemic allowed us to evidence a significant trend towards the accelerated growth of distance and virtual education. It left us with valuable innovative approaches, always with a view to improving the quality of education. It became an opportunity to rethink education, reorient training processes and address digital inequalities.

It has transformed the educational model and curriculum design towards a quality teaching and learning process attached to the use of new technologies. Awareness of the importance of education as a generator of the human potential has been raised. The necessity of the use of new technologies for the transformation and development of society has been accentuated, based on a sense of collaboration between the various universities in the region.

Undoubtedly, remote education constituted an opportunity for the consolidation of distance and virtual education. Therefore, it was necessary to restructure the pedagogical model of each of the IES, within the context of academic excellence. An educational model that responds to the needs of business and society, aimed at a comprehensive training of students in different areas of knowledge. This includes the adoption of innovative tools that facilitate communication and interaction, and that is supported by a solid technological infrastructure.

The pandemic has transformed the contexts of curriculum implementation, not only because of the use of platforms and the need to consider conditions different from those for which the curriculum was designed, but also because there are learning and competencies that become more relevant in the current context. These competencies must be adapted, responding to collective needs and social relevance. The concrete implementation should be adapted to standards of comparability and compatibility at the international level, so that the student can choose from the place where he/she is to opt for various study alternatives.

Training and education of the actors of the educational process is essential to give continuity to this new educational context. New formats require trained and empowered teachers so that they can make pedagogical decisions based on the curricular guidelines defined in each country and the conditions and circumstances of their students. Although during the pandemic many educators have been encouraged to make materials and resources available on different platforms, teachers need time and guidance to explore them, get to know them and have criteria for making decisions about their use. It is essential to empower faculty and staff to make contextualized and flexible pedagogical decisions, maintaining an appropriate balance between autonomy and support.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for training, advice and resources to work on new teaching methodologies, technical-pedagogical training for teachers and other distance and online teaching and learning platforms.

Internationalization in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) constitutes an internal transversal process focused on the permanent innovation of its substantive and adjective activities. It promotes and drives the quality of service in all processes that support academic, administrative and technological activities, and has an impact on the articulation of all areas of the institution, with a common goal: "To offer a good education, for all and throughout life".

From this perspective, institutional cooperation should be focused on the search for a common framework, with clear policies in the conduction of virtual mobility processes for teachers and students, which articulates the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the different actions that arise from each of the processes.

What innovative approaches to quality improvement are emerging from the acceleration and expansion of online/distance and hybrid study concepts?

Undoubtedly, the role of the university is of great relevance since it must assume a critical position towards knowledge and information and communication technologies, in order to promote an adequate transformation. Therefore, it is important to analyze the orientation of education towards the future from different perspectives, in order to determine not only the possibility of rapid adaptation to new situations, but also that the transition is possible.

In the social sphere, taking into consideration that higher education is developed within particular social contexts, it is evident that there will be a widening of the digital divide. Work and learning will predominate in the distance mode, and various mental health problems will arise.

In addition, it should be noted that in the economic sphere, given the history of the pandemic, HEIs will have to face the decrease in their funding, adopting new ways of thinking and planning their institutional business. In addition, new demands for skills and personnel in the areas of technology, instruction and design will be required to support teachers and students.

In the environmental field, it can be mentioned that the transition towards sustainability is undoubtedly underway, and the university is no stranger to the phenomenon of integral and global transformation. Universities must promote training with links to the real problems that are evident in the different social, organizational and community scenarios, preparing students for a full, productive and environmentally sustainable life. In this context, university education represents an important asset that must implement sustainability in all its areas of action.

It is important to highlight the relationship of higher education with politics, where the increase of online globalization, the rise of nationalism and implications in public funding for higher education are expected due to each country's own economy and political influence.

Taking into consideration the disruptions and rapid changes faced during the health emergency, digital technologies have become even more vital to higher education. Thus, going forward, the adoption by institutions of blended or hybrid models for course delivery, the increased use of new technologies and learning tools, and the development of online faculty, including remote capabilities for instructional design and technology support, will take place to ensure that faculty skills and literacy keep pace with technological advances.

Specifically, and due to the great importance for the development of quality education, it is necessary to highlight the main technological innovations, which are and will be a significant impact on the future of education. Among them we have: artificial intelligence, the use of digital technologies, big data and learning analytics being vital for the development of higher education, the spread of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and micro credentials, blended and hybrid course models, open educational resources (OER), virtual offerings supported by applications and educational platforms, and automated assessment systems. Digital teaching and learning have led to a renewed focus on quality assurance, initiating a more deliberate transformation process that ensures that content is student-centered and aligned with learning outcomes, with learning supported by the web and synchronous and asynchronous tools. Culture and knowledge management, through more open environments, should support the digital transformation.

It is also worth highlighting one of the main contributions made by accreditation agencies, specifically the Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES) and the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI), with the development of a seal of quality in distance education for Ibero-America. It is named the Kalos Virtual Iberoamerica (KVI) Quality Seal, which requires compliance with a series of criteria and indicators that refer exclusively to those specific aspects of the different levels of university education in virtual mode. This Seal has a series of quality indicators and standards, adapted to the distance mode, evaluating key dimensions and aspects of virtual degrees, such as: academic processes, faculty experience and training, students, management and operations, infrastructure and technological support, student access to university services, among others. The indicators

and standards emphasize that students are, and will be, part of this evolution, and therefore, it must be guaranteed that they receive a quality higher education.

RIACES and OEI invited the Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Quality in Higher Distance Education (CALED) to strengthen the indicators selected for the creation of the Seal due to the Institute's experience in the development of guidelines and instruments for the evaluation, accreditation and certification of distance higher education programs.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, one of the challenges of higher education in the 21st century is to adapt education to the needs and potential of students. This requires training professionals equipped with competitive skills that allow them to use different technological tools, skills that in the future will contribute to the benefit of society. Therefore, the evident educational innovation requires a governance that leads the change in the regulatory framework, that structures the digital transformation of education and that guarantees equity and accessibility, due to the fact that we are moving towards a hybrid educational model.

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NORTH AMERICA REGION

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Pandemic Response Affects Long-Term Prospects for Online Education

Pandemic Uncertainty in 2021

The year 2021 began with COVID-19 peaking in North America as elsewhere in the world, resulting in the majority of higher education institutions continuing to offer programs remotely, for the most part, in Spring 2021. For the institutions that chose to begin the year in-person, typical strategies included frequent covid testing for students, faculty and staff, social distancing, and a significant reduction of face-to-face class meetings in favor of remote and online activities.

As 2021 progressed, despite the widespread availability of effective vaccines, optimism began to fade that the pandemic could be quickly eliminated or even contained and that institutions could return to stable in-person learning in the near future. The two main factors influencing a more cautious and pessimistic point of view were the emergence of new and more contagious variants of COVID-19, and the persistence of vaccine resistance limiting the percentage of vaccinated adults and college-age students to 60-70 percent of the eligible population.

As waves of infection continued on, many schools found themselves switching between periods of in-person and remote learning. More and more institutions, inclusive of two-year and 4-year public and private, have come to realize and appreciate the necessity as well as the urgency of being prepared with remote and online. Dependence on remote and online solutions continued into the summer and fall, and, with the recent spread of the omicron variant, this pattern is poised to continue into Spring 2022 and perhaps even beyond.

Institutions Strengthen Online Learning

In 2021, the higher education community in North America remained divided on the question of whether postsecondary remote and online learning are producing student outcomes comparable to in-person learning. While opposing views on equivalency are likely to continue drawing on evidence selectively to make their case, many institutions that depend heavily on remote learning to cope with the pandemic are responding to skeptics by adding tools and course design structure associated with fully online courses to help students achieve outcomes in what had begun as emergency remote courses.

Institutions that continued to rely heavily on remote learning also expanded both the availability and scope of faculty training, with the goal of improving student engagement, persistence, and performance. Some began converting remote learning courses into intentionally designed fully online courses, thereby establishing new fully online courses and programs which had not existed before the pandemic. Many are also placing greater emphasis on quality assurance, which has been expanded to include issues that have emerged more clearly during the pandemic, such as measures to address student mental health and the technical and social constraints limiting students' remote access to online learning.

Many institutions have also taken up the challenge to explore new course delivery modalities that respond more quickly and seamlessly to the ongoing and changing pandemic situation and any future disruptive events. The new delivery modality “Hyflex” is gaining traction to describe courses in which the content and learning activities are concurrently available in-person, online, and in hybrid modes, with any combination of both synchronous and asynchronous components. In principle, such courses enable students to move from one modality to another at any point in the course of a term without missing content or repeating required course activities. During 2021, reports of various experiments in Hyflex learning showed promise with the understanding that this particularly new modality takes much more resources and preparation to design and deliver, and as such, it is not for every institution or every faculty.

Short of pursuing the Hyflex modality at scale, many institutions took more modest steps to facilitate and provide flexibility in course and program requirements to ensure, as much as possible, that students are able to complete their programs and degrees without extending their length of study at the institution.

Response to Resurgent Pandemic

According to some recent studies, the enrollment and economic impact of the pandemic on 4-year higher education institutions have proven to be negligible, but 2-year public institutions that experienced significant enrollment declines in 2020 saw further declines in 2021. These institutions serve high proportions of minority and economically disadvantaged students who are most severely affected by the economic, social and health impacts of the pandemic and, therefore, most likely to interrupt, if not stop entirely, their studies. Whether 2-year institutions will rebound from these enrollment declines is an issue that bears close watching. International student enrollments, initially hampered by restrictive travel and residency rules during the first year of the pandemic, rebounded to near pre-pandemic levels by Fall 2021 with some added modalities of learning remotely and/or online.

Data shedding light on the impact of the pandemic on long term demand for fully online learning is beginning to emerge but is somewhat hampered by inconsistent and certainly incomplete reporting of emergency remote learning from all HE providers. Some schools have not been able to accurately distinguish remote instruction from in-person at one end of the spectrum, or from fully online at the other. It is clear, however, that the increase in online education from 2019 to the present has greatly exceeded the slower but steady of in-person learning over the previous decade. This more rapid growth is, in part, a consequence of the exposure of a much higher proportion of both faculty and students to tools and resources that facilitate remote and online teaching and learning during the immediate pandemic response. The continuing hazards of in-person learning during the ongoing pandemic is also influencing the choice of online education on the part of many students.

Added online infrastructure investment made during 2020, as institutions enhanced their capacity to deliver two-way synchronous communication between students and faculty, may have leveled off. In 2021, the focus of technology-related investments appears to have shifted to improving student access, providing laptop computers and tablets to disadvantaged learners, and investing in remote proctoring solutions to ensure exam integrity.

Commitments by many schools to support increasingly refined online alternatives to in-person learning as well as growing student demand for fully online learning have placed increasing demands on staff supporting online teaching and learning – instructional designers and technicians, advisers, coaches, tutors, and mentors focused on new online learners. While there is some anecdotal evidence of growth in these job categories, more study is needed to document its magnitude and sustainability.

Trends and Quality Issues for HE

According to the 2021 EDCAUSE Horizon Report: Teaching and Learning, the following rose to the top of a list that initially consisted of 141 technologies and practices for higher education: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Blended and Hybrid Course Models, Learning Analytics, Micro-credentialing, Open Educational Resources (OER), and Quality Online Learning. Most noticeable is the fact that the issue of quality online learning, for the first time, has risen to be among the top issues/trends.

Much has also been discussed and written in 2021 about the difference between emergency remote learning vs quality online education and digital learning, which was very well summarized by Dr Darcy W Hardy, AVP of Academic Affairs at Blackboard Inc: “Remote Learning in the era of COVID-19 is fast, minimal, and primarily synchronous. It rarely includes any instructional design elements or support. The goal of remote learning is to duplicate as much traditional teaching as possible, complimented with readings and assignments. Training and professional development are focused on the use of technology and little (if any) on pedagogy. Online Learning is strategic, thoughtful and deliberate. It involves data-driven processes that evolve around quality – in both design and delivery. It includes an ecosystem that addresses vision, strategy, governance, faculty development, instructional course design, technology, and student support. It is not haphazard nor is it dependent upon either synchronous or asynchronous delivery.”

In 2021, many institutions and organizations rose up to meet the challenge in helping faculty and students transitioning from remote learning to quality online learning. Free and open resources provided by trusted organizations such as Bridge to Quality Course Design Guide by Quality Matters continue to play an important role in providing ongoing support for faculty as well as staff such as instructional designers in efforts to improve the quality of remote, online offerings and everything else in between.

Other trends affecting online learning saw significant momentum in 2021. One such trend is the acquisition of for-profit online institutions and online program management (OPM) companies by traditional in-person universities seeking to scale up their online offerings and generate more revenues from the growth of online learning. For the for-profit schools and OPMs entering these arrangements, this shift may be a response to what they perceive as greater regulatory bias against independent for-profit institutions.

Another trend that has accelerated during the pandemic is the wider adoption of open educational resources (OER) as less costly alternatives to traditional textbooks to address the twin issues of prohibitively high textbook prices and students’ choosing to use outdated books or struggling through courses without the required textbooks. With the unprecedented growth of remote and online learning, reaching disadvantaged students who have avoided online learning

in the past, digitized open learning resources provide a way to make online learning less costly and more affordable.

Summing up future prospects online learning at the end of 2021, we see a period of rapid growth ahead, further embedding online teaching and learning in the fabric of higher education but facing many challenges as well. These ongoing challenges and opportunities include:

- (1) preparing the majority of faculty to become effective online instructors,
- (2) improving and broadening services for online students,
- (3) increasing the numbers of support staff to meet both faculty and student needs for online teaching and learning,
- (4) addressing access issues and preparation deficits particularly among disadvantaged and minority student populations, and
- (5) implementing and expanding quality assurance standards and processes to improve the effectiveness of online learning and instill public trust.

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OCEANIA REGION

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Innovation in quality: Lessons from a South Pacific regional university

Introduction

The Pacific region has 14 universities. These universities were set up by individual countries, some by religious denominations, some were purely set up for technical and vocational education, but only one was set up as a regional university initially by 11 member countries of the South Pacific region: The University of the South Pacific, USP. The earliest of these universities were established in the 1960s to cater for the needs of higher education in the region, (see <https://www.upng.ac.pg/index.php/about-upng/history>; and <https://www.usp.ac.fj/why-usp/our-story/>).

There also exists regional partnerships among these universities for research. (<https://piurn.org/member-universities-pacific-island-universities-research-network/>). One of the key objectives for such partnerships is to pool resources, and to share the knowledge and capacity to achieve quality in higher education (<https://pacref.org/about-pacref/>). Other forms of prominent partnerships amongst regional countries are for economic development, environmental and natural disaster management, security and health issues. Partnership for education amongst the South Pacific countries was an imperative decision because most countries could not afford a university of their own and therefore it was decided to pool resources to set a regional University. The University of the South Pacific was therefore a unique creation modelled on the regional University of West Indies. It has since then been supported by Australia and New Zealand in a substantial manner and both these countries are also represented in the governing council of the University.

From the outset, the regional University of the South Pacific (USP) collaborated with universities in Australia and New Zealand, and most recently with colleges and universities in Western USA (WASC) to ensure the courses and programs taught at USP are internationally benchmarked, ranked and recognised. USP began providing conventional distance education courses for all its 12 members country students in the early 1970s, since the countries it served could not afford to send all their students for full time studies to Laucala campus in Fiji. Major campuses were established in Vanuatu, and Samoa followed by smaller campuses and sub-campus in all the 12 member countries. These are now the learning hub for the regional students for their Distance, Face to Face, Online, Blended and Flexible modes of studies at USP.

The advent of internet and many learning and teaching platforms have allowed USP to offer Online courses through Moodle; the Learning Management System (LMS), and Open Educational Resources (OER) and these have become very useful in delivering quality courses and student support.

USP's Centre for Flexible Learning (CFL) is USP's driver and leads course development activities, support for students in their studies through Student Learning Support systems and First Year Experience Coordination (SLS/FYEC), professional development of staff at USP, and research and development in flexible learning. CFL assists academics in teaching, designing and offering of

courses by all modes, that is, F2F, Online, Print, and Blended. CFL encourages inclusion and use of OERs/MOOCs in all courses at USP. Additionally, CFL designs, supports and manages the LMSs used at USP, which are Moodle, Lecture Capture, Mahara (ePortfolio tool), TurnItIn and REACT. CFL is therefore a leader and an advocate for OFDL at USP (Source: <https://www.usp.ac.fj/centre-for-flexible-learning/about-cfl/>)

Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (OFDL) at USP

USP's Flexible Learning and OER policies has been designed to cater for students coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds of all USP's member countries. It also takes into account the regions differing time zones, economic development prospects, geographical, social, educational and connectivity challenges.

The course designing procedures and processes at CFL ensures that a checklist is prepared and followed for quality of all courses offered at USP. USP also has criteria for course design and revision ensuring the distance and online requirements of the courses are met and regularly updated with new knowledge (<https://www.usp.ac.fj/learning-teaching/policies/quality-of-teaching-qot/>).

The procedures for new or revised courses and programs begin with the learning design and development team seeking approvals from the Academic Standards and Quality Committee (ASQC) at the School or University level, and the Academic Programs Committee (APC). (<https://policylib.usp.ac.fj/form.readdoc.php?id=216>) before any course is approved to be offered at USP.

To further enhance the quality of materials and delivery by academics CFL has always ensured that the needs of its regional students are met. Thus, courses are designed taking into account availability of internet and other learning resources in mind. Being a pioneer distance education provider in the region, USP still offers courses by all modes depending upon the students' location, connectivity, course preference, and affordability. USP has successfully created a learner centred learning environment and ensures that the learners' needs are the driving force for all modes of study at USP. It encourages learners' engagements with the learning environment (adaptable learning environment in the form of mobile phones, Wi-Fi- hotspots around the campuses, and study spaces such as fale).

Learners are also encouraged to engage with their teaching staff by various communication methods such as emails, SMS, live chats, Moodle forums, and F2F consultations. The flexibility of course offerings such as blended mode, flexi schools, cohort programs, online, print or F2F mode gives learners the choice of the best mode for their learning.

USP provides student support through a learner centered approach that is focused on the student learning experience, and meeting student needs through first year student experience programmes, student learning support, and student academic and Campus Life mentoring programmes across all campuses and centres; see:

(<https://www.usp.ac.fj/centre-for-flexible-learning/our-services/first-year-experience/>)

(<https://www.usp.ac.fj/centre-for-flexible-learning/our-services/student-learning-support/>)

Developing ICT oriented student support systems within the Online Student Support Services Framework; (<https://www.usp.ac.fj/student-online-services/>)

Access to appropriate counselling and pastoral care, academic advice and student learning support is available to students at all times regardless of mode or campus of study.

During Covid-19 lockdown in Fiji and where the CFL is based, a swift change of mode of study occurred. All F2F teaching at USP's largest campus (Laucala) stopped. Lockdown was imposed all over Fiji, when the Covid-19 cases were high and rising. With existing 'e-readiness' checklist, and Flexible Learning policy in place it did not take long for USP to adapt the F2F and Print mode courses for a new Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) mode of study. Additionally, the lockdown gave USP the opportunity to review the offering of online courses at all its campuses

Since April 2021, all courses were offered through online platforms to all students regardless of their location. Courses have been offered thus with virtual support provided using Big Blue Button and Zoom. To ensure that the courses were delivered and received successfully, both academics and students have been offered virtual training sessions to give them more confidence while engaging with the Blended mode of study. Additionally, due to limited F2F opportunities, assessments have been conducted online (via Moodle: e-proctoring, internal assessments). For these too, both staff and students have been trained and briefed to ensure that the intrusion in one's personal space is well accepted and understood by the test givers and test takers. Wherever possible, E-proctoring has been included keeping accessibility, training and affordability of the test takers in mind. The existing policies at USP enhanced the university's online offerings under the current Covid-19 and ERT environment.

Recommendations

A review of last year's ODFL efforts at USP makes it apparent that universities need to have regular course audits. At USP, course adaptability for various modes is necessary and policies are in place and adhered to for quality review of courses. Unlike most universities, USP's regional responsibility makes it even more important. Universities need to be aware of students' situations and adapt the courses most suitable for the learners on a regular basis.

The small island pacific countries are highly vulnerable to climate change impacts. Many face regular natural disasters and economic difficulties. USP's experiences with natural disasters, and political crises had prepared it well for the recent COVID-19 situation. The Oceania region will face shortage of academic staff if travel restrictions continue. USP may need to revisit some of its policies such as those related to staff appointments, and whether they be based at the main Laucala campus or at any of its regional campuses. One of the major challenges that USP faces is the lack of appropriate connectivity including travel and internet connectivity.

In the post-pandemic environment, it is crucial not to lose sight of the significance of having a well-developed digital platform for learning and teaching. A well-developed digital infrastructure the region could benefit not only from quality education at all levels but also enhance its economic prospects. It is there important that both students and academics are trained further for digital confidence. USP regional member countries would have to develop digital infrastructure to deal with its new development imperative. USP will have to support the region and national universities in developing innovative and new ways to use digital infrastructure to support quality higher education in the region. USP has had the benefit of teaching by multiple

modes across countries over so many years. Many national and smaller universities may not have that experience thus USP plays a crucial role in helping other universities what works and what does not during challenging situations.

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