



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING



# Quality Assurance:

GOOD PRACTICES IN ODL  
IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA



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IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA



The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to promote the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.



Commonwealth of Learning, 2019

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*Quality Assurance: Good Practices in ODL in Sub-Saharan Africa*

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## Acronyms

<b>ACS</b>	Academic Literacies
<b>APC</b>	Academic Planning Committee
<b>BA</b>	Bachelor of Arts
<b>BABE</b>	Bachelor of Arts in Business Entrepreneurship
<b>BL</b>	Blended Learning
<b>BOU</b>	Botswana Open University
<b>CEQUAM</b>	Centre for Quality Assurance and Management
<b>CHE</b>	Council on Higher Education
<b>CODEL</b>	Centre for Open, Distance and eLearning
<b>COL</b>	Commonwealth of Learning
<b>CoP</b>	Community of Practice
<b>GER</b>	Gross Enrolment Ratio
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technologies
<b>IDE</b>	Institute for Distance Learning
<b>IEMS</b>	Institute of Extra-Mural Studies
<b>IQA</b>	Internal Quality Assurance
<b>LMS</b>	Learning Management System
<b>M&amp;E</b>	Monitoring and Evaluation
<b>MEdEL</b>	Master of Education – Educational Leadership
<b>NQF</b>	National Qualifications Framework
<b>NUL</b>	National University of Lesotho
<b>ODL</b>	Open Distance Learning
<b>ODEL</b>	Open and Distance eLearning
<b>OER</b>	Open Educational Resources
<b>QA</b>	Quality Assurance
<b>SIP</b>	Self-improvement Plan
<b>SSA</b>	Sub-Saharan Africa
<b>TRS</b>	Theology and Religious Studies
<b>UIS</b>	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
<b>UNAM</b>	University of Namibia
<b>UNESWA</b>	University of Eswatini
<b>UNIMA</b>	University of Malawi
<b>UNZA</b>	University of Zambia



## Foreword

The Commonwealth of Learning's (COL) mission is to promote learning for sustainable development through open, distance and technology enabled learning. Learning must lead to economic development, social inclusion and environmental conservation. Higher education and lifelong learning play a major role in achieving these objectives. Over the last decades, there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of universities in Sub-Saharan Africa, and yet, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in tertiary education is about 10% or lower. Access remains a major challenge. But access, when facilitated, must also be accompanied by enhanced opportunities for success. COL welcomes the establishment of new open universities and dual mode institutions on the continent.

Quality of education must not be sacrificed in an effort to increase quantity, and it is for this reason that institutions need to uphold quality standards and simultaneously invest in creating cultures of quality in education. This would involve relevant and high quality programmes, personalised learner support and efficient administration. An institutional culture of quality promotes an Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) system, where everyone takes ownership; values capacity building on an ongoing basis; supports accountability to stakeholders; and focuses on learning outcomes. Higher education can only have a significant impact if the quality of education offered is high and also meets the needs of its learners and communities.

The idea for the Regional Quality Assurance *Community of Practice (CoP)* is based on COL's recognition of the need to prioritise quality enhancement in the process of growth so that it becomes integral to institutional systems. In

this context, an initiative was led by COL to create a group of QA practitioners from seven institutions from seven countries

(namely: Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mauritius, Namibia, Zambia and Malawi) in Sub-Saharan Africa to develop guidelines for quality in blended learning. After wide consultations with policy makers and practitioners, a draft set of Quality Assurance Guidelines was developed. The guidelines, which cover eight key themes, were piloted in these institutions. The results, challenges, and lessons learned from these piloted self-reviews have been documented in this publication.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the authors of these case studies, who have produced a valuable resource which can also be used in other jurisdictions across the Commonwealth. Appreciation is also due to the consultant who facilitated the workshop, as well as representatives of National Quality Assurance Agencies and senior staff of the participating institutions for their valuable contributions.

I hope that you will deem *Quality Assurance: Good Practices in ODL in Sub-Saharan Africa* a useful tool for creating cultures of quality in your institutions. Whether we are in a resource-rich or resource-poor context, ultimately, a "culture of quality" is a "culture of care."

Professor Asha Kanwar  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
Commonwealth of Learning





## Overview of Case Studies

Over the past decade, there has been a phenomenal growth of higher education systems across Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The number of universities in the region has increased from half a dozen in the 1960s to over 300 by 2003 (Teferra, 2007, p. 557). This number has since increased considerably as governments continue to respond to growing demand by redoubling their investments in higher education. At the same time, there has been an increasing participation of both local and transnational private education providers in many Sub-Saharan countries. Besides a growth in numbers, the growth of higher education in SSA is characterised by an increase in the use of new modes of delivery like distance education, blended learning and e-learning. This advent of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has been having a profound influence on teaching and learning in African universities. Many countries in the region have established open universities that offer distance education programmes, and almost all conventional face-to-face institutions today operate as dual mode institutions, offering at least some level of flexible learning options to their students, while many institutions offer a variety of blended learning or programmes that are entirely online.

Paradoxically, despite the expansion of higher education systems in numbers and modes of learning, SSA has the lowest tertiary Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) worldwide. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), the average GER in SSA in 2017 was 9%, compared to a global average of 37.88%, 50.64% in Latin America and the Caribbean and 9.85% for least developed countries as classified by the United Nations (“Education”, 2019). The successful expansion of higher education systems in SSA,

should, therefore, be viewed with caution, and institutions should pay attention to the quality of education offered in addition to increasing the number of enrolments and modes of learning. Scholars in the field have emphasised: “the question [...] is not whether developing countries should try to expand their higher education systems, [...] but how they can do so rapidly and with reasonable quality” (Daniel, Kanwar and Uvalić-Trumbić, 2009, p. 32).

While the expanding of higher education has been a positive development in SSA, the biggest challenge remains: investment in many countries has been directed mainly towards expansion at the expense of quality enhancement. This may have had a considerable impact on the quality of delivery, especially in distance and e-learning programmes. When the higher education offered is of low quality, universities lower their chance to have an economic impact on their societies. This trend is unfortunate, particularly in a developing context where higher education is regarded as a strategy for leveraging both economic and social development.

As a contribution to the debate surrounding QA in higher education, this publication consists of five case studies<sup>1</sup> highlighting good practices in QA within the context of distance and blended learning in Southern African universities. It addresses the strategies applied to foster quality enhancement, QA principles, and a university’s internal processes undertaken to enhance quality amidst expansion.

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1 COL facilitated the self-reviews at seven universities and five of them contributed case studies for this publication. Those five case studies have been included here.





# The Commonwealth of Learning Initiative

To address the challenge of quality enhancement during expansion, COL started a quality enhancement initiative within its scope of enhancing higher education to support communities moving towards sustainable development. COL introduced the idea of constituting a Quality Assurance (QA) *Community of Practice* (CoP) consisting of seven Southern African universities. The choice to include seven universities from seven different countries in Southern Africa was primarily made to maximise the impact of higher education on Southern African communities. To facilitate the work of the CoP, COL organised a kickoff meeting with directors of QA units in the seven universities. In addition to these institutional representatives, COL invited directors of National Quality Assurance Agencies of the seven countries to participate in the meeting. During the workshop, participants shared experiences on quality challenges in their institutions, identified opportunities for increasing participation through distance and e-learning, and proposed Quality Guidelines to use in addressing quality challenges. The Quality Guidelines built on seven standards, as listed in Table 1, plus guidelines by National Quality Assurance Agencies.

With COL's support, all CoP institutions applied the draft guidelines to various processes in their institutions by means of self-reviews. The self-review process had three key aims:

- to identify quality shortcomings in the provision of higher education, and then institute improvements accordingly;
- to identify loopholes in the QA guidelines with a view to revise and further improve them; and
- to build capacity within institutions to conduct future QA self-reviews.

The case studies included here show how these self-review exercises were conducted in the different institutional contexts. The key during the process was the approach to enhance quality by strengthening internal QA, especially at the grassroots academic levels while also including people who deal with student processes on a daily basis. According to scholars of QA in higher education, the most effective QA systems in higher education are those that are premised in collegiality thinking, that are owned by collegiality, and that are implemented for the purpose of bringing about improvement (Barnett, 1994; Lockett, 2005).

QA GUIDELINE STANDARDS	
1	Programme Design
2	Learner Support Systems
3	Materials Development
4	Student Assessment
5	Infrastructure and Facilities
6	Staffing
7	Open and Distance Education Systems and Structures

**Table 1:** Quality Assurance Guideline Standards

## QA principles underpinning the approach

The COL Community of Practice approach used in Sub-Saharan Africa is informed by the following four key principles on Good Practices in Quality Assurance:

- 1** **FIRST PRINCIPLE:** Quality Assurance should be an explicit and transparent process as opposed to implicit processes that are rather subjective. The public is increasingly interested in what is happening in higher education institutions, including the quality of education. Institutions therefore need to manage their Quality Assurance arrangements in a way that is visible and accessible to the public. Quality Assurance in higher education is designed to prove as well as improve the quality of an institution's methods, educational products and outcomes.
- 2** **SECOND PRINCIPLE:** Quality Assurance entails regular collecting and analysing of data on various aspects of institutional performance. It is based on data analysis such that the institution educates itself about its performance and plans for improvement. It is difficult to improve what is vaguely understood. The use of carefully designed instruments helps an institution collect reliable data that can meaningfully feed into planning processes.
- 3** **THIRD PRINCIPLE:** The responsibility for Quality Assurance lies with the provider. Internal players of an institution should drive Quality Assurance processes, not external stakeholders. They should take Quality Assurance as an integral part of their daily work, not as an add-on. Quality Assurance should be self-emancipatory rather than focused solely on meeting the aims of external stakeholders. External stakeholders are only there to support institutions, and the latter should take responsibility for enhancing the quality of their work.
- 4** **FOURTH PRINCIPLE:** For Quality Assurance to take hold in an institution and for a quality culture to develop, capacity building is important. This is particularly true in African universities where explicit Quality Assurance systems are relatively new and many people are not familiar with the processes. Systematic training on how to conduct internal quality reviews should be undertaken on a regular basis in African universities. Sharing, collaborating, exchanging and learning from each other are powerful mechanisms for capacity development. Together, there is potential to achieve more than a single institution working alone.



## Structure of the Case Studies

As highlighted above, all case studies in this publication illustrate the piloting processes that took place within the different institutional contexts. Some are more extensive than others, but there is a lot to learn from each and every one of them. Although all institutions vary in their approaches to their individual case study, all of them address the following questions:

- In what areas did you conduct self-reviews?
- Who was involved in the self-review exercise?
- How did you conduct the reviews?
- What were the results of the reviews?
- What challenges did you face in undertaking the reviews?
- What key lessons did you learn from the experience?



## Case Studies

### Case Study 1: University of Eswatini

#### Introduction and background: The Institute of Distance Education

The Institute of Distance Education (IDE) was created in 1994 by the University of Eswatini (UNESWA) and has an annual intake of over 1,600 students. The various Bachelor degree programmes offered include Humanities, Law, Education, and Commerce. IDE also offers access programmes which include a Diploma programme in Law and Certificate programmes in Portuguese and Psychosocial Support. Contact teaching over the year includes 15 study days where students attend lectures at the main campus on a Saturday and about the same number of tutorials at various regional centres (such as in Manzini and Mbabane). The contact sessions are intended to augment the main study mode of self-directed learning where

students are expected to engage in the self-study of courseware. Within IDE, the Instructional Design and Development Unit is responsible for the authoring, reviewing and publishing of all courseware. The independent Research and Evaluation Unit is overall responsible for the QA system and its implementation. Currently, most of the courseware is print-based, but the use of online courseware on the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS) is being tested by IDE lecturers and their students. UNESWA is committed to offering high quality undergraduate and graduate courses and programmes, as articulated in various policy documents and the current Repackaged Strategic Plan (2016-2022). The strategic plan, for example, states that UNESWA requests all teaching staff to be exposed to the institution's key QA concepts and mechanisms including peer-review processes and student satisfaction instruments. QA is one of the main challenges faced by higher education in the region, particularly in the area of distance higher education and blended learning. Like other institutions of higher

education, UNESWA, a dual mode institution, is experimenting with various options, processes and instruments in a quest to improve the quality of programmes offered to learners. UNESWA is at the early stages of implementing QA in a systematic manner, with varying levels of expertise acquired over years through practice-based approaches in Open and Distance elearning (ODEL). An overarching aim of this case study is to determine the extent to which a culture of quality has been embedded into various areas such as management, academic and support staff. This case study focuses primarily on the *Materials Development* standard as the IDE courseware creation process has been evolving over the last 20 years and continues to improve.

### **Self-review focus areas**

The IDE piloted the CoP QA Guidelines in August 2018 with a focus on six out of the total seven Quality Guideline standards, plus guidelines from the National Quality Assurance Agency. The piloted standards included Programme Design, Learner Support Systems, Materials Development, Student Assessment, Infrastructure and Facilities, Open and Distance Education Systems and Structures, plus guidelines from the National Quality Assurance Agencies.

### **Participants of the self-review**

The two IDE-UNESWA academic staff members who piloted the guidelines were Dr K. E. F. Mthethwa-Kunene, responsible for Research, Evaluation and QA, and Ms N. T. Vilakati, responsible for Instructional Design and Development. Participation in this exercise was voluntary and entailed conducting interviews with identified participants on the nature of their practices as guided by the criteria for each of the quality standards. All participants gave consent to participate in the pilot by signing forms which further permitted UNESWA and

COL to use the data and photographs taken for publications.

### **Programme selected for self-review**

The Humanities programme was selected for the pilot self-review with a focus on three General Education courses offered to all new students. The IDE Humanities Programme Coordinator and a Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) course lecturer were interviewed, as were the Computing course (CSC101), and HIV and AIDS course (GNS113) teams responsible for providing academic support to IDE BA Humanities students. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to schedule an interview with the courseware design and tutoring team responsible for the Academic Literacy (ACS111) course. Instead, the interview for the team responsible for the ACS course was replaced with that of a lecturer from the Theology and Religious Studies department.

For the Learner Support Systems standard, five students (who are currently enrolled in the BA Humanities programme) participated in a Focus Group discussion. The IDE Student Support Services Coordinator, responsible for learner support, was also interviewed. For the Materials Development standard, an interview was held with the Instructional Design and Development Unit members consisting of the Coordinator responsible for Instructional Design and Development, the Assistant Coordinator, Copy Editor and Print Manager. For the Student Assessment standard, the lecturer for the Theology and Religious Studies (TRS112) course was interviewed again. For Infrastructure and Facilities, a Senior Assistant Librarian and the Director responsible for ICT were interviewed. The IDE Director and the then Acting Pro-Vice Chancellor, who also assumed the role of Director for an institutional QA Committee, were interviewed on UNESWA's Open and Distance Education Systems and Structures. The Eswatini Higher Education Council

was consulted as a National Quality Assurance Agency.

For Materials Development, the following print-based modules for the three selected general courses were assessed: Computer Skills Foundation (CSC101), HIV Prevention, Infection and Management of AIDS (GNS113), and Academic Communication Skills: English for Academic Purposes (ACS111). For the TRS112 course, a sample podcast, accessed by students through WhatsApp, or a Mobile Learning Application and through a Moodle LMS course web page, was evaluated. One reason for the selection of the TRS112 course on Biblical Interpretation was that it is a course offered through blended and mobile learning.

## Summary of the self-review results

A summary of the results is presented in Figure 1 which illustrates the level of quality on the standards under review. In cases where more than one person was interviewed about the same standard, the scores were averaged to obtain a single score for the standard. These standards were Programme Design, Learner Support Systems, Infrastructure and Facilities, and Open and Distance Education Systems and Structures. The standard on guidelines for the National QA Agency scored 83% but is not shown in the graphs since it dealt with external QA and, as such, could not be immediately compared to the other standards.

**Figure 1:** Self-review results on selected quality standards

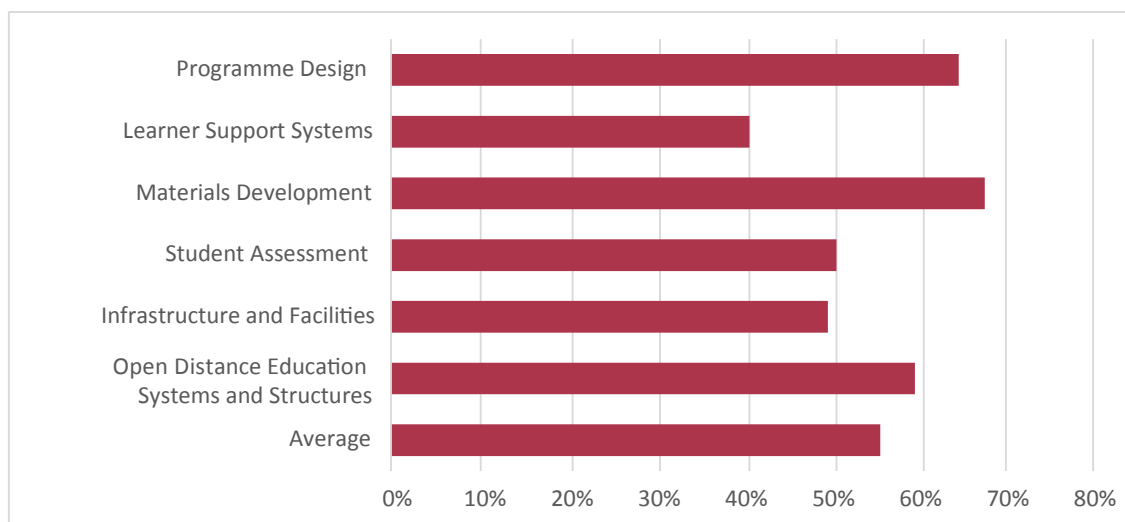


Figure 1 shows scores on the quality standards under review ranging between 40% and 67% with an overall average score of 55%. While some standards were above the average score, others such as Learner Support Systems and Infrastructure and Facilities were rated at less than 50%. It is important to note that some of the contributing factors for the low score on Learner Support Systems were the non-availability of student profiles, inconsistency in distributing

course lectures/ tutorial schedules and the non-availability of student satisfaction survey data. It is further necessary to point out that the IDE did not have comprehensive student profiles to make informed decisions regarding the provision of appropriate support for students with different needs. Currently, the only comprehensive student profiles available are of students who seek individual support from the Student Support Services unit. IDE

does not yet have mechanisms in place that would allow a proactive approach to providing learner support including mechanisms that would help to identify students with special education needs during the application and registration stages. Another identified weakness in IDE's Learner Support Systems relates to poor communication channels. The sampled students, for example, indicated a tendency of information being disseminated in print format. The Institute was also reportedly not yet conducting student satisfaction surveys to determine the appropriateness of the support mechanisms through which support is being provided.

### Good practice in materials development

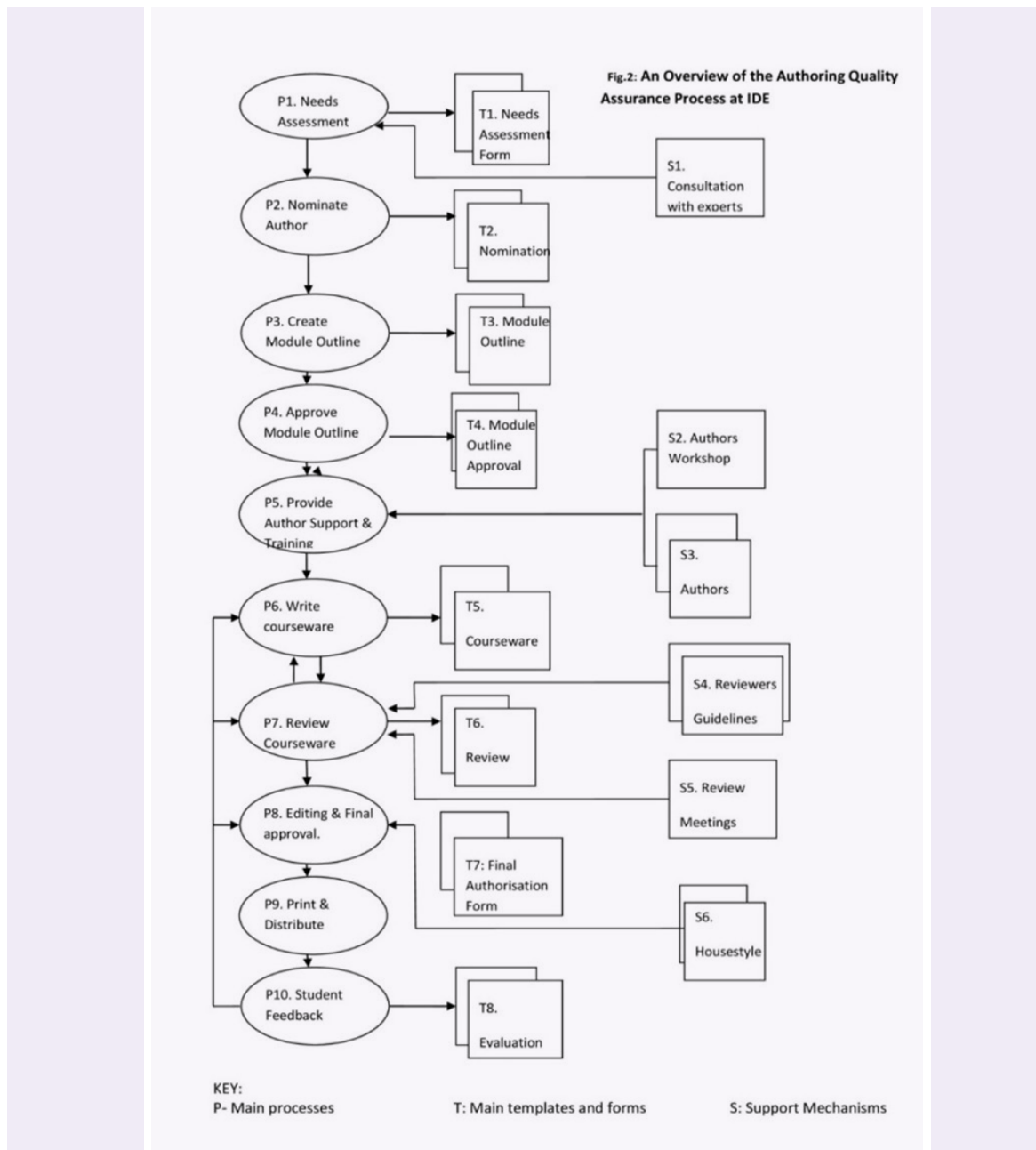
One reason for focusing on the Materials Development standard is that, as illustrated in Figure 1, Materials Development received the highest score with 67%. The standard's relatively high score could be interpreted as an indication

that Materials Development is an area where the IDE demonstrates good practice in QA. In our view, another element that exemplifies good practice is that of QA mechanisms for courseware creation at IDE, as illustrated in Figure 2. The structure depicts a clearly defined process of quality assuring materials during the development stage. The first column with the numbers prefixed by "P" refers to the main processes, the second column with the prefix of "T" refers to the main templates and forms used, and the final column with the "S" prefix refers to support mechanisms. The use of templates in developing materials is also important, as it encourages adherence to a specific in-house style which gives material an institutional character. The support mechanisms include workshops, meetings, guidelines and manuals. The process is described in detail in IDE's Quality Enhancement Handbook which is currently under review.



*On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the independence of the Kingdom of Eswatini in September 2018, Prof Romeela Mohee (left) delivered a public lecture in the presence of the Vice-chancellor, Prof Thwula (middle), and Ms Nokuthula Vilakati (right), instructional designer and CoP member.*

Figure 2: : Process flow chart – QA of Materials Development at UNESWA



Other QA elements that demonstrate good practice at IDE pertain to standard 5, which entails the development of learning materials based on sound instructional design principles to promote active learning that engages learners as well as standard 2, which focuses on the training of teaching academics in instructional materials design for print and online learning delivery. The processes involved in the design

and development of the learning materials and training of course teams foreground sound pedagogy and are documented in an in-house training manual on design for blended learning with limited interactive contact sessions and a primary focus on modularised self-directed study and online learning. A planning template based on sound instructional design principles for course teams is further provided in the

training manual. A compelling reason for the explicit guidelines in the manual is that the creation of high quality courseware<sup>2</sup> is not just an imperative for distance learning courses. All courses, regardless of how they are delivered, need to be fit for purpose. The IDE QA policy on instructional design for the process of creating distance learning courseware or content is currently in a review process premised on making a distinction at various levels of quality inspection as follows:

1. *Pedagogical* level: This has nothing to do with the content per se. It is concerned with pedagogical validity of the proposed course or module. This level is in line with QA Guideline standard 5.
2. *Conceptual* level: This is concerned with the consistency, accuracy and completeness of the content. This level is in line with standard 6: that the content is accurate, up-to-date, in line with aims and objectives of the course, uses relevant examples, and reflects the multicultural diversity of the learners. For example, during the evaluation of the courseware for the course GNS113 on HIV Prevention, Infection and Management of AIDS, the content was found to be accurate, up-to-date and in line with course objectives. On the aspect of the examples given, even though most were found to be good, there was a concern that others could promote stereotyping, such as linking one's standard of living at university with vulnerability to infection with HIV or related illnesses. For the course CSC101: Computer Skills Foundation, objectives were found to be well-formulated, realistic and measurable. Examples given were found to be well-suited to the target group, such as students who worked in communities of people with special needs.

3. *Presentational* level: This ensures that the author has presented the material in the best way to enhance its readability and comprehension. At one level, it deals with structural issues and at another, with language issues (grammar, spelling etc.). The Conceptual and Presentational levels are orthogonal but highly related.
4. *Environmental* level: This ensures that teaching and learning environments and infrastructures are fit for purpose. The self-review results revealed that the UNESWA infrastructure and facilities were inadequate due to limited access to computer laboratories for ODL students. For example, ODL students are not able to access the library resources from a remote site. The students also cited the high cost of data bundles which they need in order to access the Moodle LMS course web-pages. These restrictions may negatively affect students' ability to engage in interactive sessions embedded into courseware for blended learning (BL) purposes.

## Challenges faced during the pilot self-review

With specific reference to the Materials Development standard, it was difficult to make a distinction between some of the criteria such as the provision of assignments prior to student registration. Perhaps there is a need to clearly define what an assignment entails and whether it refers to both self-assessment and tutor marked. Another challenge experienced by the interviewers was rating the responses in cases where the interviewee responded negatively to a standard probably due to lack of familiarity with certain documents, policies or processes followed by the university and IDE.

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2 Courseware in this case study is used to describe a self-contained set of units within a given course or programme. For example, Adult Education (B.Ed) may be the programme, with courseware in Research & Evaluation containing a number of units (e.g. one on Quasi experimental designs).





## Key Lessons Learned

One of the key lessons learned is that such a quality review nuances the picture of quality culture characterised by shared values, beliefs and expectations towards quality. The case study confirms a view that building a quality culture is a complex endeavour. Another lesson is that nearly all systems, including QA systems, function best if they include a feedback loop. Various stakeholders (e.g. lecturers, coordinators etc.) are part of the system, but the key stakeholders are the students who are the main recipients of the service being offered. QA systems must be monitored and controlled. It is important that the QA processes and mechanisms are transparent, properly recorded and have an appropriate “sign off” mechanism. The latter is particularly necessary because authoring courseware can be time consuming and expensive. The impact of creating any new courseware needs to be assessed or approved prior to starting the authoring process.

Another lesson learned is that QA processes have to be efficient. To improve efficiency, the described process attempts to ensure that courseware specification is complete and occurs early in the process. A good specification helps to avoid misunderstandings leading to unnecessary and costly iterations. The review of the courseware indicated inconsistency in embedding assessments into the courseware. For example, assignments were included in the learning package for the ACS course, yet for the GNS course, only self-check assessments, such as online discussions, were included.

Another area in need of improvement is the integration of Open Educational Resources (OER) to support academic learning. This finding is in contrast with a positive development, that of the availability of a draft institutional OER policy. Another documented initiative is an introductory training of many teaching academics with an intended outcome of raising their awareness on OER. However, follow-up dedicated training is imperative, specifically, training on building a quality culture on open educational practices. Finally, the overall lesson learned pertains to not only participating in the self-review but also to compiling the case study. Indeed, QA forms a part of inculcating a quality culture, which cannot be seen in isolation from the specific context in which it is embedded, and by extension, a quality culture cannot be simply transferred from one institution to another.

## Case Study 2: National University of Lesotho

### Enhancing quality through self-reviews

The Institute of Extra-Mural Studies (IEMS), the National University of Lesotho's (NUL) Institute for Distance Education (IDE), carried out a pilot self-review based on Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by COL's Quality Assurance CoP. Since 2017, IEMS has been moving towards integrating innovations in ODL into their modes of delivery. The process was supported by COL who, in turn, helped IEMS with their own internal QA mechanisms and helped develop new first year modules. COL also encouraged the Centre for Teaching and Learning to utilise a LMS, *Thuto*, to deliver the developed modules. IEMS's Bachelor of Arts in Business and Entrepreneurship (BABE) was selected for the pilot self-review. The programme contains both distance and face-to-face teaching components, and is facilitated by full-time

and part-time university staff. BABE aims at building entrepreneurship among Basotho while embodying NUL's commitment to ODL as an inclusive approach to learning and professional development.

### The team involved in the review

The team that conducted the pilot self-review included three senior academics responsible for the coordination of ODL programmes at IEMS (see Table 2) and who represent the three main units of IEMS: the Department of Business and Management Development, the Department of Adult Education, and the Department of Research, Evaluation and Media. The three IEMS staff members were supported by NUL's Quality Assurance Specialist. At the National Quality Assurance Agency, the process was directly facilitated by the Principal Quality Assurance and Standards Officer, supported by both the Director of Quality Assurance and Standards, and the Chief Executive for the Council on Higher Education (CHE), Lesotho.

NAMES	POSITION	MAIN RESPONSIBILITIES
Dr Francis Okyere	Member of the ODL Coordinating Committee and Coordinator of Department of Business and Management Development	The piloting of instruments for QA of the programme at IEMS
Mrs 'Makatiso' Mesi	Member of the ODL Coordinating Committee and member of the Adult Education Department	The piloting of instruments for QA of the programme at IEMS
Mrs 'Makhautaliho-Ntoi	Member of the ODL Coordinating Committee and member of the Research Evaluation and Media Department	The piloting of instruments for QA of the programme at IEMS
Dr Thabiso Nyabanyaba	Quality Assurance Specialist, National University of Lesotho	The internal support and validation of the piloting process at the NUL and review of the standards for QA
Ms Maseitlheko Moima	Principal Quality Assurance and Standards Officer, Council on Higher Education	The review of the guidelines from the National Quality Assurance Agency, CHE

**Table 2:** Personnel involved in the pilot self-review at NUL

The makeup of this team demonstrates a commitment to quality higher education, particularly distance education, by key stakeholders in the country. As a pilot exercise, it was considered important that the team be inclusive, draw on the most senior academics involved in ODL, and be the most knowledgeable persons in QA.

## **The approach to the self-review**

An initial meeting with the IEMS team, facilitated by the QA unit, included the presentation of the QA instrument to the internal review team. At this meeting, the decision was made to use the Bachelor of Arts in Business Entrepreneurship as the first programme for a pilot QA self-review. BABE is one of NUL's programmes for which distance education modules were developed to reach out to an increasing number of adult learners who require business entrepreneurship skills to increase their employability.

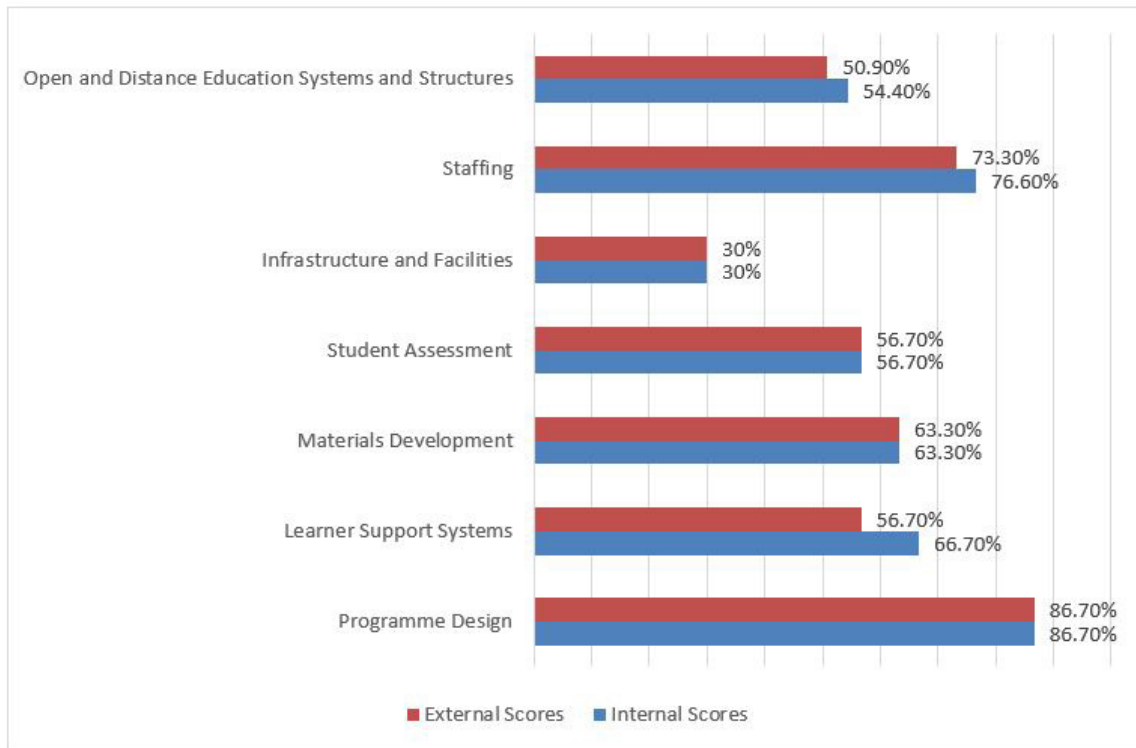
The approach taken during the review process included a combination of document reviews and interviews. Using the template provided by the CoP team, the IEMS team collected documents on the programme, as well as general regulations and modules to assess the extent to which the documents met the CoP QA criteria. This step was followed by interviews with major stakeholders including staff and students, to evaluate the quality of the programme. Given the importance of support staff to ODL programmes, the Human Resource Director, the Information and Communication Technology Director, the Librarian and the Director of Campus Security were included as interviewees.

The CHE provided further support on the interpretation of the instruments in line with the national regulatory process. This part of the exercise was intensive and admittedly resulted in the downward revision of some of the scoring. More importantly, the externalisation process provided by the CHE not only properly situated the review in the context of national regulatory processes, but also intensified the deep reflections on the state of the programme and how the scoring could be more accurately justified. This proved to be an important learning curve for IEMS staff in terms of conducting self-reviews more objectively. The initial report was compiled by the QA Specialist using the matrix that emerged from the self-evaluation process at IEMS. The final report was prepared by the QA Specialist in close consultation with both the internal review team and the external regulatory body. Noteworthy is the care that was taken to align the self-review process with national expectations and procedures by involving the National Quality Assurance Agency in the process. This is a prime example of how the COL supported initiative can complement National Quality Assurance processes.

## **Findings of the pilot self-review**

The following section summarises the findings of the pilot self-review. The case study covers the strengths and shortcomings identified in the provision of ODL in general and BABE in particular, as well as reflections on how the university can improve its approach to ODL. Figure 3 illustrates the scoring of the programme on the seven standards developed by the CoP.

**Figure 3: Self-evaluation scores**



As can be observed, the strengths of the BABE programme were found to be in Programme Design and Staffing. As with most universities, NUL has traditional structures for designing programmes that enforce some rigour in the process. Current practice in the university is that programmes are designed by departments and then interrogated by the Academic Planning Committee (APC) which then forwards the proposed programme to the highest body, the Senate, for further examination and final approval. An aspect of good practice in the institution is that there is a clear process for QA during programme development, and for programme approval. Despite this intensive process, some areas for improvement were identified through the self-review process. One of these areas is the need for more regular programme reviews and consultations with stakeholders to ensure that programmes remain relevant to the market. Another area that could be improved is the staff hiring process. Although the process of hiring is already

transparent, the review process recommended that it could be made more effective if hiring committees considered academic portfolios instead of curriculum vitae, as portfolios are more informative about staff competencies. The process of hiring staff benefits from the Human Resource Directorate ensuring that all national and institutional legislations are adhered to. Furthermore, Figure 3 clearly shows that the external regulatory agency assessment was more modest than the internal team's, but the inputs on the justification for the scoring and general assessment were both, less obvious and more important. The close collaboration of internal and external evaluators helped build capacity and disseminate the initiative.

### **Strengths identified in the BABE programme**

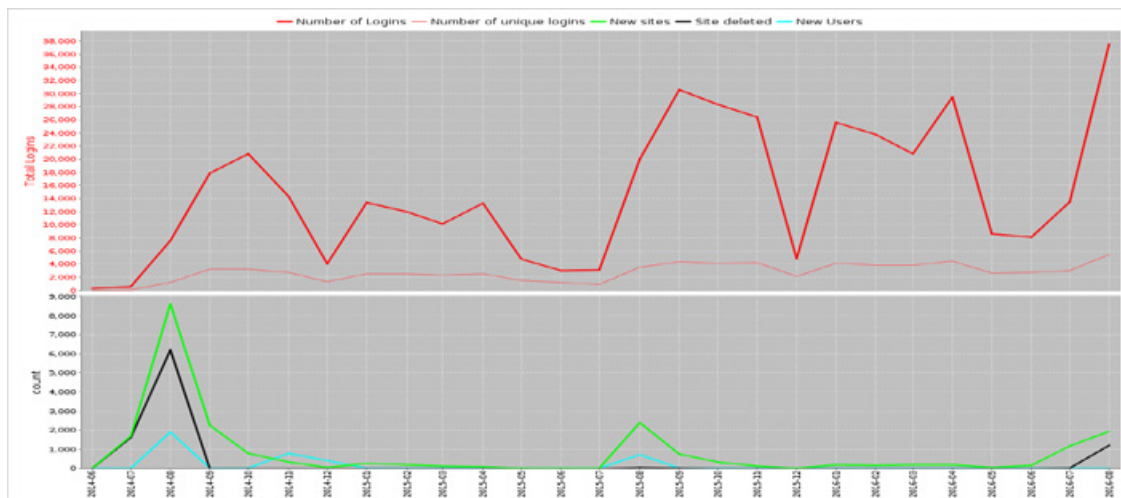
Using the CoP Quality Guidelines, the review team identified Programme Design as one of the strengths of the BABE programme. The CHE

confirmed that the Programme Design process at NUL is transparent and rigorous. The review team also remarked that the BABE programme's vision was aligned with NUL's transformation vision. The results of the self-review indicate that there is alignment between course outcomes, objectives, activities and assessments. There is also a sound rationale for offering BABE through distance education, as most of the potential students prefer distance education given their other commitments. The programme is designed in a way that it enhances success by providing ready self-study materials for students and additional electronic learning resources through the LMS, *Thuto*.

## Shortcomings identified in the BABE programme

The guidelines highlighted several shortcomings of the programme that need to be addressed. An area of weakness in the BABE programme, as well as the rest of IEMS's programmes, is the poor infrastructure and facilities. There was agreement among all stakeholders, including students, that the ICT infrastructure and facilities were inadequate for the number of students enrolled and for providing ongoing learner support. The varied use of *Thuto*, captured in Figure 4, highlights the inequitable and inefficient access to the system.

Figure 4: Access to Thuto at NUL



Daily access to ICT is inadequate, as students are only able to access the LMS from certain spots on campus and access on weekends is limited.

## Challenges experienced

At the time of this pilot, the university was on its long vacation period. Although five students currently enrolled in BABE were invited, only three showed up. Moreover, completing the exercise required the difficult task of convincing internal stakeholders about the intrinsic value of the self-review. Another challenge was to

provide supporting evidence and narrative statements to justify the scoring in a number of areas. Due to capacity issues within the CHE, IEMS programmes have not yet been fully reviewed for accreditation. Furthermore, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) has not yet been implemented which means that criteria on alignment to the NQF could not be fully evaluated. While weaknesses have been identified, it was challenging to see how they could be attributed to the institution when the budget support from national government continues to decline. Thus, structural

adjustments need to be made for improvements to take place in ODL at NUL. It is therefore suggested that the standards should include provisions for presenting on the external factors impacting quality of institutional provision in addition to internal factors. Notwithstanding this challenge, it was useful for staff to get enlightened on existing shortcomings of the programme.

## Impact on the institution

The self-review exercise contributed towards training IEMS staff on conducting self-reviews. The exercise further helped to form closer collaborations internally, as well as between the institution and the Council of Higher Education. The self-review pilot has paved the way for more regular review exercises that will be conducted at IEMS as an approach to quality enhancement.



## Key Lessons Learned

There were key internal QA lessons that were drawn from both the process and the outcome of the exercise. One of the key lessons learnt from this experience is how intricate and demanding the programme accreditation process is. It required working as a team, with the same level of commitment and clarity, and having mechanisms to support and validate the process. The idea of having evidence to support practice was outstanding. In future exercises, staff are likely to be more aware of this aspect and be more readily prepared for reviews. It is important to present the exercise in a way that internal stakeholders appreciate the significance of conducting the reviews. For example, when internal stakeholders initially considered the exercise to be about responding to donors rather than about mainly improving their own programme(s), their response to the exercise was slow and limited. Therefore, measuring instruments should be accompanied by comprehensive guidelines on the value of conducting self-reviews directed to internal stakeholders.

The understanding of the purpose of these QA self-reviews was also important in terms of the outcome of the exercise. For example, in-depth reflections on the strengths and weaknesses depended on the understanding that the main aim was not to score but to understand the quality of the programme for the sake of continuous improvement. While Programme Design and Staffing were identified as being strong and producing standardised outputs, for example, they could still benefit from deeper innovation. While the bandwidth remained weak at the Institute, this self-review has helped the internal team to identify areas where the limited infrastructure and facilities could be used more efficiently by training staff members on its utilisation for meaningful learning. The underlying principles for the self-review exercise should not be regarded as obvious. The overall impact of the exercise, though, was the building of capacity for the internal QA process that had not yet been established at IEMS in particular and at NUL in general.

## Case Study 3: University of Zambia

### Measuring adherence to quality standards in ODL

The provision of ODL at the University of Zambia (UNZA) is governed by the institutional *Policy for Open and Distance Learning*. The primary aim of this policy is to increase participation in higher education through more affordable and flexible forms of learning. The Institute of Distance Education (IDE) is responsible for the provision of ODL through the processes of planning, coordinating and facilitating curriculum design, materials development, materials distribution (including online distribution), tutoring and counselling, assessment management, and student database administration. The Institute works in collaboration with servicing schools to convert the study materials and programmes into distance and online modes of delivery. The UNZA has been offering distance education since 1966 under the Department of Correspondence Studies (the Institute of Distance Education since 2009). The number of distance students enrolled in IDE has grown in the past 50 years from the initial 250 to currently over 4,000 students. Due to increasing demand for higher education and the traditional popularity of UNZA in the country, this enrolment is likely to increase sharply over the upcoming years. Unless quality is maintained, investment in expanding ODL may not yield the desired benefits.

### Areas of focus for the self-review

**Programme Design:** At UNZA, curriculum design encompasses such issues as course content, teaching and learning methods, assessment strategies, aims and objectives or intended outcomes of courses (and how these objectives fit into the national imperatives),

as well as the curriculum design process. The starting point of curriculum development in ODL is the student profile, followed by the intended outcomes of the course, and then the teaching and learning methods, including assessment strategies that are embedded in the study material. In dual mode institutions, such as UNZA, this process also includes re-designing existing contact courses for ODL and online provision.

The quality assessment of the performance of UNZA in curriculum and course design is, therefore, crucial because the quality of the provision of ODL rests heavily on having appropriately selected and designed programmes and courses. The impact of Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) is that programmes and courses would become more closely aligned with the institution's vision and mission. In this way, the course outcomes and objectives, among other important elements, would be expected to be well aligned as well.

**Learner Support Systems:** At UNZA, learner support includes a range of services that are designed and developed to assist ODL students to meet their learning objectives and to gain the knowledge and skills to be successful in their studies. To achieve this, learner support services take into consideration the diverse needs of students as well as their level of study. Learner support services include mechanisms designed to bridge the gap by enhancing communication between students and the lecturer(s), as well as between students and their peers, the study material, administrative support, and other aspects of the institution. Assessment of the performance of the university using Guidelines for Quality Assurance of learner support is very important to UNZA. These IQA guidelines include several pertinent aspects that have a direct impact on the nature of student learning experiences. It is expected that quality learner support would result in a rich environment for active learning and would promote dialogue between teacher and students to decrease the

distance between the student and the teacher. Several of the mechanisms contained in the guidelines are already part of the provisions of the ODL Policy, but the self-review process would establish the extent to which the university is meeting the requirements of the wide range of students in ODL programmes, and identify the areas that need improvement.

**Materials Development:** ODL study materials at UNZA are developed by teams involving academics, curriculum and course designers, language specialists, tutors, and relevant external stakeholders, where possible. The curriculum design and development is predominantly done by academics who provide the content of the materials. It is the policy of UNZA that distance learning materials be designed, written, and produced in advance, ready for delivery to students as soon as they register for their courses. It is expected that the IQA guidelines would provide UNZA with a means to assess how well the institution is providing quality study materials based on sound instructional design principles. The expected impact is that the content would be accurate, up-to-date, and in line with the aims and objectives of the course. Designing for independent learning is a process that requires a tremendous amount of expertise in instructional design.

**Infrastructure and Facilities:** ODL academic and administrative processes at UNZA are made possible by enabling infrastructure such as ICT infrastructure which is used to support virtual environments like the LMS. This helps in administration, management of course delivery, encouragement of interaction through discussion forums and reporting on learning processes. It has been observed, however, that ICT has not been used as it should because of inadequate infrastructure, limited human resource capacity and high costs associated with setting up ICT infrastructure. The other critical facility is the library. The library at UNZA allows students to have access to information both manually and

electronically. For a student to have access to library facilities, s/he must first have registered so that s/he is able to use all facilities. The libraries also offer services to distance learning students designed to meet a wide range of informational, instructional and user needs including access to e-resources. It is essential for UNZA to undertake a self-assessment of its provision of library services because it provides the institution with a mechanism to assess the adequacy and appropriateness of library facilities. The expected impact of this assessment is that it will provide information that may lead to the institution meeting students' expectations and enriching their learning experience.

**Staffing:** At UNZA, IDE is responsible for the management and administration of human resources in the Institute. However, other personnel such as lecturers and administrators are sourced from servicing schools to support the activities of IDE. The management of IDE ensures that all the resources at the university's disposal are properly administered with the aim of assisting the students and lecturers in their teaching and learning so they may be successful. IDE is also responsible for training staff on development of study materials, ODL-related assessment practices, facilitation of learning, designing for online learning and administration and management of ODL processes and systems. Self-assessment in this area was important for the institution because staffing is critical to the provision of ODL. The IQA would have a major impact related to recruitment and selection procedures and would ensure that the most qualified, experienced and high calibre academic and support staff are recruited. It would also help ensure that staff recruitment is commensurate with enrolments as well as the wide range of programmes on offer, and that there is a balance of staff, subject specialisation, material development expertise and learner support services.





*Process Design workshop at the University of Zambia (June 2018). The list of participants included Dr Ephraim Mhlanga (SAIDE) and staff from the University of Zambia, Copperbelt University and Mulungushi University.*

**Open and Distance Education Systems and Structures:**

According to the UNZA ODL Policy, academic systems are a core function of higher education. Academic systems are made up of a curriculum which indicates what should be taught and how. It places emphasis on the aims of learning and what the outcomes of such learning should be. The policy indicates that, in the provision of ODL courses, distance education providers must constantly give attention to the needs of students in diverse and remote locations as well as those with learning disabilities. Due to the many different people who play different roles and have different responsibilities in distance education, an elaborate system of role specification needs to be developed to ensure that the system is operational. The different components of the system also have to coordinate and work in harmony. For example, registration processes must be in sync with Materials Development and dispatch processes.

The policy also indicates that QA plays an important role in ensuring that UNZA distance students are given quality education during their stay at the university. Quality management is about improving, supporting and developing

quality processes that are meant to improve practice. ODL programmes should go through the same rigorous quality review as contact programmes.

Some important aspects of this IQA guideline, which provided the reason for choosing to pilot it, include the fact that it would provide information to assess how well the university is meeting the requirement, and that it has appropriate distance education systems. The expected impacts include having staff dedicated to distance education programmes, and having distance education centres with the capacity to coordinate and monitor the rolling out of academic programmes, with enough office space and infrastructure to execute their duties effectively. It is also expected that there are enough financial resources deployed to facilitate the delivery of quality distance education.

People who were involved in the self-review:

1. Prof Boniface Namangala, Director – Institute of Distance Education
2. Dr Edward Lusambo, Director – Quality Assurance

3. Mr Francis Simui, Head – Quality Assurance and Research, Institute of Distance Education

A copy of the questionnaire was also sent to the Vice Chancellor who was aware of, and fully supportive of, the self-review process.

### How the self-review was conducted

The following steps were taken during the self-review process:

- A brief meeting was held between the Director of Quality Assurance and the Head of Quality Assurance and Research to select the guidelines to be used. The rationale for selecting the guidelines was considered during this meeting.

- Participants to be included in the pilot, mainly academics involved in the day-to-day teaching, were identified.
- The questionnaire was emailed to key informants who sent back the questionnaires with their responses.
- The results of the key respondents' responses were analysed and recorded in the final document which was emailed to COL's coordinating consultant, Dr Ephraim Mhlanga. This step was followed by a presentation by the Director for Quality Assurance at the convening of the CoP Task Force.

### Main findings

In addition to providing insights to the institution on its strengths, and areas that need improvement, the pilot exercise also provided essential feedback that was used to review and revise the Quality Guidelines (see Table 3).

ITEM	CRITERIA	AVERAGE SCORE (OUT OF 3)	COMMENT ON THE QUALITY GUIDELINE
1	Programme Design	2.2	Criterion evidence is clear and appropriate for the course, but there is some room for enhancement
2	Learner Support Systems	1.3	Criterion evidence exists but needs to be presented more clearly and/ or further developed
3	Materials Development	2.1	Criterion evidence is clear and appropriate for the course, but there is some room for enhancement
4	Infrastructure and Facilities	2.2	Criterion evidence is clear and appropriate for the course, but there is some room for enhancement
5	Staffing	2.4	Criterion evidence is clear and appropriate for the course, but there is some room for enhancement
6	Open and Distance Education Systems and Structures	2.3	Criterion evidence is clear and appropriate for the course, but there is some room for enhancement

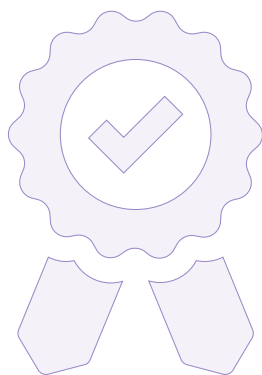
**Table 3:** Main findings from the self-review of selected standards

## Challenges faced

Most staff at the IDE were out in the regions conducting examinations at the time the surveys were sent out. This had the potential to compromise the accuracy of their ratings, as they had no ready evidence of processes at their disposal. Ideally, staff should consult records of activities from their offices, involve colleagues in their departments, including students, and score the various aspects in the review instrument as a team to minimise bias. The review process should be a team process and should enlighten the entire team.

## Institutional impact of the conducted self-reviews

The self-evaluation process had a lot of positive effects in the institution, not only in terms of unearthing good practices that need to be reinforced and weaknesses that need improvement, but also in terms of exposing staff to a simple and cost-effective way of enhancing self-improvement. Based on the results summarised in Table 3, improvement plans are going to be developed and implemented in the areas where weaknesses were identified. Another round of reviews will be done after a year in order to assess the progress made. This approach will be used on a continuous basis to improve the quality of ODL provision at the university.



## Case Study 4: Botswana Open University (BOU)

### Enhancing quality through self-reviews

This case study summarises the self-review exercise conducted at Botswana Open University (BOU) using the Quality Guidelines developed by the COL initiated and supported CoP. The self-review aimed at establishing how the institution is faring in the provision of blended learning programmes, and to determine the relevance and applicability of the COL QA Guidelines for blended learning. The reviews were conducted in the School of Education, which is the only school/ faculty that offers programmes using both online and face-to-face delivery modes. This exercise was timely, as BOU has committed to increasing the number of Technology Enhanced Learning programmes. The university's target is to have all (about 25) BOU programmes online by 2020, an increase from the four programmes that are currently in part online.

### Staff involved in the self-review process

The exercise involved gathering the views of administrative staff and Heads of Departments in the Teacher Training and Early Childhood Development Departments. The information for this review was collected through qualitative methods. Staff in the two departments were interviewed and the programme materials and other departmental documents were analysed using the QA guidelines. Results of the self-review are illustrated in Table 4.

CRITERION	RATING	STRENGTHS	AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT	RECOMMENDATIONS
Programme Design	73%	Most of the programmes are designed for technologically enabled and face-to-face delivery	There is need to include more technological data production mechanisms for monitoring teaching and learning and including more inclusive practices to accommodate learners with special educational needs	There is need to strengthen online Programme Design with more online teaching and learning activities and monitoring activities (analytics)  Build enhancement of ICT skills and competencies of students and tutors into the design of courses
Learner Support Systems	70%	Learner Support Strategies for the institution and students  A Student Representative Council was elected  A Student Charter has been crafted to guide student support operations	Online support strategies are still primitive  Connectivity still poses a major challenge for students, especially in rural areas	Alternative network provision such as APTUS should be explored  Strengthen learner support mechanisms through M&E activities of online delivery and assessment to enhance teaching and learning
Materials Development	60%	The guidelines for developing content are at the level of the policy on Materials Development and delivery  The online content still needs to be improved	There is need for more contextualisation of materials and use of more technology-enhanced activities  Online Materials Development is relatively new. Learners and tutors need more training on using the online delivery mode and content	Develop and implement policies and train full-time staff and tutors on online Materials Development and delivery.  More contextualisation of materials developed elsewhere is critical to reflect the cultural diversity of BOU learners

CRITERION	RATING	STRENGTHS	AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT	RECOMMENDATIONS
Student Assessment	55%	<p>There is internal moderation of assignments and examination questions and marked scripts</p> <p>Assignments and examinations are aligned with course outcomes</p> <p>Students are well informed in advance of assignment and examination dates</p>	<p>There is need to move to online assessment of learning to vary the assessment mechanisms and to improve the examination processes</p>	<p>BOU needs to fast track development towards a strategy for online assessment</p>
Infrastructure and Facilities	65%	<p>The face-to-face delivery has enough learning facilities through the sharing of resources with other institutions</p> <p>BOU commits to engaging in technological innovations by expanding in all key areas such as Infrastructure and Facilities, improving instructional design, teaching and learning processes as well as connectivity</p>	<p>There is need to improve the provision of technological infrastructure and facilities in administration centres</p>	<p>There is need to invest in the infrastructure critical to online learning such as connectivity, bandwidth, fully functional LMS and the back-up system of the data produced</p>
Staffing	65%	<p>Currently, there is minimal staff in the two departments</p>	<p>There have been in-service training workshops to close the skills gaps in supporting online delivery</p>	<p>Recruit more full-time staff and improve out-of-hours and weekend accessibility to resources such as libraries</p>
Open and Distance Education Systems and Structures	70%	<p>Established QA mechanisms are in place within the departments in addition to BOU's institutional QA policy</p> <p>Policies and structures for Learner Records Management need to be reviewed</p>	<p>There is need to augment the QA systems and structures for the technological aspects of delivery</p>	<p>A comprehensive approach to QA systems and structures for the relevant departments needs to be developed to identify and best manage BOU's key deliverables</p>

**Table 4:** Results of the self-review process

## Data analysis

The average rating of the seven quality standards is 66%. The Programme Design standard received the highest rating (73%) which indicates that the programmes are well developed. The good practice identified in this area relates to programmes being developed by teams rather than by individuals. Programmes are further developed by people with relevant expertise in the subject area. The main positive aspect that was revealed during the self-review process is that students are supported throughout the programme especially in the research component of their programme. Staff for the Master of Education-Educational Leadership (MEDEL) programme, for example, conduct one-on-one research support for their students, which contributes to particularly high success rates in this programme. The university has an appropriate institutional advocacy strategy to inform prospective students and parents of its offerings, as well as clear policies, processes and structures to facilitate the operation of the programmes. Student queries are handled promptly by the university, and there is an efficient system of communication with students on the university's different campuses.

With a rating of 70% each, both Learner Support Systems, and Open and Distance Education Systems and Structures scored second highest in the self-review process. Infrastructure and Facilities scored 67%. The main positive points identified are

- learner satisfaction surveys are conducted on a regular basis to get user feedback on the effectiveness of learner support mechanisms;
- timely feedback on assignments is provided to students;
- the university reaches out to learners who are in the most remote areas of the country;

- the university collaborates with sister institutions in Namibia in inter-institutional peer reviews to enhance quality;
- procedures and mechanisms are in place for the provision and maintenance of the infrastructure and facilities of the institution;
- students have access to the internet and the e-library databases on all regional campuses;
- academic support for continuing learners and research support for completing learners is provided; and
- monitoring and evaluation systems are in place for appropriate assignment grading and feedback from adequately trained part-time staff.

Results for Staffing and Materials Development are both satisfactory, with scores of 65% and 60% respectively. Student Assessment was rated the lowest, with 55%. One reason for this low score is that Student Assessment of the programmes in the School of Education does not have online assessment of student learning. The use of technology is a challenge for most of the older students as they lack experience in using computers and accessing the internet. Another contributing factor is the limited access to the internet as the bandwidth is low. Since most of the students are working or staying far from the BOU Wi-Fi facility, accessing reading materials online for assignments is a challenge. Going forward, these ratings are anticipated to rise as the institution formalises its strategic direction as an Open University and its commitment to venture into the technologically enhanced learning space.

## Challenges encountered

The review exercise was challenging, as there were major activities taking place in the university during the review process. Staff relied on for this review were not readily available due

to other commitments. The time to conduct the reviews was also limited.

## Impact of the self-review process

Overall, the self-review process was highly illuminative of how the programmes are

operating. Staff responsible for rolling out the programmes obtained a clearer picture of the shortcomings that exist and improvements that need to be made. More focus is now directed towards addressing the main weaknesses that were identified, with the support of the Quality Assurance Unit of the university.



## Key Lessons Learned

The review exercise provided the university with an opportunity to reflect and re-focus on the issues that are critical in distance learning. Through this process, it became apparent that there is a need to fast-track the development and implementation of the Programme Development and Review Policy and related documents, as most of the programmes are overdue for review. In terms of the process, it became clear that more time is needed to allow moderation of the review results. Such moderation is important to minimise bias. Finally, there is need to scope the main quality standards, so they can capture what is perceived to be good practice in that area – the “big thing” to be achieved through the little constituent elements.

## Case Study 5: University of Namibia

### Integrating ODL into UNAM’s IQA system

In addition to participating in COL’s Quality Enhancement CoP, it is important to note that the University of Namibia had previously implemented a separate quality enhancement project with COL’s support. This targeted COL initiative was aimed at enhancing the quality of ODL, expanding distance and eLearning, conducting tracer studies to estimate employability of graduates, and monitoring progress through a dashboard system. Thus, a more comprehensive support project was implemented at the institution. In terms of QA, the institutional QA policy was revised to accommodate ODL aspects, and more guidelines were developed at the UNAM College for Distance Education and eLearning which were

workshopped to all regional staff throughout the country. As part of the CoP, the institution also conducted self-reviews using the comprehensive set of Quality Guidelines developed. As reflected in the introductory paragraph below, the COL quality enhancement initiative gelled very well with the institution’s overall quality enhancement momentum.

### Introduction

The University of Namibia (UNAM) is a public higher education institution which was established by an Act of Parliament on August 31, 1992 (University of Namibia Act 18 of 1992). UNAM is a dual mode institution that offers face-to-face as well as ODL. To meet the higher educational needs of a diverse Namibia, UNAM has 12 campuses across the country, and eight regional centres supporting ODL. The latter are managed by the Centre for Open, Distance and

eLearning (CODeL), the distance and lifelong education unit of the university.

In its vision statement, UNAM aspires “to be a beacon of excellence and innovation through teaching, research and community services.” The mission of UNAM is “to provide quality higher education, undertake research, advance and disseminate knowledge, and to provide extension services with the view to produce productive and competitive human resources capable of driving public and private institutions towards a knowledge-based economy, economic growth and improved quality of life” (UNAM Strategic Plan, 2016-2020). These vision and mission statements clearly indicate the commitment of the university to quality teaching, research and community engagement activities.

### **Institutionalisation of IQA processes at UNAM**

In 2010, UNAM established a Centre for Quality Assurance and Management (CEQUAM) charged with the responsibility to coordinate

the implementation of a formalised QA system and quality management processes. It is against this background that the Quality Assurance and Management Policy has been developed to guide practice. In accordance with this policy, the QA system is mainly based on self-reviews, covering all areas of institutional operation at different levels focusing on continuous improvement and quality enhancement.

Since CEQUAM’s inception, a number of quality reviews have been undertaken. The main output of these quality reviews are review reports outlining recommendations for improvement. These recommendations are subsequently converted into self-improvement plans (SIPs) which are then implemented to enhance quality. An SIP is a plan developed by the institution, faculty or department that underwent a quality review. SIPs specify actions, designate responsibilities and timeframes, and attempt to close quality loops within the institutions, faculty or department under review. Table 5 depicts an example of a template used for a SIP at UNAM.

Recommendations	Actions needed	Responsible office/person	Overseeing person	Resources required	Timeframe for completion	Evidence for completion
1.						
2.						
etc.						

**Table 5:** Example of UNAM’s SIP

### **The challenge of integrating ODL into the UNAM QA system**

One of the quality challenges identified at UNAM through such reviews is the lack of integration of ODL into the institutional QA framework. Although the overarching

institutional QA policy and its procedures have been designed to cater to all areas of institutional operations, the system lacked components that address how quality should be assured in ODL. The QA mechanisms adopted by the institution comprised a single set of “one-size-fits-all” criteria covering all modes of



delivery. Through the reviews, it became evident that ODL criteria are not explicitly covered, and the system was biased towards conventional face-to-face modes of delivery. This posed many quality challenges, as the perception was created that ODL was a “second best” option when compared to face-to-face offerings. Even resource allocation and appointment of staff was biased towards the face-to-face mode of delivery.

Since academics in dual mode institutions are primarily appointed as full-time lecturers, ODL is often regarded as an add-on to more traditional forms of teaching and a separate activity rather than an integral part of the university system that aims at complementing face-to-face learning in order to broaden access to higher education. Hence, comments like “let me first attend to my students – full-time before I start with distance students” are very common in dual institutions. Even the QA unit has not been actively involved in ODL activities which resulted in a decrease in quality of the ODL courses offered. Based on the above, a need was identified to review the QA policy and processes to integrate ODL into the institutional IQA system.

### **Approaches for integrating ODL into the university IQA system**

From 2017 to 2018, UNAM embarked on a review of the institution’s QA system with financial and technical assistance from COL to ensure successful integration of ODL into institutional QA activities which are anticipated to lead to quality enhancement. This exercise involved the revision of the institutional Quality Assurance and Management Policy to reflect ODL more explicitly. Furthermore, Guidelines for Quality Assurance in ODL with explicit criteria for assessing the quality of programmes offered through this mode of delivery were developed. These guidelines have since been integrated into the general institutional QA framework as an addendum to existing criteria for the conventional face-to-face mode of offerings.

In developing the guidelines, effort was made to cover as many unique aspects of ODL provisioning as possible, taking into account the challenges associated with serving a diverse and dispersed group of students. The areas assessed include:

- Quality of ODL management
- Quality of student administration
- Quality of student support
- Quality of teaching and learning facilitation
- Quality of materials development (Print-based)
- Quality of stores and dispatching
- Quality of eLearning – online facilitation
- Quality of eLearning – online and blended course design

### **Piloting of guidelines for QA in ODL**

After the draft Quality Assurance Guidelines were developed with support from COL, they were piloted with the purpose of testing their appropriateness and adequacy, and for identifying areas that need improvement. For these reasons, the pilot covered all areas identified above, and involved ODL administrators, tutors, students, and members from support units. The pilot resulted in the refinement of the guidelines. Apart from improving the guidelines themselves, the self-review also identified strengths and areas that need improvement in the provision of ODL.

### **Results of the pilot self-reviews**

The pilot self-review uncovered many challenges that constrain effective ODL provision. Some of these challenges are within institutional control (student, staff and institution-related) while others (social and economic) are not, including internet connectivity, network coverage and low bandwidth. One part of the quality concerns identified was related to

programme management and coordination, particularly in terms of delays that are experienced in dispatching learning materials to ODL students and in providing feedback on student assessments. There is a general concern about the quality of academics involved in the teaching of ODL students. It appears from the review results that teaching staff are appointed based on being lecturers but without necessarily having formal qualifications or experience in ODL. This compromises the quality of learning facilitation. Efforts are being made to remedy this through the provision of short learning programmes which, however, need to be reinforced with formal academic qualifications in ODL.

The quality of learning materials and student support services were identified as being at the heart of ODL ensuring the success of ODL students. However, these two areas have been identified as the weakest with regard to quality. Since ODL students are physically separated from their lecturers and fellow students, they tend to feel isolated and frustrated during their studies, and even eventually, dropping out. Quality and timely feedback on assignments have been identified as crucial for future student learning in ODL (assessment for learning versus assessment of learning). Self-reviews showed that turnaround time for feedback on assignments is currently a great concern.

IT infrastructure has also been identified as an important tool that has the potential to enhance student success in ODL. Most of the students are provided with internet devices. However, there are still some remote rural areas where there is no internet connectivity for cell phone coverage in Namibia. Some ODL students have to travel long distances to reach ODL regional centres. In addition, some of the academic staff and students alike are not technology-literate, which hinders them from using technology to study or access the course content.

The pilot review also revealed that there are still too many student queries and student complaints. Efforts have been made to improve the situation by introducing a ticketing system, which is a commendable initiative, but implementation of this system needs to be improved to become efficient. All issues identified by the pilot review have been transformed into a SIP for implementation. The institution is currently rolling out full implementation of the final guidelines through CODEL, with assistance from CEQUAM. In 2019, there will be another self-review process that will be followed by peer reviews to assess the quality of ODL offerings at UNAM using the guideline's quality criteria. Areas for improvement will be identified and actions taken to improve identified weaknesses.

## **Conclusion and benefits to the institution**

With help from COL, UNAM has undertaken a review of its QA system with the purpose to improve the quality of ODL and eLearning provisioning in the university. QA policies and objectives are now well defined and quality criteria for ODL are adequately and explicitly stated in the institution's QA framework. This is in recognition of the uniqueness of ODL and the need to have a different set of quality standards from those catering to a face-to-face mode of delivery. As highlighted above, improvements in the various areas of delivery will be monitored over the year, and processes will be carefully documented in order to assess the value added by using the newly developed ODL Quality Guidelines for conducting regular self-reviews. The outcome of this quality intervention will be shared more widely after the second round of reviews in 2019. Whether it is more beneficial to integrate ODL and eLearning quality criteria into conventional face-to-face frameworks, than to have separate quality criteria will become clearer through the intervention. With regards to institutional benefits, UNAM benefits from

the review process in two ways: the process was used not only as a strategy for building capacity in QA among academics, but also as a way of creating awareness about the importance of reflecting on one's own practice on a regular

basis. The self-review kick-started a process that is likely to become a quality culture in the wider university context, including in face-to-face programmes.



## Conclusion

As the case studies demonstrate, practice is very different from one institution to the next in SSA. Equally, institutions are at different levels in terms of QA implementation. In institutions where National Quality Assurance frameworks are in place and well implemented, the self-review processes were better implemented than in contexts where such frameworks either did not exist or have not yet been implemented. Through the involvement of National Quality Assurance Agencies, it is anticipated that the CoP quality enhancement approach will hasten the formation of National Quality Assurance frameworks where they have not yet been formalised, and strengthen those that already

exist. As highlighted above, the approach also aims at strengthening collaboration between national agencies and institutions in enhancing the quality of higher education. By building capacity at the institutional level, it is anticipated that the facilitative role of National Quality Assurance Agencies will be profoundly improved. QA tools like Quality Guidelines are dynamic and never static instruments. They constantly respond to the needs of the system at any given time. We hope that as institutions continue to implement the CoP guidelines, adjustments and further refinements will take place.



*Regional QA Community of Practice kickoff meeting, Johannesburg, South Africa, April 2018.*



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## Appendix

### Quality Guidelines in Reporting: Template

RATING	LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE	DESCRIPTION
3	Exceeds/ Always	Criterion evidence is clear, appropriate for the course, and demonstrates “best practices”
2	Meets/ Often	Criterion evidence is clear and appropriate for the course, but there is some room for enhancement
1	Partially meets/ Sometimes	Criterion evidence exists but needs to be presented more clearly and/ or further developed
0	Does not meet/ Rarely or Never	No criterion evidence exists or is present but not appropriate for the course
NA	Objective does not apply	It may be something only a fully online course would need and you are teaching a blended course for example

**Table 6:** Instrument for measuring adherence to quality standards

1. Programme design.		
<i>Academic programmes are flexible and relevant to the needs of the economy and those of prospective learners and employers; are responsive to the changing environments; provide appropriate articulation; and have assessment strategies that are effective and in line with relevant outcomes.</i>		
CRITERION	EVIDENCE	RATING
1. Programme is aligned to the institution’s vision and mission		
2. There is a sound rationale and justification for offering the distance/ blended/ eLearning programme		
3. The aims and objectives of the distance/ blended/ eLearning programme are clearly articulated		

4. Course outcomes, objectives, activities and assessments are well aligned		
5. Programme outcomes are well stated and are in line with the NQF level of the qualification		
6. The distance/ blended/ eLearning programme is sustainable		
7. The programme enhances access and success, including for learners with special needs		
8. Programme regulations (admission requirements, progression, assessment etc.) are clearly outlined		
9. The Distance/ blended/ eLearning programme embraces emerging issues in a discipline		
10. The Distance/ blended/ eLearning programme is reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that it keeps up-to-date with developments in the field and with latest technology		

**Summary of Strengths and Areas for Improvement Within this Quality Standard:**

**OVERALL EVALUATION OF QUALITY STANDARD 1:**

Strengths identified:

Areas for improvement identified:

Recommendations:

**Overall score:**

## 2. Learner Support Systems

*There is a wide range of learner support mechanisms that cater to the variety of learners with different needs. Learner support takes care of both academic and non-academic needs of learners; makes use of student data in order to enable timely provision of support where needed; makes effective use of appropriate of technology; and puts learner success at the centre.*

CRITERION	EVIDENCE	RATING
1. Blended/ eLearning provider has an accurate profile of learners in order to choose the appropriate support for the different learners		
2. Students are informed through appropriate channels on the timetable to be followed at the beginning of the year/ semester		
3. Learner satisfaction surveys are conducted on a regular basis to determine the appropriateness of the support mechanisms that are provided		
4. Learner support services are improved/ increased with increasing numbers of students enrolled		
5. Teaching staff provide comprehensive and timely feedback on assignments to students to enhance effective learning		
6. There is policy on turnaround time for students' queries		
7. There is provision on the LMS for students to raise queries and receive responses from responsible people in the university		
8. The institution conducts regular reviews of resource usage in order to establish which support services are used and which ones are not		
9. Regular visits are made by support staff to remote centres to meet with students who study in adverse conditions. There are effective communication systems with all students registered on the programme		
10. Where blended courses are provided, cognisance is taken of those disadvantaged students who cannot access the relevant technology		

<b>Summary of Strengths and Areas for Improvement Within this Quality Standard:</b>
<b>OVERALL EVALUATION OF STANDARD 2:</b>
Strengths identified:
Areas for improvement identified:
Recommendations:
<b>Overall score:</b>

<b>3. Materials Development</b>		
<i>Learning materials are in appropriate formats that allow easy access to learners; there is coherence between learning materials and learning outcomes, course content and assessment. Learning materials teach in a coherent way, engage learners, and promote development of problem solving and critical thinking skills. Learning materials are evaluated and updated on a regular basis.</i>		
CRITERION	EVIDENCE	RATING
1. There is enough lead-in time for the various processes to take place, (for example, content review, language editing; type setting appropriateness, quality checks through peer reviews).		
2. Academics in ODL are trained in instructional materials design for print and online delivery.		
3. Relevant materials (print/ online) for the programme are developed.		
4. An in-house materials development manual is developed for material developers to follow and adhere to.		



5. The development of learning materials is based on sound instructional design principles in order to promote active and deep learning that engages learners.		
6. The content is accurate and up-to-date,		
7. The content is in line with terminal aims and objectives of the course and uses relevant examples.		
8. The content reflects the multicultural diversity of the learners.		
9. All instructional materials, in the form of guides including assignments are ready prior to registration of students.		
10. Materials development is a team exercise and involves people with disciplinary expertise.		
11. Materials are reviewed by subject specialists prior to using them on a course.		
12. There is active use of OER in supporting academic learning.		

**Summary of Strengths and Areas for Improvement Within this Quality Standard:**

**OVERALL EVALUATION OF STANDARD 3:**

Strengths identified:

Areas for improvement identified:

Recommendations:

**Overall Score:**

4. Student Assessment		
<p><i>An effective assessment strategy that is valid and reliable is in place; appropriate security and QA measures are in place to ensure the integrity of assessment processes. There is policy on student appeals and turnaround times for such appeals are clearly defined in the policy and followed in practice.</i></p>		
CRITERION	EVIDENCE	RATING
1. Anti-plagiarism software is used to authenticate assessment processes.		
2. A variety of assessment strategies are used in order to make assessment in blended/ eLearning rigorous and authentic.		
3. Communication of information relating to assessment is clear and timely received by all students.		
4. There is moderation of all forms of assessment.		
5. The goals of assessment are clearly mapped out and students are made aware of them right at the beginning.		
6. The assessment is aligned to course outcomes and learning modules.		
7. Assessment covers a wide range of cognitive domains/ levels.		
8. There is appropriate weighting of summative and formative assessment.		
9. Mechanisms are in place to ensure that the right candidates take online assessment.		
<p><b>Summary of Strengths and Areas for Improvement Within this Quality Standard:</b></p>		
<p><b>OVERALL EVALUATION OF STANDARD 4:</b></p>		
<p>Strengths identified:</p>		

Areas for improvement identified:
Recommendations:
<b>Overall Score:</b>

5. Infrastructure and Facilities		
<p><i>Basic infrastructure and facilities that are commensurate with student numbers are in place to facilitate effective rolling out of learning programmes. Institutional facilities take into account the dispersed nature of the student body in both ODL and in eLearning. Where the institution has arrangements with other stakeholders to allow students to have access to their facilities, the responsibility for quality provision of such services still lies with the providing institution (i.e. the institution where the student is registered).</i></p>		
CRITERION	EVIDENCE	RATING
1. There are adequate and appropriate facilities to run the academic programme		
2. Learning infrastructure takes into account the decentralised nature of distance education students		
3. Appropriate technological innovations are used in educational transactions to enrich the learning experiences provided to students		
4. Appropriate technology is used for effective institutional functioning, like learner support, examination processing and student records		
5. The growth of the infrastructure keeps pace with enrolment growth in the programme		
6. There are procedures and mechanisms in place for the provision, maintenance and replacement of the infrastructural facilities in the programme		
7. There are mechanisms to regularly evaluate the adequacy and accessibility of resources and services for learners and appropriate remedial measures are taken to address inadequacies		

8. There are written agreements where facilities of other institutions are made available to learners		
9. Where arrangements are made for students to use facilities belonging to other organisations, the institution remains accountable for the quality provision of services to students		
<b>Summary of Strengths and Areas for Improvement Within this Quality Standard:</b>		
<b>OVERALL EVALUATION OF STANDARD 5:</b>		
Strengths identified:		
Areas for improvement identified:		
Recommendations:		
<b>Overall Score:</b>		

<b>6. Staffing</b>		
<i>ODL providers have an appropriate staffing structure and learning programmes are supported by enough administrative, academic, technical and other support staff with appropriate qualifications and experience. Responsibilities and job descriptions of such staff are clearly defined. There is systematic development of staff in order to ensure that they are kept up-to-date with developments and perform their duties effectively.</i>		
<b>CRITERION</b>	<b>EVIDENCE</b>	<b>RATING</b>
1. Relevant staff with appropriate qualifications are recruited in a transparent way for an open, flexible and distance mode of delivery;		
2. Staff recruitment is commensurate to enrolments and the requirements of the programme;		

3. Technical and support staff is adequately qualified for the job they are doing.		
4. There is policy on continuous staff development in order to keep staff up-to-date with latest developments in their disciplines.		
5. Staff have the resources, research facilities and conducive working conditions to provide rich and coherent learning experiences through a variety of open, distance and flexible delivery modes;		
6. Staff is recruited, monitored, supported and coordinated for the specialised roles and tasks they perform.		
7. Workload allows for the development and re-development of open and distance education curricular materials, as well as orientation, tutoring and remedial services for all students;		
8. Staff is supported to utilise appropriate resources including learning management systems that enhance learning within open, flexible and distance educational contexts.		

**Summary of Strengths and Areas for Improvement Within this Quality Standard:**

**OVERALL EVALUATION OF STANDARD 6:**

Strengths identified:

Areas for improvement identified:

Recommendations:

**Overall Score:**

## 7. Open and Distance Education Systems and Structures

*Appropriate ODL systems and structures that make it possible to provide effective support to students are in place. These systems and structures take into account the peculiarities of the mode(s) of provision used and the needs of the students on board.*

CRITERION	EVIDENCE	RATING
1. An appropriate institutional advocacy strategy is in place to inform prospective students and parents.		
2. There are fair and transparent systems for student recruitment as guided by policy.		
3. An efficient registration system is in place for students in different locations.		
4. There are procedures for ensuring timely provision of learning materials, assignments, relevant tutorial letters and examination timetables to students.		
5. There are systems and appropriate facilities for ensuring the security of examinations.		
6. There are quality assurance systems and processes that ensure quality of programmes.		
7. There are quality assurance policies and processes that ensure the quality of learning materials.		
8. There are quality assurance systems and processes that ensure quality in the marking of assignments and examinations.		
9. There are quality assurance systems and processes that ensure quality in the recording and security of student grades.		
10. There are quality assurance systems and processes that ensure quality in handling students' queries/ appeals.		
11. There are quality assurance policies and processes that ensure quality of assessments.		
12. There are systems and processes that ensure quality in processing of results and accuracy in certification.		

13. There are systems of tracking enrolled students in order to facilitate student retention and timely completion.		
14. There is an efficient system of communication between decentralised centres and the head office.		
15. Distance education centres have capacity to coordinate and monitor the rolling out of academic programmes.		
16. Financial resources are allocated to facilitate the deployment of quality distance education.		
<b>Summary of Strengths and Areas for Improvement Within this Quality Standard:</b>		
<b>OVERALL EVALUATION OF STANDARD 7:</b>		
Strengths identified:		
Areas for improvement identified:		
Recommendations:		
<b>Overall Score:</b>		

## LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

COL is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.

**VISION:** To be the foremost global agency that promotes learning for sustainable development

**MISSION:** To help governments and institutions to expand the scale, efficiency and quality of learning by using open, distance and technology-based approaches

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