BOOK REVIEW

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Assuring institutional quality in open and distance learning (ODL) in the developing context

Aluko, Folake Ruth, Letseka, Moeketsi and Victor, Pitsoe (eds), 2016.

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Unless open distance learning practitioners (ODL) deliberately give attention through research to quality issues, distance education may continue to be compromised, or at least questioned, in terms of its quality. This trend would be counterproductive and all investment that is being made by governments to expand access through this mode of delivery would amount to nothing.

This book, edited by Folake Ruth Aluko from the University of Pretoria, Letseka Moeketsi and Victor Pitsoe (from the University of South Africa) and containing contributions from 12 authors – all of whom are currently active in the field – explores burning issues around the need to ensure institutional quality in ODL, especially in a developing context. This becomes imperative in view of the persistent concerns about quality among stakeholders, and the need to expand work in the context of ODL quality assurance and its management, which has just started to evolve. However, this is compounded with the need to expand higher education opportunity, in accordance with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which have particular significance for the developing contexts of Africa, the continent from which the work is conceived.

Alan Tait, in his preface to the book, laments the conflicting discourses of what excellence is in higher education in general. He observes in particular that there is another dimension of excellence, which concerns universities with a different mission, and usually those with a primary or significant commitment to open and distance education. Therefore, he advocates that our discussions of quality

should not accede to normative and a-contextual definitions of what is "best", but should rather include definitions of excellence that recognise inclusion, access and widening participation.

Therefore, this book is very important as it helps ODL providers (who are on the increase not only in South Africa but also in the sub-Saharan African region as a whole) to reflect on quality issues.

The book contains twelve chapters. These are made up of subthemes ranging from understanding ODL as second chance, the meaning of quality in ODL, theorising quality in ODL practices, assuring quality management and administrative services in ODL, to quality access to ODL. Other chapters explore programme design in ODL, quality student support in ODL, quality ODL research, programme evaluation as a tool for ensuring quality in ODL, and the example of managing the quality of an ODL module.

Chapter 1 aptly argues that ODL is now a common mode of delivery, and focusing on quality is critical for various reasons. That not enough attention has been paid to quality assurance in ODL in developing countries might not be very accurate, as some quality assurance has always been implemented. The major shift though, has been the adoption of more explicit and rigorous approaches to quality assurance. A client-satisfaction notion of quality given on p. 2 of the book seems very appropriate for ODL. This first chapter does well to foreground the purpose of pursuing the quality theme in ODL in this publication. This chapter is well written and well structured.

Chapter 2 deals with key elements of quality in ODL and tries to cast definitions of quality within an ODL context. It draws from various theories, including TQM. Whilst it is accepted that there are theoretical ideas that have withstood the test of time, the authors should also have supported their work with more recent references. The chapter links quality to throughput rates, which I believe is a very important concept. The content of the chapter is great, but the argument and structure of the chapter need to be better streamlined and strengthened. There has to be a more logical flow of ideas in the chapter, all converging on one argument.
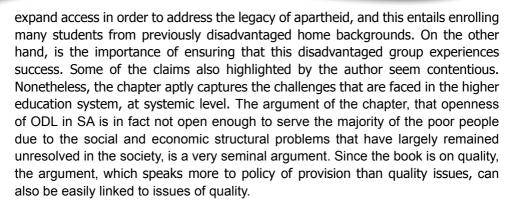
In **Chapter 3**, the argument that quality is contextual and is often conflated with concepts like efficiency, effectiveness and equity cannot be contested. It is important for scholars in the field of quality assurance to clear this confusion and generate clearer understanding of the concept of quality, for both practical and

theoretical purposes. Whilst the authors introduce a sound scholarly flavour in the debate, the chapter tends to remain very much in the philosophical realm of the cited theories at the expense of teasing out quality and quality assurance per se, and how these theories should help us understand these processes in an ODL context. Nonetheless, this is a very useful chapter indeed, particularly in terms of viewing quality assurance from a different perspective than what is common.

Chapter 4 deals with terms that are related to quality assurance, such as quality management and quality control. It is important for practitioners to understand and distinguish between these terms. In the chapter, the distinction between quality assurance as a proactive process is not clearly distinguished enough from quality control, which is a reactive process. Unfortunately, this kind of book (due to the wide range of issues confronting the theme in a developing context) is often unable to do necessary justice to important topics. This challenge can also be found in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 deals with the macro-political legacies of apartheid, and their implications for educational provision in the country. The core of the argument is that higher education has been the preserve of the elite. The curriculum, the high fees, the language and the location act as barriers that working class children have to deal with in order to access higher education. All this contributes to the dialectical structural condition of an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor. This is a powerful educational argument at the centre of the discourse on inequality and inequity challenges in current South Africa. The chapter could, however, have taken the debate further to closely link these problems to matters of quality provision of ODL. For instance, by pointing out that even in instances where poor people take advantage of cheaper ODL programmes, if the quality is poor, they remain marginalised as they fail to acquire competitive knowledge and skills. In addition, the argument that distance education is an alternative to addressing the dearth of human resource skills, can help ensure employability, and is a means to reduce inequality can only hold if quality distance education is provided, if access is further enhanced, and if throughput rates are raised. Overall, the chapter pursues a very legitimate argument on quality as transformation, but this argument also has a very strong political spin that requires scholarly unpacking.

In **Chapter 6**, the author discusses the need to expand access in higher education in order to accommodate people from previously disadvantaged groups. Whilst this is true, there is a tension here that needs teasing out. On one hand is the need to

expand access in order to address the legacy of apartheid, and this entails enrolling many students from previously disadvantaged home backgrounds. On the other hand, is the importance of ensuring that this disadvantaged group experiences success. Some of the claims also highlighted by the author seem contentious. Nonetheless, the chapter aptly captures the challenges that are faced in the higher education system, at systemic level. The argument of the chapter, that openness of ODL in SA is in fact not open enough to serve the majority of the poor people due to the social and economic structural problems that have largely remained unresolved in the society, is a very seminal argument. Since the book is on quality, the argument, which speaks more to policy of provision than quality issues, can also be easily linked to issues of quality.

Chapter 7 is a very useful chapter that brings out not only conceptual clarity on key aspects of higher education delivery like programme and course design, but also how these aspects should be coherently planned in distance education. This planning aspect is a critical quality aspect in ODL. The guidelines given in the chapter on course and programme design are extremely handy to ODL practitioners, so is the discussion on the epistemological underpinnings of such design. The chapter brings home the important point that when thinking about a curriculum, providers should not only think of the content to be transmitted, they should also consider how the curriculum will be taught. This is a point that many ODL practitioners often miss. This is a well-written chapter that clearly links theory of learning to practical design issues.

Chapter 8 deals with the all-important aspect of student support in ODL. The argument that "... student support is deeply implicated in the politics of the elite culture" p. 134 needs to be pursued and clarified further, otherwise the reader does not see how this is so. However, the chapter makes an important point that student support services constitute an essential component of delivery that determines student retention and success in distance education. It deals with an immensely critical aspect of distance education delivery – student support. It would be useful if the chapter ended with practice-oriented recommendations for ODL practitioners, though the author implied these here and there in the chapter.

Chapter 9 highlights the quality benefits of programme evaluation in ODL, a very important aspect of ODL delivery. It draws from principles of TQM and tries to show how application of these principles might improve quality delivery of ODL. It is a useful idea to use a systems approach to understanding ODL. One of the

benefits of programme evaluation is that it enhances regular programme renewal that ensures that programmes offered remain relevant to the needs of the students and of the market. The last statement of the chapter, cited from ADEA, captures this idea, though the aspect needs to be emphasised more because many institutions, ODL and contact alike, often run out-dated programmes. The next edition of the book could further illustrate how TQM principles can be applied in practice in ODL. Often, practitioners need this kind of illustration of theory.

Chapter 10 starts by acknowledging the contested nature of quality, and the implications of different understandings of the term. For instance, it links the notion of quality as excellence to elitist notions of educational provision. This reflection on implications of perceptions of quality is very important in education. The question however, is how do we understand and implement such notions of quality without being elitist? The author does well by highlighting that, in spite of the elusive nature of the concept, quality remains the hallmark of educational provision. The author aptly captures the two broad conceptions of quality as applied in education, the subjective and the objective notions of quality. The chapter also considers the notion of value-addition as another conception of quality. This is very good, but perhaps we should also explore and suggest how we can measure it.

I particularly like the conclusion the author draws from debates on quality, linking quality to the capacity of an institution to behave according to set targets. This is a very pragmatic approach to operationalising quality, which circumvents the

problem of conceptual complexity. This is an excellent chapter that is well-written, well-structured and that deals with pertinent quality issues. The argument of the chapter is clear and intelligently draws from theory. It sheds useful hints on how to apply theoretical notions of quality to practice in ODL, using UNISA as a case.

In **Chapter 11**, the author deals with quality assurance of a module so that students can derive maximum learning gains out of it. This is obviously a critical aspect in ODL. The author tried to use principles of ethical law, utilitarianism, universalism, distributive justice and personal liberty as a framework for showing how the quality of a module can be managed. This was good. However, the author would have done even better to effectively show how the principles of the framework can be applied in practice.

Chapter 12 summarises the book. Overall, the themes dealt with in the publication are pertinent to the South African context, and indeed to the wider sub-Saharan African region. In order to make the book more accessible to practitioners, I recommend that the book be published as an OER. Though the book has not claimed to cover all important aspects in detail, I am looking forward to the inclusion in future of a dedicated chapter to online learning, and how best ODL students can be supported through ICTs. This is in view of the prevalence of educational technologies.

I applaud the authors of this seminal piece of work for compiling such a publication, which has a very strong contextual focus.