

Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education (SADC CDE)



Excellence in ODL



SADC Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

Best Practice Criteria

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACDE – African Council for Distance Education

BOCODOL – Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning

COL – Commonwealth of Learning

DEASA – Distance Education Association of Southern Africa

NAMCOL – Namibian College of Open Learning

NADEOSA – National Association of Distance Education of South Africa

SADC – Southern African Development Community

SADC CDE – Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education

SAIDE – South African Institute of Distance Education

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1.0 Background

For children to reach their full potential and countries to develop, the gains made in universal primary education must be replicated at the secondary level. At present, 54 per cent of children of the appropriate age in developing countries attend secondary school. In Oceania, almost two thirds of children of secondary school age are out of school. In sub-Saharan Africa, only a quarter of children of secondary school age are in secondary school.¹

While education is often regarded as a strategy for improving economic and social conditions, there are numerous challenges that are faced in making sufficient provisions in order to realize this goal. As Fred Lockwood asserts, even with the success of the Education for All (EFA) campaign, it is estimated that by 2015 there will be 30 million children who will be unable to receive a primary school education. It is further estimated that the world will need an additional 10 million teachers by this date and that there will be over 400 million children aged 12-17 years who will be unable to benefit from a secondary school education.

Any naïve belief that we can simply scale-up conventional teaching methods, including the provision of teachers, to meet the demands for primary and secondary school education is laid bare.²

In spite of the large investments being made in Sub-Saharan Africa to expand secondary and tertiary education, the majority of learners are still failing to access these levels of education. In Sub-Saharan Africa, only one child in four participated in secondary schooling in 2006, leaving some 78 million of the school-age children out of school.³

One of the most prominent educators at the forefront of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Sir John Daniels, reports that to achieve a global secondary net enrollment of 80% requires secondary places to be created for 200 million more learners.⁴ Given the pressing needs of developing societies, the amount of resources needed to meet such demand through conventional schooling is just beyond the means of countries. Unless substantial investments are made in alternative policy options,

¹ United Nations, (2008) The Millennium Development Goals Report, New York: http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Products/Progress2008/MDG_Report_2008_En.pdf#page=16, [Retrieved on 12 August 2009]

² Lockwood, F. (2010) Series editor's foreword. In Daniel, J. (2010) Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All, Routledge, New York, p.xiii

³ Abrioux, D.A. (2009:4) "Special Issues and Practices in Open Schooling". Chapter 1 in Perspectives on Education: Open Schooling in the 21st Century. Abrioux, D.A and Ferreira, F. (eds.), pp. 3-34.

⁴ Daniel, J. (2009) "Preface". Perspectives on Education: Open Schooling in the 21st Century. Abrioux, D.A and Ferreira, F. (eds.) pp. v-vii

Sub-Saharan Africa will continue to suffer an ever-growing education deficit, and this will continue to impact negatively on social and economic development in the region.

2.0 The Case for ODL

Many countries in the region are gradually realizing the potential of ODL in expanding access at both secondary and tertiary levels. Whilst in the past ODL was offered as a second chance and did not attract much of government attention in terms of planning and budget commitment, this position is fast changing as many countries realize that it is the best option to address issues of access in cost-effective ways. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) strategies offer immense potential in alleviating problems of access in Southern Africa. There is growing commitment in the Region for countries to harness the perceived potential of this mode of educational provision and broaden access. Various institutions in the Region are doing exemplary work in providing ODL at secondary and tertiary levels and have developed expertise in this field that can be used as a platform to develop additional capacity. Due to these offerings, the region has developed pockets of excellence that form viable capital for further bolstering ODL in the region. Importantly, the existence of these various systems suggests that Southern African countries are in a position to develop their own capacity and expertise by creating peer networks of sharing and collaboration.

Unless ODL opens access to quality education, its introduction becomes counterproductive since the millions who go through the system stand the risk of remaining deprived of the knowledge and skills they need in order to make meaningful contributions in the developing economies. The quality of education is as important as the quantity offered.

It is against this background that DEASA, and indeed a number of other support organisations like COL and ACDE are supporting many initiatives that are aimed at improving the quality of ODL provision in Southern Africa. These key initiatives include developing quality assurance guidelines for use by providing institutions, building the much-needed capacity in the area of quality assurance, supporting institutions in developing robust quality assurance systems, and promoting good practice through collaboration and sharing.

The proposal document that was developed by the DEASA Executive in 2008 (**SADC Open and Distance Learning Best Practice Criteria Proposal**) which forms the basis for this guide emphasizes the importance of developing a comprehensive set of quality criteria that can be used for enhancing the quality of ODL provision in the region.

The proposal identifies some of the key areas of ODL provision where lucid criteria need to be defined, and these include quality assurance, learner support, course design and collaborative partnerships. In this guide we define the whole range of quality criteria and their constituent elements we believe represent best practice in ODL delivery. Whilst we do not claim that the list is exhaustive, we are convinced that most of the dimensions of ODL provision that require constant attention and monitoring are generally covered in these criteria.

3.0 Working with Quality Criteria

The importance for institutions to have appropriate and explicit quality assurance policies that guide institutional practice cannot be overemphasized. Such policies should take into account the unique context of an institution and should emphasise developmental rather than accountability aspects of an institution. A truism of quality is that it is impossible to demonstrate improvement without measurement, hence the need to work with quality criteria. In ODL there are minimum standards that a provider should meet in order to roll out learning programmes. This guide outlines some of the key areas of ODL provision on which quality data should be collected on an ongoing basis and in a systematic way. The data should be processed and feed back into institutional planning processes in order to enable new targets to be set. Quality assurance is a never-ending endeavor; information gathered has to result in the setting of new targets to be achieved. Collecting and analysing data on the implementation of the different quality criteria constitutes an important part of ongoing self-improvement. Quality assurance is a never-ending circle that involves goals and outcomes, measurements and findings, and changes in the curriculum based on those findings.⁵ In Lategan's view, a quality assurance system is an upward feedback spiral that is based on:

- Defining goals
- Designing or adopting quality standards
- Designing and implementing self-assessment
- Producing self-assessment reports
- Reviewing and improving the institution's strategic plan⁶

A useful guideline on approaches to quality assurance is best described in the United Kingdom Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) Guidelines of 1994. The first two guidelines read as follows:

⁵ Wehlburg, C.M. (2007)

⁶ Lategan, (1993:13) Quality assurance systems for providers of education and training. In Cutting Edge Vol. 2 (4) pp.11-21

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- An effective quality assurance and control system is characterised by agreement throughout an institution on purposes and methods and includes a feedback loop to inform and improve the quality of educational provision.
 - An effective quality assurance and control system is underpinned by wide participation, effective channels of communication, the collection of acceptable evidence, the acceptance of responsibility by staff and students, and an institutional commitment to staff development and training.⁷

In their attempts at improving quality, we recommend that institutions should work with quality criteria that are interpreted in much contextualized ways. Quality criteria should be used for regular monitoring of how well an institution performs in the different dimensions of its operations.

As pointed out in the foregoing paragraphs, collecting and analyzing data on the implementation of the different quality criteria constitute an important part of ongoing self-improvement. In other words, quality criteria make a sound basis for continuous self evaluation and self-monitoring.

4.0 Suggested Quality Criteria

Many quality assurance experts have provided quality criteria for ODL providers, and all of them are correct.⁸ Here we suggest some of the criteria that SAIDE documented in the recently completed quality assurance toolkit for open schools⁹ which also drew from the NADEOSA quality criteria to a very large extent. By no means are these criteria perfect for all ODL providers; they need to be augmented and adapted so they can meet the needs of particular institutions. Their main merit however is that they are crafted around the key elements of ODL provision, particularly within a developing context. The same criteria can also form the basis for an institutional quality assurance framework.

4.1 Policy and Planning

The educational provider has a clear sense of purpose and direction, which is informed by national priorities as well as by the quality demands of cost-effective educational provision. There are both a rationale and relevant systems for the use of distance education methods to achieve the purpose of the programme for the target learners

⁷ Higher Education Quality Council, 1994, Guidelines on Quality Assurance, London, HEQC.

⁸ See NAAC & Commonwealth of Learning; South African HEQC, NADEOSA

⁹ SAIDE coordinated the development of quality assurance toolkit for open schools on behalf of the Commonwealth of Learning. This resource is being prepared for publication by COL and will be launched at the PCF6 in India towards the end of this year.

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- i. Institutional policies are aligned with national policy, including appropriate registration, accreditation and articulation.
 - ii. Institutions establish guidelines related to all the quality criteria.
 - iii. Prior to offering programmes of study through open learning, the provider has explicitly designed systems for administering all the processes to the best advantage of learners.
 - iv. Prior to offering programmes of study through open learning, learner support mechanisms are in place and contingencies are planned in order to meet the provider's stated aims in terms of academic quality and standards.
 - v. Given the nature of change in education, at least annual planning and 3-5 year review cycles take place.
 - vi. Institutions involve all stakeholders in the planning process.
 - vii. There are policies that ensure that the physically challenged members of society have equal access to educational facilities like everybody else.

4.2 Learners

There is up to date detailed information about past, present and potential learners. This is used to inform policy and planning of programme development, course design and materials development, learner support, and other relevant aspects of educational provision.

- i. Educational Management Information Systems (EMIS) of the institution must be updated and maintained and available to planners and decision-makers, including course coordinators.
- ii. The EMIS of the institution must articulate with the EMIS of the national government.
- iii. Learner profiles include at a minimum: Demographic information, technology profile, records of learners from formal schooling, records of learners with special needs, access to regional learning infrastructures, prior learning experiences and achievements, language profile – including language ability in the main language of teaching and learning, mother tongue, and multilingual language ability. For older learners work experience would be included. This information is regularly updated.

4.3 Programme Development

Subject to national prescriptions, programmes are flexible and designed with national needs as well as the needs of prospective learners and employers in mind; their form and structure encourage access and are responsive to changing environments; learning and assessment methods are appropriate to the purpose and outcomes of the programmes.

- i. Programme development always starts with the learner profile.
- ii. Apart from meeting the needs of the learners, programme development also meets the requirements of the national curriculum and ensures equivalence in standard, even if the programme is not 'the same'.
- iii. Programme development is the integration of curriculum design, materials development, decentralized learner support and assessment.
- iv. Programme development takes account of resources available (eg. Technology, human resources, infrastructural resources).
- v. Programme development is a team exercise in order to integrate content/subject expertise, pedagogic expertise and technical expertise.
- vi. Institutions are able to design programmes to suit the wide range of differences of learners.
- vii. Appropriate stakeholders are involved in the programme conceptualization, for example learners, parents, employers and others.
- viii. Provider ensures that the programme provides a learning pathway that leads to the relevant national qualification.
- ix. Programmes and qualifications offered by an institution are aligned with the national qualifications framework of the country.
- x. To facilitate access, entry requirements for the programme are as open as possible, and include recognition of prior learning and work experience.
- xi. Due to the openness of entry, care is taken to provide sufficient academic support to academically challenged learners as identified upon enrolment. This may be through the provision of bridging courses, or more face-to-face support, or additional units (or learner guides) within existing courses, or more time to complete the programme.
- xii. Programme evaluation takes place on a regular basis.
- xiii. The institution has a reliable system of costing programme and course development.

4.4 Course Design

The course curriculum is well researched, with aims and learning outcomes appropriate to the level of study; content, teaching and learning and assessment methods facilitate the achievement of the aims and learning outcomes; there is an identified process of development and evaluation of courses.

- i. The course is structured to support independent learning and meets the requirements of the programme.
- ii. Course design attains a balance of content, pedagogy and technology.
- iii. Where e-learning is used, it is ensured that systems, technologies and support arrangements provide an effective platform for quality delivery.
- iv. The institution has a standing policy on review of the effectiveness of systems and procedures for the designing, approval and accreditation of courses.
- v. Notional hours for courses are clearly defined in line with national policy.

4.5 Course Materials

The content, assessment, and teaching and learning approaches in the course materials support the aims and learning outcomes; the materials are accessibly presented; they teach in a coherent way that engages the learners; there is an identified process of development and evaluation of course materials.

4.5.1 Print-based course materials

- i. Clear procedures are in place for the development, dispatch and timely provision of high quality learning materials to allow learners enough time to use the materials before examinations.
- ii. Course materials have a balance of knowledge, skills and values that are mediated appropriately using relevant media.
- iii. Course materials are designed in an accessible way. Access devices such as contents pages, headings, graphic presentation of information, and layout facilitate use by learners.
- iv. In designing course materials, the open schooling provider takes into account the special needs of disabled learners.
- v. Course materials are periodically reviewed in order to keep them up to date with changes in knowledge and learners' needs.
- vi. Materials are developed by people with expertise in ODL and are subjected to rigorous quality reviews before use by learners.

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- vii. The content of the materials is accurate, up- to- date, relevant to course aims and outcomes and sensitive to the multicultural realities of the context.
 - viii. The materials are based on sound learning theories and lead learners to construct knowledge rather than simply memorise facts.
 - ix. While the provider holds copyright for course materials developed by employed or contracted staff, the individual author’s intellectual property rights are also respected.
 - x. Materials actively engage learners during the learning process
 - xi. There is a clear house style for materials development.

4.5.2 Multi-media course materials

- xii. Where web-based courses are used, the site should be navigable, has a sitemap with clearly marked links, and the different elements integrate seamlessly with each other.
- xiii. As much as possible, materials use multi-media resources to allow ease of adaptation and user friendliness.

4.6 Assessment

Assessment is integrated into the course design with formative assessment being an essential part of the teaching and learning process. Assessment is well managed with sufficient external moderation to meet the requirements of accreditation bodies.

- i. Due recognition is paid to assessment as the key motivator to learning and as an integral part of the teaching and learning process.
- ii. A credible assessment system which regulates both internal and external moderation, criteria for the appointment of moderators and use of moderator reports is in place.
- iii. There are processes for the recognition of prior learning as well as diagnostic testing for appropriate placement.
- iv. In designing assessment arrangements, and communication systems with tutors and other institutional stakeholders, the open schooling provider takes into account the special needs of challenged learners.
- v. There is carefully scaffolded continuous formative assessment with timeous constructive feedback that contributes to an environment that supports learners throughout their course of study.
- vi. Formative assessment prepares learners to meet the demands of the final summative assessment.
- vii. The range of outcomes for the final summative assessment is validly and reliably assessed.

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- viii. Weighting of examinations and continuous assessment (course work) is well regulated by clear policy that takes into account the rigor of each of these assessment processes.
 - ix. Sound rules and regulations are in place to guarantee security procedures, disciplinary and appeals procedures, marking procedures, aegrotats and supplementary examinations.
 - x. Effectiveness of the assessment policies, strategies and practices are reviewed on a regular basis.
 - xi. Policies and systems that take into account that the unique needs of physically-challenged learners are in place.

4.7 Learner Support

Learners are provided with a range of opportunities for real two-way communication through the use of various forms of technology for tutoring at a distance, contact tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring where appropriate, counseling (both remote and face-to-face), and the stimulation of peer support structures. The need for learners to access physical facilities and study resources and to participate in decision-making is also taken into account.

- i. Learner support is conceptualized as part of the course design process with methods selected to suit the activities and outcomes, including appropriate learning through social interaction.
- ii. Learners with special needs are adequately catered for in the learner support services of the provider.
- iii. Particularly for younger learners, the learning environment helps them develop the necessary discipline for increasingly independent learning and good work habits, and for older learners peer support and collaborative learning is in place.
- iv. The level of support is dependent on the age and entry level competence of the learners, and may well be different for different types of learners in a programme and/or at different stages of the programme.
- v. To provide an adequately supportive learning environment, as much as possible the existing structures and resources of the education system and the community are used.
- vi. Each learner is linked to an appropriate tutor for mentoring, assignment tutoring, and help in understanding the materials.
- vii. Subject specific tutors are trained in techniques to mediate the course material, rather than re-teach the content of the curriculum. This is particularly important if teachers in conventional schools are employed as open school tutors.

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- viii. A contract (covering for example, role, deliverables, and payment) is entered into with tutors, and attendance and performance is monitored with appropriate sanctions and rewards.
 - ix. Feedback from tutors informs ongoing improvement of the programme, materials, assessment and learner support.
 - x. Different kinds of tutorials are provided for different students, both for remedial and enrichment purposes. Tutorials are not just for remedial purposes, they are also for the fast learners who need enrichment in various areas of learning such that there is maximum exploitation of the potential of learners who go through an institution's programmes.
 - xi. Available technology is used to enhance the quality of learning and learners are sufficiently supported to make maximum use of available technology.

4.8 Human Resource Strategy

The staff structure as well as the roles and key performance areas, experience and qualifications are appropriate for the education and training services provided; staff development programmes equip staff to perform their roles and tasks effectively.

- i. A clear recruitment strategy that ensures appointment of suitably qualified and well experienced staff is in place.
- ii. An effective performance management system is in place and works to the benefit of every member of staff in the organisation.
- iii. There is a staff structure that includes all the key personnel to ensure that the institution carries out its services efficiently enough.
- iv. There are sufficient tutors/mentors, usually employed on a part-time basis to provide for the individual needs of learners.
- v. Staff are trained, monitored and supported for the specialised roles and tasks they perform in the organisation.
- vi. There is a clear induction policy for new staff that join the organisation in order to acquaint them with work processes and procedures in the open school.

4.9 Management and Administration

There is effective, transparent and democratic management of communication and information as well as human and material resources; efficient administrative systems support the activities of the educational provider; the educational provider is functionally sound and can make reliable educational provision.

4.9.1 Accountability and governance

- i.** There are clear lines of accountability within an institution and its governing structures, and between the governing structures and the community.
- ii.** Proper accountability mechanisms and guidelines are in place to ensure proper governance systems.
- iii.** Staff and learners and external stakeholders are represented on governance structures.
- iv.** Mechanisms are in place to prevent staff from using their position of power within the institution to generate extra revenue for personal benefit or double payment for the same work.

4.9.2 Management of communication

- v.** There are effective systems for communication with stakeholders.
- vi.** Enquiries, complaints and general correspondence are dealt with quickly and clearly within a structured administration system.
- vii.** The enrolment procedures/guidelines include provision of accurate, helpful information to prospective learners.

4.9.3 Management of the curriculum

- viii.** The enrolment and registration guidelines include provision of accurate, helpful information to prospective learners.
- ix.** Production and delivery of course materials are in accordance with a course production schedule. Where existing systems prove inefficient, creative alternatives are considered.
- x.** There are systems to organise decentralized support for remote groupings of learners, allocation of tutors, location of suitable sites of learning.
- xi.** There are clear procedures to receive, record, process, and turn around assignments. The turnaround time is kept to the minimum.
- xii.** There are systems of managing examination papers, processes, and results in a manner that maintains the credibility of the entire examination systems of the institution.

4.9.4 Management of information

- xiii.** Learners' records (for example, contact details and assessment results) are detailed, up-to-date, and accessible to tutors, academic and administrative staff.
- xiv.** Tutor records (for example, qualifications and experience) are detailed and available to tutor-monitors.
- xv.** Records of course results and other management information are analysed to:

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- Give completion rates for each group of learners;
 - Identify learners at risk;
 - Identify incentives for learners

xvi. Important indicators like pass, throughput and retention rates are monitored

4.9.5 Management of facilities and equipment

xvii. Facilities and equipment accommodate all learner profiles (they are inclusive)

xviii. Equipment and facilities are well-managed and maintained and secure against theft or damage.

xix. There are emergency methods of communication for use in the event of a failure of the primary channel of communication.

xx. Staff and learners are trained in the use of the equipment, facilities, and communication and information systems.

4.9.6 Management of finances

xxi. Proper budgetary processes are in place to ensure that allocation of resources reflects the goals, values, and principles of the educational provider.

xxii. Budgetary procedures are in place to deal with allocation of resources and monitoring of expenditure.

xxiii. Budgeting procedures are flexible enough to promote and enable constructive experimentation in design and delivery methods.

xxiv. Financial procedures (like handling fees, orders, accounts, receipt of external funds, and part-time and full-time salaries) are known and adhered to.

xxv. Proper evaluation systems are in place to compare estimated goals and budgets with actual achievements.

xxvi. There are clear and concise internal and external auditing procedures

xxvii. Fees are pegged at levels that allow learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds to access the educational services of the institution

xxviii. Financial aid and information about criteria for its allocation are provided for learners, external funding and donations permitting. Information about financial aid is clear to all learners.

4.10 Collaborative Relationships

In the interests of cost-effective provision of education and training, collaborative relationships are formed and collaborative projects are undertaken wherever possible.

- i.** Open Schooling requires collaborative relationships with key stakeholders like parents and other community care givers, governmental and non-governmental education providers within and outside the country, and the corporate world for:
 - Sharing of existing facilities such as libraries, ICT facilities, learning centres, human resources, health facilities and counseling services, examination centres.
 - Sharing existing courses, jointly developing new courses and learning materials, peer reviewing each other's performance, jointly delivering programmes, collaborating in research.
 - Facilitating workplace learning
 - Resource mobilisation and support
- ii.** Affiliate membership of relevant associations and forums is encouraged.
- iii.** There are collaborative relationships with other ODL institutions with similar mandates.

4.11 Quality Assurance

There is a quality assurance framework that integrates policy and practice, and that informs a clear cycle of planning, implementing, monitoring, reflection and action to ensure that learners' and staff needs as well as the needs of other stakeholders are met.

- i.** There is a clear quality assurance framework supported by clear quality assurance action plans.
- ii.** The institution ensures that day-to-day activities are aligned with its mission, goals, principles and policies in relation to national, regional and global priorities.
- iii.** Internal quality assurance processes are articulated with external processes as laid down by the relevant national quality assurance bodies.
- iv.** There are clear routines, procedures and systems for quality assurance and staff and learners are familiar with those.
- v.** There is a clear cycle of planning, development, documentation, reporting, action, and review of policies and procedures within the institution.

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- vi. A quality culture is nurtured within the institution.
 - vii. Staff development is seen as fundamental to quality service provision.
 - viii. Staff, learners, and other stakeholders are involved in the process of quality assurance and quality review.
 - ix. The institution engages in benchmarking against other similar institutions and uses appropriate monitoring and evaluation techniques to gather and analyse data to use as a basis for setting priorities and planning for quality improvement.
 - x. In the case of electronically –offered programmes, mechanisms for monitoring learner participation and performance are designed into the technical platforms used in electronically-delivered programmes. For example systems may be designed to track:
 - The time spent by different learners on components of the materials
 - The sequence of choices made by learners in accessing web-based files; or
 - Learner participation in online discussions

4.12 Advocacy and Information Dissemination

Education services provided by the institution are effectively and accurately promoted in a variety of ways

- i. There is an advocacy strategy in place to positively influence ODL perception by the public.
- ii. There is accurate and sufficient publicity of programmes to enable potential applicants to make informed choices. Institutional advertisements are truthful and professional.
- iii. In the case of programmes using electronic methods, sufficient information is provided to the learner regarding access to technologies used in the programme, technical competences required, and the nature and potential challenges of learning in the programme’s technology-based environment.
- iv. Employers and others who enter into collective agreements regarding education or training have received sufficient and correct information about the aims, content and outcomes, entry requirements and implementation of the programme.
- v. Information dissemination strategies form part of the institution’s management of information system and are subjected to institutional cyclical reviews.

4.13 Results

The educational provider fulfils its mission and individual programmes achieve valid teaching and learning goals in cost-effective ways that have a positive impact on society and meets the needs of clients and national priorities.

- i. The educational provider is fulfilling its mission and is meeting the expectations of clients and the nation.
- ii. Other institutions, like colleges and universities as well as employers are satisfied with the quality of the graduates from the providing open school.
- iii. Learners are attaining the intended outcomes specified by the provider in the design of the programme.
- iv. Sufficient numbers of learners complete programmes enrolled for and within reasonable time periods to justify the cost in time and person power for the design of the programmes, courses and learner support systems.
- v. Pass, throughput and retention rates are monitored and mechanisms are put in place for continuous improvement of these rates.
- vi. Feedback and results of the programme review/evaluation are used to effect improvements in the programme's design and delivery and to develop further educational expertise of academic staff.
- vii. The administrative systems are informed by and meet the needs of learners and of staff involved in programme /course /support design and delivery.
- viii. As much as possible, there is integration of learners with special needs in the mainstream student body so as to avoid psychological isolation.

5.0 The Need for a Plan

To achieve quality in ODL in the region, there is need for DEASA to develop a plan of action that takes into account the varied needs of different institutions in the region. Again, we emphasise the developmental nature of quality assurance and the need to accommodate the different ODL institutions in the region; their levels of maturity in terms of implementing quality assurance policies, their missions and the means available for quality improvement in their context. We propose that DEASA develops an implementation plan based on the following performance areas:

5.1 Research Quality Assurance (QA) Frameworks

In order to assess the current QA practices and existence of QA frameworks within the SADC region all country representatives should collect information in their countries for discussion. This information should form the basis for an intervention that is aimed at formulating a comprehensive quality assurance framework appropriate for regional institutions.

5.2 Develop and Maintain QA frameworks for SADC Region

Following the analysis of individual country QA Frameworks, a standardised QA framework for DEASA can then be developed. This may entail developing common minimum standards ODL institutions should meet and a quality audit system to be followed in order to foster inter-institutional support in improving quality. In this regard we recommend that DEASA should explore the possibility of forming a Regional Quality Assurance Agency for ODL institutions.

5.3 Promote Quality through Training and Development

This should be pursued in light of the need for capacity building and partnerships. Training and development needs in relations to QA should be communicated to a focal point for support. In terms of section 2 above, DEASA might want to assist those institutions who wish to use the COL QA toolkit by facilitating capacity building and providing professional support to ensure successful development of their own QA frameworks and standards.

5.4 Monitor and Evaluate QA through Inter-institutional Audits

Monitoring and evaluation intends to promote continuous inter-institutional QA audits as a way of enhancing inter-institutional collaboration in quality improvement as. This is another area that needs in-country investigations. NAMCOL and BOCODOL, for instance already conduct such audits using a common set of criteria. This practice should be encouraged and efforts made to extend the good practice to other ODL providers in the region.

6.0 Conclusion

What is suggested in this guide should augment and not replace the good practices happening in some of the institutions in the region. Institutions that have developed their own standards should continue using those standards, in a much more enhanced way. The development of a regional quality assurance framework and a regional quality assurance agency are initiatives that are meant to bring ODL in the region at par with international best practice. Standards exist at national level in South Africa, like the NADEOSA and HEQC standards. In addition, the Commonwealth of Learning has contracted SAIDE to develop a Quality Assurance Toolkit for Open Schools. This toolkit should be a valuable tool for those institutions wanting to develop their own QA frameworks and standards, as well as those who just want to improve theirs. DEASA might need to focus on assisting institutions who wish to use the toolkit in developing their own frameworks and standards in order to maximize the translation of this resource into practice.