

CHALLENGES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE INTEGRATION OF ICT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The integration of ICT in open and distance learning is changing the way education is delivered and accessed. While attention has been directed towards teaching and access by learners, the attendant issues of quality assurance have not been adequately addressed. This paper highlights what these issues are and how they pose major challenges to open and distance learning in developing countries. It is argued that forces within the institution, the teachers, the learners themselves, the ICT infrastructure, curriculum and content development processes and factors within the environment pose challenges to quality assurance in the use of ICT in open and distance learning programmes in developing countries. Suggested ways of overcoming them would include: systematic approach to adoption of ICT; create awareness of importance of ICT; provide technical and administrative support through training and policy statements; enhance collaboration with other institutions to access open source software and policy makers to involve stakeholders so as to create ownership of ICT programmes.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning, Information and Communication Technology, Quality Assurance, Developing Countries

Introduction

Quality assurance in the use of ICT in open and distance learning is difficult to pin down because it can mean different things to different stakeholders. Learners, curriculum developers, courseware writers, reviewers, editors, tutors, policy makers, and potential employers may all have different concerns. Quality is about perceptions as well as measured outcomes. The indicators of quality are many and varied.

Quality in the use of ICT is often viewed in terms of access, user friendliness of the technology and content. This is understandable for three reasons: Firstly, the course materials are tangible and publicly visible products. They are open to scrutiny to all. They can be judged in terms of their consistency of quality, soundness of content and effectiveness of their instructional design for learners. Much of the credibility of open and distance education depends on the quality of the materials and delivery because only this can instill confidence in the student, prevent dropouts and establish the status and reputation of ODL institutions. Secondly, course materials are the only means to engaging with learners in ODL; therefore, while teaching materials are key to any education system, they assume a central place in open and distance learning. Lastly, it is easier to see the quality or lack of it in a product such as a course unit, video or online material than the less tangible aspects such as processes involved in construction of the learning materials or management of support services.

This paper seeks to highlight and discuss the various challenges of quality assurance in the use of ICT in open and distance learning. The paper hinges on the premise that while the use of ICT in open and distance learning is gaining credence among educational providers, issues of quality assurance should be considered at every stage if ICT is to have credibility as a viable and effective tool of teaching and learning. Past studies, both theoretical and empirical will be used to advance this argument.

The argument revolves around three objectives namely: to identify the quality assurance issues in the use of ICT as an instruction tool in ODL; to establish the challenges associated with achieving quality assurance in the use of ICT in ODL programmes and to suggest ways of overcoming these challenges. This paper is expected to expose quality assurance issues in the use of ICT in open and distance learning especially because there seems to be more focus on access, delivery and increasing usage of ICT. It is also important to note that the use of ICT in open and distance learning is the core method of content delivery rather than supplementary as in conventional educational systems.

The discussion is expected to contribute to the ongoing debate in the areas of quality assurance and ICT in open and distance learning.

Statement of the problem

The use of ICT in ODL has gained momentum in the last ten years due to major advances in technology, foremost being the World Wide Web (WWW) and Internet. This enhanced the development of online programmes that can be moved around with ease without any geographical hindrances. While much attention has been directed towards access to hardware, software and content development, less attention has been directed to the attendant problems of quality assurance in the use of ICT in open and distance learning, an area where content delivery via different technologies has been the tradition. The main question of concern, therefore, is as we address issues of access: to what extent are issues of quality assurance addressed in terms of content development, delivery and certification?

Quality assurance and ICT in open and distance learning

Quality assurance is a process that covers all aspects of an activity. In the case of open and distance learning, this would include: the quality of the product for example, courses, study materials (printed texts, video, audio, e-learning/ online), number of graduates, examination pass rates or achievement of intended skills, equivalent results in public examinations or conventional system; the quality of the process involved: learning and teaching processes such as tutoring, assessing written work and providing feedback, monitoring tutors, record keeping and coordinating subjects areas and tutors work and the quality of the production or delivery systems: course and print production, warehousing and stock control and material distribution to students (McIlroy and Walker, 1996).

Quality, therefore, can be seen as a general philosophy pervading a system as reflected in its policy statements, attitudes of staff, management and training of staff, (having a motto or slogan e.g. nothing but the best), images and messages presented to the public such as leaflets,

brochures, posters and web pages. Quality is located in different aspects of an organization's activity. Achieving quality in ODL means achieving agreed or identified standards in each of the aspects outlined above. Ways of judging quality will differ according to which aspect you are examining. It is easy to find indicators for some than others. It is easier to measure survival rates than quality of face to face teaching. These sets of activities in DE do not function in isolation but are essential parts of one operation and are dependent on one another. They all affect the quality of the learning experience for the learner (UNESCO, 2002). The interdependence of the activities in practice mean, for example, that if materials are of excellent quality but do not reach the learner when needed, then the whole programme fails to be effective. Secondly, if the e-learning material is of high quality and imaginatively produced, they would still be irrelevant to the learner if they were inaccessible due to lack of internet connectivity as is often the case in developing countries. Quality is a product of planning, monitoring, control and coordination; hence it needs to be built into an ICT programme at the time of design and not at the end.

The challenges of quality assurance in use of ICT in open and distance learning include the problem of resistance to change. The attitude of both learners and teachers towards ICT, work ethics, competence and training in ICT, present challenges to the adoption of ICT. There is also competition for resources especially in dual mode institutions where priority is given to in-campus fulltime students. Even where ODL programmes generate its own income, it goes to a common pool from which it is not easy to get equipment or money for capital development in ICT infrastructure (Sife *et al*, 2007). In addition, students themselves compromise quality by not being serious in meeting quality expectations as most of those in ODL programmes tend to be working adults who have limited time for studies (McIllroy and Walker, 1996).

Conclusions

Quality assurance in the use of ICT in ODL has many challenges as noted above, These can be overcome by systematic approach to adoption of ICT; creating awareness of the importance of ICT in accessing and delivering education conveniently; providing technical and administrative support through training and policy statements; enhancing collaboration with other institutions to access open source software and involving stakeholders so as to create ownership of ICT usage.

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