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Abstract

Within the community of distance and online education, quality and quality assurance have been one of the most talked and discussed areas. This is especially true within the context of mega open universities where policies are always designed to optimize the openness, flexibility, and accessibility of the system. Even though distance education had initially been associated with opening access to education, the quality of education has become more and more important in

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line with the advancement of technology use throughout the system. It is within this quality paradigm that quality assurance (QA) has become one of the key aspects in planning and managing open, distance, and digital education (ODDE). This paradigm has also brought many ODDE providers including the mega open universities to reformulate their visions, missions, and strategies to address quality issues more adequately (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007). This chapter explores the implementation of quality assurance (QA) programs at two mega universities, Universitas Terbuka and Open University of China, which have developed QA system and implemented systematic QA programs consistently, resulting in their enhanced quality of learning over the years. The discussion will start with a general overview about the universities, followed by their internal QA systems and implementations. The two exemplary QA systems and practices would illustrate how mega open universities undertake the quality assurance programs to ensure continuous improvement as well as to develop quality cultures within the respective institutions.

Keywords

Quality assurance · Mega university · Quality standard · Open and distance learning

Introduction

The twenty-first century brings higher education institutions to focus on quality in response to stakeholders' demand and global competitive landscape. The competitive pressures on quality are also faced by distance teaching universities (DTUs) including mega universities. Mega universities are universities with student body of over 100,000 (Daniel, 1999), and many of those are open universities. Among the 62 largest mega open universities, 8 are located in Asia and are serving nearly ten million students (Belawati & Bandalaria, 2019). Those open universities have been the most significant higher education providers in Asia (Belawati & Bandalaria, 2019).

The adoption of open and distance learning by many countries in Asia is related to the issue of equity and equality for education, especially at tertiary level. Many countries are under pressure to increase the accessibility of people to quality and affordable higher education. Therefore, the issue of quality in open universities is very strategic and political as it represents the commitment of the authority to provide quality higher education to the masses (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007).

Open universities have always been very keen with quality and quality assurance (Jung & Latchem, 2012). However, there is no standardized nor obligatory system of quality assurance. The study by Jung and Latchem (2012) shows that there are many approaches and systems that are being adopted and implemented by different open distance education (ODE) institutions. This chapter describes the development and

the employment of QA programs at two mega universities in Asia, namely, Universitas Terbuka (UT) and Open University of China (OUC).

Universitas Terbuka (UT) is one of the leading open universities in Asia. At UT, quality assurance (QA) program has been placed as the central node for every policy, regulation, as well as academic and administrative services to the students. The strategic value of QA for UT is in line with the provision of mass higher education that has become an important policy in Indonesia (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007). Indonesia is a developing country in Southeast Asia, and it has been regarded as the world's biggest archipelago country. Indonesia has a large population, more than 268,000,000 people as of 2020, scattered all over Indonesia's 17,000 islands. Therefore, providing quality higher education for people residing in remote islands has been regarded as one of the strategic issues. For that purpose, UT has been designed by the government to increase and equalize access to higher education, for people who for some reasons do not have access to conventional campus-based higher education including those who live in remote areas. UT is now 36 years of age with massive student body and has consistently adopted and implemented QA programs as its commitment to promoting quality education.

Open University of China (OUC) is the largest university in China, and perhaps in the world, and serves as the main open distance learning (ODL) provider in China. Quality assurance (QA) has always been the strategic focus of OUC. And, as a national public university directly managed under the Ministry of Education, OUC accepts quality supervision from the Ministry of Education in various ways and means. The Open University of China (OUC) has played an important role in the expansion of higher education for the last decades. The number of students at OUC has increased from 1.15 million in 2000 to 4.6 million in 2020 (Ju, 2020). In the next 5 years which corresponds to the China 14th Five-Year Plan period, the government proposes that the higher education should be transformed from a quantity-based strategy to a quality-based strategy. High-quality education is put forward at the core. Quality becomes the key point and focus of OUC's development.

Quality Assurance at Universitas Terbuka (Indonesia Open University)

General Overview of Universitas Terbuka

Established in 1984, UT is a state university and was until recently the only university using an open and distance learning system in Indonesia. UT has been intended by the Indonesian government to deliver higher educational services for those in society who for some reasons cannot join conventional higher education (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007). UT has set a vision to become a world-quality open and distance higher education institution. UT was named as one of the mega universities in the world (Daniel, 1999) with a student body of more than 300,000, mostly residing in Indonesia but some overseas (in about 43 countries). UT has a well-built, centralized management system with its head office located in Jakarta and

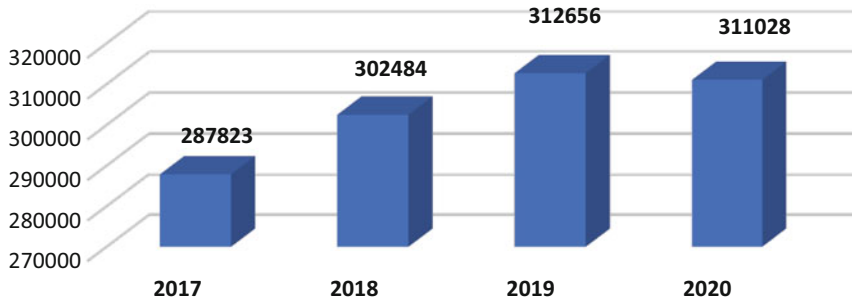


Fig. 1 UT student body 2017–2020. (Source: UT’s Bureau for Academic Administration and Planning)

equipped with 39 regional offices spread throughout Indonesia’s 34 provinces. Figure 1 shows the trend of UT’s student body over the last 4 years.

The increasing number of student body since 2017 is the result of the new policies on student enrolment that allow new students to enroll at any time and marketing programs that are designed to attract the digital native generation. As shown by the figure, however, the number of students slightly decreased in 2020 due to COVID-19 outbreak.

The Nature and Importance of QA at UT

Why is Universitas Terbuka and perhaps all distance higher education (DHE) institutions considering the development and implementation of a formal QA system? For decades, there are many institutions that have prospered, flourished, and established good reputations without intentionally commencing formal QA programs. Although there are considerable advantages to be gained from having a formal QA system, there are people who believe that QA is a good practice to be implemented in education. For example, Bradley (2005) contends that the adoption of QA programs from industry to education tends to simplify the conclusion of success or failure. University is different from industrial manufacturing institution that can create a QA system in an obvious approach. University provides education, which is a service process that involves the whole university system comprehensively; and, it is very difficult to translate the complexity of that process into a linear QA system. There are natural and significant differences between a university and an industrial manufacturer. Manufacturers are concerned with the production of physical products, whereas universities are concerned with educating students so they can have meaningful and productive lives in the various roles they will play in society.

It is argued that QA should be internally driven and accepted as an integral part of the institutional strategies in supporting student success. Based on the writer’s observation in three open universities in Southeast Asia, QA programs have been employed by these open universities to equip the management with quality guidelines for all departments and people involved in their respective quality areas. According to

UT's *Manual Book for Quality Assurance* (2012), for example, there are at least four reasons to why a QA system is important to UT, that is, to improve "...readiness for accreditation, accountability, competitiveness, and effectiveness" (p. 3).

(a) Improve readiness for accreditation.

Accreditation deals with policy interest of the government. As mandated by the National Education Law, the National Accreditation Board for Higher Education or BAN-PT (stands for *Badan Akreditasi Nasional – Perguruan Tinggi*) regularly conducts quality review for accreditation purposes at study program level. Obtaining accreditation from BAN-PT is compulsory for all higher education institutions in Indonesia. UT's quality criteria should correspond well with quality standards being applied by BAN-PT for external inspection.

(b) Increase public accountability.

UT is a public university with a complex system and large geographical coverage. Therefore, it needs a quality framework and guidelines to assure standardized quality of services and products for public accountability.

(c) Rivalry among higher institutions (competitiveness).

Educational global markets are now moving to experience greater competition from local and global higher education institutions, both in distance higher education and conventional campus-based education. There are almost no time and geographical boundaries in the global market. In such situations, quality that relates to teaching and learning provision as well as support services becomes a strategic issue and a competitive advantage. The QA system provides an opportunity to develop a systematic and sustainable improvement toward that quality.

(d) Increase effectiveness (economies of scale).

While existing standard operational practices might have embedded quality, these might not always be the most efficient or effective method. A comprehensive approach to university performance is considerably important in restructuring its educational approaches to reduce costs while maintaining and improving quality of the products. A QA system can present tools by which quality can be achieved and cost of producing additional products, such as learning materials, will decrease as the volume of outputs increases.

The adoption of QA program, however, "is not a way to set goals nor a procedure to reach the goals but is an effort for systematic and sustainable improvement" (UT QA Manual book, 2012). The program is necessary and a strategic tool for the university which applies "open policy for [serving] a large number of students within a large country" (Hardini, Sunarsih, Meilani, & Belawati, 2012).

The implementation practices of QA programs in open and distance universities vary significantly. There are QA approaches/methodologies that involve accreditation, quality audits, and student surveys (Chalmers & Johnston, 2012), and there is also another approach that is more industry-based quality review such as ISO standards and the Baldrige National Quality Award (Bogue, 1998; Sallis, 2002). UT currently practices both approaches through its internal quality system and external quality assessments. The external quality assessment is conducted by BAN-PT to seek

accreditation, by ISO QA agencies to seek ISO certification, and by the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) for quality review.

UT's Internal Quality Assurance System

Universitas Terbuka has developed a comprehensive internal QA system (known as SIMINTAS or Sistem Jaminan Kualitas) and has been implementing it for almost 20 years. The current internal QA program complies with the government quality standards as laid out in the Education Law for Higher Education No. 12, 2012, and further elaborated by the Ministerial Regulation No. 50, 2018, about "National Standards for Higher Education" and Ministerial Regulation No. 109, 2013, about the Provision of Distance Education for Higher Education. The UT's SIMISTAS was developed based on the AAOU's quality assurance framework covering several key components of the open and distance education system. The SIMINTAS was developed in 2001 by a QA committee (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007), which was formed as a strategic action for enhancing UT's quality through several steps starting from analyzing and adapting the AAOU framework to resonate UT internal requirements, as well as to comply to the Indonesian educational setting. The QA committee also identified the structure and components of quality areas, as well as selected priorities needed for developing quality guidelines of each value chain activities within the whole UT's business processes.

Over the years, UT's QA system and standards have gone through several reviews and revisions to meet stakeholder's demand and changes in both internal and external situations. Based on the current UT's QA manual (2012, p. 4), UT internal QA system consists of 10 quality areas, which are elaborated into 120 quality policies/standards in forms of statement of best practices (SOBP) as follows (Table 1):

The statements of best practices were developed and defined involving key staff (including academic, administrative, and technical staff) across departments to

Table 1 UT's quality areas and policies/statement of best practices

No.	Area of quality	Statement of best practices (SOBP)
1.	Policy and planning	7 SOBP
2.	Human resource recruitment and development	9 SOBP
3.	Management and administration	21 SOBP
4.	Learners	10 SOBP
5.	Program design and development	6 SOBP
6.	Course design and development	14 SOBP
7.	Learning supports	18 SOBP
8.	Assessment of student learning	15 SOBP
9.	Media for learning	7 SOBP
10.	Research and community services	13 SOBP

Source: Adapted from UT's quality assurance system (2012), p. 2

ensure the comprehensiveness of the coverage. For implementation purposes, job manuals in the form of work instructions and standard operating procedures (SOPs) for each and every particular business process were developed. According to Belawati, Zuhairi, and Wardani (2012), the quality job manuals “helped to generate a quality-oriented work culture in line with systems and procedures” (p. 116).

The SOPs and work instructions have been regarded as major references for quality guidelines. It was important to note that one of the main changes at UT during the initial adoption of QA programs was the introduction and the development of various SOPs for different quality programs (Darojat, 2013). Every SOP shows the workflow and the interrelationships among all operational activities within the system. The SOPs reflect the value chain activities for different business processes and the “how” of putting quality into practices. Meanwhile, work instructions describe the time frame, the human capital needed, the financial estimation, and other resources needed to support quality programs.

Within the execution, internalization of the whole QA system and procedures that involve rigorous discussions among staff across departments was conducted continuously. This is to achieve shared perception about standards and procedures. Having the same perception is very important in respect to sharing feelings and beliefs around the QA programs. Rigorous discussion followed by orientation sessions both face-to-face and virtual briefings across departments also includes UT’s staff at the regional offices throughout the country. The discussions during the orientation step focused not only on how to implement the job quality manuals but also on how to measure achievement in all quality areas. The orientation session was very important for two reasons. Firstly, it provides people with more understanding of QA job manuals. Secondly, the orientation offers a room for staff engagement leading to higher confidence in the use of tools and implementing the program (Belawati & Darojat, 2014). The success of QA implementation is believed to be affected by the shared understanding about what quality and QA really mean and about their roles and involvement in the QA programs. All staff should be well informed on how to be involved and improve quality in their daily works. It is important to note that shifting an organization’s behavior is one of the major tasks when undertaking “transformation.” In this step, such a change requires encouragement and commitment from all staff as well as from managers at all levels.

A further organizational change has also been taken through formally establishing the Quality Assurance Centre in 2004 (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007). The strategic role of this center was to manage and coordinate the development all quality guidelines and to monitor the employment of the quality programs. To ensure that the implementation of UT’s quality programs corresponds well with procedures, work instructions, and quality criteria that have been agreed upon, the QA Center invited and trained a number of faculty members and other relevant staff to become internal auditors. In additions, the QA Center is also responsible for coordinating external quality assessments carried out by ISO QA agencies and by the ICDE.

Regularly internal quality audits are conducted to disclose nonconformity (major and minor findings) dealing with quality process and criteria achievement in various areas such as in registration, learning materials, tutorial services, and examination.

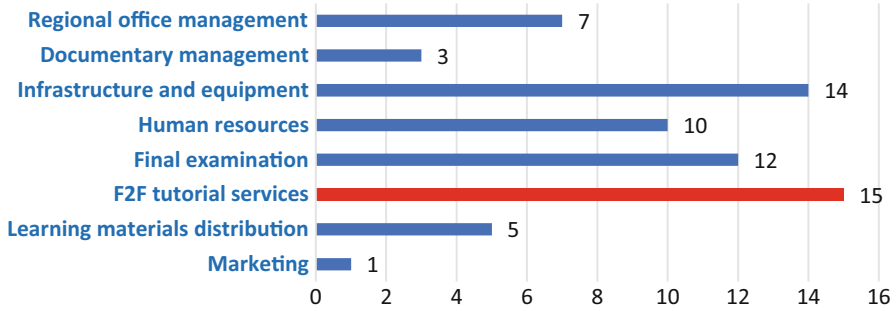


Fig. 2 Internal quality audit findings by quality areas in 2019 in 39 regional offices. (Source: UT Quality Assurance Center (2019))

The results of the internal quality audits provide feedback to the management for improvements. Figure 2 shows an illustration of the internal quality audit's results in UT's 39 regional offices for 2019.

The above figure shows the different nonconformances to different quality criteria, namely, office management, documentary management, infrastructure and equipment, human resources, final examination, face-to-face tutorial services, learning materials distribution, and marketing. The findings varied in terms of number, types, and weight (major and minor nonconformity). Based on quality audit in 2019, it was identified that most nonconformances were found in the area of face-to-face tutorials and infrastructure and equipment (15 minor nonconformances and 14 nonconformances, respectively). All nonconformances were analyzed and discussed in the management review meeting called as *Rapat Tinjauan Management (RTM)* involving all units in UT's head office and all regional offices. Analysis and exposure of findings of quality audits in the RTM was intended to give a general description about the problems faced by UT, especially in implementing the policies, procedures, and guidelines of the university quality programs in the regional offices. To support productive discussion during the meeting, the QA Center generated a quality implementation report with two purposes: on one hand, to provide the map and general summary of weaknesses and nonconformity faced in the implementation of quality programs and, on the other hand, to deliver recommendations to the management in respect to the university's future quality programs. The management review meeting has also been regarded as an important forum for recognizing and identifying strategic solutions and different actions that should be undertaken for future continual improvement.

Lessons Learned

The adoption of QA program at UT reveals a number of emergent lessons learned in different aspects of organization and management. It was clear that the QA system has helped the university in providing guidelines on how to put quality programs into practices. As the means to achieve quality, the QA programs were equipped with

standards and procedures that enable faculties and administrative staff to fully understand and contribute to the quality programs in their respective daily activities. Based on the writer involvement in the implementation of the program, specifically when the writer was assigned as the head of UT's Quality Center, there are several lessons learned that have been regarded as the favorable characteristics for implementing the quality programs at UT.

(a) Involve all people within the system.

The adoption of QA called for participation of leaders/managers and the entire staff in all management levels. All people in the university should have two roles, as part of the QA system and as contributors to continuous improvement. The involvement of all people and functions within university has led to the benefit of "getting things right first time" for every single aspect of the quality activities. It is important to note that top and middle managers played a significant role in the initial stage when adopting the QA programs. The managers are not only primarily responsible for initiating and introducing the system to their subordinates, but the managers were also the first people who were trained for the QA programs. Various actions have been taken by the managers in developing, maintaining, and changing appropriate cultures to support the implementation of the QA program. They were responsible for creating new rules and policies that reinforced the desired performance of new organizational culture and simultaneously eliminating rules and policies that hindered the desired ways of operating. The top and middle management levels are also responsible for establishing a physical environment that reinforced the cultural changes, reviewing an organizational structure that strengthened operational changes, and providing training to all staff that focuses on the new skill level needed to support quality programs.

(b) Design SOPs and improve the quality process within the system.

The prerequisite to having better and organized workflows for each quality areas requires standardized operating procedures and work instructions, which would increase the awareness of faculties and administrative staff to perform more effective ways of completing their tasks as well as to enhance their feeling of ownership toward the system. The implementation of the quality programs should also be supported by necessary training activities for both top and middle managers as well as all staff to allow them develop and upgrade their new required skills. Thus, all employees would have the opportunity to perform well within the system.

(c) Integrate continuous improvement activities with the university's annual strategic plan (ASP) derived from the university's strategic business planning (SBP).

The implementation of QA programs called for integration of the continuous improvement programs within the framework of ASP as well as the mid- and long-term SBP of the university. All units should formulate their own set of quality achievements, agendas, budgets, and all necessary resources within the existing quality programs. All individual units must have clear objectives and directions regarding quality. However, those objectives and all the working plan to achieve the objectives should be flexible enough to deal with uncertainty. The

continuous changes in competitive global markets, government policies in education, and other unpredicted external factors including those coming from students would have certain impacts on how the university should be operated and moved forward from one approach and tactic to other scenarios.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that QA has an unexpected impact on quality culture. It reveals itself in several obvious ways. Since implementing QA programs, the university culture is reflected in the pride of excellence and achievement. The merit system that is part of the QA paradigm provides opportunities to all staff to perform well and receive encouraging rewards including financial rewards. The reward system is embedded in the monthly staff performance appraisal. In addition, the QA programs also generate specific values and norms, which have influenced staff's positive attitudes and behavior. It appears that all staff appreciates the university's commitment to fostering an organizational culture that is characterized by trust, integrity, and fairness; upholding the value of faculty and administrative staff; emphasizing cooperation and collegiality; ensuring flexibility, responsiveness, open communication, and transparency; as well as ensuring accountability for decisions and outcomes.

Besides gaining many benefits, nevertheless, practicing QA programs is not without challenges to encounter. The implementation of QA that requires consistency and discipline has been also felt as being too demanding and time-consuming, especially in terms of documentation activities (Darajat, 2013) and changing prevailing mindset (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007) that leads to staff misunderstanding about QA. There were some staff who feel intimidated as the quality programs significantly impact their daily activities, performance, and remuneration. Therefore, intensive communication, well-defined quality criteria, and clear directions to all stakeholders being involved are part of important exercises to develop shared understanding and to achieve a shared purpose, which is a continuous quality improvement.

Finally, at UT, the ultimate reason of adopting QA program is derived from the shared spirit of all staff and management to produce well-educated students and graduates through quality educational programs that will equip them with knowledge, skills, and experiences to allow them to have successful and meaningful lives.

Quality Assurance at Mega University: Open University of China

General Overview of the Open University of China (OUC)

China's higher education has developed rapidly since the twenty-first century. Statistics from the Ministry of Education (2020b) show that from 2000 to 2019, the number of higher education institutions in China has increased from 1,813 to 2,956 and the students enrolled in higher education has increased from 12.3 million to 40.02 million. In 2020, the gross enrollment rate of higher education reaches 54.4%, and it has transferred from massification toward popularization. In the next 5 years which corresponds to the China 14th Five-Year Plan period, the government

proposes that the higher education should be transformed from a quantity-based strategy to a quality-based strategy. High-quality education is put forward at the core. Therefore, quality becomes the key point and focus of the Open University of China's development.

The Open University of China (OUC) has played an important role in the expansion of higher education for the last decades. The number of students at OUC has increased from 1.15 million in 2000 to 4.6 million in 2020 (Ju, 2020). OUC is the largest university in China and serves as the main open distance learning (ODL) provider in China. Quality assurance (QA) has always been the strategic focus of OUC. And, as a national public university directly managed under the Ministry of Education, OUC accepts quality supervision from the Ministry of Education in various ways and means.

OUC is established based on the China Central Radio and TV University (CCRTVU), which was officially established on February 6, 1979, with approval of Mr. Deng Xiaoping in person. On July 31, 2012, the CCRTVU was renamed as OUC with the purpose of providing a flexible and open lifelong learning system and developing a learning society (Li, 2014). OUC is designed to be open to all members of society in China, not only working adults but also school-aged students, the elderly, farmers, the unemployed, and other disadvantaged groups, and offers degree and nondegree education services to all members of society. It aims to promote equal access to education, sharing of quality education resources, and continuous improvement of the human resources quality.

OUC promotes lifelong learning for all. It has shaped a broad educational system made up of 1 headquarter, 45 provincial branches, 14 industrial and corporate colleges, and over 4,000 study centers, covering all urban and rural areas in China. Over the last 40 years, OUC has approximately 20.5 million enrollments and 15.12 million graduates, and it occupies 10% of the higher education enrollments and graduates in China (Jing, 2020). Of the 4.31 million active students of degree education, 70% are from grassroots communities and 55% are in branches located in the central and western regions of China (Ju, 2020).

The Overview of QA at OUC

In 2012, OUC upholds five core educational ideas, including Openness, Responsibility, Quality, Diversity, and Internationalization. It is committed to integrating quality into the university's teaching and learning, scientific research, and social services. Today OUC has established a specialized organization for QA, a QA framework and standards system, with a holistic view of QA system including internal and external systems. At the same time, OUC has also strengthened research on quality assurance. Using the *Open University* and *quality* as keywords, 2186 academic papers can be found in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) which is an important academic journals database in China. The number, distribution, and trends of the papers are shown in Fig. 3. These research papers provide strong support for QA understanding of ODL on the concepts, methods, practices, effects, and so on.

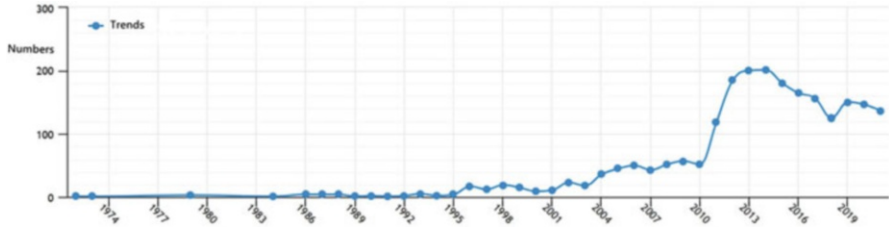


Fig. 3 The academic research trends on quality of Open University by CNKI. (Source: CNKI Database (2021))

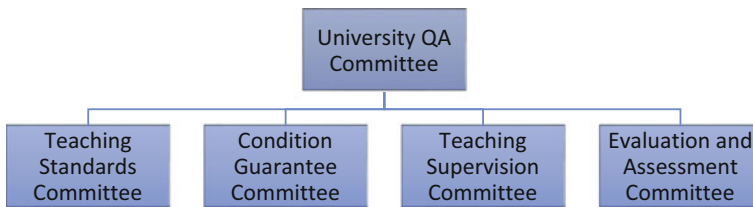


Fig. 4 Governance structure of quality assurance at OUC

OUC’s QA Organizational Structure

In terms of QA governance, OUC established the University QA Committee in 2013. The Committee is the QA governance body and is a specialized organization that conducts research, planning, guidance, and supervision of university QA system. OUC President chairs this important committee which formulates the *Statutes of the Quality Assurance Committee of OUC*. The Committee has four subcommittees that are the Teaching Standards Committee, the Condition Guarantee Committee, the Teaching Supervision Committee, and the Evaluation and Assessment Committee (see Fig. 4).

In terms of QA management, OUC headquarters set up a specialized department called the Quality Monitoring and Evaluation Center responsible for evaluating, monitoring, and researching the quality ODL provision of each level of the university system and making suggestions for improvement. The Center currently has a full-time work team and it has set up three offices including a general office, a quality monitoring office, and a quality evaluation office (see Fig. 5). The Center is responsible for development and maintenance of the quality standards, implementation of dynamic quality monitoring, carrying out periodic evaluation of quality status, as well as doing quality research.

At each level of the university system including branches, colleges, and study centers, there are also QA departments and QA personnel. OUC carries out regular education and research training for all QA staff of the whole system.

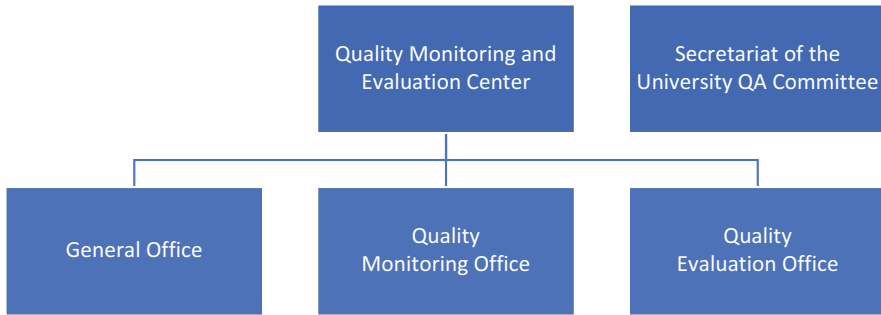


Fig. 5 Management structure of quality assurance at OUC headquarter

The Quality Standards

In 2016, OUC set up quality standards framework and indicators. The quality standards framework includes 12 indicators and 40 sub-indicators (Open University of China, 2016). The 12 indicators cover general rules, university conditions, professional courses and resources, enrollment management, teaching process implementation, practical teaching, educational administration management, student affairs management, teaching process monitoring, evaluation and feedback, scientific research, and social services. The 40 sub-indicators represent specific requirement of the 12 indicators. For example, the sub-indicators of “educational administration management” are “student status management” and “examination management.” The sub-indicators of “student affairs management” are “selection of the outstanding graduates” and “scholarship.” The sub-indicators of “the scientific research” are “scientific research system,” “scientific research process,” and “scientific research results.”

OUC quality standards focus on teaching and learning process. It standardizes the quality requirements of all links and aspects of the entire process of teaching and learning, in order to clarify the basic requirements for the university to implement lifelong learning for all. The indicators of the quality standards include not only the quality requirements for graduation but also the quality requirements for educational process including the policies, mechanisms, conditions, training process, etc.

The QA Procedure and Mechanism

OUC QA system can be divided into internal system and external system as shown in Fig. 6. The two systems have different focuses. The procedure and mechanisms are shown in the figure.

The Internal QA System

The focus of the internal QA system is on teaching and learning. It has adopted a variety of methods to pay attention to the organization, operation, maintenance,

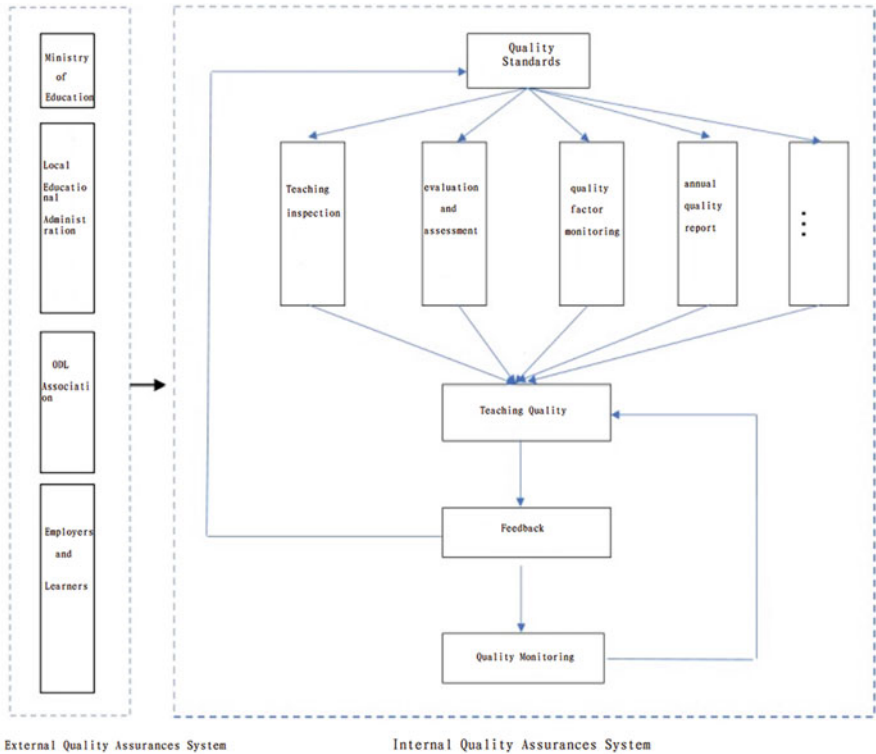


Fig. 6 Quality assurance system of OUC

monitoring, and management of the teaching process by various institutions in the university system. For example, in order to support student learning, OUC provides various multimedia materials, course syllabi, formative assessment brochures, exam instructions, and other learning resources based on a comprehensive consideration of student needs, especially different learning conditions in the economically developed and less developed areas, and offers quality printed, audio, and video materials and provides the online resources (Li, Yang, & Niu, 2013).

In order to carry out all-round quality assurance, OUC adopts varieties of the QA methods, including teaching inspection, evaluation and assessment, specialized supervision, quality factor monitoring and analysis, annual quality report, etc.

The External QA System

The external QA system of OUC includes evaluation and supervision from educational administration, various third-party agencies, employers, and learners.

Quality Monitoring from the Educational Administration

There are mainly three means of monitoring. The first is making policy requirements. The development of ODL in China is closely related to the government regulation (Gaba & Li, 2015). Since 2012, the Ministry of Education has successively issued several policies related to the quality development of open universities. For example, in 2016, the *Recommendations on Improvement of the Open University* demands that the Open University should adhere to the principle of quality first (Ministry of Education, 2016). In 2020, the *OUC Comprehensive Reform Plan* issued by the Ministry of Education emphasizes the need to improve quality assurance system (Ministry of Education, 2020a). The second means is related to quality review on degree-awarding programs. The Ministry of Education reviews the academic degree-awarding programs offered by OUC every year, and only those programs that passed the review can enroll students. This regulation requires OUC to consider its quality conditions for teaching and learning. The third is related to specialized evaluation and inspection. The Ministry of Education requires OUC to submit its annual development report. In addition, it often carries out special evaluations, such as special inspection of study centers and so on.

Quality Management from the ODL Association

There are not many third-party organizations related to ODL in China. The Ministry of Education has set up a National Collaboration Group for Modern Distance Education in Universities. The Group carried out many activities, for example, to select best practice of ODL in China. OUC maintains a good relationship with the organization.

Quality Evaluation from the Employers and Learners

Since 2018, OUC has carried out an annual survey on employer satisfaction and has invited a third-party education consulting company (Maxus) to jointly conduct the survey (Open University of China, 2020). According to the quality annual report released by OUC Quality Monitoring and Evaluation Center (2019), the satisfaction of employers is at generally good level, with a very satisfied ratio reaching 60%.

Achievements and Challenges

Achievements

Since 2012, with the implementation of a series of reform practices such as the implementation of the strategy of “creating quality and improving quality,” the recognition of OUC has been greatly improved. It has been rewarded several important international awards including the ICDE Prize of Excellence (2017) and UNESCO King Hamad Bin Isa Al-Khalifa Prize (2020). These rewards generally admit OUC’s continuous commitment to high-quality development in recent years.

Challenges

The first challenge is to cope with the digital transformation which has significance on OUC QA governance mechanisms and tools. In recent years, OUC has vigorously developed online education, especially during the COVID-19 epidemic period, and a large amount of teaching and learning data has been generated and restored online. This puts forward new need for the QA governance mechanisms and tools. At present, OUC has not yet been able to fully apply artificial intelligence and big data technology to optimize quality assurance governance effects.

The second challenge is to meet high-quality education development and its influence on the professional requirement of the teaching staff. Successful ODL depends largely on the quality of teaching staff (Li et al., 2013). Until the end of 2019, OUC has more than 60,000 academic teachers, 34,000 tutors, and 16,000 management staff (Ju, 2020). And many of them lack professional development opportunities (Zhang & Li, 2019). To achieve high-quality educational development, there is a huge need of upgrading teachers' professional abilities.

The third challenge is related to its social reputation and its challenge to building a quality culture for ODL providers. In China, the ODL providers and mega universities have a different quality reputation and social recognition from the on-campus education. The society must establish an appropriate quality culture and solve the problem of inconsistent understanding.

Conclusion

This chapter presents some important development of and new challenges to QA system of UT and OUC today. Along with the advancement and increased use of information technology, and the demand for high-quality education, the QA of UT and OUC are also facing new pressures and challenges. Despite the uniqueness of the system adopted, UT and OUC have demonstrated that as mega universities in Asia and the world, they could develop an effective, robust, and comprehensive internal QA system. Both UT and OUC's experiences show that assuring quality is not isolated nor simple programs. The QA system has to be developed systematically and embedded in the whole university's structure and management. In addition, the ultimate goal of such QA programs is not to have a robust system but to have a continuous improvement culture that is understood, believed, and internalized by all parties involved.

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