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## A Discussion on Quality in Open and Distance Learning and Efforts made by Hanoi Open University

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### Abstract

*Quality in education is crucial for any open and distance learning institution. Pursuing quality has been the critical issue theoretically and practically. The concepts of quality in open and distance learning has been discussed by a number of scholars and researchers in various workshops and conferences.*

*Though there have been different approaches to the concept of quality in ODL, scholars and researchers may agree upon some common aspects, such as caring for clients, coherence in teaching and learning process, responsiveness to changing client needs, and focusing on public accountability, student learning, program effectiveness, institution evaluation, etc.*

*To assess the quality, some researchers have developed different models, such as Four Component Model, Quality Wheel Model, and Five Criteria Model. Each criterion in these models could be observed based on a number of indications by different viewers.*

*For 14 years since the establishment, Hanoi Open University has been unceasingly striving towards excellence to meet the demand and requirement of the society and people. The efforts made by HOU will be discussed based on the criteria of quality.*

## **Introduction**

There has been increasing interest in the quality of open and distance learning (ODL), especially with regard to the questions of what and how, i.e., what is quality in ODL and how can we measure and manage it? There have been wide debate and discussion on the quality. Judgments about quality differ according to the viewers. Some scholars argue that quality means different things to different interest groups. Consequently, the fundamental question in the context of quality is quality for whom and in whose interests?

In this paper we attempt to discuss and examine different models of quality in ODL. Based on the standards and criteria of quality, the efforts made by Hanoi Open University since the foundation will be presented and discussed.

*It is believed that the two large questions below will continuously require the researchers, practitioners in ODL to find the solutions to the answers:*

*How can an institution providing ODL manage its own quality effectively? How can it improve the quality of the ODL it offers?*

## Areas of Standards to Evaluate Quality in Higher Education

On 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2004 the Minister of Education and Training promulgated the Provisional Regulations on Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions. Under these regulations ten standards for accreditation of higher education institutions were set up. They are in ten areas. Each standard has certain criteria:

No.	Areas of Standards	Number of criteria
1	Mission and goals of higher education institution	2
2	Organization and management	5
3	Curriculum	4
4	Training activities	5
5	Managing cadres, faculty and staff	10
6	Students	9
7	Research and development of technology	5
8	International cooperation activities	3
9	Library, learning equipments and other facilities	7
10	Finance and financial management	3

As accreditation is a new measure of quality assurance ever applied in Vietnam, in the Provisional Regulations on accreditation the Ministry of Education and Training constructs two levels for each criterion so as institution can easily reach at least the first level. It can be considered the psychological solution to introduce accreditation into the higher education context in Vietnam.

## Quality In Open and Distance Learning

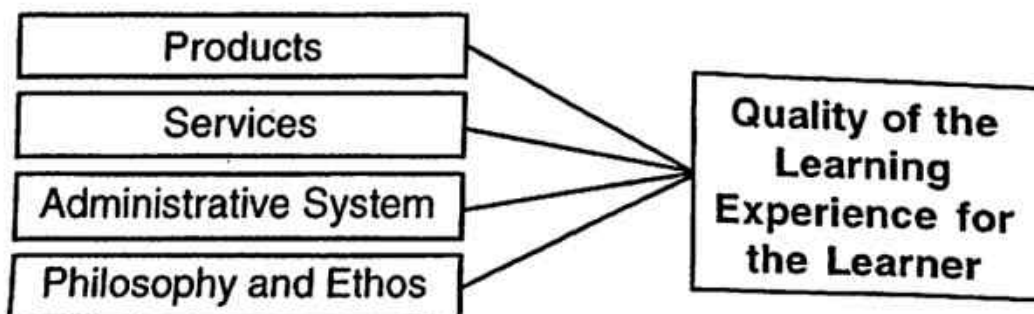
The main groups concerned with the quality in ODL are governments (government departments or agencies), professional bodies, employers, the managers of education institutions, teachers (academics, tutors) and students.

The quality of ODL can be the result of a variety of factors, both internal and external to an ODL organization for example, the levels of skills and expertise of staff, the amount of resources available, weak or strong leadership, efficiency of its administrative systems, or the communications infrastructure in the country. The question of “what” and “how” in evaluating the quality will be discussed based on a particular model.

### 1. Four Component Model

According to Prof. Robinson, to achieve good quality in ODL, the institution has to achieve it in all four of the components. This requires the management of quality at an institution-wide level.

Four component model - the model illustrates four components, each contributing to the quality of the learning experience for the learner. These components are:



*Source: University of Leeds, UK*

- a. **PRODUCTS** - The learning materials, course design and provision for practical work, media use, assessment strategy
- b. **SERVICES** - Registration and advisory services, tutoring and educational counseling, feedback and guidance on assignments, provision of information, access to learning materials or resources
- c. **ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS** - For delivery systems, record keeping, scheduling, monitoring, management of assessment systems, quality assurance procedures.
- d. **GENERAL PHILOSOPHY & ETHOS** - Policy statements about status and resourcing of open and distance learning, ethos and culture of the organization, slogans and mottos, such as “students first”, attitudes of staff and their levels of commitment, images of the organization presented to the outside world.

## **Quality Wheel Model**

Quality wheel model - a diagram made up from four concentric circles illustrating the components that surround and support the quality of learning experience. The third circle is split into thirds by three arrows pointing to the innermost circle from the outer two.

These thirds are labeled:

- Learning materials and courses
- Administration
- Learner support services

The innermost circle is labeled quality of learning experience.

## Model of Five Criteria

Peter S. Cookson (2002) develops the five criteria: *effort, performance, adequacy, efficiency, and process.*

Let us discuss these five criteria.

*Effort*, the first criterion of quality refers to the activities that open and distance institutions carry out. The indicators of effort include: numbers of degrees, certificates and courses designed, developed, and delivered; numbers of applications, registrations, and examinations. Growth in such numbers suggests expanded capacity to meet students' needs.

*Performance*, the second criterion of quality refers to the effects of the institution's activities on those whom it serves. Perraton (2000: 193) points to five indicators of changed performance of students: change in productivity, work practice, learning gains, successful completion, and examination performance.

*Adequacy* refers to the capacity of open and distance learning institutions to meet the educational and social needs of their students. According to Cookson (2002:186), questions that address the criterion of adequacy include: What operative structures (governing councils, external members of curriculum development teams, etc.) are in place that enable academic staff members to engage in dialogues with knowledgeable stakeholders? What has the institution done to document the social and education needs of students? How strong is the institutional commitment to act (revise or amend existing courses) in response to feedback from students?

*Efficiency*, the fourth criterion of quality, refers to the cost of open and distance learning. Because large numbers of students in some

ODL institutions, fixed costs and variable costs per student can be low. However, Perraton (2000: 196) and Hulsmann (1999) distinguish two types of costs: costs per student and costs per successful student. Milam (2000) argues that cost of sophisticated educational applications of information and communication technologies can be extremely high. Rao (1999: 24) points out, "Access means not only providing physical access to instructional technology, but also creating a host of supportive factors that contribute to the use of that instructional technology". Such practice will increase cost per student of ODL but reduce the institutional cost per successful student.

*Process*, the fifth criterion of quality, comprises a series of actions or operations conducive to particular ends. With reference to open and distance learning, process may be identified in connection with each of the following subsystems:

- *Course subsystem*: creation, production, distribution, and evaluation of instruction.
- *Student subsystem*: registration, orientation, learning assistance, allocation to courses, collection of fees, course materials, and communication of expected performance.
- *Regulatory subsystem*: practices of academic and administrative staff and bodies, governance and management, and management of reward and accountability within the institution.
- *Technological subsystem*: information communication technology (ICT) in design and delivery of instruction.

## Efforts made by Hanoi Open University

Based on the three models above, the efforts made by HOU since the foundation can be described as follows.

The HOU missions and goals have been translated into strategic plans, including:

- *Creating opportunities for higher education to meet the diversified needs of the people, contributing to the national development*
- *Improving the quality of human resources in various areas*
- *Improving the accountability of open and distance education*

In accordance with the missions and goals, HOU promotes the slogan “*Upgrading the people’s knowledge, training the human resources, and breeding the talents*”.

Hanoi Open University has been operating various educational modes: distance learning, part-time courses and formal education. For 14 years of development, HOU has gained encouraging achievements due to its continuous efforts. Over 40 thousand graduates from HOU have contributed to the trained human resources for the development of the country. Some faculties produce graduates of good quality, which attracts the employment of enterprises. The measure for quality education is not merely the high level of skills and knowledge gained by the student in general. It requires the suitability, adaptability and effectiveness from the trained *human resources towards* the requirement of particular areas, regions and industries.

Year by year, HOU has been confirming its status in the national



system of education. More and more students want to apply to HOU's courses. Currently, there are over 45 thousand students taking courses throughout the country.

**ODL students take courses for different purposes**

Learning areas	Purposes of ODL Students			
	Upgrade knowledge	Promotion	Better salary	Change jobs
Business management	56.4%	16.1%	19.5%	8.1%
Accounting	49.2%	8.7%	33.9%	8.3%
English	78.7%	8.6%	12.1%	0.6%
Economic Law	44.8%	9.4%	42.2%	3.6%
ICT	75.8%	3.2%	19.4%	1.6%

*Source: Prof. Nguyen Kim Truy, "Basic solutions for pursuing quality in ODL", Ministry leveled Research, 2007*

The most significant effort of HOU is to create opportunities for higher education to those who are unable to take courses offered by other institutions because of their social and/or individual circumstances, and ODL has been used to meet changing labor market needs and unmet demand for higher education. The market economy has generated new motivation to learn, either for advancement in the workplace or for changing occupations. Hanoi Open University has been collaborating with the mass media: National Radio (The Voice of Vietnam: VOV) and Central Television (Vietnam Television: VTV) in disseminating ODL programs. The National Radio covers the whole country bringing courses provided by HOU to millions of people. So far, nearly 9,000 programs have been broadcasted (20 minutes each) since 1995, bringing knowledge and news to millions of people. Educational programs provided by HOU via The Central Television are also very effective and highly appreciated. The programs broadcasted by VTV2, the dedicated channel to education and technologies development, are either

transmitted by the local TV stations or broadcasted via satellite direct to homes (DTH).

Promoting distance education has been regarded as the first priority, 45 local centers have been established in 26 provinces and cities, making the system stretching from the North to the South of the country, serving the people in different areas: town, countryside, mountainous areas and islands.

Print has been the major medium for distance education at HOU because of its usefulness and friendliness to the learners. Print materials are supplemented by CD, VCD and CD-ROM. The video conferencing system has been installed, connecting Hanoi with the local centers in five provinces. Students can get access to the website [www.hou.edu.vn](http://www.hou.edu.vn) for instruction and information. To improve provisional materials and resources for learners, HOU is developing comprehensive learning resources, including print materials, e-books, web-based programs, on-line tutorials, and radio transmission.

HOU's operation has proved to be effective. While the Government has been investing much money to conventional universities, around 300USD per student each year, HOU has almost to balance the budget itself from tuition fees. This effectiveness is the result of the institution-wide commitment, sharing mutual responsibility and rewards.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

We have discussed the standards for quality required by the government bodies, the models of criteria for evaluating the quality in ODL, and the efforts made by HOU.

Whatever model of quality assurance we approach, in the end, students in ODL systems are in the best position to assess the quality of any particular distance education program. They buy, use and perceive not only the physical products but also services. Their judgements of quality are personal and subjective, based on their individual needs, demands, desires and experiences. They may have different levels of expertise when it comes to determining the quality of a particular study program. However, their judgments are decisive for the future of any study program, because the student-customer is the one who makes the investment in terms of money, time and effort.

In the total quality management philosophy the goal of any successful study program should satisfy the customers who feel having received good value for their investment.

Therefore, the quality assurance system in an ODL institution should include clear and measurable objectives and standards, guidelines for implementation, including stakeholder involvement, appropriate resources, consistent evaluation methods, associating self-assessment and external review, feedback mechanisms and procedures for improvement, and widely accessible evaluation results.

Quality assurance initiatives at international, national and regional level should be coordinated in order to ensure overview, coherence, synergy and system-wide analysis.

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