

Analysis of the TCU Standards and their Relevance to Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning

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Abstract

This paper uses the systems model of open and distance learning to review the standards issued by the Tanzania Commission for Universities. Documentary review method is used to analyse and establish the scope and relevance of the standards and guidelines to the practice of open and distance learning. The paper reports that the standards and guidelines are reasonably fair and provide for all the key basic quality domains to be assured in an institution practising open and distance learning. However, there are some quality issues that could be institutional-specific that need attention, leading to the need of having in place institutional quality assurance policies on open and distance learning. The paper proposes a model for quality open and distance learning institutions.

Keywords: Quality assurance, open and distance learning, Quality culture

Introduction

Zuhairi, et al., (2020) concluded that it may be unnecessary to have a universal definition of quality, as quality and quality assurance (QA) may be of culture context, and that there seems to be no agreement on universal definition, model, and practices of QA in higher education. The only problem with this position is that institutions may not be well informed if they assure something that is not well known; or when every institution has its own meaning. As Schindler, et al., (2015), put it, one must be aware of what quality is before determining how to assure it. According to Elshaer (2012) quality is defined as meeting customers' and stakeholders' needs. Yet, the problem is that the needs of the customers and the stakeholders are not static; they are continuously changing. According to Uvalić-Trumbić and Daniel (2013) quality is not a thing, it is something which forms itself in its process. Ossiannilsson, et al., (2015) proposed that focus on the use of the term quality should be on the context of the quality management processes used

in the provision of education. Quality, therefore, is not a product, it is a totality of the inputs, the process and the product.

It is not surprising that issues of QA are treated with strong emphasis in open and distance learning (ODL). According to Latchem (2016), ODL is likely to have such features as lower entry standards, limited support for isolated learners, the costs and effort involved in creating and maintaining the technological infrastructure and developing the courseware, and the low completion rates and higher failure rates. If not addressed, these features would continue perpetuate the discourse of cheap quality of ODL. Historically, conventional QA systems have been used for ODL institutions and programmes. However, this trend proved to be irrelevant and thus QA systems specific to ODL were developed. Globally, there has been a trend to let ODL institutions have QA systems that are more relevant to the field. ODL institutions need relevant QA systems that will improve accountability and quality improvement, mitigate competition, capture customer and employee satisfaction, maintain standards, promote credibility, prestige and status, control mushrooming of ODL providers, and address stigma on ODL (Ng'umbi, 2014).

Commonwealth of Learning (COL) (2020) presented a scenario of higher education institutions (HEIs) trying to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 lock downs by providing some kind of ODL programmes. In its analysis COL observed that that process has led to a general perception of loss in quality, since ODL is practiced as an easy quick fix, without proper planning especially on QA systems. Most HEIs had no previous experience in the ODL modality. What they could do is to replicate face-to-face teaching methodologies and experiences in virtual classrooms, without considering the different nature of virtual learning environments (Hodges et. al., 2020). Their unprepared students soon missed the campus experiences and were disappointed by the new arrangements. Besides there has been some difficulties in offering courses of a practical nature or with lab components through a virtual classroom. The COVID-19 example tells us more than just not getting prepared; it informs of lack of the culture of ODL.

In 2019, TCU issued a set of standards and guidelines for ODL institutions, with 17 standard domains. The domains are: institutional governance, governance units, management and administration, ODL programmes and delivery centres, ICT infrastructure and facilities, staff recruitment, programme design and development, course design and development, learner-centred teaching and learning, recognition of prior learning, orientation and progression, learner

assessment and evaluation, programme level staffing and tutoring, student admission system, learner support systems, teaching and learning materials, and face-to-face facilities (p.220-240). However, the scope across the ODL system; and relevance of the standards to ODL institutions have not been well established in the available literature. In conducting the analysis, this study was guided by two research questions:

- i) What is the scope of the standards across the ODL subsystems?
- ii) How relevant are the standards to ODL institutions?

Literature Review

Literature review was guided by the Rumble's systems model of ODL (Figure 1). The four subsystems of the model acted as reference point to the review. With regard to the regulatory subsystem, much of the literature is on developing a culture of quality in ODL institutions that is focused on ODL (Kanwar et al., 2019; Ramdass & Nemavhola, 2018; Qadri, 2018; Mahafzah, 2012; Zhang & Cheng, 2012). Development of QA frameworks should take into consideration the key stakeholders of the ODL system (Nsamba & Makoe, 2017; Kant, 2019; Kocdar & Aydin, 2012). Another important issue as far as the regulatory subsystem is concerned, is on comparability of quality among ODL institutions and between them and the conventional mode. Bibi et al., (2018) made a comparison among ODL institutions and concluded that there were similarities in the QA frameworks. This is not surprising considering that there are global and regional QA frameworks as well as frameworks and toolkits provided by national regulators. What could be interesting is whether the QA frameworks are for improving ODL practice, or for compliance. Comparability between QA systems in ODL and conventional institutions have had a common conclusion that with QA systems in place the quality of education has no difference between the two settings (Afolabi, 2019).

Another key issue with regard to the regulatory subsystem is the need to innovate in conducting QA in ODL. Just like quality itself, ODL is changing rapidly. Reviews of QA systems may be a common feature. Singh and Das (2019) observed that QA systems need to change accordingly lest they become less effective in enhancing the practice of ODL; not because they are inherently ineffective, but because the world is changing so rapidly that effectiveness of QA system will only depend on the context. This also includes having in place QA mechanisms

for the changing demographics and participation rates like the case for massive enrolments in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (Kabanda, 2014).

On the materials subsystem, literature is mainly on interactivity among learners (Batsila, 2016; Baldwin & Trespalacios, 2017). Studies have found that strong educator presence along with quality course content are essential elements in courses that successfully facilitate ODL student engagement and learning (Moore, 2014; Swan & Shih, 2014). Establishing educator presence in ODL courses can be achieved in a number of ways, such as through regular communication with students and consistent feedback (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016). ODL students need to feel connected to the educator, to other students in the course and to the course content, which can be achieved in a supportive learning environment in which educators strategically combine audio, video, synchronous and asynchronous discussions, practical activities and other online tools to engage students (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016).

The student subsystem literature is mainly on open admission (Tereseviciene, et al., 2020); handling of examinations (Simui, et al., 2017); and support to learners via a networked institution. Tereseviciene, et al., (2020) observed that although there is much pressure to have an open admission policy, only a few institutions are actually ready and have procedures to assess and recognise open online learning or prior learning; and generally, the matter is more complicated than it otherwise sounds. The authors concluded that higher learning institutions lack readiness to become open. With regard to examinations, Simui, et al., (2017) have warned that ODL institutions risk having chaos, if planning of examinations is short of an updated, accurate and accessible student record system with statistics disaggregated by programme, course, region and examination centre; and a rapid response mechanism. Jeong (2019) observed that ODL institutions should maintain the structure of networked institution that allows them to have headquarters, regional offices and study centres; in order to reach out to the customers. This structure is what presents ODL institutions unique as compared to other institutions for whom students have to reach out to the institution.

For the logistical subsystem much is on the discourse of moving towards online learning. Bozkurt and Zawack-Ritcher (2021) have observed that more ODL research for the past five years has been revolving around online learning – technologies, design, media, support, and QA. They conclude that the fields of ODL and educational technology have actually converged. In interpretation, this

means that in order to survive in ODL, institutions need to invest in educational technology.

Bozkurt (2020) further warned institutions not to get into confusion as to how to go along with technology. His opinion is for them to have technology adaptation rather than technology integration into the education system. The networked institution (Jeong, 2019) argument is relevant in this subsystem as well. If ODL institutions are to reach out to the customers then logistical considerations are enormous in terms of infrastructure, personnel, running costs, electricity, and internet connectivity in the remote centres, just to mention a few.

The Rumble's Systems Model

This study used the Rumble's Systems Model in analysing the TCU standards and guidelines. Rumble (1986) proposed a simple model that summarises the operations in ODL institutions in four related sub-systems.

- i) Materials subsystem which was regarded as the first major sub-subsystem with all activities involved in the design, production and distribution of self-instructional materials; for all kinds, print-based or other media.
- ii) Student subsystem which comprises all operations that are involved in facilitating learning by students and managing their progress and it involves staff, resources and students.
- iii) Logistical subsystem which includes all other units which procure and manage resources for the institution; units involved in finances, human resources and information and communications technology (ICT) comprise the logistical subsystem.
- iv) Regulatory subsystem which is involved in all activities related to strategic planning, policy formulation and monitoring the institution's performance in meeting its goals.

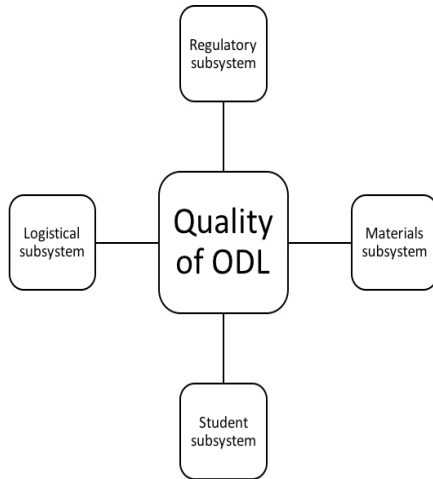


Figure 1: ODL Quality Analysis based on Rumble’s Systems Model

Materials and Methods

The study used documentary analysis as the research method. Documentary analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents (Dalglish et al., 2020). Usually, depending on research questions, documentary analysis can be used in combination with different types of interviews (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2018), observation (Harvey, 2018), and quantitative analyses, among other common methods in policy research. However, documentary analysis can be used as a standalone method (Dalglish et al., 2020).

The study used content analysis to analyse the content of the TCU standards and guidelines. The 17 quality domains on ODL were used as level of analysis, where codes were provided as either regulatory, materials, student or logistical. These codes were pre-determined categories, as were adopted from the guiding model, the Rumble’s systems model. The pre-determined categorisation is opposed to the grounded theory that require categories to emanate from the text. In this study the coding had to stick with the pre-defined set of categories; for which frequency of categories was recorded by counting the number of times the category appeared in a text as well as analysing the relevance of the content to quality practice of ODL. This helped in re-grouping the standards according to the ODL subsystems. The decision to count in one category or another based on implication of the standards and the issues covered in the standards and corresponding guidelines, and not on exact words required in the respective categories.

Results

Scope of the Standards

The first question that guided the study was: What is the scope of the QA standards across the ODL subsystems? It sought to establish the scope of the QA standards across ODL subsystems. The TCU document has a total of 17 domains of QA, with corresponding standards; and a total of 77 guidelines. Table 1 presents alignment of the standards with the ODL subsystems. The standards are fairly distributed across the subsystems, ranging from 13 (regulatory) to 25 (student). At guidelines level, the subsystems have a greater range from 1 (learner-centred teaching and learning) to 12 (face-to-face facilities). It can be observed that such a coverage of standards and guidelines has fairly provided for all the subsystems with the detail they deserve, as per the ODL subsystems. However, the guidelines are not, and perhaps they should not, be more elaborate as to the contextual issues of the ODL institution. There are more issues that need attention. They include: systems for online teaching and learning, systems for addressing cheating and plagiarism, academic staff qualifications on ODL, resource sharing between on-campus and ODL, interpretation of 'certifiable' open admission system, comprehensive public sharing of the ODL programme, material development specific to ODL, support services to learners with special needs, library services to distance learners, how to recruit and manage part time staff; and cost management in ODL. A solution to this would be to have an institutional QA policy on ODL.

Table 1: ALIGNMENT OF ODL SUBSYSTEM AND QA STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

Subsystem	Standards Domain	Number of Guidelines	
Regulatory	7.1 Institutional governance	4	13(17%)
	7.2 Governance units	4	
	7.3 Management and administration	5	
Materials	7.4 ODL programmes and delivery centers	3	20(26%)
	7.7 Programme design and development	7	
	7.8 Course design and development	4	
	7.16 Teaching and learning materials	6	
Student	7.9 Learner-centered teaching and learning	1	25(32%)
	7.10 Recognition of prior learning	3	
	7.11 Orientation and progression	5	
	7.12 Learner assessment and evaluation	6	
	7.13 Programme level staffing and tutoring	3	
	7.14 Student admission system	5	
7.15 Learner support systems	2		
Logistical	7.5 ICT infrastructure and facilities	3	19(25%)
	7.6 Staff recruitment	4	
	7.17 Face-to-face facilities	12	
		Total	77(100%)

Relevance of the Standards to ODL

The second guiding question was: How relevant are the standards to ODL? It sought to establish the relevance of the standards to ODL. Tables 2 - 6 present standards and corresponding analyses of the key issues in each of the standards. The standards are presented according to the subsystems of ODL. Every standard is relevant to ODL; although some others could be generic to both conventional and ODL institutions. Most of the standards presented in tables 2-6 could also act as means for cultivating the culture of quality within the ODL institution. For example, the standards provide for a commitment to ODL, use of e-learning management systems, and transforming institutions into digital operations. Across the subsystems, the standards and guidelines encourage institutions to invest in technology; including computer systems to mitigate cheating and plagiarism. This, however, will require financial power to invest in computer, networks, and all associated infrastructure. The aim should be to have capacity to offer services to all students at a distance, including international students.

As presented in Table 2, the first three standards (7.1 - 7.3) are dedicated to the regulatory subsystem. They provide guidelines on vision, mission and systems that commit the institution to ODL. The systems in question include learning centres, collaborations, e-learning management system and administrative support systems.

Table 2: REGULATORY SUBSYSTEM

	Standards	Issues in guidelines
7.1	Vision and mission statements and governance systems shall be reflective of commitment to the provision of education through ODL	Vision and mission; governance and organizational structure; partnership and collaboration; and publicity.
7.2	Establish learning centers	Learning centers; network through collaboration; e-learning management system
7.3	Establish effective management and administrative systems	Management structure; communication channels; administrative support systems; and qualified administrators.

As presented in Table 3, the materials subsystem comprises of the issues related to programme design and development; as well as delivery. The key issues are: comparability of ODL programmes to those offered through conventional mode; consideration of learners needs; meeting accreditation requirements; and consideration of media mix. The requirement to have an e-learning management system is of high value to ODL institutions.

Table 3: MATERIALS SUBSYSTEM

	Standards	Issues in guidelines
7.4	Ensure that the quality of ODeL and face-to-face delivery modes are comparable.	Accreditation of ODL programmes; Right to offer ODL at a learning centre; Learning centres to meet standards.
7.7	Design and develop programmes that meet the needs of learners and stakeholders	ODL-designed programme; meeting accreditation requirements; adequate staff; flexibility of access; learner support within materials; interactive LMS
7.8	Have clear objectives and learning outcomes, content, approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, learner support and most appropriate ODeL technology	Media and technology; ICT policy; learners and technology; active learning; media mix
7.16	Produce materials which are accessed through print and/or electronic media	Appropriate materials; regular review; teaching aids and resources; accessible technology

Table 4 presents standards and an analysis of key issues that are related to the logistical subsystem. The standards are on physical and human resources, and investment in ICT. Key issues of the value addition in this subsystem include the requirement to have academic staff develop competencies on ODL.

Table 4: LOGISTICAL SUBSYSTEM

	Standards	Issues in guidelines
7.5	Ensure availability and adequacy of ICT infrastructure and appropriate technical support staff for the infrastructure.	ICT infrastructure; technical support; reliable electricity; reliable internet connectivity.
7.6	Have a staff establishment and recruitment procedures.	Academic staff qualification in ODL; appropriate managerial and administrative staff; regular staff performance review.
7.17	Have secure premises with face-to-face teaching facilities and appropriate institutional policy guidelines regarding face-to-face sessions	Secure tenure of premises; safe environment; training rooms; offices; assessment facilities; policy on learner attendance; policy on non-discrimination; policy on international students; safe accommodation, where applicable.

Table 5 presents standards and key issues regarding the student subsystem. The subsystem has seven standards all related to students. They are on learner-centredness, orientation and progression, assessment, admission, and support services. Value addition guidelines include: RPL as entry qualification, attention to students at risk, mitigating cheating and plagiarism, effective tutoring, having an open admission system, and attention to learners with special needs.

Table 5: STUDENT SUBSYSTEM

Standards	Issues in guidelines
7.9 Ensure that programmes are delivered through learner-centred teaching and learning.	Learner autonomy Learner-centred methods
7.10 Use Recognition of Prior Learning as one of the student admission schemes.	Inclusion of RPL in admission guidelines RPL certification by Commission
7.11 Establish a mechanism for determining the orientation and progression of a student	Identification and support to students at risk; monitoring retention, progression and graduation; equal opportunities for all students; tutor-learner interaction; regulation of shared human and other resources
7.12 Establish an appropriate and secure assessment and evaluation system for the teaching and learning process that is properly managed, and reflect institutional, national and international standards.	Academic grading policy; student assessment system; progress tracking; tracking of completion and graduation rates; review of teaching and assessment system; assessment and appeal procedure; cheating and plagiarism.
7.13 Have an effective programme management system that is adequately staffed and adheres to the ODeL requirements.	Coordinators' experience in ODL; qualified tutors; tutor recruitment and monitoring system; programme review; tutors with content and pedagogical skills related to ODL
7.14 Establish minimum admission criteria and processes most appropriate for the ODeL system of delivery, which shall be comprehensive, transparent and supportive to applicants and certified by the Commission.	Open admission system; minimum entry qualifications; foundation programme; RPL; adequate information to applicants; simplified application documentation; fair and transparent contractual terms with learners.
7.15 Provide learner support services that meet the reasonable needs of learners.	Support system to learners; attention to struggling learners; resources and facilities in learning centres for learners with special needs

Discussion

The analysis of TCU standards and guidelines has revealed the potential of the standards to foster the culture of quality because of the value addition provided across the standards. In this case, if the standards and guidelines are used as benchmarks for institutions to learn from, the institutions could constantly improve performance. TCU standards could fairly be viewed as propagation of the culture of quality for ODL institutions. The issues of vision, mission, governance and organisational structures, as well as establishing learning centres and their respective managerial and administrative structures is a clear manifestation of the practice of ODL. The standards and guidelines provide solutions to some foreseen problems such as the pressure to establish learning centres in the remote areas, by providing for collaboration among institutions. This makes it manageable for ODL institutions to enter into agreement with partners to have access and use of premises, staff and other resources in a sharing spirit. One major issue that ODL institutions need to attend to with regard to governance is the issue of cost. This could be addressed in the institutional policies so that cost-effectiveness is realised. ODL could be very expensive especially for newly established institutions or those that replicate the traditional conventional system. Cost minimisation strategies are needed so that ODL becomes an affordable option that is meant to be. Unfortunately, cost is not mitigated by simply adopting e-learning. As Magaji and Adelabu (2014) put it, it does not cost less to apply e-learning in ODL although it could, in the long run when the programme can attract a sizeable number of students, when there is high economies of scale in full e-learning approach. Unfortunately, these issues of costing, cost-effectiveness and cost minimisation are not fully covered in the provided standards and guidelines. They will have to be benchmarked and included in the internal QA policies.

ODL materials as a subsystem has been presented as an important one especially with regard to having programmes that are comparable to those offered through face to face; programmes that are creditable, programmes that meet the needs of the learners and programmes that are designed to be learner centred and that consider a variety of media. With the issue of cost in mind, ODL institutions could be more cautious on material development at times when OERs could be adopted. Open education resources such as books, teaching resources, and teaching software, could be a starting point (Huang et

al., 2020); and this need to be clearly articulated and staff properly trained how to adopt and adapt.

The issues related to students such as open admission, examinations, orientation, progression and retention, tutoring in learning centres, learner support, including learners struggling and those with special needs are fairly covered in the TCU standards. The standards also provide for ODL institutions to enter collaborations on sharing resources, including premises and staff. The standards further provide for use of technology to offer tutoring and other support and to have in place policies on supporting international students. However, much more is required for ODL to fully develop the QA culture with regard to the student subsystem. Guidelines on open admission for example, as also observed elsewhere by Tereseviciene, et al., (2020); require a lot more guidance, especially when institutions are required to observe the minimum standards when admitting students, and again having an open admission system that is verified by the Commission. Understanding of open admission could be contextual, that means a clear definition should be provided. ODL institutions will also need to sort out the issue of quality tutoring in the learning centres.

Logistical subsystem is also well covered, especially on physical and human resources and investment in ICT. The requirement to have academic staff develop competencies on ODL is of much interest, although institutions need to have their internal policies on how to develop such competencies. As already discussed, most costing could be on the logistical subsystem where physical resources such as premises across regions and beyond may be required. On top of that ICT investment could require considerable financial investment. Much has been provided in the guidelines with regard to sharing materials and staff. The problem would be the fact that not every kind of resource that is effective in other settings could be readily useful for ODL. The case of tutors, for example, demands ODL institutions to understand that there are unique challenges in tutoring ODL students (Joubert & Snyman, 2017); and hence the need to re-train the tutors shared with the conventional mode to be able to practice in ODL.

In the final analysis, we need to consider that the standards and guidelines may lack the institutional context and hence the need to have institutional ODL policies. ODL institutions need to have in place a clear policy on QA and that they need to draw up well-defined quality criteria that show the different aspects of the operations that will be quality assured. QA policy requires institutions to engage

in critical self-assessment that promotes the development of a reflective culture of quality that is needed among ODL systems. ODL institutions need to have internally developed standards for running their ODL operations. For example, they need standards on recruiting academic staff who are not only qualified in content knowledge but also on the pedagogy of ODL based on their ODL practitioners' competence frameworks. They need to address in detail all other issues related to the move from traditional to modern practice of ODL.

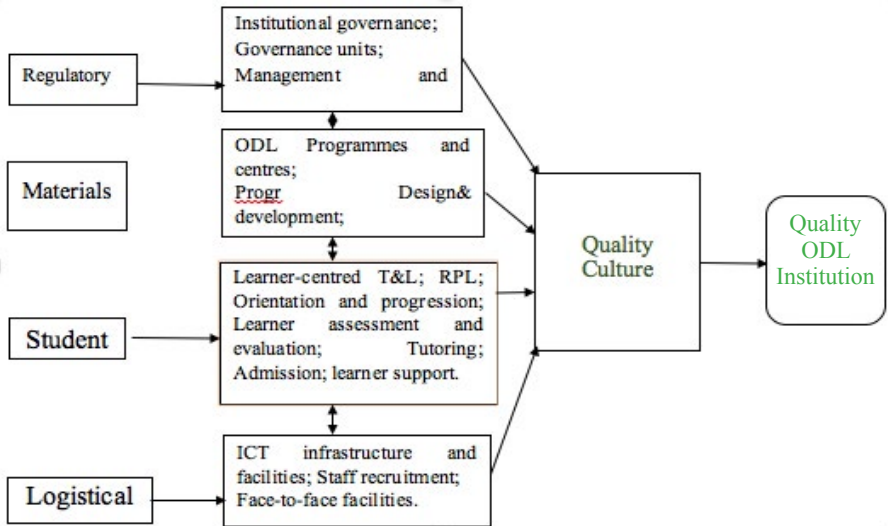


Figure 2: Quality ODL Institution Model

It can be concluded that the TCU standards and guidelines provide for all ODL subsystems, namely regulatory, material student and logistical. The standards and guidelines have relevance to ODL quality improvement in that they can be viewed as benchmarks for good practice. As presented in Figure 2, ODL institutions could use the standards and guidelines to cultivate the culture of quality as they transform the practice of ODL. It is however observed that the standards and guidelines may not address institutional specific QA issues, and hence the need for internal QA policies on ODL. The requirement for internal QA policies is for both single and dual mode institutions, for nurturing the culture of quality; but particularly important for dual mode institutions that require additional guidelines on how ODL shares resources with conventional learning operations. Two recommendations are made: one, ODL institutions need to

develop institutional QA policies on ODL; for which the Quality ODL Institution Model (Figure 2) could be one of the major reference points; and two, ODL institutions need to build their internal capacities to be able to improve the quality of their practice. Understandably, ODL is a new venture and is rapidly changing. Institutions need to have capacity to draft competence frameworks for the required personnel and be able to train internally, as required.

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