A Study of Quality Assurance Practices in the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Malaysia

Helen **KHOO** Chooi Sim & Rozhan M. **IDRUS**
School Of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)**, MALAYSIA**

Abstract

This article looks at the quality assurance practices amongst three (3) groups of staff in the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia, i.e. lecturers, resident tutors and support staff. 9 dimensions of the Quality Assurance Practices i.e. Staff Development, Planning, Work Process, Team Work, Prioritise Customers, Performance Evaluation, System For Sending Of Learning Materials, System For Receiving Of Assignments From Students and Management of Students' Records are identified in this study. The results show that quality assurances practices amongst three groups are different. Profile Analysis used in this research shows that quality assurance practices amongst lecturers and support staff are parallel. Results also show that quality assurance practices of resident tutors have profiles that differ from the lecturers and support staff.

Keywords: Learner support, Quality measures, synergism.

Introduction

The education sector is becoming an important sector. This can be seen in the budgetary allocations of RM22.7 billion for education and training in the Eighth Malaysia Plan for the period 2001-2005. This figure is 20.6% of the total budget allocation. This is an increase compared to RM20.2 billion (19.5%) in the Seventh Malaysia Plan, 1996-2000. This increase in the allocation is a testimony of the government's continued and sustained commitment to the educational enterprise in the country.

The issue of quality especially quality assurance has become the focus of many institutions. Over the past few years, there has been increasing interest in the issue of "quality" especially in the field of distance education. There has been a remarkable increase in the number of distance education programmes offered by local institutions. The number of distance education students' enrolment increased from 3,472 in 1995 to 12, 597 in 1997 (Malaysia, 1998). It is estimated that there are 36,000 distance education students and this number will increase to 54,000 in the year 2005 (Eighth Malaysia Plan, 2001). The

importance of quality in distance education has to be addressed as the Malaysian government is advocating making the nation a regional centre of education excellence.

In distance education, there is strong emphasis on the provision of learner support, which is designed to facilitate interaction and communication between students and academic staff (Garrison and Baynton, 1987; Kember & Dekkers, 1987; Sewart, 1992; Hillman, Willis and Gunawardena, 1994). Support services are required to ensure a complete well-rounded education. Educational institution providing distance education programmes must also provide quality support services to all students. Due to the wide range of technologies used by distance educators, the support must be available and consistent to all students at all times. The support services require constant interactions between instructional designers, counsellors, student support staff, administrators, and technical staff, help support staff, and students.

Learner support is a very important component of distance education. Learners without support are most liable to delay their completion of a programme or drop out altogether. Research has consistently shown that, without the necessary student support services, a distance education programme will not succeed. Learner support is needed in order to facilitate students' learning. These supports can be in the forms of facilities, administrative, learning materials, reading materials and references, human interaction, advice and moral support. It is important that providers have quality assurance measures to ensure that students receive the support needed to achieve their educational and personal goals.

Quality Assurance in Distance Education

The issue of quality assurance has become the focus of many institutions to enhance quality of distance education. Quality Assurance is a philosophy and a process in which all the functions and activities of an institution shall be treated equally, planned, controlled and implemented in a systematic and scientific manner (Venkaiah 1995, 159).

Oakland (1993, 13) define quality assurance as follows:

> *"Quality assurance is broadly the preventing of quality problems through planned and systematic activities (including documentation). These will include the establishment of a good quality management system and the assessment of its adequacy, the audit of the operation of the system, and the review of the system itself".*

This definition is supported by Robinson (1994) who defines quality assurance as the set of activities that an organisation undertakes to ensure that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for quality, in other words, that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or service. Its goal is the anticipation and avoidance of faults or mistakes. Basically, it involves setting attainable standards for a process, organising work so that they are achieved, documenting the procedures required, communicating them to all concerned, and monitoring and reviewing the attainment of standards.

The quality policy of an institution should contain quality mission statement, resource allocation norms, quality review and control programmes through Quality Monitoring Teams (Venkaiah, 1995). The levels of skills and expertise of staff, the amount of resources available, weak or strong leadership, efficiency of its administrative systems are factors that determine the educational quality (Robinson, 1994). Quality assurance practices adopted by any distance education providers should include elements of Total Quality Management namely Staff Development, Strategic Planning, Work Process, Team Work, Prioritise Customers and Performance Evaluation. Other important elements in distance education are the System For Sending Of Learning Materials, System For Receiving Of Assignments From Students and Management of Students' Records. Distance education students are separated physically from the providers (Rozhan, 1999; Venkaiah, 1995). Therefore, it is important that quality assurance measures should include systems for sending of learning materials and receiving of assignments.

Staff of an institution plays an important role in quality assurance. Effective staff development and involvement of staff in planning are important elements of quality assurance. Staff of an institution will be able to analyse their operations and modify them to optimise the use of resources (McIlroy and Walker, 1993). This is important for the continuous quality improvement of an institution.

Quality Assurance can be achieved through effective internal management involving effective utilisation of human resources, system, facilities, finance, and the development of positive corporate culture (Zuhairi and Suparman 2002, 262). The success of quality assurance in an organisation depends on the total commitment of the management. The quality assurance in an educational institution is possible when every member of the organisation contributed his might to the quality process (Venkaiah 1995, 159).

Aims of Study and Methodology

The aim of this study was to examine the quality assurance practices of School of Distance Education, USM. The development of the research instrument was based on the literature of distance education regarding the nature and purpose

of quality assurance. The instrument constructed by the researcher consists of 9 dimensions that are important to quality management in distance education. The dimensions are Staff Development, Planning, Work Process, Team Work, Prioritise Customers, Performance Appraisal, System For Sending of Learning Materials, System For Receiving of Assignments From Students and Management of Students' Records. The population of this study are lecturers, resident tutors and support staff of School of Distance Education, USM. The questionnaires were distributed to 3 groups of respondents i.e. lecturers, resident tutors and support staff. Responses to the 42 statements in the questionnaire were based on a five-point Likert Scale.   Data analysis was conducted by the SPSS version 10.

Results and Discussion

A total number of 113 questionnaires were distributed to lecturers (50), resident tutors (17) and support staff (46). The rate of response is 54%, that is a total number of 61 questionnaires were returned (30 questionnaires from lecturers, 10 from resident tutors and 21 from support staff).

Table 1 shows results of the reliability of the items in the questionnaire constructed. It can be seen from the table that the alpha for reliability is more than 0.7 for all dimensions. The overall alpha is more than 0.9 and it is clear that the items in the questionnaire has internal consistency and is reliable.

Table 1: Reliability of Questionnaire

Dimensions	No. of Items	Alpha
1. Staff Development	6	0.9035
2. Planning	4	0.8754
3. Work Process	4	0.8884
4. Team Work	4	0.9549
5. Prioritise Customers	4	0.9240
6. Performance Appraisal	4	0.8743
7. System For Sending Of Learning Materials	7	0.9642
8. System For Receiving Of Assignments From Students	4	0.8372
9. Management of Students' Record	5	0.9461
TOTAL	**42**	**0.9630**

Table 2 shows the demographic profile of the respondents.   The respondents of this study are generally male (42). Majority (57) of them are 30 years and above and 48 of them have more than five years of experience working in the School.

The respondents from the group of Lecturers are all masters' and PhD's holders and all Resident Tutors have a minimum first degree. A few of the Support Staff of the School are first-degree holders (3) and most of them have a minimum MCE/SPM qualification.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Respondents

	Lecturer (n=30)	Resident Tutor (n=10)	Support Staff (n=21)	Total (n=61)
Gender				
Male	23	9	10	42
Female	7	1	11	19
Age				
20 – 30 years	0	1	3	4
31 – 40 years	6	4	7	17
41 – 50 years	12	4	8	29
Above 51 years	7	1	3	11
Academic Qualifications				
MCE/SPM/SPVM	0	0	14	14
STPM/HSC	0	0	3	3
Diploma	0	0	1	1
First Degree	0	5	3	8
Masters	7	4	0	11
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)	23	1	0	24
Years of Working Experience				
Less than 5 years	5	5	3	13
5 - 10 years	3	3	6	12
11 - 15 years	8	2	2	12
16 - 20 years	11	0	4	15
More than 20 years	3	0	6	9

Quality Assurance Practices

Table 3 shows the mean value and standard deviation of each dimension of the study for three groups of respondents. The mean value for all dimensions recorded values more than 3.0. This indicates that the quality assurance practices in the School of Distance Education, USM are high. The dimension "Work Process" recorded the highest overall mean of 4.00. "Prioritise Customers" recorded an overall means of 3.89 and it is followed by "System For Sending Of Learning Materials" with an overall means of 3.72. This shows that these 3 dimensions are important and being prioritised by the respondents.

Table 3: Quality Assurance Practices

Quality Assurance Measures	Lecturers Mean (SD) n=30	Resident Tutors Mean (SD) n=10	Support Staff Mean (SD) n=21	Overall Mean (SD) n=61
1. Staff Development	3.37 (1.05)	2.25 (1.81)	3.34 (1.32)	3.17 (1.34)
2. Planning	3.18 (0.89)	2.45 (1.39)	3.69 (0.63)	3.24 (0.99)
3. Work Process	3.79 (0.97)	4.18 (0.58)	4.19 (0.39)	**4.00** (0.65)
4. Team Work	3.29 (1.17)	2.98 (1.74)	3.95 (0.80)	3.47 (1.21)
5. Prioritise Customers	3.71 (0.94)	4.23 (0.59)	3.98 (0.81)	**3.89** (0.86)
6. Performance Appraisal	3.00 (1.08)	2.03 (1.72)	3.79 (0.73)	3.11 (1.25)
7. System For Sending Of Learning Materials	3.42 (1.18)	3.71 (0.90)	4.15 (0.39)	**3.72** (0.97)
8. System For Receiving Of Assignments From Students	3.28 (0.97)	2.23 (1.85)	3.82 (0.97)	3.30 (1.26)
9. Management of Students' Record	3.29 (1.36)	2.76 (1.24)	3.98 (1.04)	3.44 (1.29)

Profile Analysis

Profile Analysis is conducted to see if the responses from 3 groups of respondents i.e. lecturers, resident tutors and support staff are parallel. From Figure 1, it can be seen that the profile of Lecturer and Support Staff appears to be parallel. The profile of resident tutor with profile of lecturer and support staff does not appear to be parallel. Practices of resident tutors towards dimension "Work Process" and "Prioritise Customers" are high compared to the other dimensions. Practices of resident tutors in dimensions of Staff Development, Planning, Team Work, Performance Appraisal and System of Receiving Assignments from Students and Maintenance of Students' Records are low compared to lecturers and support staff.
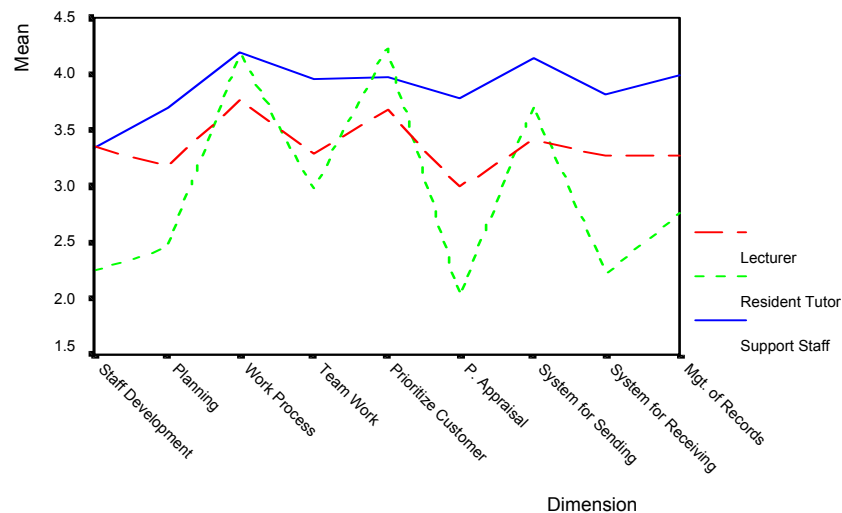
Figure 1: Profile Analysis of Lecturer, Resident Tutor and Support Staff

Since the profile of lecturer and support staff appear to be *parallel*, further analysis was conducted to see if they are statistically parallel. The result of the analysis shows that quality assurance practices of the two groups i.e. lecturers and support staff are parallel (p=.1475) towards the 9 dimensions of quality assurance practices in this study. Both groups are permanent staff of the School of Distance Education, USM. Therefore, their practices towards the 9 dimensions are parallel. The practices of support staff group are much higher in 8 dimensions compared to the lecturer group except for dimension Staff Development. The 8 dimensions of quality assurance practices are concerning administration and management of the school and they are the main focus of support staff. Lecturers, besides involving in administration and management, play important role in the academic development of the students. This explains the higher means recorded by lecturers in the dimension of Staff Development.

As the profile of the lecturers and support staff are parallel, further analysis is conducted to see if they are *coincident*. Results indicate that, their practices are not coincident (p=.006). Involvement of lecturers in the 8 dimensions of quality assurance except Staff Development is much lower than support staff. This is so because not all lecturers are involved directly in the administration and management of distance education, especially in the dimension of sending materials to students, receiving of assignments from students, and maintenance of students' records. Both groups have different job description.

From Figure 1, it can be seen that the profile of resident tutors with lecturers and support staff do not appear to be parallel, nevertheless further analysis was conducted to show that they are *not statistically parallel.* The analysis shows that profile of resident tutor and lecturer is not parallel (p= .0014). The analysis also shows that profile resident tutors and support staff are not parallel

(p=.0117). Resident Tutors are part-time staff of the School of Distance Education. They are appointed by the Dean to administer the Regional Centres. It is clear that they serve in a totally different environment and have job descriptions that are different from Lecturers and Support Staff. This explains why the profile of Resident Tutors is not parallel to the profile of Lecturers and Support Staff.

Concluding Remarks

The nature, range, method of delivery and organisation, and management of learner support system varies from one institution to another. The competitive advantage of an institution lies in its systems, procedures, policies and programmes. It is difficult for any distance education institution to serve the needs of its students efficiently and effectively without any quality assurance measures.

The success of quality assurance in an organisation depends on the total commitment of the management and all the members of its staff. Quality Assurance practices are important for the future existence of Distance Education Providers. Quality Assurance practices are here to say especially in the fierce competition faced in the education industry. In order to compete in the 21st century, distance education providers must examine their quality assurance measures and conduct studies on ways to improve it. Continuous improvement, which is the key to quality assurance, should be adopted. The call for the ISO 9000 certification is one way towards quality assurance recognition. An approach based on ISO 9000 may serve to provide evidence that an institution has soundly grounded approach to the assurance of quality and standards (Yorke, 1999). Quality assurance is possible through commitment and synergism of the management and all the staff of an institution.

References

Crosby, P. B. (1979). *Quality is Free*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Eighth Malaysian Plan 2001-2005. (2001). Malaysia: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad.

Garrison, D & Baynton, M. (1987). Beyond Independence in Distance Education – The Concept of Control. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 1(3), 3-15.

Gronroos, C. (1982). A Service Quality Model and its Marketing Implications. *European Journal of Marketing*, 18 (4), 36-44.

Hillman, D. C. A., Willis, D. J. & Gunawardena, C. N. (1994). Learner-interface Interaction in Distance Education: An Extension of Contemporary Models and Strategies for Practitioners. American Journal of Distance Education, 8(2), 30-34.

Kember, D. & Dekkers, J. (1987). The Role of Study Centres for Academic Support in Distance Education. *Distance Education*, 8 (2), 30-42.

Malaysia. (1998). [Online] Available from http://www.moe.gov.my/upustat.htm. [Accessed 31.3.2002]

McIlroy, A. and Walker, R. (1993). Total Quality Management: Some Implications For The Management Of Distance Education. *Distance Education*, 14 (1), 40-54.

Oakland, J.S. (1993). *Total Quality Management.* Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Robinson, B. (1994). *Ensuring Quality in the Planning and Development of Distance Learning Courses*. Paper presented at the 20th Anniversary International Conference on Distance Learning, Colombia (September 20-22, 1994) Sewart, D. (1992). Student Support systems in Distance Education. In. B. Serven, R. Lunden, Y. Ryans (eds.). *Distance Education in the Twenty-first Century* in 16th Conference of the International Council for Distance Education, Thailand, November, 1992.

Rozhan Mohammed Idrus (1999). *Khidmat Sokongan Pembelajaran Dalam Sistem Pendidikan Jarak Jauh*. Malaysia: Utusan Publications & Distributors Sdn Bhd.

Venkaiah, V. (1995). Quality Assurance in Student Support Services. In Rao, M.S., Srinivasacharyulu, G. and Mohanraj, J. *Quality Assurance in Distance Education*. India: D.K. Fine Art Press (P) Ltd., 151- 159.

Yorke, Mantz. (1999). Assuring quality and standards in globalised higher education. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 7(1), 14-24.

Zuhairi, A. and Suparman, A. (2002). Managing quality and accessibility in Open and Distance Learning. In Dikshit, H.P. (et. al.). *Access and Equity.* New Delhi: Kogan Page.

Correspondence:

❑ **Associate Prof. Dr Rozhan M. Idrus**, School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia. rozhan@usm.my

❑ **Helen Khoo Chooi Sim**, School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia. helenkcs@hotmail.com