| Subject | External Quality Assurance |
|---|---|
| Module | External Quality Assurance Agencies Emerging Challenges |
| Topic | 5.6 Open, Distant, Flexible Learning |

**Please note that this is a text-only version. All links and animations are not activated in this version. It is recommended that you view the topic online for an interactive learning experience.**

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## 1. Introduction



The last three decades are significant for the growth in new forms of education. We will discuss the emergence of 'flexible and distributed learning' (FDL) and the challenges for QA agencies. The topic also details the guidelines, practices and approaches that QA agencies have developed in response.

**Objectives: Open, Distant, Flexible Learning**

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to
- describe the term 'flexible and distributed learning' (FDL)
- identify the challenges posed by these modalities
- explain, with examples, how QA agencies are dealing with distance education
- identify different approaches that agencies use for QA of FDL

## 2. New Forms of Education

Traditional education that requires students to be physically present on campus in order to be involved in learning activities is increasingly a less important mode of delivery. The last three decades have seen a significant increase in new forms of education. Due to unprecedented developments in the information and communication technologies, technology has been integrated into almost all forms of education obscuring the distinctions between various forms of education.

In particular, the integration of technology and an emphasis on flexibility in time and place have changed the traditional understanding of distance- and campus-based education. With online delivery systems and approaches being employed for both off-campus and on-campus students, distance education and on-campus instruction are converging. In fact, the 'anytime, anyplace' nature of new forms of learning has had its greatest impact on campus instruction. Today, on-campus students can take part of their program or courses online or by e-learning, while on campus or at their

home or workplace. These options have narrowed the gap between on and off-campus students.

Many universities in the US award certificates that do not differentiate between students who have studied on- or off-campus. Australian universities of good repute have awarded indistinguishable degree testamurs to on- and off-campus students for decades. In the UK, Open University degrees are recognised for providing a rigorous and thorough British education. In many countries where online courses are popular, the 'distance' tag is seen as too restrictive, so the term 'distance education' is being replaced by broader terms such as 'distributed learning' and 'flexible education'. In other words, distance learning and off-campus education have been redefined as a subset of flexible learning (Stella, 2003). Here we will use the term 'flexible and distributed learning' (FDL).

The various forms and meanings that FDL has acquired, its convergence with traditional learning, and its global impact pose several challenges. Programs that are predominantly or entirely online seem to have attracted the concern of governments and QA agencies. They are perceived as a potential threat to the "safety" of national systems where the legitimacy of providers, the operations of fake providers, the quality of programs and courses are said to be "difficult to assess." One would think that these "threats" are fit subjects for regulators, assuming no small measure of political will.

Many QA agencies have responded to these concerns, and debate continues about ways to ensure quality in programs with large FDL components. Some think that QA practices for FDL are essentially the same as those used for traditional education, while others argue that some aspects of FDL deviate so much from what has been practiced over hundreds of years that they challenge conventional assumptions. This argument then suggests that present mechanisms of QA cannot guarantee the quality of FDL. These arguments are reviewed in the pages below.

# 3. Defining FDL

Flexibility in various aspects of the teaching-learning environment is the key in FDL. A website hosted by the Australian government on higher education for students in Australia gives the following explanation about flexible study options:

> "Distance education, flexible learning, or correspondence study offer an opportunity to undertake a course of study while balancing other commitments. FDL means that you can undertake a course of study without having to attend campus lectures. You can study from home or in a distant area without having to relocate. You can be a part time or full time student, choosing to do the entire course by distance education or to do some components by distance and others face to face".

Source: www.goingtouni.gov.au

To cite another example, the website of a higher education provider advertises distance education programs by stating that "No matter what age you are, or where you live, you can study at the University from home by distance education." The University offers the "option of mixing study modes – doing some subjects on-campus and others by distance. You can extend the time taken to complete your program to fit with your personal pace or lifestyle demands." (Adapted from the website of the CQ University, Australia).

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The UK QA agency (QAA/UK) uses the term 'Flexible and distributed learning' (FDL), "to characterise approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that:

- Do not require a student's place of study to be physically located within the institution (the awarding institution) whose academic award is being sought through successful completion of the program of study;
- Do not assume that a student's program of study is necessarily delivered directly by the awarding institution;
- Do not assume that a student is necessarily supported directly by staff of the awarding institution;
- Do not assume that a student is routinely working with other students; and
- Do not necessarily require assessment of a student's achievement to take place at the location of the awarding institution."

Encompassing the above approaches, QAA uses the following definition of FDL:

> "Flexible and distributed learning (FDL) denotes educational provision leading to an award, or specific credit toward an award, of an awarding institution delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through means which generally do not require the student to attend particular classes or events at particular times and particular locations."

Clearly, FDL can take many forms. At one end of the continuum, it may be an online course offered by a conventional university and available only to campus-based, full-time students. In this case, students can undertake their studies at a time, place and pace convenient to them although primarily using campus facilities. The management of the online teaching, provision of learning resources, assessment and awarding credits will be handled directly by the university. At the other end of the continuum, you might have an Indian student who is working in Malaysia and enrolled in a program of a Virtual University. The 'University' may not have a physical address and all of its online operations may be handled at a branch of an IT company located in Singapore with headquarters in Hong Kong. Consultants from all over the world may have developed the course materials for a fee (just as salaried faculty develop courses, or the task is given to a consultant engaged by the venerable university). A local private higher education provider could have an agreement with the University for access to library facilities. Between these extremes there is a spectrum of possibilities for modes of learning, locations, learner characteristics and learning experiences.

## 4. Organisational Differences and Consequent Challenges

There was a period when courses offered through non-traditional modes, with a heavy reliance upon internet-based learning, were criticised for a lack of intellectual enquiry and inadequate interaction with teachers and peers. The supporters of FDL brushed away these reservations by reminding others of situations in traditional classrooms where hundreds of students move between large lecture halls without any interaction with teachers. Thus, FDL is just like any other form of traditional education; it can be done well or badly. The present situation is an acceptance that the various forms of FDL – distance education, online education, e-learning and so on – can be as good as traditional education if conducted properly.

Flexible learning modes can accommodate a range of different learning styles and needs through various means of access (face-to-face, distance, a mix of both). Depending on the target group or learner needs, the mode may be named differently and its characteristics may evolve in a particular way. For example, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), as the name suggests, aims to use the distance education

mode to provide open access to education for learners of all categories irrespective of age and formal prior qualifications.

As the various modes of education and their purposes evolve, QA faces new challenges. In this context the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) states that, to establish credibility and equivalence, QA must deal with certain organizational differences:

- Larger number of stakeholders, specialists, or sites involved in development and delivery.
- Separation of learner and institution.
- More separate activities, roles and participants.
- More detailed planning of production and budgets in advance of program presentation.
- More administrative tasks distributed between different sites and partners.
- More diverse target audiences.
- Greater use of the Web and other information and communications technologies (ICTs).
- More delegation of aspects of learning and assessment to local or workplace partners.
- Distributed organisational structure for materials creation, teaching or learner support.
- Different interpretation of what constitutes teaching, for example, a learner-based instead of a lecture-based approach.

Eaton (2000) identifies the following challenges that distance education poses to core academic values.

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**Distance Education vs. Academic Values**

**Institutional autonomy**

Distance education challenges institutional autonomy by encouraging institutional groupings, such as electronically-driven consortia, which require individual institutions to emphasize their similarity to others in the group rather than their uniqueness.

**Collegiality and shared governance**

Distance education challenges collegiality and shared governance by dispersing faculty, students, and administrators across an even greater number of sites and by increasing the use of part-time faculty.

**Role of faculty**

Distance education challenges the intimate relationship among faculty, curriculum, and standards through reliance on commercial courseware, standardized courseware, and online examinations of student performance.

**Competition from other forms of credentialing**

Distance education increases competition from other forms of credentialing (e.g., certificates of training) and it provides powerful technological assistance to entrepreneurial new degree providers, operating outside the bounds of traditional higher education. General education Distance education challenges general education

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by strengthening and contributing to an overall trend toward training and episodic learning (part-time, stop-in/stop-out education).

### Site-based education

Distance education challenges site-based education by creating virtual institutions and by relying on the World Wide Web and telephone lines for educational delivery, rather than on lecture halls and dormitories.

Source: Eaton, J. (2000). Core Academic Values, Quality, and Regional Accreditation: The Challenge of Distance Learning, CHEA, Washington DC.

FDL introduces new conditions and structures to the higher education environment. The faculty role is different, the course management has to adapt, and the library and learning resources must allow electronic access. Instructors can now provide material in highly interactive audio, video, and textual formats at a pace set by the student. These developments are very exciting, but different from the traditional classroom-based education so the question arises as to how they might be assessed.

Student advising is an area of changing roles. In many traditional institutions (mostly outside North America) the faculty may not have a specific advisory function, except where doctoral students are involved. This function may not be in the typical contract, nor are other functions, such as service on committees, quality assurance, accreditation, etc. Some institutions have gifted the advising function to professional staff, or it may just be absent. Given the limitations inherent in FDL, the students must still receive timely and adequate advice or help in at least curricular matters. Beyond that, the responsibilities of FDL instructors devolve to the course level and to interaction as a way to realize specific course objectives.

### Evaluation, Accreditation, and FDL

The traditional QA process includes a peer team visit, which may need some tinkering in order to work in the FDL context. This was characterised by a basic question about the site visit raised by June Lester in 1991 in the US context – "How do you translate an evaluation process that was designed to work in a bricks and mortar environment into one that works for distributed sites that include one person's living room and another's kitchen?"

Concerning this last reference to evaluating a "bricks and mortar environment," this suggests an evaluation of the wrong things. In the FDL regime, it is entirely possible to focus the peers' attention on learning objectives, curriculum and lesson plans, the content of web lectures and exercises, exams and written assignments, and above all, the evaluated results of each course. In any worthwhile evaluation, the central issue is, after all, what the students have actually learned. Perhaps it's just as well not to be so mindful of inputs, including bricks.

We tend to think of the institution as a complex of physical buildings, faculty, staff and students. This definition obviously doesn't work for distance education where the learning environment is physically distributed. Some key elements of the new environment are the access to counselors, instructors, and information resources. Hopefully there will be a supportive and intellectual response. Peers have to cope with this 'distributed site'.

Another rationale for the site visit is that it is an efficient way to interact with a cross section of the constituents of the institution – management, faculty, students, alumni, and even parents, which constitutes a major source of information for the

peers. Can this be achieved in distance learning? One approach could be to use electronic mail, computer conferencing, two-way video and audio, or the telephone. A member of the assessment team can observe an e-conference in progress without having to move from his/her office or home and still assess the effectiveness of the meeting. Peer teams need appropriate training to assess the institutions in this newer way of delivering education.

It is said that a traditional site visit enables the peers to get a sense of the "institutional ambiance." First of all, can you find a criterion for this? Secondly, if you think that you have it in hand, what will you do with it?

There is yet another level of complexity for peer reviewers in the new learning environments. Middlehurst (2001) highlighted the range of QA challenges associated with 'new variables' that have an impact on 'conventional' forms of higher education. Click the following to view the four challenges identified by Middlehurst:

[Cross-Border Challenges]

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**Cross-Border Challenges**

Under cross-border challenges, the Middlehurst report identifies four challenges:
1. The first challenge arises from learning that crosses national borders (transnational education).
2. The second relates to learning that crosses sectors, borders, or educational levels (e.g., university/industry or further/higher education).
3. The third arises from crossing functional boundaries (where the education process is designed and delivered by different agents in a supply chain).
4. The fourth relates to borders of time and space and the particular challenges associated with online education.

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Simply then, peer reviewers should still have live discussions with the principals of an FDL provider, key administrative staff, and whenever possible, with instructors, counselors, and others who interact with students. The peer reviewers should be well briefed in advance on the particulars of the FDL provider, with attention given to characteristics that must be addressed in the evaluation.

# 5. Discussion

### Discussion: Challenge of Distance Learning

Read the publication "Core Academic Values, Quality and Regional Accreditation: The Challenge of Distance Learning" from Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).
1. What are the transitional strategies described in that publication?
2. Which of Eaton's points do you believe are legitimate and substantive criticisms of FDL, online education, etc.? That is, which complaints actually result in a less effective learning experience?
3. Which of Eaton's points do you believe are essentially a complaint that FDL is "different" and therefore undesirable?

# 6. QA Response

In general, institutions that emphasize the flexibility of their study options also make cautious comments that the programs offered by FDL are the same and just as demanding as on-campus programs. This emphasis on 'flexibility' but not at the expense of quality is a global phenomenon except in the emerging economies where distance education is seen as a poor cousin to traditional education. This is because of concerns about the quality of some distance education programs. To cope with these concerns several organisations have developed principles, guidelines, or benchmarks to address these QA issues.

In 1999, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) of UK, at the request of the distance learning provider community, produced QA guidelines for distance education programs. The guidelines acknowledged that the continued development of this form of higher education and its worldwide acceptance depends upon rigorous QA. The guidelines also recognised that there are many areas in which the usual ways of doing things for 'on-campus' provision may not be appropriate in the context of distance learning.

### Reading: QAA's Guidelines for QA of Distance Education

The QAA guidelines are now part of the "Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education." This provides guidance on maintaining quality and standards for universities and colleges served by the QAA. It consists of 10 sections, notably 'Section 2: "Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)' is relevant to the discussion here."

Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education

The Institute for Higher Education Policy of the USA developed 24 benchmarks covering seven aspects considered essential to excellence in internet-based distance learning: Institutional Support, Course Development, Teaching/Learning, Course Structure, Student Support, Faculty Support and Evaluation and Assessment (IHEP 2000).

Another approach is embodied in 'The Guiding Principles for Distance Learning in a Learning Society'. This focuses on the major dimensions of learning support and outcomes: Learning Design, Learner Support, Organisational Commitment, Learning Outcomes and Technology (ACE 1996).

The Distance Education and Training Council (DETC), a U.S. based accreditation agency that undertakes the accreditation of distance education institutions world over, and has also developed QA standards for distance education.

With the increasing interest of the federal and state governments in ensuring the quality of distance education, the regional accreditation agencies, in dialogue with the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), have revised their standards to include both distance education and electronic course offerings in their assessment procedures. Both CHEA and the US Department of Education when conducting recognition reviews of accreditors, investigate how well the accreditors deal with QA for distance education in their standards. In addition, accreditors that develop new standards or policies for distance learning may undergo a special review. Institutions such as the Jones International University, Phoenix University

and the US Open University (now dissolved) have been accredited by several of the U.S. regional agencies.

Several years ago, each recognized accrediting body in the US adopted and implemented a common statement of Principles of Good Practice in Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs, developed by the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET). This resulted in a shared approach to distance education. More recently, to complement these efforts, the regional commissions collectively and through the Council of Regional Accrediting Commission (C-RAC), contracted with WCET to produce a more detailed presentation of the elements which exemplify quality in distance education. The resulting statement, Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs, provides a comprehensive and demanding expression of what is considered current best practice. It is being used by each commission, compatibly with their policies and procedures to promote good practice in distance education among their affiliated colleges and universities.

### Reading: Best Practices

Click the link below to read the best practices:

[Best practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs](#)

Barker (2002) produced 'Canadian Recommended E-learning Guidelines (CanREGs)' for the Community Association for Community Education and the Office of Learning Technologies of Human Resources Development Canada. The National Centre for Higher Education Management Systems (2000) and CHEA have designed and tested an alternative approach that places significant emphasis on student outcomes and delivery via distance education. It proposes a set of competency standards that are organised in three main areas of institutional performance: Student outcomes and attainment; Responsiveness to students; Organisational alignment and support.

In summary, the boundaries between traditional on-campus programs based on face-to-face learning situations and the new online methods of interaction and instruction are increasingly blurring. Nonetheless there remain sufficient differences between the modes to justify the use of additional QA methods to ensure the effectiveness and integrity of the experience.

# 7. QA Approach: What Do the Surveys Indicate?

Surveys conducted with APEC economies, Asia-Pacific countries and Brisbane Communiqué signatories – point to three different approaches to QA of FDL or 'distance education' as it is still generally referred to in developing countries. The main approaches are
- Some countries have dedicated mechanisms for QA of FDL specifically, while others consider all types of educational provisions in an integrated way.
- Some countries have not taken a stand or are in the process of developing procedures to consider certain modes such as online learning.
- Most QA agencies consider FDL only if there is some degree of integrated face-to-face learning and do not monitor purely online delivery of programs.

The Distance Education Council of India has a dedicated approach to QA for FDL. The Malaysian Qualifications Authority (MQA) follows an integrated approach with a focus on issues such as entry criteria, student support for online learning, training of

academic staff for online delivery, integrity of online student assessment, and access to information and communication technologies that are key to FDL. One of the Philippine agencies (PAASCU) is developing guidelines for distance education and a government arm in Singapore known as SPRING follows the same method irrespective of mode of delivery. The Korean Council for University Education (KCUE) is developing an evaluation handbook for distance education.

Most QA systems do not have policies and practices in place to evaluate the quality of education provisions when offered purely through online delivery. Hong Kong's University Grants Committee (UGC) does not require registration for distance education that has no face-to-face teaching and learning. The Indonesia HE agency (BAN-PT) considers the distance education operations of its domestic institutions and visits the regional centres of universities throughout the country, but it does not consider purely online delivery. ITP-Q (Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics Quality) and the NZUAAU in New Zealand also align with the majority and do not consider the purely online mode but will follow the standard method for the integrated approach of teaching and learning.

Attention to QA for online education without a face-to-face component depends on how prevalent this is in a particular country. For example, it is seldom an issue in a country where there is limited access to the appropriate technology and lack of good internet connections as these serve as barriers to cyberspace educational providers. Developed countries such as Hong Kong are known as major importers of education and regulations are in place requiring all overseas providers, not operating through accredited Hong Kong institutions, to register with the government and to meet the stringent quality criteria for registration. Nevertheless, these mechanisms cannot be applied to institutions that operate globally online and have no physical or legal presence in Hong Kong.

There are some interesting examples of QA for new forms of education delivery. Jones International University, the first institution to be accredited by a regional accrediting body, offers its courses and services on a global scale entirely by internet. In March 1999, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCACS) accredited Jones International University. Of the 56 faculty members then employed by the university, two were full-time, and the other part-time members generally held academic posts at other universities. Content experts helped to develop the subject matter and course structures, and teaching faculty executed the courses from locations around the world. To assess the Jones International University, NCACS team also went into the virtual mode.

## 8. Discussion

### Discussion: Flexible and Distributed Learning

Look around the room you are sitting in. Where are you sitting as you read this topic? Are you in your home in the living room or in the train travelling?
- What are the technologies around you that were not available 20 years ago?
- In what way has use of the new technologies changed your style of living?
- What impact have these technologies made in your way of learning?

# 9. Exercise

**Exercise: Changes in Higher Education Sector**

Starting from this point, move to an aerial view of changes in the higher education sector of your country.

1. What are the changes and challenges that your country faces with the new forms of education?
2. In the realm of FDL, what are the various forms that you can identify in your country?
3. What are your considered view on the regulatory and QA policies and procedures that your country should develop and implement to deal with FDL in a responsible manner?

We strongly recommend that you go to the websites of CHEA (U.S.), the QAA (U.K.), and the appropriate Australian agency for distance education or FDL. The Eaton paper of 2000 (CHEA) is a good starting point. Look for the most recent utterances of the QAA/UK on distance education.

# 10. Summary

**This topic covered the following main points:**

- Distance learning and off-campus education have been redefined and are seen as a subset of flexible learning, hence the emergence of the term 'flexible and distributed learning' (FDL).
- FDL does not require the student to attend particular classes or events at specific times and particular locations.
- FDL may be an online course offered by a conventional university and available only to its campus-based, full-time students. It may be also be a virtual university offering programs for working professionals.
- FDL introduces new conditions and structures to the higher education environment. The faculty role is different, the course management has to adapt and the library and learning resources may require more electronic access. Eaton (2000) identified the following challenges that distance education poses to core academic values.
  - Institutional autonomy
  - Collegiality and shared governance
  - Role of faculty
  - Competition from other forms of credentialing
  - General education
  - Site-based education
- Several organizations have developed principles, guidelines, or benchmarks to address issues related to QA of FDL.
- Accreditation agencies worldwide have revised their standards to include both distance education and electronic course offerings into their assessment procedures.
- QA agencies in some countries
  - have dedicated mechanisms for QA of FDL
  - consider all types of educational provisions in an integrated way
  - are in the process of developing procedures for QA of FDL
  - consider FDL only if there is some level of integrated face-to-face learning and do not monitor purely online delivery of programs
- Attention to the QA of online education which has no face-to-face components may depend on how prevalent the all-electronic mode is in a particular country.