Quality Assurance in Asian Open and Distance Learning: Policies and Implementation

Ojat Darojat, Michelle Nilson and David Kaufman

VOL. 2, No. 1

Abstract

Open universities have emerged as an innovative pillar in the expansion of access to higher education participation, with single-mode distance education providers broadening access in many countries through economies of scale supported by large enrolments. These models raise questions about the quality of education provided. This paper reports on a comparative case study of quality assurance (QA) programs in distance education at three open universities in Southeast Asia. Focusing on QA development and implementation in learner support services, the study explored QA policies, supporting management practices and structures, and the influence of internal and external environmental factors, as identified through thematic analysis of data from semi-structured interviews and policy documents. The results showed many similarities in QA for learner support at the three institutions. Their learner support services were determined to be responsive to government and external quality agencies, external cultural and language factors, and student feedback.

Editorial Note: Anak Bangsa Open University (ABOU) is a pseudonym used for another university, and there is no ABOU as such. All references are to actual documents and processes of said university but readers will not find the documents cited under ABOU in the references.

Introduction

Open universities have emerged as an innovative pillar in the expansion of access to higher education participation. According to Guri-Rosenblit (2005), open and distance teaching institutions have mushroomed outside conventional universities, reflecting diverse clientele, programs, and funding models. Following the example of the United Kingdom Open University, established in 1969, single-mode distance education providers have broadened access to higher education in many countries and enjoyed economies of scale supported by large enrolments (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Tait (2008) notes that "broadly speaking, they are for development, not just for teaching and research, nor even for adult higher education at a distance" (p. 93). That said, the role of open universities as a path to obtaining academic qualifications, while also providing mass education in a country or region, is essential to their purpose and value. Examples of these institutions include Pakistan's Allama Iqbal Open University (3.2 million students), India's Indira Gandhi National Open University (3 million students), and the Open University of China (2.7 million students). Nekongo-Nielsen (2006) nicely explains the role of open and distance education in development as follows:

> Education in general continues to be a crucial means to national development, and a well-educated and trained population is found to contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic development of any country (Marope, 2005). In addition, open and distance learning methods and programmes are known to make valuable contributions to the socio-economic development of countries that offer such programmes. Many countries

> have therefore recognized that open and distance learning is a powerful tool for achieving the country's educational and training needs and a potent instrument in creating a learning society capable of bringing about scientific, technological, social, and economic development (p. 1).

In spite of their strategic role of providing access to higher education, these newer universities face many of the same challenges found in many institutions instrumental in development, such as challenges with human resources, distribution of goods and services and continuing support for infrastructure. For this study, the challenges are in providing tutors, academic advisors, schedulers, and technical assistance (Rena, 2007); difficulty in overseeing instruction delivery (Rashid & Rashid, 2012); and establishing infrastructure and delivery of academic and logistical student support services (Hoosen & Butcher, 2012; Inglis, 2003). As a result of these continuing pressures on the institutions, distance education has been regarded as poor quality and substandard (Daniel, 2012; Davies, Howell, & Petrie, 2010; McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2001), leaving the impression in some circles that open universities deliver a second-rate education (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). The balance between access and quality is a complex calculus that transcends open universities; the debates surrounding these concerns reach into bricks and mortar institutions as well (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003). In fact, the enormous scale of these huge single-mode distance education institutions naturally raises questions about the quality of education provided.

Quality assurance initiatives in open universities can help to address these challenges and questions by establishing acceptable best practices and developing standards of quality by which distance education can be objectively judged (Davies et al., 2010). There is scant research-based literature to guide policymakers, managers, and practitioners in applying QA in education (Jung & Latchem, 2012), resulting in the quality of distance education being described as "an uncharted area for many QA agencies" (Stella & Gnanam, 2004, p. 150). It is therefore important to study quality assurance at university-level distance teaching institutions, in particular as these institutions play such a vital role in regional development and innovation.

This research explored quality assurance policies and their implementation at three open universities in Southeast Asia, all well-established and serving large numbers of distance learners across wide geographical areas. Focusing particularly on learner support services (those that facilitate student learning processes and ensure that learners' needs are met), it examined QA using a comparative case study approach, with the goal of understanding and learning from the ways in which these universities are working to achieve high-quality innovative distance education in their unique cultural contexts.

Background

The term ***quality assurance*** in distance education is generally understood to refer to policies, actions, systematic standards, and procedures designed to enhance quality and achieve pre-determined quality criteria (e.g., see Stella & Gnanam, 2004; Tait, 1997). Implementing quality assurance (QA) programs in distance education is challenging, partly because quality in this domain is difficult to define or standardize. Open higher education serves multiple stakeholders, involving relationships between and among faculty, learning material developers, tutors/instructors, learners, administrators, employers, government, and professional bodies. Integrating these diverse perspectives to make quality definitions and standards acceptable throughout the system is a complex and multi-faceted process.

QA relies on best practices, standards, performance indicators, and feedback to support quality

evaluation and improvement. Generally, QA models in industry, such as ISO 9001 and the Baldrige National Quality Award, offer additional perspectives. ISO 9001 requires that quality must be integrated into the systems and procedures of the organization in its attempt to make continuous improvement (Sallis, 2002), while the Baldrige model, as applied to education, helps educational institutions to gain competitive advantage through the establishment of criteria for excellence and recognition for performance (Sallis, 2002).

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) provides a QA model specifically for distance learning that provides standards and performance indicators for key performance areas (COL, 2009). For the COL, learner support must effectively provide tuition (activities that promote intellectual support such as explaining a concept or instruction to the learners, exploring issues with the learners, and giving feedback to the learners) and counselling (personal and emotional support such as providing learners with information and advice, taking action to help learners, and advocating on their behalf). A related QA framework from the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) sets out important guidelines for ten strategic issues in the distance education system (AAOU, 2010). In this framework, learners are supported by a range of opportunities for real two-way communication through the use of various forms of technology for tutoring at a distance: contact tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring, counselling, and peer support structures.

Distance education theories also offer guidelines for achieving quality, as do successful institutional examples and QA practices in other domains. Theories proposed by scholars can guide and support good practice (Peters, 2003). For example, Holmberg's theories of interaction and communication (1983, 1986, 2007) articulate the importance of teacher-learner dialogue; Moore and Kearsley (2012) stress that, despite the increasing importance of online delivery and services, face-to-face (F2F) interaction is still sometimes most effective for some services. Wedemeyer (1981) and Moore (1993, 1994) also emphasize the importance of communication as support for learners' autonomy and independence during distance learning.

The need for learner support in distance teaching comes from the recognition that learning processes take place with a geographical separation of teaching providers (tutors, instructors, and learning material developers) and students. This learning mode requires distance students to work alone for most parts of the learning process. Therefore, distance learners have unique needs, and many practitioners in the field believe that providing distance learners with appropriate support services will increase the quality of their learning (Lee, 2000; Simpson, 2002). Their unique needs include the following: 1) information to help learners relate to the institution and understand its systems, 2) contact with tutors to help maintain motivation and overcome learning problems, 3) a strong institutional identity to feel that they are part of a body of learners rather than studying in isolation, and 4) advice on how to study in distance education delivery mode (COL, 2009). There are two different perspectives from which to approach learner support: supplementary and holistic (Robinson, 1995; Tait, 1995). The supplementary approach is more limited in that learner support is confined as an add-on to learning materials; the holistic/ complementary approach views learner support services as pervading the entire education system (Lee, 2000). Holmberg's theory of interaction and communication resonates with QA in learner support dimensions in that it addresses the importance of counselling and tutoring as well as simulated conversation built into the design of the self-learning materials; these are important components of both the AAOU and COL QA models (AAOU, 2010; COL, 2009). This study reviews QA in learner support areas based on these models because these organizations have had a significant influence on QA in the three institutions involved in this research. It is particularly important to study quality assurance at these distance education institutions, since these institutions play such a vital role in regional development and innovation.

Research Purpose

The overall purpose of this study was to explore the development and implementation of QA at three open universities in Southeast Asia: Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) in Thailand, Anak Bangsa Open University (ABOU) in Malaysia, and Universitas Terbuka (UT) in Indonesia. This article reports on results related to institutional policies and the implementation of QA in learner support areas, documenting and comparing the three institutions' QA approaches and implementation methods with the goal of advancing understanding of QA programs in open universities in the Southeast Asian context.

Methodology

Research Questions

The portion of the research reported on in this article, part of a broader investigation into QA in the three universities, was guided by two main research questions:

1. What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas in the selected universities?
2. How are the selected universities implementing QA policies in learner support areas?

Research Approach

This study employed the case-study research methodology, which attempts to understand phenomena in the social world (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2012). It investigated and analysed the universities' QA programs for the purpose of gaining insight and collective understanding of how these universities develop and implement QA policies, revealing key characteristics of the QA programs employed by each of the three universities.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data sources for this case study consisted of interviews with key informants and institutional policy documents. Documentary analysis was used primarily to answer the research questions about formal written QA policies, while interviews sought to build understanding of the knowledge and views of key people who developed and carried out these policies. The multiple data sources allowed for triangulation of findings and conclusions about policies, practices and procedures, and problems.

Data analysis included the development of coding, conceptual categorisation, and thematic grouping (Saldana, 2009). Supported by MAXQDA Version 10 software, this phase involved identifying closely related codes by pointing out differences and similarities, underscoring underlying and recurrent concepts, grouping related concepts, and developing conceptual constructs. Further, using the list of categories as a reference, we identified the passages in the transcripts that represented the emerging themes for each institution's individual case study. Finally, a cross-case table display (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was employed for each of two issues underlying the related research questions (QA policies and implementation). This allowed us to compare and contrast the three cases and to discern patterns or themes. In the cross-case analysis, tables were used to indicate the summary of the findings of the comparison of the QA policies and practices in the three DTUs according to two parameters, the institutional QA policies and implementation that support the QA in learner support areas. The purpose of comparison was to highlight the continuum of differences and similarities of existing phenomena being observed in each institution and to provide further comment and researchers' impressions as to the extent

of the differences.

Results

Research Question 1: What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas in the selected universities?

In order to understand the extent to which the QA program adoption relies on institutional policies that fully support the definition, development, and implementation of the program, we explored the nature of QA policies at each of the three institutions. These policies also guide the institutions in resourcing, regulating, and maintaining their QA systems. While focusing on QA in learner support areas, data in these case studies highlighted the importance of university-wide policies, particularly as articulated in QA manuals, as the foundation for QA in individual areas. Emergent themes from the individual case studies are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Emergent Themes Related to Institutional Policies Supporting QA in Learner Support Areas.

Theme	University		
	STOU	ABOU	UT
1. Foundational role of the university QA manual	• A guide for implementing the full QA system, emphasizing the use of key performance indicators and internal and external QA audits	• A guide for university-wide QA implementation • The first level in a hierarchy of quality management documentation	• Implementation guide containing ten quality areas of the university QA framework
2. Role of institutional policies as guides for QA in learner support	• Policies in teaching and learning provision and student development activities as QA guides for learner support areas, focusing on the development	• Policies in teaching and learning provision and support services as guides for QA learner support areas, with focus on students' needs and continuous improvement	• Policies in teaching and learning provision and support services as guides to ensure that learner support services fit students' needs

	of student self-learning skills		

Theme 1: The foundational role of the university's QA manual. Quality Assurance is regarded as a current and innovative practice in Asian online learning institutions. University QA manuals are important official documents at STOU, ABOU, and UT. Because quality emphasizes establishing and meeting standards for products and services, these texts set out standards and performance indicators, as well as important background and procedural information such as the university's profile, institutional quality statements, quality components, procedures and guidelines, and internal mechanisms for evaluating quality performance.

STOU has adopted a QA systems approach, and its QA manual covers all aspects of the system, including policies and procedures, indicators and benchmarks, guidelines for self-assessment reporting, and guidelines for assessing the quality of education (STOU, 2011). It defines internal and external QA dimensions and sets out Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and guidelines to achieve the standards. It clearly defines guidelines for a self-assessment report (SAR), outlining the purpose, structure, and elements to be followed by all departments across the university. The manual was developed in accordance with guidelines from government agencies responsible for controlling and regulating higher education quality. When viewed as a tool for development, it provides a shared understanding of the baseline expectations for delivery of services and supports.

The ABOU and UT QA manuals are similar to that at STOU in that they outline comprehensive quality program frameworks. The latest version of ABOU's quality manual (ABOU, 2011) is a major reference and a required template for department-level QA manuals. For implementation purposes, the university's manual is supplemented by quality operations documents for individual quality areas, such as ABOU (2012), the manual of the Center for Student Management (CSM). This provides detailed guidelines about quality criteria and how support services should be organised and delivered to students.

The QA manual at UT presents the background of UT's quality framework and the structure and components of QA, covering 10 quality areas with best practices that serve as the university's quality policies. The latest version (UT, 2012) is used as the current guideline for QA programs and serves as a major reference for quality manuals in different service delivery areas.

This study found that quality manuals are important guides for QA implementation. Belawati, Zuhairi, and Wardani (2012), senior managers at UT, addressed this importance as follows:

> The QA Policy Manual … explained the job descriptions and performance standards/ criteria, how feedback would be provided, the appeals process, and how various incentive systems related to performance. It was found that these not only helped staff in performing their daily tasks, but also triggered the realization that their knowledge and skills could always be improved upon and that targets and performance indicators could always be raised. (p. 116)

Cross-case analysis also found that the development and implementation of quality manuals in these three open universities emphasize actions to develop, change, and maintain the work culture to support the implementation of their QA programs. These frameworks allow for the development of a consistent set of expectations and a process whereby innovation and learning

can be fostered.

Theme 2: The role of institutional policies as guides for QA in learner support areas. The focus of QA policies at STOU, ABOU, and UT differ, but all emphasize student skills and needs. Although each institution has different QA policies in learner support areas, the policies at all three universities address two dimensions: teaching and learning provision, and support services. Teaching and learning provision refers to the various academic services provided by the university to promote students' learning; support services include a variety of non-academic kinds of support based on students' requirements.

At STOU, institutional policies for QA in learner support areas promote the development of student self-directed learning skills. The policies outline systems and mechanisms to (1) provide information and educational services to students, and (2) promote student development activities that are also useful to alumni (STOU, 2011, p. 162). The QA policy in student support services is particularly evident in (1) technical advisory services and guidance to students, (2) provision of useful information for students, (3) activities to improve student academic performance, and (4) activities to develop students' knowledge and experience that are also designed to be useful to alumni.

At ABOU, quality emphasizes customer needs and continuous improvement. Policies there outline infrastructure and services to support these priorities, including student feedback to assist with improving their offerings. For example, some students prefer to be involved in face-to-face (F2F) sessions and self-directed learning using modules rather than online tutorials.

At UT, QA policies address the provision of services for teaching and learning, and student support, setting out general guidelines for service provision and criteria for evaluation.

STOU, ABOU, and UT have thus all been deeply involved in designing quality policies that serve as guides for implementing QA in learner support areas. In all three universities, QA follows quality standards (indicators, benchmarks, or statements of best practices) that are intended to enable people to understand and contribute to the QA program.

Research Question 2: How are the selected universities implementing QA policies in learner support areas?

The universities' quality policies and practices provide the foundation for QA implementation in the area of learner support. QA implementation is then both supported by and responsive to their internal and external environments. Table 2 summarizes emergent themes related to systems, practices, and priorities in the universities' internal environments.

Table 2. Emergent Themes Related to the Institutions' Internal Environments.

Theme	University		
	STOU	ABOU	UT
3. Support from the internal environment for QA in learner support	• Supported by two levels of QA management systems and	• Supported through centralized QA management systems and	• Supported through centralized QA management and distributed

areas	the centralized Educational Quality Assurance and Coordinating Center • Adoption of PDCA Quality Cycle • Importance of both academic and administrative staff	distributed learning centers • Adoption of PDCA Quality Cycle • Importance of both academic and administrative staff	regional offices • Adoption of PDCA Quality Cycle • Importance of both academic and administrative staff
4. QA emphasis in learner support	• Emphasis on employment of a blended learning pedagogy and the important roles of the Office Educational Services and the distributed student clubs	• Emphasis on employment of a blended learning pedagogy and e-CRM to promote students' success	• Emphasis on employment of a blended learning pedagogy and learning skills workshops to support students' success
5. Theoretical basis for the implementation of teaching and learning processes	• Holmberg's interaction and communication theory	• Holmberg's interaction and communication theory	• Holmberg's interaction and communication theory

Theme 3: Support from the internal environment for QA in learner support areas. In all three universities, QA implementation in learner support areas is supported by internal environments integrating QA into their organization structures and management systems. Centralized QA centers, along with learning centers scattered across their countries, have been regarded as strategic units for QA management, while QA systems and human resources have played key roles.

QA management structures and systems. All three universities have created centralized QA centers to coordinate and manage their departments across the university, within faculties or schools that perform learning support activities, and offices of student management.

At STOU, the Office of Educational Quality Assurance and Coordinating Center has played strategic

roles in diverse activities including reviewing QA policies, organizing training sessions to implement SAR, and coordinating all departments in executing quality standards. Each department or faculty has a QA committee responsible for an annual performance review. At ABOU, centralized QA management has been carried out by the Institute of Quality, Research and Innovation (IQRI), which has promoted quality within the university, provided necessary training for academic and administrative staff, and promoted quality culture across departments. Similarly, the Quality Assurance Center (Pusmintas) at UT has played important roles in organizing quality initiatives and managing quality processes within the university as well as coordinating internal and external quality audits. All the open universities have been supported by the development of study centers (STOU version) or learning centers (ABOU and UT version) that offer local learner support services throughout their countries. For example, these support services provide academic and non-academic counselling, manage F2F tutorials and practicum activities, and distribute learning materials.

The PDCA quality cycle. All three universities have adopted as the basis for their QA management the classic Shewhart PDCA (Plan – Do – Check – Act) cycle (Deming, 1993; Gabor, 1990). For planning, a series of information sharing, training, and management meetings have ensured that all staff understand the QA policies and participate accordingly. Then all faculties and other supporting departments execute the work of their respective QA areas in accordance with quality policies and performance indicators. Self-assessments are then performed, followed by management review meetings at the department and university levels to identify weaknesses and challenges during the implementation and to take necessary action for future QA programs. Interviewees reported that the adoption of the PDCA cycle in the universities' QA systems has contributed significantly to these universities in maintaining and improving the quality of their distance education.

Human resources. There is no doubt that the implementation of QA in learner support areas in the three universities has been strongly supported by both academic and administrative staff. Academic staff and administrators, often referred to as human resources, are the most valuable assets who manage, implement, and evaluate all of the activities of QA programs at STOU, ABOU, and UT.

Corresponding to Holmberg's (1995) ideas about course development, academic staff at all three institutions have been involved in designing and developing learning materials (as content developers, course reviewers, and instructional designers), performing teaching and learning processes (e.g., tutoring and academic counselling), preparing test items for final examination, managing courses, and being involved in managing quality programs. All three universities employ as tutors non-permanent staff from other institutions, particularly from public and private local universities, with status equal to that of professors in conventional universities. All the universities in this study reported seeing these tutors as a critical component of program quality and conduct training sessions to help them develop appropriate tutoring skills and attributes to complement their subject matter competency. Academic counselling responsibilities at all three institutions involve email, telephone calls, texting, and the use of social media.

Effective administration is the second crucial component of distance education quality in all three universities. Administrative staff shoulder a far more complex burden than in conventional universities, encompassing central office and regional offices, learning centers scattered in many locations, and administrative links with diverse suppliers such as other educational institutions (for tutors), post offices and shipping companies (for delivery of learning materials), commercial television and radio telecommunication corporations (for broadcasting and communications links), commercial banks, and regional and local universities' libraries.

STOU administrative staff members handle learner support areas such as information services, student inquiries and complaints, and organization of F2F and online tutorials and local student club activities. The administrative staff play a substantial role in QA implementation as committee participants and chairs and in helping to develop QA policy, monitor implementation, and represent the university on government QA bodies. Administrative staff at both ABOU and UT are deeply involved in learner support activities, including counselling programs, organizing orientation programs, implementing customer relationship management, organizing and analyzing students' feedback, organizing study skills workshops, conducting examination clinics, and providing financial assistance for eligible students. Interviews at all three institutions confirmed that administrative staff play essential delivery and QA roles, particularly in learner support areas, and significantly contribute to helping the three universities achieve consensus in implementing and maintaining quality and student satisfaction for these functions.

Theme 4: QA emphasis in learner support. Closely aligned to the institutional policies, as previously discussed, the application of QA in learner support areas at STOU, ABOU, and UT emphasized two broad areas: (1) blended learning pedagogy, and (2) programs of student activities and support services tailored to student needs and institutional priorities. These confirm the common view that learner support comes from a collection of services that work together for more effective learning.

Holmberg (1995) argued that distance learning instructional processes should be based on the insight that student learning activity or student-centered learning is more important than teacher-centered learning. According to Holmberg (1995) and Moore (1977), distance education is concerned with developing independent and autonomous learning. Because the specific characteristics of distance education providers are different from conventional universities in their separation of students from teachers and the extensive use of media in instructional processes, it is the task of tutors, instructors, course developers, planners, and administrators to develop learning support services that promote independent learning.

Consistent with this argument, STOU, ABOU, and UT have all implemented blended learning pedagogies that emphasize the need for and development of independent student learning. Self-guided study (the term used at STOU) (STOU, 2012), self-managed learning (used at ABOU) (Abas, Sankaran, Bakar, Johari, & Ayob, 2009), and self-directed learning (used at UT) (UT, 2010) all describe independent study that is used together with F2F sessions, online tutorials, mobile learning (M-learning), and tutorials by radio and television. For example, STOU supports self-managed learning with mixed media packets of textbooks, workbooks, cassette and video tapes, radio and television programs, tutorials, and practice in STOU's study centers (STOU, 2004, 2012). ABOU's blended pedagogy (self-managed learning, F2F classes, and online learning) requires distance learners to engage in self-managed learning most of the time. "However, even in this, tutors have a crucial role to play. [They] need to consistently provide learners with moral support and encouragement throughout their learning process" (Abas et al., 2009, p. 27). At UT, this encouragement is seen as important for motivating students to regularly manage their time for learning (UT, 2010).

Moore and Kearsley (2012) stressed that although an increasingly large range of materials for students are delivered by the Internet, some learner support services are better provided in a F2F group setting. Student feedback reinforced this finding at all three universities.

The importance of online platforms for learning support has increased at STOU, ABOU, and UT. Online learning has empowered distance students to interact with tutors and other students in more flexible ways (Magano & Carvalho, 2010). At STOU, online learning services have been used for graduate programs, allowing students to update teaching content from tutors and take part in

online discussions that fit with their own schedules (STOU, 2003); this has strengthened student engagement and improved the student experience in the instructional process. Web boards have also been used to promote students' learning and support tutor-learner interaction (STOU, 2012). ABOU has developed myVLE, a "home-grown" learning management system, to support online learning services (Ali & Fadzil, 2012). UT-Online, now supported by Moodle, was launched in 2002 and offers Internet-accessible online tutorials and counselling; it is now being extended to all courses.

Theme 5: Theoretical basis for the implementation of teaching and learning processes. In all three universities, the implementation of both academic and learner support processes has been closely aligned to Holmberg's (1995) interaction and communication theory. Many interview subjects, supported by data in official institutional documents, confirmed that interaction and communication on different media channels have been highly important for maintaining educational quality. Reflecting Holmberg's (2007) ideas, the three universities have been deeply involved in building real dialogue through e-mail, telephone, audio and video conferences, and simulated dialogue through conversational course writing. These practices reflected Holmberg's (1986) principal argument that the "communication element is rightly considered a cornerstone of distance education" (p. 54).

Pre-produced course materials (print, TV and radio, and online) are the universities' major forms of learning materials for independent study. In relation to the autonomy and independence theory proposed by Wedemeyer and Moore (cited in Keegan, 1996), Holmberg (1995) maintained that students in distance education were independent "in carrying through a program of study" (p. 15) in terms of time, course, and place. As distance learners have "***different capacities*** for making decisions regarding their own learning" (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 213; emphasis in original), distance learners have choices to decide "where and when to learn [and] how much of a course to undertake at a time" (Holmberg, 1995, p. 15). Development and regular revision of course materials by multi-skilled course teams help to ensure and maintain their quality in all three institutions.

Holmberg (1995) argued that distance teaching institutions should provide learner support services that promote real communication and interaction. STOU, ABOU, and UT have done this through teaching delivery modes such as F2F tutorials and online learning. The use of online learning helps the three universities not only to provide one-way content presentations but also to support two-way interactions and collaborative learning, thus supporting communities of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000). At the time of this research, all three universities were also heavily involved in providing F2F tutorial sessions; although these were not compulsory, many students asked for and attended them.

Holmberg (1995) identified three 'guiding operational values' for implementing learner support at a distance: personal relationships, empathy, and friendly conversation. Interviewees at STOU, ABOU, and UT all confirmed the importance of developing personal relationships between tutors and learners. Tutors and administrative staff are encouraged to develop a 'personal touch' with their students in their interaction and communication, and STOU and ABOU have assigned staff to maintain close communications with their students. Interviewees recognized this as important for keeping students in their programs and attaining their educational goals.

Empathy is seen as critical when counsellors or academic advisors encounter distance learners with either academic or non-academic problems. An interviewee at ABOU shared this intense experience:

> A student told me that she was sick and was going for an operation for cancer. She left

> the message asking "if I die please help for funerary arrangements. I left your phone number with my doctor...' So, when we express our empathy to the students, they trust us.... They believe that we are the ones who can share their feelings and problems.

A respondent at UT noted that expressing empathy has kept his students from dropping out and motivated them to continue their study and success. Friendly and encouraging conversation was also consistently seen as important for reducing isolation and supporting students' success.

Theme 6: Influence of the universities' external environments. Their external environments push the three universities to continuously evaluate their strategic directions in implementing QA programs. This final section discusses relationships between the implementation of QA in learner support areas, at STOU, ABOU, and UT and their external environments (Table 3).

Responses to the local culture. Implementation of QA in learner support areas in the three Southeast Asian open universities tended to vary with their particular local cultures. Among other things, learner support services have been designed to meet the needs of local students, including their common learning habits, religions, and languages. Interviewees identified language as the most critical aspect in designing both academic content and support services. With regard to the importance of language in designing support for students, Simpson (2002) warned that, "anyone providing support should be aware that … students might be more at risk in situations where their language skills are under stress" (p. 160). Therefore, language choice for pre-produced learning materials and other support services has been considered a strategic decision. STOU and UT use their national languages, Thai and Indonesian, in their learner support services; this has allowed their faculty, administrative staff, and especially students to clearly express their understanding of learning content and to participate in meaningful thinking. In contrast, ABOU has chosen English, rather than the national language, bahasa Melayu, for all of their learning materials and support. One interviewee noted that this is not an obstacle for ABOU's students, since they understand English well, but this does bring into question the role of language in development. However, another commented that some students wish to study in Melayu, and ABOU has developed soft copy (online) learning materials in this language that can be accessed by their students at no cost. According to one respondent at UT, local languages might be used during F2F tutorial sessions and in other interaction and communication settings, although this is not the university policy.

Interviewees also described how students' ethnicity and religion have influenced the universities' support services. For example, ABOU and UT have been particularly concerned with Muslim students; they provided an interfaith room (surau) at each of their learning centers to serve students during tutorial and final examination sessions. To address ethnicity issues, the universities employ local people in administrative positions, as well as faculty members from local universities for tutorial services.

Table 3. Emergent Themes Related to the Institutions' External Environments.

Theme	University		
	STOU	ABOU	UT
6. Influence of the universities' external environments on QA	• Response to the local culture, particularly language • Support from	• Response to the local culture, particularly language • Support from	• Response to the local culture, particularly language and learning habits

implementation in learner support	educational technologies for both academic and administrative services • Correspondence with government QA standards • Alignment with standards of the Baldrige National Quality Award	educational technologies for both academic and administrative services • Correspondence with government QA standards • Alignment with IS0 9001 and COL QA Toolkit	• Support from educational technologies for both academic and administrative services • Correspondence with government QA standards • Alignment with ISO 9001 and ICDE standards

Educational technology support. Instructional design and delivery in open universities have progressed in line with the advancement of technologies. Technologies have created new opportunities and possibilities for learning and instruction (Halverson, 2009), and all three universities rely on current technologies to deliver their academic, administrative, and communication services. For example, STOU broadcasts academic services via four satellite TV channels (STOU, 2004, 2012); UT uses a virtual private network (VPN) for data transaction and video conferences in its head office and across 37 regional offices (UT, 2010), and ABOU uses its own learning portal, My Virtual Learning Environment (myVLE), to support various e-Learning activities. MyVLE has been supplemented with multimedia capabilities featuring e-mail, digital library, and learner connections (ABOU, 2006).

Government QA standards. STOU, ABOU, and UT all operate within QA frameworks and quality criteria mandated by their national governments. STOU is required by law to follow internal and external specifications. Internal ones, overseen by the Office of the Higher Education Committee (OHEC), focuses on inputs and processes, while external standards, under the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assurance (ONESQA), are focused on QA outputs. ABOU must ensure that its academic programs and qualifications comply with the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF), which provides guidelines, standards, and codes of practice to help higher education institutions, including distance higher education, enhance their educational programs through internal and external quality audits (Ali & Fadzil, 2012). As in Malaysia, all higher education institutions in Indonesia, including UT, are bound by quality standards governed by the National Accreditation Board of Higher Education (DGHE).

Alignment with professional QA agencies' standards. In line with their internal efforts to establish rigorous and innovative QA systems, STOU, ABOU, and UT have all sought external validation to ensure that their efforts have indeed resulted in better quality performance. At the time of this research, STOU was in the initial stages of applying for the US-based Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012). The Baldrige model covers seven core components: leadership; strategic planning; customer and market focus; measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; human resources; process management; and business results (Sallis, 2002). Top management at STOU confirmed in an interview that the university preferred adopting the Baldrige Award criteria because "ISO standards are focused on some aspects, but the Malcolm Baldrige has an overall focus — total quality management. It's a good system."

Meanwhile, ABOU and UT adopted ISO quality standards for some core business areas, but not for the whole university. In 2006, UT was awarded certification for ISO 9001:2000 for the course material distribution from the UT headquarters to regional offices. UT later (between 2007 and 2011) earned ISO certificates for these areas: development of learning and examination materials, academic administration services, promotion and cooperation, and student/ learning services for regional offices (Yuniati, Hardini, Sunarsih, Meilani, & Belawati, 2012).

Rather than use business process evaluations, ABOU has adopted ISO standards based on administrative units. Four of its strategic units have been ISO-certified: Registration, the Center for Instructional Design and Technology (CIDT), the Center for Student Management (CSM), and the Digital Library (Ali & Fadzil, 2012).

The adoption of ISO QA standards has helped ABOU and UT to develop their QA manuals and thus ensure the expectations and quality of their academic and learner support processes. Standard operating procedures (SOPs) have been regarded as current practices that help to maintain process consistency and support the commitment of all staff involved in their respective quality areas. UT's staff and top leader confirmed the impact of adopting ISO on their development as follows:

> Based on the experience of the past five years of using the ISO system, a positive impact on staff and university performance has been observed, resulting in a significant decrease in students' complaints and problems. It is of course a 'bonus' that having ISO certificates also helps to strengthen public confidence in UT. (Yuniati et al., 2012, p. 88)

UT and ABOU have also adopted additional QA standards. Since 2009, ABOU has periodically carried out self-assessment using the Commonwealth of Learning (COL)'s QA Toolkit for Distance Higher Education Institutions and Programmes (Ali & Fadzil, 2012). UT has been certified by the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) since 2005. The adoption of these QA programs has resulted in quality initiatives and continuous improvement involving people and communications across departments, as emphasised by senior managers at ABOU (Ali & Fadzil, 2012):

> Recognizing that teamwork and collaboration within and across departments are the mainstay of any quality management system, the university gives due emphasis to holding QA meetings that are attended by quality management representatives from all departments. This facilitates communication and encourages collective and coordinated quality initiatives. (p. 263)

It was also reported that the adoption of ISO and other external QA standards, such as ICDE and the Baldrige Award, have supported these three DTUs as learning organizations and have enabled them to remain competitive and innovative in their educational business environments. STOU, ABOU, and UT have been totally involved in implementing self-assessment and external quality audits for evaluating the implementation of their quality policies. These continuous internal and external quality assessments have also supported strategies informing their quality practices.

Theme 7: Student involvement in QA. The three universities involved in this research confirmed that students are very important and are regarded as their major customers or crucial stakeholders. Using different mechanisms, all have involved their students in designing and implementing QA programs in learner support areas by soliciting regular student feedback and developing quality guidelines based on students' perspectives.

Table 4. Student involvement in QA.

Theme	University		
	STOU	ABOU	UT
7. Student involvement in QA	• Regular surveys and tutor evaluations	• Regular feedback through the e-CRM system, surveys, and evaluations of tutors, modules and courses	• Regular student surveys evaluating all services

ABOU, which has declared itself a "customer-focused organization" (Ali & Fadzil, 2012, p. 263), has integrated students' feedback for quality improvement into its online systems. UT and STOU ask their students to evaluate every tutor's performance. Interviewees at ABOU and UT reported that their students are regularly involved in assessing the level of quality achievement in the core areas of registration, learning materials, learner support services, examinations, and academic administration. Students' feedback samples are analyzed and reported in management review meetings at department and university levels. This student feedback is then used for continuous improvement in policies, standards, and procedures as well as human resources and the QA program itself.

Conclusion

This study has found that STOU, ABOU and UT share many similarities in their policies and implementation of quality assurance for learner support services. For example, the foundation of their QA programs each included the development of a detailed QA manual, which served as important documents, guiding QA implementation throughout their institutions. Institutional QA policies and guidelines, with a strong focus on student needs and the development of learning skills, have also supported QA implementation, as have the universities' management systems, administrative structures, and academic and administrative staff. In particular, the universities' innovative approach to quality assurance centers and geographically distributed learning centers has played a strategic role in supporting the implementation of QA in learner support areas. This process has confirmed for multiple stakeholders of these institutions that the education provided nationally to hundreds of thousands of learners is meeting their needs and those of their governments.

STOU, ABOU, and UT also share similarities in integrating QA into their learner support activities and processes. Closely aligned to Holmberg's (1995) theory, their learner support processes emphasize interaction and communication in order to promote student engagement and effective learning. Similarly, the recommendations of Gooley and Lockwood (2012) note the importance of peer connections, problem solving, and modeling behaviours and outcomes, all of which are

present in the institutions studied here.

This study also confirms the importance of relationships between the implementation of QA in learner support areas and the universities' external environments. External factors identified as important influences on the implementation of QA programs include local culture and language, educational technology, governments, and external QA agencies. These findings are similar to Robinson's (1995) findings that effective learner support in open and distance education is heavily contingent on local circumstances. Thus, models of 'good practice' for learner support in developed countries with modern and different educational settings are not always appropriate for countries with different cultures. Finally, student involvement, particularly through regular feedback, is confirmed as a key to implementing and maintaining QA in academic and learner support services.

As this study has only focused on QA programs at open universities operating in developing countries, its findings may not be relevant for other settings. However, the three case studies reveal interesting patterns in the ways QA approaches are implemented in unique and innovative ways in response to demands within each educational, institutional, social, cultural, and political setting. We see common themes regarding problems, challenges, experiences, and achievements in employing QA programs in open and distance learning institutions. The adoption of quality frameworks at all three universities can be regarded as an exemplar of the innovative implementation of QA agendas in ODL universities, specifically in the Southeast Asia context.

Editorial Note: While the references here are correct, readers will not find the documents related to ABOU as these have been changed to hide the identity of the organization.

References

1. Association of Asian Open Universities (AAOU). (2010). ***Quality assurance framework.*** Retrieved from http://www.aaou.net.
2. Abas, Z. W., Sankaran, T., Bakar, W. L. L. W. A., Johari, H., & Ayob, A. P. (2009). ***ABOU tutor's handbook***. Unpublished internal document, Anak Bangsa Open University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
3. Ali, A., & Fadzil, M. (2012). Open University Malaysia. In I. S. Jung, T. M. Wong, and T. Belawati (Eds.), ***Quality assurance in distance education and e-learning: Challenges and solution from Asia*** (pp. 258 – 274). New Delhi, IN: SAGE Publications.
4. Anak Bangsa Open University (ABOU). (2006). ***Quality policy and client charter: Prospectus 2006***. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Anak Bangsa Open University.
5. Anak Bangsa Open University (ABOU). (2011). ***Institut kualiti, penyelidikan, dan inovasi: Manual kualiti*** [Institutional quality, research, and innovation: Quality manual]. Unpublished internal document, Anak Bangsa Open University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
6. Anak Bangsa Open University (ABOU). (2012). ***Pusat pengurusan pelajar (CSM): Manual operasi perkhidmatan CSM*** [Student management centre (CSM): Operations manual]. Unpublished internal document, Anak Bangsa Open University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
7. Bastedo M. N., & Gumport, P. J. (2003). Access to what? Mission differentiation and academic stratification in U.S. public higher education. ***Higher Education, 46***(3), 341-359.
8. Belawati, T., Zuhairi, A., & Wardani, I. G. A. K. (2012). Quality assurance in a mega-university: Universitas Terbuka. In I. S. Jung & C. Latchem (Eds.), ***Quality assurance and accreditation in distance education and e-learning: Models, policies, and research*** (pp. 113-123). New York: Routledge.
9. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL). (2009). ***Quality assurance toolkit for distance***

higher education institutions and programmes. Vancouver, BC: Commonwealth of Learning.
10. Daniel, S. J. (2012). Foreword. In I. S. Jung & C. Latchem (Eds.), ***Quality assurance and accreditation in distance education and e-learning: Models, policies, and research*** (pp. xiii-xvi). New York: Routledge.
11. Davies, R. S., Howell, S. L., & Petrie, J. A. (2010). A review of trends in distance education scholarship at research universities in North America. ***International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 11***(3), 42-56.
12. Deming, W. E. (1993). ***The new economics for industry, government, and education***. Boston, MA: MIT Press.
13. Gabor, A. (1990). ***The man who discovered quality: How W. Edwards Deming brought the quality revolution to America—the stories of Ford, XEROX, and GM***. New York: Times Books.
14. Garrison, R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. ***Internet & Higher Education, 2***(2), 87-105. doi:10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6
15. Gooley, A., & Lockwood, F. (2012). ***Innovation in open and distance learning: Successful development of online and web-based learning.*** New York: Routledge.
16. Guri-Rosenblit, S. (2005). Diverse models of distance teaching universities. In C. Howard, J. V. Boettcher, L. Justice, K. Schenk, P. L. Rogers, & G. A. Berg (Eds.), ***Encyclopedia of distance learning*** (pp. 674-680). London: Idea Group Reference.
17. Halverson. T. (2009). ***Distance education innovations and new learning environments: Combining traditional teaching methods and emerging technologies.*** Amherst, NY: Cambria Press.
18. Holmberg, B. (1983). Guided didactic conversation in distance education. In D. Sewart, D. Keegan, & B. Holmberg (Eds.), ***Distance education: International perspectives*** (pp. 114-122). London: Croom Helm.
19. Holmberg, B. (1986). ***Growth and structure of distance education***. Buckingham, UK: Croom Helm.
20. Holmberg, B. (1995). ***Theory and practice of distance education***. London: Routledge.
21. Holmberg, B. (2007). A theory of teaching-learning conversations. In M. G. Moore (Ed.), ***Handbook of distance education*** (pp. 69-75). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
22. Hoosen, S., & Butcher, N. (2012). Quality assurance for distance education in sub-Saharan Africa. In I. Jung & C. Latchem (Eds.), ***Quality assurance and accreditation in distance education and e-learning: Models, policies, and research*** (pp. 48-57). New York: Routledge.
23. Inglis, A. (2003). Planning and management of networked learning. In S. Panda (Ed.), ***Planning and management in distance education*** (pp. 171-181). London: Kogan Page.
24. Jung, I. S., & Latchem, C. (2012). Preface. In I. S. Jung & C. Latchem (Eds.), ***Quality assurance and accreditation in distance education and e-learning: Models, policies, and research*** (pp. xvii-xxi). New York: Routledge.
25. Keegan, D. (1996). ***The foundations of distance education***. London: Routledge.
26. Lee, Y. (2000). Current status of learner support in distance education: Emerging issues and future research agenda. In ***Annual proceedings of selected research and development papers presented at the National Convention of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology*** (pp. 177-185).
27. Magano, J., & Carvalho, C. V. (2010). From traditional teaching to online learning: Revolution or evolution. In H. Song (Ed.), ***Distance learning technology, current instruction, and the future of education: Applications of today, practices of tomorrow*** (pp. 17-26). New York: Information Science Reference.
28. Marope, M. T. (2005). Namibia human capital and knowledge development for economic

growth with equity. ***Africa Region Human Development Working Paper Series – No. 84.*** Washington, DC, USA: The World Bank.
29. McIsaac, M. S., & Gunawardena, C. N. (2001). ***Theory of distance education.*** Retrieved from http://www.aect.org/edtech/ed1/13/13-03.html.
30. Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). ***Qualitative data analysis*** (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
31. Moore, M. G. (1977). On a theory of independent study. ***ZIFF Papiere No. 16.*** (pp. 3-30). Hagen, DE: Fernuniversitat.
32. Moore, M. G. (1993). Theory of transactional distance. In D. Keegan (Ed.), ***Theoretical principles of distance education*** (pp. 33-38). London, UK: Routledge.
33. Moore, M. G. (1994). Autonomy and independence. ***The American Journal of Distance Education, 8***(2), 1-5.
34. Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (2012). ***Distance education: A systems view of online learning.*** Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
35. Nekongo-Nielsen, H. (2006, October). The contributions of open and distance learning to national development in Namibia. Paper presented at the ***Fourth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning.*** Retrieved from http://pcf4.dec.uwi.edu/viewpaper.php?id=351
36. Peters, O. (2003). Models of open and flexible learning in distance education. In S. Panda (Ed.), ***Planning and management in distance education*** (pp. 15-27). London: Kogan Page.
37. Rashid, N., & Rashid, M. (2012). Issues and problems in distance education. ***Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education-TOJDE, 13***(1), 108-114. Retrieved from http://tojde.anadolu.edu.tr/yonetim/icerik/makaleler/726-published.pdf
38. Rena, R. (2007). Challenges in introducing distance education programme in Eritrea: Some observations and implications. ***Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education-TOJDE, 8***(1), 191-205. Retrieved from http://tojde.anadolu.edu.tr/yonetim/icerik/makaleler/323-published.pdf
39. Robinson, B. (1995). Research and pragmatism in learner support. In F. Lockwood (Ed.), ***Open and distance learning today*** (pp. 221-231). London: Routledge.
40. Saldana, J. (2009). ***The coding manual for qualitative researchers.*** Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
41. Sallis, E. (2002). ***Total quality management in education***. London: Kogan Page.
42. Simpson, O. (2002). ***Supporting students in online, open and distance learning.*** London: Kogan Page.
43. Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), ***The Sage handbook of qualitative research*** (pp. 443-466). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
44. Stella, A., & Gnanam, A. (2004). Quality assurance in distance education: The challenges to be addressed. ***Higher Education, 47***(2), 143-160.
45. Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU). (2003). ***25th anniversary Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University***. Bangkok, TH: The Office of the University Press.
46. Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU). (2004). ***26th anniversary Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University***. Bangkok, TH: The Office of the University Press.
47. Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU). (2011). ***Quality assurance: The elements of quality indicators and evaluation criteria.*** Unpublished internal document, University Thammathirat Sukhothai Kingdom, Bangpood, Nonthaburi, Thailand.
48. Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU). (2012). ***Educational opportunity for all: STOU distance learning system*** (STOU Newsletter). Bangkok, TH: The Office of the University Press.
49. Sungkatavat, P., & Boonyarataphan, T. (2012). Thailand's Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University. In I. S. Jung, T. M. Wong, & T. Belawati (Eds.), ***Quality assurance in distance education and e-learning*** (pp. 25-41). New Delhi, IN: SAGE Publications.
50. Tait, A. (1995). Student support in open and distance learning. In F. Lockwood (Ed.), ***Open***

and distance learning today (pp. 232–241). London: Routledge.
51. Tait, A. (1997). ***Quality assurance in higher education: Selected case studies.*** Vancouver, BC: The Commonwealth of Learning.
52. Tait, A. (2008). What are open universities for? ***Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning, 23***(2), 85–93.
53. Universitas Terbuka (UT). (2010). ***Brief information about Universitas Terbuka Indonesia: Submission to International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) Standard Agency (ISA).*** Universitas Terbuka, Jakarta, Indonesia.
54. Universitas Terbuka (UT). (2012). ***Sistem jaminan kualitas Universitas Terbuka: JKUM UT00*** [Universitas Terbuka quality assurance system: JKUM UT00]. Unpublished internal document, Universitas Terbuka, Jakarta, Indonesia.
55. Wedemeyer, C. A. (1981). ***Learning at the back door. Reflections on non-traditional learning in the lifespan.*** Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin.
56. Yin, R. K. (2012). ***Application of case study research.*** Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
57. Yuniati, S., Hardini, P. K., Sunarsih, D. Meilani, A., & Belawati, T. (2012). Indonesia's Universitas Terbuka. In I. S. Jung, T. M. Wong, and T. Belawati (Eds.), ***Quality assurance in distance education and e-learning: Challenges and solution from Asia,*** (pp. 81–93). New Delhi, IN: SAGE Publications.

Ojat Darojat is the Director of Quality Assurance at Universitas Terbuka. E-mail: ojat@ut.ac.id

Michelle Nilson is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University. E-mail: mnilson@sfu.ca

David Kaufman is a Professor in the Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University. E-mail: dkaufman@sfu.ca