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IMPLEMENTATION

Managing the ODL System in Pursuing Quality and the Case of Hanoi Open University

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Introduction

Quality is crucial for any open and distance learning institution. Pursuing quality in ODL has been the critical issue theoretically and practically. It is imperative for any open and distance institution to strive for a better way to manage the system towards excellence as the demand and requirement of the society, industry and students are increasingly growing, especially in the developing countries.

For 14 years since the foundation, Hanoi Open University (HOU) has been striving to carry out the mission given by the Government, society and people. Though achievements have been recorded, HOU should strive more for qualified management, operation and service.

In this paper, we attempt to discuss:

- the concept of quality.
- the steps taken by HOU to manage the system pursuing quality and

- the prospect of pursuing quality in providing equal opportunity for higher education to every Vietnamese, contributing to the industrialization and modernization of the country.

Quality Issues

The quality in open and distance learning has been discussed by a number of scholars in workshops and conferences. When talking about quality, we inevitably talk about excellence (*Deshande, 1995: 18*). Excellence may be defined as the state of being good or superior relative to certain standards. In the field of open and distance learning, standards may be set institutionally or by associations of agencies. In higher education, in general, the concept of quality comprises "... caring for clients, coherence in teaching and learning process, responsiveness to changing client needs. In universities, quality expectations focus on public accountability, student learning, faculty productivity and performance, program effectiveness, and institutional evaluation (*Peterson and Dill, 1997*) (*Gumport and Sporn, 1999: 112*).

However, the questions may arise that how we may assess the quality and what the criteria of quality in open and distance learning are. *Peter S. Cookson (2002)* develops the five criteria proposed by *McAnany (1975)*: *effort, performance, adequacy, efficiency, and process*.

Let us discuss these five criteria.

Effort, the first criterion of quality refers to the activities that open and distance institutions carry out. The indicators of effort include: numbers of degrees, diplomas, certificates and courses designed.

developed, and delivered; numbers of applications, registrations, and examinations. Growth in such numbers suggests expanded capacity to meet students' needs.

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

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

Efficiency, the fourth criterion of quality, refers to the cost of open and distance learning. Because large numbers of students in some ODL institutions, fixed costs and variable costs per student can be low. However, *Perraton (2000: 196)* and *Hulsmann (1999)* distinguish two types of costs: costs per student and costs per successful student. *Milam (2000)* argues that cost of sophisticated educational applications of information and communication technologies can be extremely costly. *Rao (1999: 24)* points out, "Access means not only providing physical access to instructional technology, but also creating a host of supportive factors that contribute to the use of that instructional technology". Such practice

will increase cost per student of ODL but reduce the institutional cost per successful student.

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

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

Administrative, academic and other staff member will be held accountable for their performance in accordance with rational and mutually agreed-upon standards of practice, after which rewards are located accordingly. Questions that address the criterion of performance may include:

- How are knowledge, skills, and sensitivities relative to good practice in ODL disseminated throughout the institution?
- What provision is there for training to reinforce and advance beyond initial basic staff training, in particular ODL process?
- Are staff members accountable for their work performance?
- Are rewards (promotion, tenure, salary increments, etc.) within the institution reflective of demonstrated accomplishments?
- Is there an operating information system that enables

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- Is there an operating information system that enables

recording, tracking, and projecting individual and unit performance at every level?

- Are standard metrics in place that permits comparative analysis of different units and operations both within the institution and with other institutions?

Some scholars argue that quality can be assessed through the indicators in ODL institutions. The notions of quality differ for different groups of people. It means different things to different stakeholders: managers, tutors, students, employers, government (Robison, 1994). Indicators of quality in ODL include products, processes, production, delivery system, services, and philosophy. Quality of products includes course materials, numbers of graduates, examination pass rates, employment after graduation, admission in further studies, etc. Quality of process includes teaching - learning, counseling, coordinating, and networking with local centers, managing student information. Quality of production and delivery system includes course production (print, multimedia, web-based), test items, scheduling, delivery of instructional materials, and transmission of broadcast. Quality indication of philosophy covers vision and mission statements, institutional value and culture and public image.

Hanoi Open University in Vietnamese Context

Since the renovation policy for socio-economic development of the country, there have been pressing needs to improve the national education system in general and ODL in particular. The educational system is facing difficulties and challenges, which require efforts and effective solutions for development. The pressing issues can be identified as follows:

- The existing educational system with limited resources cannot meet the growing demand for education of the people,

especially in higher education. As the population grows and the human resources develop, millions of people need education and training from the system. The universities and colleges of the traditional mode are able to enroll only 300,000 out of 1,200,000 school-leavers every year. In addition, millions of employees need retraining and upgrading.

- There is a conflict between the educational product (graduates) and the requirements from the employers. The unemployed account for 30% of the graduates though the labor market still needs trained human resources. This is due to the inadaptability of the educational programs.
- There exists an unbalance between the growing quantity with limited resources and the quality required by the society in education.
- The educational programs, in general, are not flexible or transferable. The accreditation bases on school year. Although the credit based system for accreditation has been highly appreciated, the application and management are still slow to go. The competition in education has not been fully exploited; therefore, the improvement of quality becomes a critical issue

Managing Quality at Hanoi Open University

Under the guidelines of Government, the HOU missions have been translated into operational plans:

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

- *Improving the accountability of open and distance education;*
- *Developing network of partnership with other agencies based on mutual responsibility and advantage;*
- *Utilizing appropriate technology in management and instruction;*
- *Undertaking research for qualified ODL development.*

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

Year by year, HOU has been confirming its status in the national system of education. More and more students want to apply to HOU's courses. In 2006 the number of face-to-face students reaches 15 thousand and distance learners are over 33 thousand. There are over 48 thousand students in all.

ODL Students by Occupation and Profession

Academic Courses	Occupation				Profession			
	School leaver	Worker	Manager	Employee	Civil	Police	Army	Other
Business management	10.1%	23.5%	7.4%	59.1%	70.5%	2.7%	5.4%	21.5%
Accounting	18.5%	34.3%	1.6%	45.7%	73.6%	0.8%	3.5%	22.0%
English	24.7%	9.2%	2.9%	63.2%	93.7%	2.3%	2.3%	1.7%
Laws	5.1%	13.7%	7.2%	74.0%	83.4%	9.4%	2.2%	5.1%
ICT	30.6%	0.0%	3.2%	66.1%	85.5%	4.8%	0.0%	9.7%

It is proud to mention the percentage of face-to-face students who have jobs after graduating. According to the report made by the Higher Education Project, the ratio of employed graduates is quite high.

Most of distance students are employees. They maintain their jobs while learning, and many of them are promoted to higher positions after completing the courses.

ODL students take courses for different purposes

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

The most significant effort of HOU is to create opportunities for higher education to those who are unable to take courses offered by other institutions because of their social and/or individual circumstances, and ODL has been used to meet changing labor market needs and unmet demand for higher education. The market economy has generated new motivation to learn, either for advancement in the workplace or for changing occupations.

Hanoi Open University has been collaborating with the mass media: National Radio (The Voice of Vietnam: VOV) and Central Television (Vietnam Television: VTV) in disseminating ODL programs. The National Radio covers the whole country bringing courses provided by HOU to millions of people. Nearly 9,000 programs have been broadcasted (20 minutes each) since 1995 bringing knowledge and news to millions of people. Educational programs provided by HOU via The Central Television are also very effective and highly appreciated. The programs broadcasted by VTV2, the dedicated channel to education and technologies development, are either transmitted by the local TV stations or broadcasted via satellite direct to homes (DTH).

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

Technologies

Print has been the major medium for distance education at HOU because of its usefulness and friendliness to the learners. Print materials are supplemented by CD, VCD and CD-ROM. The video conferencing system has been installed, connecting Hanoi with the local centers in five provinces: Bac Giang, Hai Duong, Nghe An, Da Nang and Gia Lai. Information technology has been introduced to some courses. Students can get access to the website **www.hou.edu.vn** for instruction and information.

Research

Hanoi Open University is also a leading center in Vietnam for research and development in open learning and distance education. The national leveled research namely “Research and apply distance education in Vietnam” conducted by Prof. Nguyen Kim Truy, former President of HOU, has been highly appreciated. In 2006, the ministry leveled research “Applying ICT in Distance education at HOU” conducted by Dr. Pham Minh Viet, the President, is being carried out. Besides, seven ministry leveled research projects are on-going.

Towards the Future

Advancing towards the future, we are fully aware of our new status and mission:

- Hanoi Open University is a higher education institution of mixed mode, multi-areas in different levels, leading provider of ODL in Viet Nam;
- Hanoi Open University aims at upgrading the people’s knowledge, training the human resources, meeting diversified needs for education of the people, providing the labor market with qualified products, contributing to build a learning society.
- HOU will improve and diversify the media and technologies, keeping up with the international standards to meet the learners’ needs, and for international collaboration.
- By 2010, the number of distance students will reach 100 thousand, hundreds of thousand learners will attend short training courses via the mass media and the Internet.
- Millions of people throughout the country including rural, mountainous, remote areas and islands will be beneficial from the programs broadcasted via radio, television and the Internet.

Modes and programs

HOU will maintain mixed modes of learning, including face-to-face courses, part-time programs, and distance education, of which distance education is given the first priority. The programs and courses will be transferable in terms of areas and levels.

Short training courses and modules to meet the diversified needs of the people will be offered, including:

- Rural development, forestry and environment protection, fishery;
- Getting to know the laws and how to apply to everyday life;
- Applied ICT, foreign languages, cultural preservation and communities tourism;
- Programs of skills for healthy life.

None-degree programs will be widely disseminated. These programs aim to provide the people with knowledge and skills on culture, languages, daily life and technologies, etc.

Developing ITC in ODL is the priority in the coming years. Facilities and equipment will be improved for ITC development. Web-based courses and E-learning will account for a larger proportion in the system. HOU will set up an electronic library, connecting with local centers, universities and institutes. The whole system will be audited and regulated to achieve the strategic goals.

Conclusion

A new renovation in education is now beginning in Vietnam. The National Assembly has released a Renewed Law of Education to meet the demand of the new era of development. The Government's Strategy of Education and Training Development identifies the goals (among others) of quality improvement, increased levels of education and training, the creation of skilled and flexible workforce, recognition of the importance of life-long learning. The Strategy for building a Learning Society has been approved of. It includes ODL as one means of building Learning and Knowledge-based Society.

Therefore, ODL and HOU will continue to make significant contribution to the development of the country. HOU is seeking all possible opportunities to exchange experience and expertise with other distance education institutions for further development.

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