

## CHAPTER 2

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# QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN DISTANCE EDUCATION—TOWARDS A CULTURE OF QUALITY: A CASE STUDY FROM THE KYAMBOGO UNIVERSITY, UGANDA

Felicity Binns  
Aron Otto

### ABSTRACT

*This case study considers the quality assurance practices at the recently established Kyambogo University (KYU) in Uganda. In a resource-poor environment, practices have developed that put the learner at the centre of efforts to provide quality materials and learner support through the “culture of care.” This leads to the conclusion that the ideology of an institution and the putting of this ideology into practice are key factors in establishing quality assurance.*

### 1. BACKGROUND

#### 1.1 Distance education in Uganda

Distance education has a long history in Uganda (Pennells 1993). Correspondence study began in the colonial period and was used to provide learners, especially civil servants, with communication skills in English, to upgrade teachers, and to prepare learners for

Makerere University established a department of extramural studies in 1953. They used face-to-face sessions, radio and television broadcasting and newspaper columns—lessons were printed in the newspapers and feedback followed in later editions. These days Makerere houses the main African Virtual University facility for Uganda and has a thriving Centre for Continuing Education.

The pioneer institution for the delivery of teacher education was the Kyambogo Teacher Training College, the forerunner to the Institute of Teacher Education Kyambogo (ITEK) which, only a few years ago, was given university status and is now known as the Kyambogo University (KYU). KYU's focus is on vocationalising and universalising education at all levels. Its mission is "to advance and promote knowledge and the

having regard for quality, equity and the progress of society." In the *Education Strategic Investment Plan*

was enrolled in a distance course designed to upgrade them to Grade 5 (Diploma level).

Distance education became popular in Uganda when the National Resistance Government liberalised the economy and social services in the 1980s. This led to the establishment of more private schools, thus creating job opportunities and encouraging many to train as teachers through the distance mode of delivery.

Table 1: Country and Kyambogo University information

INDICATOR	UGANDA/KYU
Size of country*	236,000 sq km
Population*	24,700,000
Literacy level**	62%
GNP per capita**	\$320
Percentage untrained teachers	In 1998, 55% of primary school teachers were
Language of instruction	English
Institution starts DE for teacher education	1957
Motive for establishment	Teacher training pre- and in-service
Single or dual mode	Dual mode
DE courses offered	Diploma in Education, Primary, External (DEPE) Diploma in Special Needs Education, External (DSNEE)
Number of students doing DE programmes	5026
Technology	Print based and audio (planning use of SMS/text messaging)
Student support	Three two-week face-to-face sessions during vacations, including some coursework assignments

Source: \* UNESCO EFA year 2000 assessment, country report.

\*\* World Bank 2002.

Table adapted from Binns and Wrightson (forthcoming).

Programmes developed since then include the Mubende Integrated Teacher Education Project (MITEP), which trained about 900 untrained primary teachers in Mubende and Kiboga districts in southern Uganda in the 1990s; the Northern Integrated Teacher Education Project (NITEP), an in-service programme which trained about 3000 primary

school teachers from 1993–97; and the Teacher Development and Management System (TDMS), a programme designed to train primary school managers in management skills, as well as delivering an in-service teacher training programme based on the NITEP model.

ITEK played the leading and central role in teacher education in Uganda with responsibility for matters relating to teacher training throughout the country and was closely involved in the development of MITEP, NITEP and TDMS. KYU maintains this responsibility. It provides pre- and in-service training in teacher education. It coordinates its work with teachers' colleges to develop curricula and improve standards of education.

in education services, research and publications. ITEK also developed its own distance education programme and launched it in May 1999. This is the Diploma in Education, Primary, External (DEPE), a distance version of the diploma designed to train Grade 3 primary teachers to Grade 5 level.

Distance education programmes are offered by dual-mode institutions; single-mode

developed in Uganda yet. In addition to those mentioned earlier, a number of private educational institutions such as Uganda Martyrs University, Nkozi, the Islamic University in Mbale and Busoga University, Iganga, also provide distance education programmes leading to the award of diplomas and degrees.

Distance education programmes in Uganda have relied heavily on print media to disseminate information to learners. Radio and audiocassettes are used but on a much smaller scale, due to limited resources and infrastructure. Television and video are rarely used. KYU is investigating the use of SMS (text messaging) as a student and tutor support mechanism for their programmes.

## **1.2 Distance education at Kyambogo University**

When (in 2001) ITEK joined with the Uganda Polytechnic to become the Kyambogo University (KYU), the Distance Education Unit (DEU) was promoted in status to the Department of Distance Education (DDE). The latest step in the rationalisation of education delivery in Kyambogo has been the merger (in 2003) of the Institute for

of distance education (DE), as UNISE had a DE unit of its own which is now integrating into the KYU DDE. The university Senate has approved the promotion in status of the Department to become the Institute of Distance Education.

one desktop computer. Materials writers were drawn from departments in ITEK/KYU and from other professional institutions in Uganda. They were involved in three programmes

for Primary Head Teachers (both for TDMS) and a Diploma in Primary Education.

The recent integration of UNISE has increased the size of the DE department. Restructuring is ongoing, but for the moment, the DDE has four academic staff, three administrators and two secretaries. There are currently several thousand learners in the DEPE programme and about 1500 in the Diploma in Special Needs Education. The TDMS-related courses are not running at this time due to lack of ministry funds for printing study materials.

The Registry enrolls distance programme students using a paper-based system. The print-based DEPE materials are supplemented by face-to-face residentials, which include

elements of assessment and examination. Residentials are held at the nine participating Primary Teachers' Colleges (PTCs) (functioning as Coordinating Centres) during the school vacations.

DDE is currently planning the development of a B.Ed. External and a paper for presentation to Senate has been written following lengthy discussions.

## 2. QUALITY ASSURANCE AT KYU

In this section, the quality systems that are developing at KYU, particularly as they relate to distance education, are described. This is not an evaluation of quality at the university.

KYU has not yet adopted a quality assurance system across the board. National standards do not exist as yet and in the past the former organisation, ITEK, relied heavily on

has recently established the National Council for Higher Education and located it at education nationwide.

In the meantime, as noted, this is a new university formed from several amalgamated institutions, and energies are being concentrated on working together to create a single institution. What is interesting, however, for this case study is that the Department of Distance Education is setting up procedures of its own and thereby leading the way in addressing quality issues. This study considers this approach and offers lessons learned for others to consider.

“Quality is a product of planning, monitoring, control and coordination” (Robinson 1993: 77)—it “depends on products, processes, systems and people.”...“Quality assurance does not merely mean a set of procedures to be followed—it is also an attitude

words, commitment to quality ought to be a part of an organisation’s culture.

The Department of Distance Education in KYU *defines quality as providing the best materials and supporting those studying the materials with the best support system that it can manage*. It strives to achieve excellence, in both its products and services, within the meager resources it has at its disposal. Though the notion of quality assurance as an activity in the university as a whole is still in its infancy, the department endeavours to provide quality materials, supported by quality face-to-face sessions and professional and pastoral counseling and contact. It does this by promoting the “culture of care.”

During the early nineties a programme called the Northern Integrated Teacher Education Project (NITEP) was implemented in northern Uganda. The project trained 3000 primary school teachers to Grade 3 level using distance education. It developed a type of student support/philosophy which it called the “culture of care.” The “culture of care” means making special efforts to stay in touch with the students. In effect this necessitates all

strategy. This caring culture was considered a key to the retention of NITEP learners, who came to the programme with relatively low levels of academic preparedness. Alongside the formal student support system, informal contacts were encouraged. Support staff

would visit students in their homes and at school or arrive at informal study groups, and students in turn would visit the support staff:

...if a student was absent from a bi-monthly tutorial, the tutor ... might well go to visit that student, by bicycle or motorcycle, or even on foot, on a journey of up to 60 km, over rough roads and through garden tracks, in sometimes very wet and muddy or extremely hot conditions, risking things like a bicycle breakdown, land mines and other road barriers. Informal study groups might be taking place under a mango tree, with students seated on the ground, being watched, probably distracted, by a crowd of small village children. Students might visit project staff in order to share problems, such as, “The in-laws have taken my wife away—what should I do?” or “I have raised most of the money

you advise?” or “My brother has just died from AIDS, and I will be unable to attend the next tutorial or submit my assignment—what should I do?” or “My sister’s dowry is being paid this weekend; I would like you, my tutor, to come and attend the celebrations.” Such a visit might occur spontaneously on a village road, at the house of the support staff, or even at the village *marua* or drinking place (Wrightson 1998: 27).

This philosophy underpins KYU’s approach to student support and is implemented

required to proceed and develop a sense of belonging and being cared for, despite the

Evidence of this approach is visible at KYU as noted in the evaluation of the Human Resource Development programme being implemented by KYU in partnership with the International Extension College (IEC). “Aron and colleagues spend a great deal of time out with PTCs and other centres—they know people well, and invest in keeping relationships working” (Graham & Tierney 2003: 6).

The programme around which the Department of Distance Education at KYU is

runs from May each year. It is administered through Coordinating Centres that are usually based in the local PTCs. It starts with a two week face-to-face residential which is followed by 15 weeks of self-study. A second residential is held in September, and

January and is heavily biased towards revision in preparation for the examinations that

ministry and another from the University of Makerere. The committee reports to the university Senate of which it is a sub-committee. The DDE and the Coordinating Centres are involved in review and evaluation meetings producing reports, to an agreed format, for them.

The DDE's mechanisms for maintaining quality involve the monitoring and review of materials and systems. To do this, they use participatory teamwork. The teams vary

Registrar, College Tutors), subject specialists (from KYU), DE specialists (from within the DDE) and technical specialists (e.g., for audio components). The teams are involved largely in material development but also consider student support and play an advisory role as they manage and monitor the processes. Meetings are chaired by the Head of the DDE. Subject panels provide more specialised input to the teams.

It is possible to summarise the DDE's quality control and assurance activity by

processes, production and delivery systems and general philosophy of the organisation.

Table 2: Four aspects of quality in distance education at Kyambogo University

<b>THE PRODUCTS</b>	<b>KYU MECHANISMS FOR DEVELOPING, MEASURING AND MAINTAINING QUALITY</b>
The courses and materials (print, with plans for audio)	<p>Writers and designers are trained to an agreed level.</p> <p>A qualitative editing process follows writing to validate content, language and design.</p> <p>Materials are evaluated and revised on the basis of feedback from students and tutors.</p> <p>Contents meet needs of the curriculum.</p> <p>DEC puts forward course to Senate for approval.</p>
Number of graduates or successful completers	<p>level through the Study Centre Registrar and at Headquarters by the Programme Coordinator and student support administrators.</p> <p>Culture of care.</p>
Examination pass rates or achievement of intended competencies or practical skills	<p>Reliance is placed on the quality of the materials.</p> <p>Tutors are trained.</p> <p>designed.</p> <p>Effective communication with learners (developing SMS/text messaging to improve this).</p> <p>External moderation.</p>
Equivalent results in public examinations	<p>Learners sit the same examinations as conventionally trained students.</p> <p>Programme is being amended to conform to the recently developed national curriculum.</p> <p>DEC puts forward candidates for awards to Senate.</p>

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## THE PROCESSES

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Learning and teaching processes such as tutoring; assessing written work and providing student feedback; tutors; training group leaders	Culture of care informs working practice. Training is given to tutors and its design is reviewed regularly. Learners' written scripts are sampled and moderated to test quality over time and space. Programme Coordinator and his staff makes regular and frequent monitoring visits to PTCs and Coordinating Centres. Learners receive feedback on assignments and also at face-to-face sessions. 50% of the assessment is based on coursework. Developing SMS to improve communication with tutors.
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Application, registration and examination	Administrative Assistants in DDE liaise with the university Registry and Study Centres. Registration is a paper-based process.
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Advising students and keeping track of them	Systems are designed at the Headquarters and instructions are sent to Study Centres, where regular contact with the students  SMS/text messaging is being developed to improve this.
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Record keeping	Basic databases, designed in consultation with Headquarters and Study Centres, are maintained by Administrative Assistants and monitored by the Programme Coordinator.
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Coordinating groups of external writers	There is a database of trained writers. Writers are given further training as required. Writing is reviewed by the programme team.
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## PRODUCTION AND DELIVERY SYSTEMS

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Course production	DDE must follow the university tendering and procurement procedures to get value for money.
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Print production	During the printing process, the DDE monitors closely. Printed materials are sampled for quality.
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Audio production	Monitored by DDE staff.
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Scheduling and progress chasing	Contracts with printers.
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Warehousing and stock control	Print what is needed and distribute straight away. Small stocks held at Coordinating Centres and at Headquarters. Stock records are kept.
Getting materials to students	The department supervises and monitors the distribution of the materials to the various centres. The materials are delivered to students from the centres. The Centre Registrar is responsible for the distribution of materials, while the Programme Coordinator monitors this process.
<b>AS A GENERAL PHILOSOPHY OR ETHOS</b>	
Policy statements	The Distance Education Committee has been established to information between the department and senior management.
Attitudes of staff	Regular and ongoing staff training programmes which department.
Management and training of staff	A wide range of training activity is undertaken. In partnership with IEC, a programme comprising a series of specialised workshops is being implemented and a distance delivery programme on open and distance learning has been offered to two cohorts of teacher educators across Uganda (120 individuals). Further cohorts are planned. DDE offers top-up training to writers, editors and tutors in conjunction with developing and delivering new courses.
Motto or slogan.	DDE's motto is a "culture of care" for the DE learners.
Images and messages presented to the public  press reports)	Brochures are developed and distributed through the reception desk. National, medium-wave and local FM stations are used to provide information about the programmes. The contents of these are reviewed regularly by the department.

Adapted from Robinson (1993)

Central to quality improvement in KYU's distance education programme is the training of its staff and the network of tutors and PTC staff. The need for this was recognised in

This programme includes a series of workshops for staff at all levels, research skills delivered at a distance (Binns & Bradley 2004). Two cohorts (120 learners), enrolled

from all over Uganda, have studied the DE programme, and a third and possibly a fourth cohort are planned:

The one year course has been the single most important activity... Virtually all of those enrolled (tutors, administrators, principals of Primary Teachers' Colleges and National Teachers' College and others involved in DE) completed the course.... It appears to have been a really exciting and transforming experience—inspiring people, making them realise from their own experience just what learners need, and bringing people together in peer groups and experiencing a level of support that has had a profound effect on many of those I talked to (Graham & Tierney 2003: 5–6).

As well as improving their knowledge of open and distance learning, it engendered in the participants a sense of pride in their work and awareness of their responsibilities to learners. This has enabled the DDE to make real improvements in the quality of their student support and materials:

The course is the key part. It puts people in the customer's shoes—a complete reversal which has had a very powerful effect. Effectively the course has been a Trojan horse bringing about major cultural changes in attitudes and practice as well as skills (Graham & Tierney 2003: 14).

Participants commented on the power of evaluating their own materials:

...especially the writers who seem to have accepted it with good humour and humility. The materials they reviewed had up to then been a source of some pride, so this was a real eye opener! (Graham & Tierney 2003: 8)

The DDE also provides training for tutors, writers and editors on a course-by-course basis, topping up and refreshing skills.

Another outcome of all the training activities has been a raised awareness, among a large and widely spread group of people involved in distance learning in Uganda, of the need for good research skills, record keeping and teaching practice as elements requiring attention to improve quality. The DDE is attempting to address each of these areas.

The DDE has formed a partnership and exchanged visits with the Kenyan Institute of Special Education (KISE). Among other things, the DDE is learning how KISE is implementing its school practice as the former plans to introduce teaching practice into the Diploma programme. The greatest challenge to DE teacher education “is to set in place effective arrangements to support students and, in particular, to supervise their classroom practice” (Perraton 2000: 8). Thus establishing a high-quality teaching-practice element will be a challenge to KYU. Some lessons, however, may be available from earlier work in Uganda (Ataro Atim & Wrightson 1996), including the NITEP programme.

an activity new to the DDE. As skills develop so does the appreciation of the value of feedback and evaluation for informing practice. Record keeping is considered by the DDE to be its major area of weakness. Currently no analysis of pass rates, completion rates or comparison with conventionally trained graduates is available. The databases that the DDE has developed are basic, and the paper-based information held by the Registry is

the past. Now with external funding they are addressing these issues but probably do not

This raised awareness and widened involvement in distance education has led to a number of practical changes for the learners:

- Distances learners will get a student ID card—recognition that they are part of the university.
- Tutors are more accessible due to phone numbers being shared.
- The curriculum of the Diploma in Primary Education (conventional version) and the DEPE (DE version) are synchronised so that there will be a common examination
- A learner’s handbook has been developed, printed and distributed.
- Different methods of fee payment are considered—payment by instalments is now

### **3. LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE IMPLEMENTATION OF QA STRATEGIES**

#### **3.1 Impact of QA strategies on the workforce**

The biggest impact felt by the workforce in KYU and its collaborating partners in the provision of the DEPE programme has been the training. As described above, it has

they administer, work as a team (or in teams) and have a shared understanding and shared goals.

Topics learned in the open and distance-learning course provide transferable skills, enabling participants to take what they have learned and adapt it to their daily work across the faculties and colleges.

Personnel also relish the improved attitude towards and increased credibility of the DE

captured in contracts. Feedback on facilitator performance shows consistently higher scores for those tutors trained on the ODL course.

Senior colleagues in the university, both academic and administrative, give their backing to the DE programmes and plan further developments. The department will become an institute of the university, underlining the improved status of the methodology and the staff.

#### **3.2 Advantages derived from QA strategies**

One of the most obvious and pleasing advantages for KYU has been the increasing recognition of the quality of its staff and the programmes it offers through distance learning. Their advice is sought after more widely both in country and beyond (for example, KISE). Most recently, KYU has been selected by the Ministry of Education to host the African Virtual University (AVU) teacher education activity. This will be based within the new Institute of Distance Education, which will be responsible for the development and delivery of the B.Ed. programme and eLearning.

The materials developed are considered to be of value for conventional learning—so much so that KYU sees a market for generating an income by selling them to teacher educators and teachers. Improving the materials by adding audio has led to improved motivation of learners. This in turn has the potential to increase completion rates and there seems to be increased demand to enrol in the programmes.

KYU now has a cadre of professionals working together who wish to promote and improve the programmes. Plans and a paper for the development and launch of a B.Ed. programme have been prepared for presentation to Senate.

Once the DDE has improved its record keeping and analysis capabilities, it should be possible to elucidate further advantages in terms of the number of graduates and comparisons with conventionally trained teachers.

Research in Uganda (Senkomago 2004) indicates that DE trained teachers are well respected in their schools and communities and that increasingly the DE methodology is considered a credible way of training teachers.

### 3.3 Difficulties in putting QA into practice

As a whole, its amalgamation of several institutions, and the ongoing restructuring that is involved, has diverted its efforts from concentrating on developing such a function. Practice is occurring but it is not fully documented or monitored. Colleagues in the DDE

Resourcing is crucial to establishing quality. It has been more than 15 years since Jenkins developing effective distance education programmes. KYU has the backing of the ministry

are minimal. The DEPE programme must pay for itself from student fees, and the DDE therefore has to balance what it spends the funds on. Face-to-face sessions are costly but considered very important, and running this as part of the student support leaves less to expend elsewhere. There are, for example, no funds to update the Registry's paper-based application procedures. Also, the university has a tendency to move staff from one department to another, and the DDE has found it particularly challenging when trained staff are moved on suddenly, leaving them temporarily without staff or with untrained staff.

developed, but staff move on, and methodology and practice need to be updated. KYU  
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#### 4. TOWARDS A CULTURE OF QUALITY

O'Shea and Downs (1997: 57), writing about the British Open University, consider that there are "...three key QA principles for an educational institution:

- that the institution have an educational mission that can be related in a tangible positive way to the educational well being of society at large or some particular community;
- that it is possible to measure success in achieving that mission by focusing primarily on the quality of the student learning experience; and
- that at any time the institution should have explicit goals for the further enhancement of the quality of the student learning experience."

KYU has such a mission, the DDE focus is clearly learner centred, and the DDE has plans for improvements. KYU, however, faces the challenge of institutionalizing a QA system and must consider what it might learn from the DDE's experience. Robinson (2004: 202) notes that "One advantage in making institutional plans for managing quality ... is that many of the customary practices (in developing good-quality materials, in using student feedback, in monitoring learner-support systems and operational systems) provide an existing basis for system building."

What is extraordinary in KYU is that they turn ideology into practice. Although KYU operates in a relatively resource-poor environment, its greatest strength is the *culture of care*. Training has been the key in achieving a shared understanding and appreciation of learners' needs in their own resource-poor environments, and this approach is reinforced by a leader who was instrumental in the development of this methodology in Uganda.

Thus a fourth key QA principle might be:

- that the institution have an ideology and culture that recognizes the needs of its learners and trains its staff in such a manner that this ideology is put into effect.

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