INTERNATIONAL
COUNCIL FOR OPEN AND
DISTANCE EDUCATION

SUMMARY REPORT FROM ICDE's ROUNDTABLE AT UNESCO WHEC2022:

Quality in online, open and distance higher education across borders

Editor: Torunn Gjelsvik

Authors and contributors to this report (in alphabetical order):

Professor Moustafa Hassan, Rebecca Heiser, Elena Tarasova

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents regional perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for the topic of quality within Open, Flexible and Distance learning (OFDL). With the backdrop of an increasing need for quality assurance in OFDL and the aim of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education, this report looks at one initiative for quality data collection and benchmarking among institutions as well as the international views during a panel discussion.

Firstly, this report introduces the Benchmarking Framework and Consortium, a quality assurance initiative established in 2019 by Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University (HBMSU). The objectives, online education pillars and members are presented, with a link for further information.

The second part of this report summarizes the WHEC2022 Roundtable discussion. The roundtable consisted of five panelists and explores their views on eight identified challenges. Key opportunities for quality assurance of OFDL are then presented from their regional and institutional contexts.

The discussion ends with their visions of the future of education, OFDL's place in the system and how the benchmarking framework can be utilized by institutions across borders. This report concludes with a final view of next steps and recommendations for the improvement and innovation of quality assurance within the OFDL system.

FOREWORD

The International Council for Open and Distance Education – ICDE – is the leading and oldest global membership association for open and distance education. Founded in 1938 in Canada with its Secretariat hosted in Norway since 1988, the association is established as a well-governed, not for profit NGO, supported by the Norwegian ministry of higher education. ICDE has been in a formal consultative partnership with UNESCO since 1967 and share UNESCO's key value – the universal right to education for all. ICDE also values its relationship with over 18 international and regional organizations who together collaborate on bringing quality education to all.

As quality is integral to the UN Sustainable development goal number 4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", the focus on quality in open, distance and online education is integral to ICDE's strategic goals. Within the context of globalization, rapid digital transformation and a growing knowledge economy, the quality of higher education is increasingly regarded as strategically important for national economic development and competitiveness. As a result, countries and development partners are more willing than ever before to invest in quality higher education.

A debate on quality of distance and online education has been accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as educators worldwide were forced to an immediate pivot from traditional face to face, to online and distance provision. Actors in the field have significantly grown and become more diversified – both public and private distance education institutions are active in the field – and questions of quality and accountability are being raised. There is an increased demand for quality assurance agencies and mechanisms that encompass flexible learning pathways, including open, flexible, distance and online education. As UNESCO states in its concept note for Quality Assurance Across Borders:

Good structures for the quality assurance of higher education are crucial for enabling trust in a qualification and protecting academic standards and integrity. They are also an underlying pillar of the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education and the regional recognition conventions. (Higher Education Conversation Series, 28 April 2022)

In many countries, the lack of acknowledgment of open, flexible, distance and online education from authorities and accreditation agencies presents a significant challenge. There is a need to inform and involve the policy and accreditation level so that diverse learning modes and innovative methods of teaching and learning can be better adopted incorporated into the quality frameworks and accreditation systems. As a direct response to this challenge, ICDE's contribution to the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference 2022 (WHEC22), naturally took the form of a roundtable discussion on quality assurance across borders.

The background for the discussion is as follows: In June 2021, ICDE became an official partner for the Consortium for the Benchmarking Framework for Online, Open, Smart, and Technology-enhanced Higher Education, initiated by Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University from the United Arab Emirates. The consortium unites online and open universities from all over the world, as well as higher education associations and quality

assurance agencies, to collectively develop and implement a benchmarking framework that establishes and promotes a shared understanding and criteria for quality in technology-enhanced higher education.

The consortium is open and free to join for all interested higher education institutions, associations, and quality assurance agencies globally. It already includes a substantive list of prominent member institutions from various parts of the world, namely the Association of Arab Universities, Asian Association of Open Universities, Commonwealth of Learning, Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, UNESCO-International Center for Higher Education Innovation, European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, and many others.

This report gives a brief introduction to the benchmarking framework and consortium, followed by a summary of the ICDE moderated roundtable at the UNESCO WHEC2022. Another contribution to the event, was the submission of 7 short videos on quality in open, online and distance education, provided by members of the ICDE Quality network. The videos are published as open knowledge products under "resources" on the WHEC2022 homepage (password "demo"). The video recording of the roundtable can be accessed here.

ICDE sincerely believes that an open and transparent benchmarking framework, being collaboratively developed by members and partners from various world regions, brings a new dimension of international collaboration to the table. As the benchmarking framework is considered a living resource, subject to continuous improvement and adaptation to regional and specific needs, it has substantial potential for increased multi-stakeholder collaboration on quality assurance in the higher education sector globally.

Torunn Gjelsvik
ICDE Secretary General
Oslo, September 2022

THE BENCMARKING FRAMEWORK AND CONSORTIUM

Background and rationale

With the rising need for quality assurance in online and open education worldwide and aspiring to facilitate the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education, HBMSU and its partner universities and associations launched, in 2019, the benchmarking framework and consortium. The idea was to establish and promote a common understanding of the quality criteria that are particularly relevant to and reflective of the uniqueness of online and open higher education.

The consortium aims to support universities in assuring high levels of quality online and digital learning and pursues the following objectives:

- Establish a common understanding and criteria for quality in online higher education.
- Create a mechanism to operationalize the collection, analysis, and announcement of benchmarking data.
- Facilitate sharing of best practices and experience among its members.

In 2020, the technical committee of the consortium developed dimensions and indicators that formed the benchmarking framework and agreed on how each of the selected dimensions and indicators can be measured and benchmarked (evidence and data sources).

The Benchmarking Framework covers all essential pillars of online education under its 37 indicators and 6 dimensions:

- Dimension I. Teaching and learning
- Dimension II. Student services
- Dimension III. Technology environment
- Dimension IV. Outcome and impact on society
- Dimension V. Diversity and inclusiveness
- Dimension VI. Organizational aspects

The pilot implementation of the Benchmarking Framework had been successfully completed, and the global implementation started in March 2022 with the participation of 10 member universities from all over the world, utilizing the newly launched website of the consortium: https://benchmarking.hbmsu.ac.ae/.

A members-only section of the website facilitates data collection, presentation, and comparison among members and over time. The discussion section is dedicated to collaborative work among members on the strategies for performance improvement of participating institutions. The consortium holds expert meetings, panel discussions, roundtables, and many other events for its members.

Members

The consortium currently unites more than 20 members, being various types of institutions - leading online and open universities, quality assurance agencies and international associations from all world regions - with the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) as the official partner:

1. Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE)
2. Association of Arab Universities
3. Asia e University, Malaysia
4. Asian Association of Open Universities
5. Commonwealth of Learning (headquartered in Canada).
6. European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)
7. Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University (HBMSU), UAE
8. International Telematic University UNINETTUNO, Italy
9. Maseno University, Kenya
10. Open Polytechnic New Zealand
11. Open University Malaysia
12. Open University of China
13. Quality Matters, USA
14. Saudi e University, KSA
15. Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico
16. UNESCO-ICHEI
17. UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education (IITE)
18. University of Philippines Open University
19. University of South Africa (UNISA)
20. Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia
21. Network University Association (UniRede), Brazil
22. Western Caspian University, Azerbaijan

More information is available at the official website.

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION @WHEC2022

Introduction video

A video presentation introducing the Benchmarking Framework and Consortium was provided by **Prof. Moustafa Hassan**, Vice-Chancellor for International Cooperation, Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University (UAE).

Panelists

The following invited panelists participated in the round table discussion at the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference, 19 May 2022:

- **Dr. Mansoor Al-Awar** (UAE). Chancellor of Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University, Chairman of the Governing Board of the UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education (IITE).

- **Professor Asha Singh Kanwar** (Canada). President and CEO of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), and one of the world's leading advocates of learning for sustainable development. COL, hosted by the Government of Canada, is the world's only intergovernmental organisation solely concerned with the promotion and development of distance education and open learning.

- **Dr. Deborah Adair** (USA). President of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), a world-wide association of 300+ organizations active in the theory and practice of quality assurance in higher education. Executive Director and CEO of Quality Matters, an international non-profit organization providing a scalable quality assurance system for digital learning.

- **George Ubachs** (Netherlands). Managing Director of EADTU, the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities. EADTU is Europe's leading institutional association in online, open and flexible higher education. Responsible for the development and support of the EADTU network, policies and execution of its goals in online, open and flexible higher education.

- **Prof. Hussein Baghirov** (Azerbaijan). Founder and President of Western Caspian University. Established in 1991, Western Caspian University was the first private institution of higher education in Azerbaijan. A recent incoming member of the Consortium for the Benchmarking Framework.

Discussion themes: challenges and opportunities

The panelists were encouraged to give a short introduction each to address challenges and opportunities for quality assurance of online, open, distance and technology-enhanced higher education from their regional and institutional contexts.

The main discussed **challenges** are summarized below irrespective of their relative importance:

- **Rapid digital transformation of education**
  Rapid digital transformation of education, which accelerated more during the COVID-19 pandemic, requires fast synchronization of quality assurance standards with new developments in this evolving field of education.

- **Lack of communication among stakeholders**
  Rapid digital transformation of education is not coupled with sustainable dialogue among key stakeholders such as higher education institutions, quality assurance, accreditation agencies, and Ministries of Higher Education. Sustainable dialogue among all stakeholders facilitates the flow of information and exchange of best practices to assure the quality of online and open education.

- **Unavailability of specialized quality assurance standards for online and open education in many countries**
  Traditional and online education share several characteristics but online, and distance education also have their own exclusive ones. Accordingly, specifically designed criteria and indicators are needed to assure the quality of online and distance education.

- **Exclusion of disadvantaged populations from online and open education**
  When the pandemic hit the education system in 2020, educational institutions moved to online delivery to manage the crisis. Unfortunately, many disadvantaged populations struggled with basic access to the internet and familiarity with online platforms, disrupting their access to education.

- **Dissatisfaction with the quality of online education and learning loss**
  Online education has its own learning design, pedagogy, and success factors. It requires a properly designed eco-system to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of the learning process. With the rapid movement towards online delivery due to the pandemic, ineffective practices resulted in dissatisfaction among students and faculty and learning loss.

- **Changing role of instructors**
  Online delivery necessitates changing the role of instructors from lecturing to coaching. The teacher-centered approach is still practiced and unsuitable for online

delivery, which relies on accessing online resources, especially OERs, peer-to-peer support, and instructor coaching. Some universities developed instructors' professional development programs in online delivery. There is an urgent need to equip instructors with the knowledge and skills for online delivery.

- **Mismatch between quality assurance agencies' structured mechanisms and the openness era**
  Openness in education is the future. There is continuous innovation in the delivery modes, online platforms, artificial intelligence in education, personalization of learning, and open educational resources use. The structured mechanisms followed by most quality assurance agencies is not keeping pace with innovation in education. There is a need to adopt innovative tools to maintain quality assurance agencies nimble and agile in addressing emerging challenges.

- **Absence of consensus on accreditation mechanisms for upskilling and re-skilling programs**
  Upskilling and re-skilling programs play a pivotal role in the knowledge economy. These programs usually depart from traditional research-driven degrees to micro-credentials, nano degrees, and professional development programs. Furthermore, joint programs by several universities are currently being offered. Accreditation of these programs requires innovative and flexible mechanisms to ensure sustainability and responsiveness to the rapidly evolving market needs.

Opportunities offered by the Benchmarking framework
The panelists equally gave their perspectives on the **opportunities** offered by the benchmarking framework for online, open, distance, and technology-enhanced higher education:

- **An open access knowledge product with global relevance**
  Being developed by world-class experts from online education stakeholders, the benchmarking framework offers free access to a transparent teamwork product that is not specific to one region or community but reflects a global agreement on generic criteria for quality online education.

- **A collaborative tool subject to continuous improvement**
  The Delphi technique used to develop the framework facilitated consensus among experts and the inclusion of all stakeholders. After the development phase, continuous improvement is assured. The framework is considered an open document that encourages participating members' feedback during each implementation cycle. By closing the feedback loop, it dynamically responds to the changes and innovations in online and open education and supports sustained dialogue among stakeholders, which facilitates the flow of information and exchange of best practices among members.

- **A capacity building tool for newcomers in the field**
  As a free tool developed by experts in the field, the introduction of the framework during the pandemic when many traditional universities shifted to online education, may help them build their capacities in online education. Its inclusive approach may support the increasing numbers of traditional universities that are currently expanding their online learning portfolios.

- **An enabler for international collaboration across institutions and countries**
  The benchmarking framework and consortium has already created an international community and strengthened the prospects for inter-institutional cooperation across borders. As conventional universities improve the quality of their online programs, the overall satisfaction level of instructors and students is likely to increase, which again may positively impact the overall support for the expansion of online and open education programs.

- **The potential of a data driven approach to quality assurance**
  The importance of improving the quality of technology-enhanced higher education beyond the traditional accreditation processes. The benchmarking approach, which is a data-driven approach to quality assurance resulting in objective and transparent assessment across universities, provides a step forward. Regional and global perspectives on quality assurance parameters for online, open, and distance education were also discussed. Emphasis was also given to data collection, transparency, and privacy protection by using a dedicated website for collection, presentation, and comparison.

Summary of interventions and discussions

Building on this foundation, the round table moderator and ICDE Secretary General, Torunn Gjelsvik, initiated a dialogue with the panelists, which converged into the interplay of four themes:

1.   Open, Accessible, Agile Models
2.   Technological Trends and Innovation
3.   Equity and Inclusion for all Stakeholders
4.   Measuring Quality Inputs and Outputs

Panelists called for quality dimensions to exist in open ecosystems that, as Dr. Al Awar stated: "...have the ability to transform" and "remain agile to international developments and trends." However, given that quality is created from social, political, economic and cultural values, the complexity of untangling these concepts into a universal and responsive framework is challenging.

Prof. Kanwar questioned: "How can quality be agile and embrace agile developments? With so much openness, how can we ensure they meet?"
Open, accessible and agile models are dependent on communication technologies, including the internet. The field of open and distance education has a paralleled history and evolution with communication technologies, in which Ubachs shared: "Quality frameworks based on technology require ongoing and rapid, agile developments." Dr. Adair suggested that we need policies for internet access, implying that internet access should be a fundamental human right in today's knowledge society. Prof. Baghirov reminded us that "technology is not universal", and thereby suggesting that open and distance education quality dimensions must be inclusive of all distributed delivery models and encourage the development of open educational systems focused on multimodal learning resources.

Beyond technology and adaptive models, Dr. Al Awar described how another challenge in cross-border quality assurance "...is to sustain a community of ongoing continuous improvement that is relevant." His assessment is accurate; how can quality dimensions be generalizable to all contexts and remain relevant and meaningful? For example, quality dimensions and performance indicators relevant to one university building and improving a student support system may not be as useful and meaningful for another university with a robust and highly effective student support system. According to the panel, collaboration and communication are a way to develop relevancy in quality dimensions.

Prof. Kanwar recommended that benchmarking is an effective regional-level process that can be used as a collaborative tool to create a sense of ownership among stakeholders to localize quality. George Ubachs made calls for communication and collaboration within and beyond regions to develop transparency on competencies that could be supported through regional training and micro-credentialing to support upskilling and lifelong learning. At the same time, Dr. Adair identified that "practitioners and quality assurance specialists must continue to evolve together" to inform practice and utilize standards to drive change. Dr. Al Awar also advocated for practitioners to "learn from each other for horizontal exchange of practices among universities and create a sustainable dialogue with free information and reciprocity."

Although collaboration and diverse voices are pertinent to addressing this macro-level challenge, Gjelsvik reflected on a critical point, "How can we engage multiple stakeholders? Does it have to be a top-down or bottom-up model?" One of the dimensions of the Benchmarking Framework and themes of this roundtable discussion is equity and inclusion. Adding to the conversation, Prof. Kanwar suggested that quality is not universally equitable, therefore, she critically questioned: "How does quality fit equity and inclusion?" Perhaps, to answer these questions, we should consider the voices of the transnational students and how they define quality in their experience within cross-border education. What barriers do transnational students encounter? How can instructors, support systems, institutions, agencies and policymakers reduce barriers to transnational student success? What are the affordances of a cross-border education? In order to support more openness and collaboration, the student perspective is a diverse stakeholder group that should be equally engaged to inform and co-design quality dimensions.

As the panel concluded, the roundtable discussants described the future of education as open and online, focusing on student mobility and interconnectedness in the digital space. According to Prof. Baghirov, the global pandemic created an opportunity to demonstrate how open and distance education can be more accessible and convenient to the world. Therefore, it is imperative that as these learning provisions continue to expand, we must incorporate quality frameworks with a more profound understanding and measurement of institutional inputs and outputs. In order to meet this need, "benchmarks support the process," stated Ubachs and Dr. Al Awar confirmed that "…benchmarking is more than course-level quality; it assists institutions with an ecosystem to improve outcomes." By recognizing that quality is a process, evaluating quality should focus on "learning outcomes; they are what count," said Prof. Kanwar.

In the Round Table (from left to right): Dr. Mansoor Al Awar (Chancellor - HBMSU), Deborah Adair (President - INQAAHE), George Ubachs (Managing Director - EADTU), Torunn Gjelsvik (Secretary General - ICDE), Prof. Hussein Baghirov (President - Western Caspian University) and Professor Asha Kanwar (President and CEO – Commonwealth of Learning).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the evolving needs in the digital education era, the benchmarking framework offers a valuable mechanism to improve the quality of online, open, distance, and technology-enhanced education. Contrary to implement fixed rules, as often given by quality assurance organizations, the bottom-up approach adopted in developing the framework ensures a more dynamic approach, as well as relevance and inclusion of all stakeholders. Assuring the quality of online and open education is a prerequisite for successfully transforming the education system into a futuristic dynamic, and flexible one. The voluntary participation of universities and the openness to sharing information now attract a growing number of online universities.

The roundtable panelists all valued the developmental and implementation effort of the consortium and supported the widespread implementation across the globe. They recommended to engage quality assurance agencies in different countries in an open dialogue about the implementation findings and their use for providing insights into accreditation criteria. Furthermore, panelists emphasized the importance of regulating micro-credentials and badges. It was recommended to initiate a global mechanism for assuring the quality of micro-credentials and badges as they play a vital role in the reskilling and up-skilling efforts of the workforce.

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