REPORT FROM THE ICDE QUALITY NETWORK:

GLOBAL QUALITY PERSPECTIVES ON OPEN, FLEXIBLE AND DISTANCE LEARNING 2023

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

The ICDE Quality Network constitutes of academic experts appointed as regional Focal Points on Quality among ICDE institutional members. All world regions are represented. The Quality Network informs and advises ICDE's members on quality assurance and quality enhancement of open, flexible and distance education.

In 2023, Dr. Souma Alhaj Ali from Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University replaced Prof. Alan Tait as Chair for the ICDE Quality Network. Having held this position since the network first started in 2016, Alan Tait had ensured a solid foundation for the continuation of activities within the current mandate period. As former Focal Point on Quality from the Arab region, our new Chair was already familiar with the Quality Network, and all was settled for a smooth transition.

During the past year, Dr. Souma has inspired and encouraged the network members to be more productive than ever. A new webinar series named "Ask the ICDE Experts" was offered as an exclusive benefit to ICDEs members. The webinars explore selected topics relevant to quality Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (OFDL), where the regional focal points make themselves available to members so they can ask questions and discuss challenges faced within their respective institutional and regional contexts. Another membership benefit under development is a quality resources area, where the focal points have curated a collection of quality-focused resources, divided into regions.

An additional achievement was the very engaging panel session titled: "Regional Perspectives on Quality Assurance: Good Practices in the Age of Digital Education", hosted by the ICDE Quality Network at the 29th ICDE World Conference in Costa Rica in November. The session sparked some interesting conversations among delegates around the usefulness of sharing of practices, and transparency in benchmarking and quality assurance frameworks and regulations. With 6 out of 7 world regions represented in the panel, the ICDE Quality Network brought an immense diversity to the discussions and brought regional as well as national and global perspectives to the table.

This year's annual report from the ICDE Quality Network provides an updated status of the adoption and implementation of OFDL in the respective regions. Furthermore, it examines national and regional quality standards, accreditation and licenses, and sharing of the good practices from key players across the world.

I would like to thank the ICDE Focal Points on Quality for their significant contributions to this report. Their engagement, insights and regional connections are invaluable to ICDE as a global organization, operating in a complex and rapidly changing educational and technological landscape. A sincere appreciation also to our Chair, Dr. Souma Aljah Ali, for her inspiring leadership and outstanding working capacity, which truly reflects the outcomes from the ICDE Quality Network in 2023.

Oslo, January 2024

Torunn Gjelsvik,

ICDE Secretary General

THEMATIC INTRODUCTION

Souma Alhaj Ali
Chair ICDE Quality Network
Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University

The landscape of higher education has undergone a remarkable transformation recently with the exponential growth of online learning. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics in the United States, a substantial 61% of undergraduate students were enrolled in at least one distance education course in 2021, with an additional 28% exclusively opting for distance education courses. StudyPortals estimated that enrollment in Europe increased 15-20% last year and the number of universities offering distance learning grew to 500 – up 40%. While global statistics may vary, the overarching trend underscores a substantial surge in the adoption of distance and online learning. Research shows that the narrative of higher education, once confined to physical classrooms and lecture halls, has expanded its horizons to encompass virtual spaces, providing a flexible and interactive learning environment that caters to the diverse needs of a contemporary student body.

The surge is attributed to the widespread utilization of digital technology, artificial intelligence (AI), educational software and applications, making learning from digital devices an increasingly appealing method. The appeal lies in the virtues of flexibility, accessibility, affordability, and adaptability to diverse learning preferences, styles, and backgrounds, positioning online learning as a viable solution to broaden access to quality education beyond the constraints of time and location.

Amidst this transformative wave, institutions of higher learning are grappling with the imperative to assure the quality of their online offerings. The task is not without its challenges, given the vast diversity of educational offerings, learning models, and the scarcity of online quality assurance standards and regulations. The pursuit of quality in online learning demands a strategic and concerted effort to navigate this evolving terrain, ensuring that the digital transformation aligns seamlessly with the principles of effective pedagogy, continuous improvement, and learner-centric education.

In addressing this challenge, the ICDE Quality Network has embarked on the creation of this report, a pivotal initiative underscoring its dedication to inspiring and promoting the embrace of the highest quality standards in open, flexible, and distance education. The overarching objective extends beyond the attainment of learning outcomes and the delivery of exceptional personalized experiences to students. It also encompasses the imperative to cultivate graduates who are qualified, skilled, and instilled with confidence to assume leadership roles in the future workforce and drive innovation.

Each focal point of quality within the ICDE Quality Network has summarized the latest developments of quality work related to open, flexible and distance education within the purview of their institutions and respective regions. This involved a meticulous examination of the status of adoption

and implementation of open, flexible, and distance learning, key parameters include the number of higher education institutions, programs, students, and the mode of delivery (blended or fully online). This thorough exploration extends to encompass both governmental and private standards, regulations, and guidelines that are either applicable or have been developed in the respective region.

The cumulative findings from the regional reports highlighted a significant upswing in the embrace of online learning, accompanied by a heightened interest and concerted efforts from both public and private sectors in developing robust quality assurance standards and regulations specially formulated to fit the particularities of online education. Moreover, the regional reports spotlighted commendable initiatives specific to each region, that hold the potential for adoption in other geographical areas.

As we embark on the journey of navigating through these reports, it is imperative to maintain a steadfast focus on our shared goal – providing students with an inclusive and equitable quality online learning experience. This commitment aligns seamlessly with our collective vision for the future of education, echoing UNESCO's call for accessible and high-quality learning opportunities for all. It beckons us to collaboratively shape the future of online learning, where quality is not merely a benchmark but an ever-evolving force propelling all stakeholders toward a state of excellence.

AFRICA REGION

Obhajajie Juliet Inegbedion
National Open University of Nigeria, Nigeria

Introduction

Africa is the second largest continent with 54 countries covering about one-fifth of the total land surface of Earth with approximately 30,365,000 square km. Africa has five subregions – Eastern Africa, Middle Africa, Northern Africa, Southern Africa, and Western Africa. The Africa people are diverse in culture and language but have same dispensation in embracing education.

The quest for widening access into formal education, especially at the higher levels of education led to the introduction of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (OFDL) without compromising quality. The first Open and Distance Learning institution in Africa is the University of South Africa (UNISA) which was established in 1873. Since then, several countries in Africa have adopted Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a mode of learning.

There are two modes of OFDL in Africa: single and dual modes. The single modes ODFL are specifically established for OFDL while the dual modes run both the conventional modes and an aspect of the programmes for distance learning through a flexible mode. Not until recently, the single modes were mostly public universities. Nigeria has 25 approved conventional universities as dual mode, which appears to be the highest number of dual mode universities in an Africa country.

Status of Adoption and Implementation of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning

The experience of COVID-19 gave more acceptance to Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning (OFDL) in Africa. Before the COVID-19, it was only at the university levels that OFDL was in practice. The certified public single mode universities practicing OFDL in Africa are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Public Single Mode OFDL Universities in Africa

No.	Name of University	Country	Headquarters	Sub-Region	Website	Year of Founded
1	Open University of Tanzania	Tanzania	Dar se Saleem	Eastern Africa	The Open University Of Tanzania (out.ac.tz)	1992
2	Open University of Sudan	Sudan	Khartoum. Khartoum	Northern Africa	Open University of Sudan | (ous.edu.sd)	2002
3	National Egyptian E-Learning University	Egypt	Gizaa	Northern Africa	The National Egyptian E-learning University - (eelu.edu.eg)	2008

4	Botswana Open University	Botswana	Gaborone	Southern Africa	Home (ac.bw)	2017
5	Open University of Mauritius	Mauritius	Réduit, Moka District	Southern Africa	OU – Open University of Mauritius	2012
6	University of South Africa	South Africa	Pretoria	Southern Africa	https://www.unisa.ac.za	1873
7	Zimbabwe Open University	Zimbabwe	Harare	Southern Africa	ZOU – Empowerment Through Learning	1999
8	International Open University	Gambia	Banjul	Western Africa	International Open University (IOU): Online Degree Programs (edu.gm)	2007
9	National Open University of Nigeria	Nigeria	Abuja	Western Africa	NOUN | National Open University of Nigeria	2002
10	Open University of Kenya	Kenya	Konza Technopolis	Eastern Africa	https://ouk.ac.ke/history-ouk	2023

Also, there are other six private single open universities in Africa as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Licensed Private OFDL Universities in Africa

No.	Name of University	Country	Headquarters	Sub-Region	Website	Year of Founded
1	Zambia Open University	Zambia	Lusaka	Southern Africa	Zambian Open University – University without walls (zaou.ac.zm)	2002
2	Laweh University College	Ghana	Accra	Western Africa	LUC | Laweh University College - Copy	2014
3	Miva Open University	Nigeria	Abuja	Western Africa	Miva Open University - Get a Degree that Gets You Hired!	2023
4	Iconic Open University	Nigeria	Sokoto State	Western Africa	https://www.iconicuniversity.edu.ng/	2023
5	West Midlands Open University,	Nigeria	Ibadan	Western Africa		

6	Al-Muhibbah Open University	Nigeria	Abuja	Western Africa	Al-Muhibbah Open University (AOU)	2023

Quality Standards, Accreditation, and Licensing

Every country in Africa has a sector in its government that is dedicated to ensuring standards in schools. There are different agencies and bodies dedicated to the various levels of education in ensuring quality standards in teaching and learning. There are quality standards that must be met at the university levels before a university can be approved or licensed to admit students into the approved academic programmes. For continuous improvement, the universities are subjected to earning full accreditation every five years. Where a university cannot earn full accreditation, such university may earn interim accreditation or receive a denial. Programmes with interim accreditation are revisited in the next two years while those that receive denial are stopped from admitting students into the programmes till further notice. The major standards for monitoring quality at the universities are institutional governance and management, teaching and learning, technology, learning infrastructure and facilities, learner support, human resources and development, collaboration and partnership, research, and innovation. The method of utilising these standards is summarised into a model as shown in Figure 1.

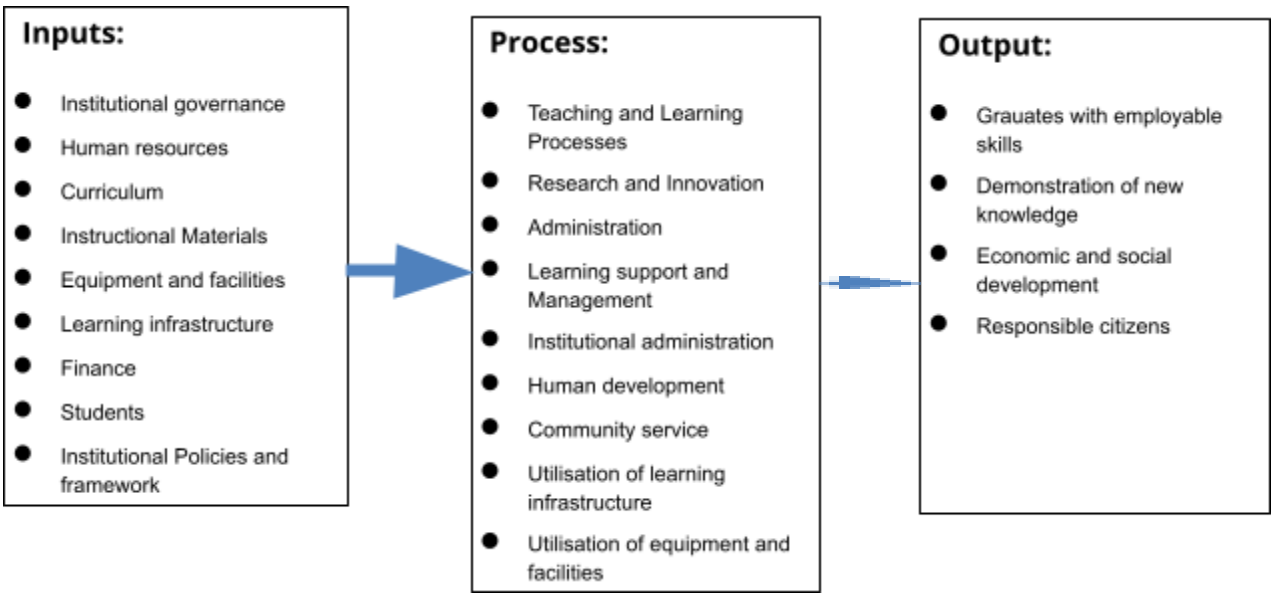

Figure 1. Input-Process-Output Internal Quality Assurance Model for OFDL.

Internal institutional quality assurance in Africa uses this model. The gap at the level of implementing the model differs from institution to institution. The external quality assurance which comes in form of accreditation has a better implementation structure as compared to the internal

quality assurance of the institutions. Developing internal quality assurance calls for attention and improvement.

Good Practices

Different measures have been put in place at institutional, country, and continental levels to improve on internal quality assurance. The African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) is a continental educational organization comprising African universities and other higher education institutions, which are committed to expanding access to quality education and training through Open and Distance Learning (ODL), including eLearning. The year 2023 has indeed been a year of remarkable activities at the Council with key highlights in the following areas:

Quality Standards

Ensuring consistent and reliable methods for assessing the quality of ODL programs remains a challenge, affecting accreditation processes in Africa.

The Council through its Directorate of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency, led by Prof. Christine Ofulue, has been reviewing the ACDE quality assurance toolkit, an exercise that commenced in July 2022. Between 26th and 29th March 2023, the Council held a quality assurance train-the-trainer workshop at Kenyatta University, Kenya. The main aim of the workshop was to train the trainers of trainers on the use of the QA Toolkit and to get further feedback that would improve the toolkit. Twenty-seven (27) quality assurance officers from different higher education institutions in Africa participated in the workshop. The feedback from the workshop has since been integrated into the toolkit to enhance its effectiveness.

The Council's Board also directed all its member institutions to start using the ACDE Quality Assurance Toolkit in internal quality self-assessment and to submit back the reports. This is an on-going process within individual institutions.

Research and Innovation

The National Open University of Nigeria, Open University of Tanzania and Zimbabwe Open University are conducting research on the low enrolment in Open Universities post COVID-19 pandemic. We hope that the findings will be published to inform the necessary measures.

Collaboration and Networking

The Council is working with higher education regulators in the implementation of the quality assurance toolkit to enhance consistency of quality standards in higher institutions of learning across the continent.

With support from the Council, the Universidade Aberta Isced (UnISCED) hosted their first international conference on 'Cooperation between higher education institutions' on the 1st of September 2023. The conference proved to be a resounding success, with participants engaging in

productive discussions on collaborative efforts to enhance the quality of educational services provided to our societies.

Though, at its initial stages, there is a collaboration between the Open University, UK, Kenyatta University, Nairobi University and two (2) universities in Ghana on Open STEM Africa Open Societal Challenge research project.

The findings will inform the necessary actions that will help in improvement of enrolment in higher education in the coming years.

Conclusion

African open and distance learning universities and the accrediting bodies are committed to continuous improvement of service delivery. Therefore, efforts are made through trainings and institutional collaborations to continuously improve on services. Currently, UNISA and NOUN is at the last stage of signing an MOU to collaborate and share/exchange resources and services to improve quality delivery. Also, NOUN is providing mentorship role to other open and distance universities in Western Africa sub-region. Recognising the gap and willingness for improvement is the key to having a successful OFDL institution.

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ASIA REGION

Ojat Darojat
Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia
Asian Association of Open Universities

Introduction

The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) focal point on quality in Asia region, in carrying out its role, has a solid commitment to support the strategic goals of the ICDE headquarters, which align with the fourth sustainable development goals (SDGs) as outlined in the United Nations 2030 agenda, which aims to ensure access and quality in inclusive and equity education, as well as promote lifelong learning opportunities for the global citizen. The President of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU), who is also entrusted with the role of ICDE focal point on quality in the Asia region, along with all relevant stakeholders, has made various efforts to facilitate the achievement of ICDE goals for the period 2021-2024, particularly those related to open, flexible, and distance learning (OFDL) in higher education access and quality.

In 2023, various initiatives and activities have been undertaken in Asia to promote the adoption of OFDL practices. This annual report highlights the following three key areas of focus.

1. The status of OFDL adoption in Asia region.
2. Accreditation.
3. Good practices in the area of quality assurance.

Status of Adoption and Implementation of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning

In the Asian region, the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) stands out as the primary non-profit organization representing higher education institutions focusing on Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning (OFDL). Currently, AAOU boasts 46 full members and 12 associate members within Asia, with an additional four hailing from outside the region. These member institutions have successfully implemented OFDL systems in their respective establishments. Discussions within the AAOU executive committee and general body meetings highlight the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically contributing to a notable rise in enrollment in open and distance higher education institutions across Asia. As of 2023, among the 62 members (see: https://www.aaou.org/full-members-1/ and https://www.aaou.org/associate-members/), five universities emerged with the highest student numbers.

In East Asia, the Open University of China (OUC) leads with a student population exceeding five million (source: OUC academic affairs department). South Asia showcases India's Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), which boasts over four million students (source: india.com). From the same region, Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) in Pakistan reports an active student base surpassing one million (source: https://www.aiou.edu.pk/). In West Asia, Anadolu University (AU) in

Türkiye offers distance education across three faculties, catering to an active student population of over one million (source: https://www.anadolu.edu.tr/). Finally, in Southeast Asia, Universitas Terbuka (UT) in Indonesia stands out with an active student count exceeding five hundred thousand (source: https://www.ut.ac.id/), which aims to double this figure in the following years.

To achieve equitable access to quality higher education systems, there is a requirement to enhance student enrollment growth in OFDL higher education institutions (HEIs) across Asia, aligning with the objectives of the fourth Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and ICDE. For instance, in Indonesia, the Central Agency of Statistics reported a gross enrollment ratio (GER) for higher education at 31.16%. This underscores the need to elevate GER, wherein OFDL HEIs emerge as a significant solution due to their flexibility, efficiency, affordability, and capacity advantages, distinguishing them from traditional face-to-face HEIs.

Quality Standards, Accreditation, and Licensing

To establish a uniform standard for all OFDL HEIs in Asia, AAOU is in the final stages of developing an accreditation system. This initiative is organized by the AAOU accreditation board, with Prof. Melinda Dela Peña Bandalaria, Ph.D., from the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) as chairperson. The board comprised three members: Prof. Dr. Kam Cheong Li from Hong Kong Metropolitan University (HKMU), Prof. Dr. Paulina Pannen from Universitas Terbuka (UT), and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Thanasak Saijampa from Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU).

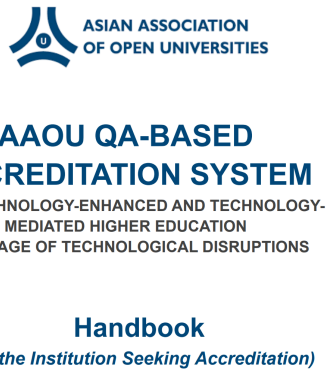

Figure 1. Handbook of AAOU QA-Based Accreditation System

Three participating institutions, namely Open University Malaysia (OUM), Universitas Terbuka (UT), and the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) have already fulfilled the necessary submission of documents and designated points of contact to the AAOU accreditation board as mandated in the handbook of AAOU accreditation system for their involvement in the initial phase of the pilot run. The pilot run for this accreditation initiative is scheduled to take place in the early months of 2025.

Good Practices

The ICDE focal point on quality in the Asia region collaborated with various parties to promote the improvement of OFDL quality in the Asia region, such as ICDE headquarters, AAOU, Five Southeast Asia Open Universities Forum (OU5), and Universitas Terbuka. Some strategies for fostering the quality of OFDL through collaborative initiatives have been conducted, such as ICDE quality review, sharing quality assurance (QA) best practices at ICDE World Conference 2023, conducting an international accreditation by the Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA), collaborative research projects and dissemination, webinars, and benchmarking projects. The following are the details.

ICDE Quality Review at UT

To maintain academic services and provide quality education, UT has made improvements and enhancements to the international-scale implementation of OFDL HEIs standards since 2005. In this regard, UT regularly and continuously seeks to improve the quality of education services to become a leading provider. One of the important steps taken by UT to enhance and ensure the quality of education services is to invite quality reviewers from the ICDE. This year, in the middle of 2023, UT conducted a quality review for the fifth time by ICDE after completing it in 2005, 2010, 2016, and 2019.

Figure 2. ICDE Quality Reviewers with UT's Rector, Vice-Rectors, and Head of Quality Assurance in Indonesia in 2023

The reviewer team from ICDE this year consists of Prof. Ebba Ossiannilsson (Chair of the ICDE OER Advocacy Committee and ICDE OER Ambassador for Global Advocacy, Sweden), Prof. Morten Flate Paulsen (The Norwegian of Science and Technology and Former ICDE Secretary General), and Prof. Kam Cheong Li (Dean of School of Open Learning at Hong Kong Metropolitan University). The quality reviewers from ICDE conducted the quality review process to ensure and suggest that all business processes implemented at UT, from recruitment and development of teaching materials, learning

services, and assessments to the management system of OFDL HEIs, comply with international standards.

Sharing Quality Assurance (QA) Best Practices at ICDE World Conference 2023

The ICDE World Conference is a prestigious international venue for sharing innovations, knowledge, and best practices among leaders, members, and delegates from various educational institutions worldwide. In November 2023, UT sent a delegation of four individuals to the ICDE World Conference, including Prof. Ojat Darojat, M.Bus., Ph.D. – the Rector and ICDE Focal Point for the Asia Region, Prof. Ainun Na'im, M.B.A., Ph.D. – the Chair of the Board of Trustees, Prof. Dr. Ali Muktiyanto, S.E., M.Si. – the Vice-Rector for Finance, Resources, and General Affairs, and Prof. Dr. M. Gorky Sembiring, M.Sc. – a Professor at the Faculty of Education.

Figure 3. Prof. Ojat Darojat with ICDE Secretary-General and Quality Reviewers, sharing UT's QA best practices at ICDE World Conference 2023

During the conference, Prof. Ojat was one of the panel discussion speakers, sharing experiences in the quality review process with ICDE quality reviewers and highlighting UT's international contributions to quality assurance, management, and academic services. Through ICDE, UT continues its efforts to enhance the quality of its learning services, contributing to the nation's advancement by improving academic qualifications of the Indonesian population, both domestically and internationally.

Conducting an International Accreditation by the Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA)

Quality assurance (QA) is the key element for Universitas Terbuka (UT) in providing quality OFDL. Until now, all programs offered by UT have adhered to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (MoECRT) of the Republic of Indonesia Regulation Number 53 of 2023 concerning National Standards for Higher Education. All UT programs have also been accredited by the National Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (NAAHE) or through Independent Accreditation Agencies. Currently, 13 study programs at UT have received an A from NAAHE.

Since 2022, the Faculty of Economics and Business (FEB) and the Faculty of Law, Social Sciences, and Political Science (FLSSPS) have been preparing for international accreditation for four study programs by the Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA) from Germany. The four study programs to be accredited are Bachelor in Management, Bachelor in Accounting, Bachelor in Development Economics from FEB, and Bachelor in Law from FLSSPS.

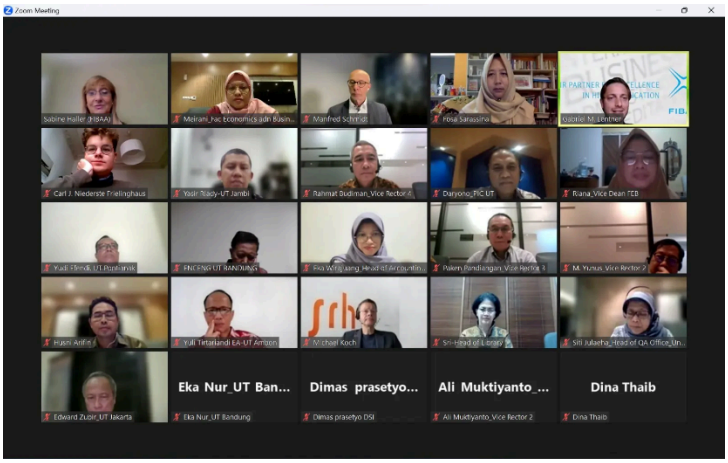

Figure 4. FIBAA accreditors with UT leaders and staff during an online accreditation visit

Following the accreditation proposal, FIBAA conducted an online visit on October 16-18, 2023, with a reviewer team consisting of (1) Prof. Dr. Michael Koch (Science & Distance Learning Expert) from SRH Distance University-The Mobile University, Dusseldorf, Germany; (2) Prof. Dr. Gabriel Lentner (Science) from University for Further Education Krems, Austria; (3) Prof. Dr. Marcus Oehlrich (Science) from the University of Applied Sciences Bad Homburg, Germany; (4) Dr. Manfred Schmidt (Professional Practice) from Sikos GnbH; (5) Carl Johann (Student Representative) from Free University of Berlin, Germany; (6) Dr. Fosa Sarassina (Country Expert) from Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia; and (7) Prof. Dr. Sabine Haller (FIBAA Project Manager).

Collaborative Research Projects, Dissemination, and Benchmarking

One of the ways to find an innovation in OFDL area is by conducting collaborative research projects (CRP). Five open universities in Southeast Asia (OU5), namely, Universitas Terbuka (UT, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), Open University Malaysia (OUM), University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), and Hanoi Open University (HOU) regularly held a CRP with five different research topics. In 2023, the research topics are as follows.

- Innovative Pedagogy in the 4IR Era.
- The Role of Open Universities in ASEAN in Sustainability Development.
- Metaverse in Promoting Effective Learning Design for Practical Sessions at Open Universities in ASEAN.

- Indigenous People in ASEAN.
- Disaster Risk and Reduction Management in ASEAN.

To share quality OFDL best practices, AAOU also held an AAOU Inter-university staff exchange fellowship program as a part of benchmarking activities. In 2023, there are at least three member institutions opened for applications in the program, i.e., UT accepted three applicants, Korea National Open University (KNOU) accepted two applicants, and Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) accepted two applicants. Besides, AAOU also held the 36th Annual AAOU Conference 2023 hosted by Anadolu University in Istanbul, Türkiye, where 250 participants from 20 countries and 40 institutions attended the event, eager to get input and enlightenment from keynote speakers and presenters in a wide range of sub-topics to build new networks and possible collaboration among OFDL practitioners.

AAOU also manages AAOU Journal, which is indexed in Scopus and ranked Q1. It indicates that AAOU is also concerned with disseminating quality OFDL innovations and practices through a highly reputable international journal that accepts high-quality and relevant research articles in the field of OFDL. Moreover, since May 2023, AAOU also routinely held a monthly international webinar series with various essential and cutting-edge themes related to OFDL in each episode.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the efforts of the ICDE focal point on quality in Asia region have been instrumental in advancing the goals outlined in ICDE, SDGs, and the United Nations 2030 agenda to provide inclusive and quality education and reflect stakeholders' dedication to fostering OFDL in higher education.

The status of OFDL adoption in the Asia region, as highlighted by AAOU, underscores the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on enrolment in open and distance higher education institutions. Institutions such as the Open University of China, Indira Gandhi National Open University, Allama Iqbal Open University, Anadolu University, and Universitas Terbuka have emerged as mega universities catering to millions of students. To address the need for equitable access to quality higher education, there is a growing emphasis on enhancing student enrolment in OFDL higher education institutions across Asia, aligning with the objectives of the fourth SDGs and ICDE.

Looking forward, AAOU is finalizing the accreditation system for OFDL higher education institutions, aiming to establish a uniform standard for quality. The collaborative efforts involving institutions like the University of the Philippines Open University, Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Universitas Terbuka, and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University are a testament to the commitment to OFDL quality assurance. The forthcoming pilot run in 2025 signifies a crucial step towards achieving this goal. Additionally, collaborative initiatives, such as the ICDE quality review at Universitas Terbuka, participation in the ICDE World Conference, and international accreditation by the Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation, showcase a multifaceted approach to enhancing the quality of OFDL in the region. Through these endeavors, ICDE focal point on quality

for Asia region continues to play a pivotal role in promoting quality, excellence, and innovation in OFDL.

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EUROPE REGION

George Ubachs,
EADTU, Netherlands

Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a strong evolution in the digitalisation of higher education in mainstream as well as in continuing education. Institutions of higher education are increasingly adopting synchronous hybrid and blended teaching and learning models in on campus education, and online learning models in continuing and open education. This shift has significant implications for quality assurance. With the disruptive evolution of technology, particularly generative AI, this change is even expected to accelerate, but the full impact of this acceleration remains unclear.

Other developments in higher education, such as the breakthrough of micro-credentials in continuing education and the increased international collaboration and mobility within European University Alliances, are also influencing higher education and quality assurance. Some of these developments are described recently in "Quality Assurance Systems for Digital Higher Education" (Ubachs & Henderikx, 2023).

In Europe, the responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with national agencies, fitting to criteria and frameworks created by national governments. These national agencies are coordinated by the European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA).

On a global scale, the OECD has recently established principles for the quality assurance of digital education in developed regions. These principles could potentially support national agencies in enhancing their systems.

Status of Adoption and Implementation of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning

In the past three years, Europe's higher education landscape has undergone rapid changes. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift towards digital education, as out of necessity institutions were quickly transitioning to remote learning. The pandemic has undoubtedly influenced digital education practices and strategies of European universities.

However, most studies have concentrated on the qualitative rather than the quantitative aspects of digital learning adoption and implementation. Post-pandemic, a large number of universities have incorporated digital teaching and learning into their bachelor's and master's degrees. Yet, it remains uncertain how many of these institutions are consolidating this shift or returning to pre-pandemic "back to normal" methods, particularly considering that many implementations appeared to fail due to a lack of a pedagogical foundation based on scientific principles.

To now get a fully updated quantitative overview of status of adoption and implementation of digital education in Europe, we have to look out for the next European University Association's (EUA) Trends report that will be published in 2024. The EUA Trends reports (EUA, 2018) examine how teaching and learning at European higher education institutions evolves in the context of changing demands, technological and societal development, and European- and national-level policies and reforms. Data are gathered from more than 300 higher education institutions in the 42 "Bologna" countries.

Three primary digital education settings in European universities

In the framework of the European Commission's Digital Education Readiness initiative, the DigiTel Pro project, coordinated by EADTU, has provided a picture of qualitative developments in digital education in some European front-runner universities (DigiTeL Pro, 2023).

The project compiled a qualitative compendium that reported on the practices of digital education after COVID-19 at various universities in Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Ireland, Italy and France. This revealed a variety of digital education practices and strategies. They were influenced not only by the domain, course type, education level, class or cohort size, but also by teachers' prior experiences with digital education, their didactic and pedagogical methods and beliefs, and their preferences and experiences during the COVID-19 period (Brouns et al., 2022). They were of course also shaped by the prevailing institutional policies and culture.

These practices and strategies reflect three primary digital education settings for digital higher education in Europe: synchronous hybrid, blended learning, and online distance education. Due to their already significant contributions to research and innovation in these prevalent settings, a number of Digital Pro universities were chosen to further update cutting-edge research and innovation, as well as a selection of pre-existing CPD resources for these settings:

- Synchronous hybrid learning (KU Leuven): based on course design that has in common that both on-site or "here" students and remote or "there" students are included simultaneously (Raes, A., Pieters, M. & Van de Plas F., 2022a, 2022b).
- Blended learning (TU Delft): based on a course design with a deliberate combination of online and offline learning activities (Wahls, N., Dijkstra, W. & Oudehand, M., 2022; Oudehand & Dijkstra, 2023).
- Online distance learning (Universidad Oberta de Catalunya, Open University of the Netherlands, Uninettuno): based on a course design with a continuous physical separation between teacher and student (Sangra et al., 2022a, 2022b).

All three settings are to some extent used in each of these institutions, depending on the type of students and courses, the individual preference of teaching staff or the institutional culture. Open universities of course use mainly an asynchronous online distance setting to be flexible for students at work.

DigiTeL Pro course modules for continuing professional development

Drawing from these studies, three new course modules have been developed, each addressing one of the three settings, with a focus on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for digital higher education aimed at university staff and leadership. Collectively, they constitute a comprehensive CPD programme. All course materials, along with a user manual, are freely available for individual staff use or for integration into CPD initiatives of educational support services (EADTU, 2023c).

These three course modules were presented in webinars on the EMPOWER platform of EADTU, as well as through peer learning trajectories on the European Digital Education Hub. This hub is an initiative of the European Commission aimed at sharing expertise, fostering collaboration, and improving the quality of digital education (European Commission, 2022).

A course on student readiness for digital education, published on Futurelearn (Futurelearn, 2023), complements these offerings. This course aims to equip students with the digital competences necessary to succeed as a digital learner at university and help them achieve their learning objectives). The course was based on updated research and innovation of the City University Dublin (Beirne, 2022).

Institutional policies and frameworks

To scale up innovation, these universities develop robust institutional policies and frameworks for digital education, which is needed to create the necessary conditions for high quality digital education. The DigTeL Pro project has analysed them in more detail (EADTU, 2023a).

The KU Leuven Learning Lab supports a comprehensive network for integrated digital transformation across the institution. It brings together expertise and frameworks from both educational and ICT services at a central level, and from faculty services at a decentralized level, potentially on different campuses. The Learning Lab provides front-line support to teaching staff and curriculum boards and assists the central leadership in developing institutional policy priorities.

The TU Delft Teaching and Learning Services and Teaching Academy respond to the needs of individual teachers and entire faculties based on a shared educational vision and strategic framework. They offer guidance, including pedagogical frameworks, guidelines, and continuing professional development, and help teachers choose appropriate learning resources and design effective courses and curricula. The Teaching Academy fosters a community of teachers, providing a shared physical space where all teachers can work and showcase innovative teaching practices.

The UOC e-Learning Centre has created a unique online distance learning teaching model for the entire institution with differentiated roles for each curriculum a programme director, coordinating professors, course instructors, and tutors. The e-Learning Centre offers methodological support to teachers in the design of courses and programmes. Learning designers and advisors train faculty members, and personalized advice is given through expert advice sessions. The centre has developed an advanced course development template for online challenge-based distance

education. All initiatives are grounded in research and innovation conducted in the eLearning Centre.

This report resulted in a set of recommendations for the management of digital higher education, contributing to the conditions for high quality teaching and learning (EADTU, 2023b).

The DigiTeL Pro reports and courses undoubtedly provide a solid foundation for updating quality assurance systems for digital higher education.

The adoption and implementation of open, flexible and distance learning

The number of dedicated open and distance teaching universities in Europe is quite stable as these are well-established universities of which Europe now counts a dozen in various countries. These are Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED, Spain), the Open University (OUUK), Anadolu University (Turkey), FernUniversität in Hagen (Germany), Open Universiteit (Netherlands), the International Telematic University UNINETTUNO (Italy), Hellenic Open University (HOU, Greece), Open University of Cyprus (OUC), Universidade Aberta (UAb, Portugal), Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Open University of the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) and Unidistance Suisse (EADTU, 2023).

Among the open and distance teaching universities, only the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) operates in an entirely online setting. UOC's educational model is designed to offer students an engaging, supportive, and tailored learning experience that equips them for success in their chosen careers. It is founded on three fundamental components that always prioritize student activity, which is always at the centre: cutting-edge digital learning resources, individualized student support from teaching staff, and a networked community of peer-students, all within a completely asynchronous online environment. Other open and distance universities seem to increasingly incorporate synchronous hybrid as well as blended teaching and learning activities in their digital education models.

In European countries where there isn't a specific open and distance teaching university, the mission of providing distance higher education is assumed by conventional universities, offering remote courses next to their regular offerings. This approach allows for greater flexibility and inclusivity in higher education, reaching students who may not be able to attend in-person classes due to professional, personal or geographical constraints. These universities are often represented by associations dedicated to online and distance education, such as the Fédération Interuniversitaire de l'Enseignement à Distance (FIED) in France. FIED comprises 21 universities, each having a Centre de Télé-Enseignement Universitaire (CTEU), which offers a variety of courses in different fields of study (EADTU, 2023).

It remains uncertain how conventional universities will leverage the institutional possibilities of synchronous hybrid, blended, and online distance education settings to extend their educational offerings towards open and flexible learning in a lifelong learning context. Since the inception of the MOOCs movement, there has been a more favourable attitude towards online distance learning.

Both KU Leuven and TU Delft, which are part of the DigiTeL Pro universities, provide numerous MOOCs via the Edx platform. Similarly, many European universities offer courses through the European MOOC Consortium's platforms, which include Futurelearn, FUN MOOC, AI Campus, iMooX, NAU, OpenHPI, and OpenupEd) (European MOOC Consortium). In addition to this, they organize micro-credentials programmes for continuing education and also degree programmes using one or more of the three discussed settings, especially in areas where countries face a labor market shortage (e.g. education, healthcare, information technology). Also in cooperation and mobility within European university alliances (EUIs) (European Commission, 2018) they are offering courses in digital settings.

However, conventional universities often fall short in terms of flexibility, specialised course design models, and business strategies to match the scalability that dedicated open and distance learning universities can achieve in providing open and flexible education.

Quality Standards, Accreditation, and Licensing

Quality assurance (QA) structures in European countries vary as these are regulated at national level, but there are common principles and frameworks that countries adhere to. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (the Bologna Process) has played a significant role in promoting quality assurance in higher education across European countries. As a result, there are some key elements and structures commonly used in European quality assurance systems.

National quality assurance agencies and ENQA

The national European quality assurance agencies and consequently most universities comply with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG, 2015). The ESG were developed by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Students' Union (ESU), the European University Association (EUA), and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE). These guidelines provide a common framework for quality assurance and enhancement in higher education institutions (self-assessment, programme reviews, and quality improvement initiatives) and for the national quality assurance agencies across Europe. While the ESG provides a set of standards and guidelines, it is important to note that they are not prescriptive standards for quality, nor do they prescribe how the quality assurance processes are to be implemented. Instead, the ESG offers guidance on the areas vital for successful quality provision and learning environments in higher education. The applicability and implementation of the ESG can vary depending on the context and are designed to be applied to all higher education regardless of place or mode of delivery. The adoption of the ESG is fundamental for the development of a cohesive higher education area in Europe, facilitating mutual recognition and trust among institutions and across countries.

Another key element is that European QA systems typically involve various stakeholders, including students, academic staff, employers, and the wider community. Stakeholder involvement is seen as

essential for ensuring that quality assurance processes are comprehensive and reflective of the diverse needs and expectations of the community.

The focus in European QA systems is not just on compliance with regulations but also on continuous improvement and enhancement of quality. Institutions are expected to demonstrate a commitment to ongoing quality improvement. Therefore, QA processes often include recommendations for enhancement.

While there are common principles and structures in Europe, there are also variations in the implementation of quality assurance systems among European countries. These reflect differences in educational systems, legal frameworks, and cultural contexts. National legislation and policies therefore play a significant role in shaping the specific characteristics of quality assurance in each country.

Quality assurance guidelines for digital education, new educational formats and AI in education

Next to quality assurance of face-to-face higher education, ENQA developed add-on quality assurance guidelines for assessing formats of digital education, called "Considerations for quality assurance of e-learning provisions". These are all still in line with ESG, but more specifically focused on envisaged accessibility, flexibilization and personalisation by online education as well as on interactivity and engagement of formats of online supported education (Huertas et al., 2018).

Recently, ENQA also developed "Approaches to Quality Assurance of Micro-Credentials" (ENQA, 2023). This provides an overview of the state of play of policy developments and presents latest information on various initiatives and activities related to the quality assurance of micro-credentials in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It specifically explores different national policies, as well as practices by quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, and positions these within the European policy context. These quality assurance approaches are very important for micro-credentials in digital education settings, which are provided in open and flexible higher education.

A next development in quality assurance and digital education is linked to the transformative influence of Generative AI on learning activities. This impact extends to the design of teaching and learning, and even to educational goals in higher education. Systematic research is required to map this connection and to formulate criteria for its evaluation. EADTU starts the ADMIT project, supported by the European Commission, on Generative AI in higher education exploring the link between AI and teaching and learning design, including educational and ethical conditions.

In addition, the increasing internationalization and even globalization of digital educational programmes and associated mobility is influencing the learning experience of students in European Universities Alliances (EUIs) and other networks (European Commission, 2018). Benchmarking the quality of international collaborative education and mobility will undoubtedly be subject of future quality assurance efforts (EQAR, 2015; EUNIQ, 2020; Henderikx & Ubachs, 2022; Henderikx, Ubachs & Antonaci, 2022)

Global context

Recently, the OECD Education Working Paper on Quality Standards for Digital Higher Education has analysed the standards and indicators for digital higher education developed by QA agencies and identified trends and best practice from higher education institutions for the quality management of digital study programmes. This review suggests eight key principles for quality assurance which can lead the future development or adjustment of instruments: institutions should develop a mission, vision, and strategy for digitalisation and innovation; an organisational quality culture centred on digitalisation, innovation and collaboration; an appropriate digital education infrastructure; assure the quality of digital course content, design, delivery and assessment; support and incentivise staff professional development; prepare and support students for digital learning; monitor the quality of digital teaching and learning; and strengthen feedback and monitoring practices (Staring et al., 2022). (Staring et al., 2022)

These principles should be embedded in future quality assurance efforts.

Good Practices

The European Digital Education Hub

To anticipate on the shift towards more online and blended education and the response to the need for related expertise, the European Commission is actively promoting digital education. The Digital Education Action Plan (European Commission, 2018) and the European Education Area (European Commission, 2020) aim to promote the use of digital technologies in education. The European Commission has launched the European Digital Education Hub as a community and platform that fosters cooperation and dialogue among stakeholders in digital education across Europe and beyond (European Commission, 2023). It aims to support the development of a high-performing European digital education ecosystem and enhance citizens' digital competences and skills for the digital transition.

DigiTeL Pro

As previously mentioned, the European Commission funded projects like DigiTeL Pro to professionalise digital teaching and learning by offering guidelines and CPD programmes for teaching staff and leadership on providing high quality digital education in synchronous hybrid education, blended education and online and distance education settings (EADTU, 2023). DigiTeL Pro offers as well as a student readiness course to equip students with the digital competences necessary to succeed as an online learner at university. With this course, students have the chance to understand the challenges and opportunities of online learning from the perspective of students who have already experienced this.

These initiatives are crucial to elevate the quality of digital education and in further developing benchmarks and guidelines for quality assurance.

E-xcellence

The quality assurance manual and benchmarking instrument E-xcellence, developed by EADTU, is dedicated for online and blended education (Ubachs et al., 2015; Ubachs & Henderikx, 2023). The E-xcellence quality benchmarking instrument supports universities in enhancing their online, open and flexible education at course, curriculum and institutional level, which also includes staff and student support services for online and blended education. Universities are stimulated to improve their blended and online education performance by a free guided self-assessment (quickscan). This assessment can be a stand-alone exercise for a higher education management and staff, leading to the first insight in fields of improvement. The approach can be extended with a paid review online or on-site from blended and online education experts. This extension is formalised in the E-xcellence Associates label. The E-xcellence Associates label is not a label for proven excellence but rather a label for institutions/faculties using the E-xcellence instrument for self-assessment to take measures of improvement accordingly.

EMBED

Another instrument developed by EADTU is EMBED (the European Maturity Model for Blended Education). The model is based on thorough research consisting of a literature research on the concepts of blended learning, teaching and education, and also dozens of interviews with educators and management (EADTU, 2020)

The EMBED framework serves as a tool for evaluating the maturity of decision-making processes regarding blended education in higher education institutions (van Valkenburg et al., 2020; Goeman et al., 2018, 2019, 2021; Goeman & Dijkstra, 2019). It iteratively checks whether decisions about blended education at the course, curriculum, or institutional level are based on evidence or valid information, rather than merely intuition or common sense. The model is structured into three levels: the course level, the programme level, and the institution level. Each level encompasses multiple dimensions, which collectively provide a comprehensive view of blended learning and education within an institution. These dimensions include indicators that describe the institution's maturity level. For each dimension, guidelines, technologies, and examples of good practices are provided to inspire improvement roadmaps. EMBED's goal is to assist anyone looking to implement or enhance blended learning in their institution.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the landscape of higher education in Europe has undergone significant changes, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread adoption of digital education practices and strategies. These changes are primarily reflected in three key digital education settings: synchronous hybrid, blended, and online distance education.

Dedicated open and online distance teaching universities continue to play a stable role in the European education system. However, it remains uncertain how conventional universities will

leverage the institutional potential of digital education to extend their educational offerings towards open and flexible learning in a lifelong learning context. They often lack the flexibility, tailored course design models, and business strategies needed to achieve the scalability that dedicated open and distance teaching universities can offer in delivering open and flexible education.

The European Commission actively promotes digital education through initiatives like the Digital Education Action Plan and the European Education Area, with the European Digital Education Hub facilitating collaboration and expertise exchange at the EU level.

Quality assurance remains a crucial aspect of higher education, with national agencies in Europe adhering to the European Standards and Guidelines developed by ENQA. Stakeholder involvement, continuous improvement, and commitment to quality enhancement are central to European quality assurance systems. ENQA has also developed specific guidelines for digital education, including considerations for e-learning provisions and approaches to quality assurance for micro-credentials.

Looking ahead, the European University Association's Trends report, scheduled for release in 2024, is anticipated to provide updated insights into the adoption and implementation of open, flexible, and distance learning in Europe. Quality assurance in the digital era faces new challenges, with the transformative influence of Generative AI on learning activities requiring systematic research to formulate evaluation criteria.

On a global scale, the OECD has outlined key principles for quality assurance in digital higher education, emphasizing institutions' missions, organizational cultures, infrastructure, and support for both staff and students. As higher education becomes more internationalised and globalised, efforts in benchmarking the quality of collaborative education and mobility are expected to be integral to future quality assurance endeavours.

In specific reference to quality assurance for blended and online education, models such as EMBED and E-xcellence are pertinent and should be considered in shaping future quality assurance efforts and mature decision making. The evolving landscape of higher education calls for a dynamic and adaptive approach to quality assurance to ensure the continued enhancement of education standards across Europe and beyond.

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LATIN AMERICA AND CARIBBEAN REGION

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Introduction

In recent years, in Latin America and the Caribbean, there has been significant growth in non-face-to-face higher education, thanks to technological advances and the benefits and characteristics offered by this type of study. The work developed towards the creation and strengthening of a culture of educational quality in the region is notable, and has been achieved thanks to the efforts of the State, Higher Education Institutions and evaluation and accreditation agencies.

With the growing demand for higher education and the need to overcome geographical barriers, distance education has become a viable option for many people in the region. However, despite the growth of distance education, several challenges still remain to be addressed. These challenges include limited access to technology and Internet connectivity, lack of adequate funding for distance education initiatives, and the need for accreditation and quality assurance processes. Additionally, there is a need for standardized policies and regulations to ensure the quality and credibility of distance education programs in the region.

The state of distance education in Latin America and the Caribbean is heterogeneous. Great progress has been made in expanding access to higher education through distance education programs in Latin America and the Caribbean, but there are still important challenges to overcome to fully exploit the potential of this type of study.

This report aims to reveal the panorama of non-face-to-face higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean, presenting the growth of its enrollment, the regulatory framework, evaluation models and good quality assurance practices.

Status of Adoption and Implementation of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning

Open, flexible and distance learning potentially contributes to the development of higher education; For this reason, its recognition and degree of acceptance is evident in the majority of Latin American countries, thus leading to guaranteeing the fundamental right to education for all people.

It is pertinent to highlight that the region of Latin America and the Caribbean, in recent decades, has experienced significant growth in the demand for the type of education analyzed, a change driven by the contribution of some factors, among them: the modality of studies has allowed access to higher education for people who would not otherwise be able to participate due to geographic, economic

or other limitations; technological advances, especially in terms of internet connectivity and electronic devices, facilitating the implementation of distance education programs, and the use of online platforms, videoconferencing and digital resources, achieving greater accessibility of higher education; the combination of academic activities with work or family commitments thanks to more flexible higher education programs; International collaboration between universities from different countries provides the possibility for students to access programs offered by internationally renowned institutions; the adaptation of higher education to the digital era generating pedagogical innovation; among others.

However, it is relevant to point out that despite the multiple advances, there are still challenges in the region, one of the most notable is the existing digital divide, also the quality of distance education, the approach to learning outcomes as articulating axis of the teaching-learning process, the incorporation of artificial intelligence, the use of appropriate learning evaluation methods, the strengthening of teachers' digital competencies, the implementation of microcredentials , etc. Facing these challenges must lead to guaranteeing not only educational quality, but also ensuring that education is inclusive and accessible to all; thus achieving, promoting active, personalized and quality learning, and leaving behind the lag and inappropriate conception of this type of study with respect to face-to-face education.

Without a doubt, the expansion of higher education in Latin America has been significant, reflecting a considerable increase, going from around 11 million students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in 2000, to almost 29 million in 2020. Figure 1 reflects the increase in enrollment by country during the period 2000 – 2019, with Panama showing the lowest percentage of growth, and Guatemala, the highest increase. It is important to highlight that enrollment predominates in private HEIs, with a growing trend over the years.

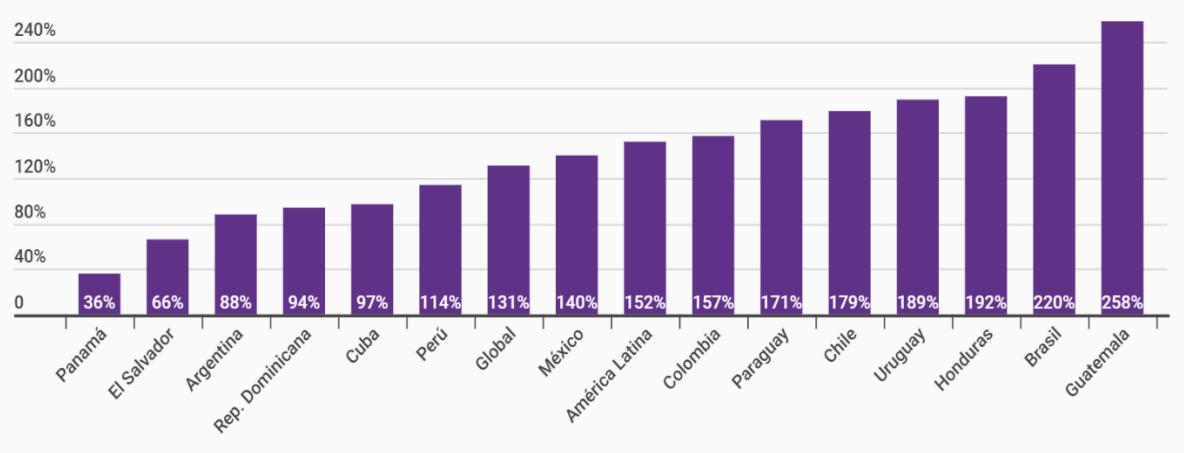

Figure 1: Enrollment growth in HEIs in Latin America (2000 – 2019).

Source: Information System for Educational Trends in Latin America (SITEAL).

Likewise, the percentage of students enrolled in ISCED 5, 6 and 7 first degree programs by study modality (face-to-face or distance) in Latin America can be seen, where the growth in distance

enrollment is visibly observed, and the reduction in the in-person modality, corroborating the growth of said modality of studies evidenced in recent years. Although it should be noted that the highest percentage of enrollment is in person, exceeding rates of 70%, and distance enrollment is close to around 25%.

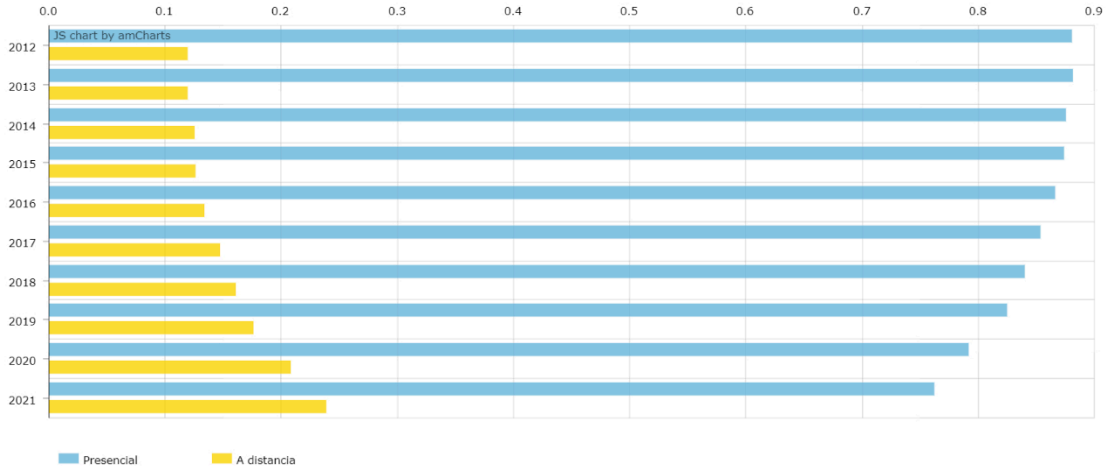

Figure 2: Percentage of enrolled first-degree students by type of study (2012 – 2021).

Source: Ibero-American Network of Higher Education Indicators (Red IndicES).

Taking into consideration the aforementioned, it can be highlighted that the highest percentage of graduates is in the face-to-face modality, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentage of graduates (2012 – 2021).

Country	Study Modality	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Argentina	In person	93%	93%	92%	93%	92%	54%	86%	94%	89%	89%
	From distance	7%	7%	8%	7%	8%	5%	8%	6%	11%	11%
Brazil	In person		85%	83%	81%	82%	80%	80%	77%	71%	66%
	From distance		15%	17%	19%	18%	20%	20%	24%	29%	3. 4%
Chili	In person	99%	97%	98%	97%	96%	96%	96%	95%	90%	90%
	From distance	2%	3%	2%	3%	4%	4%	4%	5%	10%	10%
Colombia	In person	84%	86%	86%	84%	83%	84%	82%	82%	79%	79%
	From distance	16%	14%	14%	16%	17%	16%	18%	18%	21%	21%
Cuba	In person	93%	93%	95%	97%	98%	99%	99%	99%	99%	99%
	From distance	7%	7%	5%	3%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Ecuador	In person	74%	72%	74%	75%						
	From distance	26%	28%	26%	25%						
Honduras	In person				72%	72%	64%	69%	71%	24%	
	From distance				28%	28%	36%	31%	29%	39%	
Mexico	In person	100%	100%	100%	100%	85%	84%	84%	83%	82%	78%
	From distance					15%	16%	16%	17%	18%	22%
Dominican Republic	In person	91%	91%	90%	89%		88%				
	From distance	9%	9%	10%	11%		12%				
Uruguay	In person	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	From distance										

Source: Ibero-American Network of Higher Education Indicators (Red IndicES)

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the positioning of this type of study and its growth is indisputable, and although it would be a great contribution to have official and updated statistics to know and analyze the state of the higher education system, it can be highlighted that this significant growth must generate that the actions of Higher Education Institutions are directed towards the consolidation of a culture of quality, ensuring that they fulfill their substantive functions in the best possible way, and carrying out the constant and systematic search for excellence, relevance, transformation and development to through continuous improvement.

Regulations and Quality Standards

The issue of open, flexible and distance education regulations has always been a current discussion, and a challenge for countries that do not yet have it. Governments have advanced at a slow pace in the development of specific legislation for the development of this educational modality, and it is after the pandemic that its relevance and adoption has generated the prevailing need to have a current and updated regulatory framework, and where government authorities have taken on the challenge with a view to achieving a process of regulatory convergence aimed at the development of higher education in the region. It is relevant to point out that the regulations must be consistent with the characteristics of the study modality.

Undoubtedly, all efforts are focused on fulfilling the right to education, and ensuring the quality, equity and relevance of the programs and courses offered, as well as the establishment of clear guidelines for their implementation and regulation. Next, Table 2 shows the higher education legislation that governs the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, and shows the absence of regulations for distance and online education in most countries in the region.

Table 2. Higher education legislation in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Country	Legislation	
	General - does not include EaD	**Specific for EaD**
Argentina	Higher Education Law No. 24,521 (1995)	Ministerial Res. 1717/04 - Distance Education. General disposition. Guidelines for the presentation and evaluation of Programs and Careers under the Distance Education modality.
Bolivia	Avelino Siñani Education Law - Elizardo Pérez (2010)	
Brazil	Law No. 9,394 (1996). Establishes the guidelines and bases of national education	
	Decree No 9235/2017, Provides for the exercise of the functions of regulation, supervision and evaluation of higher education institutions and undergraduate and graduate courses in the federal educational system.	

Chili	Law 21,091 on Higher Education (2018)	
Colombia	Law 115 of 1994 - By which the general education law is issued.	
	Decree 1075 of 2015 - Through which the Single Regulatory Decree of the Education Sector is issued	
Costa Rica	Fundamental Law of Education No. 2160	
Cuba	Decree - Law No. 369 of 2018. "Amendment of Law No. 1307 of July 29, 1976"	
Ecuador	Organic Law of Higher Education – LOES	
	Academic Regime Regulations (2022)	
	Organic Law Reforming the Organic Law of Higher Education (2018)	
		Regulations for Careers and Programs in Dual Training Modality
The Savior	Higher Education Law - Decree No. 468 (2004)	Special Regulation of Non-Personal Education in Higher Education (2012)
	General Regulations of the Higher Education Law (2009)	
Guatemala	Political Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala	Ministerial Agreement 3590-2011. Provisions that regulate the distance modality and the operation of the educational institutions that carry it out
Honduras	Higher Education Law (1989)	Regulation of Distance Education at the Higher Education Level in Honduras (2014)
	Regulations of the Higher Education Law (1989)	
Mexico	General Law of Higher Education (2021)	
Nicaragua	Law 89 of Higher Education Autonomy (1990)	
	Reforms to the Law of Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions. LAW NO . 103 (1990)	
Panama	Executive Decree 50: Regulates the operation of higher education centers, official and private (1999)	Executive Decree 949: Distance Operation of Universities and Higher Education Institutions and the Implementation of Distance Study Plans and Programs (2011)

		Executive Decree 61: Which establishes regulations for the creation and operation of distance universities; whose modalities are blended and/or virtual for the implementation of distance, blended and/or virtual study plans and programs (2022)
Paraguay	Law 4995 on Higher Education (2013)	CONES Resolution No. 63/2016 "Regulation of Distance and Blended Education"
	CONES Resolution No. 166/2015, "Regulating Law No. 4995/2013 – Higher Education"	
Peru	Law No. 30220 - University Law (2014)	
Dominican Republic	Law No. 139-01 of Higher Education, Science and Technology	
	Decree No. 463-04: Regulations of Higher Education Institutions of the Dominican Republic	
Uruguay	Law No. 18437 - General Education Law (2008)	

As well as the existence of a regulatory framework that regulates the open, flexible and distance study modality, it is necessary to have minimum quality standards in educational processes and products; For this reason, distance education programs must undergo accreditation processes that evaluate their curricular design, the pedagogical resources used in the teaching process, the evaluation systems and the learning results. Without a doubt, accreditation guarantees the educational quality and validity of the degrees awarded.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, during the last decades, the creation of evaluation and accreditation organizations has been evident, which have generated different models that contemplate dimensions, criteria, indicators and standards to evaluate quality in the different modalities of study. whether at the institutional or career level. Quality assurance processes are different in each country. Below, the accreditation bodies of the region are established, and the specific evaluation and accreditation models for distance modality, among them we have:

Table 3. Accreditation Bodies and Evaluation Models.

Country	Organism	Evaluation model
Argentina	National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAU)	

Bolivia	Vice Ministry of Higher Education for Vocational Training	
Brazil	Anísio Teixeira National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (INEP)	In-Person and Distance External Institutional Evaluation Instrument. (2017). Evaluation Instrument for In-Person and Distance Undergraduate Courses. (2017).
Chili	National Accreditation Commission (CNA)	Quality Criteria and Standards for the Institutional Accreditation of the University Subsystem. (2023).
Colombia	National Accreditation Council (CNA)	Accreditation guidelines for academic programs and institutions. (2021).
Costa Rica	National Higher Education Accreditation System (SINAES)	Official Accreditation Model for Degree Courses of the National Higher Education Accreditation System for the Distance Modality. (2011).
Cuba	National Accreditation Board (JAN) protected by the Ministry of Higher Education	
Ecuador	Council for Quality Assurance of Higher Education (CACES)	External Evaluation Model for Accreditation Purposes for Quality Assurance of Universities and Polytechnic Schools. (2023). Evaluation Model of the Learning Environment of the Law Career in distance mode . _ (2021).
The Savior	Higher Education Accreditation Commission (CdA) - Ministry of Education of El Salvador (MINED)	
Mexico	Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education, AC (COPAES)	
	Interinstitutional Committees for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CIEES)	Principles and standards for the evaluation and accreditation of distance programs. (2017).
Nicaragua	National Council for Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEA)	
Panama	National Council for University Evaluation and Accreditation of Panama (CONEAUPA)	
Paraguay	National Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (ANEAES)	Mechanism for Evaluation and Accreditation of Degree Courses in the Distance Education Modality. (2020).
Peru	National System for Evaluation, Accreditation and Certification	Quality Model for Institutional Accreditation of Universities. (2022).

	of Educational Quality (SINEACE)	
Dominican Republic	Vice Ministry of Evaluation and Accreditation of HEIs - Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology	
Uruguay	Ad Hoc Accreditation Commission - Ministry of Education and Culture	
Venezuela	University Evaluation, Supervision, Support and Accreditation System (SESA)	

As can be seen in the table, the lack of institutional and career evaluation models and instruments specific to the distance and online modality is highlighted in the majority of countries in the region, which becomes a relevant challenge for accreditation agencies and the pursuit of educational quality and continuous improvement.

Regulations and accreditation are two relevant issues for the development of education, and despite their weaknesses in the non-face-to-face study modality, the competent bodies continue to work to ensure the right to quality higher education, in all its study modalities.

Good Practices

In Latin America and the Caribbean, various good practices have been implemented in the area of quality assurance of higher education, specifically, aimed at improvement processes in the development of the substantive functions of HEIs, which is the result of carry out self-evaluation processes, being an important part of the organizational culture that allows the promotion and implementation of improvement actions, in an early and relevant manner. Likewise, the accreditation processes demonstrate compliance with minimum quality standards, demonstrating the academic excellence of the universities and the programs taught.

Among the good practices implemented, we can highlight the work developed by the Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Quality in Distance Higher Education (CALED), which, in keeping with its institutional mission of contributing to the improvement of quality in distance higher education in All institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean that offer this type of studies have worked on the design and implementation of quality management systems in distance education, through the development of the following instruments:

- Evaluation Guide for Virtual Continuing Training Courses
- Self-Evaluation Guide for Distance Undergraduate Programs
- Evaluation guide for accessible virtual courses

- Scorecard (SCCQAP) Evaluation of Online Undergraduate Programs

Likewise, it is important to mention a regional initiative launched by the Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES) and the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI) , the development of a quality seal in distance education for Ibero-America, called Kalos Virtual Ibero-America Quality Seal (KVI), which requires compliance with a series of specific criteria and indicators for university teaching in virtual mode. The seal evaluates key dimensions of this type of study, whether: academic processes, teaching experience and training, students, management and operations, infrastructure and technological support, access to university services, among others. It should be noted that RIACES and OEI had the collaboration of CALED to strengthen the indicators selected for the creation of the Seal, taking advantage of the Institute's experience in the development of guidelines and instruments for the evaluation, accreditation and certification of distance higher education programs.

Conclusion

The panorama of open, flexible and distance education in Latin America and the Caribbean shows the significant increase in its enrollment, the efforts of accreditation bodies to develop quality assurance processes and regulatory development at the level of each country. However, some challenges still remain that must be resolved:

- That accreditation agencies and bodies review and update instruments for the evaluation of distance and online education.
- Establish a framework of comparable and compatible standards at an international level.
- Consolidate teams of experts in evaluation processes of distance and online education.
- That accreditation agencies are part of the digital ecosystem of educational innovation and transformation.
- Develop collaborative work between networks, higher education institutions and evaluation organizations to consolidate true quality assurance systems.
- Generation of regional and global alliances.

Each of these actions requires the effort of government organizations, universities, and accreditation agencies, with the purpose of guaranteeing not only the right to access education, but also that it is of quality. All of this will lead to its growth, to demonstrating the validity of the study modality, the ability to train competent professionals suitable for the changing world of work, adaptation to technological innovations and continuous improvement.

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MIDDLE EAST REGION

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Introduction

The Middle East is a geopolitical area that includes the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Iraq. According to the World Population Review, the population of the Middle East in 2023 is 483 million, with an approximately average population growth of 1.70% since 2000. The region has a rich historical heritage, diverse cultural tapestry, and dynamic societies. It has undergone a profound transformation of its higher education system in recent decades. In a period marked by rapid technological advancements and increasing globalization, Middle Eastern countries have acknowledged the central role of education in shaping their future trajectory. This region has made significant progress in both broadening access to higher education and establishing quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms.

Although public and private universities have been present in Middle Eastern countries for decades, they still need to be increased in number compared to the population's educational requirements. Despite the existence of reputable Middle Eastern universities, these institutions, on the whole, still need to adequately prepare their students for the local or global job market. In recent years, governments and educational elites have taken significant steps to emphasize the importance of indigenous higher education, initiating various projects that are bringing about tangible changes. Notably, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states, including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman, have invested billions in developing new institutions over the past decade.

Status of Adoption and Implementation of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning

Except for a few innovative universities, the popularity of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning (OFDL) and online education lagged behind other regions. This can be attributed in part to the lack of recognition of these programs by local accreditation entities in many countries in the region as well as the perception of lower quality of these modalities. A study conducted in Saudi Arabia in 2011 found that employers in Saudi Arabia (KSA), in particular, are not willing to employ applicants with online degrees or would prefer conventional learning over distance learner graduates.

In response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, some universities and educational institutions in the Middle East have embraced e-learning platforms, offering various online programs. With the pandemic phasing out, many conventional universities realized that these modalities could address issues such as access, flexibility, and the growing demand for specialized skills. Furthermore, governments in the region began to pivot toward greater acceptance of online

education, recognizing its role in achieving the Vision for 2030 goals in various countries. To achieve the Vision for 2030 goals, countries recognized the importance of online education as a diverse and essential modality. The UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia are actively incorporating online education to address specific economic and industry needs. The number of online programs is growing, and more institutions are supplementing their face-to-face experience with online courses and programs. The scalability of online education opens opportunities for public and private sectors to form partnerships with domestic and international universities, facilitating workforce upskilling. For example, Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University, Dubai has partnered with Alexandria University in Egypt to offer a joint master degree program in Innovation and Change Management that is offered as a blended program in a totally conventional University. The following table lists OFDL and online universities in Middle Eastern Countries.

Table 1. Examples of Open and Online Universities in Different Middle Eastern Countries.

Country	University	University website
Bahrain	Arab Open University (AOU)	https://www.aou.org.bh/Pages/default.aspx
Egypt	Arab Open University (AOU) The Egyptian E-learning University	https://www.aou.edu.eg/Pages/default.aspx https://www.eelu.edu.eg/
Iran	Payame Noor University (PNU)	http://enold.pnu.ac.ir/Portal/Home/
Israel	The Open University of Israel	https://www.openu.ac.il/en/pages/default.aspx
Jordan	Arab Open University (AOU)	https://www.aou.edu.jo/Pages/default.aspx
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	Arab Open University (AOU) Saudi Electronic University	https://www.arabou.edu.sa/Pages/default.aspx https://seu.edu.sa/
Kuwait	Arab Open University (AOU)	https://www.aou.edu.kw/Pages/default.aspx
Lebanon	Arab Open University (AOU)	https://web.aou.edu.lb/Pages/default.aspx
Oman	Arab Open University (AOU)	https://www.aou.edu.om/Pages/default.aspx
Pakistan	Allama Iqbal Open University Virtual University of Pakistan	https://www.aiou.edu.pk/ https://www.vu.edu.pk/
Palestine	Al-Quds Open University Arab Open University (AOU)	https://www.qou.edu/ https://www.aou.edu.ps/Pages/default.aspx
Sudan	Open University of Sudan (OUS) Arab Open University (AOU)	https://portal.ous.edu.sd/ https://www.aou.edu.sd/Pages/default.aspx
Turkey	Anadolu University	https://www.anadolu.edu.tr/en
UAE	Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University	www.hbmsu.ac.ae

Quality Standards, Accreditation, and Licensing

Accreditation of higher education programs is typically carried out by relevant education authorities or accrediting bodies recognized by the respective Ministries of Higher Education. In many countries, open and online education lacks accreditation, and their degrees often face skepticism from Ministries of Higher Education. Irrespective of the institution's reputation, holders of online learning usually face difficulty getting their certificates acknowledged in their own country. However, some countries, such as the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, have created accreditation standards for open and online programs. Both examples are highlighted below. More countries in the region are eagerly establishing accreditation standards for open and online programs. In December 2023, a conference was organized by the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) and the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA). The chief executive officers of 18 local accreditation agencies focused their efforts on the accreditation of open and online programs and the need to join efforts to accelerate the pace of their recognition across the region.

The Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) in the United Arab Emirates has been actively accrediting fully online programs offered by Hamdan Bin Mohammed University (HBMSU) since 2016. The CAA is the official Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education under the UAE Federal Government's purview. To be accredited by CAA, online programs should comply with especially developed accreditation standards, the latest of which is Annex 15 of the 2019 outlining accreditation standards for online programs.

The CAA standards require institutions offering online programs to have a comprehensive strategy that spans planning, stakeholder engagement, and approval by the governing body. This strategy should align with the institution's short-term and long-term educational mission, emphasizing continuous improvement through annual reviews. One of the mandatory keys to success is developing and maintaining a robust e-learning environment, including learning platforms, communication tools, and support resources. Faculty and student training and consistent technical support should facilitate effective and accessible e-learning experiences. The institution should ensure that e-learning courses share learning outcomes and rigor equivalent to those offered through other delivery modalities.

The standards prioritize faculty engagement with clear expectations, workload adjustments, and opportunities for professional development. Online programs should have comprehensive student support, addressing admission processes, support services, and data security. The institutions offering online programs commitment should extend to public transparency, with clear documentation of online course delivery on the institution's website. The holistic approach is codified in an e-Learning Manual, covering responsibilities, delivery modes, assessment policies, and intellectual property considerations. A commitment to quality, accessibility, and continuous improvement of e-learning programs is highlighted in the standards.

Another example that has outlined standards for open and online programs comes from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The accreditation process for higher education programs falls under the purview of the National Commission for Academic Accreditation & Assessment in Saudi Arabia. This commission applies its own set of standards to assess programs for accreditation. Notably, the accreditation of distance learning programs requires specialized understanding due to their distinct approaches. To address this, the National Center for E-Learning and Distance Learning (NCEL) was entrusted with establishing standards tailored explicitly for distance learning programs. These standards, formulated by NCEL, received approval from the Ministry of Higher Education in 2011 (NCEL, 2011).

The latest published accreditation standards for e-learning programs in Saudi Arabia by NCEL are structured around four core components: Design, Interaction, Equity and Accessibility, and Evaluation and Assessment. Design standards emphasize clarity, universality, and accessibility, with requirements for objectives, standard designs, and diverse content forms. Interaction standards focus on guiding learners, providing timetables, and ensuring diverse learning methods. Equity and Accessibility standards encompass providing accessible technologies and determining minimum knowledge levels. Assessment and Evaluation standards cover various aspects, including tools aligned with objectives, continuous internal evaluations, and mechanisms for stakeholder satisfaction measurement. Together, these standards emphasize the need for well-designed, interactive, accessible, and thoroughly evaluated e-learning programs in Saudi Arabia.

Good Practices

Several best practices and initiatives have emerged from the few online universities in the region. The following paragraphs shed some light on one of these initiatives: the Middle East e-Learning Quality Framework (MeLQ Framework).

MeLQ Framework 2.0 is a collaborative effort between HBMSU in Dubai, UAE, and the Swiss Competence Centre for Innovations in Learning (SCIL) at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland. MeLQ 2.0 aims to enhance the quality of online learning and facilitate digital transformation in the Arab region. Developed in 2022, it builds upon the 2009 version, aligning with current research on best practices. It covers dimensions such as Governance and Leadership, Teaching and Learning, Assessment and Analytics, Learning Experience, Technology, Organization and Support, and Improvement and Innovation. The framework was updated to reflect the latest trends and best practices in online education.

MeLQ's comprehensive approach incorporates seven quality dimensions and 34 criteria tailored for schools, higher education, and private e-learning providers. It provides a structured framework for institutions to enhance the quality of their online learning, with customization based on an institution's maturity level and needs. The MeLQ quality framework supports schools, universities, and e-learning providers through training, certification, and consultancy services. The certification process involves self-assessment, online audit meetings, and a decision by the awarding body.

Eligible institutions in the Middle East can achieve international certification for the quality of their online education, contributing to the goals of inclusive and equitable quality education outlined in Sustainable Development Goal 4. MeLQ's offerings include highly customized and interactive training, consultancy, and certification processes.

Conclusion

This chapter overviews the current landscape of open and online higher education programs in the Middle East. Adopting these modalities offers a promising solution to address the growing demand for higher education, particularly in the face of the current strains on conventional systems. Implementing robust quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms is crucial to ensure the wider recognition and acceptance of open and online higher education. While some countries in the region have taken significant steps to enhance the quality and accessibility of open and online education, others are progressing more gradually. Collaboration among different stakeholders such as accreditation bodies, universities offering open and online education, and cross-regional bodies such as the Gulf Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE), and the Association of Arab Universities (AARU) is highly needed to accelerate the development and acceptance of quality standards for open and online higher education that are accepted across most if not all, countries in the Middle East.

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NORTH AMERICA REGION

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Introduction

Online education and digital learning (aka open, flexible and distance education) allow learners from different backgrounds, locations, and circumstances to access high-quality education that may not be available or affordable in their local areas. Online learning also enables lifelong learners to pursue their personal and professional goals at their own pace and convenience. Online learning can also help reduce educational disparities and promote social inclusion and diversity. According to Oxford Learning College research, online learning is the fastest-growing market in the education industry worldwide – it has grown nine-hundred percent (900%) since its creation in 2000. Forty-nine percent (49%) of students have completed some type of online learning. Seventy percent (70%) of students say online learning is as good as or better than traditional classroom learning. The number of online learners is expected to increase to 57 million by 2027, and the trend is certainly obvious and affirmative in the North America region as well.

Status of Adoption and Implementation of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), online education has grown significantly in the United States in the past decade, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced schools and colleges to shift to remote or hybrid learning models. In fall 2022, about 60% of all postsecondary students in the U.S. took at least some online classes, and 28% took online classes exclusively. In the same year, 30.3% of higher education students in the U.S. were taking exclusively distance learning courses, and 27.9% were taking at least some distance learning courses. Online education also expanded in the K-12 sector with a majority of K-12 students (72%) are using cloud-based tools.

According to Made in Canada reports, the revenue from online learning in Canada is predicted to be around 6.925 billion CAD in 2023. Before the pandemic, 93% of Canadian universities offered online courses and programs and 29% of students in Canadian universities were taking an online course or program before the pandemic. Now three quarters or 75% of total Canadian universities offer online learning programs to widen their catchment area, and 91% of Canadian universities use learning management systems to facilitate online learning.

Quality Standards, Accreditation, and Licensing

Online education and digital learning offer many benefits for students, such as flexibility, accessibility, affordability, and personalization. However, it also poses many challenges, such as

quality assurance, accreditation, engagement, and equity. To address these challenges, various organizations and agencies have developed standards, regulations, and guidelines for online education in the North America region. Some of the prominent examples in the U.S. are:

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) is the federal agency that oversees education policy and funding in the U.S. ED also regulates online education through various programs and initiatives, such as the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC), which is a national accreditor of distance education institutions.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a private, nonprofit organization that recognizes 60+ accrediting organizations for degree-granting institutions in the U.S. CHEA also provides guidance and resources for online education accreditation, such as the CHEA Quality Platform, which is a voluntary, non-governmental process for reviewing and affirming the quality of online education providers.

The State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) is a voluntary agreement among member states and territories in the U.S. hat establishes comparable national standards for interstate offering of postsecondary distance education courses and programs.

Quality Matters (QM) is a US-based nonprofit organization that provides quality assurance tools and resources for online and blended learning. QM has developed multiple sets of course design standards for different types and levels of online courses, such as higher education, K-12, continuing and professional education, and publisher courses. The QM course design standards are based on research, best practices, and expert input from experienced online instructors, teachers and instructional designers, and aim to help course developers, teachers, instructors, and organizations create and deliver online courses that are aligned, engaging, and effective for diverse learners.

The National Standards for Quality Online Learning consist of three sets of standards for online courses, online teaching, and online programs. These standards have been the benchmark for online education since 2007 and have been revised and updated by a consortium of online learning organizations, such as the Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance (VLLA), Quality Matters (QM), and the Digital Learning Collaborative (DLC).

In Canada, there is no single entity that governs and controls the quality of online learning as education is a provincial and territorial responsibility. However, there are some national and regional organizations that provide quality assurance and accreditation for online programs and institutions, including:

Canadian Association of Distance Education (CADE) is a professional association that promotes research and innovation in distance and online education. CADE offers a certification program for online educators, which recognizes their competencies and skills in online teaching and learning.

Canadian Association of Graduate Studies (CAGS) is a national organization that represents graduate education and research in Canada. CAGS has developed a set of guidelines and best

practices for online and blended graduate programs, which cover aspects such as curriculum design, student support, faculty development, and quality assurance.

Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN) is the national accrediting agency for nursing education in Canada. CASN accredits both online and on-campus nursing programs that meet its standards of excellence.

OntarioLearn is a shared online platform that offers institutions access to a wide variety of high-quality courses, programs and services from 24 of Ontario's publicly-funded colleges. Students can search, register at any member institution offering the course or program they need, and get support from dedicated support specialists. OntarioLearn is a leader in the delivery of high-quality online education in Canada for more than 25 years, and adopts Quality Matters course design standards to ensure quality.

Good Practices

Online education and digital learning are becoming more prevalent and diverse in the North America region, especially due to the impact of the COVID pandemic. As a result, many studies and researches have been conducted resulting in best practices in quality assurance for online education and digital learning, which are aimed at ensuring the quality of online courses, programs, and support services for all learners as well as providing faculty training for effective and engaging online teaching. Some of the good practice examples include:

- Developing and applying quality standards, frameworks, and guidelines that are relevant, rigorous, and transparent at course, program and institutional levels.
- Involving various stakeholders, including faculty, students, administrators, and external reviewers, in establishing or improving internal quality assurance processes and fostering a culture of continuous improvement in unique institutional contexts.
- Providing adequate and just-in-time training and support for faculty before, during and after they teach online, recognizing their progress and accomplishment, and ensuring their professional development and satisfaction.
- Collecting data to evaluate students' online learning experience and outcomes, and using results to ensure and improve student access, engagement, retention completion.
- Adopting appropriate technologies and pedagogies that suit the online learning context and meet the diverse needs of all learners.

Collaborating and sharing best practices with other institutions and organizations that offer or support online education, and participating in regional and international networks and initiatives.

Education Trends and Conclusion

The online education landscape has been changing rapidly over the past few years, in 2023 and beyond, as the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption and innovation of online education

and digital learning platforms and methods. Some of the major trends that have emerged or intensified in online education and digital learning include:

The potential for AI to become mainstream is growing.

Simple AI tools such as ChatGPT are already ubiquitous in education, mainly used to improve relatively mundane, repetitive tasks. However, as they become more sophisticated, AI technologies are increasingly a viable way for institutions to save money and improve efficiency and workflows. The potential is growing for AI to address more complex and higher-stakes tasks. AI can help institutions address persistent challenges such as enrollment, retention, and resource allocation. AI also has the potential to improve the teaching and learning experience. It can impact teaching by helping faculty create instructional content and grade assessments, for example. It can impact the student experience by increasing engagement through the use of avatars and the metaverse, in addition to improving learning outcomes via personalizing learning.

Hybrid learning becomes prevailing and enters a new phase.

Hybrid learning, which combines online and face-to-face instruction, has become more prevalent and sophisticated as institutions and educators adapt to the changing needs and preferences of students. Hybrid learning can offer the best of both worlds: the flexibility and personalization of online education and the social interaction and collaboration of traditional teaching and learning. Hybrid learning can also help students develop essential skills for the 21st century, such as digital literacy, critical thinking, and creativity.

Project-based learning is the top priority.

Project-based learning, which involves students working on real-world problems or challenges, has gained more popularity and recognition as an effective and engaging way of learning. Project-based learning can help students develop deeper understanding of the subject matter, as well as skills such as problem-solving, communication, and teamwork. Project-based learning can also foster student autonomy, motivation, and intellectual curiosity.

Gamification in learning has become the new norm.

Gamification, which applies game elements and mechanics to learning activities, has emerged as a powerful tool to enhance student engagement, retention, and performance. Gamification can make learning more fun, interactive, and rewarding, as well as provide instant feedback, incentives, and challenges as motivation for students. Gamification can also appeal to different learning styles and preferences, as well as cater to the digital generation of learners.

Online learning infrastructure continues to level up.

Online learning platforms and tools have become more advanced and user-friendly, as well as more accessible and affordable, thanks to the rapid development of technology and innovation. New features and functions, such as AI-powered personalized learning, VR/AR technology, nanolearning,

adaptive learning, and more, continue to be adopted by institutions and schools to enhance the quality and effectiveness of online education and digital learning.

E*ducation consumers (students as well as parents) are more cost-conscious.*

Online education can offer a more affordable and flexible alternative to traditional learning, especially in the context of the economic and social impacts of the pandemic. Online learning can help students and families save on tuition, fees, textbooks, transportation, and other expenses associated with campus-based education, which help students and families avoid or reduce education related cost, debt and financial stress.

Student engagement becomes critical for retention and completion.

Online learning requires more effective and frequent communication between students and instructors, as well as among learners themselves, to ensure a positive and productive learning experience. Online learning platforms and tools can facilitate various modes and channels of communication, such as video conferencing, instant messaging, email, forums, and more, to enable synchronous and asynchronous communication. Online communication can also help build rapport, trust, and community among and between educators and online learners.

All these online education trends and best practices are shaping the future of learning and teaching in 2023 and beyond. Just in U.S. alone, the online education market was worth $100 billion in 2022, which makes it the largest in the world. Research estimates that online learning industry globally will be worth $687 billion by 2030. Online education and digital learning are not only a necessity, but also an opportunity, to transform and improve the way we teach, learn and grow as individuals, as institutions, as nations and as a global society as well.

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OCEANIA REGION

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Introduction

The University of the South Pacific (USP) was founded in 1968 and spans an expansive area of 33 million square kilometers across 5 time zones, standing as one of only two regional universities of its kind globally. Jointly owned by 12 Pacific Island nations—Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Samoa—USP boasts 14 campuses and 11 centers. Its primary campus is located in Fiji, with the School of Agriculture and Food Technology situated in Samoa and the School of Law in Vanuatu. Originally established in the 1970s to address crucial skill gaps in newly independent nations, USP has expanded its scope to offer education and training across diverse fields including agriculture, computing studies, economics, environmental sciences, law, climate change, accounting, management, and teacher training. Renowned for its extensive expertise in the Pacific region, USP conducts comprehensive research covering all facets of the Pacific islands.

Status of Adoption and Implementation of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning

Open, Distance, and Flexible Learning (ODFL) serves as a crucial avenue for expanding educational possibilities and enhancing outcomes. This is especially pertinent for the Pacific region, considering its small and widely scattered remote populations, along with constrained access to secondary and post-secondary opportunities in rural and outer island areas.

USP operates as a diverse university with multiple learning modalities, providing courses through various modes such as print, face-to-face, blended, and online. Out of the nearly 25,000 current students at USP, over half pursue their studies beyond the main Suva campus, opting for online or other flexible delivery methods. These students benefit from the University's advanced satellite communications network, USP-Net, acting as a portal for interaction, information, research, and advanced learning. This network establishes connections with USP's three major campuses in Fiji, Samoa, and Vanuatu, as well as 12 smaller regional campuses and centers, (The University of the South Pacific, 2023).

The USP’s Centre for Flexible Learning (CFL) serves as a dedicated hub promoting quality support through a range of services. Functioning as the primary center for course development at USP, CFL extends support to students during their tertiary studies (Student Learning Services/First Year Experience Coordinator support), facilitates professional development for staff, and engages in research and development in flexible learning. CFL plays a crucial role in assisting academics in the teaching, design, and delivery of courses across various modes, including Face-to-Face, Online, Print,

and Blended formats. The center actively encourages the incorporation of Open Educational Resources (OERs) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in all USP courses, fostering inclusivity. Furthermore, CFL is involved in the design, support, and management of Learning Management Systems (LMSs) used at USP, including Moodle, Lecture Capture, Mahara (ePortfolio tool), TurnItIn, and REACT. In essence, CFL stands as a firm advocate for ensuring quality Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in the South Pacific region (The University of the South Pacific, 2023a). USP offers courses through face to face, print, blended, online and flexi-school modes, as indicated below:

Table 1. USP courses.

Distinct	2020	2021	2022	2023
Distinct Headcount	31448	31316	26944	24909
Distinct Courses Offered	1349	1396	1362	1400
Distinct Courses on single mode	654	683	744	783
Distinct Courses on multiple modes	695	713	618	617
Distinct Courses on F2F	1066	1085	988	992
Distinct Courses on Print	355	355	282	283
Distinct Courses on Online	449	469	419	425
Distinct Courses on Blended	654	682	620	648

Source: USP Planning and Quality Office, 2023

The surge in online learning among students at the University of the South Pacific has reshaped the provision of student support services. Consequently, the way student support workshops are conducted has evolved from the traditional face-to-face model to a combination of tailored workshops offered both in-person and virtually. These workshops, developed in partnership with course coordinators, provide students with the opportunity to explore and enhance their academic and English learning skills in various formats, catering to the changing educational landscape. The following are some of the virtual workshops that have become very popular since the Covid-19 lockdown online workshop initiative. These have remained very popular at all USP campuses.

Figure 1. Online Generic SLS Workshops.

Quality Standards, Accreditation, and Licensing

USP actively collaborates with the rising number of National Agencies established by its member countries, aiming to regulate and monitor higher education by defining and upholding essential academic benchmarks that educational providers must adhere to. This ongoing engagement ensures that all programs offered by USP meet the necessary registration requirements set forth by these agencies. The following are National Agencies that USP engages with: Fiji Higher Education Commission (est. 2008), Samoa Qualification Authority (est. 2006), Tonga National Qualifications Authority Board (est. 2004), Vanuatu Qualifications Authority (est. 2014) and Solomon Islands Tertiary Education Skills Authority (est. 2019). Additionally, USP continues to lift its quality standards by carrying out activities with other stakeholders for accreditation and recording of programmes with national regulators, expanding international recognition and accreditation of programmes,

regular external reviews of programmes and support services, and benchmarking of USP with global universities through global rankings (The University of the South Pacific 2023c).

Good Practices

USP's CFL houses the Pacific regional center of the Commonwealth of Learning, known as PACFOLD. PACFOLD is presently engaged in a project titled "Partnership for Open, Distance, and Flexible Learning in the Pacific," funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) of New Zealand. This initiative, while ensuring stringent quality assurance measures, seeks to bolster the capabilities and effectiveness of education sectors across the Pacific by leveraging innovative delivery methods and technology.

Post-COVID-19, the project has initiated four distinct streams aimed at providing a comprehensive package of open educational resources (OER) accessible to Ministries throughout the region for learning and teaching purposes. These workstreams focus on several key areas:

- Enabling Access to OER to Support Distance Learning.
- Offering Professional Development for Teachers Engaged in Distance Learning.
- Enhancing Professional Development for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Providers.
- Providing Skills and Leadership Training for Youth, Particularly Empowering Young Women and Youth with Disabilities.

Additionally, the project concentrates on fortifying Technical Resilience in the Pacific through Cloud-based computing, strengthening the capacities of educators and officials in Open, Distance, and Flexible Learning (ODFL), and supporting the development and management of regional tools aimed at advancing education in the region.

Conclusion

USP, via its Centre for Flexible Learning (CFL), remains dedicated to enhancing quality assurance across the regional tertiary education landscape. Serving as a staunch advocate, USP not only implements quality assurance measures within its institution but actively engages with other tertiary establishments to promote excellence and exemplary standards in ODFL. CFL is committed to sustaining its advocacy efforts for ODFL in the region while also encouraging neighboring tertiary institutes to join the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), fostering a community dedicated to advancing educational quality and innovation.

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