



A Trajectory towards a Culture of Quality: A Phenomenological Study of an Open Distance Learning University in South Africa and in China

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, we have witnessed immense advancements of technology which challenge conventional teaching methodologies. This paper analyses an open and distance learning university from two culturally distinct continents—Africa and Asia— through an international staff exchange program that was attended over a two-week period. This essay examines both distance learning institutions and data that was collected through interviews and observations to benefit students through quality assurance. According to the research presented in this paper, it is necessary to create an atmosphere that makes it possible for quality assurance activities to be carried out consistently. Distance learning institutions need to move towards a culture of quality and by doing this they need to tailor their student support not just to produce graduates at the end of a cohort but to produce quality graduates needed for the ever evolving and rapidly transforming information and communication technologies. The recommendations made in this paper are intended to help distance education institutions develop a culture of quality. It is argued that to successfully develop a quality culture, a supportive environment should be created for pedagogical activities linked to quality assurance.

KEYWORDS

Student support; quality assurance; culture of quality; distance education; community of inquiry; open and distance learning.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, transformation in universities has led to the implementation of national and international policies to measure the performance of institutions around the world (Dube et al., 2022; Koul & Kanwar, 2006; Williams et al., 2021; Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016). Two key issues have emerged from the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic: quality and equity. Quality is significant as open and distance learning (ODL) requires systematic planning and delivery and equity because many students are still excluded from online learning. A key notion in this paper is how ODL institutions can embed student support in their institutions to enable a culture of quality so that no student is left behind. This paper seeks to understand the status of quality assurance (QA) in two diverse universities with a view of recommending quality management as a move towards a trajectory of a culture of quality in distance education. This study makes a significant contribution by examining the present standards of teaching practices at an ODL university in South Africa (University A) and China (University B).

The researcher, who lectures at University A, received funding to participate in a staff exchange program at University B. The researcher had seen and learned about how University B uses QA as part of their purpose of “no child left behind” during the two weeks of the visiting scholar program. To achieve a level of quality that would be advantageous to all members of a distance learning institution, this article argues that QA should be integrated with student support to build a culture of quality. The two universities being examined are firstly described in this essay. The foreign exchange program's structure is then addressed. A discussion of QA comes next. To establish a culture of quality in remote learning across two distinct continents, this research adopts a qualitative methodology and explores the phenomena of QA and quality culture of learning. This paper compares QA in student support in Universities A and B and concludes by providing recommendations on a move towards a culture of quality for distance education institutions.

University A

One of Africa's biggest and most established ODL institutions is University A, with a student enrolment of more than 500,000 and being 150 years old. University A describes itself as a civic-minded organization with a distinct social mission. Through pedagogy, research, and community participation on a national, continental, and international level, it is focused on quality, development and transformation (Unisa, Annual Report, 2017). The mission of University A is to promote an African perspective that incorporates quality and technological innovation through interactive, open distance learning (Unisa, Annual Report, 2017). The goal of University A is to develop into a comprehensive ODL institution that produces outstanding scholarship and research, teaching and learning, and encourages engaged community participation. University A was established on the principles of ethical responsibility, collaborative accountability, quality, innovation, and responsive student-centeredness. These principles include lifelong learning, student-centeredness, innovation, and creativity (Unisa, Annual Report, 2017).

University B

University B is one of the most established and recognized ODL institutions in Asia. With more than 600,000 registered students, it offers access to both formal and informal learning (Shanghai Open University, 2019). The institution uses broadcast and digital technologies to reach students in the most diverse social groups, including migrant workers, elderly people, civil servants, and teachers in diverse socio-economic contexts. University B has around 44 branch schools throughout Shanghai and more than 4,000 teachers. It offers more than forty formal degree programs. By 2020, it was projected that Shanghai should have taken the lead in having finished creating a learning society, working to develop each person to their full potential. This plan also emphasized the need to eliminate educational inequality and promote respect for diversity and the unique requirements of each student. According to Shanghai's 2010-2020 strategic plan, education development means entering an era of quality, equity and individuality (Shanghai Open University, 2019).

The structure of the staff exchange program

The 15 participants for the international staff exchange fellowship program were selected from around the world: Myanmar, Italy, Australia, University of South Africa, Tanzania, United Kingdom, Germany, Philippines, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Vietnam, United States of America, and India. The scholars comprised nine ladies and six gentlemen. Three scholars were chosen from Africa and two from two different departments at University A; the researcher was one of these scholars. The international staff exchange fellowship program's goals were to improve the standard of instruction and research in ODL and to exchange best practices between University A and University B. It also aimed to foster cooperation between foreign open universities and Shanghai Open University through academic exchange. The visiting scholars were selected through an academic evaluation process. Over two weeks (10-21 June 2019), the researcher was involved in the following activities: an in-depth discussion with the institute of international exchange; the R&D Department; Teaching Affairs office; school of Science and Engineering; school of Public Administration, school of Humanities and Arts. The researcher was further involved in the sharing of best practices and delivered a presentation at a seminar on QA in ODL. The researcher has further participated in a workshop on learning design and virtual learning environments and visited various branch schools. The official languages during the program were English and Chinese. The research question is thus: What are the quality assurance measures that University A and University B employ to support students?

TOWARDS A CULTURE OF QUALITY IN STUDENT SUPPORT

Student support in ODL

Student support is one of the fundamental services in ODL; it is the variety of support services that are offered to students. Student support includes academic (cognitive, assessment and feedback support) and non-academic (informing, advising, and counselling students) support (Singh, 2020). As there is a geographical division between the students and lecturers, student

support in ODL differs from student support in a contact university. According to the findings of an ODL study by Sevnarayan (2022), only a small number of lecturers in the studied module utilized eLearning tools to support students, while others were not involved at all. This is concerning since, for effective student support to occur, it is argued that student support must include a cognitive, social, and teaching presence between lecturers and students. The framework supporting this study is the 'community of inquiry' approach, as coined by Garrison et al. (2000).

Quality assurance

The main objective of QA is to guarantee that students have access to high-quality instruction and academic success, which opens doors to employment opportunities. The phenomenon of QA differs amongst different organizations. Kanwar (2021) makes a similar point that quality assurance means using pedagogical skills to support students to become employable, in preparation for the future skills and jobs that lie ahead for students. QA is the process of guaranteeing quality in higher education to build trust between all role-players in education and to meet the outcomes as the minimum criteria.

It is imperative that ODL institutions design a set of quality assurance measures such as a separate section with professional employees, quality policies, strategies, procedures, and pre, mid, post and self-evaluations to form an internal QA system (Li & Chen, 2019). Given the "interconnectedness of institutions nationally, regionally, and worldwide," it is imperative to ensure course quality (Mohee & Perris, 2020, 5). During the pandemic, Williams et al. (2021) conducted a study, and the student participants in their study noted that planning needs to consider the needs of the most high-risk and vulnerable students. The results of their study showed that although there is still an issue with the digital divide among educators and students, educators have built a community of cooperation and mutual support to foster a culture of quality.

A culture of quality

One of the biggest issues facing distance education universities is the application of high-quality instruments and quality management systems. Higher education institutions operate in a more competitive environment, which raises the bar for teaching, student support, research, and administration excellence. Kanwar (2021) asserts that a culture of quality is what we refer to as a culture of caring. It is a culture that supports an internal quality assurance system where each employee is accountable, committed to capacity building, applies QA, and focuses on educational goals (Koul & Kanwar, 2006). A culture of quality means adapting to new pedagogies. Education as it happened before the pandemic, may no longer be compatible in our teaching post the COVID-19 pandemic (Kalimullina et al., 2021; Tarman, 2020). According to Mbhiza et al. (2021), lecturers need to be aware of the paradigm shift in education that has compelled the education sector to be receptive to the new paradigm's apparent signs. Lecturers should base their expectations for the future of the education sector post the pandemic on their continuous experiences with online teaching and learning.

Creating a culture of quality is pivotal in developing internal quality assurance systems in higher education. However, Moodley (2019) contends that academics' ignorance of their own institutions' regulations needs mediation to guarantee the alignment and consistency of their courses. This paper argues that for a culture of quality to ensue, there must be a community of inquiry to implement and manage quality practices in student support in ODL institutions. The community of inquiry framework, which is discussed next, argues that knowledge building on a quality culture of learning results from collaborative interactions between all stakeholders in an institution.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The social constructivist perspective, which contends that learning is social in nature and that social collaboration promotes learning on both an individual and group level, is the conceptual basis for the community of inquiry (CoI) framework. The collaborative interactions at the heart of this framework give rise to social, cognitive, and teaching presences, as shown in Figure 1 below:

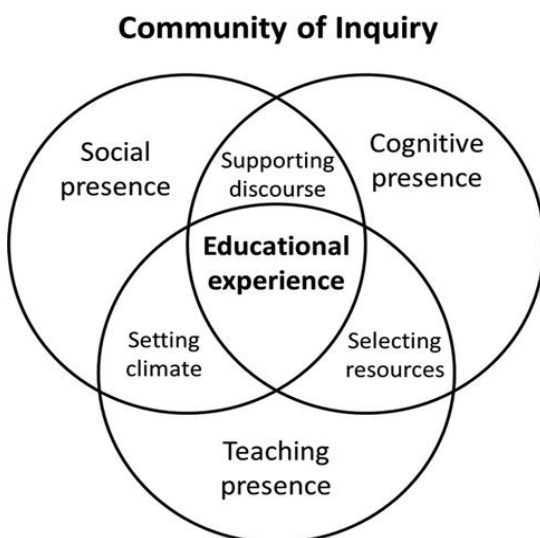


Figure 1. CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 88)

Having a social presence refers to lecturers and students' capacities to show themselves as "actual people" via a communication channel. Social presence assists the online learning community to increase interdependence, self-paced learning, and promotes discussion among students and lecturers. The CoI approach enables lecturers and students to connect, share, consider and circulate current knowledge and information. Students' cognitive presence suggests that they can create and verify meaning through reflection (Anderson et al., 2001). Whether or not students will cognitively understand the material will depend on how lecturers present it to them. Thus, creating, mediating, and guiding social and cognitive processes constitute teaching presence. This paper further discusses a fourth presence, which is referred to as learner presence. Learner presence is the self-efficacy in addition to the cognitive, emotional, social, behavioural constructs that are indicative of an online student. CoI is viewed

as a viable strategy for building an inclusive teaching and learning environment that is beneficial in fostering an engaged, high-quality culture of learning for ODL students (Zhang, 2020). Therefore, this paper investigates the use of Col to understand the QA measures that Universities A and B employ to assist their students. To comprehend the phenomenon of QA as we move toward a culture of quality, this study focuses on all aspects of the Col.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

A qualitative, exploratory, and phenomenological approach was compatible with the study's focus as it enabled the researcher to understand the experiences that took place in two diverse social contexts (Ellis, 2018; Holloway & Galvin, 2016; Williams et al., 2021). This exploratory study gathered preliminary information such as the literature and observations as outlined in this study, which helped to define issues about quality assurance and the culture of quality and suggests recommendations. In addition, it generates data that intensifies insight into the phenomenon of quality assurance rather than providing representative information (Ellis, 2018; Polit & Beck, 2017; Williams et al., 2021).

Research participants

When the ethics committee gave the project approval, the researcher contacted lecturers/teachers at both universities to learn about the best practices in their student support. Lecturers were informed that they could participate and/or withdraw from the study at any point. At University A, three first year lecturers were interviewed and are referred to as Lecturers A, B, and C. At University B, three first year lecturers were interviewed and are referred to as Teachers X, Y and Z (Lecturers are called teachers at University B). Pseudonyms were provided to protect the identities of the lecturers and institutions (Holloway & Galvin, 2016).

Research instruments

Data were gathered through observations and one-on-one unstructured interviews with lecturers and was qualitative in nature (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Polit & Beck, 2018). To address the research question, unstructured one-on-one interviews with lecturers from both universities were conducted.

Interview questions

- How is quality assurance assured in your modules to cater for all students?
- How do you support your students to ensure a culture of quality?
- How are you supported by your institution to create a quality culture of learning for students?

Observations were made to corroborate the research question and make recommendations for the study. Observation questions:

- How is quality assurance assured in both universities?
- What support is given to students in both universities to ensure a culture of quality?

- How are lecturers/teachers supported in their institutions to create a quality culture of learning for students?

Data collection

The data collection and discussion method employed were the phenomenological approach (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Ellis, 2018). Data were obtained over the course of a month in June and July 2019. During the first two weeks, observations, and one-on-one unstructured interviews (Cresswell & Poth, 2018) were conducted at University B in Shanghai. When the researcher returned to South Africa, observations and unstructured interviews were conducted at University B. While the data was being studied, thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) was used where the researcher developed themes which were linked to the questions asked and posed in the interview and observation schedules.

FINDINGS

The major discoveries that were categorized into themes are presented in this section. This part explored the quality control procedures used by both institutions for student support. At both universities, lecturers were interviewed, and the responses they provided were supported by data gleaned from observations. Through the unstructured one-on-one interviews with lecturers and observations at both institutions, the following three themes emerged:

- Quality assurance for all citizens
- Blended learning to support learning
- Teacher development for quality assurance

Quality assurance for all citizens

According to Lecturer A at University A:

I try to provide quality teaching to all our students. The problem is that University A is so big. When students fail, they are lost in the system. We have no idea who these students are and how many times they fail or are stuck in the system. With the modules that I teach, I reach out to all of them and the students who do communicate with me are the ones I can help further.

From the response above, it is evident that although the student numbers are large at University A, there is an attempt by lecturers to reach out to all their students. Lecturer C similarly stated:

We put so much attention into our online teaching. If there is a module of 16,000 students, 500 students may attend that live session. Where are the other students? We also see that many of them are not accessing our recordings that we post. As lecturers, we try our best for our students, but our students do not engage with and access the material we post.

The issue is that some students keep to themselves and refuse to ask lecturers for help. A different finding was recorded when Lecturer B interestingly noted “it is sad that in some modules, our resources and assessments are quality assured but, in many modules, this is not

done well.” When the researcher probed and asked Lecturer B what he meant by ‘this is not done well,’ he responded, “Well, sometimes we see resources that are uploaded onto module sites that are very sloppily done with errors. Sometimes our students pick this up and this can be very embarrassing because it is a poor reflection on us all.” When corroborating the above data with observations at University A, it was found that there are lecturers in modules who do try to offer quality teaching by reaching out to their students, however, students do not reciprocate the lecturers’ student support initiatives. The researcher observed that very few students attended live sessions by lecturers or answered the activities that were uploaded on the Moodle learning management system. It was revealed that at University A, lecturers did not meet all the needs of students in terms of the resources they generated. Although there were modules which catered for students’ auditory and visual needs in some modules (podcasts and vodcasts), most modules lacked diverse resources which students could relate to. It was also observed that lecturers at University A were workshopped on how to use tools such as marking tools and how to create assessments; however, there was little attempt to workshop lecturers on creating a quality culture of learning.

When asked how quality assurance is administered to cater for all students in their modules, Teacher Y at University B noted:

At our open university, we cater for all our students’ needs: the blind, the deaf, and the paralysed. We look at what our students’ strengths are, and we zoom in on those skills, whether it is art, music, pottery, or dance. The aim of individualised attention on students with disabilities is to ensure that they are employable after graduation.

Teacher Z at University B responded to the question on what support they provide for students and the support their institution provides simultaneously:

Quality means everything so that the focus is on life-long learning. It is about equipping students with skills that would benefit them after university. Our lecturers are specialised, and we are trained to support our diverse group of students. Our mission is to build a learning city for lifelong learning, this means that we should and we do prioritise every individual to maximise on their potential.

The findings of the interviews showed that University B teachers took quality assurance in their courses very seriously and place a strong emphasis on accommodating all students. After a two-week long program, it was observed that University B is committed to their mission of building of learning city through lifelong learning and development of its citizens. This was apparent when we visited the QingPu Branch School and observed deaf students in a face-to-face class being taught programming skills such as Photoshop. This is corroborated when Teacher Y noted that irrespective of their abilities, University B’s role is “to ensure that they are employable after graduation.” University B goes by the principle “For All Learners, All for Learners” and this was observed during the program. Another observation was that there were

a diverse range of resources in every module. Each concept was taught with various resources to reach a diverse range of students.

Blended Learning to Support Learning

Blended learning to support learning was another theme that emerged in the interviews across both universities. At University A, there is no rigid system for QA that is followed like the way University B does. Although there are lecturers who are technologically perceptive at University A, there are many lecturers at University A who are reluctant to use the tools that are at their disposal. They do not create visually stimulating and interactive resources such as micro lessons, podcasts, and other interesting resources that are compulsory at University B. For example, Lecturer B at University A noted:

I love creating various resources to stimulate my students. However, this is not true for all my team members. We have some lecturers who do not know how to record a podcast, for example. This can be frustrating for many of us. We feel alone in the teaching process but we do recognise that we need a range of resources to appeal to our students.

The above response was corroborated by the observations where pedagogy is interactive between the lecturers and students with strong social, teaching, and cognitive presences. Then, there are instances where there are modules with little to no technology-integrated teaching and learning. For Lecturer A:

I know that all students are not going to participate on Moodle. For this reason, I created a Telegram group which was extremely successful with my students in a large module. This group added an element of social cohesion and quality to my teaching even though other lecturers did not want to be a part of it.

There are lecturers who are resistant to technology and social media. Our students, however, are digital natives and enjoy communicating and learning through social media. It is significant to highlight that University B prioritizes resources that are visually appealing and interactive. University B was observed to have an organised QA system. According to teacher X:

All teachers in a module are trained by teaching managers and QA managers on an ongoing basis. For each section of work in a module, there should be print material such as visualised study guides and books, digital material which includes podcasts, video lectures or micro lessons which are about 2.5 minutes each, web links to videos, and presentations created by the teacher.

The above response reveals that students have full support from a diverse range of resources. In University B, all courses follow six aspects of QA in each module: educational objectives, quality standards, teaching management, faculty training and evaluation. These aspects were observed to be adhered to in each module. For each module, the objectives or outcomes of the module must be understood. These objectives are then linked to all the activities and assessments that students will receive. Every course follows a blended learning approach. There are face-to-face classes offered at the university and the branch schools, and

there are online classes that are accessible on the distance learning network (DLN) and WeChat app. As a quality control measure, before these materials are given to students or posted online, they are double-checked by the QA manager to ensure an elevated level of quality. These materials are then quality controlled by third parties (outside the university) to do quality control checks on each resource. Evaluations are done before the module starts, while the module is in progress, and when the module has ended. Students evaluate each teacher and each resource in the module. The QA manager, responsible for that module, monitors these evaluations and reverts to the teachers and the teachers who created the resources. University B makes use of practical experience where students were expected to engage in continual critical thinking activities while using their abilities on the job. Therefore, a strong teaching and cognitive presence is at play. Figure 2 shows the observed collaboration amongst University B role-players. The university, with its student affairs department and service delivery, fully supports teaching and learning in all modules across the departments, administration services, the teachers, the call centre, and the students.

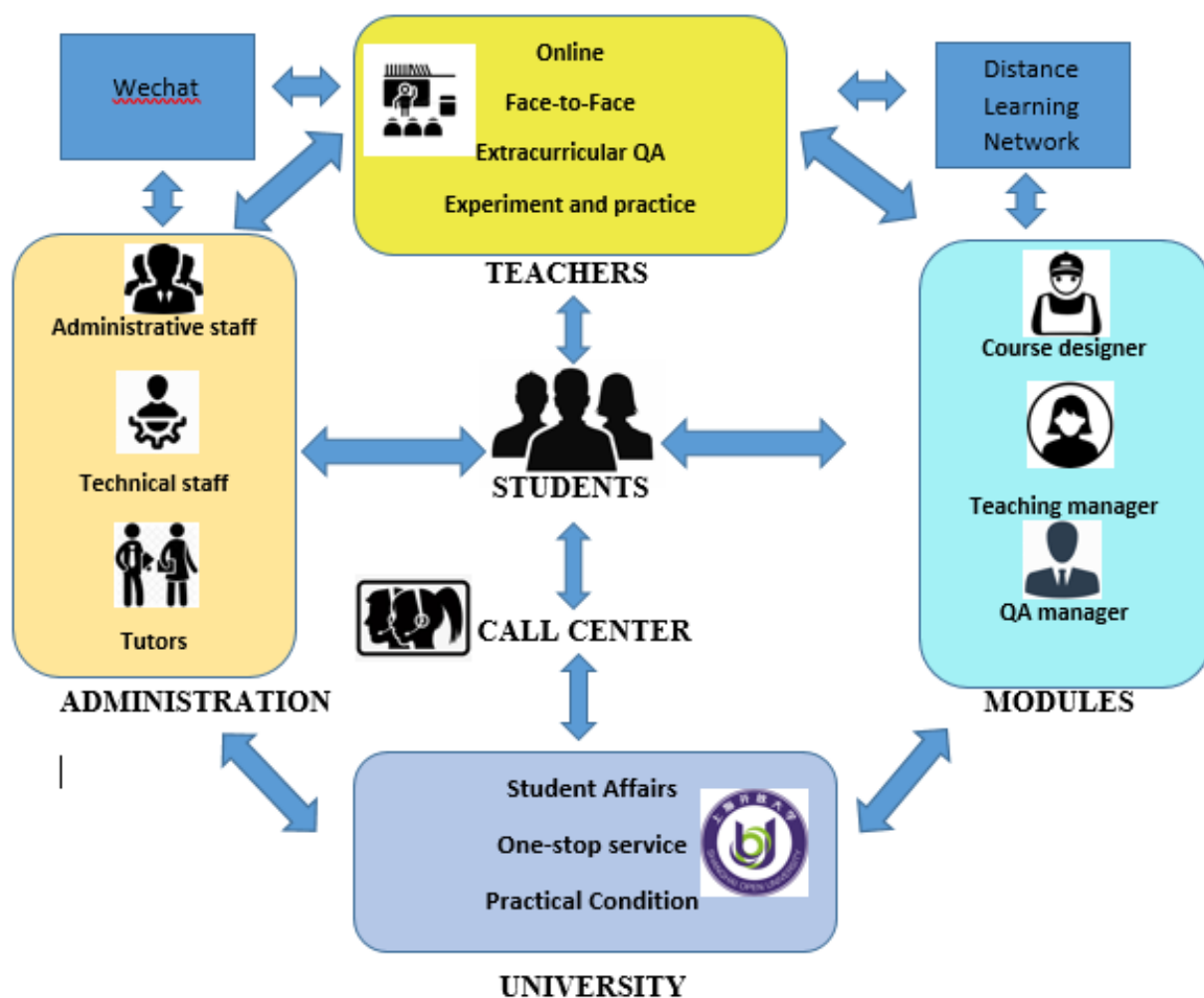


Figure 2. The internal quality assurance system at University B

University B's DLN integrates teaching, learning, assessment, and management, providing full support such as registration, course selection, tutoring, experiments, evaluations, interactions, and inquiries. This DLN is also available on 'WeChat,' a social media network, where students can access the courses immediately on an app and start participating in discussions, completing, and submitting activities.

Lecturer/ Teacher Development for Quality Assurance

When asked how lecturers are supported by their institution to create a culture of quality learning, Lecturer A mentioned, "I wish we could share our resources across modules. Some lecturers are doing remarkable things in their modules, but it feels as though we should be recreating those resources again using our own voices. There is no need to waste a lot of time for no reason." At University A, lecturers work in isolation in modules and not across modules. Lecturer B mentioned "Training is offered to capacitate lecturers' knowledge on pedagogy, and we do try to respond to students' needs." This implies that University A lacks a qualitative focus on lecturer development for student support.

University B invites professors from various countries yearly to train teacher on instructional design. Teacher Y noted that University B "sends 20–25 of their teachers abroad to learn from established universities and professors". Teachers in University B, moreover, have access to a central 'course resource centre,' where they are guided on how to create resources. If a student has a complaint about a resource, the teacher will be given support to upgrade the resource to meet the students' needs. If a teacher is not approachable or not meeting the students' needs according to the evaluation, teaching managers and QA managers will refer these teachers to the 'teachers' training centre' where training is provided for faculty members to adapt to the students' needs. University B recognises that there are differences between students and teachers. According to Teacher X,

Teachers are motivated to embrace innovative technologies since the quality of students is evolving every year with technology. Teachers who experience difficulties with technology are supported by the information communication and technology department to provide technical solutions to embrace recent technologies.

It was interesting to observe that many teachers who are older at University B have an open attitude towards technology; they are quick and eager to learn new ways of teaching with technology. There is a strong emphasis on a qualitative teaching, cognitive and social presence; as well as learning presence at University B.

DISCUSSION

The research question in this paper sought to understand the quality assurance measures that University A and University B employ to support students. Two findings emerged under the first theme. Lecturers at University A seem not to be supported by their institution as students "are lost in the system" and they fail many times. The lecturers approach student support

quantitatively and not qualitatively as they do not know their students. One of the lecturers at University A noted that students are not cooperative as they do not attend live sessions and access their recordings. Although lecturers may have a presence when teaching (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Zhang, 2020), students might not be willing to return the favour due to the lack of social presence by lecturers (Moodley, 2019), which could result in a loss in a culture of quality (Kanwar, 2021). In relation to this, a lack of teaching presence on social media apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram or WeChat, may reduce learner, social and cognitive presence in a module as learners learn best through technology-enhanced teaching and learning (Sevnarayan, 2022; Williams et al., 2021). This supports other scholars who contend that for a culture of quality to emerge, lecturers and instructors' pedagogical techniques must be both of high quality and equitable (Koul & Kanwar, 2006; Moodley, 2019; Singh, 2020; Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016). Another finding was that resources did not cater for students' diverse needs. In contrast, at University B teachers cater for "all" their students' diverse needs. Regular training is provided to University B's faculty members so they can meet the needs and expectations of every student.

The observations confirmed that at University B, the goal is for all students to be employable after graduation. In other words, the institution strives to give students the skills necessary to launch their own business or find employment, therefore preparing them for the unpredictable future/ jobs that lie ahead (Kanwar, 2021). The goal of every distance education university should be to provide learning opportunities to anyone, to provide learning service at any time and place and most importantly, to provide universal access to digital learning resources. The teachers and students work closely together so that a quality culture of learning is inculcated. After a two-week long program, it was observed that University B is committed to serving the building of a learning city of lifelong learning and the development of its citizens. This indicates that there is a close connection between the social, teaching, cognitive and learner presences of the Col paradigm (Garrison et al. 2000).

Three findings emerged from the second theme of blended learning and learning support across both ODL institutions. It was revealed that University A has no rigid QA system in place for its student support. This results in students who are left on their own with their study guides, prescribed books, and tutorial letters, which includes their assignment questions. As a result, there is a decline in a high-quality learning culture as well as a lack of teaching and social and cognitive presences. This suggests the importance of quality assurance measures that need to be developed by educational institutions to support the unique educational needs of both ODL staff and students. In addition to this finding, lecturers were not as eager to use technology to support students like the Teachers in University A were. Once students are engaged, teaching and social presence through social media networks have a noteworthy influence on facilitating and directing student engagement, which has been shown to be vital in reaching a resolution phase and thus moving towards a culture of quality (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Li & Chen, 2019; Zhang, 2020). Another finding was that University B made use of various resources and technologies to support their students; however, at University A there are some lecturers who

do not know how to create a podcast, for example. The researcher has observed a quality culture of teaching and learning (at University B) when teaching and learning are driven by learner presence, teaching presence and a social presence, as was observed by Anderson et al. (2001). What stands out is that the Col framework's three components are intricately tied together as it supports curriculum creation and upholds QA rigor student support. The Col framework assumes that a system of QA that is actively involved in fostering understanding and critical reflection will encourage higher-order learning, qualitative instruction, and a social presence. A Col inquiry might arise because of specific collaborative contacts that result in "distance presence," according to the Col's conceptual foundation (Garrison et al., 2000; Zhang, 2020). A Col is fostered at University B through the face-to-face, online, experimental, practical, and extracurricular QA components of blended learning.

The final theme, which dealt with lecturer/ teacher development in quality assurance, found that at University A, lecturers work in isolation and not with each other. There is a stronger need for teaching and social presence (Garrison et al. 2000; Zhang, 2020), especially post the COVID-19 pandemic (Kanwar, 2021). In contrast, at University B it was seen that teachers make use of a central course resource centre where all teachers can post, share, and update their resources on a regular basis. Teachers at University B are trained by professionals each year on how to create resources to support their students. From this finding it is clear that at University A, there is pedagogical focus on quantity and University B focuses more on building a culture of quality in their student support. The literature states that there is a need for the interconnectedness of universities nationally, regionally, and worldwide to ensure course quality (Kanwar, 2021; Koul & Kanwar, 2006; Mohee & Perris, 2020). Another finding is that at University A, teaching and quality assurance are viewed synonymously while University B views them distinctively as the latter makes use of teaching managers and QA managers. This implies that University B accepts the Col framework. If University A could prioritise on investing in their lecturers to support students, they could enjoy higher throughput and success rates institutionally. Investigating the students' presence in online education institutions post COVID-19 would be relevant given the shift in emphasis toward how students study remotely. Recommendations on a trajectory towards a culture of quality for ODL institutions are covered in the concluding section of this paper.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper lays out the significant presences of a Col as one way of building the phenomenon of a quality culture of learning. The researcher has not given a prolonged rundown of "do's and don'ts" for a building a quality culture of learning. Rather, the paper offers thoughts and directions to strengthen quality assurance measures in online distance learning. The argument is that the emphasis should be on lecturers and teachers' pedagogical development with a focus on quality assurance in student support due to the evolving educational circumstances that disrupt online pedagogies. A quality culture of learning was defined 16 years ago by Koul &

Kanwar (2006) as a culture that promotes an internal QA system and supports capacity building, implements QA, enforces accountability to all stakeholders and places a focus on learning outcomes. In 2022, this definition seems like a fallacy for many institutions. University B, however, is an example of a university that takes pride in its quality assurance procedures; a place where teachers take responsibility and ownership for their instruction; and a place where capacity building is valued, not just for themselves but also for the students. If high-quality learning cultures are to be ensured in ODL contexts, an enabling infrastructure that permits continual QA operations is required. To generate quality graduates needed for our constantly changing economy, higher education institutions should personalize their student support efforts. This goes beyond simply producing graduates at the end of a cohort.

The QA model from University B should be adopted by University A and other distance learning institutions. It is advised that lecturers in ODL universities engage in with their students face to face (either synchronously or asynchronously) and establish a central resource hub to exchange concepts, information and materials. Many of our teaching and learning problems would be solved if each module team had an academic who would be both a QA manager and a teaching manager. Student evaluations of lecturers and the resources they receive should also become the norm in each module. Pre, during, and post evaluations are critical to determine the quality of teaching and learning in modules; this could help lecturers and teachers understand their shortfalls and improvements can be made. Resources should be updated according to the needs of the students, and all lecturers should be on the 'technological train' of resource creation.

Additionally, it is suggested that Chinese and African institutions work together to enhance global communication, invest in skills development, and promote academic and student exchanges. This would enhance cultural understanding between diverse contexts and extend collaboration opportunities between the two continents. Given the amount of emphasis given to facilitation-related concerns, it is appropriate to focus on the practical components of a Col. More research is needed to determine how ODL lecturers may use the Col framework to integrate technology into their instruction, thereby empowering them and assisting their students in learning. One could argue that this would aid in fostering and developing a culture of quality.

It is advised that ODL researchers focus on the transfer of knowledge and skills to the school environment as we move closer to the mainstream of remote pedagogies, particularly post the COVID-19 pandemic. We urgently need to improve the abilities of our remote teaching instructors as the pandemic is decentralizing our educational space. The rising diversity of student origins, the growth of learning as a liminal activity, the dispersion of educational resources across online and offline networks, and the evolving nature of the pedagogical environment are all contributing elements to this. Consequently, the roles and responsibilities of all the stakeholders in ODL need to be redefined and embraced.

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