GLOBAL QUALITY IN ONLINE, OPEN, FLEXIBLE AND TECHNOLOGY ENHANCED EDUCATION

AN ANALYSIS OF STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

AUTHOR: JENNIFER MATHES

Table of Contents

Introduction

This report was developed to provide a platform for development of guidelines for quality in online, open, flexible and technology enhanced education in all regions of the world . The intended audience includes:

- relevant associations that support quality in online, open, flexible and technology-enhanced education
- institutional leaders responsible for quality
- policy makers
- other educational stakeholders interested in quality initiatives

By working with regional experts, this report provides an overview of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to educational quality in online, open, flexible and technology enhanced learning. It is not intended to be all-inclusive as there are many institutions that have not participated in the opportunities to provide feedback. However, it does provide a good foundation regarding areas of success (strengths) and an overview of the challenges faced by many.

One important take away that was identified within all of the regions is that quality assurance models are of central importance and value . Those areas that do not provide good guidelines, policies or sharing of best practices face more challenges than others since they need to spend time proving the value of this range of modes of education.

How to use this report

Institutions should carefully review the information provided in this report (including the regional narratives in the Appendices) to identify areas where they face challenges. This information can serve as a foundation to support continued conversations towards the development of quality initiatives globally. In addition, the recommendations can be implemented at a micro level (specific program or university) or at the macro level (national governing or accrediting bodies) in order to support multiple levels of quality.

Background

In 2016, ICDE put out a call to identify candidates to serve as focal points of quality (FPQ) and lead their respective regional task force within the overall Quality Network. This initiative was designed to align with UN Sustainable Development Goal 4: *Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning*. This work was also intended to support UNESCO's higher education initiatives in online, open and flexible learning.

The FPQ leaders were also tasked with providing input and contributing to the final report that would provide an overview of regional quality initiatives in online, open and flexible learning.

Focal Points of Quality

In order to complete the identified activities and provide a global perspective, seven regional FPQ's were selected to represent each of the following:

- Africa
- Arab region
- Asia
- Europe
- Latin America and Caribbean
- North America
- Oceania

Individuals selected to participate were senior leaders within their own organization and recognized experts in the area of quality. In addition, each came from ICDE member organizations and associations. The Quality Network was chaired by Alan Tait, Open University UK, with support from Torunn Gjelsvik, Head of Development ICDE.

Region	Focal Point on Quality
Africa	Professor I F Adu ACDE (African Council for Distance Education) in joint collaboration with Ms. Liana Griesel, Executive Director Planning and Quality Assurance, UNISA
Arab region	Dr. Souma Alhaj Ali HBMSU (Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University) United Arab Emirates
Asia	Professor Orjat Darojat Universitas Terbuka Indonesia

Europe	George Ubachs EADTU (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities Netherlands
Latin America and Caribbean	Mary Morocho Quezada AIESAD (Iberoamericain Association of Higher Distance Education) and CALED (Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Quality in Higher Distance Education) Ecuador
North America	Karen L Pedersen/Jennifer Mathes Online Learning Consortium United States of America
Oceania	Associate Professor Philip Uys Director, Learning Technologies Charles Stuart University Australia

Project Mandate

The overarching goal of this working group was to complete an overview of regional quality initiatives. The group was tasked with four main responsibilities. As regional representatives, it was expected that each member would participate in UNESCO regional events focused on quality; provide advice to the Executive Committee on its quality work; support the production of a final report with an overview and status report on online, open, flexible and technology enhanced education; and inspire and facilitate the work of their respective regional task forces.

This report represents the culminating work for this group and provides a focused overview on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to quality in online, open, flexible and technology enhanced education found within each of the identified regions. In addition, it also serves to support the work that ICDE does in partnership with UNESCO towards the UN SDG Agenda for Education. "Towards inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning for all."

Approach

Formed in early 2017, members of the working group participated in multiple virtual meetings in order to organize the work and provide direction on the necessary steps. The first step involved collecting information on the various forms of quality guidelines that may be available within each region. This included a review of frameworks, relevant publications addressing potential quality initiatives, and other guidelines or direction provided by regional accrediting or governing bodies.

Using the information obtained through the prior step, a SWOT analysis on quality in online, open, flexible and technology enhanced learning was led by each FPQ for their region. Diverse methods were used to collect the information for each region's overview. This resulted in regionally relevant information that could be further analyzed and interpreted within the context of this report. Methods for the collection of this information included surveys, focus group, or collaborations/discussions during regional meetings.

Results were then shared with the overall working group before being converted into a narrative by each FPQ that could be used for the final report. The original information as provided by each FPQ is provided in the Appendix of this report.

Regional Quality Highlights

Each of the regional reports outlines those distance learning modalities that are most prevalent and growing within those areas of the world. What is especially promising and evident globally, is that there is a recognition that quality, on some level, needs to be addressed. However, it is recognized that, for a variety of reasons, this does not always occur. Another commonality that was identified in some regions is that there is still a stigma attached to distance learning. This is not a new issue with open, online, flexible and technology-enhanced learning so it is not surprising that this lack of acceptance may result in limited offerings in some countries.

Africa
- Open and distance learning are the most widespread forms of distance learning throughout the region. There are currently good quality assurance frameworks that can be used within sub-regions; however, there is a need for adoption of resources at the national level that can be used in the accreditation process.
- Online and flexible learning options were introduced more recently. While these can offer more flexibility to learners, the nature of the technology also provides more opportunities for cheating which can be difficult to curtail without costly technical deterrents.
- It is anticipated that these modes of delivery will continue to grow.

Arab region
- In some Arab countries there is an increased emphasis by governmental entities on innovation. However, the countries included in the Arab region are very diverse in terms of the challenges being faced. In some areas, there is limited availability of digital infrastructure, internet penetration is low, and connections costs are high. In other areas the perception that learning in these modalities is inferior to traditional methods remains open to challenge.
- Another issue specific to this region is related to the dependence on Arabic as the language used in learning. This has created barriers to understanding content that is often available only in English. In addition, this results in limits to the number of topics available in Arabic.
- A lack of quality standards related to open, online, flexible or technology enhanced education exists in the Arab world. Where standards are provided for these modalities, it tends to still follow more traditional standards for campus modes with limited flexibility.
- Faculty development is also needed in this region to assist in creating an understanding of roles and teaching styles in an online learning classroom.

Asia
- It appears to be recognized that there is a strategic role for open and distance learning in many Asian countries; however, there are still issues related to the perception of these modalities as being substandard to traditional higher education. Many institutions use some forms of internal quality assurance models to address these concerns. Online and distance learning universities have developed quality assurance manuals for the overall implementation and assessment of quality.
- A challenge exists related to the lack of a common quality assurance instrument that can be used for online learning. The existing government quality assurance frameworks for higher education do not specifically address distance and online learning.
- Online and distance learning universities are also threatened by a lack of quality that may be found in some universities that are allowed to offer courses in this modality but lack the expertise. This may result in the delivery of substandard programs that influence the overall perception of the delivery modality.

Europe
- Within European universities, digital learning environments maintain a strong presence and there seems to be more acceptance related to the value of learning in these modalities.
- The development of blended and online learning does not always appear to be developed through a systematic approach. Instead development may rely on the interest and commitment of individuals resulting in slow and limited implementation.
- There is a need to build competence and expertise in blended and online learning design by offering professional development on relevant topics. However, there may be challenges within academic environments where the culture does not encourage innovation.

Latin America and the Caribbean
- A significant issue that continues to be an issue in the region is that distance and online education is considered to be inferior to traditional education models. This perception may be a result of poor quality international programs, absence of policies, and limited laws to regulate delivery mode. In addition, there may be questions of academic rigor in some programs.
- Where certification programs for quality in distance learning exist, they focus more on achievements rather than areas of improvement. This has led to a recognition that there is a need to develop and implement an evaluation process

that can be used for continuous improvement and not just to complete the requirements of a government body.

North America
- Online and distance learning continues to grow throughout the region. To support this, there are many quality frameworks to evaluate the effectiveness at the course and program-level.
- An issue that exists within the region is that there is a lack of consistency since there is no industry standard for quality. While these learning modalities are often evaluated through accreditation processes, limited guidelines may be provided on expectations. In addition, there were institution level issues in how online learning may be organized. As noted in the narrative, there were issues in implementing quality standards within a decentralized learning environment.
- Other challenges faced were focused around faculty needs. This included the need for faculty development that can cultivate the expertise to design and teach in these modalities. Other issues included a lack of buy-in from faculty that there was a need to implement quality standards and a lack of collaboration between faculty and staff to incorporate quality standards.

Oceania
- There currently exist a large number of quality frameworks for use in the region focused on the effectiveness of open and distance learning.
- Many universities also have quality models to support their distance and online programs. However, there is still a need to provide assistance to those institutions in developing countries to create standards that are focused on quality.

Themes

One thing that was consistent throughout all of the regional reports was that online, open, flexible and technology-enhanced learning still has significant potential globally. Each region may face diverse challenges to implementation and growth in the various modalities, but it was also shared that the benefits that are seen from these modalities vary based on the individual needs of a country or region.

Overall, there were three themes that seemed to emerge from the regional overviews. While these did not come up within all regions, they did come up often enough to reflect that these are challenges that are faced within many countries.

1. Quality assurance
   ❖ While multiple regions identified quality frameworks that could be used to evaluate effectiveness, there is still an issue with consistent standards being used by governing bodies for quality through the accreditation process. Without standards, it is difficult for an institution to benchmark against others and it creates ambiguity regarding expectations for quality.
   ❖ This lack of standards can also create issues with the credibility of open, online, flexible and technology-enhanced learning. Institutions may offer courses or programs that do not incorporate best practices resulting in poor learning experiences for students.

2. Professional development
   ❖ Appropriate training is not always available to build the expertise and skills of faculty and staff responsible for developing and/or teaching courses in these modalities. This can result in a poor teaching experience for faculty and a poor learning environment for students.
   ❖ Without professional development, faculty comfortable teaching in a traditional face-to-face mode may not understand their role in a distance learning environment. In addition, faculty may not understand how to best support students in a virtual classroom.

3. Societal perception
   ❖ In many parts of the world, it is recognized that distance learning can be as effective as traditional learning; however, this is not the case in all regions. The fact that many countries still view learning in these modalities as substandard reflects the need for guidelines and processes to be established that can support and enhance the credibility of distance learning as a whole.

❖ This negative perception may also be influenced by the culture of a country where traditional views on education are pervasive. Overcoming this viewpoint may be more challenging in these environments and require support from higher levels in the university or even governmental bodies.

Conclusion

In a review of research related to quality in online, open, flexible and technology-enhanced education, it is readily seen that these learning modalities have been and continue to be a major focal point and strategic priority. Seaman, Allen and Seaman (2018) found that in the United States there continues to be growth in distance learning even while overall student enrollments are declining. Further, they noted that approximately 15% of students were enrolled in only distance education curriculum. In other parts of the world, such as India, open and distance learning is seen as a way to reach a larger population and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Trines, 2018). In fact, distance learning is expected to continue to grow in areas like sub-Saharan Africa and India.

With the potential for significant growth in distance learning, the question then becomes one of quality and best practices. In 2015, ICDE released a report detailing frameworks and standards used globally to assess quality (Ossiannilsson, Williams, Camilleri & Brown, 2015). This review included an analysis of more than forty frameworks and models that were identified at the time. These frameworks focused on program, or institution, level quality, which may include everything from course design elements to services offered. In some cases, these provided standards and guidelines that led to certification, benchmarking or, in some cases, accreditation.

Models for assessing the quality of a program are especially important in countries that use them to determine program effectiveness in order to regulate the educational offerings. Some regions rely on the frameworks to validate program quality for other stakeholders (students, governing boards, and other relevant agencies) and provide a competitive advantage over similar programs at other institutions.

Incorporating best practices from scholarly research has helped many of the more mainstream models to establish credibility. While each resource varies, many of them include some type of guideline in the following areas:

- Course Design
- Faculty development and support
- Institutional Support
- Learner Services

Recommendations

As reflected in the narratives provided by each FPQ and throughout this report, many universities continue to identify open, online, flexible and technology-enhanced learning as a strategic initiative to support growth and meet the needs of various segments of their population. In some regions, these delivery modes have become widely accepted, yet still face numerous challenges in terms of quality.

While there were several themes identified from this analysis, each region is experiencing its own challenges that are as diverse as the countries they represent. Additionally, there are multiple recommendations for next steps in building global quality in online, open, flexible and technology-enhanced learning. This list is not all inclusive as there may be specific needs within a region. However, they are meant to serve as a starting point to help relevant organizations, institution, and governmental agencies support quality in online, open, flexible and technology-enhanced learning.

1. More work needs to be done in supporting regions with the adoption of guidelines and standards for quality in online, open, flexible and technology-enhanced education. As reflected in the ICDE report by Ossiannilsson, Williams, Camilleri and Brown (2015), there are a number of frameworks that currently exist for course-level and program-level quality that can be used to support this work. These could be reviewed and normed as appropriate for various the regions to implement.
2. Further research and analysis needs to be conducted on quality in online, open, flexible and technology-enhanced learning. This will help in building the credibility of these modalities as well as informing relevant organizations, accreditors and governmental agencies on best practices for quality.
3. Faculty and staff professional development standards need to be identified and used to build expertise and competency in the development and teaching of courses in these modalities. Some research has been done, which includes a Faculty Framework offered through the Online Learning Consortium, that can support this need (Mohr & Shelton, 2017). Higher education institutions are encouraged to continue this work and implement training on best practices internally.

ICDE Quality Review Services

As outlined in this report, quality assurance standards are a concern in many regions. Many governmental or regulatory agencies do not provide standards that are specific to online, open, flexible or technology enhanced learning. This in turn creates confusion and misunderstandings on expectations. To better support institutions in providing quality learner experiences, ICDE offers quality review services. These are conducted "in the spirit of academic peer review" in order to provide expert feedback to institutions ("ICDE Quality Review Services, n.d., para. 3). More information on the process can be found on the [ICDE website](#).

References

ICDE Quality Review Services. (n.d.). International Council for Open and Distance Education. Retrieved from https://icde.memberclicks.net/icde-quality-review-services?servId=6603

Mohr, S.C., & Shelton, K. (2017). *Online faculty professional development framework* [White paper]. Newburyport, MA: Online Learning Consortium. Retrieved from https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/online-faculty-professional-development-framework/

Ossiannilsson, E., Williams, K., Camilleri, A. F., & Brown, M. (2015). *Quality Models in Online and Open Education around the Globe: State of the Art and Recommendations.* Retrieved from https://www.icde.org/assets/WHAT_WE_DO/icdequalitymodels22.pdf

Russell, T. L. (1999). The no significant difference phenomenon: A comparative research annotated bibliography on technology for distance education: As reported in 355 research reports, summaries and papers. North Carolina State University.

Seaman, J. E., Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2018). *Grade Increase: Tracking distance education in the United States*. Babson Survey Research Group. Retrieved from http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/highered.html

Trines, S. (2018, September 13). Education in India. Retrieved from https://wenr.wes.org/2018/09/education-in-india

Appendix: Original Narrative for Region SWOT Analysis

Africa

It can be recalled that the Incheon Declaration at the world Education Forum in May 2015, UNESCO was given the responsibility of being a lead and coordination agency for the "Education 2030 Agenda" alongside other partners (https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/ vis. 8th June 2018). The Global Education 2030 Agenda is an ambitious aspirational and universal agenda to wipe out poverty through sustainable development by 2030 and to ensure this, Education was found to be universally essential for achieving all the 17 SDGs. The SDG 4 on quality education that seeks to "Ensure access to inclusive and quality education for all and to promote lifelong learning". Therefore, the possibility for obtaining quality education will constitute a major foundation for improving people's lives and ensuring sustainable development. The SWOC analysis presented in the next sections, seeks to narrate how can quality enhancement of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Online Learning and Flexible Education can assist Africa to attain the SDGs in general and particularly the SDG 4. By exploiting the above three modes of education delivery, one can ensure the participation in higher education is inclusive and affordable.

Summary of the SWOC for the African Region on current efforts of enhancement of quality assurance of ODL, Online learning and Flexible Learning

Overall, the extent of application of the above three modes of learning in Africa with regard to quality enhancement can be presented as three mini-SWOCs that are hereby presented in three separate paragraphs:
Open and Distance Learning (ODL) – This mode of delivery is currently the most prevalent mode with two extremes, those who teach exclusively in ODL mode as well as those who use ODL as part of the blended mode of delivery. In terms of strength, quality assurance for ODL modes is attained through the national regulatory bodies that have the legal mandate to accredit all higher education programmes principally using the ACDE quality assurance toolkit, where applicable. Others may use other quality assurance kits like COL RIM and e-excellence from EADTU. The existence of national or regional quality assurance frameworks becomes beneficial as experienced in East Africa and Southern Africa (SADC). The main weakness is the failure of the national regulatory bodies to mainstream relevant ODL quality assurance tools in their accreditation instruments as well as their failure to adopt the quality enhancement approach in the accreditation. Some residential universities adopt the ODL mode without adequate preparations including training staff and students.

Existence of trained peer reviewers in ODL mode of delivery is a major benefit for EAC and SADC which have regional quality assurance frameworks and some national frameworks for ODL only for the latter. The main challenge includes failure of the

national regulatory organs to mainstream ODL quality assurance systems during accreditation as well as some residential universities adopting the ODL modes without being prepared. The existence of a number of ODL universities in most of the five African sub-regions results in opportunities to obtain qualified peer reviewers. Also trending is the introduction of more privately owned ODL universities and colleges which can be considered both an opportunity and a challenge due to the resulting increasing competition. The inclusive nature of the ODL mode is assisting to improve the possibility for Africa to attain the SDG 4.

Online and Flexible Learning – These two modes of delivery are a recent innovation in most parts of Africa with online learning being more prevalent than the flexible learning at the moment. The main strengths of both modes are the ability to offer a very flexible manner of studying. However, the weaknesses of these modes lie in the necessity to have many technical facilities that are not cheap for prevention of cheating by the learners. Opportunities here include maximum flexibility in terms of the timing as well as location and style of learning that one can adopt. The two modes of learning also offer the possibility of teaching in multiple languages due to the ability to translate the teaching materials into other languages.

The major challenge that is there is the fact that most national regulatory organs have not yet prepared any requisite quality assurance tools to ease the accreditation process. The professional bodies will also need to be better educated about the importance of this mode of learning. Any efforts geared at preparing the national regulatory organs to undertake rational accreditation of the two modes of delivery. Guidelines will need to be produced for flexible learning and particularly when MOOCs are delivered.

In future, the need for lifelong learning will increase due to the trained workers being required to take new skills to match with technological changes. The use of these two modes is the only answer that can also guarantee quality for any number of students enrolled to study since there is no limit on the numbers of students admitted. Africa needs to increase the efforts to exploit the flexible learning modes of delivery including MOOCs that must however guarantee quality.

Arab

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed an impressive proliferation of Online, Open, Flexible and Technology Enhanced higher education institutions in all parts of the world including the Arab World. These institutions adopt a wide range of delivery platforms. While, such institutions were emerging with astonishing speed in the US and Europe, mainly due to the emergence of extremely useful smart information and communications technologies (ICTs) and changes in learners' needs for flexible educational programs, the introduction of Online, Open, Flexible and Technology Enhanced Education in the Arab World follows a much slower rate.

Efforts in the field of online education in the Arab world can be classified into two categories: 1. upgrading the IT infrastructure and platforms of current conventional universities to offer some courses or programs online, and 2. establishing new fully open, online, flexible and technology enhanced higher education institutions. While the progress on the first category is noticeable among many higher education institutions in the Arab World, up till 2018, the number of fully open, online, flexible and technology enhanced higher education institutions in the Arab World is very low. Some countries in the Arab World does not yet have an accredited online university, other countries may have one or a maximum of two fully online universities. open, online, flexible and technology enhanced education in the Arab World is facing some challenges partially due to the availability of digital infrastructure, PC and Internet penetration, and connection costs, in some of the Arab countries like Sudan and Yemen, but mainly due to the perception of the general public and some of the employers on the quality of technology enhanced education as being of inferior quality compared to conventional one. High reliance on Arabic as a learning language pose an additional challenge to the spread of open and online education in schools.

The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and challenges presented in this concept paper were collected via the following platforms:

- UNESCO Regional meeting in Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the Arab states, 2 March 2017, Bahrain.
- Innovation Arabia 11: Innovate, Disrupt and Transform, Smart Learning Track, 11-13 March 2018, Dubai, UAE.
- A specialized survey disseminated in April 2018 to all Arab online universities.

Strengths

The online environment offers unprecedented opportunities for learners who would otherwise have limited access to education. Educators in the Arab World agreed of the following strong point:

- **Provide learners with flexibility (Anywhere, Anytime, Any Pace):**
The self-paced T&L material and virtual classrooms are accessible 24/7. Asynchronous communication through online conferencing programs allows the professional to juggle work, family, and study schedules.

- **Affordability:**
The reduced need for physical infrastructure and rely on part-time faculty members allow higher education institutions that adopt open, online, flexible and technology enhanced education to offer its programs and courses in a very competitive and affordable prices.

- **Easy to access:**
Learners can access their courses at any time of day or night. They usually have unlimited and easy access to lectures recordings, teaching and learning material, and discussion boards.

- **Learner Centric:**
Within the interactive online learning environments, learners have better opportunity to control their own learning experience to meet their own specific needs.

- **Enriched with features:**
Smart information and communications technologies comes with many features that are not possible with conventional learning including digitized content, chatbots, ability to record and retrieve lecture, automated assessment, social communication tools,…etc.

- **Access to Resources (distinguished guest experts or international faculty members):**
Virtual classrooms and other online platforms enabled the engagement of local and international experts and faculty members. Distinguished guests can address learners virtually and with minimal resources and logistics.

- **Ability to utilize new trends as micro-learning and badging:**
Availability of digitized content and short learning objects enables lifelong learning and open doors to new forms of learning and credentialing including the micro-learning and badging.

Weaknesses
• **Language barrier:**
Learners in the Arab World have various levels of proficiency in communicating in English, some of them have trouble following virtual lectures or reviewing teaching and learning material in English language.

• **Availability of quality digitized content:**
The digitized content available does not cover the depth or breadth of topics needed and the digitized content available in the Arabic language is very limited.

• **Lack of online qualities of faculty:**
Most of faculty members working in an open, online, flexible and technology enhanced higher education institutions do not have prior experience in open and online education, and to the different role expected from them in the online environment, i.e. ability to engage learners through virtual lectures, developing content, etc.

• **Lack of self-disciplined, well organized, and self-motivated students:**
Online learning well suit learners who are mature, independent, and disciplined, some other students, although being technologically savvy, may underestimate the time and effort required for studying and passing an online course.

• **Low research output:**
Open, online, flexible and technology enhanced higher education institutions usually have core full time faculty members and rely more on part-time faculty members, which result is less research activities and output compared to conventional universities.

Opportunities
• **The growing trend of internet users and wide spread of mobile phones:**
According to many international reports, the size of the Internet users continues to grow day by day.

• **Expanding market for e-learning:**
The size of the eLearning market is expected to increase rapidly.

• **Recent governmental emphasis on innovation and smartness:**
Recently, some of the Arab countries including the UAE is focusing on innovation, smartness, and entrepreneurship for national development.

• **Increased acceptance of blended learning and eLearning/smart learning worldwide:**

Interest in blended/ smart/ online learning is increasing worldwide; more and more universities and training institutes are moving towards online learning, at least partially. The Arab world is moving in that direction as well but with a slower rate.

- **Ability to provide access to learners across the globe:**
Blended/ smart/ online learning enable providers to expand their markets beyond their geographical borders.

Threats
- **Competition from local conventional universities:**
Higher education sector in some of the golf countries is very competitive; many of the international universities are opening braches in the Arab World.

- **Competition from local partially online universities:**
Recently, some conventional universities are offering some courses or programs online.

- **Competition from international online universities:**
Learners from the Arab region can access any of the international online universities while still residing in their home countries.

- **Quality and Accreditation:**
Some of the Arab countries do not recognize Technology Enhanced education; others recognize it while enforcing very strict standards.

- **Society perception:**
Some of the learners, parents, or employers in the Arab world may argue that Technology Enhanced education is inferior or less efficient than conventional learning.

Challenges
- **Lack of quality standards:**
Many of the countries in the Arab world do not recognize Technology Enhanced education and do not have or publicize a related accreditation or quality standard.

- **Lack of communication between Technology Enhanced HEIs in the region:**
Many of the Technology Enhanced HEIs view themselves as competitors rather than partners. They do not communicate or collaborate with each other.

- **Conventionality of the accreditation standards:**
Some of the accreditation standards adopted in the few Arab countries that have accreditation standards for blended/ smart/ online learning), tend to be a bit rigid and close to the conventional standards.

• **Conventionality of the ranking systems and ranking indicators:**
Most of the ranking systems and ranking indicators focus on research and the number of full-time faculty members, which is usually less in blended/ smart/ online learning HEIs.

• **Faculty roles and responsibilities:**
Many of the faculty members are a bit confused on how to adopt their role and teaching style to fit smart and online learning environment, especially those with very long teaching experience in conventional universities.

• **Course design and development:**
The quality and interactivity of many online courses and OER is not up to learners expectations, furthermore, online courses and OER available in the Arabic language are very limited.

• **Staying up-to-date with modern technology:**
The pace of change in the technology seems to accelerate at an increasing rate. Keeping up with modern technology and ensuring the right selection of the technology is challenging operationally and financially.

• **Choosing the right business model:**
While most conventional universities follow similar business model; open, online, flexible and technology enhanced higher education institutions seems to adopt different, structure, operating models, delivery strategy, etc.

Recommendations for Improvements
Open, online, flexible and technology enhanced education has become a reality of our time. With increasing emphasis on cutting-edge innovations in the ICTs sector and the emergence of smart societies, open and distance education is bound to grow. Therefore, policy makers and higher education institutions should work together to facilitate the adoption of this form of education across the Arab World, the following initiatives could support:
  • Developing platforms for sharing information and good practices among ICTs-driven Universities.
  • Establishing standard for recognition of prior learning for ICTs-driven Universities.
  • Developing platforms for exchange of learners among ICTs-driven Universities.

Asia

In Asia, open and distance education have played significant role with the advantage of providing extended access and meeting the rising expectations of people who would not be able to attend traditional campus-based universities. In Asia with large populations, such as China and Indonesia, ODL institutions offer a strategic way to enroll a large number of students.

In spite of the strategic role of ODL in providing access to higher education, there are several challenges and opportunities. Besides, in some Asian countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, distance education has been regarded as poor quality and substandard leading to the stigma that ODL universities deliver a second rate education. Thus, quality assurance (QA) currently has been regarded as one of the strategic issues for Asia's ODL landscape. The following section discusses SWOT analysis on QA in Asia Region.

Strengths
Most ODL institutions involved in this survey have already been involved in employing QA programs. The stress on formulation and implementation of QA has been regarded as their major concerns. In China and Indonesia, for example, the importance of QA for DTUs is in line with the provision of mass higher education that has become an important policy concern. As part of their commitment to quality, these ODL universities have been formally equipped by the establishment of their centralized quality assurance units to coordinate and manage their quality programs.

To support the implementation of their QA programs the ODL universities have developed their QA manuals which have been regarded as a major reference addressing the implementation of their internal QA audits. In some universities, the development and implementation of the QA system have been coordinated, planned, and integrated by the Quality Assurance Center. The implementation of the QA system and the obligation of the university to apply their government regulations over higher education have led the ODL universities to develop their official QA manuals covering all aspects of QA, including QA policies and procedures, indicators, and guidelines for implementing and assessing their quality programs.

The implementation of QA program in many ODL universities in Asia have also been supported by well qualified staff (academic and administrative staff) and facilities. Academic staff and administrators are the most valuable assets who manage, implement, and evaluate all of the activities of QA programs at these universities. Human resources have played key roles particularly when they are connected with the implementation of learning and teaching provisions and support services. Academic

staff are involved in the very core of the universities' business activities as educational providers, starting from developing educational programs, designing and developing learning materials, performing teaching and learning processes, preparing test items for final examination, and being involved in managing quality programs.

Further strength of the QA program in Asia region deals with structured set of quality guidelines. The QA manuals have been regarded as important official documents at ODL universities for setting quality programs into practice. As quality focuses more on establishing criteria or standards of the university's products and services, these QA manuals were developed in order to provide guidelines for the universities for achieving such established quality criteria. The universities' QA manuals also describe some important information in order to provide a platform in adopting QA programs. For example, the university's profile, institutional quality statements, components or areas of quality, quality standards and their performance indicators, quality procedures or guidelines, as well as internal mechanisms for evaluating quality performance are included.

Weaknesses
The writer notes that there is little research-based literature to guide vice chancellors, rectors, vice rectors, and practitioners in developing and applying QA program in distance higher education. There is a gap in the research about assuring quality of distance education so that it remains problematic issues and uncharted areas for policy makers. There remain questions about what constitutes quality and how quality should be measured in ODL institutions. Therefore, it is interesting enough to investigate problems and issues of QA program in ODL in Asia region. How does QA actually work in distance teaching universities? What philosophical background rests with a given QA decision? And how can findings on current QA processes are applied to improve the culture of quality in ODL institutions?

It was disclosed that in some ODL institutions, the government's QA framework has not been specifically designed for distance education. Quality criteria set by the government do not correspond well with distance education and online learning. Therefore, the open and distance universities should accept and follow the same QA standards used as other traditional universities. However, they have opportunity to add their own QA indicators representing their own quality distinctiveness. Further, it was found that there are some weaknesses dealing with current situation of QA program in Asia region as follows.

It is also an issue being disclosed that there is no specific QA instrument for online learning modes. Currently, in Asia, academic interaction among

tutors/teachers/facilitators and students have moved forward from face-to-face tutorials to online learning. The use of online learning services at Asia open universities is in line with the advancement of educational technology, economic development, and market or students' demands. Teaching learning provisions for distance learners now move away from face-to-face to online by inviting students into the forum and developing the supplement for the learning materials. It seems that online learning has empowered distance students to interact with tutors and other students in more flexible ways. Although the employment of online learning services has strengthened student engagement and improved student experience in the instructional process, it is sadly to say that there is no quality guideline on how online learning material should be developed and how to measure the of quality of online learning mode.

Opportunities

As for the opportunities, a distance and online education has created a new and modern way of education with modern equipment and facilities with low fee without age limitation for education. Its flexible learning modes (with face-to-face and online elements) could enhance the quality in terms of student learning experience. Moreover, the ODL institutions have the scope to reach the mass to give lifelong learning opportunity. And to tackle the mass, ICTs and software are needed to improve the quality of education and access such as improvement of user interface and ongoing software modification. Furthermore, some of the universities are the leading ODL institutions in the country which provides the guideline for quality control on distance learning in its country. It also gives opportunity to collaborate with other universities in the region to adapt AAOU QA framework to guide and control distance education and online learning. Other opportunities that it could take advantage of more learning analytics/institutional data to better inform the QA framework and could accelerate the process of QA with sufficient survey and policy document.

Besides, there is a growing commitment among ODL providers to be involved in QA paradigms. Many ODL universities demonstrate QA program involving internal and external parties. They have designed principles and guidelines to assure quality in distance education
Based on the survey, it is disclosed that a number of different organisations, such as STOU, UPOU, UT, and OUM have their own QA program to support their quality policies into practices.

Threats

The main threats for some of the ODL institutions are the sub-standard programs delivered by institutions who are allowed to offer distance learning programs since they lack the expertise and end up downplaying the quality assurance practices of legitimate

ODL institutions. The freely available courses/open educational resources and the online courses offered by conventional face-to-face institutions also a threat from competitors. Therefore, universities need to strive for continuously enhancing the education quality in order to cope with the changing market. Commitment and strong leadership support are needed to drive the process for quality improvement. Moreover, it needs regular monitoring and more staff in terms of quality experts. There should be staff specialized in education quality accreditation for extensive improvement. Other threats include workload allocations particularly in relation to course design work and commitment to the process across the university.

Furthermore, it is also reported that not all people agree with the adoption of QA policies in distance teaching universities. The importation of QA programs from the world of business into higher education tends to inhibit innovation in instructional process. Some argue that a common criticism of QA programs is that this pays little attention to educational processes and theories, as a result quality improvement is only incidental. The objections to the emerging QA issues in distance higher education reference what many academics perceive as reducing academic autonomy.

Europe

European framework

In European universities three areas of provision emerge: *degree education* as the backbone of a university; *continuing education* and continuous professional development, which probably will exceed the number of degree students; and *open education* which emerged mainly by the MOOC movement. Universities attempt policies and strategies to define their profile in these areas, which can be complementary to each other and to some extent interwoven (See annex 1).

Digital modes of teaching and learning can solve problems higher education is facing today and will offer new opportunities for teaching and learning in each of these areas. They will innovate and even transform higher education provisions in the course of next years:

- Blended degree education will raise the quality and efficiency of degree education, facing large numbers of students and lower staff/students ratios.
- Blended and online education will upscale the area of continuing education and continuous professional development (CPD) by offering flexible courses with a large outreach responding to the needs of learners at work, who face longer careers and career shifts.
- MOOCs are offered online only, providing massive and open learning opportunities for all, promoting engagement in the knowledge society.

Blended and online systems are important to accelerate innovation and to keep pace with the needs of learners of all ages and of society.

Changing times need new solutions, touching upon the structure of higher education provisions. There is a need for investment in lifelong learning in European societies, in particular in continuous education / continuous professional development. All member states need to extend their provisions.

In the area of continuing education, the deployment of short learning programmes (SLPs) is a most important solution. The *online* provision of SLP`s makes them even more scalable and flexible. They facilitate the accessibility of courses by learners and can be taken in combination with a job at all stages of life. SLPs should be awarded with appropriate qualifications (e.g. certificates, diplomas), corresponding with the European Qualification Framework.

In the framework of ICDE's focal point approach to quality assurance of online education, EADTU has performed a SWOT analyses for Europe based on **three action lines:**

1. Survey on accreditation of QA in blended and online education

2. EADTU-ENQA Peer Learning Activity on QA in blended and online education

3. EADTU-ENQA PLA Questionnaire at 3 levels

European SWOT

The rationale for governments to implement quality assurance (QA) systems or processes is usually two-fold: they wish to be assured that the higher education that they fund (albeit in varying ways) is of sufficiently high quality, and they wish to ensure that it is being continuously improved, ie., quality enhancement (QE). In almost all European countries, quality assurance for higher education is achieved through the establishment of agencies. Quality assurance agencies, whose role is to assess quality in the learning and teaching business also need at least some expertise in new modes of teaching by online and blended education, which they might best obtain by also having such staff in-house. This was proposed by the Dutch QA agency, NVAO, at the ENQA conference in Zagreb (Flierman, 2014).

If one of the tasks of external quality assurance agencies is to support the improvement of teaching and learning, they should also look to educational processes in universities and not just to learning outcomes. The quality of teaching and learning is also determining the quality of results. In systems, where the focus is more on institutional quality assurance, quality assurance agencies should make available to universities criteria and models for internal evaluation, also for digital modes of teaching and learning. Hence, quality assurance agencies play a pivotal role in institutional quality assurance processes.

Although several agencies in Europe have set important steps in evaluating and valuing innovation and quality enhancement by digital education, there is still a way to go in other countries. Only a minority of agencies are giving criteria, indicators, guidelines or examples of good practice for improvement to institutions. ENQA can assure that expertise and good practice are shared between agencies and that specific criteria, benchmarks, guidelines and frameworks are developed and disseminated to institutions.

Relevant criteria, indicators or guidelines are published by agencies in Cyprus, Ireland and the United Kingdom. In the UK, learning and teaching in general, including e-learning, is covered by the Quality Code. These guidelines are a good basis for sharing criteria and indicators for quality assurance as are also frameworks, benchmarks and criteria for quality assurance developed by international associations in the field (ICDE study, 2016; EADTU, E-xcellence, 2015).

Already, ENQA has taken a pro-active role in response to latest developments in online and blended education by setting up a Working Group on E-Learning. This WG on E-Learning is consisting of some 10 quality assurance agencies.

The objectives of the ENQA WG on e-learning are:
- Create an inventory of sources on quality assurance and e-Learning.
- Agree on definition of e-learning.
- Agree on recommendations (QAA and HEIs).

Based on EADTU's study on accreditation of online education and recent cooperation with ENQA in the SEQUENT project (https://www.sequent-network.eu/), both organisations decided on organising the EADTU-ENQA Peer Learning Activity on blended and online education for September 2017.

This forms the basis for a structured dialogue between stakeholders; EADTU (HE institutions), ENQA (QA agencies) and governments.

Interesting is Esther Huertas Hidalgo (Chair ENQA WG E-Learning) view on how to include ways forward in the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG, 2015), in particular with respect to the role of agencies in quality assurance for blended and online / distance programmes. Main challenge is to share the understanding on quality assurance for new modes of teaching and learning by higher education institutions (HEI) and professionals/teaching staff within institutions. Also, how can the agencies get the message across in line with the role of agencies. In the logic of the European Standards and Guidelines, the applicability of standards has to be examined and how indicators can be fine-tuned, taking into account challenges from HEIs, government and quality assurance agencies.

The ENQA working group now aims at providing a generic framework and a common basis for national and institutional activities by those standards and guidelines for quality assurance (ESG). They should be applied to all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery (transnational education, e-learning, short courses…). Blended and online learning provisions fulfil the same standards (ESG) as traditional ones.

Thus, all types of e-learning are included as well as all phases in the learning process (e.g. e-assessment). It applies to all types of quality assurance activities, agencies (quality audits, program accreditation, institutional assessment...) and quality assurance purposes (enhancement/improvement, accountability).

From the peer learning activity, including all 3 stakeholder organisations we have identified the following main SWOT elements for European introduction and quality assurance of online and blended education.

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
STRENGTHS	**WEAKNESSES**
At the university level: The strong presence of learning environments/digital technology at European universities; Good practices in blended teaching and learning, although in many universities dispersed; incremental implementation; The MOOC movement has resulted in broader awareness and acceptance of the added value of blended and online education Strong digital skills of students and teachers A strong leadership in frontrunner universities, developing blended mainstream education, online continuous education/CPD and open education/MOOCs There is an objective strong need for enhancing the quality of education for large student numbers in mainstream education at a reasonable cost (Daniel's iron triangle). Blended and online can extend the classroom as well as create smaller learning communities	**At the university level:** In many universities, the leadership still doesn't develop innovative policies, strategic plans, frameworks for innovation in teaching and learning Blended and online teaching and learning is developed incrementally, not systematically. Often the use of ICT-based modes of teaching and learning and innovation is only based on the commitment of individuals Some institutions are engaged, but developments are going slow and efforts are dispersed and not systemic enough. Inertia in academia to innovate. Academic culture not in favour of innovation. Attitudes of students and staff towards online learning Misconceptions on blended/online teaching Low awareness of innovative pedagogies; Institutional expertise on the design of blended and online teaching and learning not well developed Blended and online learning competencies of staff not enough developed Institutional educational support frameworks not well developed Institutional quality framework didn't enough adopt criteria and indicators

m

At Quality Assurance agency level:

The national quality assurance agencies in the ENQA network represent a wide range of expertise in quality assurance (institutional, program level)

As blended and online education are gradually developed in most European universities, institutional quality assurance services will be involved in evaluation reviews in these areas

The widely referred Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance can be a perfect framework for adopting fit criteria and indicators for quality assurance in blended and online education

Within this framework, national Quality Assurance Agencies adopt quality assurance guidelines and inform institutions about criteria, indicators, guidelines on blended and online education. Institutional systems further support the quality of online and blended education.

ENQA provides the opportunity to exchange expertise in blended and online education

Several QA agencies are already active in ENQA's WG E-Learning

Some national agencies have elaborated systematically criteria and indicators for quality assurance in blended and online education (UK, Cyprus, Portugal,..)

The E-xcellence Manual and benchmarking instruments are widely

for blended and online education and innovation

No adequate solutions for the changing roles and related workload of staff

No clear incentives for career development;

At Quality Assurance agency level:

Criteria, indicators and guidelines for blended and online education are not yet enough developed and implemented in quality assurance systems and reviews

Difficult finding experts for reviewing blended and online courses and programs

In some agencies, more attention for outcomes, less for processes

	used in institutional QA and by ENQA members (open license) ENQA can facilitate the sharing of good practice between its members to improve quality criteria, indicators and guidelines; This will also continuously improve quality assurance practices at the university level. From this perspective of continuous improvement, it would be necessary to stay up-to-date with the current discussion in the field and to establish ways of permanent exchange of experience and expertise, e.g. workshops with institutions, ENQA members, expert organisations and stakeholders. The EADTU-ENQA Peer Learning Activity on QA in blended and online education (Sept. 2017) has led to a structured dialogue of stakeholders.	
	OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
EXTERNAL	Educational technology becomes stronger, more fit to blended and online course design and to independent learning (the new yOU-platform of the Open University of the Netherlands) Educational theories and design science becomes stronger Innovative pedagogies and examples of good practice are published (CPL, Innovative Pedagogies UKOU, Envisioning report of EADTU/EMPOWER)	The funding per student for higher education is decreasing in many EU universities Weak governmental strategies in many EU countries

CPD is organised for leadership and staff (EMPOWER, EOLLA) The MOOC movement is inspiring many. The MOOC platforms contribute to innovative strategies and practices (EMC consortium, edX, etc.) It is expected that there will be more requests on accreditation of online study programmes in the near future EU policies in favour of the modernisation of higher education Some countries develop strategies for innovation and blended and online education	

Latin America and the Caribbean

The ongoing concern about the level of development of distance higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the regulatory frameworks that provide the norms of educational offers in this modality, motivated the Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Quality in Distance Higher Education (CALED) to carry out a preliminary study in 2011 about the laws, norms and regulations that regulate distance and online education in the region. In this study, there is an historical overview of distance and online higher education, as well as an examination of the universities that offer this type of education. In addition, it looks at the legislation that regulates distance higher education. Although this was at its preliminary stages, CALED carried out an analysis of the norms in the field of autonomy and financing, and assessed the regulating bodies in the academic field, and those related to evaluation and accreditation.

Notwithstanding, the importance of gathering data about legislation in the field of distance education in Latin America and the Caribbean led to the creation of a new book in 2014 about laws, norms and regulations. This book, which gave an updated perspective to distance higher education, aimed to provide a comparative analysis, find points of convergence, and identify differences and diverse ways of organizing, managing and regulating distance education in various countries of the region. Despite the level of development which distance education has achieved, it was observed that its norm-based instruments have multiple characteristics. Moreover, although there have been significant advancements in terms of this modality of education, the characteristics have not been integrated in a uniform manner in the educational institutions within the region. This diversity highlights that it is a complex task to be able to provide norms, as well as to promote and guide the regulations and their implementation in both national and internationally recognized plans.

In order to identify the regulatory frameworks and the evaluation and accreditation processes that were carried out by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Latin America and the Caribbean, to assess the quality management systems that were implemented, and the criteria and indicators that were used at the undergraduate and postgraduate level, and in order to examine quality assurance and institutional accreditation procedures, CALED formulated a study aimed at Higher Education Institutions that taught classes via the Distance Education modality. The results of the study are synthesized in the following paragraph:

A total of thirteen higher education institutions participated in the project, among which we can mention: the Universidad Nacional de Quilmes in Argentina, the Open and Distance Education University of Colombia, the Universidad de Antofagasta, the Universidad Arturo Prat in Chile, the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja in Ecuador, the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the Universidad La Salle Nezahualcóyotl

in Mexico, the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua- Managua and the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua, León, the National Autonomous University of Asunción, the Universidad Columbia de Paraguay, the Universidad Católica Los Ángeles De Chimbote in Peru, the Universidad de Puerto Rico in Puerto Rico, the Universidad Tecnológica del Salvador, and the Universidad Central in Venezuela.

Based on the analysis carried out and the aforementioned research, i.e. not only performed in 2018 but also that which used the data compiled from the previous years, it was concluded that distance and online education in Latin America and the Caribbean continues to face a general problem, and that it is still considered as second-rate learning. The educational program offers that were developed also lacked academic rigor in some cases. Moreover, there was limited student and professor mobility, a proliferation of international programs, a lack of public policies that transcend the global level, and a partial existence of laws that enable you to regulate offers of programs in this modality.

With regards to evaluation, certification and accreditation of this mode of study, evaluation practices have been executed by highlighting more on achievements and less on weaknesses, i.e. with the aim of obtaining favorable judgments and identifying weaknesses in norms, inconsistences and extrapolations in the processes that regulate the evaluation of distance higher education. With the advent of an evaluation process in some of the countries, there is a lack of models and instruments specifically for distance education. There thus arose the need to establish a team of multi-disciplinary evaluators that used a unified language to implement the evaluation process, and which enabled HEIs to establish evaluation processes as a source of significant learning, and thus not simply to complete a process before a state body.

The aim was to align the evaluation and accreditation frameworks of each institution from an international perspective, to consolidate the quality assurance systems in a flexible manner according to the nature of education and the needs from various contexts; and, to include a process of shared development. It was also a goal to promote the integration of students, professors, and administrative personnel whilst also considering the identity of each institution and recognizing social needs and those of the region itself.

At the First Latin American Convention of Rectors, which was held in Bogota, Colombia, at the campus of the Open and Distance University (UNAD) on the 10th and 11th of May, 2018, with the presence of representatives from various institutions in Latin America, it was agreed that there was a need for the "definition of regulatory frameworks for the management of virtual and distance education, which was geared towards common guidelines that guaranteed quality and the right to education within the framework of sustainable development, and which secured the right to the self-determination, university

autonomy and quality criteria, and which was founded on pertinence and the specific needs of each country".

From May 29 to June 1 2018, the VI CREAD ANDES Conference and the VI Virtual Educa Meeting were held in Loja, Ecuador, at the campus of the Universidad Técnica Particular de LojaDuring these meetings, the results of the studies carried out with representatives and experts from organizations at the national and international level were consolidated. It was also a moment to share experiences and visions about distance higher education and to discuss the processes of evaluation, certification and accreditation from the point of view of each institution. Quality assurance was discussed not as a separate process, but as an integral factor in which the following aspects were highly pertinent: culture, context and training. On the other hand, it was manifested that this was a process that should not only be developed by the authorities or governing bodies of the institutions themselves, but that quality, apart from being a final objective, is a cultural process that should permeate all levels of the institution. Its process of construction should be shared and integrate students, professors and administrative staff, whilst also bearing in mind the external bodies that promote the creation of quality environments, which due to their trajectory, accredit these processes by means of indicators or methodologies suitable for the environment in which these activities take place.

The continual growth of Higher Education institutions (IES) that offer distance and online degrees, and the processes of evaluation that determine the quality of the educational offers, should enable us to distinguish specific models of evaluation that lead to a positive impact and which enhance the quality assurance of distance higher education.

North America

In the spring 2018, a total of 27 colleges and universities participated in an informal survey regarding the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for quality in distance learning. Of those that responded, 74% worked at public institutions while the remaining 26% worked at non-profits.   It was also noted that two-thirds of the responses came from 4-year institutions (granting a baccalaureate or higher degree), 29.6% were from 2-year colleges, and the remaining 3.7% was a response for a system.

Quality at the Program Level

Strengths

Many of the institutions that participated in the survey indicated a focus on quality in course design with a limited focus on quality at the comprehensive or program level. In fact, the survey was broken out to collect information on quality at each level, but many respondents focused predominantly at the course level. Those that did review quality at the program level, identified as the OLC Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Programs as their main resource. In many cases, that was coupled with a course level tool (e.g., Quality Matters, OSCQR, etc.).

Weaknesses

There were many that saw a lack of consistency in standards as a problem. For example, Participant 1 stated "no industry standard is used for program, only qm [Quality Matters] for course level and that is not consistent yet". In other cases, how online was structured at the organization influenced the consistency in quality across programs. As shared by Participant 16, "With a distributed academic organization, it is challenging to assess across all indicators for all programs".

Another identified weakness revolved around faculty-related constraints which limited a comprehensive view of quality. Participant 19 indicated that, "Our contract does not allow us to evaluate faculty, so we are only able to evaluate design, services, and general performance". Participant 20 saw further issues related to "Not enough Department insight and faculty's lack of understanding the online learners".

Opportunities

A review of responses regarding potential opportunities reflected a need to adopt best practices and standards of quality for the digital learning program. This included developing policies or mandating requirements on processes to improve the overall quality of the program. Participant 1 indicated a need to follow "industry standards and also carefully applying the regional accreditor guidelines". Although it was also recognized by Participant 12 that "The quality initiative would need supplemented with funds and come from top down to have an impact and enforce changes and improvements".

Threats

In terms of threats to the quality of an online, blended or digital program, there was more variance in responses. These included: institutional support, faculty buy-in, funding, faculty development, and the development of a formal, institutional strategy. In addition, there was a recognized issue with faculty and staff not working together to achieve quality in their online, blended, and digital learning initiatives.

Quality at the Course Level

Strengths
A review of the quality initiatives reflected that many currently use some type of quality course review rubric that has either been validated externally or developed internally. Although there is still a problem with consistent use of quality rubrics. In cases, where a formal rubric is not used, quality is being measured on an ad-hoc basis using resources like student surveys, faculty evaluations, or other measures of student success in the course.

In addition, it was very common to find that institutions had modified a validated rubric (e.g., Quality Matters, OSCQR, QOLT, etc.) to meet the needs of their institution. Participant 27 noted the use of "A rubric based on QM". Others indicated a combination of rubrics are made available to faculty and staff to review course design effectiveness.

Weaknesses
A weakness found in many institutions is due to a lack of consistency in what rubric they use as well as how they use it and when it is implemented. As participant 2 noted, "Each college is doing its own thing. No consistency and, until now, no rules, policies, or procedures about it." There also may be no expectations established related to the outcomes of using the rubric. In the case of Participant 12, "The QM Review is a great first step, but since the results only go to the instructor and no improvements are required from those recommendations, many times the improvements are not made."

Opportunities
At the course level, participants recognized that training on the use of rubrics, consistent policies, or the establishment of course design standards could be used to improve quality course design. Participant 15 identified multiple opportunities when stating:

> I could do a lot more interactive and engaging course design if there was a release or any sort of support from the administration to develop these things. As it is, I have to create them in very small pieces that I can work in around my other heavy course teaching load and service obligations. I think having a stronger culture of pedagogy and course design for online and F2F on my campus would also help improve my courses, since I would be able to talk about what works or does not work with peers. As it stands now, people who innovate are attacked by their peers because they make others look "lazy" or "out of date."

The most important thing mentioned by many related to increased support and resources to encourage quality course design. A consistent theme seemed to be a

need to the online, blended and digital learning initiatives to be seen as a priority at the highest level of the institution.

Threats

In general, a lack of buy-in by faculty seemed to be the largest threat to quality course design. Workload and staff resources (e.g., time, money) are also seen as threats to developing quality courses. However, Participant 27 seemed to recognize the need for balance when stating that "A drive for growth must be tempered by the need for quality courses to ensure students continue to get the same or improved value."

Conclusion

Overall, this review of quality initiatives in online, blended and digital learning in the North American region reflected a recognition and willingness to adopt relevant best practices to support the development of an effective learning environment. However, it appears that an emphasis on quality needs to exist at the highest levels of the institution in order for appropriate policies, processes and standards to be implemented.

Oceania

A. A strength in Oceania is the number of quality instruments regarding open and distance education that have emanated from the Region. These are:

1. Through a focus on enhancing the effectiveness of tertiary teaching and learning practices, Ako Aotearoa will assist educators and organisations to enable the best possible educational outcomes for all learners.
    a. Date - 2014
        - URL - http://www.elg.ac.nz/
        - Abstract - The eLearning guidelines (eLg) have been developed to assist the tertiary sector in its engagement with eLearning. The guidelines offer prompts for reflection from five perspectives - the learner, teacher, manager, organisational leader and quality assurance body. When considering one of these perspectives in the eLearning and eTeaching process, the guidelines assist the designing, implementing and enhancing of your practice to ensure thoughtful and intentional eLearning provision.

2. The Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning (ACODE) is the peak Australasian organisation for universities engaged or interested in technology enhanced learning and teaching
    a. Title - *ACODE Benchmarks for Technology Enhanced Learning*
        - Date - 2014
        - URL - http://www.acode.edu.au/pluginfile.php/579/mod_resource/content/4/TEL_Benchmarks.pdf
        - Abstract - The ACODE benchmarks have been developed to assist institutions in their practice of delivering a quality technology enhanced learning experience for their students and staff (recognising that some institutions refer to their practice with terms such as e-learning, online or flexible learning, blended, etc.). There are eight benchmarks, each of which can be used as a standalone indicator, or used collectively to provide a whole of institution perspective.

3. The Connected Learning Advisory – Te Ara Whītiki provides free, consistent, unbiased advice on integrating digital technologies with learning for all state-funded schools and kura in New Zealand. This service will help schools and kura make the most of the connections that digital technologies provide so they can get the best results for their students and school community. NZ government – Ministry of Education
    a. Title - *e-Learning Planning Framework*
        - Date - 2014
        - URL - http://elearning.tki.org.nz/Professional-learning/e-Learning-Planning-Framework

- Abstract - This section contains the e-Learning Planning Framework (eLPF) along with supporting information and resources. These resources are designed to support you, and your school, in assessing and developing your e-capability.

4. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) is Australia's independent national regulator of the higher education sector. The new *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015* (HES Framework) applies from 1 January 2017.
    a. Title - Guidance Note: *Technology-Enhanced Learning*
        - Date - 2016
        - URL - http://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/GuidanceNote_Technology-EnhancedLearning1.0.pdf
        - Abstract - Higher education is delivered in many ways, including through the use of a diversity of technologies such as multimedia, video and online conferencing tools, podcasting, chat rooms, and dedicated learning management systems. Technology-enhanced learning (TEL) is a generic term for modes of course delivery that include such elements, and their use is sometimes also referred to as 'e-learning'
        TEL is not a term used in the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015* (HES Framework), but in this context it is interpreted broadly as any learning that occurs through the application of electronic communications and computer-based educational technology, combined with pedagogical principles and practices that are applicable to and tailored for this purpose. This might range from augmenting face-to-face teaching with TEL in a limited way, through 'blended delivery' (with a more equal mix of the two) to fully 'online' delivery.

5. The Open Education Licensing Project was a joint research and development project undertaken by Swinburne University of Technology and the University of Tasmania in 2015/16. In 2015 the project team surveyed and collected information from managers, educators and information professionals in Australian universities about their understanding and experiences with licensing issues for open online education. In 2016 the team developed the OEL Toolkit to support the use and development of Open Educational Resources (OER) in the Australian higher education sector.

6. Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE) is developing "The ASCILITE Technology Enhanced Learning Accreditation Scheme (TELAS)" – see https://ascilite.org/get-involved/telas/

7. The *e-learning Maturity Model* developed by Stephen Marshall of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. A paper below:

> Title - *Using the e-learning Maturity Model to Identify Good Practice in E-Learning*
> - Author – Stephen Marshall
> - Date - 2013
> - URL - http://www.ascilite.org/conferences/sydney13/program/papers/Marshall.pdf
> - Abstract - E-learning is a complex endeavor which presents significant challenges as the scale and complexity of different technologies and pedagogical models grows. The e-learning Maturity Model is a quality framework aimed at helping educational institutions engage with this complexity both by understanding the state of their current organizational e-learning capability, but also by providing tools aimed at systematically improving that capability. The eMM framework includes an extensive body of information drawn from the literature but is also intended to help identify useful examples from different institutions so these can inform other organization seeking ideas for their own situation. This paper describes a number of such examples of good practice identified as part of an ongoing project applying the eMM to Australian universities, and signals the potential outcomes possible from a more complete sample in the future.

B. Another <u>strength</u> in the Region is that most of the Universities in Oceania do have quality models for distance/online learning (given that Australia and New Zealand are most prominent in the region). These are not listed as there are too many.

C. An <u>opportunity</u> in the region is to assist developing countries to develop policies and guidelines on quality on distance/online education.

D. A number of institutions in Oceania have responded to a request for information on a <u>SWOT analysis of their institutions</u> regarding quality in distance and online education.

Institution	Description of Quality initiative	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Charles Sturt University, Australia	Charles Sturt University has introduced a university-wide, collaborative course design process (CDP) to address quality in course and subject design, development and delivery. Through a process of backward mapping, learning outcomes, learning experiences and authentic assessment, tasks are aligned with a set of graduate attributes comprising both industry and professional standards.This process is enabled by the development of a bespoke design software programme *CourseSpace©* (CSU & Bain 2012). This platform enables transparent and informed backward course design. The software comprises design components that enable a team to collaboratively create and evaluate a course, and submit the course for internal accreditation. It is a dynamic tool that enables building course components, mapping and asynchronous feedback at all stages of the process and facilitates the active engagement of all stakeholders.	Collaboration and interdisciplinarity; Consensus of design; Mapping of assessments to outcomes; Evidence of alignment for accreditation .	Workload allocation, timescale for completion, integration with other systems, governance/approval structure;	Improved user interface; ongoing software modifications; developing educational leadership of course directors; improved integration with Subject outline and course and subject databases; commercialisation.	Workload allocations particularly in relation to course design work; commitment to the process across the University
Victoria University of Wellington,	Using the ACODE benchmarks to guide strategic and operational planning.	Collaboration within the University and	Challenge of sustaining success No empirical standards	More collaborations	Needs strong leadership support to actually drive improvement.

New Zealand		with other universities. Structured set of questions designed to probe capability without overloading staff involved	provided as reference points, needs work to provide context for collaboration		
University of Tasmania	Using Quality Matters as a framework for professional development and quality improvement.	The QM rubric is strongly research-based and Internationally validated. QM offers scalable professional development opportunities that are well aligned with teaching expectations for promotion.	Challenge of sustaining funding (approx 5-10k pa). Significant (20 hours) time commitment by staff to professional development.	Engagement with QM has created a common understanding of good design and has established a common language for discussing quality. Peer review of units to QM standards is a win-win for reviewer and reviewee. Customisable for specific focus. Opportunities for inter-institutional and international reviews	Reluctance by some to get involved with an 'American' program. Internal restructures and leadership changes.
RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia	RMIT University is currently undertaking a transition from Blackboard to Canvas (LMS). A Digital Learning and Teaching Framework was produced, based on internal consultation and utilising as a reference point ACODE and QM frameworks. As part of the initial application of the framework, mapped to TEQSA	Originated from collaboration across University, existing well established frameworks, student and regulatory requirements and caters to the	Supporting systems and processes, need to still define and establish a strong form of governance for ongoing success moving forward.	Guidance for staff on often overlooked administrative basics, easy to follow method to improve identified student feedback issues, integration of quality process with introduction of new LMS to capitalise on affordances offered	EBA and workload aspects - especially in regards to VE staff and the additional requirements in the move to Canvas. Significant cultural as well as technical change occurring simultaneously, and need for processes and systems to be quick to facilitate transition.

	requirements and priority student feedback, a baseline of '14 Elements for Canvas Success' was released for courses transitioning to Canvas that provides the basis for a regular 'go live' quality assurance process across the University.	specific context of RMIT. Helps support academic staff in the administrative aspects of teaching, while not restricting opportunities for innovation or alternative teaching practices.		by technology, prompts reevaluation of existing processes and systems that hinder quality.	
National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Australia	Research project on current practices in online education that support/improve outcomes for online students, particularly undergraduate domestic students. Interviews conducted at 15 Australian Higher Education institutions and the Open University UK, with 151 participants (academic & professional staff). Full report incl. Key findings and Guidelines available at: https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/opportunity-online-learning-improving-student-access-participation-success-higher-education/	Brought together the 'combined wisdom' of online educators and practitioners, across a wide range of Australian universities and the leading UK university for distance/online education; along with other research findings on what online students want and need to help them to persist and succeed.	Limited evaluation of practices discussed.	Guidelines provide a practical direction for institutions to take, to improve the online student experience.	While the findings and guidelines have been welcomed by educators and practitioners working with online students, persuading senior exec levels of universities to change their practices may be more difficult, particularly as more resources would need to be deployed.