Quality Assurance Systems in Open and Distance Learning: A Search for Normative Judgement

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"….When we say that we want the freedom to take our position as equals with other countries in the word, we must realize what this means. It means that our teachers, our doctors, our engineers, and our technicians, as well as our sweepers and labourers, must aim at being as good as those found anywhere else. That is true equality. Anything else is sentiment…"
J. K. Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity*, 1966

Abstract: This article seeks to explore the role and importance of quality assurance systems in open and distance learning mode. The article begins with the introduction of quality assurance and proceeds with the definition and meaning of quality which is very complex to define. The author further proceeds to trace the history and development of quality assurance from medieval Europe in the late 13th Century up to 19th Century during the industrial age to the present information age.

The article has articulated as to why providers, consumers and accreditation agencies are at all levels interested in quality assurance. For the case of Tanzania the article clearly pointed out that quality assurance became important for ODL during the 1980s and 1990s as a result of its growing use by the public sector providers and also as a result of the growing emphasis on accountability in education generally.

The article has proceeded by tracing the history and development of open and distance learning mode of delivery in Tanzania up to and including the present moment. The main gist of this part among others is to reveal how open and distance learning mode of delivery was perceived in the beginning as being inferior and of no good quality.

The author points out some discourse and social dynamics of quality assurance in open and distance leaning by pointing out that open and distance leaning is an instrument of social and economic transformation. It is the most important source of transformation of educational delivery system all over the world.

The article further explores the establishment of the quality assurance system in Tanzania and the role played by both the Tanzania Commission for Universities as well as the Inter-University Council for East Africa in strengthening the quality assurance systems at OUT.

This article has revealed that only a tiny proportion of those who are eligible to join tertiary education participate in higher education. For instance the gross enrolment rate for 2000-1 was 0.7 per cent, with a very large gender imbalance - for males the rate was 1.2 per cent, for females 0.2 per cent. Private higher education came into

being during the 1990s with the liberalization of the economy. By December, 2012, there were 43 public and private universities and university colleges but yet the enrolment level is very low compared to other countries even within East Africa. The above situation indicates that open and distance learning stands a better chance to increasing the enrolment rate at tertiary level. In the same vein quality education for open and distance education has to remain top in the agenda so as to balance both quantity and quality.

Lastly the article highlights several challenges facing open and distance learning such as lack of National ODL policy, lack of home grown quality assurance framework, lack of proper and reliable ICT infrastructure to support the open and distance learning system and absence of adequate experts in open and distance learning.

Key words: quality assurance, search for normative judgment

INTRODUCTION
Over the past few years, there has been significant growth of quality assurance (QA) activities aimed towards improving higher education on institutional, national, regional and global levels. Public and institutional stakeholders seeking accountability in higher education have encouraged governments to establish national quality assurance and accreditation agencies (Belawati and Zuhari, 2007).

Agencies, such as International Council for Distance Education (ICDE), European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA), International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education (INQAAHE), Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), typically work together and share information about quality standards, benchmarks and best practices (Belawati and Zuhari, 2007). At national level a number of quality assurance and accreditation agencies came into being in the past few years. Within East Africa the Council for Higher Education (CHE) in Kenya, Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) in Tanzania, National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in Burundi, Higher Education Council (HEC) in Rwanda and National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) Uganda plays the critical role for quality assurance not only at the national level but at regional level in the auspices of the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA).

A number of terminologies have been developed and used to refer to similar ideals of improving the quality of higher education, such as quality assurance, quality assessment, quality improvement, and quality development (Harman, 2000; Brennan and Shah, 2000; Hopkin and Lee, 2000; Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001). In the past few months there has been a paradigm shift from quality assurance to quality management and later total quality embracing not only quality of education but also the other support services to academic activities such as human resources, in fractures and finances.

However, while the definition of quality assurance may differ, all quality assurance terminology shares a common purpose of ensuring that students receive a high quality and relevant education and awarded credentials that are widely recognized by governments and employers. (Belawati and Zuhari, 2007).

MEANING OF QUALITY

The main question to begin with is how does one define quality? In particular it is not easy to precisely decide what constitutes quality be it in education, industry or otherwise. Different persons may have different perspectives of quality.

The word 'quality' has two things. The first is the particular or essential character, an inherent feature, property or attribute by which a thing may be identified or described. The second refers to the superiority or rank of particular merchandise (cf Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary). The idea of quality in education involves both these meanings, and the account of the history of the term presented in this article (Kumar, 2004). There are two aspects of quality especially in the educational context: quality of the system as a whole and quality of what the system offers to students or learners. In relation to conventional education quality covers various components of face-to-face teaching like infrastructure and basic amenities, social and geographical environment, professional competencies of the teaching, administrative and finance staff, appropriateness and relevance of the curriculum, teaching-learning materials, teaching and learning processes, community support to the institution, performance evaluation of the teachers, students and the system as whole (Gandhe, 2009).

What does quality mean in the context of education? Many definitions of quality in education exist, testifying to the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept. The terms efficiency, effectiveness, equity and quality have often been used synonymously (Adams, 1993). Considerable consensus exists around the basic dimensions of quality education today. The definition of quality in education allows for an understanding of education as a complex system embedded in a political, cultural and economic context. This definition also takes into account the global and international influences that propel the discussion of educational quality (Motala, 2000; Pipho, 2000), while ensuring that national and local educational contexts contribute to definitions of quality in varying countries (Adams, 1993).

Quality is often defined as embracing effectiveness, efficiency and accountability. These terms, however, have connotations with terms used in trade, commerce and industry. Education per se and higher education in particular, is much different; every element therein- input, process and output- is a human being which is a very complex and highly individualistic phenomenon. Education is not more a sheer effort to become "learned". It is a means to prosper in personal life and achieve higher living standards. It reflects needs and aspirations of the beneficiaries. Hence quality in higher education is defined as "fitness for the purpose" But this is somewhat an elusive criterion.

Furthermore the terms quality assurance in the context of higher learning has been defined as "systemic management and assessment procedures adopted by higher

learning institutions and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements" (Harman, 2000:1). Quality assurance facilitates recognition of the standards of award, serves public accountability purposes, helps inform student choice, contributes to improved teaching learning and administrative processes, and helps disseminate best practices with the goal of leading to overall improvement of higher education systems (Belawati and Zuhari, 2007).

Brennan and Shah (2000) use the term 'quality assessment,' whose common methods and elements include (i) a national coordinating body; (ii) institutional self-evaluation; (iii) external evaluation by academic peers; and (iv) published reports. They further identify four main types of "quality values" they determine to underpin different approaches to quality assurance: academic, managerial, pedagogic, and employment focus.

Definitions of quality must be open to change and evolution based on information, changing contexts, and new understandings of the nature of education's challenges. New research – ranging from multinational research to action research at the classroom level contributes to this redefinition (UNESCO, 2000).

In general, the term QA refers to a process of defining and fulfilling a set of quality standards consistently and continuously with the goal of satisfying all consumers, producers, and the other stakeholders. In engineering and manufacturing, for example, 'quality control' or 'quality assurance' is viewed as a set of measures undertaken to ensure that defective products or services are not made- typically under the credo 'do it right the first time'- and that the design meets the product or service meets predetermined performance requirements. It includes the regulation of the quality of raw materials, assemblies, products and components; services related to production; and management, production, and inspection processes. QA programmes typically include peer or utilization review procedures to remedy any identified deficiencies in quality (Wikipedia, n.d).

Quality assurance refers to the planned and systematic activities implemented in a quality system so that quality requirements for a product or service will be fulfilled. It is the systematic measurement, comparison with a standard, monitoring of processes and an associated feedback loop that confers error prevention. This can be contrasted with Quality "Control" which is focused on process outputs.

Two principles included in QA are: "Fit for purpose", the product should be suitable for the intended purpose; and "Right first time", mistakes should be eliminated. QA includes management of the quality of raw materials, assemblies, products and components, services related to production, and management, production and inspection processes.

QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR WHOM AND FOR WHOSE BENEFITS?
Suitable quality is determined by product users, clients or customers, not by society in general. It is not related to cost and adjectives or descriptors such "high" and "poor" are not applicable. For example, a low priced product may be viewed as

having high quality because it is disposable where another may be viewed as having poor quality because it is not disposable.

In the context of education, 'quality' has been placed high on the agenda of educational leaders, policy makers, and practitioners, and is in line with consumers' ever increasing demand for quality education. In many countries, stakeholders both 'providers' and 'consumers' alike have been placing more emphasis on the need to provide education of high quality to meet societal needs and challenges. As a result educational institutions and accreditation agencies have been compelled to work hard so that higher learning institutions produce high quality products, services, processes and by extension, students and graduates.

Government on the other hand have also been seeking increased levels of accountability initially from publicly funded educational institutions, but currently all higher learning institutions public and private alike. Faced with the globalization of the world economy, coupled with associated challenges of producing high-calibre human resources needed to effectively participate in the global economy, both producers as well as consumers have voiced serious concerns about the 'quality' of educational provisions to ensure their competitiveness. Thus, it is clearly imperative that educational institutions continuously improve the quality of their educational provisions. This improvement of quality for education is beneficial not only to consumers but also to providers since satisfaction of the consumers as to the quality of education provided have a corresponding effect to providers as well since its effect has a vicious circle of productivity.

Stakeholders interested in ODL have become increasingly interested in quality assurance issues. Learners are demanding better quality education services and provisions. This means ODL providers must pay close attention to quality in terms of product, processes, production, delivery systems, and philosophy (COL, 1997). The 'total quality approach,' which covers not only products but also services and processes as well, is a very useful methodology that holistically examines the process of ODL as an integrated whole (Zahairi, Purwanto and Isman, 2002).

GENESIS AND HISTORY OF QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS
The quality movement can trace its roots back to medieval Europe, where craftsmen began organizing into unions called guilds in the late 13th century. During the middle ages guilds adopted responsibility for quality control of their members, setting and maintaining certain standards for guild membership. Until the early 19th century, manufacturing in the industrialised world tended to follow this craftsmanship model. The factory system, with its emphasis on product inspection, started in Great Britain in the mid 1750s and grew into the Industrial Revolution in the early 1800s (Wikipedia, n.d).

Royal government purchasing was interested in quality control as customers. For this reason, King John of England appointed William Wrotham to report about the construction and repair of ships. Centuries later, Samuel Pepys, Secretary to the British Admiralty, appointed multiple such overseers (Ibid).

Prior to the extensive division of labour and mechanization results from the Industrial Revolution, it was possible for workers to control the quality of their own products. The Industrial Revolution led to a system in which large groups of people performing a specialized type of work were grouped together under the supervision of a foreman who was appointed to control the quality of work manufactured (Ibid). At the time of the First World War, manufacturing processes typically became more complex with the large number of workers being supervised. This period saw the widespread introduction of mass production and piece work, which created problems as workmen could now earn more money by the production of extra products, which in turn occasionally led to poor quality, workmanship being passed on to the assembly lines. To counter bad workmanship, full time inspectors were introduced to identify quarantine and ideally correct product quality failures. Quality control by inspection in the 1920s and 1930s led to the growth of quality inspection functions, separately organized from production and large enough to be headed by superintendents.

In the early 20th century, manufacturing began to include quality processes in quality practices and after the United States entered World War II, quality became a critical component of the war effort. Bullets manufactured in one state, for example, had to work consistently in rifles made in another state. The armed forces initially inspected virtually every unit of the product; then to simplify and speed up this process without compromising safety, the military began to use sampling techniques for inspection, aided by the publication of the military-specification standards and training courses in Walter Shewhart's statistical process control techniques (Wikipedia, n.d).

With the impact of mass production required during the World War II made it necessary to introduce an improved form of quality control known as Statistical Quality Control, or as SQC. Some of the initial work for SQC is credited to Walter A. Shewart of Bell Labs, starting with his famous one-page memorandum of 1924. The birth of total quality in the United States came as a direct response to the quality revolution in Japan following World War II. In the period following World War II, many countries' manufacturing capabilities that had been destroyed during the war were rebuilt. The Japanese welcomed the input of Americans Joseph M. Juran and W. Edwards Deming and rather than concentrating on inspection, they focused on improving all organizational processes through the people who used them. Both individuals promoted the collaborative concepts of quality to Japanese business and technical groups, and these groups utilized these concepts in the redevelopment of the Japanese economy.

By the 1970s, U.S. industrial sectors such as automobiles and electronics had been broadsided by Japan's high-quality competition. The U.S. response emphasized not only on statistics but also on total quality management (TQM). By the last decade of the 20th century, TQM was considered a fad by many business leaders. But while the use of the term TQM has faded somewhat, particularly in the United States, its practice continues. In the few years since the turn of the century, the quality movement seems to have matured beyond total quality. New quality systems have

evolved from the foundations of Deming, Juran and the early Japanese practitioners of quality, and quality has moved beyond manufacturing into services, healthcare, education and government sectors.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: THE EQUATION

Quality has always been an issue in distance education (DE) and distance learning (DL). Since distance education's inception and subsequent widespread diffusion, distance education has been increasing access to education, a reality that has been compelled many countries to adopt distance education as part of their educational system (Garrison, 1993). Further, this paradigm of 'access to education' is in line with the belief of student autonomy and independence, as students studying at a distance often do so alone (Moore, 1993).

Distance education has evolved over time in the same manner the society has evolved from the post-industrial era to the information age. As a result of this concern over the quality of education provided by open and distance learning institutions have been a subject of intense discussion and study. The main thrust of this concern lies from the fact that distance education unlike conventional education is peculiar and not familiar to majority. In addition to that distance education is student centred unlike the tradition conventional education which is teacher centred thus attracting a lot of study in this area. For instance, interactive communication between and among students and tutors is now being emphasized (Belawati, 1999). It is with this 'access to education' and managing open and distance leaning (ODL) provisions.

Any consideration of quality assurance in the context of ODL entails a detailed examination of those characteristics that can give credibility to the various programmes and products of ODL. With the increasing acceptance of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as widening access to education, it has become increasingly necessary that Quality Assurance (QA) process is developed and maintained if the ODL provision is to be relevant and more functional that the products recognised in the conventional higher learning in emerging open learning environment (Olojede, 2008).

Quality assurance in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions has gained serious attention by institutions, stakeholders and scholars since 1990s. Institutions have in response to quality assurance line of inquiry, begun to re-define and re-orient their institutional missions, strategies, and visions to incorporate and address quality issues. Quality assurance has now reached an important turning point and influencing open and distance learning institution's management strategies and cultures. Numerous reports have been published to share ideas, experiences, and articulate the 'how and how not to' and 'best practices' of quality assurance implementation in open and distance learning context from around the world (Deshpande and Mugridge, 1994; Tait, 1997).

Quality assurance have in the past few years dominated reports and resolution of various international and regional fora such as the International Council for

Distance Education (ICDE), African Council for Distance Education (ACDE), European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA), International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education (INQAAHE), Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Similar situation has been obtained at national level where the accreditation agencies working with universities and university colleges have worked tirelessly towards quality assurance.

Indeed quality assurance in open and distance learning is an issue that has received considerable attention of late, the work of scholars such as O'Neill and Palmer (2004), Steyn and Schulze (2003), and Olojode (2008). Much more than the increasing numbers of applicants, there are also other reasons such as: change in work place and employment dynamics, majority of people in developing countries for instance start work after the professional course after secondary education because of the cost of education and opportunities that are available for low income earners in industries (Olojede, 2008).

The quality of course delivery influences the quality of the learning which, in turn permits the identification of criteria for quality delivery (Hunt, 1998). In the ODL setting, therefore, it becomes a question of getting appropriate quality assurance processes in place and administering them concern for both the conventional education and ODL include for example contents of the course, learning and teaching materials, accreditation of programmes, and issue of quality in certificate awarded. In as much as the same tutors are used for both the students in ODL and conventional universities, the major challenge for the ODL providers therefore is how to maintain high standards of the programmes in view of the fact that ODL operates in an environment characterised by a complex community of students with varying levels of capability and availability.

Despite the importance of the process component as a whole, 'quality' in ODL tends to be viewed in terms of 'materials' produced. Judging the quality of ODL products is relatively easy, however. The course materials, which are often the primary means of engaging learners, are tangible and open to scrutiny by students and other interested parties. Indeed, it is much easier to judge the quality of tangible product of say, a course syllabus and curriculum, than of less tangible aspects such as learning process, teamwork, or management (COL, 1997). Clearly, quality in ODL covers a number of aspects, which along with the physical products; include pedagogical processes, production and delivery systems, and philosophy (COL, 1997). Quality of products include course materials, number of graduates, examination pass rates, admission in further studies, and so forth. Quality of processes covers areas such as learning and teaching processes, advising students, coordinating external courses and test item writers, networking with regional offices, and managing student information. Quality of production and delivery systems includes course production, print and multimedia production, test item production, scheduling, warehousing and stock control, getting materials to students, and broadcast transmissions. Quality of philosophy covers such things as ODL vision, mission and policy statements, institutional culture, governance, corporate culture, and public image (COL, 1997).

In terms of products, the quality of ODL varies from one institution to another, depending on priorities, resources, size, and the student body of which it aims to serve (COL, 1997). For instance, ODL institutions in developed countries typically use ICT-based courses, while institutions in developing countries use printed materials as its primary medium of instructional delivery. The use of ICT in ODL in the developing countries such as Tanzania is at experimental stages, and even though many institutions are ready to experiment with modern ICT-based courses i.e. e-learning platforms such as Moddle and the like still access and participation by students is still relatively low (Belawati, 2005). Absence of the requisite ICT infracture in most part of the developing countries owing to low bandwidth and unreliable energy is one of the critical factors which have limited students' participation in ICT-based courses. It is imperative to stress also that low income is another factor as majority cannot afford to buy computers or access computers through internet cafes.

ODL in higher education institutions is under increasing pressure to meet students' demand for flexibility, as students have increasingly diverse background and needs. To meet this challenge, innovation in flexibility and mode of delivery is essential. Innovation in ODL assumes that new techniques will help individual institutions to achieve their aims in terms of concrete access, cost, quality, and flexibility (Daniel, 1999). In this context, technology becomes a vital tool in ODL. For technology-based universities, particularly open universities such as The Open University of Tanzania, the quality of teaching and learning is of critical importance, as ODL materials are open to public access and scrutiny, and when the use of information and communication technology is involved, such access can often become global (Bates, 2000). Contents of quality in technology-based educational materials include content, media production, instructional design, and delivery and student support (Bates, 2000).

Quality assurance can be adopted as an effective method and tool to respond to the challenge of quality in ODL. Quality assurance is not an effort to create quality, but rather a systematic and comprehensive effort to improve quality. Quality assurance, therefore, is not a means to achieve a particular target and develop procedures, but rather a continuous process of improvement. Quality assurance is based on the assumption that quality can be improved continuously. Systems and procedures that are developed for this purpose ensure that staff continuously and critically question the quality of ODL products and processes, and continuously attempt to improve it. Because quality assurance is inspired by the business practice, it uses the language commonly applied in business, such an approach as inappropriate; however, escalating pressures from all stakeholders groups for greater accountability requires ODL institutions to have quality self-assessment (Belawati, 2007).

However, this requirement for a country like Tanzania is mandatory for both ODL and conventional higher learning institutions alike which exercise is required to be done once in every four years preceding the visitation of the Technical Evaluation Committee sent by the Tanzania Commission for Universities. This is a requirement for re-accreditation. ODL systems operate like service organization premised on

industry- like operations, such as designs, development, production, and distribution of multimedia materials.

It is important to note that implementing quality assurance in ODL institution is a monumental task. It takes a great deal of effort, patience and training to ensure that innovation is productive. People in organizations undergoing change will talk about quality, but may not know exactly what 'quality' means, specifically how to initiate, provide, and improve upon quality processes, products, and services continuously. Changing an organization's mindset is one of the biggest tasks when undergoing 'innovation'. Such change requires a great deal of courage and commitment of the top leaders of an institution (Daft, 2006). Implementation of quality assurance implies change of work culture of staff at all levels. Everyone in the organization must think about- and more importantly, do something- to effect quality improvements in every step of their work activities. In theory, drafting organizational change and improvement could be easy (Daft, 2006). In practice, however, leading people towards change is a formidable task. People tend to maintain status quo, and resist new ideas, even if these ideas are to improve their professional practice (Daft, 2006; D' Aprix, 1995).

NEWER PLAYERS AND NEW RULES: THE CASE OF BLENDED LEARNING
Distance education have seen extraordinary growth in the last decade owing to the increasing demand for education and training and rapid development of information super highway. While well-established single mode ODL institutions are expanding beyond their national boundaries and becoming global resource centres, and the Open University of Tanzania is the case in point, newer players are emerging at both national and global level. Many single mode institutions have embraced dual mode of delivery of programs in order to harness the opportunities for increasing demand for places and to augment their income in the wake of shrinking public funds. Each of these ODL institutions passionately try to convince the academics, stakeholders, and public in general about their supremacy over the others (Mannan, 2009).

The wave of growth of ODL although washed away the skepticism about its quality, professionals still believe that same-time, same place interaction is central to the success of learning experience (Twigg, 2001; Muirhead, 2000). While academic debate will continue on the learning experience in both modes, ODL providers have promoted quality assurance as an important tool for building public confidence. There are quality assurance frameworks and transnational qualification frameworks developed nationally and internationally to guide and regulate ODL programs and institutions. Emerging trend has been to develop their quality assurance policies. National regulating authorities, professional bodies and ODL providers developed these policies and frameworks based on the inference drawn by them with respect to potential learners (Deshmuk, 2005). As a result quality assurance policies and frameworks are more prescriptive based on perceptions rather than evolutionary based on learner experience. However, this trend seems to be in the decrease as a result of active participation of learners and other stakeholders who have been instrumental and active participants in the formulation of quality assurance policies for ODL.

A specific quality assurance strategy is not university adoptable (Olojede, 2008) because distance education outfit varies widely from institution to institution and one country to another. As a result, the pace of development and process of maintenance of quality assurance on open and distance learning must be flexible (Granger and Gulliver, 1995) to the extent of practices without prescriptions.

Quality is an incremental process (Daniel, 2005) involving continuous development along with the development of ODL institutions. Hopkin (2003) suggests the evolution of quality assurance at three different stages of ODL institutional development implementation of quality assurance policies in accordance of the stages of institutional development (Mannan, 2009).

Prescriptive quality assurance policy is more or less influenced by the quality assurance and/or accreditation framework to meet the requirement of the accreditation body. Similarly, use of quality assurance toolkits and/or well-developed policies is susceptible to an ambitious quality assurance policy covering all stages of development while the institution may be at early stage of development. Therefore, a suitable and practicable quality assurance policy would evolve with the stages of institutional development in order to ensure the consideration of the leaner and practitioners' experience. There is no single definitive or foolproof method of ensuring quality, especially in the context of distance education (Upot, 2005). It is necessary to consider different forms and criteria for quality assurance to suit different education function (Middlehurst, 2001). Thus, it is imperative to formulate quality assurance policy with the implementation of various functions of the ODL institution rather than developing a quality assurance policy before hand (Mannan, 2009).

An ODL institution and more profoundly a new institution thus may not have a well documented quality assurance policy, as the institution may have concentrated on its establishment, capacity building, designing and implementing systems, process and procedures. What is required essentially is to keep the quality concept in mind while developing and implementing systems, process, and procedures (Mannan, 2009). The Open University of Tanzania did not formulate a quality assurance policy during its establishment period but the quality assurance evolved along with its development. The formulation of quality assurance policy and its attendant operational procedures took place at a later stage of its establishment based on the learners and institutional experience. While The Open University of Tanzania was established in 1992 the quality assurance policy was formulated in 2008.

QUALITY IMPERATIVE IN ODL
Quality improvement becomes imperative for ODL providers, and governments have established quality agencies to improve the quality of educational practices. Pressures for quality improvement have emerged from both internal and external parties. Internally, ODL institutions are being challenged to undertake continuous improvement from within. Externally, stakeholders (that is users, consumers, educational funders) are persistently questioning quality, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency of educational endeavours in which they have interest. Moreover, for many ODL institutions funding and student enrolment levels depend

on quality of their bottom line performance and the quality of the services they offer (Belawari, 2007).

The term 'quality' is often used in a vague, blurred way. If someone talks about 'working on quality', they may simply mean activities designed to improve the organization and its services. Quality is essentially about learning what you are doing well and doing it better. It also means finding out what you may need to change to make sure you meet the needs of your service users. There are two definitive types of "quality". Quality of design and quality of the process (Olojede, 2008).

Quality is defined as the level of value in a product or a level of achievement, a standard against which to judge others (Uvah, 2005). Quality assurance which is the process for determining this is defined as both fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose. While fitness for purposes is related to the university's missions, that is what the universities have set for themselves; fitness of purpose refers to their capacity to satisfy the national goals of higher education (Odejide, 2007). The principal responsibility for quality assurance rests with the institution themselves and not with the accreditation bodies as it does at present. In other words, it is in the interest of the accreditation bodies such The Tanzania Commission for Universities as it does at present. In other words, it is in the interest of the institutions themselves to carry out periodic audits of their programmes in which they identify their strengths and weaknesses. Periodic audits should cover teaching effectiveness, assessment of courses and teaching, textbooks facilities, e-learning facilities, and capacity development. The purpose of institutional periodic audit is to institutionalize self-regulation and ensure continuous improvement and innovation.

Two principles should characterize attempts to ensure quality in higher education provision. The first identifies learner's cognitive development as the major explicit objective of all education systems. Accordingly, the success with which systems achieve this is one indicator of their quality. The second emphasizes education's role in promoting values and attitudes of responsible citizenship and in nurturing creative and emotional development. The achievement of these objectives is more difficult to assess and compare across countries (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2005). The quality of course delivery influences the quality of learning which in turns permit the identification of criteria for quality of course delivery (Hunt, 1998).

Quality assurance became important for ODL during the 1980s and 1990s, as a result of its use by public sector providers, and also as a result of the growing emphasis on accountability in education generally. Many governments at the state level have expanded post-secondary education in order to meet the needs of their states for more skilled and capable labour. Concepts from business have been introduced into education, as part of this drive to ensure that the increased investment in provision will provide the outputs that governments require. The issue of quality of provision has also been emphasized by the demand for accountability to all the stakeholders involved in an expanded system of higher education in particular, including students as well as employers (Olojede, 2008).

Some scholars points out that it may be almost impossible to recommend a specific quality assurance strategy that can universally be adopted because the distance education programme, the background of the clientele it serves, the extent and levels of programmes offered, the modus operandi and from one scope of the distance education outfit may vary widely from institution to institution and from one country to another (Olojede, 2008).

It must, however, be noted that the focus of any quality assurance system must be to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the learners vis-à-vis the appropriate level of delivery of services. There are many factors that may be considered for the improvement of the management strategy of distance education programmes in order to achieve higher quality. (Akinpelu, 1995) Braimoh Adeola and Lephoto (1999) have stated that the major aspects, to which good attention should be paid, in a distance education delivery mode, include the following:

- admission requirements and procedures;
- development and production of instructional materials;
- structure and management of the delivery system;.
- student assessment procedures;
- quality of materials used for teaching and promotion of learning;
- problem of assessment of the effectiveness of an individual distance education facilitation since distance education has the element of quasi-bureaucratization (teamwork);
- the student support services;
- monitoring, evaluation and feedback mechanisms;
- availability of adequate human and material resources for the operation of the programme.

This is not far from Egbokhare's (2006) identification of quality of staff environment of instruction; content of instruction; student support services; culture of quality; management by processes and facts; continuous learning and improvement; quality of instruction and feedback from clients and consumers of products as the basis of quality assurance (Olojede, 2008).

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ODL: CHALLENGES
The inability to learn while at work is one reason why distance learning is not as effective as full time immersion in a learning community. Leaning is most effective when it is a student's full time job (Egbokhare, 2006 quoting Rosenfield, 2000), this is the more reason why quality of programmes must be maintained in order to at least produce a justified learning outcomes. However, just like the National University Extension Association (NUEA) is the body responsible for quality control and promotion of standard among the universities in the USA, this has not been so in most parts of Africa. Until the past few years in Tanzania, Higher Education Accreditation Council (HEAC) and later Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) is responsible for accreditation of all programmes both in quality control and assessment of universities teaching and learning.

The National Council for Technical Education (NACTE) oversees the running of technical and professional education which also allows education programmes run through distance learning. While the Tanzania Commission for Universities controls the admission exercise of candidates for universities for regular students, there has been no specific regulatory body assessing the admission process for the ODL programmes under the NACTE. Among the main challenges facing the ODL in Tanzania includes:

- lack of national ODL policy;
- lack of national quality assurance framework;
- lack of awareness on ODL due to its infancy nature in Tanzania;
- lack of adequate funding from the Government;
- lack of proper ICT infracture to support the ODL system;
- absence of adequate expertise on ODL

It is therefore essential that a national policy on ODL is formulated by the government, and that the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) establishes a dedicated section or department whose main duty is to oversee the running of programmes in ODL in the country. This will assist in the accreditation and quality assurance of the ODL programmes which of recent have been coming out in excess and proliferation as a result of various institutions introducing ODL programmes from within and outside Tanzania.

It is high time that appropriate structures are put in place to facilitate due processes on ethics, standards and curriculum development. It is important to note that since the personnel being used for regular programmes are also been used for the ODL, for success of ODL therefore, they are factors to reckon with. They must be adequately empowered so that they would give in their best and the products of ODL would cease to be seen as inferior to those produced in the conventional system of education. Lastly students in ODL should be given opportunity to think, reflect, challenge and engage in dialogue with their lectures through effective student support services whenever the opportunity arises (Olojede, 2008).

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ODL: OPPORTUNITIES

The ODL system, despite having been in place for quite sometimes, still it does not command much respect and confidence to the general populace much as the conventional learning system does, hence quality assurance is an opportunity to built confidence to the stakeholders and more in particular the doubting Thomases who think that ODL system is inferior over conventional system.

ODL institutions are intelligent entities capable of making choices, determine their direction and plan their betterment. Priority number one for any ODL institution is its survival in the competing world of higher learning. Intelligent ODL institutions transcend this goal by striving not only to survive but also to do so well. An ODL institution cannot achieve this goal if it ignores quality assurance. This is an area that shapes and sharpens ODL institutional intelligence as such quality assurance presents a great opportunity to an ODL institution to place itself better in the context of higher education not only within the country but also beyond its territorial borders.

Evolving Quality Assurance

The absence of a comprehensive quality assurance policy and culture in Tanzania has connotation with ODL not having a quality assurance policy at its establishment. A quality assurance policy at the beginning of the establishment of ODL could be futile exercise due to lack of quality culture and quality assurance framework within the country and lack of quality commitment across corridors of power mainly by policy makers. It is important that higher learning institutions ensure that policies, process and procedures of developing and delivering programs apply best practices with full commitment of staff to their best ability and qualitative aspects are embodied at all level of operation in the form of system development and implementation, instruction as well as documentation.

Evolution of quality assurance (Hoopkin, 2003) during embryonic stage of development require political commitment and planning, setting of organization structure awareness and advocacy, capacity building in staff development and training, infrastructure development, development of process and procedures, design and development of materials assessment system, establishment of study centre student support system and feedback and internal and external review. A close examination of the development at OUT reveals the presence of quality assurance including criteria and indicators, which was integrated with the system process and procedures.

Discourse and Social dynamics of Quality in ODL

It is well recognized that higher education including open and distance learning, is an instrument of social and economic transformation. It is the most important source of transformation of educational delivery system all over the world. One cannot think of this transformation without a quality-conscious education system. Quality in higher education is synonymous of well-developed industrial production quality. Some scholars have gone a step further and say that education without quality is no education at all (Mannan, 2009).

It is not easy to precisely decide what constitutes quality of education. Different persons may have different perspectives of quality. There are two aspects of quality in the education context; quality of the system as a whole and quality of what the system offers to the students or the learners. In relation to conventional education quality converse various components of face-to-face teaching like the infrastructure and basic amenities, social and geographical environment professional competence of the teaching, administrative and finance, staff, appropriateness and relevance of the curriculum, teaching-learning materials, teaching and learning processes, community support to the institution, performance evaluation of the teachers, students and the system as a whole.

However, ODL is not the same thing as the conventional education. The profile of the distance learner is much different; her/his main objective of taking to higher education through the distance mode may also be much different than the 17-23 age-group of tertiary college students majority of whom finds themselves in conventional universities. In a country like Tanzania which still has a backlog of adult illiterates, semi literates, all in search of new knowledge and new skills

including professional skills, ODL is a god-sent opportunity. It is against this background that OUT with the support of the Government has planned to raise enrolment in the ODL system as part of the implementation of the National Strategy for Growth and Poverty Reduction (NSGPR II), National Vision 2025 as well as the Millennium Development Goals.

Application of Quality in ODL

Open learning removes barriers in access like admission pre-requisites, physical attendance at a particular place and time possession of prescribed equipment, books, journals, and so on. Distance learning means that the learners are physically separated in space and time from the teaching institution and its staff. Nevertheless, the broad criteria of quality concerns mentioned in the previous parts above apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to open and self consciously than in the conventional system. The five areas of quality concerns need to be vigorously applied to the following elements of ODL to ensure that no element lacks the expected degree of quality.

- Curriculum design content and organization
- Teaching, learning and assessment
- Student progressing and assessment
- Student support and guidance

The panoply in quality education has a three-pronged approach; internal quality assurance mechanism, evaluation by peers; and accreditation by an independent and competent organization. Quality measurement of education institutions rests on this panoply. A good and serious ODL institution will ensure that the three-pronged approach is adopted to ensure the best quality in all aspects of distance learning. The concept of quality is complex and value laden. But in the ODL system, quality means attainment of the expected levels of knowledge and skills which are the tools for further learning by actual work experience necessary for managing the learner's personal and social transaction in day-to-day life. This quality is to be attained by all distance learners, in a given time-frame.

Quality Assurance at OUT

Quality was embedded within OUT from its inception stage, that is why the necessary structures were put in place at the time of the establishment of the OUT in 1992 and its subsequent commencement in 1993. The Senate is the supreme academic decision making body responsible for among other things quality assurance through its various committees such as faculty and institutes boards.

Just like in any other part of the world, the education which is offered at OUT did not win much trust from the general public at the inception stage except for some few quarters who owing to their global exposure knew for sure the value and role of ODL in bridging the educational gap in any country where the number of those who are admitted for tertiary education was by then well below 1%. This trend can be vividly established from facts and figures which demonstrate that OUT started with only 79 students, but as ODL gained momentum in terms of its recognition and trust the number has now grown to more than 60,000 within the initial 20 years of OUT existence. This trend is not peculiar to Tanzania but it equally apply to other

jurisdictions where ODL in the beginning was perceived to be inferior to conventional learning.

The OUT quality assurance unit was created at OUT in the year 2007 initially by the appointment of the coordinator and later recruitment of monitoring and evaluation officers who are full time members of staff. The creation of the QA unit at OUT in 2007 was part and parcel of the IUCEA/DAAD QA initiatives which aimed to develop a harmonized quality assurance system in higher education in the region as one way to address the challenges arising from the rapid demand for enrolment in higher education that has prompted proliferation of many new universities in the region.

The impetus for these initiative was further taken to another level by OUT/SIDA Capacity Building Programme which enabled OUT to implement a number of activities under Project number 2 whose purpose was to enhance academic quality assurance at OUT. This project sought to establish comprehensive measures for quality assurance and control. Several activities were implemented under Project number 2 which included strengthening the quality assurance unit, developing QA policy, developing/implementing QA operational procedures, designing monitoring and evaluation systems, implementing monitoring and evaluation system and mainstreaming feedback and learning mechanism.

The project on academic quality assurance also sought to come out and actually was able to come up with a better understanding of student inactiveness and student retention programme. A framework for conducting of tracer studies was formulated with the support of a local consultant and actually piloted in three regional centers namely Mbeya, Mwanza and Arusha and the results were presented before the stakeholders workshop for validation. Data on student performance was updated and made available through Student Academic Register Information System (SARIS) for quality control purposes, a framework for periodic academic audit namely proforma for programme specifications and academic staff CVs in a given and agreed formats, and self evaluation report was developed and applied in 2011 hence enabling OUT to benchmark itself against its peers.

As a result of OUT/SIDA Capacity Building Programme the Quality Assurance and Control office was strengthened and monitoring and evaluation officers were recruited. Following the formulation of the QA Policy and Operational Procedures the QA Committee was formed composing of all Deputy Vice Chancellors and representatives from all faculties, directorates, institutes and units such as the library in order to inculcate and embrace the quality assurance culture. This ensures that quality assurance becomes one of the pillars of the provision of university education by OUT rather than being an external requirement by the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU).

Transformation of the QA Unit to a Directorate
The continued expansion of OUT in terms of students enrolment, acquisition of more regional centres, increase in use of ICT facilities for both teaching and

learning coupled with rapid changes at institutional, national, regional and international levels necessitated OUT to formulate the organization structure in 2005 to reflect the requirement of the Universities Act, 2005 towards the formulation OUT Charter of Incorporation and Rules of 2007. A critical appraisal of OUT Organizational structure of positions of 1992 reveals a number of weaknesses which necessitated the formulation of OUT Organizational Structure with three Deputy Vice Chancellors in 2005 which was revised and approved by the Council in December, 2007 (OUT, 2011).

Although the 2007 revised organizational structure conformed fully to the National Higher Education Policy of 1999, The Universities Act, 2005 and OUT Charter of Incorporation and Rules of 2007 still it was found prudent to revise it in 2011 in order to address the continued rapid expansion of OUT activities as well as the ongoing national, regional as well as international initiatives on quality assurance such as the IUCEA.

Thus, the revised organizational structure which was approved by Council in December, 2011 transformed the QA unit from a mere unit to a fully fledged Directorate. In addition to that the QA issues were shifted from the office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic (DVC-Academic) to the office of the Vice Chancellor in order to give it more vicinity as well as widen its mandate from quality assurance to total quality management (TQM) which is beyond academic matters.

The Quality Assurance directorate has three main departments namely the Department of Monitoring and Evaluation, the Department of Records and Statistics as well as the Department of Risk Assessment and Certification.

CONCLUSION

In Tanzania, there is a high demand for higher education as majority of the advanced certificate holders that are qualified for admission to higher institutions of their choice cannot do so because there are inadequate institutions of higher learning compared to the number of 'A' level pupils. The situation is dire in particular now that majority of 'A' levels are coming out from the ward secondary schools. Only a tiny (0.02%) proportion of these participate in higher education. The gross enrolment rate for 2000-1 was 0.7 per cent, with a very large gender imbalance - for males the rate was 1.2 per cent, for females 0.2 per cent. Private higher education came into being during the 1990s with the liberalization of the economy. By December, 2012, there were 43 public and private universities and university colleges.

The National Higher Education Policy (1999) aims to address problems of enrolment and access through expanding public facilities and encouraging private universities, cost sharing, affirmative action to expand female participation and the promotion of science and technology. Most institutions have been taking steps to improve female participation. But there is nothing in the Policy which addresses ODL as a means to bridge the educational gap in Tanzania.

With the increasing acceptance of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode as widening access to higher education in Tanzania and elsewhere, then if the ODL provision is to be embraced and nurtured then the problems related to large number of pupils compared to the available higher learning institutions will be a history since ODL institutions will be able to enroll all the pupils who cannot secure placement at conventional institutions. However, this will only be possible if ODL institutions will adhere to quality assurance so as to restore confidence from the stakeholders.

There are various challenges facing ODL in Tanzania, just like any other developing country in the world, these stem from the admission requirements, quality of the teaching and learning process; management monitoring and evaluation of quality of services provided in the various institutions that embrace ODL as a standalone mode of delivery or blended learning. This article recommends that a National Policy on ODL be formulated in Tanzania as this will guide the administration and supervision of the ODL mode of delivery for both ODL institutions and the one administered by conventional institutions in Tanzania which have opted to offer course in ODL mode along with those offered by conventional mode.

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