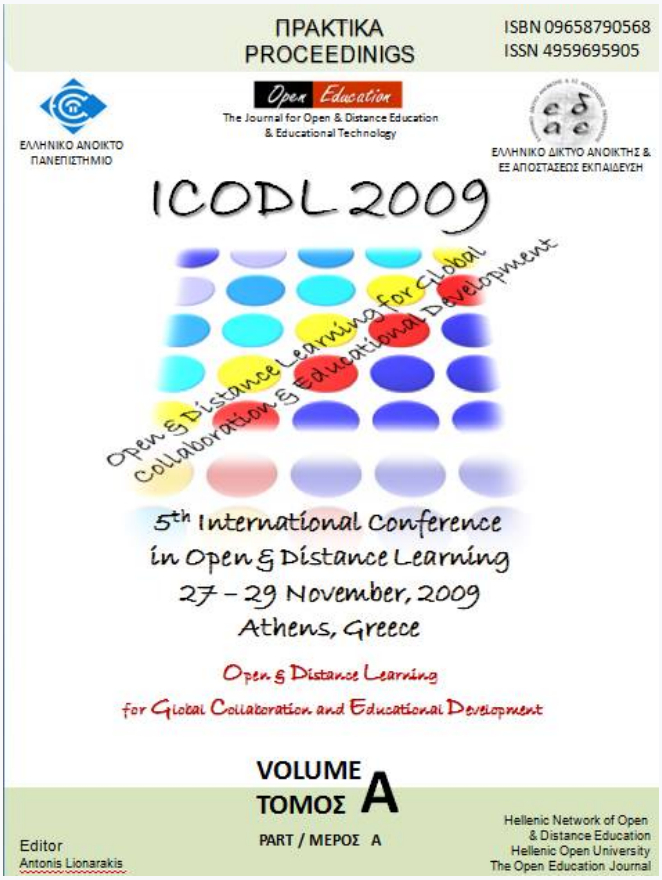
ePublishing

ΕΚΤ ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΤΕΚΜΗΡΙΩΣΗΣ NATIONAL DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

Διεθνές Συνέδριο για την Ανοικτή & εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση

Τόμ. 5, Αρ. 1Α (2009)

Open and Distance Education for Global Collaboration & Educational Development



An Exploratory Model for Educational Quality Assurance: The Case of Korea National Open University

Kim JAE-WOONG

doi: 10.12681/icodl.485

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Εκδότης:** ΕΚΤ | **Πρόσβαση:** 07/06/2026 04:46:22

An Exploratory Model for Educational Quality Assurance: The Case of Korea National Open University

Kim JAE-WOONG

Ph.D.

Professor, Sogang University

Seoul, Republic of Korea

jngkim@sogang.ac.kr

Abstract

This paper suggests an exploratory model for the educational quality assurance at Korea National Open University (KNOU). Quality is one of the key issues in current educational debates. We have to distinguish the 'management-oriented approach' the 'education-oriented approach,' which is concerned with educationally important questions such as 'What is education?' and "What is the quality of education?' Thus, within this management-oriented approach, the educational process tends to remain as a black box, economic effectiveness being pursued. This paper tries to construct a so-called 'education-oriented approach', in conjunction with the management-oriented approach. This education-oriented approach focuses on the process of teaching and learning itself. According to education-oriented approach, if teachers and learners are committed to teaching and learning voluntarily and with pleasure and passion, the criteria for quality of education are satisfied.

Introduction

Since the liberation from the Japanese control in 1945, formal education system in Korea has been continuously expanded. Primary and secondary education was universalized a quarter century ago and higher education has passed through the stage of mass education. Recently, more than three-quarters of graduates from high schools entered a certain kind of higher education institutes including 2-year junior colleges.
The establishment of Korea National Open University (KNOU) KNOU started as a 2-year distance education institute attached to Seoul National University and its English name was Korea Air & Correspondence College. But since 1981 when separated from

SNU it has been a bachelor degree conferring university, and its English name was changed to Korea National Open University in 1995.

KNOU has a special meaning in terms of expansion of higher education opportunities in Korea. It had an admission quota of twelve thousands for five departments in 1972, which increased to sixty thousands for twenty-one departments in 1995. The number of students enrolled in 1995 was about 180,000. Now KNOU is regarded as one of the big ten mega universities in the world.

Unfortunately, however, KNOU has been recently experiencing sharp decrease of applicants year by year. This is caused by several reasons: 1) admission quotas of conventional colleges and universities have been expanded; 2) many two-year junior colleges were newly set up; 3) the number of graduates from high school has been decreased; 4) lots of adults who did not have higher education had already received some forms of higher education; 5) communication technology began to used by conventional universities; and 6) educational programs of KNOU have not satisfied learners' needs, that is, the quality of education at KNOU failed to attract adult learners whose educational needs are diverse.

This paper pays attention to the last one, which is the only element the University can handle. However, KNOU have not felt the need to concern the issue of the educational quality until it began to experience sharp decrease of applicants recently. It is true that KNOU has enjoyed excessive demand in shortage of higher education opportunities. It means that most of the applicants choose KNOU not because of its educational quality but because of getting a degree from it. But many people are now finding various paths to get a degree outside of KNOU. Furthermore, college-age group has been reduced and the competition among the colleges and universities to recruit them are more and more severe. Such changes surrounding KNOU have made KNOU radically rethink what it has been doing so far in terms of the quality of education.

This paper is going to suggest that 'education-oriented approach' to the educational quality should be introduced in harmony with 'management-oriented approach', even though concern about the educational quality at KNOU was triggered by the practical interest in solving the problem of sharp decrease of applicants. It might be the first time for the issue of quality to be raised at KNOU academically or practically.

What is quality?

It seems that everyone talks of quality everywhere. It is true that quality is becoming more and more important to everyone. Interestingly, however, different people are likely to talk of quality differently from their own points of view. Some people pay more attention to level or standards, while others are concerned about efficiency or effectiveness (Frazer, 1994).

Of the many definitions of quality, a working definition made by Ellis (1993a, p.4) seems to be most appropriate for quality of education. He defines quality as "the standards that must be met to achieve special purposes to the satisfaction of customers."

The purposes and the criteria for satisfaction here might be differently set by diverse customers, i.e., students, parents of students, teaching staff in higher education institutes, managerial staff in higher education, government, employers of graduates, citizens as tax-payers, funding Councils, and accrediting bodies (Green, 1994a; Frazer, 1994). As far as 'education' is concerned, however, teaching and learning should be core purposes of universities, and teachers and students should be most importantly counted as customers. Furthermore, it should be noted that unlike in the case of purchase of a product, in education participation of learners as customers is necessarily required for customer satisfaction. Consequently, unless the value of education is experienced by learners, which requires not only money but also time and mental operation from learners, learners as customers cannot be 'educationally' satisfied. Here lies in the uniqueness of educational service.

Why quality? -- Management-oriented vs. education-oriented approach

There are two contrasting approaches to the issue of quality of education, i. e., 'management-oriented approach' and 'education-oriented approach'. (It should be noted that these two approaches are conceptually distinguished but merged practically to work together in a real situation.) While management-oriented approach is more concerned with the productivity of education system, education-oriented approach tends to pay attention to educational process or teaching and learning. While the former is based on management theories, the latter depends on education theories. In a sense, while the former concerns the quality of education system or school, the latter concerns the quality of education. (It is very important to distinguish the concept of education from that of schooling. This will be discussed in detail later.)

While management-oriented approach is likely to concern the interests of the

outsiders who benefit the products of the school, education-oriented approach concerns the people directly involved in the educational process itself. In order to improve the quality of schooling, we need to borrow interdisciplinary theories including management theory about school. But the most important thing for us to improve the quality of education is to understand the nature of education itself.

Concern with the quality in higher education tends to come from non-educational issues. Diana Green (1994b, p. 5) summarizes the backgrounds of current concern about quality in the United Kingdom as follows: 1) Rapid expansion of student numbers against a sackcloth of public expenditure worries; 2) The general quest for better public services; 3) Increasing competition within the educational 'market' for resources and students; and 4) The tension between efficiency and quality.

Researchers and educational managers are likely to be concerned about the quality because of practical problems of an educational institute (Clark, Butler, Schmidt-Hansen, & Somerville, 2004). They tend to think the current problems are due to the low quality of education. (In fact, however, they are pointing to the quality of school system, not of education. It can be understood in the same context that education reform was launched in the United States during 1980s when she was losing the economic competitiveness to Japan.) It is believed that if only the educational quality be enhanced, the facing difficulties can be relieved or cleared up. This approach to the quality tends to focus on the results or effects which are yielded by the quality of the education system from the perspective of efficiency or effectiveness. Same thing can be said about educational quality at KNOU. The issue of educational quality was addressed in order to solve the problem of sharp decrease of applicants.

According to this line of thinking, if the number of applicants begins to be increased, it can be said that the quality of education are enhanced. But more strictly speaking, what is improved here is not the quality of education itself but the quality of education system or school. Of course the quality of education affects the quality of school system. But the quality of school system is not that of education. We need to remember while KNOU had no problem of applicants, we might still have the problem of the quality of education. Here we can raise an issue of educational quality independent of the quality of school from the education-oriented approach.

Quality of what? -- Quality of schooling vs. quality of education

Not infrequently, we make a mistake to regard education as schooling. It is the case that when we are talking about the quality of education, it is likely to be the quality of schooling that we are actually pointing to. This leads us to make distinction between

the concept of education and that of schooling.

Traditionally, education administered by non-formal institutes, even though its quality was far better than that provided by formal institutes such as schools and universities, was not recognized as 'education'. This is deeply related to the myth that education equals to schooling. This myth has distorted the concept of education systematically in a way that education happens only in schools (Chang, 1991). In a sense, "ever since mass schooling was first introduced the enlargement of its influence and control over the young has fostered the impression that there is little or no significant difference between education and schooling" (Richmond, 1975, p. 11).

However, education was happening long before the invention of formal institution, i. e., school or university. Schools and universities are a sort of social institution whose functions are not confined to education. Instead, education is only a part of many elements which constitute a school or a university. Schools and universities play not only educational roles but also social, political, and economic roles.

Thus, the quality of schools or universities can only be defined according to their roles. That stakeholder outside of schools or universities raise a criticism about the quality of schools or universities when these institutes do not meet their social, political and economic needs can be understood in this context. In this case, the thing they are pointing to is not the quality of education but that of schools or universities, even though they are using the term of 'quality of education'.

In this context, interestingly enough, Section 36 of the 1944 Education Act in the United Kingdom (England and Wales) concerning compulsory education had been interpreted as compulsory schooling. The clause in the Act states that: "It shall be the duty of the parent of every child of compulsory school age to cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable to his age, aptitude and ability, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise." The discovery of the fact that 'education is compulsory; schooling is not' triggered the parent education movement under the name of 'Education Otherwise' in 1976. In the beginning about ten families were involved, but now the number increased to about ten thousands in 1995 (Meighan, 1996). Their main concern is to attest the merits of home-based education and exchange their home-based education experiences.

If so, what is education? And what is quality of education? Education has been defined in many ways. This paper is going to adopt the conceptual model proposed by Chang(1996). His model of education concept consists of two distinct activities, i. e., teaching (or 'descending education') and learning (or 'ascending education'), which have six pairs of contrasting components. First, with regard to motivation of activity, teaching is based on compassion and love for the less advanced, while learning begins

from self-love of a learner to fulfill his or her deficiency with the abundance. Second, from the perspective of relativism, the advanced ('descender' or teacher) needs to respect the current status of the less advanced ('ascender' or learner), while the ascender should respect the descender, even though he or she cannot understand the current status of the descender. Third, concerning the sequence of learning, the ascender (learner) needs to pursue step by step, while the descender (teacher) needs to go down to the current status of the ascender. Fourth, in terms of transformative actions while the ascender (learner) needs to take a progressive self-help for excavating himself, the descender (teacher) needs to take a regressive assistance to pretend not to know the answer. Fifth, with regard to the way of proving the human greatness, it is important to keep the balance between heuristic verification and persuasive verification. Heuristic verification is for the ascender (learner) to express approval from the heart when he or she comprehends his or her foolishness of the past and the value of the new status by attaining the upper status. Persuasive verification is for the descender (teacher) to show his or her status is higher than the status of the descender by helping the ascender to get close to his or her current status. Finally, concerning the results of education, there are different interpretations between the descender (teacher) and the ascender (learner). That is, new status as a result of educational activities has a transformative meaning to the ascender (learner), but it has a conservative meaning to the descender (teacher) in that it reinforces only the already known to him or her.

Given this concept of education, the quality of education is revealed in the process of education or teaching-learning. If teaching and learning are done following the six pairs of contrasting elements of education, it can be said that the quality of education is very excellent. For instance, if the descender (teacher) is committed to teaching voluntarily and with pleasure, respecting the current status of the ascender (learner), and the ascender (learner) has a passion for learning, respecting the current intangible status of the descender or teacher, the quality of education is assured.

What is quality assurance?

Now we can find some differences between the concept of education and that of schooling, and between the quality of education and that of a school system or a university. In the same line of reasoning, quality assurance in education and quality assurance at a school or a university can be somewhat differently defined.

Quality assurance is one of the most important issues in open and distance education (Daniel & Kanwar, 2006; Mugridge, 1999; Oliver, 2005). Generally, quality assurance

is defined as "the process whereby standards are specified for a product or service and steps are taken to ensure that these standards are consistently met" (Ellis, 1993b, p. 17). If the service mentioned here is education, this quality assurance is quality assurance in education. If the service here is schooling, then quality assurance is quality assurance at a school or a university. Robinson (1994, p. 187) suggested a simple set of procedures to follow in applying quality assurance:

- You set standards for a product or service.
- You organize the production or delivery of a product or service so that the standards are consistently met.
- As a consequence, you create confidence in the client or recipient that what is promised is what will happen.

This idea might be very useful to ensure quality of a school or a university. Still, however, we might omit education or teaching-learning process which is crucial for quality of education. Instead, we are likely to pay attention to conditions for teaching and learning, leaving the process of education as a black box.

It might be true, as Ellis (1993a, p. 9) mentions, "we don't know much about teaching." The lack of knowledge of university teaching makes it not easy to apply quality assurance to university. In suggesting an exploratory model of educational quality assurance at KNOU, this paper tries to specify the standards of teaching and learning for KNOU by unveiling the conceptual structure of education at KNOU as well as identify determinants which have influence on teaching and learning process.

An Exploratory Model for Educational Quality Assurance at KNOU

An exploratory model for educational quality assurance at KNOU is not only for ensuring the quality of education but that of KNOU. Thus, the model this paper is going to propose is a kind of combination of education-oriented approach and management-oriented approach in quality assurance, placing educational process at the center of KNOU's educational system. The model borrowed the concepts of input, process, and output from Systems Approach. At the center of process is put teaching and learning, surrounded by curriculum and educational media, which are under the influence of administrative system and educational support system. Input elements are broken down into humans, materials, and educational objectives. Finally, outputs are represented as persistence rates and the number of graduates, rates of entrance to graduate schools, and social contribution.

A strength of this model lies in that ingredients of teaching and those of learning are specified. These are described in the next section, with an emphasis on process-related

variables only. But it should be noted that all the descriptions are based on KNOU, which might have common characteristics with other open and distance education institutes but still be different from them in some ways.

Standards for Teaching and Learning at KNOU

What can be standards or ingredients for quality teaching and learning? Standards for quality teaching and those for quality learning are separately set. While teaching is an autonomous world which has its own structure and objectives, learning is another autonomous world which has its own structure and objectives.

Standards for Teaching (or Descending Education) at KNOU

It is not easy to specify clear standards for quality teaching, especially at the open and distance learning institute such as KNOU. Generally, enough faculty members with good quality, research activities of faculty members, and staff development program are believed to ensure quality teaching. However, these are only external conditions for teaching. In addition to these, thus, something intrinsic to teaching should be added. For instance, following questions can be considered for standards for quality teaching:

- Do teachers start their teaching by identifying the current status of learners?
- Do teachers organize coursework and contents which reflect the current status of learners?
- Do teachers induce step by step development of learners in comprehending the subject matter concerned?
- Do teachers take learners' responses into account and reflect them in the way of teaching?
- Do teachers make a choice the most appropriate educational media for teaching the subject matter?
- Do teachers experience the value of teaching? In other words, are teachers pleased to see learners' moving up to higher status in comprehending the subject matter and commit themselves to teaching itself?

These are rather qualitative, not quantitative. So, it might be not easy to detect whether these things are happening or not in the process of education. However, these questions provide very important criteria for identifying the quality of teaching or descending education. Unless teachers perform teaching activities with commitment and appreciate the value of teaching, it should be said that quality of education is not

so good, even though more applicants are coming and persistence rates are rising.

Standards for Learning (or Ascending Education) at KNOU

Learning or ascending education is an activity performed by learners or ascenders. The role of learners at distance and open learning institutes is more substantial than that in conventional universities. Learning at distance and open learning institutes depends rather on learners' self-directed learning. So, most literature on quality assurance for open and distance learning focuses on student support system. However, from the viewpoint of quality assurance of education, this is only external conditions for learning. Well-provided student support system might lead to ensuring the quality of learning. Yet, it cannot be one of the standards for learning itself. Such questions as follows are to be considered for standards for learning at KNOU.

- Do learners have strong intrinsic motivation to learn and passion for learning itself?
- Do learners invest enough time on learning?
- Do learners have their own questions in the process of learning? And do they try to solve them through collecting relevant data and information or ask teachers or tutors or colleague learners?
- Do learners participate in voluntary study group for cooperative learning?
- Do learners experience the value of learning? Or do learners experience the sense of progress by comprehending the weakness of past status and the treasure of the new status?

If students at the open and learning institutes are leaving school without experiencing the intrinsic value of learning, the quality of learning is doubtful, even though thousands of graduates are produced. Interestingly, however, from the perspective of management-oriented approach to the quality assurance for the university, we can say a different story.

Standards for 1st-level Determinants of Teaching and Learning at KNOU

Standards for Curriculum

Curriculum is contents teachers teach and learners learn. It provides a kind of way learners pass through. Important questions for quality of curriculum are as follows:

- Does curriculum reflect the diverse needs and levels of learners?
- Is the ratio between general courses and major courses which are required to get a degree appropriate?

- How much freedom is given to learners in taking courses?
- Does each subject matter reflect the recent developments of the discipline concerned? And how often is the curriculum revised in order to catch up with the rapid changes of knowledge and technology?

Standards for Educational Media or Technology

Open and distance learning institutes are characterized by the utilization of various kinds of educational media or technology. Now KNOU is using such technologies as print, audio-cassette, Educational Broadcasting Service (EBS) radio, internet, TV (Open University Network, OUN), and video-conferencing. It seems that no media is the best for all the subject matters. For decision-making of most suitable technology, following criteria named ACTIONS can be suggested (Bates, 1995):
- Access: how accessible is a particular technology for learners? How flexible is it for a particular target group?
- Costs: what is the cost structure of each technology? What is the unit cost per learner?
- Teaching and learning: what kinds of learning are needed? What instructional approaches will best meet these needs? What are the best technologies for supporting this teaching and learning?
- Interactivity and user-friendliness: what kind of interaction does this technology enable? How easy it to use?
- Organizational issues: what are the organizational requirements, and the barriers to be removed, before this technology can be used successfully? What changes in organization need to be made?
- Novelty: how new is this technology?
- Speed: how quickly can courses be mounted with this technology? How quickly can materials be changed?

Standards for 2nd-level Determinants of Teaching and Learning at KNOU

Examples of 2nd-level determinants of teaching and learning are as follows: administrative and financial system, regional/local study center, library, and research center (e. g., Institute of Distance Education). They have direct effects on teaching and learning as well as indirect effects on teaching and learning through affecting curriculum and educational media. They provide external conditions for teaching and learning. With regard to standards for such elements, following things can be

considered:
- Is administrative system appropriate for open and distance learning?
- Is management of the University cost-effective?
- Does the University have adequate staff training programs?
- Are regional/local study centers convenient for learners to use? And do they have sufficient educationally useful resources?
- Does the University library provide adequate educational services for learners? Is it equipped with digital library system?
- Does Institute of Distance Education, a research center attached to KNOU, execute research which helps the development of open and distance education at KNOU?

Suggestions

The quality assurance model without consideration of what education is tends to deal with external conditions of education, leaving educational process to a kind of black box. Unless we do not improve education itself which consists of teaching (descending education) and learning (ascending education), quality assurance model makes no sense in terms of education. Suggestions for improving the quality of education at KNOU are drawn from the results of the study.

First, it needs to encourage teachers to show enthusiasm in teaching, free from sundry administrative works. The Best Teacher of the Year or the Distinguished Teaching Award (Lewis, 1993; Thomas, 1993) needs to be introduced.

Second, policy measures to correct the distorted learning pattern of students at KNOU should be taken. Objective test-oriented evaluation, which is thought to affect students' memorizing trivial facts and data, should be reformed. Tutor system, which is now in an experimental stage, should be developed in the right direction. Interaction between teachers/tutors and students needs to be more facilitated. Also, it needs to encourage students to organize voluntary study groups and support them administratively as well as financially.

Third, curriculum structure should be more diversified in order to reflect the diverse needs and levels of learners at KNOU. More freedom to choose courses should be given to students.

Fourth, printed textbooks need to be improved in terms of its contents as well as its form, reflecting the characteristics of distance education. Printed textbooks are the most important educational media in KNOU in that students are using them most frequently for their learning. It is recommended that the Best Textbook of the Year

be developed.

Fifth, measures to increase the number of students who watch TV programs for their learning should be taken. It is reported that about 60% of students at KNOU have never used TV programs for their learning (Choi et al., 1996). This is very closely related to the issue of cost-benefit in distance education.

Sixth, consideration should be given to making the present library a digital library and to making regional/local study centers genuine study centers rather than administrative units.

Finally, organizational structure needs to be restructured to respond effectively to rapidly changing open and distance education. Also, staff development programs for academics as well as administrators should be developed.

References

Bates, A. W. (1995). *Technology, open learning and distance education*. London and New York: Routledge.

Chang, S. H. (1996). Implications of educational relations for epistemology. *Study of Educational Principles*, 1(1), pp. 1-50. Seoul National University. (In Korean)

Chang, S. H. (1991). *Reconceptualization of inquiry realms for education science. Institute of Education Research*, College of Education, Seoul National University. (In Korean)

Choi et al. (1996). *A study on learning activities and the process of scholastic achievements at KNOU*. Student Guidance Center, KNOU. (In Korean)

Clark, M., Butler, C., Schmidt-Hansen, P., & Somerville, M. (2004). Quality assurance for distance learning: a case at Brunel University. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 35(1), pp. 5-11.

Daniel, J. & Kanwar, A. (2006). Quality assurance for open, distance and eLearning: Issues for developing countries. World Bank Joint Client-Staff Learning Seminar on Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (18-20 June 2006). http://www.col.org/resources/speeches/2006presentations/Pages/2006-06-20.aspx. Retreived May 21, 2009.

Ellis, R. (1993a). Quality assurance for university teaching: Issues and approaches in R. Ellis (Ed.), Quality assurance for university teaching. Buckingham, United Kingdom & Bristol, PA, USA, The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, pp. 1-15.

Ellis, R. (1993b). A British standard for university teaching? in R. Ellis (Ed.), Quality assurance for university teaching. Buckingham, United Kingdom & Bristol, PA, USA, The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, pp. 1-15.

Frazer, M. (1994). Quality in higher education: An international perspective. in D. Green (Ed.), What is

quality in higher education?, Buckingham, United Kingdom & Bristol, PA, USA, The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, pp. 101-111.

Green, D. (1994a). Looking ahead. in D. Green (Ed), What is quality in higher education?, Buckingham, United Kingdom & Bristol, PA, USA, The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, pp. 112-117.

Green, D. (1994b). What is quality in higher education? Concepts, policy and practice. in D. Green (Ed), What is quality in higher education?, Buckingham, United Kingdom & Bristol, PA, USA, The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, pp. 3-20.

Lewis, J. M. (1993). Teaching styles of award-winning professors. in R. Ellis (Ed.), Quality assurance for university teaching. Buckingham, United Kingdom & Bristol, PA, USA, The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, pp. 149-164.

Meighan, R. (1996). The implications of home-based education effectiveness research for opening schooling. in T. Evans & D. Nation (Eds.), Opening education: Policies and practices from open and distance education. London & New York: Routledge.

Mugridge, I. (1999). Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Education. Indian Journal of Open Learning, 8(3), pp. 213-220

Oliver, R. (2005). Quality assurance and e-learning: Blue skies and pragmatism. ALT-J, 13(3), pp. 173-187.

Richmond, W. K. (1975). Education and schooling. London, Methuen.

Robinson, B. (1994). Assuring quality in open and distance learning. in F. Lockwood (Ed.), Materials production in open distance learning, London, PCP, pp. 185-194.

Thomas, E. (1993). The first Distinguished Teaching Award in the United Kingdom. in R. Ellis (Ed.), Quality assurance for university teaching. Buckingham, United Kingdom & Bristol, PA, USA, The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, pp. 165-178.