

**QUALITY ASSURANCE IN DISTANCE TEACHING  
UNIVERSITIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY IN  
THAILAND, MALAYSIA, AND INDONESIA**

by

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in the  
Curriculum Theory and Implementation Program  
Faculty of Education

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**SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY**

**Summer 2013**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an international comparative case study that investigates the perceptions, policies, and implementation of quality assurance (QA) programs in the learner support areas of three distance-teaching universities (DTUs) in Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia. Whilst participant accounts varied in their emphasis to understand and measure educational products and services that meet students' requirements, their perspectives on QA reflect the importance of quality guidelines to achieve expected outcomes. The adoption of QA programs has led to diverse critical challenges from both internal and external environments. For example, the participants reported that the implementation of QA was perceived as being too demanding. This situation has been exacerbated by the fact that government quality standards do not correspond well to the practice of distance education, as the standards have not been specifically designed for DTUs.

Although there were different QA policies in learner support areas, these DTUs shared similarities in terms of area of focus. Referring to their QA policy texts stated in quality manuals and the evidence drawn from interview data, the overall quality policy in learner support areas can be classified into two dimensions: teaching and learning provisions which address the employment of blended learning pedagogy and support services that include a variety of non-academic kinds of support to promote students in how to be effective distance learners.

The findings indicate that the implementation of QA in learner support areas were supported by the centralized QA management systems and the distributed learning centers throughout the countries. The implementation of QA in learner support also was related to the universities' external environments. Local language, educational technology, external QA agencies, government, and students have been identified as the major external factors that support the application of the QA in learner support areas. Continuous quality improvement has been maintained through the adoption of self-assessments that address the importance of students' feedback, the implementation of regular management review meetings, and the invitation of external quality professional

bodies to validate their QA programs. The adoption of internal and external QA audits allows these three DTUs to use current QA processes to inform better QA practices.

**Keywords:** Distance education; distance teaching universities; learner support; quality; quality assurance; case study.

*This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved wife, Susi, and my children, Farhan & Salsa.*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the respectful Committee members, particularly to my Senior Supervisor, Dr. Michelle Nilson. Not only for her expertise in giving invaluable insights to this study but also for her graciousness, patience, and understanding, encouraging me always to move forward in this study and supporting me during the whole process, from preparation to completion of this dissertation. I also want to thank the Co-supervisor, Prof. Dr. David Kaufman and all committee members, Dr. Norm Friesen and Dr. Alyssa Wise, for their support, thoughtful feedback, and critiques on this study. I was fortunate to get help from SFU's Student Learning Commons, particularly from Megan Robertson—thank you for your kind help during the writing process of this dissertation. My particular thank goes to Dr. Charles Scott who has played in diverse ways as fellow classmate, instructor, and thoughtful copy editor.

I wish to acknowledge the enthusiasm of the top management level and all key participants, as well as contact persons at STOU Thailand, ABOU Malaysia, and UT Indonesia for the provision of information as well as for their time, without whom this dissertation would not be possible.

I am grateful to the JIPS - World Bank, which has provided scholarship for my study at SFU, Canada. Besides, the Rector of UT, Prof. Ir. Tian Belawati, M.Ed., Ph.D. and all top managers at UT who have supported me to continue my study overseas, thank you!

Ian Andrew, Jane Pane, and my colleagues in the same boat (Isti Titi, Yudhi, Toha, and Adhi) as well as graduate students in Faculty of Education, thank you for sharing happiness during the study process.

I also wish to thank my parents in Indonesia and my wife, Susiah Hartina, for her love and all the sacrifices that allow me to complete this academic journey.

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## List of Acronyms

AAOU	Asian Association of Open University
ABOU	Anak Bangsa Open University
BAN-PT	Badan Akreditasi Nasional – Perguruan Tinggi (the National Accreditation Board for Higher Education)
CIDT	Center for Instructional design & Technology
COL	Commonwealth of Learning
CSM	Center for Student Management
DHE	Distance Higher Education
DTU	Distance Teaching University
e-CRM	Electronic Customer Relationship Management
F2F	Face-to-face
DGHE	Directorate General for Higher Education
ICCE	International Council for Correspondence Education
ICDE	International Council for Open and Distance Education
ICT	information and communication technology
ISA	International Standard Agency
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
IQRI	Institute of Quality, Research and Innovation
ITLA	Institute of Teaching and Learning Advancement
MQA	Malaysian Qualification Agency
MQF	Malaysian Qualifications Framework
NIST	National Institute of Standards and Technology
ODL	Open and Distance Learning
OHEC	Office of the Higher Education Committee (OHEC)
ONESQA	Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assurance
Pusmintas	Pusat Jaminan Kualitas (Quality Assurance Center)
QA	Quality Assurance
SAR	Self-Assessment Report
SFU	Simon Fraser University
Simintas	Sistem Jaminan Kualitas (Quality assurance system)
SIRIM	Standards and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia

STOU	Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University
UKOU	United Kingdom Open University
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UT	Universitas Terbuka
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment
WOU	Wawasan Open University

# **Chapter 1.**

## **Introduction**

This dissertation is a study of quality assurance (QA) programs in distance teaching universities (DTUs), which have been my long term professional interest as one of the faculty members in a distance education institution. It explores and analyzes the actual QA programs in the learning support areas of three selected DTUs. It describes how QA programs in these areas have been interpreted and implemented by the people in the organisations under investigation. This study also investigates three major contextual factors—the DTUs' external environments, DTUs' internal environments, and existing theories in distance education—that considerably shape QA models in each university. In order to provide a general picture of this research, this chapter discusses the introductory part of the study addressing some of the following issues: background and research questions that are examined and the context, purpose, and significance of the research. Finally, this chapter concludes by providing definitions of terms used and an outline of the organisation of the dissertation.

## **Background**

The emergence of DTUs is an inevitable development in the expansion of higher education. According to Guri-Rosenblit (2005), DTUs have mushroomed outside conventional universities and grown into diverse models reflecting the clienteles they aim to serve, how they were initiated, how they are funded, and the kinds of programs they offer. Following the model of the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) established in 1969, a number of single mode DTUs have been developed and embraced in many countries representing approaches that focus on widening access to higher education provisions. Currently, Dhanarajan (2010) and Moore and Kearsley (2012) reported that many of these DTUs are enjoying economies of scale allowing for large enrolments.

They include such examples as Allama Iqbal Open University which has 3.2 million students, Indira Gandhi National Open University which has 3 million students, and Open University of China which has 2.7 million students. Moore and Kearsley (2012) went on to disclose that although there are differences, these DTUs share an important similarity: “they are single mode distance teaching institutions” (p. 34). According Peters (2008), single mode distance teaching universities are referred to as such for the purpose of offering distance education only such as the Open University of United Kingdom (UKOU). Currently, there are about 50 autonomous single-mode distance teaching universities scattered all over the world (Peters, 2008) and 16 of them are called ‘mega universities’ (Daniel, 1996).

Several distance education scholars (Holmberg, 1995; Keegan, 1996; Moore & Kearsley, 2012) have argued that DTUs have 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 developing countries with large populations, such as Indonesia, DTUs offer a strategic way to enrol a large number of students (Zuhairi, 1994). As governments try to meet the rising expectations and public demand to upgrade the skills for the next generation and economic growth, DTUs have become an important element to provide access and equity to higher education (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007; Belawati, Zuhairi, & Wardani, 2012).

In spite of the strategic role of DTUs in providing access to higher education, there are several challenges that these new universities face; for example, the lack of support and services such as providing tutors, academic advisors, schedulers, and technical assistance (Rena, 2007), difficulty in oversight of delivery of instruction (Rashid & Rashid, 2012), and delivery of student support services including academic and logistical elements or establishing infrastructure (Inglis, 2003; Hoosen & Butcher, 2012). According to Daniel (2012), distance education has had been burdened with an image problem; it has been regarded as poor quality and substandard (Davies, Howell, & Petrie, 2010; Mclsaac & Gunawardena, 2001) leading to the stigma that DTUs deliver a second rate education (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). In Universitas Terbuka (UT) Indonesia, for example, recent high school graduates enrolled in UT are generally those denied access in traditional state universities (Zuhairi, 1994).

These challenges have attracted an examination of the quality of DTUs particularly regarding the need for establishing acceptable best practices and developing standards of quality by which distance education can be judged (Davies, Howell, & Petrie, 2010). At this point, it seems important to study QA at distance teaching institutions at the university level. In contrast to the practices of QA in conventional universities that may vary between subjects, programs, and faculty, and in which lecturers teach face to face, in DTUs, in essence, the roles of university planning and management as a whole are more important than the roles of individual lecturers (Zuhairi, 1994). In achieving a standard quality for printed learning materials, for example, institutions must develop criteria and standard operating procedures or quality guidelines for course development that will be applied to all academic programs.

Quality is a concept long associated with the manufacturing sector. In his seminal work, Garvin (1984) noted five product quality definition approaches, which have been adopted across multiple contexts: the transcendent quality approach, the product-based approach, the user-based approach, the manufacturer-based approach, and the value-based approach. Later, Garvin (1987) adapted his five approaches into eight critical dimensions or categories of quality including: performance, features, reliability, conformance, durability, serviceability, aesthetics, and perceived quality. These notions of quality are relevant to education in that they help provide a heuristic for the ongoing discussions about student preparation, program quality, university rankings, and graduation rates. A more detailed discussion of the complexity of defining quality will be provided in the literature review section of this thesis. For the purpose of his chapter, I will focus on providing a general background of QA in education, specifically in distance higher education.

Dale (2000) argued that the introduction of quality and QA policies in education, particularly in higher education, were partly derived from the marketization and privatisation in higher education. Dale (2000) added that the marketization and privatization of higher education have been encouraged within the discourses of neoliberalism in Western (Industrialized) countries in which economic policies with a focus on competition have supported the policy making framework in the public sector. Neoliberalism is a political movement which supports the ideological belief that competition, privatization and open market forces strengthen the economy (Shanahan,

2009). Within this ideological view, QA increasingly becomes defined in global markets, including in education to create transparency, to ensure quality, and to inform different stakeholders (Martin & Stella, 2007). According to Gibson (1986), however, quality in the higher education context is “notoriously elusive of prescription and no easier even to describe and discuss than to deliver in practice” (pp. 128-129). Martin and Stella (2007) argued that the dilemma of defining quality in higher education “is not merely a question of setting standards; it is also an issue of who defines it on the basis of what interest” (p. 33). For this reason, conceptualizing quality in higher education in general, and DTUs in particular, may serve multiple perspectives. Harvey and Green (1993) argued that ‘quality’, like ‘liberty’ or ‘equality’, is a slippery concept.

While QA policies have gained pre-eminence in manufacturing sectors, in higher education, not all people agree universally with the adoption of QA policies. The importation of QA programs from the world of business into higher education tends to inhibit innovation in instructional process rather than advance it (Nicholson, 2011). Some argue that a common criticism of QA programs is that this focus on QA pays little attention to educational processes and theories; as a result, quality improvement is only incidental (Bogue, 1998; Harvey & Knight, 1996). Plimmer, Clarke-Okah, Donovan, and Russell (2012) noted that the adoption of the concept of quality into education institutions as the conversion of education institutions to the manufacturing industries encourages “mechanistic compliance-driven behaviours” (p. 165). According to Ryan and Brown (2012), the objections to the emerging QA issues in distance education reference what many academics perceive as “an ideology which sought to reduce academic autonomy, and teaching to an atomized, mechanistic assembly line of resources (p. 92).

There are extensive debates throughout academia about the concept of quality and QA in DTUs. While quality measures have gained significant attention over the past 30 years in higher education (Maniku, 2008), questions remain about quality in DTUs. The concept of quality in DTUs is challenging, in part because quality in DTUs is difficult to define and standardized practices remain elusive. This is particularly the case because DTUs consist of multiple stakeholders, involving relationships between and among faculty, learning material developers, tutors/instructors, learners, administrators, employers, government, and other professional bodies.

Despite the difficulty in conceptualising the terms quality and QA, scholars in the field of distance education such as Belawati and Zuhairi (2007) and Jung and Latchem (2012) argued that it is crucial for DTUs to deal with QA for the development of distance education and the upcoming challenges of the growing demand for improving quality and accountability. According to McKay and Makhanya (2008), enhancing quality of distance education programs has become a key challenge for DTUs and “this challenge must be met in the context of greatly increased access to a wide diversity of students” (p. 33). There is a growing commitment among distance teaching providers to be involved in QA paradigms (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007; Jung & Latchem, 2007; Latchem & Ali, 2012; Parker, 2004). According to Parker (2004), in the current environment, it is incumbent for educational institutions to “demonstrate the quality of their services in ways that are intelligible to potential students and their employers, faculty and staff, regulators, and government agencies” (p. 385). Latchem and Ali (2012) observed that a number of different organisations, such as Asian Association of Open University (AAOU) (2010) and Commonwealth of Learning (COL) (2009) have designed principles and guidelines to assure quality in distance education. Some note, however, that assuring quality in DTUs is much disputed (Jung & Latchem, 2007; Stella & Gnanam, 2004) involving multi-dimensional and complex systems. Although considerable studies on QA have been undertaken, there is a little agreement regarding standards, principles, and procedures of QA in DTU contexts (Latchem & Ali, 2012). Some think that QA practices for DTUs should essentially be the same as those used for conventional universities (Jung & Latchem, 2012). Others think the present mechanisms of QA for traditional higher education are not adequate to ensure quality of DTUs (Jung, 2008; Stella & Gnanam, 2004). Following his study of six colleges and universities, Compura (cited in Moore & Kearsley, 2012) disclosed that “there appears to be a discrepancy between the literature cited and the actual practice of the institutions surveyed” (p. 190).

There is scant research-based literature to guide policymakers, managers, and practitioners in applying QA in education (Jung & Latchem, 2012). There is a gap in the research about assuring quality of distance education so that it remains “an uncharted area for many QA agencies” (Stella & Gnanam, 2004, p. 150). There remain questions about what constitutes quality and how quality should be measured in DTUs (Chalmers & Johnston, 2012). Therefore, there is substance enough to investigate problems and

issues of QA program in DTUs. How does QA work in DTUs? How should a QA program be managed? What philosophical background rests with a given QA decision? And how can findings on current QA processes be applied to improve the culture of quality in DTUs? This research may help close that gap by investigating QA programs in different DTUs: Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) Thailand, Anak Bangsa Open University (ABOU) Malaysia, and Universitas Terbuka (UT) Indonesia addressing how these DTUs implement their QA programs specifically in learner support areas.

## **Context**

The STOU, ABOU, and UT are DTUs in the Southeast Asian region which have already been involved in employing QA programs. The organisational changes and the stress on formulation and implementation of QA are their major concerns. In 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. Unlike in developed countries, the practice of distance education in developing countries, such as in Indonesia, is mostly involved with the use of physical materials (particularly designed textbooks) as major learning sources for distance learners. The use of modern interactive communication media, such as online learning, has been difficult for many distance students in rural areas of developing countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. It is also the reason why there is a compulsory requirement for students in the three DTUs in this study to have specifically designed textbooks for each course. In the current years, however, these DTUs are beginning to integrate information and communication technology (ICT) including online learning instructions as one of their options to support and improve the quality of student learning services.

As part of their commitment to quality, STOU, ABOU, and UT have been formally equipped by the establishment of their centralized quality assurance units to coordinate and manage their quality programs. These three universities have been recognized as the only DTUs which adopted quality programs in Southeast Asia region. The rationale behind the selection of the three DTUs in this study is discussed further in chapter three, under the subheading “unit of analysis”.

As a member of the Indonesian DTU faculty for more than twenty years, I want to enhance my understanding about the QA issues in DTUs particularly in learner support areas. This study is comparative research investigating QA programs in DTUs in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The aim of this study is to explore the different approaches, philosophies, and methods in assuring quality in learner support areas of DTUs. To support these aims, a qualitative case study approach is used to investigate the issues.

## **Purpose of the Research**

The overall purpose of this study is to explore and understand the issues related to the development and implementation of the QA program in the learner support areas of three selected DTUs, STOU, ABOU, and UT. The comparative nature of the study helps to address existing questions in the research on QA programs in learner support areas specifically within Indonesia's distance education environment.

## **Significance of the Research**

Previous research into QA programs in Indonesia's DTU context has proven scarce. In 2001, Tadjudin explained the QA system in Indonesia through the establishment of the National Accreditation Board for Higher Education for reviewing and evaluating programs in higher education for accreditation and QA. The article describes the QA programs in general and is obviously not meant as an analytical presentation because no attempts were made to treat QA critically or empirically. There was no specific information on the BAN-PT accredited study programs in DTUs that primarily used technology to bridge the distance between tutors and students.

Currently, Jung and Latchem (2007) and later Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, and Belawati (2011) conducted research on QA in Asian DTUs. Both studies investigated the national QA systems for distance education at the higher education level focusing on how educational quality had been defined in different Asian DTUs and what the differences and similarities were of the QA system implemented in the selected Asian

countries. These studies provide a general description on how QA programs have been tailored in different ways and how they share some similarities in terms of purpose, policy frameworks, methods, and instruments.

The findings of how quality is being implemented and accredited at DTUs in Asian countries vary. Jung and Latchem (2007) classified them into four categories. In China, Thailand, Taiwan, Japan and Hong Kong, quality of DTUs conforms to the standards applied to conventional education. In India, Korea, and Turkey, quality was judged as being 'fitness for purpose.' Moreover, quality has also been perceived as 'meeting customers' needs. In UT, Indonesia, quality has been defined as 'continuous improvement.' Finally, the dynamic concept and practice of quality encourages some DTUs to meet with "international standards and requirements" (p. 245). The disparities of these quality approaches have a significant impact in choosing criteria, standards, methods, and the ways each DTU internal management system must be operated. However, the study does not provide in-depth information on how to assure quality in DTU. There is also lack of evidence on how certain primary QA activities, such as learner support must be carried out in order to meet with or conform to the standards applying to DTUs. Given these concerns, hopefully the launching of this research could:

- Help close the gap that exists in the research of QA specifically in learner support areas with regard to the DTUs in the context of Indonesia's education environment.
- Contribute to the practice of QA in DTUs in regards to the following issues. First, my analysis of QA implemented in the institutions attempts to examine key characteristics of each system that may be useful as a feedback for the institutions. Second, the findings of the study may assist the institutions in developing QA systems that meet with local needs and/or international standards. Third, the results of the study may illuminate some of the philosophical and practical issues regarding QA programs and how policies have been interpreted and implemented in each institution.

## Delimitations

Considering the broad areas of focus and complexity of QA, the present study only concentrates on the learner support or student support areas. According to AAOU (2010) and COL (2009), learner support deals with various provisions of a range of opportunities for tutoring and counselling through the use of various forms of technology. Learner support services in DTUs may include contact tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring, counselling, and the stimulation of peer support structures to determine students' holistic progression (COL, 2009).

This study focuses on learner support areas for two primary reasons. First, Simpson (2002) argued that “student support is a vital element in any [open and distance learning] ODL” (p. 9). In a highly competitive market, learners should become the major concern of all higher education institutions including DTUs, as attrition rates are a concern (Garland, 1993; Roberts, 1984; Simpson 2002; Thompson & Shillington, 2008). Second, as QA areas in DTUs covers many areas (see appendix A), in order to be able to provide a richly detailed and contextually embedded picture of each of the DTUs being investigated, the study needed to be narrowly focused on the areas that relevant and have professional connection to the researcher. I have been working at a DTU for almost 10 years with major responsibility to manage and coordinate learner support at faculty and regional levels.

Based on his involvement as staff at UKOU, Simpson (2002) disclosed that studying at DTUs is often a very isolating experience: “students are isolated from other students, their tutors, the institution, and sometimes their own family and friends” (p. 10). The isolating experience is also recounted by Jayasundera (2007) who argued that feelings of isolation of distance learners has been regarded as one of the contributors for attrition rate in distance learning. Simpson (2002) went on to argue that there are many factors that contribute to high dropout rates in DTUs that generally could be classified into two areas: academic issues, such as students who are demoralized by a poor exam results, and non-academic factors, such as lack-of time-management skills, or poor communication skills (Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

The importance of student support in DTUs can also be viewed from student satisfaction and student persistence perspectives. According to Simpson (2002), quality of student support will have considerable impact on student satisfaction, which in turn will ultimately affect their persistence and success. Therefore, student support may be designed to support “enjoyment, excitement, [and] pleasure...during the course” (Moore & Kearsley 2012, p. 153). Much research, according to Moore and Kearsley (2012), has shown that the three main causes of dissatisfaction and resistance to distance education are: 1) poor course design and teacher incompetence, 2) mistaken expectations on the part of students, and 3) inability to use technology. In distance education, Irons, Jung, and Keel (2002) revealed that comfort with the technology involved for learner support is a critical factor in determining satisfaction and success. Therefore, it is strategically necessary to have a solid understanding of both the theoretical and logistical elements of student support program to ensure effective implementation of student support delivery.

This study is further delimited by the selection of DTUs involved in this research. While there are a number of DTUs in Southeast Asian region which do not employ international quality standards such as ICDE-ISA, ISO, and Baldrige Quality Award, only these three universities have adopted international QA schema for validating their internal QA programs. Therefore, this research may be regarded as an example of how QA programs have been developed and implemented in DTUs in Southeast Asian context; the results or findings may not be applied to other DTUs.

## **Terminology**

Concerning a number of related terms that have been the subject of debate in the field of distance education, it is imperative to overview these terms in order to better understand the definition of DTU and other related terminologies such as open universities, open and distance learning, and other relevant terms. This section discusses a number of terminologies used throughout this research.

**Blended learning** – Blended learning has been regarded as combining instructional methods (Rossett, 2002) involving online learning and face-to-face (F2F) instruction

(Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Rooney, 2003). Meanwhile Graham (2006) stated that: “blended learning systems combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction” (p. 5). For the purpose of this research, blended learning is defined as blended pedagogy which comprises self-managed learning, face-to-face tutorials and, e-learning (Abas, Sankaran, Bakar, Johari, & Ayob, 2009). E-Learning refers to “any form of telecommunications and computer-based learning,” (Bates, 2005, p. 8). It may include web-based, the Internet or an Intranet, satellite broadcast, and interactive TV (Ellis, 2004). I will use the term blended learning as the major delivery mode of teaching and learning provisions conducted in the three selected DTUs in this study.

Distance higher education (DHE) – DHE in this study refers to all types of studies at the post-secondary level provided by universities or other educational establishments (such as community colleges, institutes, and academies) which employ distance education system as their teaching delivery. They are approved as institutions of DHE by the state authorities. Phillips (2010) defined DHE as any learning that takes place with the instructor and student being geographically remote from each other. It may occur by surface mail, TV, radio, or any number of Internet technologies such as message boards, chat rooms and desktop computer conferencing. Since this research focuses on the three DTUs, I use this term as a general term in describing all kinds of post-secondary education level which employ distance education systems.

Distance teaching university (DTU) – Rumble and Keegan (1982) provided comprehensive characteristics of DTUs. They argued that distance teaching refers to “the institutional role of providing education at a distance” (p. 11). Following their extensive survey at the nine institutions employing open and distance systems, Rumble and Keegan (1982) then called UKOU, and other ‘open’ and ‘distance’ universities, “distance teaching universities” (p. 9). While DTU refers to the open and distance learning at the higher education level, the term ODL refers to the practices of open and distance learning system at all levels education. For the purpose of this study, I will adopt this term for the most part of my research. It is a more generic term for describing the three institutions (STOU, ABOU, and UT) that employ a distance education system at the university level.

Learner support areas – Learner support or student support areas refer to all activities provided by DTUs to support “the progress of students in their studies” (Simpson, 2002, p. 6). In this study, these broad activities are classified into two major areas. The first is teaching learning provisions that include three modes of instructional process: self-directed learning, e-learning, and F2F tutorial sessions. The second is support services that include various activities such as study orientation, workshops for distance learning skills, assignment and examination workshops, student development activities at student clubs or regional centers, non-academic counselling, handling students’ complaint and inquiries, and different forms of financial support.

Mega university – A mega university is defined as “a distance teaching institution with over 100,000 active students in degree level courses” (Daniel, 1996, p. 29). Currently there are about 10 mega universities have been established to meet the increasing educational needs of adults and lifelong learners. Referring to Daniel’s (1996) and the number of enrolments found by Moore and Kearsley (2012), two of the selected DTUs in this study, Universitas Terbuka and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, are identified as mega universities.

Online learning – Online learning refers to instructional deliveries through the use of the Internet to facilitate a student’s ability to “access learning materials, interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to conduct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience” (Ally, 2004, p. 5). I will use this term as one of the instructional modes in the teaching and learning areas conducted by the three selected DTUs in this research.

Open and distance learning (ODL) – COL’s (2009) defined ODL as “a way of providing learning opportunities that [are] characterized by the separation of teacher and learner in time and/or place; ...the use of a variety of media... [for] two-way communications that allow learners and tutors to interact; [and] the possibility of occasional face to face meetings between tutor and learners (p. 334). Based on this definition, ODL covers large areas of distance education systems including the features of open universities exemplified by UKOU. In this research, I will use the term ODL to refer to all levels and types of education, including open schools at the secondary level in Indonesia (Perraton, 2007).

Open Universities – The original term ‘open university’ can be traced to the foundation of the British Open University or UKOU in 1969 with its first student enrolled in 1971 (Holmberg, 1995; Keegan, 1996; Schlosser & Simonson, 2006). In that context, the term open university refers to the openness of the university in respect of: 1) people, since it will not exclude applicants on account of their previous academic qualifications; 2) place, learning and teaching activities can be performed anywhere and are not restricted to classrooms or a campus; 3) the use of new methods of teaching; and 4) ideas (Rumble & Keegan, 1982). Whilst this study will involve the three different institutions under the name of open university (STOU, ABOU, and UT or Open University of Indonesia), I call them distance teaching universities in this study for the reasons that this term is more general and covers the types of autonomous single mode distance teaching universities (represented by STOU and UT) and consortia-type venture (represented by ABOU).

Printed learning materials – Printed learning materials or modules, as they are popularly called, are specially designed textbooks for distance education learners. These textbooks are ‘self-contained’ (Holmberg, 1995). A self-contained course provides “all the learning matter that is necessary... Such courses are complete in themselves and provide texts, grammar, vocabulary, ... exercises in composition, translations, etc.” (Holmberg, 1995, p. 71). I will use this term as it refers to the textbooks or modules produced by the three DTUs selected in this study. Designed printed learning materials have been regarded as major learning sources for distance learners at these selected DTUs.

Quality assurance (QA) – Closely aligned to the term quality, QA in this study has been regarded as quality guidelines reflecting institutional policies and practices in order to achieve predetermined standards or quality criteria of products and services.

Self-directed learning – Self-directed learning or self-managed learning refers to the process of a learner being an active participant in the process of study in distance learning systems supported by self-contained learning materials, e-learning, and limited face-to-face interaction. I will use this term as one of the instructional modes in providing learner support specifically through the use of designed modules supported by a number of non-printed materials, such as CDROM courseware, digital and physical library materials, audio-video programs, peers, and tutors (Abas, Sankaran, Bakar, Johari, & Ayob, 2009).

## Organization of the Thesis

This thesis explores the issues of QA programs in the DTU context in Southeast Asia. The discussion in chapter one begins with an introduction to the study, outlining its background and context of this study, purpose and significance of the research as well as delimitations and terminology used in this research. A review of the relevant literature is presented in the first part of chapter two. The second part deals with the conceptual frameworks drawn from the literature to illustrate how existing theories in distance education have a significant contribution to the analysis of learner support dimensions within the QA framework. Further, chapter three presents the research methodology undertaken in this study emphasizing the paradigm and research framework that are adopted in this study, the procedures of the research, the data gathering, and the methods of analysis employed in this research.

Chapter four focuses on the individual case studies from the three different DTUs under investigation, STOU, ABOU, and UT. Each presents a summary of development of the institution, the development and implementation of a QA program, QA in learner support areas, and how macro and micro environments—especially DTUs' stakeholders—and existing theories in distance education influence their QA models. Recent critical challenges are also presented in this section. Once the individual case studies have been discussed, chapter five presents the discussion of QA issues through cross case analysis derived from a thematic analysis of each individual case study. The final chapter, chapter six, offers conclusions of the study. The chapter also offers implications and contribution to both policy and practice to strengthen the QA programs in learner support areas in the DTU context.

## **Chapter 2.**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter reviews literature and theories that have informed this research on distance education and QA programs. The chapter consists of three sections. The first part begins with a review of the historical developments and current issues in defining the concept of distance education. The discussion continues, focusing on the two major contemporary theories in distance education, including: 1) the theory of interaction and communication proposed by Holmberg (1995) and 2) the theory of autonomy and independence based on the works of Wedemeyer (1981) and Moore (1993) as a derivative theory in this research.

These theoretical foundations of distance education play double roles in this study. First, they are essential to guiding the researcher in understanding the recognition policy, practice, and current development of distance education. Theories in distance education may respond to existing policy and practical concerns of distance education. The present research accepts Peters' (2003) standpoint that: "Every distance teaching institution is shaped by certain theoretical notions and ideas about distance education. These can be transformed into concepts. If the concepts are strong and convincing they can be developed into models" (p. 17). Thus, the existing theories proposed by different scholars in distance education such as Holmberg (1983; 1995) Wedemeyer (1981), and Moore (1993) may help to point to what are good practices in distance education. Second, these distance education theories also provide a lens for analysing QA in DTUs, including QA programs in learner support areas. These theories in distance education may sketch out as to what QA programs in DTUs might look like.. Thus, the discussion of these theories provides a useful means of analysing the practices of QA in

the three selected distance teaching institutions under investigation. It seems to me that there is a relationship between theory of distance education and the practice of QA for distance education; the theory and practice may inform each other.

In the second part, the discussion begins with an examination of the notion of quality in general, of the predominant QA systems and mechanisms that have been adopted and adapted in higher education, and describes how QA programs work in DTUs. The discussion will highlight the problematic nature of defining quality and resultant tensions concerning QA in DTUs, the dimensions of quality in higher education, and conceptualizing QA in DTUs. The discussion continues to review the QA programs in DTUs, covering the QA areas in DTUs focusing on learner support areas, and the adoption of the QA model for learner support areas proposed by COL (2009) and AAOU (2010). This section concludes by presenting the QA assessment models in DTUs, including accreditation, quality audits, self-evaluation, and student surveys, and industry-based framework of QA (ISO and Baldrige Award).

Finally, in section three, the discussion focuses on the conceptual framework proposed for this research by discussing QA programs in learner support areas viewed from three perspectives: the DTUs' external environment, DTUs' internal environment, and the existing theories of distance education.

## **Development of Distance Education**

The concept of distance education has evolved in different ways in line with the evolution of distance education itself (Schlosser & Simonson, 2006). In its first incarnation of correspondence study, distance education was devised as a means of providing education to students who were geographically isolated and who were unable to go to an ordinary campus (Shale, 1986; Holmberg, 1986). Correspondence instruction grew when England established the penny post, which allowed Isaac Pitman to teach shorthand (Schlosser & Simonson, 2006). Correspondence instruction was taken by 'self-instructional texts' (Holmberg, 1995), conveyed by the postal service initially as the major medium of delivery (Rumble, 1989) that could make possible 'independent study' (Wedemeyer, 1981) and the 'home-based student' (Lambert, 1983). According to

Holmberg (1995) and Peters (2008), correspondence study can be regarded as the first generation of distance education in which the principal means of communication was the circulation of printed courses and the exchange of letters.

In its further development, however, there are many names that have been used to describe the variety of teaching and learning processes where there is a physical separation between the learners and the teachers such as correspondence education in the United Kingdom; home or independent study in the United States; external studies in Australia; and distance teaching at United Kingdom. It also refers to “tele-enseignement” in France; “Fernstudium/ Fernunterricht” in German; “education a distancia” in Spanish and “teleducacao” in Portuguese (Zuhairi, 1994). For Keegan (2000), although the normal name in English for distance teaching universities is ‘open university,’ the term ‘distance teaching university’ is more generic and better translates ‘Fernuniversitat’ and ‘Universidades de Educacion a Distancia.’ Therefore, in the present research I follow the ideas of Keegan (1996) and Rumble and Keegan (1982) and use the term ‘distance teaching university’ for at least two reasons. First, this research only focuses on distance education in the context of higher education. Second, the three sites of DTUs involved in this study employ single mode distance education systems, not dual mode systems.

The first DTU was established by governmental decree at the University of South Africa in 1962 (Boucher cited in Holmberg, 1995; Schlosser & Simonson, 2006). Further, a more significant landmark of distance education at the university level has been credited to the founding of the British Open University (BOU) or Open University of the United Kingdom (UKOU) in 1969, with its first student enrolled in 1971 (Holmberg, 1995; Keegan, 1996; Schlosser & Simonson, 2006). Since the early 1970s, DTUs have gradually been adopted in most English-speaking countries and have spread rapidly to other parts of the world (Zuhairi, 1994). DTUs have been established in North America, Latin America, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, as well as Asia in that period. Many countries have promoted DTUs as a strategic way to provide wider access and equity for higher education provisions (Zuhairi, 1994), including in Southeast Asian countries, such as, STOU in Thailand, launched in 1978, then UT Indonesia in 1984, and recently ABOU in 2000 in Malaysia.

As electronic communications technologies became more common and have advanced since the early 1990s, the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has broadened the opportunities for the growth of distance education (Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008; Simpson, 2002; Schlosser & Simonson 2006). Nowadays, computer networks are becoming a commonplace and convenient way to distribute learning materials; they have made Internet-based education and online learning programs more attractive to both students and distance teaching providers (Ally, 2004; Anderson, 2004; Koonts, Li, & Compura, 2006; Milheim, 2004). Trentin (2010) also asserted the advance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is opening up new possibilities for learning that can offer students the option of time, pace, and place through online learning.

## **Defining Distance Education**

The varied nature of defining distance education can be presented by exploring the different definitions from a number of pioneering theorists in the field over the decades, such as Holmberg (1995) who contended that distance education covers various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance, and teaching of a supporting organisation. Moore (1994) asserted that the fundamental concept of distance education is simply that it is the separation of students and teachers by distance and sometimes by time. Meanwhile, Wedemeyer (1981) emphasised two important components in the concept of distance education: 'distance' in terms of the separation of teachers and learners, and 'the use of media' as the primary communication mode. Education at a distance, for Wedemeyer (1981), is the teaching and learning of knowledge via various methods used when learners and teachers are at physical distance from each other.

Addressing the interest in defining the term, Keegan (1996), following his extensive survey into the literature, concluded that the following five characteristics are to be regarded as essential for a comprehensive definition of distance education:

- The quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process;
- The influence of an educational organisation both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services;
- The use of technical media: print, audio, video or computer, or the World Wide Web, to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course;
- The provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue;
- The quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals rather than in groups, with the possibility of meetings, either face-to-face or by electronic means, for both didactic and socialisation purposes. (p. 49)

Keegan's (1996) five characteristics of distance education have sparked further debate, particularly Keegan's last characteristics (the lack of study group in distance education). Some commentators have argued that such a definition has been too restrictive in its view and too descriptive in its orientation to the past practices of distance education. Garrison and Baynton (1987) and Garrison and Shale (1987) criticized Keegan's definition in that it reflects the traditional view of distance education and does not adequately consider the advancement and future possibilities of distance learning technologies. Others, such as Baath (1989), asserted that in the future new media will make possible various kinds of non-contiguous communication between tutor and students and among students themselves. Baath further clarified that with the spread of computers we are getting a new very powerful medium for almost unlimited contiguous multi-way communication between tutor and students by electronic mail and video conferencing. The fifth element of Keegan's definition, the possibility of occasional face-to-face meetings, is also critiqued by Baath (1981) who argued that "although only as a possibility, [the face-to-face element] is conceptually, diametrically opposite to distance education" (p. 214). Baath (1981) went on to state that it is then important to discuss and clarify the meaning of distance education.

With regards to these problematic issues in defining the field of distance education, it is clear that from Keegan's (1996) point of view, a group method of learning such as teleconferencing (Garrison & Shale, 1987) or computer conferencing (Baath, 1989) cannot be considered as a form of distance education because learners need to be taught as individuals rather than in groups. As new technological developments have

supported the current practices of distance education, such as the capability of computer conferencing (Baath, 1989) for networked groups of learners, Keegan (1998) has reconceptualised his previous definition of distance education in his article entitled “The Two Modes of Distance Education” by arguing: “There is ample evidence for distinguishing group-based from individual-based and that studies which ignore these different modes can present an unbalanced view of the field” (p. 43). It means that distance education “needs no longer to be limited to individual study, but can also include group work” (Holmberg, 2008, p. 27).

The purpose of a definition is to summarise and clarify rather than complicate. Yet there is still confusion and debate about the terminology of distance education. There have been agreements and disagreements among authors on what constitutes distance education (Keegan, 1980). Consequently, it is argued that a theoretical basis for distance education is needed. According to Garrison (2000), theory is “a coherent and systematic ordering of ideas, concepts, and models with the purpose of constructing meaning to explain, interpret and shape practice” (p. 3). A theoretical understanding of distance education is important in order to reach “a common framework, a common perspective, and a common vocabulary that will help us ask questions in a sensible way and make sense of the problems” (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 197).

## **Theories of Distance Education**

While distance education has evolved from traditional correspondence courses to networked learning modes (Taylor, 2001), literature in the field reveals a fragmented framework that lacks theory (Mclsaac & Gunawardena, 2001; Perraton, 1983). Distance education has been described by some as no more than “a hodgepodge of ideas and practices taken from conventional education and imposed on learners who [are] just separated physically from instructor” (Mclsaac & Gunawardena, 2001, p.1). The lack of theoretical foundations has resulted in the lack of guidance on research to be undertaken and the lack of confidence in planning and decision making in the field (Sewart, Keegan, & Holmberg, 1983).

There also remains a debate as to whether or not distance education deserves the status of a discipline (Simpson, 2002). Holmberg (1985), a supporter of viewing distance education as a discipline, argued that distance education is a well-defined area of research and academic teaching and thus deserves disciplinary status. Others, such as Rumble (1988), however, have put forward the idea that there are no grounds for seeing distance education as a separate specialist domain of knowledge, as there is a lack of a real disciplinary culture that is distinct from education as a whole. In the same vein, Tight (1988) argued that it is more appropriate to think of distance education as a set of methods and practices, rather than as a discipline.

With regard to the debate of the distance education theories, it seems important to emphasize that, in this research, the discussion of theories of distance education seems to be important for a number of reasons. As I highlighted at the outset, it was argued by Peters (2003) that theories in distance education have an impact on how DTUs must be managed and confirmed by Garrison (2000), who asserted that theoretical dimensions will help to interpret and shape practice. Using these basic ideas from Garrison (2000) and Peters (2003) seems very useful for this study, since their standpoints will allow the researcher to maintain that theories in distance education may sketch out or point to good practices of distance education. In other words, theories of distance education may respond to existing practices and practical concerns about the adoption of quality and QA in DTUs. The discussion of distance education theories provides a clearer and stronger connection between DTUs and QA programs. This means, in other words, that theory in distance education is not scientific, but that it points towards a rough consensus as to what quality and QA in distance higher education actually may be.

Given the above concern, there are a number of significant contributions to the theoretical approaches in distance education that have been made by many scholars, for instance Charles Wedemeyer, Michael Moore, Otto Peters, John Baath, Borje Holmberg, Desmond Keegan, and Randy Garrison. For the purpose of the present research, however, I only focus on one of the pioneering theories in the field, the theory of interaction and communication founded by Holmberg (Holmberg, 1995; Keegan 1996). In addition, I also discuss another theory, the theory of autonomy and independence, based on the works of Wedemeyer and Moore (Keegan, 1996) in this research, this

theory is regarded as derivative theory that resonates and supports Holmberg's interaction and communication theory.

### ***Theory of Interaction and Communication***

Borje Holmberg has made substantial contributions to the theory of interaction and communication in distance education (Garrison, 2000; Keegan, 1983; Schlosser & Simonson, 2006). Other pioneering theorists who have contributed to this field are John A. Baath, David Sewart, Kevin C. Smith, and John S. Daniel (Keegan, 1983, 1996). Holmberg was born in 1924 in Sweden and has worked in distance education since 1955. He has been regarded as a pioneer in research on distance education. The core of Holmberg's theory is what he calls "guided didactic conversation" (Holmberg, 1981, p. 30) introduced in 1960. The guided didactic conversation refers to the relationship between a student and his or her tutor and other representatives of a supporting organisation. His theory of distance education implies that a guided conversation is essential to fill the distance between the teacher and the learner. The typical traits of such a conversation facilitate learning processes (Holmberg, 1985).

Holmberg (1983; 1995) believed that didactic conversation is customary in learning. This communication is of two kinds: "one-way traffic" (Holmberg, 1995, p. 46) in the form of pre-produced course materials sent from supporting organisations and involving students in interaction with text, described as simulated communication. "Two-way traffic" (Holmberg, 1995, p. 6) refers to real communication between students and the supporting organisation (Holmberg, 1995). Emphasizing the essential aspect of didactic functions, Holmberg argued that course developers in distance education have to develop a focus on didactic rather than logical aspects when structuring a course. A mixture of instructional presentation, such as: the use of examples, discussions, and suggestions for student activities is found valuable to create productive and meaningful learning (Holmberg, 1995). The printed and written words are the most common media, followed by other forms of interactions in this type of instruction. A printed distance study course is basically different from text-books characterized by 'self-contained' learning materials (Holmberg, 1995, p. 6) in order to support internalized conversation. The self-contained learning materials are developed in such a way to allow distance students to get all information needed to comprehend the concepts or subject matter under study

without necessarily requiring additional materials. The distance study course and non-contiguous communication are seen as the instruments of a conversation to stimulate attention and motivate student learning, guide and structure learning, and provide feedback as well as facilitate retention (Holmberg, 1995). For Holmberg, personal relations, study pleasure, and empathy between students and those supporting them were central to learning in distance education. Feelings of empathy and belonging encouraged students, motivated them to study, and improved the results of learning (Holmberg, 2003a). Therefore, two forms of communication—counselling and didactic two way communication—should be provided in distance education systems (Holmberg, 1995). Counselling can be performed through correspondence, on the telephone, or face- to-face to encourage and express concern as well as ask pertinent questions. Meanwhile, didactic two-way communication is customary for courses to provide questions, problems and other tasks, evaluation and correction.

Holmberg (2003a) put forward the idea that the conversational character of distance education should be conceived of as a teaching-learning conversation instead of a guided-didactic conversation, as the term 'didactic' in many cases indicates "an authoritarian approach" (p. 79). In his current work on teaching-learning conversations, Holmberg advances the idea that "the development and use of computers gradually revolutionized distance education and a series of methodological insights were identified and new approaches were applied" (2011, p. 67). According to Holmberg (cited in the "Speaking personally-with Borje Holmberg" essay (2011)), the unprecedented technological innovation in communications has "further opened new possibilities for interaction among students" (p. 67). Online teaching and student contact with one another spontaneously makes individual and group work in distance education possible for adults with jobs, families, and other commitments (Holmberg, 2008). They strengthen and advance "the flexibility that from the beginning made [distance education] a useful tool in adult education and caters [to] collaborative learning" (Holmberg, 2008, p. 27). For Holmberg (2008), computer technology is an excellent medium for interaction between students and their tutors, for exchanges of views and experiences between individual students and groups of students, and "for all kinds of contact between those engaged in a [distance education] program" (p. 29).

The latest publication of Holmberg's (2007) teaching-learning conversation theoretical framework is based on six postulates, as follows.

1. Feelings of personal relations between the learning and teaching parties promote study, pleasure, and motivation;
2. Such feelings can be fostered on the one hand by well-developed self-instructional material and on the other hand by interaction;
3. Intellectual pleasure and study motivation are favourable to the attainment of study goals and the use of proper study processes and methods;
4. The atmosphere, language and conventions of friendly conversation favour feelings of personal relations according to postulate 1;
5. Messages given and received in conversational forms are easily understood and remembered;
6. The conversation concept can be successfully applied to distance education and the media available to it. (p. 70)

From these postulates, Holmberg puts forward his theory that supporting organizations will promote learning and make study relevant to the individual learner; creating feelings of rapport between the learner and supporting organization; facilitating access to content; engaging the learner in activities, discussions, and decisions; and catering for helpful real and stimulated communication to and from the learner (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003). Aligning with the "characteristics of guided-didactic conversation" (see Holmberg, 1983, p. 115), the value of personal relations, and the empathy approach to distance education (Holmberg, 2007), these six postulates provide a conceptual framework for this study specifically in outlining the quality of distance education in learner support areas.

In this research Holmberg's interaction and communication theory is adopted for several reasons. Firstly, his theory addresses the value of interaction and communication that has been regarded as crucial components in learner support areas. Holmberg's theory attempts to involve students by a conversational manner to address individual students and involve their reactions, views, and experiences in developing quality programs in learning support services. Therefore, this theory may be relevant to investigating quality issues in learner support areas. In contrast, for example, if I were to investigate the issue of learning materials production in DTUs, perhaps I would adopt Peters' industrialised of teaching (Keegan, 1996) not Holmberg's interaction and

communication, or I would employ Garrison's community of inquiry for investigating collaborative online learning in distance education, but this is not the case.

Secondly, Holmberg's interaction and communication theory promoted the use of both one-way traffic communication and two-way educational transaction. One-way communication through physical products, such as self-contained learning materials closely associated with the practice of distance education in developing countries. This is to say that designed textbooks have been regarded as major learning sources in the three DTUs involved in this research. This issue is addressed by Spronk (2008) who observed that the Asian [DTUs] are the largest universities in the world which use largely 'print-based' materials as their delivery mode. Therefore this theory seems to be more relevant to investigate the practice of QA for DTUs in developing countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Thirdly, since the present research is conducted in the three different countries each of which has a different educational setting, Holmberg's theory provides a useful framework since interaction and communication components always play a central role in teaching and learning processes. It is expected that Holmberg's theory is applicable in various contexts because interaction and communication will always be something experienced in all distance educational settings. Feelings of personal relations between learning and teaching parties (Holmberg, 2007) are important aspects in the learner support areas to motivate distance learners, leading to productive performance and meaningful learning. Intellectual pleasure and friendly and supportive instructors' postings may contribute to student success.

Fourthly, Holmberg's theory of interaction and communication (Keegan, 1996) corresponds with the existing QA framework identified in this study, AAOU's (2010) QA framework and COL's (2009) QA tools. Holmberg's theory of interaction and communication resonates with QA in learner support dimensions, which addresses the importance of counselling and tutoring (AAOU, 2010; COL 2009) as well as simulated conversation built into the design of the self-learning materials (AAOU, 2010; COL, 2009). It seems that Holmberg's interaction and communication theory provides solid theoretical foundation to investigate two core quality issues in learner support areas,

tutoring and counselling. Further, his theory will also provide a useful means to examine quality issues for self-learning materials.

Finally, Holmberg's interaction and communication ideas also seem to be corresponding to another theory of distance education, specifically the autonomous and independent study proposed by Wedemeyer and Moore (Keegan, 1983). Teaching and learning conversation theory resonates with Moore's (1993) transactional distance model, which addresses the importance of dialogue between student and supporting organizations, such as tutors and counsellors. The following discussion focuses on the theory of autonomy and independence and how Holmberg's (Keegan, 1996) interaction and communication theory resonates to this theory.

### ***Theory of Autonomy and Independence***

The theory of autonomous and independent study closely aligns to the interaction and communication theory. As communication and interaction have been regarded as a critical aspect in developing independent and autonomous distance learners, Holmberg's (1995) two-way traffic communication and particularly Holmberg's one-way traffic communication through printed learning materials or audio-video recorded instructions can be regarded as strategically important to support student independence.

The theory of autonomous and independent study is based on the works of Charles Wedemeyer and Michael Moore (Keegan, 1996). For Wedemeyer (1981), the essence of distance education is the independence of the learner to organize instruction so that greater freedom in learning is possible for the learner. Corresponding to Holmberg's interaction and communication, Wedemeyer (1981) further argued that a communications system in distance education is one of the essential elements to support students' autonomy and independency. This communication component must present in all teaching and learning processes.

Further, Michael Moore shared similar views to that of Wedemeyer. Moore was attracted to the idea of independent study, which lead him to offer his theory of independent study (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Parallel with Holmberg's standpoint which addresses the importance of interaction and communication in the process of learning, Moore (1973), argued that in a distance learning environment the learner and the

teacher are connected by a variety of communication techniques. Distance is identified as a function of individualization and dialogue rather than measured by physical proximity such as miles. Over a period of more than ten years, Moore (1994) refined his theory of independent study. Moore (1993) argued that the most profound impact on distance education is pedagogy rather than the physical or geographical distance that separates instructor and student. He defined transactional distance as “a psychological and communication space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner” (Moore, 1993, p. 23). He went on to explain that the transactional distance is a function of three components: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. Closely aligned to Holmberg’s notion about the essence of communication transaction, Moore noted that dialogue refers to the communication between instructor and student. Structure refers to the elements of course design and to the “rigidity or flexibility of the programme’s educational objectives, teaching strategies, and evaluation methods” (p. 26). Learner autonomy refers to the varying capacities of students to make decisions about their learning.

Based on the foregoing discussion, the theories of distance education provide useful theoretical frameworks for discussing QA in DTUs. As it is mentioned in the earlier discussion, these theories may sketch out good practices in distance higher education. Therefore, these theories may provide a fundamental departure for developing policies and practices of QA programs in DTUs. Some questions arise as to how these theories of distance education correspond to the existing practices and practical concerns of quality in DTUs. Supported by Garrison’s (2000) findings, in what ways will these leading theories of distance education have profound impacts on both policies and implementation of QA in DTUs? As QA commonly refers to the system and procedures, how may these theories guide our understanding to develop quality guidelines? How can we implement them to ensure the quality of interaction and communication? What kind of values and qualities must be developed in order to articulate the balance between interaction and independence and how might we maintain and improve them? It is also appealing to explore how Internet-based instruction and other interactive technologies that now are becoming more commonly used in DTUs will have more impact on student teacher interaction and communication, and whether they will strengthen autonomous

and independent study. These questions will be meaningful for analyzing quality issues in DTUs.

With regard to the current issues of quality in DTUs, Holmberg (1995) observed that the increasingly crucial issue of distance education is to “safeguard the highest possible educational quality and also to ensure that money is invested in a way that yields the highest possible educational output” (p. 183). Quality evaluation is a general educational concern with the purpose “to find out to what extent teaching and learning lead to expected results and acceptable standards” (p. 183). These quality concerns can be regarded as strategic issues in the discussion of distance education with a systems view. The next discussion focuses on the issue of a systems view of distance education as a fundamental framework for discussing quality and QA in DTUs.

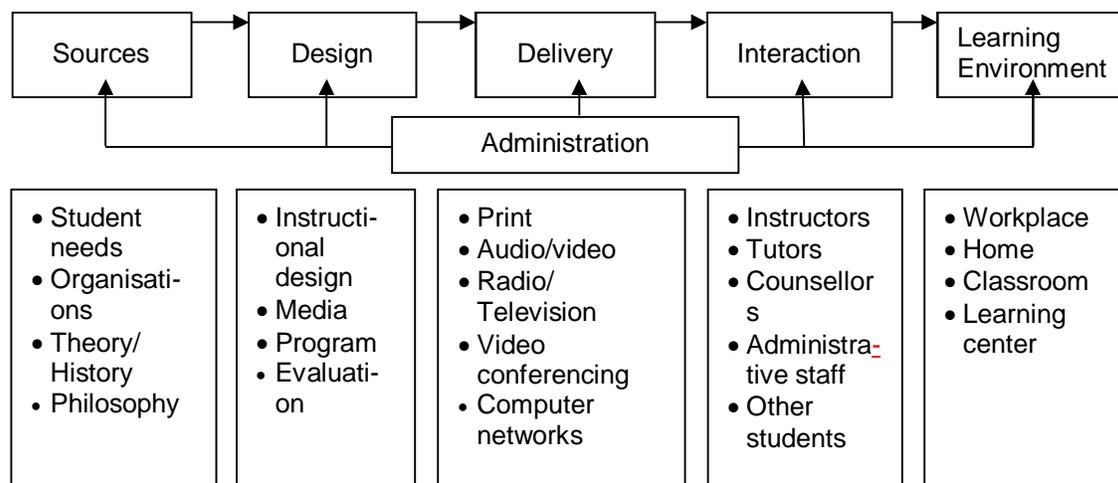
## **A Systems View of Distance Teaching Universities**

According to Lin (2010), a systems theory puts forth the idea that all organizations are systems and all systems are part of larger systems. In DTUs, the use of this system approach will allow us to see institutions in a holistic manner. It “stresses the whole (the system) and studies its parts not as separate entities but as components of the whole” (Holmberg, 1995, p. 28). A distance teaching institution is a system involving complex processes and consists of various sub-systems that work together and contribute to the overall purpose of the university. As a system, a DTU has five characteristics: 1) it has a purpose, 2) the elements (subsystems) have an established arrangement, and each element has its own sub-objectives, 3) a synergetic interrelationship must exist among subsystems, 4) the process of input to output is more important than the arts of the system, and 5) the objective of the whole outweighs the subordinate objectives of the subsystems (Luchinger & Dock cited in Frantz & King, 2000). Examining the arena of distance education, Frantz and King (2000) urged the usefulness of a systems approach as a powerful tool to connect necessary people, goals, organisations, and technologies in the DTUs. Others, such as Moore and Kearsley (1996) argued that the use of a systems approach will help us to support our understanding of distance education as a field of study. Regarding student support services, the systems model represents an overall strategy designed to seek appropriate

strategies for dealing with learning services, designing and implementing student support, assessing their quality and reformulating the process.

Emphasising the need for a systems view, Moore and Kearsley (1996) proposed “A systems model for distance education” (p. 9) as a general model illustrating common components that will be found at all levels and types of distance education (see Figure 1). According to this approach, components of a distance education system may include: sources, design, delivery, interaction, and learning environment. The figure illustrates how these components interact with each other to support the whole systems of DTUs.

**Figure 1. A system model for distance education**



Adapted from: Moore and Kearsley (1996), p. 9.

In this model, every distance education system will be supported by subsystems, which are systems in themselves that are related to different components that make up distance education. For example, there is a subsystem in distance education that deals with teaching delivery as one of the important factors in learner support areas. In this scenario, the teaching delivery mode includes many component activities working together so that instructional processes can be delivered with quality, comply with established criteria, and meet students’ interests. This teaching delivery subsystem links to the other subsystems such as course design, sources of curriculum, and student learning environment to form the total system of distance education. All these components are critical inputs for DTU’s learner support services. In this model, it is important to distinguish media and technology. Moore and Kearsley (1996) argued that

technology refers to not only the machines for delivering the messages but also includes the institution and human resources who make them work. Technologies may include such as radio and computer networks. Meanwhile, Media refers to *symbol systems* or *mediated messages* distributed through technologies. For example, the technology of television broadcasting distributes messages by sound and picture through the air.

The system model for distance education proposed by Moore and Kearsley (1996) can be regarded as a strategic approach to study quality and QA in the context of distance education. First, it provides an opportunity to delimit and define the different subsystems, particularly the learner support subsystem. Second, this system approach allows the researcher to confirm the inputs, processes, and outputs as basic elements of QA programs in the learner support subsystem. Inputs, processes, and outputs have been regarded as important elements in the implementation of a quality system (Nicholson, 2011). This systems model leads the researcher to recognize that all inputs and processes that relate to the quality of learner support areas should be carefully analysed since the subsystems of learner support should be regarded as results of integrating course within the large systems of DTUs. Therefore, a change in one subsystem will bring about change in the others. Third, the systems model will also provide an opportunity to the researcher to explore as to how DTUs to organising the tasks required accomplishing their quality criteria (outputs) in learner support areas, which sets the conditions for proceeding in their orderly ways. To achieve the outputs that meet quality criteria in face-to-face tutorial program, for example, what organisational resources (inputs) are involved? What mechanisms (processes) are put in place to execute the program? And how are the QA procedures evaluated and reformulated? How are problems in learner support defined? How are these problems analysed and alternative solutions drawn up? How are selected solutions put in practice? The next discussion will review the concept and practices of quality and QA in DTUs.

## **Quality and Quality Assurance in Distance Teaching Universities**

This part of chapter 2 focuses on the issues of quality and QA. The first section begins with the general overview of quality focussing on the problematic nature on defining quality in higher education. The second section reviews the dimensions of quality in higher education. Section three presents the discussion of conceptualizing QA in DTUs. Then, the discussion moves to the QA areas in DTUs, which focus more on learner support areas adopting COL and AAOU QA models. Finally, section five provides a general review of QA methodologies commonly used in DTUs.

### ***Defining Quality***

The concept of quality is likely perceived to be multifaceted. The different perspectives of the term quality are widely debated along with the quality movement in the business sector. Each of the proponents of quality has his or her particular emphasis, generally depending on the academic and business background. To name a few, quality can be seen as “conformance to requirements” (Crosby, 1979, p. 17), “best for certain customer conditions” (Feigenbaum, 1951, p. 1), and “fitness for use” (Juran, 1988, p. 1.1). Joseph M. Juran (1988) applied the quality concepts to develop his management process that focuses on continuous improvement. Others such as W. Edwards Deming (1990), who is generally credited as the father of the modern quality movement, was heavily involved in the manufacturing industry. Deming developed a ‘plan, do, check, act’ (PDCA) cycle as basic principles to manage continuous quality improvement (Sallis, 2002). Deming’s PDCA cycle as the road to quality is naturally couched in the jargon of the manufacturing industry. Deming’s statistical quality control was adopted by the Japanese production sectors and contributed to their emergence as a major industrial nation (Beckford, 2002). Recently, the theories and practices of quality have been applied and carried out by many organizations, both profit and non-profit institutions, worldwide. Higher education sectors have therefore also been heavily involved in adopting quality and QA programs.

According to Sallis (2002), the movement of quality in education is of more recent origin. The introduction of QA policies in higher education presupposes an implicit

understanding of 'quality'. The concept of quality has emerged and became one of the principal themes in higher education policy debates over the last three or four decades (Maniku, 2008). Issues such as maintaining academic standards, achieving student satisfaction, meeting the needs of industry or other employers' demand, accreditation and accountability to all stakeholders have attracted much attention as rivalry among higher education institutions for educational market becomes much more competitive.

In higher education, however, the term quality appears to be difficult to conceptualize (Chalmers & Johnston, 2012; Jung, 2008; Jung & Latchem, 2007; Martin & Stella, 2007). As debates and interests grow, new perspectives of quality emerge and extend the meaning of existing definitions. How to integrate and accommodate those different perspectives of quality in order to make the definition and standards acceptable throughout the system is an obvious strategic challenge for DTUs. As applying quality programs in higher education, particularly in DTUs, can be regarded as a recent phenomenon, it seems relevant to examine how the term quality has been defined in the discussion of the field of distance education.

Some authors articulate that quality is even more elusive in higher education than in manufacturing industries. Various stakeholders have different perspectives of quality in higher education (Harvey & Green, 1993; Jung & Latchem, 2007; Weber, 2007). Martin and Stella (2007) asserted that "the concept of quality is...often used by stakeholders in order to legitimate their specific interest[s]" (p. 30). The conflicting definitions of quality in education have also been addressed by Vlasceanu, Grunberg, and Parlea (2007) who contended that:

Quality in higher education is a multi-dimensional, multilevel, and dynamic concept that relates to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional mission and objectives, as well as to specific standards within a given system, institution, programme, or discipline. Quality may thus take different, sometimes conflicting, meanings depending on the understanding of various interests of different constituencies or stakeholders in higher education. (p. 70)

The government, as a potential stakeholder, may be more interested in graduating as many students as possible with reducing costs (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). The university may judge quality according to the amount of research performed by all

academic staff (Martin & Stella, 2007). On the other hand, learners will address quality based on personal interest, individual development, and preparation for a position in a society (Vroeijenstijn, 1995).

According to Green (1994), the robust discussion of quality in education can be traced back to the public demand for quality in the mid-1980s driven by the increasing number of people entering higher education in 1970s. Harvey and Green (1993, pp. 9 - 34) identified that quality in higher education can be classified into five dimensions as follows:

- Exceptionality. Quality as something exceptional, distinctive, and exclusive.
- Consistency. Quality as perfect or zero defects.
- Fitness for purpose. Quality as fulfilling customers' requirements.
- Value for money. Quality as a return on investment.
- Transformation. Quality as enhancement and the development of new knowledge.

These five approaches to quality reflect a wide range of meanings ranging from the traditional notion of quality as excellence to focussing on processes that it aims to meet perfectly (consistency), mission orientation and consumer specification (fitness for purpose), and the transformative quality, through enhancing and empowering the consumers (Harvey & Green, 1993). Considering these different perspectives and the complex nature of defining quality, it can be drawn from the above discussion that there is no single definition of quality that is correct to the exclusion of all others (Green, 1994).

The forgoing discussion of quality suggests a universal message that the term quality can be viewed from two dimensions. Firstly, quality can be regarded as standards or degree of what constitutes quality in products or services. In DTUs, quality relates to the establishment of their acceptable quality criteria of the basic important of their products or services. These products or services may include the quality of printed learning materials, audio-video programs, tutorial sessions, and counselling services. Secondly, quality implies understanding of the people in the system to measure the degree or level of quality of these products or services. Therefore the term quality may also incorporate both the establishment of the degree or level of quality and the

measurement of these quality criteria for educational products and services offered by DTUs.

### ***Conceptualizing Quality Assurance in Distance Teaching Universities***

Along with the problematic nature of defining quality, the perspectives of QA also lack a universal definition. The concept and practice of QA has also been very loosely linked with other related terms such as quality control, quality assessment, quality audit and accreditation (Martin & Stella, 2007) with no general consensus on the exact meaning of each of the terms. However, broad definitions of QA can be found in the literature. For example, Harvey and Green (1993) contended that QA refers to “those mechanisms and procedures designed to reassure the various stakeholders in higher education that institutions accord a high priority to implementing policies designed to maintain and enhance institutional effectiveness” (p. 178). Other, such as Vlasceanu, Grunberg, and Parlea (2007), argued that QA in higher education requires a dynamic process involving internal approaches to the institution and external agencies. It is a never-ending process for maintaining and improving quality rather than simply a system of evaluation and checking for errors (Warren, McManus, & Nnazor, 1994).

Generally, the term ‘quality assurance’ in DTUs is understood to refer to policies, actions, systematic standards and procedures designed to enhance quality and achieve pre-determined quality criteria. Tait (1997) suggested that adoption of QA calls for mechanisms of self-evaluation in relation to meeting quality standards. COL (1999a) stated that QA is “the set of activities that an organization undertakes to ensure that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or service” (pp. 2-3). The COL (1999a) stated that the ‘products’ refer to the aims of educational process that bring about changes in learners’ knowledge, skills and attitudes. Meanwhile, the services provided by educational organizations can include provision of information to prospective students, enrolment and registration, supporting learning by means of tutoring, counselling and advising, and assessing learners’ performances.

Given these diverse perspectives of QA on one hand, and considering the specific meaning of quality defined in the earlier discussion on the other hand, it is fair enough to set up the specific meaning of QA in this study as referring to quality

guidelines that reflect the universities' policies and practices in achieving standards of the products or services being offered. In learner support areas, these quality guidelines may include standard operating procedures in handling students' inquiries, conducting F2F tutorial sessions, and examining online learning services. The issue of QA in DTUs is discussed further in the following section.

### ***Quality Assurance Areas in Distance Teaching Universities***

The complex nature of defining quality and QA has resulted in disparities between QA approaches at each DTU in terms of defining criteria, standards, methods, and the ways of managing QA programs. Stella and Gnanam (2004) contended that any assessment of quality in DTUs should be made with reference to a set of criteria. Warren, McManus, and Nnazor (1994) revealed that the initial investigation of criteria and focus of QA in DTU was developed by Nunan and Calvert in a 1992 study, who found that QA in DTUs has focused on two key areas: the processes and production of course and program materials and the delivery of distance education to learners. The American Council on Education (ACE) recommended the following major dimensions that focus more on learning support and outcomes: learning design, learner support, organisational commitment, learning outcomes and technology (cited in Stella & Gnanam, 2004).

The more wide-ranging information on QA areas in DTUs has been disclosed by Jung (2004) based on a survey of eight mega universities and another six distance education providers. For example: at the Open University of the United Kingdom (UKOU), criteria include: institutional management of quality and standards, framework for academic quality and standards, internal review, assessment and awards, collaborative awards, student support and guidance, staff, and accountability to stakeholders. Meanwhile at Athabasca University in Alberta, they include: openness, flexibility, quality courses, programs and student support services, organization and people, provincial, national, and international positioning, and fiscal health (Jung, 2004).

Currently, with the support of the World Bank and UNESCO, the global and regional initiatives for QA have been developed under the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) including the ASEAN

Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) and the Central Asian Network for Quality Assurance and Accreditation (CANQA) (Latchem & Ali, 2012). The framework of QA areas has also been identified accordingly by different institutions, such as COL and AAOU. They provide general QA frameworks which allow them to be adapted and tailored by different DTUs with different cultural and educational settings. The QA areas from different institutions and sources are presented in appendix A to compare similarities and differences. Both AAOU (2010) and COL (2009) proposed ten quality areas for the university level covering strategic areas of distance education system.

Whilst COL addresses the different list of criteria indicating the number of standards for institution and programme level, the AAOU provides quality areas at the university level that need to be elaborated into specific performance indicators. These QA areas are general enough for DTUs to be adopted and meet some of these QA areas, if not all. These general quality areas are essential elements in offering distance education and it is very likely that the QA areas are open to varied interpretation, and are in general rather specific (Murgatroyd, 2008). Considering a broad range of QA areas in DTUs, as was previously discussed, this present study will only focus on learner support areas. These areas are discussed in the following section.

### ***Quality Assurance in Learner Support Areas***

The need for learner support in DTUs comes from the recognition that learning processes take place with teaching providers (tutors, instructors, and learning material developers) and students being geographically separate from each other. This learning mode requires distance students to work alone for most parts of the learning process. Therefore, distance learners have unique needs, and many practitioners in the field believe providing distance learners with appropriate support services will increase the quality of their learning (Lee, 2000; Simpson, 2002). These unique needs include: 1) information to help learners relate to the institution and understand its systems, 2) contact with tutors to help maintain motivation and overcome learning problems, 3) institutional identity to feel that they are part of the body of learners rather than studying in isolation, and 4) advice on how to study in distance education delivery mode (COL, 1999b).

The term learner support, however, has been defined in different ways to classify different areas of learner support services in DTUs. According to Lee (2000), Robinson, (1995), and Sewart (1993), learner support is rather a broad concept and its definition varies. Simpson (2002) also argued that the term learner support has been used and exemplified very loosely and linked with the words like 'guidance', 'advice' and 'counselling'. There are two different perspectives to approach learner support: supplementary and holistic (Robinson, 1995; Tait, 1995). The supplementary approach is more limited in that learner support is confined as an add-on to learning materials and in the latter, holistic/ complementary approach, learner support services are viewed as an important factor which pervades the entire education program (Lee, 2000).

Simpson (2002) defined learner support in the broadest terms as "all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their study" (p. 6). Simpson (2002) extended his definition into two major learner support services. The first category includes academic support covering all areas, such as defining course territory, explaining concepts, exploring the course, feedback, developing learning skills, achieving progress and enrichment (extending the boundaries of the course and sharing the excitement of learning). The second grouping of activities consists of advising (giving information, exploring problems and suggesting directions), assessment (providing feedback to the individual on non-academic aptitudes and skills), action (dealing with practical help to promote study), advocacy (making out a case for funding and writing a reference), agitation (promoting changes within the institution to benefit students), and organizing student support.

Recently, it seems that learner support in DTUs has been regarded as one of the critical factors and integrated in DTUs' QA program consisting of various key elements ranging from administrative support, instructional support, technical support, and tutorial/counselling support. The importance of learner support services has also been addressed in the QA guidelines of COL and AAOU as discussed earlier in this chapter. For the purpose of this study, I review QA in learner support areas based on the COL and AAOU models for the reason that these organisations have had a significant influence on the quality development of the three DTUs involved in this study.

## **Quality Assurance in Learner Support Areas: COL Model**

The COL theory for assuring quality for distance higher education can be regarded as one of the leading models that has been adopted by some DTUs, especially those operating in Commonwealth countries. The development of what they call the “Quality Assurance Toolkit: distance higher education institutions and programs” (COL, 2009) has been attributed to the COL, Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The QA toolkit consists of several aspects covering ten key areas for institutions and six areas of essential elements for program levels.

The COL’s QA model is equipped with a number of important elements needed for the application of the model including criteria standards for each respective area including learner support areas and performance indicators. According to this model, the performance indicators are developed to enable DTUs to: 1) conduct a summative self-evaluation for quality improvement, and 2) monitor the processes of continuous learning and ongoing improvement. The COL (2009) proposed 386 performance indicators across 10 quality areas at the institutional level and 276 performance indicators across six quality areas at the programme level. To support the application of the model, COL identifies a five-point scale (0, 1, 2, 3, and 4) as a descriptor for each performance indicator. The (0) refers to fails to meet criteria, unsatisfactory (1), satisfactory (2), good (3), and excellent (4). The results of the quality assessment are derived by totaling the points gained on all performance indicators.

According to the COL (2009), learner support deals with various provisions of a range of opportunities for tutoring at a distance through the use of various forms of technology. Learner support areas include contact tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring, counselling, and the stimulation of peer support structures are employed to facilitate their holistic progression (COL, 2009). The COL (1999b) further stipulated that regardless of the form and management of these services, learner support must meet two functions—tuition and counselling. Tuition services refer to a number of activities that promote intellectual support such as explaining a concept or instruction to the learners, exploring issues with the learners, and giving feedback to the learners. Meanwhile, counselling services deal with personal and emotional support such as

providing the learners with information and advice, taking action to help learners, and advocating on behalf of learners.

To ensure the expected benefits of adopting a quality framework and to help DTUs in assuring quality for learner support areas, the COL's QA framework provides 15 criteria standards (COL, 2009). According to the COL, the quality criteria for learner support areas that DTUs may adopt include a number of standards as follows:

- learner support is planned during programme development and is built into the design of the programme and course materials;
- learner support is provided using a range of media, with emphasis on the use of appropriate ICTs;
- tutors are selected and trained to shift their roles from being teachers to facilitators of learning;
- tutorial group size is optimum in facilitating adequate support to learners in various ways;
- tutors provide timely feedback to learners on their assignments;
- academic, administrative and technical staff facilitate learner success;
- there are mechanisms to follow up and support learners throughout the duration of their study;
- opportunities are provided for academic and social peer interaction, vertically with tutors and horizontally with peers;
- measures for feedback and monitoring of learner support services are in place; and
- institutional mechanisms developed to facilitate student progression from one level of education to the next higher level successfully and towards gainful employment. (Adapted from COL, 2009, p. 71-79)

These criteria standards reflect the essential elements in offering quality of learner support in DTUs. Therefore, these criteria statements represent a distillation of good practice in the specific domain of learner support services. Further, these criteria standards were transformed into 49 performance indicators to guide DTUs to address “the requirements for quality provision and to meet the expressed needs of learners” (p. 9). These performance indicators for learner support also indicate the kinds of data to be collected while implementing each activity of learner support areas. Table 1 presents an example of the linkage between criteria standard within the learner support areas and its performance indicators.

**Table 1. Criteria standard and performance indicators for learner support (An example)**

Criteria Standard	Performance indicators
Learner support is planned during programme development and is built into the design of the programme and course materials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sufficient contact sessions are planned and integrated into the course design.</li> <li>• Mandatory attendance is fixed at a minimum desired level.</li> <li>• The support of individual learners is built into the design of course materials.</li> <li>• Peer support mechanisms are built into the course materials.</li> <li>• The institution provides on-going support for learner progression across courses within a programme of study.</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from COL (2009, p. 71-72)

The above table shows how a certain quality standard in the area of learner support services and the integration of learner support with the program and course design and development will be assessed by using performance indicators covering the scope of the content/activities. Connected to the existing theories of distance education, the list of performance indicators presented on the right side aligns with Holmberg's notion of the design of learning materials for distance education (Holmberg, 1995). The list also addresses the importance of communication, interaction and collaborative support during learning processes that has been highlighted by Holmberg (1995; 2003b; 2007), Moore (1993), and Garrison and Anderson (2003).

### **Quality Assurance in Learner Support Areas: AAOU Model**

AAOU was founded in 1987 by a number of higher education distance institutions in the Asian region. AAOU is designed as a focal point for sharing issues, research, and current developments in the field of distance education across Asia. When I started this research project, the secretariat of AAOU was moved from UT Indonesia, my work place, to Wawasan Open University (WOU) Malaysia. This AAOU's QA framework can be regarded as important guidelines for practicing QA program covering ten strategic issues in distance education system (WOU, 2011a).

AAOU's QA (A-QA) model is best described in statements of best practices that are generally applicable in quality distance education provision. The statements of best

practices are generic statements that can be adapted for use by DTUs to maintain and enhance quality. These statements can be used as a means to assess performance trends in DTUs to initiate continuous improvement. These statements of best practices can be regarded as the same as 'criteria standards', the term used in the COL's (2009) QA framework. These statements should not only inspire practice, but they have to be practiced by DTUs to meet certain sets of quality distance education system. According to AAOU (2010), the A-QA framework is currently an enrichment, improvement, and re-organization of the existing QA framework, taking into accounts new development, and integrating recent developments in the field of distance education such as e-Learning and open educational resources (OER).

According to AAOU (2010), learner support refers to all variables relating to tutorial and learning services to ensure that students' learning processes are facilitated and their needs are met. Learners are supported by the provision of a range of opportunities for real two-way communication through the use of various forms of technology for tutoring at a distance; contact tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring, counselling, and the encouragement of peer support structures. In its current QA framework, AAOU (2010) has revised the QA criteria for learner support areas into two sub-components – tutorial and counselling.

1. Sub-component tutorial. Tutorial support for distance learners is different from teaching as demonstrated in conventional universities. Tutoring modes either include face-to-face contact or involve media for tutorial support such as radio, audio cassette, telephone, television, video, video conferencing and computer-mediated instruction. Tutorials can be seen as crucial services for helping students to develop study skills, to learn to be master concepts and to support student success. In this AAOU QA model, the sub-component tutorial is then supported by a number of statements of best practices as follows.
  - The institution provides clear tutorial guidelines to tutors and learners.
  - The institution has procedures to ensure that a sufficient number of qualified tutors are recruited for the courses.
  - The institution selects tutors who meet the particular criteria for tutoring the courses.
  - The institution provides appropriate training to tutors for tutoring the course.

- The institution has an effective system which ensures that the tutors give constructive feedback about the learners' progress to the learners and the institution.
  - The institution provides orientation sessions to learners prior to tutorial activities.
  - The institution has a mechanism for monitoring students' progress.
  - The institution provides a variety of tutorial modes that are easily accessible by the students.
  - The institution provides sufficient facilities for conducting tutorials.
2. Sub-component counselling. Counselling support covers the various aspects of guidance and advising. With regard to the current trends of using online services, counselling services also include several ways to improve communication and interaction skills to promote network and community building (Lee, 2000). To facilitate the application, a number of the best practices of counselling support are identified as follows.
- The institution has counselling guidelines for the counsellors and students.
  - The institution ensures that the counsellors are aware of their roles in providing counselling.
  - The institution provides both synchronous and asynchronous channels for the counsellors to communicate with the learners.
  - The institution has an effective process of diagnosing student problems to determine the individual counselling needs of the learners.
  - The institution has an effective mechanism for monitoring and evaluating student learning support services. (AAOU, 2010)

These lists of best practices in the learner support services are important to this study in terms of: 1) informing the researcher with regard to the perspectives of QA, how QA has been interpreted in the three selected DTU institutions. As the three selected DTUs in this study are members of the AAOU, their QA programs may include some of these list items, if not all. 2) Aligning with the quality criteria discussed previously, the three DTUs under investigation may develop their QA policies under the influence of the COL and AAOU QA framework. Thus, these lists of QA criteria and best practices provide an initial picture on how QA has been understood by the people in the three universities. These in turn will help the researcher in developing his interview guide.

The emergence of these QA models and other transnational QA frameworks allow local DTU actors from different territories to further develop the QA mechanism and procedures in their endeavours for improving quality based on both local requirements and international certifications. Harvey and Green (1993) contend that “Quality assurance is not about specifying the standards or specifications...[It] is about ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures, and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality...is delivered” (p. 20). UT Indonesia, for example, has advanced to adopt and contextualise the AAOU’s QA framework by developing various QA manuals illustrating the standard operating procedures (SOPs) to enhance quality in different QA areas that fit its local context and to seek accreditation from international QA professional bodies (Belawati, Zuhairi, & Wardani, 2012). Some DTUs prefer to adopt a certain QA framework and ask for external QA audits as their methods for assessing quality and QA certification. The next discussion will focus on the issues of QA methodologies.

### ***Quality Assurance Methodologies***

The approaches to QA in DTUs point to a great variety in methodologies. Some frequent approaches to QA methodologies in education include: accreditation, quality audits, student surveys (Chalmers & Johnston, 2012). Others focus on self-study or self-evaluation and industry-based frameworks such as total quality management, ISO 9001 standards, and the Baldrige National Quality Award (Bogue, 1998; Sallis, 2002). In this paper, however, I will focus on providing an overview of four major approaches identified as the more commonly used methodologies at DTUs: accreditation, self-assessment, quality audits, and student surveys. In addition, industry-based frameworks of quality will also be highlighted as current practices in some DTUs.

#### **Accreditation**

Accreditation refers to a quality assessment and review by an accreditation or certification body which evaluates whether an institution or program qualifies for certain status (Brennan & Shah cited in Maniku, 2008; Chalmers & Johnston, 2012). The primary purpose of accreditation is to ensure quality and to support continuous improvement (Olcott, 2003; Sterian, 1992; Sywelem & Witte, 2009). Accreditation can be defined as “a process of external quality review used by higher education to scrutinize

colleges, universities, and educational programs for quality assurance and quality improvement" (CHEA, 2002, p. 1).

Scholarly assessments of post-secondary accreditation have identified the promotion of a number of core values: institutional autonomy and academic freedom (Eaton, 2010), the quality and the efficiency of educational processes (Sterian, 1992), and institutional commitment to student learning and achievement (Sywelem & Witte, 2009). However, accreditation also has some serious challenges: 1) it places more emphasis on minimum standards and less on continual re-evaluation, experimentation, and improvement (Maniku, 2008), 2) the correlation between the requirements for meeting accreditation standards and future professional success is not clear, 3) the potential different perspectives of the experts involved make the process subjective and is in itself questionable (Sterian, 1992).

### **Self-assessment**

The self-assessment or self-study is an excellent first diagnostic step on the path to quality (Sallis, 2002). It refers to the study of institutional processes and practices by members of the respective institution (Maniku, 2008). According to the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), self-assessment is:

A comprehensive, systematic and regular review of an organization's activities and results...The self-assessment process allows the organisation to discern clearly its strengths and areas in which improvements can be made and culminates, in planned improvement which are the monitored for progress. (Sallis, 2002, p. 148)

Martin and Stella (2007) made further clarification by explaining that in the self-assessment process, faculty together with administrators should discuss the strengths and weaknesses in their respective units, and identify the causes of possible shortcomings. The underlying assumption behind the use of self-assessment is that an educational institution that really understands itself in terms of its strengths, weaknesses, potential opportunities and threats (SWOT) is likely to be more successful in employing its educational mandate than the one without self-awareness (Martin & Stella, 2007).

## **Quality Audit**

According to Chalmers and Johnston (2012), quality audits in DTUs tend to predominantly use performance indicators developed and collected at the institutional level, although some countries have standardized national performance indicators against which institutions are audited. Performance indicators and quality assessment, according to Shale (2003), are terms that are closely associated in QA. The performance indicators are generic statements that can be adapted for use by distance education providers to maintain and enhance quality (COL, 2009). They can be used as tools to evaluate performance trends in the institution, to initiate continuous improvement (COL, 2009) and to monitor efficiency with regard to staff-student ratios, indexes of revenue and capital resources, market share and examination (Harvey & Green, 1993).

One of the dilemmas related to QA at DTUs lies in identifying suitable benchmarks (Stella & Gnanam, 2004), statements of best practices (AAOU version) or performance indicators (COL version), which will make the quality assessment clear especially to the QA agencies and the DTUs. To use the benchmarks, indicators and sources of evidence are necessary and important for judging the level of quality performance (COL, 2009; Stella & Gnanam, 2004). For example, without specific indicators, the statement of best practice: "The institution has well run student support services" (p. 154) does not tell us clearly what characterizes effective student support. For Stella and Gnanam (2004), "it is essential to spell out what characterizes the different levels of performance" (p. 154) to avoid the ambiguity and affect the objectivity of quality assessment.

## **Student Survey**

One of the strategic issues in research has focused on the students as the principal 'customers' in distance higher education (Davies, Howell & Petrie, 2010; Lee, Driscoll, & Nelson, 2007; Zawacki-Richter, Backer, & Vogt, 2009). Surveys that gather information on the experiences and perceptions of students have been widely undertaken by many DTUs to seek feedback and assess quality (Chalmers & Johnston, 2012). The surveys can be conducted at the different phases of the students' experiences, during the study process and thereafter.

One of the significant models for conducting student surveys is Kirkpatrick's four-level approach (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006; Phillips, 1997). Kirkpatrick's four levels: "reaction, learning, behaviour, [and] results" (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006, p. 21) have been adopted by higher education institutions in order to know the following; 1) were the students pleased with the program? (reaction), 2) what did the students learn in the program? (learning), 3) did the participants change their behaviour based on what was learned? (behaviour), and 4) did the change in behaviour positively affect the organization? (results) (Phillips, 1997). Kaufman (cited in Phillips, 1997) expanded the Kirkpatrick model and adds a fifth level addressing societal issues which examines "the extent to which the performance improvement program has enhanced society and the environment surrounding the organization" (p. 39). Since the main characteristics of distance learners are those of working people, the Kirkpatrick' evaluation model provides an important means to assess quality of educational programs viewed from students' perspectives.

### **Industry-based Frameworks of Quality**

There are several studies which disclose that external quality standards that are commonly used in industry-based framework of quality have also been adopted in DTUs. ISO 9001 and the Baldrige National Quality Award are major approaches to QA in DTUs. Belawati, Zuhairi, and Wardani (2012) and Yuniati, Hardini, Sunarsih, and Belawati (2012) revealed that UT Indonesia has employed and received the ISO 9001 quality certificate since 2006. Ali and Fadzil (2012) also disclosed that ABOU has also adopted ISO 9001 as the road to quality. Meanwhile, STOU Thailand has moved forward in its initial step in implementing Baldrige Award format in order to achieve world class distance higher education (Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan (2012a).

The ISO 9001 standard that was originally set for industrial sectors is concerned with quality management. It had origins in the United Kingdom and developed into an international standard in 1990s (Sallis, 2002). It has since spread to other sectors including in education in the 1990s (Van den Berghe in Maniku, 2008). The philosophy behind the ISO framework is that quality must be integrated into the systems and procedures of the organization in their attempt to make continuous improvement (Sallis, 2002). The ISO standards can be regarded as a method of QA that promotes the

adoption of process approach when employing and improving the effectiveness of quality management. The employment of these standards calls for a descriptive documentation (Maniku, 2008; Sallis, 2002). Learning support programs in DTUs, for example, need to document all the activities concerned with the delivery of teaching learning provisions and support services, including the distribution of learning materials to their students, the implementation of F2F tutorials and online learning services, academic and non-academic counselling, and the management of students' inquires and problems.

The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award is the US prestigious quality award created in 1987 that is originally designed for manufacturing, service, and small business. In 1999, the award was extended to the health care and education sectors. Different from ISO 9001 which focuses on quality procedures, the Baldrige Award emphasis is on the non-procedural aspect of quality and focuses on results and continuous improvement (Sallis, 2002). The Baldrige quality framework is built upon seven core criteria; they are leadership, strategic planning, customer and market focus, information and analysis, human resource focus, process management, and business results (Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012a). The implementation of the Baldrige quality award in education is aimed to "design and deliver effective educational programs and activities that lead to strong learning results and educational improvement" (NIST, 2012, p. 1). According to Maniku (2008), the implementation of the Baldrige quality criteria in education implies the assumption that all educational institutions operate competitively in their market situations. The Baldrige model helps educational institutions to gain competitive advantage through the establishment of criteria for excellence and the recognition for performance.

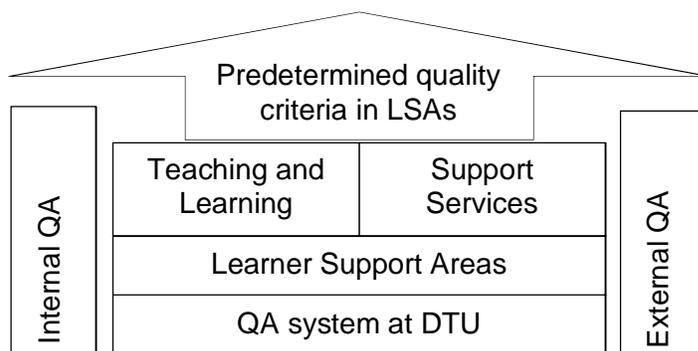
From the whole discussion of quality and QA, it seems that quality and QA in DTUs are identified and implemented in different ways which reflect the differences in cultures and expectations. The complex nature in defining quality and the different methodologies in assuring quality have encouraged me to ask questions about how QA works in DTUs. How do different DTUs identify quality and QA programs? What philosophical background influences their QA decisions? The discussion of QA methodologies has also prompted further questions as to whether accreditation is more appropriate than these other approaches, or whether self-assessment is less dominant

in DTUs. It would be very challenging to compare and contrast QA approaches in three different DTUs that are operated in different cultural and educational settings. The expansion of current educational technologies and the globalization of international certification of distance education imply further questions concerning the definition of educational quality, and changes in the nature of distance education. How does the advancement of multimedia technology for education affect the current practice of quality criteria and mechanism of DTUs in developing countries? How do these DTUs develop and implement their QA frameworks to ensure their sustainability.

## Conceptual Framework

According to Jabareen (2009) a conceptual framework is a network, or a plane of interlinked concepts that together provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena. The conceptual framework of the present study reflects the concepts from the literature review, which illustrates how those concepts support the framework to establish evidence in supporting the need for the research question that will be investigated. Based on the foregoing discussion on the theories of DE, the concept and methods of quality and QA, as well as the growing influence of globalization and its implications for QA in DTUs, the conceptual framework of the present research can be illustrated as follows (Figure 2):

**Figure 2. QA system in learner support areas (LSAs)**



The QA system DTUs provide a fundamental platform for the implementation of QA different areas such as human resources, program design, and curriculum

development.. This present research focuses on the learner support areas emphasising how the selected DTUs develop and implement their quality programs in teaching and learning provisions and support services to achieve their predetermined quality standards in learner support areas. While there are different methods in assessing quality in DTUs ( see the discussion of the QA methodologies in the previous section), in general, however, these different methods of assessing quality can be classified into two approaches namely internal quality audits or self-assessment and external quality audits. Internal quality audits are a quality assessment conducted by the DTUs to assess whether their learner support programs meet their predetermined quality criteria. Meanwhile, external quality audits are performed through the involvement external QA bodies in the name of governments and other private QA professional bodies.

In this study, it is argued that the development and implementation of QA programs correlate to the different elements within and surrounding the organizations. In other words, there is a relationship between the QA programs employed by DTUs and their external and internal environment, as well as to the existing theories in distance education. The next section discusses how these components relate to the QA programs in the learner support areas.

### ***Distance Teaching Universities' External Environment***

According to Moore and Kearsley (2012), a distance teaching institution is an organization that reflects an open system which exists by interacting with its external environment where they operate to receive necessary inputs such as employees, physical resources, financial support, and information. The transformation process changes or adds these inputs into something of value that can be exported back to the environment (Daft, 2007; Rumble, 1986). A DTU, as an open system, will interact with its environments. These environments can be classified into two main groups: external and internal environments (Barney & Hesterly 2010). The external environmental can be further classified into two sub-groups: general and specific environments (Robbins, 1983). The general environments include those environments that might not have a direct impact on the daily operation of the organization but indirectly influence it (Daft, 2007; Robbins, 1983). The general environment often refers to the economic, geographical, political, socio-cultural, and technological environment (Barney & Hesterly,

2010; Robbins, 1983). Meanwhile, the specific environments are concerned with a number of immediate stakeholders surrounding the organisation. In this study, these DTUs specific environments include: government, QA professional bodies, and students. Students, in this study, have been classified as external element based on the view that students are important customers who pay tuition fees for educational services. Therefore, all QA policies in learner support areas must be considered as part of the universities' attempts to support students' success. The following section reviews these general and specific environments of distance teaching institutions.

### **Distance Teaching Universities' General Environment**

All DTUs are surrounded by external environments in which they operate. These general environments present new opportunities and challenges. The university must find and obtain information and resources such as human resources and educational markets for DTUs, interpret and put them into the system. Considering the broad and complex area of DTUs' general environments, in this study, I will focus only on two crucial environments: socio-cultural and technological environments. These two environments have been identified in previous studies as being of important consideration for the trends and directions of distance education and learning support (Tait, 1995; Robinson, 1995). To be more specific, Simpson (2002) revealed that "the future of student support in [DTUs] will depend on social and technical developments within the wider field of education" (p. 212). Both socio-cultural and technological environments have played significant roles in the development of DTUs and in the forms and delivery modes of learner support services.

#### ***Socio-cultural Environment***

Based on the previous research into learner support areas, Robinson (1995) reported that there is enormous variation in learner support in distance education in which learner support has been significantly influenced by the cultural context in which the DTU operates. Therefore, understanding socio-cultural aspect can be regarded as important strategy before developing appropriate learner support services (Lee, 2003; Usun, 2006). Robinson (1995) disclosed that cultural and social structures have considerable implications for the situated nature of DTUs learner support programs, for example: "while education means spreading awareness and lifting taboos, it does not

mean violation of people's customs and traditions. This must be kept in mind while planning a support system" (Priyadarshini cited by Robinson, 1995, p. 225). Others, such as Sweet (1993) revealed that learner support in DTUs could be regarded as "unique to particular institution and reflected local conditions, customs, and practices" (p. 97).

The different approach to learner support at DTUs is also derived from students' cultural backgrounds that are different from one region to another. According to Daniel (2012) and Jung (2012), there is a stereotype that Asian distance learners feel reassured by F2F teaching whereas elsewhere learners put greater value on flexible study opportunities. This local culture in turn will have a significant impact on designing online and F2F tutorials for learning support. The importance of cultural aspects in designing QA for education has also been addressed by UNESCO, which observes that different cultural understandings of quality and management can lead to the differences in QA between developed and developing countries (cited in Latchem & Ali, 2012). Given these concerns, it is crucial for DTUs to consider "cultural appropriateness, inclusiveness and acknowledging cultural, ethnic, social and linguistic diversity [as] key performance indicators in assuring quality in cross-border [DTUs]" (Latchem & Ali, 2012, p. 31).

### ***Educational Technology***

Another DTU variable in the general environment, educational technology, can be considered as a critical issue that will support the practice of teaching and learning provisions in DTUs. Media and educational technologies, specifically computerized communications for bridging the dialogue and interaction among instructors, students, and content, have always been a defining feature of distance education (Anderson, 2004; Bates, 2008; Kaufman, 1986). According to Kaufman (1986), "the marriage of computers with communications technology" (p. 297) has provided a significant impact on developing and delivering learning materials in various instructional modes. The delivery modes of instruction in distance education have been changed from paper based and processed correspondence study to web-based instruction and other kinds of online learning programs that leads to the possibilities of virtual learning environments

(Han, Dresdow, Gail, & Plunkett, 2003; Haughey, Evans, & Murphy, 2008; Juwah, 2006; Koper, 2000).

Computer networks are now becoming a convenient way for people to distribute course materials and to participate in learning (Friesen, 2011; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003). In line with the affordability of personal computers and the increased user friendliness (Anderson & Jackson, 2000), Friesen (2011) noted that “Many people—whether teachers [or] students, ... often end up spending the majority of their time during the day face-to-face with the computer” (p. 76). The advent of computer-mediated communications has had an impact on the traditional approach to the designs of distance education instruction that made them “well suited to professional development activities” (Kaufman, 1986, p. 301), facilitated interaction in online discussion (Wise, Saghafian, & Padmanabhan, 2011), and increased collaborative learning among the students (Fennema, 2003; Sammons, 2007; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003).

While the delivery modes of instruction seem to have evolved to include more advanced technologies, the primary purpose of DTUs remains the need to deliver quality instruction for learners (Koonts, Li, & Compura, 2006). Therefore, it is important that the instruction delivery fits with the students’ interests. Some researchers, such as Luschei, Dimiyati, and Padmo, (2008) and Riana, Zuhairi, and Maria (2006) disclosed that the innovation of online learning in developing countries, such as Indonesia, has proved a daunting task simply because many students in developing countries do not have access to the Internet. Access to online learning is relatively difficult for many students residing in rural and remote regions of the country. Moreover, the lack of skill in information navigation is one of the critical factors involved in online programs which has also proved a big challenge not only for students but also for online instructors. Moore and Kearsley (2005) disclosed that distance education is much more complex than simply integrating technology in a conventional classroom. Others, such as Koonts, Li, and Compura (2006) suggested that “careful planning and a systematic design approach...[are] essential to make sure that the needs of the students are continuously being met in an ever-changing environment” (p. 32). Therefore, it is important for DTUs to seek ways to better understand how to integrate ICT in designing learner support strategies. The need for analyzing internal strengths and weaknesses as well as future

opportunities and challenges may be critical issues to be considered before integrating ICT into their learner support program.

### **Distance Teaching Universities' Specific Environment**

While the general environment is concerned with aspects that might not have direct relationship with DTU activities, the DTU specific environment (Robbin, 1983) or local environment (Barney & Hesterly 2010) refers to the immediate environment surrounding the institutions that often includes customers, competitors, suppliers and government (Robbins, 1983). Therefore, DTUs are working not only to accommodate cultural difference and advances in education technologies, but they must also consider, analyze, and respond to these specific environments that may include students, users, suppliers, government, and other relevant professional bodies such as external QA agencies.

For the purpose of this research and concerning the broader area of the specific environments, this study will only focus on three issues—students, government, and QA professional bodies. Students, government, and QA professional bodies, in this study, are identified as strategic external stakeholders for DTUs. These external stakeholders will have significant roles in how the universities and their QA programs must be developed and implemented. Therefore, DTUs must understand the needs of these stakeholders when developing a QA program and designing quality standards for learner support areas. As the concept of quality in DTUs is perceived to be of “complex multi-stakeholder arrangements” (Daniel, 2012, p. xv), and various stakeholders have different perspectives (Harvey & Green, 1993; Jung & Latchem, 2007; Weber, 2007), it is important for DTUs to “give attention to the different standpoints of quality held by all stakeholders that may potentially [present] conflict of interests in an attempt to establish a set of QA criteria agreed by all” (Darojat & Levisohn, 2011, p. 8). The next section provides a general overview of the importance of these three specific environments for DTUs when adopting and developing QA policies and implementation.

### ***Learners***

According to Coates (2005), student engagement information is inherently valuable for QA evaluation because students are the final people who will judge the

quality of their learning process. It appears that learners will be the ones most affected by the adoption of a QA program. There are various areas of the QA frameworks that directly relate to the learners (see attachment E). In the COL's QA framework, for example, there are at least six areas that directly focus on the learner dimension: 1) learners; 2) program design and development; 3) course design and development; 4) learner support; 5) learner assessment; and 6) media for learning (COL, 2009). Understanding learners' perspectives are important as they can then be integrated into the development of QA standards and procedures that meet with their interests. It seems interesting enough to explore how DTUs involve their learners and what steps are taken to develop systematic mechanisms for negotiating QA models that accommodate learners' values and interests. It is argued that the right approaches in involving learners' values and interests are crucial in developing and implementing quality programs that suit learners' expectations.

### **Government**

According to Weber (2007), government has a responsibility for higher education for at least two reasons. First, as a public good, government has a responsibility to support higher education as a benefit to society. Second, governments have a responsibility to ensure access for those who qualify by removing discriminatory practices. Finally, Weber (2007) argued that government interests can also be understood from the perspective of an accountability system for the large sums of money spent with little direct oversight in the sector. These are among some of the considerations which may have led governments to get involved with the QA agendas. Another important issue that comes from government demand in judging quality is that there is a system where the assessment is based on the professional judgment of the assessor (Martin & Stella, 2007). The use of evidence, judged against a QA framework, leads to decisions that have important consequences. An accreditation body in the name of government may assess quality in different ways—some develop standards and some develop performance indicators, others develop broad standard statements. In this context, DTUs should take into account the importance of accommodating government perspectives in determining methodology for their QA programs.

### ***External Quality Assurance Agencies***

QA professional bodies play a strategic role helping DTUs in developing, implementing, and assessing the practice of QA programming. They are accountable to other stakeholders to prove the credibility of the quality process and to ensure the objectivity and transparency of their decisions or recommendations. For this reason, DTUs need to consider external QA professional bodies' requirements in their QA program. The government, higher education institutions, or other private groups may establish QA professional bodies. In some countries, a QA professional body has developed as a mechanism independent of the government and some have been governmental initiatives and clearly serve as governmental functionaries. For example in Indonesia, the National Accreditation Board for Higher Education (BAN-PT) serves the Directorate General of Higher Education (DGHE) in the name of Indonesian Government (Tadjudin, 2001).

Given the range of DTUs stakeholders that potentially have different perceptions and interests, according to Rinehart (1993), it is imperative that the QA programs employed reflect a socially constructed approach. It means that QA programs should reflect the balanced interests of all people in the organization and its stakeholders (Rinehart, 1993). There is a need to consider the interests of various stakeholders in DTUs concerning specific and essential characteristics that may be covered by QA (Kohler, 2007). Or, as Gumpert and Sporn (1999) noted, "the competing interests in these decisions need to be made more explicit, so that they can be carefully weighed, negotiated, and then implemented by the organization." (p. 37).

### ***Distance Teaching Universities' Internal Environment***

Identifying the internal environment is another issue that is significantly important for organizations. The organizations need to identify their internal environments' strengths and weaknesses. Identifying internal environments is concerned with the organizations' resources that may include tangible and intangible assets. Tangible assets refers to resources that have physical forms such as equipment, buildings and all visible assets, and intangible assets are all nonphysical resources such as goodwill and brand name recognition. Barney and Hesterly (2010) classified an organisation's internal resources into four groups—financial, physical, individual, and organizational resources.

Barney and Hesterly (2010) went on to write that financial resources include all monies that the institutions use to conceive and implement strategies. Physical resources include all tangible/visible assets. Individual resources refer to human resources that may include training, experience, judgement, intelligence and insights of individual managers and workers in an organization. The organizational resources are attributes of groups of individuals. These organisational resources include such things as an organization's formal reporting structure; formal and informal planning, organizing, actuating and controlling systems (management system), and organizational culture.

Within the context of an educational organization, such as a DTU, these internal environmental resources can be regarded as strategic elements for supporting the development and implementation of QA program. These internal resources can be managed by the universities to provide significant contributions to their QA programs in different areas including in learner support services. Learner support is one of the subsystems that will be relied on in these internal resources and capabilities first acting as inputs to be transformed into outputs. Equipment and other physical resources, financial resources, and human resources (faculty and administrative staff) are critical inputs for ensuring the implementation of QA programs in learner support areas. For the purpose of the research, however, I will focus in this study more on two internal environmental aspects—QA management systems and human resources (faculty and administrators). The internal QA management system, faculty, and administrative staff in this study are regarded as internal DTUs' internal factors that will play key roles in developing and implementing the university's QA program.

### **Quality Assurance Management System**

There is no doubt that all organizations must develop their own QA management system in adopting QA programs. The practice of QA programs in DTUs must be integrated into their existing organizational structures that allow the universities to establish internal mechanisms for ensuring continuous quality improvement. Referring back to the Moore & Kearsley's (1996) work on a systems model for distance education, the implementation of QA in learner support areas can be viewed as a component that interrelates with other components such as registry, learning materials production, and

examination. All of these components are sub-systems that will contribute to the overall university's system.

The implementation of QA in learner support areas will be supported by internal management systems in several ways. The development and implementation of QA programs are supported by an appropriate organizational structure that represents the interrelated and coherent activities in managing learner support systems. In the area of teaching and learning services, for example, the implementation of QA is maintained by different strategic units that may include faculty, regional offices, and learning centers. These three units play key roles in how the university policy in teaching and learning provisions will be executed. The QA management systems may provide clear guidance on how the people within these units understand and contribute to the overall goals (quality criteria) in teaching and learning provisions.

## **Faculty**

Faculty and teaching providers play a strategic role in all educational institutions. Therefore, it is important to integrate their interests in the quality programs (Coates, 2005; Rinehart, 1993). Faculty members conduct their work within the educational system to provide learners the means to learn and develop to achieve their goals (Rinehart, 1993). The university may achieve a high quality of learner support through faculty members because their skill, knowledge, and abilities can support quality programs. Their talents may be combined and deployed to work on new assignments in accordance with the transformation of quality within the whole university system. According to Beaudoin (1990) and Dillon (1989), the support and involvement of the faculty as well as their attitudes, whether positive or negative, have been documented as being critical to the effectiveness of any distance education program. The attitudinal issues—how people perceive and react to QA programs—are important in attaining educational quality. Perhaps the negative faculty attitudes towards distance education resulted in intentional and unintentional sabotage of distance education programs (Schrock, 1985). Lewis and Wall (1990) found that when faculty felt fearful or intimidated by distance learning, they were reluctant to use such systems or provided ineffective instruction. Thus, it seems important that before implementing a quality program, faculty need to perceive the positive attributes of the quality programs. These positive attributes

may include such things as rewards, benefits, and the value for using new innovation in their instructional delivery.

### **Administrators**

Administrative staff engagement in QA can help the university to achieve consensus in implementing and maintaining the quality of learner support. Administrative staff at all levels may provide a solid means of support for implementing a quality program. Typically, as the front line implementers of any QA program, administrative staff plays an instrumental role in sustaining a QA plan and fostering support. Gumpert and Sporn (1999) noted that “Managerial prescriptions have positioned administrators as experts wielding tools of forecasting, cost-benefit analyses, and modeling techniques facilitated by access to technology that enables careful scrutiny of centralized data” (p. 36). In DTUs, administrators have several distinct responsibilities related to building and maintaining relationships with faculty members, learners, and other stakeholders. They also take part in managing tutorial services for faculty members or tutors and learners as well as monitoring the program. Therefore, DTUs’ administrators have significant roles in defining and implementing quality programs.

In addition to the faculty and administrators as well as other internal environments, QA policies and practices in DTUs are also fashioned by existing theories in distance education. The following section discusses how major theories in distance education may sketch out quality programs in DTUs.

### ***Existing Theories of Distance Education***

Theoretical dimensions of distance education have a profound contribution to the management of DTUs (Peters, 2003). Referring back to the theoretical section, Moore (1991) argued that theory provided a summary and synthesis of what is known in the field of distance education (Moore, 1991). Aligning with the conceptual framework illustrated in the Figure 1, this present study accepts Peters’ (2003) ideas that the theoretical foundations in distance education will guide the existing practice and practical concerns in DTUs. In this present study, however, I will focus more on the theory of interaction and communication proposed by Holmberg. Holmberg’s (1983; 1995; 2007) theory is particularly useful for several reasons as they are discussed in the outset.

Holmberg's approach to distance education is based on his general observation that "feeling[s] of empathy and personal relations between learner and teacher support motivation for learning and tend to improve the result of learning" (Holmberg, 2007, p. 69). Holmberg's (1983) guided didactic conversation theory is his first attempt to identify a general theory of distance education (Holmberg, 1983). In line with his next observation and research in distance education, his concepts and assumptions are refined and reconceptualised into his current theory of "teaching-learning conversations" (Holmberg, 2007, p. 69). According to this theory, the "communication element is rightly considered a corner stone of distance education" (Holmberg, 1986, p. 54). Real communication (dialogue) occurs in distance education in interactions through writing, telephone, and computer exchanges. Meanwhile, simulated dialogue is created by "a conversational way of course writing" (Holmberg, 2007).

Although never linked to Holmberg's work, interaction and communication theory parallels the COL QA format for learner support areas (COL, 2009). COL's zone of learner support describes the DTU's responsibilities to provide a range of opportunities for tutoring and counselling through the use of various forms of media to support distance students' holistic progression. COL's (2009) QA toolkit highlights the provision that learners have access to sessions with tutors, counsellors, administrators, and technical staff of the university. Similar to the Holmberg's works (1996, 2007), simulated conversation through self-contained courses coincides with COL's quality standard of learner support which emphasizes independent learning skills built into the design of the program and course materials. With respect to the online teaching being either synchronous or asynchronous to maintain individual and peer group interaction (Holmberg, 2003b), COL (2009) highlighted the importance of providing opportunities "for academic and social peer interaction" (p. 76) using "a range of media including appropriate ICTs" (p. 72).

In the Southeast Asia context, Holmberg's interaction and communication theory also aligns with the AAOU's quality of best practices (AAOU, 2010) that classifies learner support areas into two general components: tutorial and counselling. Tutorial and counselling are two major activities that have been addressed in Holmberg's (1983) "two-way communication" (p. 84). Holmberg's theory of feeling[s] of empathy and personal relations supported the AAOU's QA framework, with counselling support

covering various aspects of guidance and advising areas. Holmberg's (1995) ideas about teaching and learning conversation also supported the employment of the blended learning pedagogy used in STOU Thailand, ABOU Malaysia, and UT Indonesia. Therefore, it is hoped that the use of Holmberg's interaction and communication theory will support this research in order to explore and enhance my understanding about the implementation of QA programs in distance higher education particularly in the three selected DTUs invited in this study.

## **Chapter 3.**

# **Methodology**

## **Introduction**

This chapter presents an overview of the methodology followed in responding to the research questions. It elaborates the actual design and conduct of the research plan. The discussion begins with the restatement of the overall purpose and research questions followed by an exploration of the research framework that underpins the approach adopted for the present research. It then locates this study within the worldview of constructivism as the epistemological position of the research. The discussion continues to a justification for the adoption of qualitative research, focusing on the selection of a case study approach and the selection of a multiple case study design. The next section presents the research process describing practical and procedural issues with the following elements in focus: 1) procedures for the research, 2) components of the research design, including: a) research questions, b) units of analysis, c) study propositions, d) linking data to the propositions, d) methods of data collection and e) the methods of analysis adopted in the present research. The final section discusses a number of considerable justifications taken to discuss the credibility of the study. This chapter is also equipped with a discussion of the general ethical issues of the research.

## **Restatement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The overall goal of the present study is to explore the development and implementation of QA programs in three DTUs, STOU in Thailand, ABOU in Malaysia, and UT in Indonesia. Based on the overall goal of this study, the following served as the

key research question: how do DTUs develop and implement QA related to learner support areas? This research question leads to the following sub-questions:

1. How do key people involved in the QA programs in learner support areas at the STOU, ABOU, and UT conceive of quality in general?
  - a. In what ways do they perceive quality in learner support areas?
  - b. Given their understanding of quality, how do they conceive of QA?
2. What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas at STOU, ABOU, and UT?
3. How do the key people at STOU, ABOU, and UT report that QA policies in learner support areas are being implemented?
4. What are the challenges that key people at the STOU, ABOU, and UT face in the development and implementation of the QA in learner support areas?
5. How are the results of the current QA processes in learner support areas used at the STOU, ABOU, and UT?

## **Method of Inquiry**

One of the critical decisions in designing this study is to decide on a 'paradigm' within which to situate my present research. A paradigm, according to Kuhn (cited in Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993), "provides a way of looking at the world" (p. 7). It refers to a set of general philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality or ontology (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and how we know it, epistemology (Creswell, 2003; Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell (2005) added that at the most general level, paradigms include philosophical positions such as realism, positivism, and constructivism, "each embodying very different ideas about reality and how we can gain knowledge of it" (p. 35) and at a more specific level, examples of such paradigms include interpretivism, critical theory, and phenomenology, to name a few. Creswell (2003) asserted that paradigms refer to the knowledge claims meaning that researchers start their research project with certain assumptions about "how they will learn and what they will learn during their inquiry" (p. 6). At this point, in my discussion of research paradigms I explain how I understand QA programs as a basis for answering the research questions.

In the context of social inquiry, research perspectives are generally classified into quantitative and qualitative research. Both of them have different epistemologies and different forms of representation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). According to Guba and Lincoln (1989; 1994) and Crotty (1998), quantitative methods derive from an objectivist epistemology which views reality as single, objective, and universal that can be observed, known, and measured. On the other hand, qualitative perspectives emphasize the individual as 'a sense maker' (Darlaston-Jones, 2007) in which reality is inherent in the perceptions of individuals. Qualitative methods support the idea that "there are multiple realities—that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception" (Merriam, 1988, p.17). These philosophical assumptions about the nature of knowledge have remained controversial with no fundamental beliefs held in common between the two methodological paradigms (Bredo, 2006). With regard to these controversial issues, Guba (1993) and Willis, Jost, and Nilakanta (2007) argued that each paradigm has its own appropriate rules and criteria where "no common points of reference exist to which differences and conflicts among paradigms may be submitted for resolution" (Guba, 1993, p. x).

Social researchers have also long debated the advantages and limitations of both quantitative and qualitative methods in research, which have different features with regard to focus, philosophical roots, goals, data collection, modes of analysis and findings (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1990). While qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed, in-depth information about a small sample, quantitative methods make possible the measurement of many subjects to produce comparative and statistical aggregations of data (Patton, 1980). Qualitative research, which is in part associated with the epistemological foundation of constructionism, accepts and values the role of the researcher "to seek a deeper understanding and to explore the nuances of experiences not available through quantification" (Darlaston-Jones, 2007, p. 25). Through qualitative research, I intend to explore how QA programs have been adopted in DTUs with different social, cultural, and educational settings.

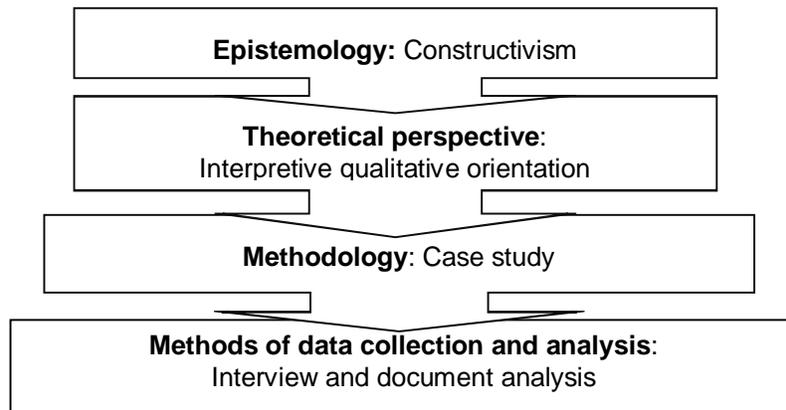
Social and educational inquirers recently have turned increasingly to qualitative methods because of their potential to better understand the social world and because of dissatisfaction with quantitative approaches which tend to reduce the complexity of human experience (Zuhairi, 1994). Qualitative research is "an umbrella concept covering

several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena” (Merriam, 1990, p. 4) that includes a number of research types, such as case study, the one that I will use in this present research. I will discuss this case study approach further in upcoming section of this chapter.

## Research Framework

Crotty (1998) provided a useful research framework that can be adopted to support the purpose of this study as depicted in the following figure.

**Figure 3. Components of the Research Framework**



Source: Adapted from Crotty (1998, p. 4).

These four components of this research framework inform one another in the present study about what epistemological view informs the theoretical perspective. What theoretical perspective lies behind the methodology? And what methodology supports my choice of methods that will be used in this research? I will discuss these components in the following section.

### ***Epistemological Position of the Research***

According to Grbich (2007), the term ‘epistemology’ comes from the combination of two Greek words: episteme, meaning knowledge and logos, meaning theory. It deals with questions about the construction of ‘truth’: “what do we accept as truth? And how has this been constructed?” (Grbich, 2007, p. 3). In the context of research,

epistemology deals with our claims of knowledge or how we know what we know (Maxwell, 2005; Lichtman, 2006). Therefore, in selecting a research design it is essential to identify which epistemological traditions the researchers have chosen to work within (Crotty, 1998; Grbich, 2007).

This present study adopts an epistemology based on constructivists' views that claim that meaning is not discovered but constructed. Crotty (1998) wrote that "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (p. 43) and therefore "different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon" (p. 9). With respect to the constructivist standpoint of meanings and multiple perceptions of reality, in this research I accept Crotty's perspective that "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within [an] essentially social context" (p. 42). With regard to this, the QA programs in DTUs are social phenomena that are socially constructed by the people who participate in them. Following Crotty's model, the constructivist epistemological approach will help the researcher to understand how QA programs have been socially and collectively constructed by people in three different DTUs. The constructivist epistemological view will help me to explore how the context of QA programs and the placement of these programs within wider social environments have impacted constructed understandings.

### ***Theoretical Perspective: Interpretive Qualitative Paradigm***

According to Crotty (1998), a theoretical perspective provides "a context for the process involved and a basis for its logic and its criteria" (p. 66). Theory is "the philosophical stance lying behind a methodology" (p. 66). The theoretical perspective considered in this present study is an interpretive qualitative paradigm which "looks for [a] culturally derived and historically situated interpretation of the social life-world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). This research will emphasize qualitative interpretation designed to optimize my understanding of the QA phenomena involving multiple case studies. According to Ericson (cited in Merriam, 1988), qualitative interpretive research is needed in education to "consider the local meanings that happenings have for the people involved in them" (p. 165) and to "engage in comparative understanding of different

social settings—considering the relation between a setting and its wider social environment helps to clarify what is happening in the local setting itself” (p. 166).

The interpretive qualitative orientation is adopted to understand how QA programs are interpreted and implemented in the everyday educational and social worlds where DTUs operate. Since the QA programs are constructed by people as they interact with the world they are interpreting, it seems very likely that the QA programs may be interpreted in different ways that increase multiple perceptions of such programs. Therefore, this theoretical perspective supports the use of qualitative research which focuses on understanding and interpretation rather than experimentation (Merriam, 1988). The interpretive paradigm advocates the importance of understanding and the appreciation of subjective interpretations in the process of the development and the implementation of QA programs. The interpretive paradigm also takes into account the importance of values and beliefs of the people, vision and missions of the organization, as well as the cultural settings. Heck (2004) argued that policies are socially constructed, and are shaped by the assumptions, values, and goals of the people who develop, implement, and are affected by them. Therefore, it is important in policy and implementation research to explore collective dimensions related to organizations, their culture, and more importantly the viewpoints of the people involved as they interact within quality policy, shape and are shaped by organizational culture.

As this qualitative research assumes that meaning is embedded in people's experiences and this meaning can be interpreted through the researcher's own perception, it is very important to discuss the researcher's role in this study before discussing the research methodology. The researcher's role seems to be critical in most forms of qualitative research as the researcher acts as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1988).

### ***The Role of the Researcher***

QA programs in DTUs, the subject of this research, have attracted my long-term professional interest. As a faculty member of UT for more than twenty years, I have had daily experience with the various activities and problems confronted by non-traditional higher education institutions in a developing country. The origin of this research rests in

my involvement as a former member of UT's QA team when UT adopted a QA program in 2001 as part of its efforts to improve the quality of its educational service and to ensure that the UT education programs meet quality standards internationally.

As a former member of the QA team, I was able to contribute to the development of UT's QA framework. This framework included a document called "Quality Assurance System for UT". It consisted of nine components and 107 quality criteria or performance indicators (COL, 2009) or statements of best practices (AAOU, 2010). Secondly, I have been involved in developing QA methods of achievement, including systems and procedures required to monitor and improve quality. I have also been invited to be involved in two QA activities: 1) developing self-assessment and 2) integrating it into UT's annual action plans, which need careful consideration in allocating resources used in priority settings. Related to my position as a Vice Dean in Student Affairs, I have been appointed to be involved in developing QA job manuals and other relevant guidelines for learner support areas. These QA job manuals delineate systems and procedures in performing particular learner support areas and indicate standards relating to time, output, workflow, resources and competencies required to support particular learner support programs, such as face to face interaction and online tutorials.

As part of the QA team and the Vice Dean in Student Affairs in the Faculty of Education, and later moving to the position of head of UT's regional center, I have had an opportunity to contribute to the preparation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of UT's QA program specifically in learner support areas. I have been involved in organizing and implementing QA programs in learner support areas at the faculty level. The implementation of the program becomes a critical step to ensure that the policy can be effectively put into practice. At this step, I was able to contribute to training and promoting initiatives for QA programs.

I enrolled as a doctoral candidate at Simon Fraser University (SFU) with a clear intention of undertaking research on the topic of QA in DTUs, which is closely related to my job. As a former member of UT's QA teambuilding group, as mentioned before, I have professional connections related to the research topic. My prior professional experience provides an invaluable source of information that will guide my initial formulation of the research questions in this present study.

However, my professional background as an insider who is familiar with one of the research sites became a problematic issue and may affect the credibility of the research findings. Merriam (1988) argued that the researchers “need to be aware of biases that can affect the final product” (p. 34) and their articulation of their own worldview for the study (Janesick, 2000). The same position is also stated by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) who argued that the results of qualitative research are more easily influenced by “the researcher’s personal biases and idiosyncrasies” (p. 20). On this point, Janesick (2000) asserted that “qualitative researchers accept the fact that research is ideologically driven. There is no value free or bias free design” (p. 385). This indicates the need for bracketing personal experiences by the researcher. The researcher needs to give consideration to subjective disclosures and needs to decide how and in what way his or her personal experiences should be introduced into the study. In this present study, I am aware of the potential bias associated with a familiar setting, UT Indonesia. In this regard, I reduce my potential bias through the attention paid to the QA program in DTUs and follow the operational procedures of the case study design adopted from Yin (2003). The issues of the limitations of this study are further elaborated in the dependability and confirmability section in this chapter.

### ***Research Methodology: Case Study***

In this study, conceptually, I employ the case study research method proposed by Stake, (2006) and Merriam and associates (2002) as it attempts to understand phenomena in the social world. The case study proposed by Stake (2006) and Merriam (2002) also resonates with the constructivists’ world-view. Both of them (Stake and Merriam) addressed the interpretive qualitative paradigm. According to Merriam (2002), case study represents “all the characteristics of qualitative research ... that is the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation ... this meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument” (p. 6). Using qualitative case studies allows me to understand QA programs, in particular distance teaching institutions. In contrast to the scientific paradigm of quantitative research, which sees the world as being made up of objective things, the qualitative case study approach assumes that the world is a subjective phenomenon which requires interpretation rather than measurement (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 2005). As DTUs are social institutions, qualitative case study research is an appropriate approach in order to better understand

the dynamic aspects of human interaction behind institutions. The qualitative case study gives attention to the complexity of the case in its own right and it allows for subsequent interpretation. It produces a rich and holistic account of phenomena, offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its researcher's experiences (Merriam, 1990).

The purpose of a qualitative case study is to study intensively the background, current status and environmental interactions of a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution or a social group (Isaac & Michael, 1981; Merriam, 1988). Case studies begin with the purposeful selection of a case or site followed by the organisation of data-gathering procedures. They can be undertaken by using evidence derived from fieldwork, archival records, verbal reports, observation, or any combination of these (Yin, 1981). According to Yin (1993, 2012), the application of case study research can be in the forms of a single or multiple case studies. If the study contains more than a single case, the study has used a comparative or multiple case study design, which is often considered "more compelling and the overall study is therefore regarded as being robust" (Yin, 1993, p. 46).

Whilst Yin's standpoint reflects the positivist stance, since he recommends the use of hypotheses and/or propositions, Merriam (1998) and Stake's (1995) conceptualisation of case study (as mentioned in the outset) is in the interpretative paradigm. According to Stake (2005), in qualitative case study the researcher wants to appreciate the uniqueness of the case and its interaction with its context. Case study research allows a researcher to gain greater understanding and appreciation of subjective interpretations of the case leading to 'interpretation in context' (Merriam, 1998). Stake (1995, 2005) argued that case study can be classified into three types: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective case studies. He used the terms intrinsic case study if the study is undertaken to develop better understanding of a particular case because of its particularity and ordinariness. Meanwhile, instrumental case study refers to the study of a particular case "to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalisation" (Stake, 2005, p. 445). The case itself is of secondary interest and plays a supportive role to facilitate an understanding of something else. Collective case studies involve "a number of cases [that] may be studied jointly in order to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition" (p. 445). The purpose of doing collective case study research is "to [lead to] better understanding and perhaps better theorizing"

(p. 446) through the understanding of each individual case that may or may not share some common characteristics. For Stake, as cited in (Maniku, 2008), collective case studies are different from single case studies and are also known as multiple case studies, cross case studies or comparative case studies.

Merriam (1998) classified case studies into three different categories: descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative case studies. Descriptive case studies present detailed information of the phenomenon under investigation. This type of case study is atheoretical but it is helpful to present information in areas where little research has been conducted. Interpretive case studies are used to “develop conceptual categories to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data gathering” (Merriam, 1998, p. 28). Evaluative case studies involve description, explanation, and judgement. It provides thick description and weighs “information to produce judgement” (p. 28). These case study approaches may explore a detailed examination of a single event or multi-subject studies involving different educational organisations.

Recognizing the different perspectives of the types of case studies, it is fair enough to say that making a clear-cut definition of the case study types in this study is a very challenging issue. Whilst a number of significant conceptualisations of case study have been used to inform this research, Stake’s collective case studies are significantly relevant to this present study. This study will investigate and analyse the QA programs at the university level in the different DTUs for the purpose of gaining insight and collective understanding of how DTUs develop and implement QA programs, particularly in the area of learner support. It tries to reveal the detailed key characteristics of the QA programs employed by the three DTUs. The case study approach supports the purpose of the research which attempts to understand a complex phenomenon of educational quality and the way in which QA policy has been developed and implemented. Qualitative case study allows the researcher to understand how participants make meaning of situations or phenomena in QA programs and how these meanings are mediated through “the researcher as instrument” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). As the researcher adopts the interpretative qualitative paradigm, the case study approach facilitates the researcher’s development of a culturally derived and historically situated interpretation of QA programs in the three selected DTUs.

Aligning with the epistemological assumption of this research discussed earlier, the case study approach is relevant in being adopted since the aim of this study is “seeking out the emic meanings held by people within the case” (Stake, 2000, p. 41). Case study design promotes the research approach taken in this study, which focuses on how a QA program is constructed by those who participate in the system. Further, a case study approach also supports my research orientation that assumes no intervention from the researcher and hence there is little or no disruption to the actual setting. This study does not attempt to test hypotheses but rather it is undertaken to generate better understandings of QA phenomena in different educational settings. The following discussion presents the research design emphasizing the adoption of the case study format provided by Yin (2003, 2009).

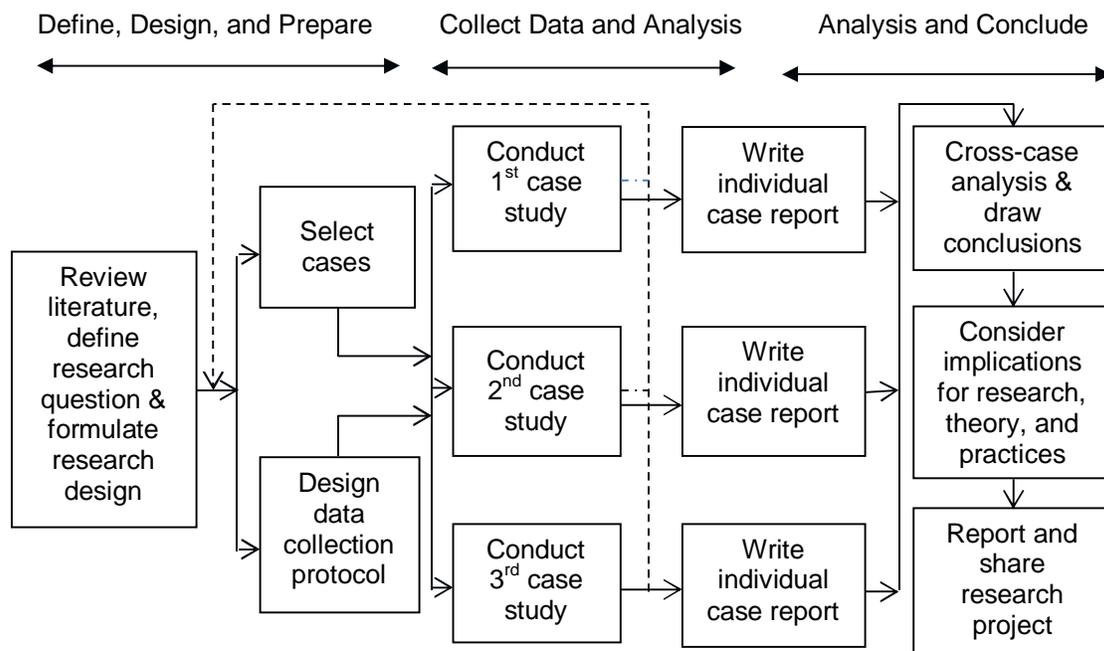
## **Research Design**

While conceptually this research adopts the interpretative paradigm proposed by Merriam (2002) and Stake (1995; 2005), methodologically this study adopts the research design proposed by Yin (2003) for several reasons. First, research design proposed by Yin (2003) provided useful information on how the researcher may approach the cases under investigation. It is to say that Yin's (2009) provided a systematic approach in employing case study. He developed five components of research design that support the implementation of this research. The Yin's five components of research design are further discussed in the following section. Second, Yin's (2003) research design also provides valuable guidance for the researcher in the process of collecting and analysing data. It is the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to the research questions and ultimately to its conclusion (Yin, 1993). The research design illustrated here is my work plan of how to proceed with an investigation to ensure that the evidence obtained enables the researcher to answer the research questions as unambiguously as possible. The research design in this research is adapted from Yin (2003). This overall plan outlines the operational procedure of the study, sequence, and components of the research design.

## Procedure of the Research

The general procedure of this study can be divided into six stages: planning, designing, preparing, collecting, analyzing, and sharing (Yin, 2003). These stages of the research are illustrated in the Figure 4 as follows.

**Figure 4. The case study research design**



Source: Adapted from Yin (2003, p. 50).

In the defining, designing, and preparation stage a number of activities are included, such as the development of the research proposal, gaining access to research sites and prospective participants, as well as obtaining ethical approval. The fourth phase, the collection of data, is carried out through fieldwork in the three sites (STOU, ABOU, and UT). The fieldwork involves a similar set of activities at each DTU with respect to the QA programs in learner support areas through interviewing identified participants and analyzing relevant documents followed by the next step, analyzing and writing individual case studies. As shown in Figure 4, the dotted line feedback loop represents the situation in which fieldwork occurs in the first case (STOU), the second case (ABOU) and the third case (UT). In this phase, Yin (2003) suggested that if the

case did not suit the original design then researchers should redesign the selection of alternative cases before proceeding further. The last phase of the study, analyzing and sharing multiple case study, involves: 1) cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006) or cross-site (multi-site) analysis (Merriam, 1988) based on the three individual case studies, and 2) writing the research report.

### ***Research Design Components***

According to Stake (1995), a systematic approach in conducting case study research is needed for effective implementation. It is also critically important to start the research somewhere in order to carry out a successful investigation. In this study, I employ the five components of research design proposed by Yin (2009) to guide and provide me a systematic method in implementing case study approach. They include: 1) a study's question; 2) its propositions; 3) its unit(s) of analysis; 4) linking the data to the propositions; and 5) the criteria for interpreting the findings.

### **Research Question**

According to Stake (2006), a multiple case study is organised around at least one research question. It asks what is most important for understanding the quintain (see next section). The major research question to be answered in this study is: how do DTUs develop and implement QA in the learner support areas?

### **Study Propositions**

According to Yin (2003), study propositions, if any, will direct the researcher's attention to "something that should be examined within the scope of the study" (p. 22). In this present study, however, I propose study propositions as a means for further exploration of important theoretical issues and to help the researcher know where to look for relevant evidence, and to define and discover the extent of specific characteristics of the QA program employed in each research site. I propose the following study propositions:

- a. The employment of QA programs calls for DTUs to develop clear systems and procedures that enable faculties, administrative staff, tutors, counsellors, and other relevant stakeholders to fully understand and measure the designated standard

performances. With regard to this, the DTUs develop quality guidelines for the learner support areas that reflect that institution's policies and methods of assuring quality of their educational services.

- b. The implementation of QA in learner support areas in DTUs is supported by an internal environment, interrelated to an external environment, and corresponds to the existing theories in distance education.

For the purpose of this study, I acknowledge Stake's (1995) important idea about the use of issues as a conceptual structure in order to direct attention to what should be examined. The issues generate the development of an approach to organise research questions that connects the context of the case and the phenomenon of the study (Maniku, 2008). The research questions in this study are framed within the context of QA development and implementation in DTUs.

### **Unit of Analysis**

The third component of case study design is unit of analysis. In Stake (2006), the unit of analysis can be regarded as a "quintain" that refers to "an object or phenomenon to be studied" (p. 6). Meanwhile, Yin (2009) argued that unit of analysis is "related to the fundamental problem of defining what the 'case' is" (p. 29). Stake (2006) and Yin (2009) both point to the important relationship between a particular unit of analysis or case and the primary phenomenon that is being researched. The case itself may refer to a program, event, phenomenon, and other particular situation (Merriam, 1988). In this present study, the use of QA programs in the area of learner support at the DTUs (STOU, ABOU, and UT) is the fundamental issue to be investigated. The rationale behind the selection of cases is determined on the basis that the cases are expected to advance understanding of QA programs in the DTU context in the Southeast Asia. Three institutions offering single mode distance education systems are investigated in this study; they are STOU in Thailand, ABOU in Malaysia, and UT in Indonesia. These universities were selected because:

1. They are single mode universities that employ a distance education system. Since their early establishments, STOU, ABOU, and UT have been designed to facilitate a widening access to higher education using a single mode distance education system

incorporating the use of print, F2F tutorials, and online learning (as their current learning services) for teaching distance students.

2. They adopt QA programs. Although QA seems to be regarded as a current issue in Asian DTUs, STOU, ABOU, and UT have been identified as distance teaching institutions which currently commit to employing QA programs. They have actively engaged in implementing internal quality audits (self-evaluation) and they voluntarily invite external QA agencies to assess their quality agenda. It is identified that STOU, ABOU, and UT are the only DTUs in Southeast Asia which adopt both internal quality audit and international QA standards (such as ISO, ICDE-ISA, and Baldrige National Quality Award). Therefore, the selection of these three universities provides balance for the purpose of this study. This selection allows the researcher to develop an international comparative study.
3. They have each been equipped by a centralized QA unit (STOU's Educational QA Coordinating Centre, ABOU's Centre for Quality Management and Research & Innovation, UT's Pusat Jaminan Kualitas or UT's QA centre). The establishment of a centralized QA unit in each of these DTUs can be regarded as a similarity in approaching quality that may support this international comparative study.
4. In the Southeast Asia region, these DTUs can be regarded as the leading distance teaching institutions in developing and implementing QA programs. These DTUs have been awarded international accreditation and certificates of quality by COL (exemplified by STOU and ABOU) and ICDE (represented by STOU and UT). ABOU and UT have also been granted the award of excellence by the International Organization for standardization (ISO) 9001 standards. Therefore, it is deemed essential to examine the QA programs in these three DTUs. The involvement of these universities in this research will expand my understanding of the QA programs in learner support areas.
5. Finally, these three universities share contextual relevance in many respects: they share socio-economic, cultural, geographic, and developmental features as they operate in neighbouring countries. UT Indonesia, however, serves a large student body and operates in the world's largest archipelago and hence it may have far more complex issues in implementing QA programs in learner support areas.

It is hoped that the decision behind the rationale for choosing these universities as cases in this present study maximizes understanding of QA in distance teaching institutions. The selection of the case in this research, however, decreases the transferability and generalizability of the research findings. This study only involves three DTUs in Southeast Asia which adopt QA programs involving internal quality audits and international quality standards such as ISO, ICDE-ISA, and Baldrige quality agencies. Therefore, the findings of this study are contextually bound to only each individual case study. This issue is discussed further in transferability section of this chapter and limitation of this study in chapter six.

In order to get a better understanding of each university, the following section presents general profiles of STOU Thailand, ABOU Malaysia, and UT Indonesia.

### ***Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), Thailand***

STOU can be regarded as the oldest DTU in South East Asia, founded in 1978, and it has more than a decade of experience in implementing QA systems. Along with the university mission to provide opportunities for lifelong education and quality of life for the general population, STOU is committed to promoting quality higher education (STOU, 2007). STOU has been recognized by a number of national, regional, and international organizations for its achievements. In 1992, it was awarded the Asian Management Award in improving the quality of people's lives. In 1995, the university was granted the award of excellence by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and the International Council for Open and Distance Education Standards Agency (ICDE-ISA) (STOU, 2007). Therefore, it seems essential to explore the contextual considerations of the QA program at STOU which may enrich my understanding on how educational quality has been interpreted and how a QA system has been developed to foster STOU's quality achievement in distance education. The university has produced a total of 368,077 graduates as of 2008 (STOU, 2008) with enrolment over 200,000 students each year (Sleigh, Seubsman, & Bain, 2007), making STOU Thailand's largest university. STOU has also been designated by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as the lead institution in the Consortium on Innovation in Higher Education for Asia Pacific that allows the university to become a center of a variety of regional organizations. Currently, STOU is home to the Distance

Education Regional Resource Center (DERRC) and a key player in the development of the AAOU (STOU, 2007).

### ***Anak Bangsa Open University (ABOU), Malaysia***

The second site of this research is ABOU, Anak Bangsa Open University. As the first distance teaching institution in Malaysia, ABOU, was established to spearhead education for both national and international educational markets. Currently, ABOU serves a cumulative enrolment of 89,000 students spread out all over the country and overseas (ABOU, 2010). Founded in 2000, ABOU is a consortia-type university consisting of eleven Malaysian public universities. As the first DTU in Malaysia, ABOU has developed and expanded steadily since its establishment to provide an “educational product, experiences, and outcomes of ensured quality that were at least equal to that delivered by public on-campus universities” (Kirkpatrick, 2005, p. 5). ABOU has been formally equipped by the Center for Quality Management and Research & Innovation (Jung, 2004) to coordinate, facilitate, and manage QA implementation. In line with its mission “to widen access to quality education and provide lifelong learning opportunities” (ABOU, 2010), the university was granted the award of excellence for institutional achievement from the COL that represents significant ABOU achievement in quality of courses and programs offered and effectiveness of course materials and learner support systems (ABOU, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative to involve ABOU Malaysia in this study which shares a number of contextual situations with the third case to be examined, UT Indonesia, in terms of geographic, economic, and socio-cultural environment.

### ***Universitas Terbuka (UT), Indonesia***

UT is state university and the only university in Indonesia that is based entirely on the distance education mode. Established in 1984, UT is one of the mega universities in the world (Daniel, 1996) with a student body of over 650,000 as of 2010 (Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, & Belawati, 2011). As part of its commitment to promoting quality education, UT has initiated and implemented a QA system for more than ten years. The university has adopted the AAOU QA framework encompassing various key areas of the distance education system. In 2001, strategic action was carried out through the establishment of a QA system committee. A further organizational change has also been taken through formally establishing the Quality Assurance Centre with its strategic role to

manage the development and implementation of the QA program (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007). UT has been awarded the international accreditation and certificate of quality by ICDE standard Agency (ISA) and International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 9001: 2000. One of the current issues at UT is a need to have a comprehensive QA framework that can effectively accommodate internal, national, and international QA schema.

### ***Methods of Data Collection***

This section provides an overview of the data collection methods that are used in this study. Case study approaches encourage the researcher to use multiple methods of data collection. To investigate and answer research questions, according to Yin (2012), case studies can collect information from several sources, such as personal interviews, documentation, archival records, and physical artifacts. In this study, two main data collection strategies were used to investigate the issues: interviews and documentary analysis, the first of which was a significant component of the field work. These strategies support the case study approach (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2012) used in this study. As this case study investigates QA policies and their implementation, it seems critical to introduce this research by ‘dropping in’ on people who develop QA policy and use it in action (Putt & Springer, 1989). In policy research, it is imperative to understand the perspective of “persons [who] are involved in the process of gathering and interpreting information which helps officials decide about the actions they should or should not take” (p. 1). In this regards, interview strategies help the researcher generate potential information from these persons needed to support my understanding of the problems being investigated. Through interview approaches, the research questions number 1, 3, 4, and 5 developed for this study were investigated. Meanwhile, documentary analysis was primarily used to answer research question number 2. Collecting information from documentary data provides “the most direct response to fulfilling major information needs” (Putt & Springer, 1989, p. 223) in policy research. Documentary analysis helps the researcher by providing a rich information source and building newly collected information to complement findings. The gathered data from 1) interviews with identified key informants involved in the development and implementation of QA program, and 2) existing documentary evidence relating to the development of QA policies, practices and

procedures, problems, and results of QA for quality improvement allow the researcher to crosscheck findings and conclusions.

### **Fieldwork**

Qualitative case study methods involve the collection of data on site. According to Merriam (1998), the terms fieldwork and field study usually describe “observation and interviews and, to a lesser degree, documentary analysis” (p. 94). Fieldwork involves “that process of evoking, gathering, and organising information which take place on or in close proximity to the site of the events or phenomenon being studied” (Stenhouse, 1988, p. 50). In this study, it was through fieldwork that important documents regarding QA program within three DTUs were obtained and interviews with the key people who interact with QA policy domain and implementation were undertaken.

### **Interviews**

An interview is a purposeful conversation directed to obtaining information (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The interview is the main road to multiple realities by discovering and portraying the multiple views of the case (Stake, 1995). The interview technique also supports the interpretive qualitative paradigm taken in this study since the research focus is on the exploration of the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences in the worlds in which they live, and how the context of events and situations have impacted on the constructed understanding of those worlds (Grbich, 2007).

Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to provide a framework within which respondents can express their ideas, values, perceptions, and feelings about QA programs in their own words. The interviews in this research do not attempt to explore an inherent truth or single reality but, rather, the researcher recognises that there are multiple perceptions; different participants have their own meanings related to QA programs. This strategy is congruent with the philosophical assumption of this study discussed earlier and consistent with the epistemological view of constructivism and the interpretive qualitative paradigm taken in this present research (Crotty, 1998). Interviews may take several forms; they may be highly structured or unstructured so that even the interviewer does not know what will emerge. In the present research, a semi-structured

interviewing technique or “general interview guide approach” (Patton, 1990, p. 280) was used to explore the development and implementation of the QA programs. Identified participants were interviewed using prepared interview guides to obtain information, but the researcher has flexibility to pursue further questions relevant to the purpose of the research and to gain important information. This type of interviewing allows interviewed subjects’ view-points to be expressed in a relatively openly designed interview situation compared to a structured interview. The semi-structured interview also generates the richest single source of data filled with information that reveal key informants’ perspectives.

The key informants who are involved in initiating, developing, and implementing QA programs in each university were asked about their insights regarding the QA policies, how they define quality, and how the QA process is undertaken. They were also asked about the results of their current QA programs to support quality improvement for learner support areas. Moreover, interviewees were invited to offer their insights on the problems of using QA program in the area of learner support. The answers provided by interviewees allowed the researcher to identify the strengths and weaknesses and even the key characteristics of the QA model implemented.

### ***Participant Selection***

Aligning with the purpose of the present research, the selection of the participants became an important part of this study. In order to more fully understand QA in each context and maximize the information about each case, I sought participants who would likely provide typical and divergent data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Thus, the most appropriate sampling strategy to support my present study was purposive (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993) or purposeful (Patton, 1980). According to Merriam (1988), purposive sampling is the same as what Goetz and LeCompte (1984) call criterion-based sampling, which requires criteria or standards necessary for the subjects or participants to be included in the investigation. As the present research requires knowledgeable and experienced participants in the subject area in order to be “information rich” (Patton, 1990), the purposive sampling strategy allowed me to select the participants who are

perceived as possessing data and information to provide significant contributions to the QA program under investigation.

This research involved participants working at the three different DTUs in different countries. Therefore, it was important to consult the top management of each institution in order to identify prospective research participants. With respect to the case of UT, I had a fairly clear idea of who would be invited as the key participants because I have spent more than 20 years there and was familiar with the institution and its potential participants.

There were six key informant interviews conducted for each case study. The key informants came from QA actors within each institution, and included:

- The head of the Quality Assurance Center (STOU's Educational QA Coordinating Centre; ABOU's Centre for Quality Management and Research & Innovation; UT's *Pusat Jaminan Kualitas*) – 1 participant
- Policy contributor (Vice Rector) – 1 participant
- The head of Faculty or Department – 1 participant
- The head of regional/learning centre or coordinator for learner support – 1 participant
- Tutor or teaching provider – 1 participant
- Counselling staff – 1 participant

To reach the number of participants representing different clusters, ongoing consultation was carried out with focal point people from each university to select participants who were identified and approved by management of STOU, ABOU, and UT. Each participant also needed to possess the information needed and have the willingness to provide significant contributions to the QA program under investigation. When the fieldwork was conducted, however, there was a significant change of the interview schedule and the number of the key respondents at STOU. From this list of potential participants, I was not able to conduct an interview with the participant from the regional center as the individual was attending a healthcare treatment at the scheduled interview time. However, I was able to get information from other existing key participants.

The top down approach in the selection of the key informants had been taken for several reasons. The first concerned gaining access and negotiating entry to the research sites. Negotiating entry to the research sites in conducting an international comparative case study has a significant impact on the conduct of the design, planning, and implementation of the study (Wellington, 2000). The first positive response from top management helped me to gain access to further subsequent participants. The second aspect deals with the procedure of the research. The fieldwork of this study began from the key informants who interact with the QA policy domain that is commonly comprised, in the case of UT Indonesia, by the middle and top management levels (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007).

### **Artefacts**

There are various ways in which documents can be used as a powerful source of information in case studies (Simons, 2009). Documents provide rich and factual information to describe the context and contribute to an analysis of issues. They enable supplementary and contextual data to be gathered (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). In this study, I collected and analyzed the QA documents at all research sites, such as minutes of meetings, institutional publications, review reports, evaluation reports, newsletters, planning documents, standards and operational procedures of QA models, and institution yearbooks. These documents were used to describe specific conditions and practices, to spot trends, as well as to document the historical and current development of QA programs.

The use of document analysis as a method of data collection in the qualitative case study, according Guba and Lincoln (1982), can be processed in two ways. It can involve content analysis of the documents themselves or they may be analysed as “representatives of broader classes of theoretical rubrics,” that may produce new and broader forms of data (p. 252). The use of documentary analysis allows the researcher to validate and generate richer information from the semi-structured interviews concerning the QA policies and practices implemented at each institution. As I have mentioned in the earlier discussion: policy actions both shape and are shaped by the assumptions, values, and beliefs of those who develop, implement, and are affected by them (Heck, 2004). With regard to this, the policies of QA programs are collectively

constructed by the people who interact with and are involved in the QA policies. Therefore, it seems important in policy research to integrate existing documentary analysis relating to QA policies, practices, and procedures with interviews to understand the perspectives of people as they socially produce policy domains and further generate policy actions.

### ***Data Analysis***

For the purpose of this research, thematic analysis was employed to present and discuss the findings drawn from content analysis of interview transcripts and documents. Analysis of transcribed interviews and documents were coded after the data collection. Code, according to Saldana (2009), is a word or short phrase representing an essence-capturing for a portion of language-based data. Transcribed interviews supported by official documents generated a number of emerging themes through the use of two cycles of coding methods. In the first cycle, I used structural coding (Saldana, 2009). Structural coding refers to the “content-based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data that relates to a specific research question used to frame the interview” (MacQueen, McLellan-Lemal, Barthollow, & Milstein in Saldana, 2009, p. 66).

In the second cycle of coding, an axial coding method was used to strategically reassemble data for the purpose of categorisation (Saldana, 2009). According to Saldana (2009), “the axis of axial coding is a category” (p. 159) that generates emerging themes. Coding, categorising, and themes were arrived at through content analysis of transcribed interviews involving iterative reading, identifying initial concepts, developing codes representing evocative attribute for recurrent concepts, categorising related codes, developing and grouping conceptual constructs or themes (Saldana, 2009). In this analytical work, the list of codes in each individual case study represented the comments and served as symbolically linking from the data to my research questions. For the purpose of this study, the identification of codes, categories, and emerging themes in each research question from each individual case study was supported by MAQXDA 10 application.

Finally, the interview and documentary data were analyzed using cross-case analysis proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Stake (2006) as a central attribute to this research project. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) and Stake (2006) an important reason for doing cross-case analysis in multiple case studies is to deepen understanding and explanation of how the program or phenomenon performs in different environments. Miles and Huberman (1994) went on to extend that another reason for undertaking cross case analysis is to enhance generalizability. Although it is argued that this goal is inappropriate for qualitative study, the researcher wants to know something about the relevance or applicability of the findings to other settings. In this study, cross case analysis is taken to compare and interpret some common QA policies and practices among the cases.

In short, the data analysis in this study included the following steps:

- Develop initial identification of themes (list of tentative themes) based on the previous studies and relevant literature reviewed.
- Develop coding, conceptual categorisation and thematic grouping (Saldana, 2009) of data soon after the data has been collected, data having been drawn from content analysis of documentary evidence and transcribed interview data in each individual case study. This phase involves:
  - ✓ First, reading each transcript carefully and iteratively to understand the message and leading to the identification of coding as initial concepts for categorising and possible themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2009). As the processes of coding, categorising, and theming the data involve multiple participant interviews, then computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), MAXQDA 10 version, is involved in this research.
  - ✓ Second, identifying several closely related codes by pointing out differences and similarities, underscoring underlying and recurrent concepts, grouping related concepts, and developing conceptual constructs.
  - ✓ Third, using the list of categories as my reference to identify the passages in the transcripts which represent the emerging themes for the individual case study.

- The analysis of the data for the second and third case studies also follows these steps. Major themes for each research question were presented in each individual case study followed by 'rich descriptions' for these themes, guided by the conceptual framework used in this study.
- Further, a cross-case table display (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was employed for each of five issues underlying the related research questions (perspectives on quality and QA, QA policies, implementation, challenges, and the use of the current QA program for future improvement). In this way, it allows me to compare and contrast the three cases and to discern patterns or themes.

In cross-case analysis, tables are used to indicate the summary of the findings of the comparison of the QA practices in the three DTUs according to a number of parameters, such as perspective of quality and QA and the institutional policies that support the QA in learner support areas. The purpose of comparison is to highlight the continuum of contrasts and similarities of existing phenomena being observed in each institution and to provide further comment and personal impression as to the extent of the contrasts. Further discussion follows each table for further in-depth explanation.

## **Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability**

There has been considerable debate among researchers about the value and legitimacy for judging qualitative research and it is strongly dependent on philosophical perspectives. In contrast to the positivist tradition of judging the quality of research in terms of validity, soundness, and significance, in this qualitative study I follow Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria regarding the 'trustworthiness' of qualitative research. These criteria are: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### ***Credibility***

Criticism of the qualitative case study method is often related to ethical issues and problems related to particular biases of the researcher, particularly in qualitative case studies in which there are problems associated with the sensitivity and integrity of the investigator (Riley in Merriam, 1990; Robson, 1995). With regards to this issue, I

support the idea of credibility proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) who argued that the results of qualitative research are credible from the perspective of all participants who are involved in the research. Since the purpose of this research is to better understand the phenomena of interest from the participant's eyes, then the participants are the only people who can suitably judge the credibility of the results. To address the credibility of this research, I use three techniques. First, I designed the research procedure in such a way that follows the case study design proposed by Yin (2003, 2009), as mentioned above. In this study, I use those five components of research design as my work plan that have been previously discussed in this chapter.

Second, I use a “respondent validation method” (Silverman, 1994) or “member checking” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). This strategy allows me to check data and interpretations by validating data with the respondents. First, the information was collected from interviews with a number of the key people at the top management level. Based on the answers, I then conducted other interviews with a number of respondents from middle and lower management levels in order to get detailed information and recheck the previous data. Finally, at the end of study, I took all of the interview transcripts back to the people being interviewed.

I used two data collection methods, interview and documentary analysis, involving different sources of information about the same topic (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In this study, I collected and compared the data from different kinds of sources (e.g. respondents and documents). The results of the interviews and published and non-published materials were investigated to see whether they corroborate one another.

### ***Transferability***

With regards to the limitations of the qualitative case study approach: it is appropriate to draw conclusions from the data, but the findings cannot be generalised to other cases without further study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) addressed the issue of transferability as one of the critical issues of trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry. This current research can be regarded as being contextually bound to the cases being investigated. Therefore the findings of this research may not be applied to other cases with different educational and social settings. Stake (1995) argued that qualitative case

study is particularization and provide a poor basis for generalization. To help address this issue, I followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) advice of providing a thick description.

### ***Dependability and Confirmability***

I discuss the issues of dependability and confirmability in a single section because both elements were addressed through the same means- an auditor. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), dependability emphasizes the quality of the integrated process of data collection, data analysis, and theory generation to show that the findings are consistent and can be repeated. To address this concern, I follow Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestion to use a data auditor who is familiar with this present research. She or he has an opportunity to examine my audit trail consisting of original transcripts from interviews, documentary analysis, and my data analysis documents.

Confirmability refers to the degree of neutrality to which the findings can be confirmed by the respondents and not researcher bias or interest. Confirmability also emphasizes the importance of how well the research findings have been supported by the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With this in mind, I use the audit trail strategy (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen 1993). Recognizing the anonymity concerns and the confidentiality of the data from one of the research sites involved in this study on one side and being concerned with the issues of the dependability and confirmability on the other side, I employed and collaborated with one of the post-graduate students in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University (SFU) who has experience in analysing qualitative data as part of his research, Adhi Susilo. Currently, his research examines technology acceptance in distance education. I asked him to be the data auditor who examined the data collection and analysis and make judgements about the potential bias of the research. He helped support confirmability by examining my audit trail including the original transcripts of interviews, field notes, documentary analysis, and the whole writing of my research project specifically related to the presentation of each individual case study report and cross-case analysis.

## Limitations of the Methods

Several limitations were present in this research. This research relied on interview results involving different people from three countries with different cultural backgrounds from the researcher. Wesche, Huynh, Nelson, and Ramachandran (2010) argued that the challenges in the cross-cultural interview processes would certainly affect the research content, analysis, and results. Specifically important to this study, these cultural differences might affect “the construction of meaning” (Howitt & Stevens, 2005, p. 30). Language can be regarded as the most immediate factor that has significant impact on the construction of meaning. In this regard, national languages in three countries have played an important role to support the fieldwork. Some misunderstanding and misinterpretation of meanings of the participants seems to be inevitable as the researcher was not fluent in all three languages, in particular, Thai language. To deal with this issue, I hired native English Speaking people who understood and were familiar with Thai language and local culture for translating interview protocols and transcribing all of the audio recordings. In addition to this, I also followed Howitt & Stevens (2005) advice through the use of “respectful listening... [and] careful attention to nuances in the lives of others” (p, 30). The limitations of interview as a data collection method have also been addressed by Woods (2011) who addressed that interview method tends to possible bias and represents a limited perspective on issues being investigated. Woods (2001) went to argued that the results of interviews were not generalizable.

In addition, the use of documentary analysis also leads to the limitation of this study. According to Zuhairi (1994) the use of documentary analysis was flavored by biases of document developer. Zuhairi (1994) suggested that the researcher has to be careful in using documents as source of data, particularly concerning who has written the document, in which context and for which purpose is it written. Best (1997) also argued that not all source documents are reliable (Best, 1977).

This study is also limited by the selection of the participants. The selection of the key participants from different clusters at the three universities (STOU, ABOU, and UT) was determined by the management at each institution. Therefore, the interview subjects identified by these institutions can be regarded as representing their

universities' perspectives on QA, or might have perspectives on the QA processes that are in line with the university's views. This selection bias can serve to hide some of the challenges and over represent the positive perspectives on the QA processes. Finally, as this study adopts interpretive qualitative research, the production of generalizations is an inappropriate goal (Denzin, 1983; Erickson, 1986; Guba & Lincoln, 1981). This study aims to deepen understanding of the selected case studies by collecting data in one particular situation to appraise the practice of QA programs in each educational setting. According to Merriam (1988), generalising from case studies makes no sense at all. The researcher employs a case study approach because he or she "wants to understand the particular in depth, not because he or she wants to know what is generally true of the many" (Merriam, 1988, p. 173).

## **Ethical Considerations**

I employed the following guidelines to address the ethical issues during the data collection process.

1. Research approval. To conform to all regulations I asked for research approvals from SFU and all DTUs (STOU, ABOU, and UT) that were involved in this research project prior to the study being conducted. For confidentiality reasons of one research site, however, the research approvals cannot be attached in this thesis.
2. Informed consent. I explained the purpose and process of the study as clearly as possible to all participants. The participation was on a voluntary basis. Along with the ethical guidelines of SFU, every participant was informed about the detailed components of the study prior to being interviewed. Thus, participants have an opportunity to read and understand the context of the study and they know that they have the right to withdraw at any time.
3. Confidentiality. It has been maintained by keeping information, secure, and secret from others. Confidentiality is pursued to promote trust between researcher and participants as they have right to remain confidential and to protect both research participants and the university they are associated with. I employed different codes as pseudonyms for all key participants. I also used a pseudonym for one of the research sites. I refer to it as 'Anak Bangsa Open University' (ABOU) as a

pseudonym for the research site in Malaysia. In this research, I have tried to protect the confidentiality of the research site. However, due to its particularity, the case may be easily identified. In Malaysia, there are only two universities that employ single mode distance education systems.

## **Chapter 4.**

# **Presentation of the Results: Individual Case Studies**

### **Introduction**

The overall purpose of this study is to explore and understand the issues related to the development and implementation of the QA program in DTUs. It is hoped that the study may provide a new perspective and new possibilities for local actors in comprehending the QA concepts and practices at DTUs. The three DTUs in Southeast Asia, namely STOU Thailand, ABOU Malaysia, and UT Indonesia, are selected to identify key QA characteristics of each system that may be useful to illuminate the analysis and understand QA policy in each individual case study. The results of the study may also uncover some of the practical issues regarding QA.

This chapter provides presentations of the results from the individual case studies. Part One presents the individual case study of STOU. The QA systems (QAS) and mechanisms at the university and individual school levels in STOU are explored and analysed using interview data and documentary evidence. Part Two presents the case study from ABOU. It examines the university policies that support QA in learner support areas and how these QA policies have been interpreted in the current implementation. In the same way, part three presents the case study of UT. This part addresses the QA policies and practices at UT in relation to the evolving university quality framework. Some issues regarding the implementation of QA are explored through interview data from different subjects supported by documentary analysis. The chapter ends with a summary regarding the major themes from each case study as a basis line for further discussion of cross-case analysis.

## Part 1: Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

This part presents the findings from the case study of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) in Thailand. The data gathering for the this case study focused on QA policy and implementation involving different interview subjects including policy contributor, Director of the Educational Quality Assurance and Coordinating center, top manager of Faculty and Department, and academic and administrative staff. During the fieldwork, one of the selected key informants could not be interviewed because of health reasons. The interview data, supported by official documents from STOU international office and the Office of Educational Quality Assurance and Coordinating center, revealed different recurrent concepts for coding purposes, categories, and emergent themes. The first cycle of coding is presented in the appendix C1. The list of codes identified from key informants supported by the list of codes from official documents in appendix C1 constitutes the researcher interpretative dimension that serves for the second cycle of coding.

In the second cycle, the researcher follows Saldana's (2009) axial coding method. The product of combining emergent themes is drawn from electronic coding identification, the MAQXDA 10 version, as presented in appendix C2, covering five tables of the list of codes. Categories and emerging themes are grouped and delimited to the scope of the specific research questions. Following the collation of the initial coding, I examine the similarities and differences and organize them into categories with similar meanings. The results of the categorisation in the second cycle are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2. List of the consolidated themes related to the research questions**

Research questions	List of themes and sub-themes
<p>How do key people involved in the QA programs in learner support areas at STOU conceive of quality in general?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways do they perceive quality in learner support areas?</li> <li>• Given their understanding of quality, how do they conceive of QA?</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Quality refers to meeting customers' needs and government QA standards</li> <li>2. Quality of learning materials and instructions is important to support student learning</li> <li>3. QA as a system involves different activities to ensure expected quality</li> </ol>

<p>What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas at STOU?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. QA manual serves as the guide for implementation that emphasizes the employment of internal and external QA audits</li> <li>5. Institutional policies in teaching and learning provisions and student development activities serve as the guides for QA in learner support areas that focus on the development of student self-learning skills</li> </ol>
<p>How do the key people at STOU report that QA policies in learner support areas are being implemented?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. The institution's internal environment supports the implementation of QA that addresses two levels of the QA bureaucratic system and the important roles of the centralized Educational Quality Assurance and Coordinating Center</li> <li>7. The application of QA in learner support areas emphasizes the employment of blended learning pedagogy and the important roles of the Office of Educational Services and the distributed student clubs</li> <li>8. The implementation of teaching and learning provisions corresponds with Holmberg's interaction and communication theory</li> <li>9. The implementation of QA in learner support areas relates to the university's external environments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The implementation of QA in learner support areas responds to the local culture particularly language</li> <li>✓ The implementation of QA programs in learner support areas is fashioned by educational technology to support academic services and online QA systems</li> <li>✓ The implementation of QA in learner support areas aligns with the professional QA agency's standards</li> <li>✓ The implementation of QA in learner support areas must correspond with government QA standards</li> <li>✓ Students are being involved in the implementation of QA in learner support areas through regular student surveys</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
<p>What are the challenges that key people at STOU report they are facing in the development and implementation of QA in learner support areas?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. QA is perceived as being too demanding and time consuming</li> <li>11. Government QA guidelines do not correspond well to the distance education institution</li> </ol>
<p>How are the results of the current QA processes in learner support areas used to inform practice at STOU?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. Continuous quality assessment is done through self-assessment reports (SAR)</li> </ol>

	13. Various actions are taken to ensure continuous quality improvement through the use of the PDCA model and based on stakeholders' feedback
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The following discussion focuses on these 13 emergent themes from the case study of STOU.

***RQ 1: How do key people involved in the QA programs in learner support areas at STOU conceive of quality and QA?***

Research question 1 addressed three issues regarding general perspectives of quality, perspective of quality in learner support areas, and, given their understanding of quality, how do key people conceive of QA? Drawn from interview data, there were three major emergent themes related the research question 1.

**Theme 1: Quality refers to the meeting customers' needs and corresponds to the government QA standards**

Key informants (KIs) in STOU revealed their perspectives on quality in different expressions with the same focus on orientation of quality in which quality must fit the customers' needs and correspond to the government QA standards. The concept of customer itself has been defined by one of the KIs as referring to students, government and public (STOU-FD-03). One KI stated this point as follows: "For us, I think [quality is] meeting the customer needs and the criteria that are set by the government [OHEC and UNESQA]" (STOU-FD-03). "It means that right now we have to make the curricula meet the requirements under the TQF—Thai Qualifications Framework" (STOU-FD-06). Another KI argued that "Quality for me is that you have to meet the customer's requirements and correspondent to the Thailand Qualification Framework for Higher Education" (STOU-AS-04).

**Theme 2: Quality of learning materials and instructional delivery to support student success**

Closely aligned to compliance with students' needs, it was disclosed that perspectives on quality in learner support areas refers to the quality of learning materials and instructional delivery to support student success. The quality of learning materials and instructional delivery were regarded as an important component in STOU since

instructional textbooks play as a major role to support student learning (STOU-AS-04). Corresponding to Holmberg's (1995) ideas about the importance of self-contained course in distance education, this KI confirmed that learning materials "should be easy for the students to learn by themselves because we do distance learning." This KI went on to argue "that is a type of quality ... to make sure that if you are the student, you can read and learn by yourself and can understand ... and for producing textbooks—the content has to be correct (STOU-AS-04).

Referring to this perspective of quality, STOU has been equipped by variety of instructional deliveries methods as it was revealed by another KI as follows:

At STOU, we focus on lots of media to contribute to the studies. The first one is textbooks, or print-based. In every subject, we have the textbooks to contribute to the studies. And another media is CD, or DVD, including the content and multimedia in the disc. The third one is the STOU television channel to reach the students at home, in order that they can learn anytime and anywhere. The fourth media is e-learning. We have e-learning in order to teach interaction between the lecturers and the students online. (STOU-PC-01)

The STOU has been established to expand access to learning using different technologies. One of the interview subjects disclosed that course team approaches were employed for the development of learning materials and one of the course team members is from the Office of Educational Technology (STOU-AS-04).

### **Theme 3: QA as a system involving relevant people in different activities to ensure expected quality**

The university has adopted a QA system for a long time and everyone understands what quality assurance was about (STOU-QC-02). It was found that QA has been placed as a systems approach involving different people in diverse areas of activities. Another interview subject mentioned that "quality assurance should be any methodology or anything that you have to make sure that you've got the quality as you would like it to be" (STOU-AS-04). To ensure the success of QA and achieve the expected quality then it was very important to involve people in the system. This was confirmed by one of the participants who expressed that:

Successful quality assurance, no matter what efforts we make, what meetings we organize, if the involved people do not place importance

on it or don't take responsibility for their duties, implementing quality assurance successfully is difficult. I think for us to succeed at quality assurance—all relevant parties—we have to see the importance of our duties and of the quality assurance process so that it is part of our way of working. (STOU-PC-01)

The same participant recounted the importance of involving people in the QA process to ensure that “everyone has to look towards the same target [and] ... to make them see that quality assurance has the objective of making sure that we produce quality graduates for society” (STOU-QC-02).

### ***RQ 2: What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas at STOU?***

#### **Theme 4: The QA manual serves as the guide for implementation that emphasizes the employment of internal and external QA audits**

The STOU's QA manual has been regarded as a major reference addressing the implementation of an internal QA audit by OHEC and an external quality audit by UNESQA. The QA system at STOU has flourished in line with the growth of the university in achieving its vision as one of the world's leading distance learning universities, dedicated to the development of human resources, employing modern technology and providing quality services (STOU, 2004). The STOU QA system was developed in 1997 through the establishment of educational quality committees at the university, school, office, institute and center levels. Further, the development and implementation of the QA system has been coordinated, planned, and integrated by the Educational Quality Assurance and Coordinating Center under the supervision of the Office of the President in 2001 (STOU 2004). The implementation of the QA system and the obligation of the university to apply government regulations over higher education has lead the university to develop an official university QA manual covering all aspects of QA, including QA policies and procedures, indicators and benchmarks, guidelines for self-assessment reporting and guidelines for assessing the quality of education (STOU, 2011).

The university's QA manual was developed in accordance with the guidelines from the OHEC and ONESQA representing government's role in controlling and

regulating QA policies for all higher education institutions in Thailand with the following objectives:

- Develop the systems and mechanisms for quality assurance in accordance with existing processes to maintain the standard of education.
- Encourage faculty, staff, and students to participate in a quality assurance system. Recognizing the role of each party involved in creating quality.
- Promote the dissemination of quality assurance activities both inside and outside the university to promote the quality of university education. (STOU, 2011, pp. 3-4)

To support these objectives, the university QA manual clearly described two dimensions of QA policies, internal and external QA. Internal QA was under the control of the OHEC - Ministry of Education as the main agency and the later. Meanwhile, external QA was under the supervision of the ONESQA. The university policies were classified into nine internal QA components and six components of external QA as detailed in the following table.

**Table 3. Two dimensions of STOU's QA**

Internal QA	External QA
1. Philosophy, mission, objectives and implementation plans	1. Quality standards of graduates
2. Teaching and learning processes	2. Research and creative work
3. Student development activities	3. Academic services to society
4. Research	4. Preservation of art and culture
5. Academic services to society	5. Institutional and resources development
6. Preservation of art and culture	6. Internal quality assurance system
7. Administration and management	
8. Finance and Budgeting	
9. Quality assurance and enhancement	

Source: STOU's QA manual (2011).

These two dimensions of quality policies were integrated with the aim of achieving a high level of educational quality in accordance with the National Education Act, national quality standards and the goals and philosophy of STOU (Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012b). With regard to these internal and external dimensions of QA, an interview subject recounted that the “main policy is to meet the standards of internal quality assurance and external quality assurance” (STOU-PC-01). Indicators or key performance indicators (KPIs) for every component were used as tools to evaluate

performance trends in the university and to initiate continual improvement. All indicators reflected key policy concerns in each QA component and standard.

**Theme 5: Institutional policies in student development activities and teaching and learning provisions serve as the guide for QA in learner support areas that focus on the development of student self-learning skills**

From the documentary analysis, it was found that the institutional policies that support the implementation of QA in learner support areas were developed in order to promote student self-learning skills as important characteristics of the university's policy. To support the development of student self-learning skills, the university developed QA policy requirements in learner support areas that consisted of two major activities including support services and teaching and learning provisions. The university QA manual and paper from the Office of the Vice President stated that the quality of teaching and learning provisions was provided through the following policies.

- System and mechanisms for curriculum development and administration.
- Percentage of full-time instructors with doctoral degrees.
- Percentage of full-time instructors with academic titles.
- System and mechanisms for teaching and learning management.
- System and mechanisms for developing learning outcomes in accordance with characteristics of graduating students.
- Level of success in strengthening student ethics and morals. (STOU, 2011, pp. 99-160; Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012b, p. 2)

To support student learning, the university addressed some critical policies, as follows:

- Administrators and faculty need to develop appropriate teaching techniques.
- Evaluation of learning and the use of modern materials as well as the teaching-learning process and the learning outcomes of their students need to be supported with quality staff aligned with the mission and goals of the institution.
- A quality assurance systems and mechanisms that focus on student learning are important for all courses.
- A curriculum that promotes student self-learning skills.
- Evaluation of learners' satisfaction with the quality of teaching and support.
- A development or improvement of teaching and learning. (STOU, 2011, pp. 130-131)

It was reported that the university has developed new curriculum and different kinds self-managed learning materials, such as printed-based modules supplemented by course guides to support student-learning skills (STOU-AS-04). In addition, the university has also developed the QA policies for support services to promote student self-learning skills under the component of student development activities. There were two policies:

- Systems and mechanisms for providing information and educational services to students.
- Systems and mechanisms for promoting student activities. (STOU, 2011, p. 162)

The university intended to provide student affairs including academic support that were reachable and benefit to all eligible students and alumni. The QA policy in student support services was particularly evident in the following activities: 1) technical advisory services and guidance to students, 2) providing useful information for students, 3) activities to improve student academic and professional experience, providing information that is useful to alumni, and 4) activities to develop students' knowledge and experience to alumni.

### ***RQ 3: How do the key people at STOU report that QA policies in learner support areas are being implemented?***

A distance education institution is an open system which represents constant interaction with its internal and external environment. Referring to the conceptual framework for this study, it was disclosed that the implementation of QA in STOU was supported by its internal environment and through being in a relationship to the different external environments. This section also presents how the QA policies were implemented in diverse learner support areas that closely aligned to the existing theories in distance education.

### **Theme 6: The institution's internal environment supports the implementation of QA in learner support areas, addressing two levels of QA bureaucratic systems and the important roles of the centralized Educational Quality Assurance and Coordinating Center**

The internal environment that supported the implementation of QA in this study referred to the internal management QA system and the human resources. While these two internal environments have been identified as being important elements in the

implementation of QA systems at STOU, it was disclosed that the establishment of the two levels of QA bureaucratic systems and the centralized Educational Quality Assurance and Coordinating Center to support QA in learner support areas were two interesting issues in this research.

***QA management system: Two levels of QA bureaucratic systems and the centralized Educational Quality Assurance and Coordinating Center***

The practice of QA management at STOU has been designed for two levels representing the organisational structure and span of control of the university. One of the KIs clarified the QA management of STOU as follows:

In the QA system of STOU, we have two levels. The first level is the macro level. STOU has the board of directors of the QA committee for setting policy, contributing guidelines and monitoring performance of all departments in the university. This is the first level. The second level is the QA committee in each department—in each faculty. The second level will produce the annual performance ... according to the standards and indicators of the quality assurance. This is the second level of the quality assurance system. (STOU-PC-01)

Given this QA management, each level should follow the level above it (STOU-CS-05). It is a top down framework “that’s passed down from the organization that governs universities, so everyone gets assessed in very similar capacities” (STOU-QC-02). To support the implementation of QA, the university established the Office of Educational Quality Assurance and Coordinating Center in 2001. According to one of the KIs:

This department will coordinate all the departments in the university in order to execute the standards and criteria of quality assurance. In each year, the QA department—I mean the center of the QA department—will set the QA calendar to distribute to the heads of all departments in the university, and they will set the QA manual ... We have a period of every two years for implementation. Any department can see any standard or any criteria in the book. (STOU-QC-02)

The center was also responsible for organising training sessions at least once a year to teach people to do their Self-Assessment Reports (SAR). The office also organised “training sessions at least once a year for assessors in order to increase the knowledge of faculty and staff of the university who acted as assessors for STOU’s internal quality assurance” (STOU-PC-02).

## ***Human resources***

STOU realized the importance of its human resources as strategic assets especially when they are connected to the development and implementation of a QA system. Therefore, the university commitment to its human resource development has been formulated in its quality manual. Faculty, in relation with their role as course developers and tutors, have significant contributions to QA in teaching and learning provisions. According to different participants at STOU, faculty were key players in developing self-contained textbooks, performing online tutorials, carrying out F2F tutorials (STOU-AS-04), producing different courseware, managing courses (STOU-PC-01), and in providing advice and academic counselling (STOU-FD-03; STOU-FD-06).

Meanwhile, administrative staff has also played a substantial role in supporting the implementation of QA at the university. It was disclosed that administrators are intensely involved in QA programs. Administrators are assigned as a secretary group to support QA in school levels: a chair of QA Committee, a head of QA committee (STOU-FD-03; STOU-FD-06). They have also been involved in developing QA policy requirements, setting QA policy and monitoring implementation of QA, and representing the university for government QA bodies, OHEC, to set KPIs (STOU-QC-02).

### **Theme 7: QA in learner support areas emphasizes the employment of blended learning pedagogy and the important roles of the Office of Educational Services and the distributed student clubs**

The separation of teaching providers and students in distance education environments necessitates the provision of an effective support system for students. It was reported that the university's QA programs, the implementation of QA in learner support areas complied with the university policies on the second component (teaching and learning provisions) and the third component (Student development activities).

#### ***The employment of the blended learning pedagogy to support teaching and learning provisions***

In order to remove students' barriers for learning, the university has developed blended learning pedagogy to promote student learning. The blended learning pedagogy was delivered through diverse printed-learning materials, face-to-face (F2F) tutorials, online learning, and a STOU television channel to reach students at home (STOU-AS-

04; STOU-PC-01). STOU's educational system allowed students to use their free time to study independently, rather than having to enter conventional universities (STOU, 2004). The university has developed a variety of learning materials and employed different instructional delivery modes through highlighting the need for students to initiate and manage their own learning approaches and strategies. Textbooks or printed learning materials have been developed for all subjects as major media to promote student independent learning. Other media such as CD and DVD have been also developed to equip and promote students' self-managed learning (STOU-PC-01).

### **Face-to-face tutorials**

F2F tutorials were provided based on the requirement determined by curriculum developers. As F2F was not compulsory for distance learners, tutorial sessions are developed only for some courses that are difficult for students (STOU-FD-03). Special intensive tutorial services were also delivered for very difficult courses involving students who could not pass a final exam (STOU-FD-06). F2F tutorials were conducted at STOU's learning centers spreading out all over the country. One of the KIs explained in more detail in terms of how F2F services were carried out:

We have 15 units in our textbooks and we divide by three. So the first time we have face-to-face tutorial, students have to read the first 5 units before they go to the tutorial, and the professor will brief on these 5 units, and if they have any questions they can ask. And for the second time, another 5 units add for the third, 5 units. (STOU-AS-04)

F2F general tutorial sessions, not special tutorial classes, were managed by the Office of Educational Services with the objectives to (1) assist students in enhancing their understanding of academic content and (2) provide students' access to academic guidance and support services provided by the university.

### **Online tutorials**

The use of Internet network for educational purposes has been placed as a strategic issue, especially for graduate students. The development of the Internet-based support services was available for graduate students as it was confirmed by a participant that "professors have the web board of the School. We have students come every day to

the web board to ask some questions” (STOU-AS-04). The faculty also integrated social media networks for their instructional process. The participant revealed this as follows:

I created Facebook pages for my courses and also students come to my Facebook .... When they have a problem, they can post on Facebook and I answer them and try to help them ... some students, they develop their Facebook, only that group. (STOU-AS-04)

The university has developed fully online courses as a new prototype to support student learning. The participant explained this as follows: “the policy has changed. We don’t have online courses for undergraduates” (STOU-AS-04) but now the university has developed fully online course as a new prototype for the English curriculum. The participant went on to explain:

They have the course where students have to be online at a certain time. And the students will get into groups.... They don’t have face to face. This is the new prototype for STOU. Formerly, we had to submit the textbook, but they don’t have textbooks, they have electronic modules. And they set the time for students, which time they have to chat. (STOU-AC-04)

The university has also employed a policy to promote Internet-based support services through the development of the electronic seminar (e-seminar). Application for this e-seminar is developed using the Moodle online program (STOU-AS-04).

***Student development activities that address the important roles of the Office of Educational Services and the distributed student clubs***

STOU developed different counselling and information services and various student activities to support student success. The Office of Educational Services arranged counselling services for students, starting from their enrolment until their completion. One KI explained that counselling activities consisted of guidance for interested people, orientation for new students, educational and professional counseling services and graduate counselling services (STOU-CS-05).

Mostly KIs revealed that for support student activities, STOU’s student clubs, were the best place for students to go. Student clubs have been endorsed to promote student activities and supplement curricular activities. The clubs provided opportunities for students to come and see each other, share their knowledge and experience, and get

involved in STOU academic and non-academic programs. These student clubs were arranged by the students themselves and are in 76 provinces scattered throughout the country. The more detailed information about student clubs was provided by one KI as follows:

At STOU we have student clubs for each province—we have 76 provinces. And we ask students in each province to create their STOU student club. If they have some problems they can join together and go to their club, meet together, and ask the senior students to help them. And some student clubs have their projects. STOU provides the budget for them to do their small projects. Some projects they did, like tutoring “brother helps sister” [*pi chuai nong*]. They create projects to help each other to study, to pass. (STOU-AS-04)

The university has appointed advisors for each student club with three main objectives: first, to provide academic counselling and career advice to community college students. Second was to manage participating students, and third was to manage student's work as planned. One of the KIs stated that:

Maybe one province has three advisors. And sometimes we go to join their projects—go to their provinces when they have an event or project. They invite the advisors to go and join them. If we have time, we go to encourage them. (STOU-AS-04)

For each student club, the professors had to select which student club they would like to be the member of. This was professors' responsibility to provide support for student success. The professors provided help for student clubs in developing their annual planning.

### **Theme 8: The implementation of teaching and learning provisions corresponds with Holmberg's interaction and communication theory**

Since STOU's students and faculty were separated by distance, time, and space, the use of media for the university was indispensable, and interaction and communication have been regarded as important factors initiating and maintaining dialogue with students. Issues regarding instructional processes were explored and corresponded to the theory of interaction and communication and two derivative theories of distance education adopted in this research: autonomous and independent study and community of inquiry theory.

The instructional system at the university was sophisticated enough to support a high degree of flexibility for students and instructors to maintain their interaction and communication. Different methods for student teacher interaction have been employed that include F2F, telephone calls, and Internet-based communication. Although F2F tutorials were not compulsory for students, it appeared that meetings at Student clubs and F2F sessions at learning centers have become a critical element for promoting interaction and communication to support student learning. One KI explained “I have to go three times ... for face-to-face tutorials ... and I will teach my students, sometimes in a big group or sometimes in a small group, give assignments, and sometimes the small group can present the assignment in front of the class” (STOU-AS-04).

The development of personal relationships has also been carried out by distance through telephone call in order to help students in their learning process. A faculty member who was assigned as a KI for this study highlighted the importance of a willingness to provide help and develop personal relationships with distance learners as follows:

We are an open university. You have many types of students, and you have to be prepared to help ... for example, a student who called from Dubai. Every time that she called I explained to her, and she felt very good, and she also said “You are a good teacher. You have time for me.” ... I think if I have a good relationship with them, maybe it can motivate them to work successfully. If they have a problem, they can come see me. I never refuse my students. Never.... Right now I’ve got one advisee, and she’s not good at studying. Some professors refused to be her advisor, and I said “Oh, that’s okay,” and I asked her to work hard because she’s not strong in her academics. But right now she’s almost finished with her work. We have to give encouragement. (STOU-AS-04)

With regard to the importance of teaching and learning conversations in the context of the distance education environment, this KI also addressed a very crucial point, viewed from Holmberg’s (2007)’s teaching learning conversation, by giving her advice that empathy is very important to motivate student learning (STOU-AC-04). The KI went on to clarify that creating an atmosphere of friendliness was necessary to promote trust in personal relationships:

The atmosphere, you have to try to be their friend. You have to be friendly to them. They can tell you anything—not only just study

problems, but even family problems, personal problems. Some students ask me and if I have some comments I will tell them.... When I can talk with them and the students tell their personal problems, that's when he or she trusts you, right? That's why they would like to get some suggestions from you. (STOU-AS-04)

Student-instructor conversations have been viewed as essential by faculty at STOU that involved language matter as it was confirmed that "Language is very important, the sentences that you use to talk to the students are very important and the tone that you use to talk to them" (STOU-AS-04).

In addition, it was reported that the academic services provided by the university also related particularly to Holmberg's (1995) one way-traffic communication to support students' autonomy and independence. From the beginning STOU has been totally devoted to using an instructional system which enables the students to study by themselves with or without having assistance from tutors or instructors. To support this educational system, STOU has long been involved in implementing instructional deliveries that enable students to enjoy learning services at their home, or learning at the back door (Wedemeyer, 1981). Students received their teaching services through different forms of educational media:

- Learning materials (workbooks, modules, CD, DVD) sent through postal service. The university aimed to enable students to study independently, develop and apply knowledge from various sources and use self-contained textbooks as their major media (STOU-AS-04).
- Radio programs and television channels. The university has delivered instructional services to support students' independence through radio and television programs. (STOU, 1996; STOU, 2004, Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012a).

STOU has also been involved in providing different learning services for students in their localities. These services included:

- Self-study at STOU corners in provincial and municipal public libraries. The university has set up 75 STOU corners in provincial libraries. These corners have been set up through cooperation with the Department of Non-formal Education, Ministry of Education.
- Attending F2F tutorial sessions at learning centers. As presented at the previous section that STOU provides F2F sessions to help independent learners as a non-compulsory mode. F2F tutorials have been served for three times per semester for selected courses. (STOU, 2004)

Through the use of different media and teaching deliveries, independent learners residing in different provinces throughout the country have their opportunity to study by themselves in accordance with their own time and space, individual convenience and interests.

Further, the university online learning platform has been used to support Holmberg's (1995) two-way traffic communication. In accordance with the advent of ICT for educational purposes, online education has been regarded as a strategic option to enhance and strengthen students' learning. The online forum discussions were crucial that enable students to learn and construct knowledge beyond the classroom. One of the interview subjects confirmed that the university has employed the Moodle program and D4L (Design For Learning) application to support the virtual learning environment. The KI addressed this as follows:

We have Moodle and D4L. D4L is suitable for Ph.D. students, but Moodle is maybe better for master's degree. But you can mix together on the course team.... D4L was developed by the University of Waterloo, in Canada. They said the students can learn by using the T5 model.... They developed this model first, and after that they progressed to D4L, and they wrote their own software. They developed their own LMS. (STOU-AS-04)

When the researcher asked the KI about how this D4L program could support online collaborative learning, the KI went on to explain:

Yeah so [students] have to practice together, especially for the D4L LMS. So if we use D4L we have to follow this rule. First, you have to work alone. And after you finish, you upload your assignment and your friend will download and criticize it and give the feedback to you, and when you read the feedback, you have to criticize the feedback. Is it good feedback or not? Did your friend write the feedback based on the theory, or based on their thinking? Something like that, and they give the points the second time too.... Every step has points. After that, for the last one – task 4 – they will know who is in their group. They will work together and give feedback from everything, and write only one paper and submit it to the professor. (STOU-AS-04)

This forum was an asynchronous interaction medium that involved instructors posting individual assignments or group assignments or questions and later students posting their responses whilst instructors monitor every student's participation in the discussion.

The use of the D4L program has supported two-way communications and promoted collaborative partnership among students and teachers.

**Theme 9: The implementation of QA in learner support areas relates to the university's external environments**

STOU operates in an open system that always heavily interacts with its external environments. From different interview subjects, various external environments have been identified as being relationships to the implementation of QA in learner support areas. These include socio-cultural aspects, educational technology, an external quality agency, Government, and students. For the purpose of this study, this theme includes five sub-themes as follows.

***Sub-theme 9.1: The implementation of QA in learner support areas responds to the local culture, particularly language***

The implementation of QA in the university was in line with the university's objective to preserve Thai socio-cultural aspects (STOU, 2011). Cultural aspects have been placed as one of the strategic aspects among nine internal QA components and six external QA standards. It was recognised that the primary language, Thai, has become a major aspect of influence on QA. The desirability to use their own language has been expressed by one of the KIs as follow:

In Thailand we focus on Thai language as the first language in an institution. And another policy is for upgrading the foreign language skills of each institution. I would like to add that at STOU, we have subjects to learn about a foreign language for the first year students in every faculty. (STOU-PC-01)

The importance of using the local language was also recounted by another KI that using Thai as the first language for instruction "Like we are Thai, so we use Thai language. We can express our thinking more deeply. English is not our language, so it would be very difficult" (STOU-AS-04).

The use of local culture on STOU QA educational programs has also been identified by the university commitment for cultural preservation. Cultural aspects were one of the strategic components of QA as it was revealed by one KI, as follows:

For the aspect of culture, there is a KPI that OHEC has set so that every university has to be evaluated regarding cultural affairs—there's a cultural component. It's like a required KPI that every university has to give importance to and be evaluated on—a KPI about culture ... every university has to accept this requirement. (STOU-AS-02)

The same concern has also confirmed by another KI who stated that STOU has QA standards in the dimension of arts and cultural preservation (STOU-PC-01).

***Sub-theme 9.2: The implementation of QA programs in learner support areas is fashioned by educational technology to support academic services and online QA systems***

There was evidence that STOU's QA program for learner support areas has moved forward in line with the advancement of educational technology to support teaching and learning processes and online QA systems. These include the use of electronic modules and fully online courses, synchronous teaching delivery for English curriculum, web boards, e-seminars for graduate students, a-tutor, Moodle and the Design for Learning (D4L) program (STOU-AS-04). In meeting the challenges for the future, the university has employed an Internet network to support student success.

Employing modern technology to support STOU's QA system has become a strategic approach to running the system. Supported by ICT infrastructure, the online QA system has been developed with the aim of providing active assistance to all relevant parties to conduct self-assessment report (SAR). One KI reported that:

Regarding technology, it's something that we use a lot, and currently we are trying to apply some technology to QA. Right now, you may see that we're starting to use an online system, and everyone has to submit an SAR through the online system, and we will check using a system of online communication. But doing it all on paper wastes a lot of budgetary resources. But now there is the Internet, which provides a channel for people to submit their self-assessment report through a website. Then committee members can log on and evaluate according to various KPIs, and also provide marks on the website as well. This is an example of using technology in our QA. (STOU-QC-02)

This information has also been reconfirmed by another KI that the use of online QA system was aimed “in order to collect data from any departments of the university ... any department in the university can produce their self-assessment report online—they don't have to use paper—and can attach any file about performance, any document online”

(STOU-FD-01). The use of technology for QA was also aimed to support transparency and information dissemination on QA achievement across the university.

This online program will show the traffic light... We have the three traffic colors: red, yellow, and green. Red is below the target in each KPI. The yellow traffic light means it meets the target in each standard, and the green light means that it is above the standard. In each faculty and in all departments at STOU, everyone will see the traffic light of any department of STOU, as a means of transparency. (STOU-PC-01)

Besides, the use of a QA online system has also allowed the government QA internal body, OHEC, to monitor achievement level of every indicator anywhere at any time (STOU-PC-01).

***Sub-theme 9.3: The implementation of QA in learner support areas aligns with the professional QA agency's standards***

Inspired by its vision to become one of the world's leading DTUs, the university adopted the Malcolm Baldrige Award model. This model known as international standards consists of criteria that focus on building total quality management for high-performing organisations (Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012b). Corresponding to the discussion Industry-based framework of quality in the literature review, the Baldrige Award was built upon seven core values, including: leadership; strategic planning; customer and market focus; measurement, analysis and knowledge management; human resource focus; process management; and business result. A key participant explained that "This is the first year for the project.... I apply the Malcolm Baldrige award to all departments at STOU in order to upgrade in any aspects" (STOU-PC-01). This key participant elaborated further how the seven criteria of the Baldrige Award were implemented in the university QA system. Regarding quality measurement aspect, this KI acknowledged that "in all activities of STOU, we must set the KPIs in each activity and strategy" (STOU-PC-01). This key participant concluded that "the main policy for the QA vision of STOU—I would like to get the world-class standard. This is the highest goal of STOU" (STOU-PC-01).

***Sub-theme 9.4: The implementation of QA in learner support areas must correspond with government QA standards***

It was reported by most respondents that STOU's QA system complied with the Ministry of Education's QA guidelines. Internal and external QA processes were implemented under the control of two government's QA bodies, The Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC) and the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assurance (ONESQA). The influence of these government QA bodies on the university's QA system could be identified by as follows:

In Thailand we have the two seasons for quality assurance. We call them internal quality assurance and external quality assurance. Internal quality assurance is focused on the process and input, and external quality assurance focuses on the outcomes and impact. In each year, the Government will monitor each institution in Thailand for the internal quality assurance.... For external quality assurance, we will monitor every five years. It's a national standard of Thailand. (STOU-PC-01)

It was disclosed that in Thailand, the government's QA framework has not been specifically designed for distance education as STOU was the only higher education institution that adopted a distance education system (STOU-PC-01; STOU-QC-02). Therefore, the university should accept and follow the same QA standards used as other traditional universities (Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012b). However, the university has the opportunity to add its own QA indicators representing their own quality distinctiveness (STOU-PC-01). It was mentioned by another KI "Each institution has to operate according to that [Government QA standards], and then we can add other points that we think are necessary and we want to measure, so for unique points of our university other things to cover that" (STOU-QC-02).

***Sub-theme 9.5: Students are being involved in the implementation of QA in learner support areas through regular student surveys***

This study disclosed that the university conducted student survey to collect its students' satisfaction levels. One KI explained: "In each year, we have survey research to collect data from the students and learners of STOU ... about satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning system of STOU (STOU-PC-01). Every year the Office of Educational services runs an e-counselling project to provide room for

student engagement in the quality of learner support areas. With respect to this project, one KI mentioned that:

For first-year students, we send about 20,000 e-mails per month. And we get some feedback too, for example students might reply and say thank you for the information. And we also evaluate by surveying. If students are not satisfied they notify the department.... Altogether, for all four years of students, we send about 60,000 e-mails per month. (STOU-CS-05)

Furthermore, students' engagement in QA was also identified by their involvement in evaluating tutors' performance and other general learning support services. "After every tutorial, the students have to evaluate the teaching and send it back to the university.... We have an evaluation form" (STOU-FD-03; STOU-FD-06). This tutor evaluation by students has also been confirmed by one of the tutors who has been involved in this research; this tutor explained that:

Yes, when we finish a tutorial course, they will have to answer the questionnaire. In that one, they have to rate on a scale for the teaching, the teacher, the atmosphere, the textbook.... They have to rate everything. The Office of Educational Services is responsible for this.... We have the form and I tell the students, "You should do it, freely." I don't want them to just give me a high score. (STOU-AS-04)

Student engagement in the implementation of QA has also been recognized by an application of student survey by Thai Government. It was revealed by one KI that "the central department of the government does survey research in each institution of Thailand" (STOU-PC-01).

***RQ 4: What are the challenges that key people at STOU report they are facing in the development and implementation of QA in learner support areas?***

This part presents some interesting issues regarding challenges the university faced in the development and implementation of QA specifically in learner support areas. There were four challenges faced by interview subjects in implementing QA: QA being perceived as too demanding and time consuming, government guidelines do not correspond well to a distance teaching institution, data collection for supporting QA and

technological problems. However, this study is only focused on the first two issues identified as the major challenges.

### **Theme 10: QA is perceived as being too demanding and time consuming**

One of the participants frankly admitted that the lack of human resources to support the implementation of QA has become one of the major concerns; the KI explained that:

The actual problem ... we don't have an officer who has been assigned QA as their major responsibility. It causes people who come to do QA work feel like some work is not in their job description. After a year, they will be rotated off. The working team is rotated, and so it's time for rotation, and there is not any continuity. It makes people feel like this is just work that is temporarily assigned. They don't have a connection with the work. (STOU-QC-02)

Other issues that relate to human resources were also stated by One KI who explained that "in each year, we are overworked to produce the textbooks and media to deal with the students" (STOU-PC-01). This problem has been recounted by another KI:

We have to produce [textbooks] in time. Now STOU has a problem – we cannot produce in time. We send the textbooks to the students quite late. Actually we should send them to students before we start the semester, but right now they're maybe a month late, something like that. (STOU-AS-04)

This participant explained further about this overworking problem as follows:

The lecturers, the professors – have a lot of work. We don't have a vacation like a conventional university. We work continuously. We have to produce the texts; we have to prepare the examination papers. And some document work – we waste time, and you don't have time to develop yourself. We cannot go to seminars or join training courses. Especially in IT, my field, I need time to do that, to update myself. If you teach Thai or English, maybe you don't have to do that, but for the technology professors, you need time to develop. (STOU-AS-04)

Regarding the professors' roles in carrying out F2F tutorial sessions using the university's current policy in teaching and learning components, this participant also frankly admitted that:

Three times [meetings per semester] makes me very tired. Five chapters of mathematics – calculate, differentiate, integrate.... And the students also ... yeah, getting crazy! Too much! And I cannot finish in the five hours [for each meeting], maybe have to extend to six hours. (STOU-AS-04)

From the discussion, it seemed clear that the implementation of QA in learning support services was very demanding.

### **Theme 11: Government's guidelines do not correspond well to distance education institutions**

STOU is the only DTU in any country that fully adopts a distance education mode. The university has to follow government QA frameworks and its key performance KPIs are designed for conventional universities. This condition has significant impact on STOU in which some government QA standards do not correspond to the nature and practice of DTUs. This major concern was spelled out by a participant as follows:

Some KPIs were created by the Office of the Higher Education Commission from the Ministry of Education of Thailand, and some KPIs do not match with STOU, because we are an open university. They measure something that should be in conventional universities. STOU tries to tell them that we would like to change some KPIs that are not suitable to us. If they use this to measure us, we would fail. And some KPIs they allow this, but for some they are still strict. (STOU-AS-04)

When the researcher questioned further about the potential conflict derived by these existing QA problems, this participant, at some length, confirmed that:

If you ask if they conflict with each other—no not really anymore. In the past they sometimes conflicted because OHEC had one set of KPIs, and ONESQA had another set of KPIs. But since 2010, both organizations have begun cooperating and working together, and this has lessened these problems. So the problem of conflicting assessments, which we had in the past, has been fixed now. The cooperation between these two organizations is getting better and better, and this has reduced the problems we've had. (STOU-QC-02)

Currently, the university is very satisfied. One KI confirmed that “[Government QA bodies, OHEC & ONESQA,] note that no matter who assesses, they won't have to deal with conflicting assessments, but all will be working in the same direction. This has made our work easier” (STOU-QC-02).

***RQ 5: How are the results of the current QA processes in learner support areas used to inform practice?***

**Theme 12: Continuous quality assessment is done through self-assessment reports (SAR)**

As part of its QA system, STOU has developed and conducted continuous self-assessment reports (SAR) to ensure and monitor the implementation of QA. One of the KIs reported that:

The office has to report every three months, and that will be done at a departmental meeting or division meeting, and that is communicated to the university. The information will be reported both in number order and also levels-amounts. (STOU-CS-05)

The quality assessments were also revealed by another participant addressing how these regular assessments were carried out:

The head of the faculty and heads of departments will report online in each quarter. This online program will show the traffic light.... And for the period of six months—second quarter, third quarter and fourth quarter, the head of all departments will present the performance of the balanced scorecard to the president and vice-president ... three times in each year. If the president or vice-president sees that any KPI has poor performance ... the STOU system will provide comments and suggestions for this target in order to improve for the next quarter. (STOU-PC-01)

When the researcher confirmed these quality assessments in the faculty or department levels, one interview subject mentioned that “we have a meeting in our QA committee, we talk about how to meet the criteria. And we plan, and we try to—every board meeting we will think about how to meet the criteria of the learner support (STOU-FD-03).

**Theme 13: Various actions are taken to ensure continuous quality improvement through the use of the PDCA cycle, based on stakeholders' feedback**

Different data were disclosed on how the results of current QA processes in learner support areas have been used to inform practice at STOU. On how the current QA process has been used to inform practice was addressed by another participant as follows:

We make improvements as part of the PDCA cycle, as when we determine the weaknesses then we will correct those problems. And

there is a mutual agreement between all of the departments—there are over 40 departments—that when the assessors find strengths and weaknesses and the results are known, we will take those weaknesses and make a plan, which we call an improvement plan or a rectification plan, and it contains information on how these problems are going to be fixed. (STOU-QC-02)

One of the KIs informed that the current QA processes help him improve the quality of work based on weak areas. He explained as follows:

It helps make the work up to standard. Quality assurance helps us and our office work up to acceptable standards and helps us maintain a level of quality in our work. Also, it helps us understand the weak areas—weak points—so that we can improve our work in the future. (STOU-CS-05)

The use of quality assessment in the current QA processes for future improvement was also highlighted by other KIs who addressed the importance of evaluating stakeholders' feedback including students as their major clientele. These included the following: evaluating tutorial services based on students' feedback (STOU-AS-04), analysing government's and employers' feedback for better performance and improving the university management system based on its weaknesses & opportunities (STOU-PC-01), enhancing tutors' performance based on evaluation by learners (STOU-FD-06), using students' feedback for improving quality of teaching, and developing future planning and strategies based on the previous QA assessment (STOU-FD-03).

### ***Summary from the Case Study of STOU***

The case study of STOU reveals a number of emergent themes related to QA in learner support areas. First, it was clear that quality, albeit differently expressed, referred to the compliance of STOU' strategic stakeholders' requirements and standards, students and government. This perspective of quality reflects the importance of establishing standards or inherent requirements of what quality in their educational products arises from the stakeholders' perspective. The quality of outcomes must correspond to the customers', particularly students', requirements and quality standards set by government. The desirability of students' requirement orientation has become a major concern for STOU. At the same time, the university must also align their QA policies and practices with the government's quality criteria. The university has started to

adopt the Baldrige Quality Award in 2012 on one hand, and is considering that quality is a dynamic concept on the other hand. Thus, it is presumable that this perspective of quality may change in accordance with the potential influence of this international quality agency on the university's QA management system and the people involved in the QA programs. In turn, this will lead to the university adjusting their policies and practices in adopting QA programs.

Second, it is clear enough that the university has been equipped by a set of institutional policies that support the implementation of QA in learner support areas. The university QA policy texts have been set in the university quality manual. The university's quality manual has been regarded as major reference for all people and divisions within the university in implementing the QA programs. The QA manual addresses the university's bureaucratic QA system and the centralized QA management system controlled by the Educational Quality Assurance and Coordinating Center. The manual integrates all quality components governed by the OHEC and quality standards set by ONESQA to be combined with the university's self-assessment practices. Quality indicators and guidelines to achieve KPIs are clearly described in its quality manual to be shared by all people across faculties and the university's support system such as the Office of Educational services and STOU's study centers throughout the country.

Third, teaching and learning provisions and student development services are two major dimensions that represent the university's QA policies in learner support areas. Teaching and learning provisions refer to all STOU policies in providing academic services for students' learning. Referring to these policies, the university has employed a blended learning pedagogy in various forms of learning services, including printed textbooks, audio-video, and other multimedia to support students' self-directed learning. Additionally, the university has also designed various instructional deliveries, such as F2F tutorial sessions supported by the adoption of current educational technology for promoting students' learning using Internet networks.

Fourth, the policy and implementation of QA have been driven by internal and external environments. The major internal environments refer to internal QA management system and human resources. Meanwhile, external environments that support the university's QA system come from the general environment (socio-cultural

issues and educational technology) and the specific environments, referring refers to the university's major stakeholders namely external government's QA agencies, the external QA professional agency (the Baldrige Award), and the students.

Fifth, in some respects, the implementation of QA in learner support areas, particularly in teaching and learning provisions, corresponded to Holmberg's (1995) interaction and communication theory as the major theory employed in this study. In addition, the university academic services also resonated with autonomous and independent theory . Interaction and communication has been regarded as an important pillar for students' learning involving F2F and online learning to support independent learners. The teaching and learning provisions and support services provided by STOU indicate that the university's learner support areas parallel with teaching learning conversation proposed by Holmberg (2007). Closely aligned to Holmberg's (1995) ideas about one-way traffic communication, the university has invested its resources in developing self-contained study-guide courses to support students' learning. Contiguous and especially non-contiguous presentations are also delivered to bridge and facilitate Holmberg's (1995) two-way communication. Empathetic feelings have also been expressed by faculty members in maintaining their personal relationships with students.

Sixth, despite the challenges in implementing QA, such as it is being too demanding and some National QA standards not corresponding well to the context of distance learning, the university has made various efforts to ensure continuous quality improvement through self-assessment, along with internal as well as external quality audits. Continuous quality assessments are regularly carried out by the university in order to promote quality improvement and to maintain its standing as a provider of quality higher education in Thailand (Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012a).

## **Part 2: Anak Bangsa Open University**

This part presents the individual case study of Anak Bangsa Open University (ABOU). The presentation of data analysis for this second case study will also use a thematic analysis. The thematic analysis serves as meaningful approach to present data

drawn from interviews and supplemented by documentary analysis associated with the QA policies and practices at the university.

### ***Major Themes from ABOU***

The identification of themes from ABOU case study will also follow a similar approach to that of the STOU case study. The results of this study involved interviews from different categories including academic and administrative, middle level managers involved in implementing QA and top managers serving as policy contributors for QA at the university. The combined data from these interviews and official documentary analysis served as a list of codes for the first cycle of coding as shown in appendix D1.

Subsequent to the organisation of the list codes from different interview subjects and official documents, the second step of ordering codes was undertaken by examining similarities and differences, clustering and organising into categories, themes, and sub-themes with fairly similar meaning, as presented in appendix D2. The regrouping of categories for emerging theme purposes was delimited by the scope of the relevant research questions developed for this study. The major themes are presented the following table.

**Table 4. List of the consolidated themes related to the research questions**

Research questions	List of the consolidated themes related to the research questions
<p>RQ 1: How do key people involved in the QA programs in learner support areas at ABOU and UT conceive of quality in general?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways do they see quality in learner support areas?</li> <li>• Given their understanding of quality, how do they conceive of QA?</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Quality refers to the work culture involving everyone within organisation achieving customers' requirements</li> <li>2. Quality refers to the quality criteria in learner support services</li> <li>3. QA refers to procedures to ensure expected outcomes</li> </ol>
<p>RQ2: What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas at ABOU?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. The QA manual serves as the guide for implementation that has been regarded as the first document level in the hierarchy of the university's quality management documentation system</li> <li>5. The institutional policies in teaching and learning provisions and support services serve as the guides for QA in learner support areas, with focus on students'</li> </ol>

	needs
RQ3: How do the key people at ABOU report that QA policies in learner support areas are being implemented?	<p>6. The institution's internal environments support the implementation of QA, thus addressing the establishment of the centralized QA management systems and the distributed learning centers</p> <p>7. The application of QA in learner support areas emphasizes the employment of blended learning pedagogy and learning skills workshops to support students' success</p> <p>8. The implementation of teaching and learning provisions corresponds to Holmberg's interaction and communication theory</p> <p>9. The implementation of QA in learner support areas relates to the university's external environments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The implementation of QA in learner support areas responds to the local culture, particularly language</li> <li>✓ The implementation of QA programs in learner support areas is fashioned by educational technology for promoting e-learning</li> <li>✓ The implementation of QA in learner support areas aligns with the professional QA agency's standards</li> <li>✓ The implementation of QA in learner support areas must correspond with government QA standards</li> <li>✓ Students are being involved in the implementation of QA in learner support areas by providing their regular feedback</li> </ul>
RQ4: What are the challenges that key people at ABOU report they are facing in the development and implementation of QA in learner support areas?	10. Staff misunderstand QA
RQ5: How are the results of the current QA processes in learner support areas used to inform practice at ABOU?	<p>11. Continuous quality assessment is done through continuous monitoring and evaluation</p> <p>12. Various actions are taken to ensure quality improvement, particularly based on students' feedback</p>

The following discussion presents these 12 emerging themes.

### ***RQ 1: How do key people involved in the QA programs in learner support areas at ABOU conceive of quality and QA?***

The first research question addresses three issues regarding general perspectives of quality, perspective of quality in learner support areas, and how do key people conceive of QA? Based on interview data, there are three major emergent themes for the research question 1.

#### **Theme 1: Quality refers to the work culture involving everyone within organisation achieving customers' requirements**

From the different interview subjects, it was disclosed that the general perspectives on quality have been identified as referring to the work culture that involves everyone in the organisation achieving customers' requirements. One of the participants explained as follows:

Quality actually is a culture, good culture. Whatever you do you must do to the best ability required by the designed process, for example we want the satisfied customers. We must find out their requirements. We meet their requirements. This is actually quality. We deliver what they are expected. (ABOU-QC-02)

This participant clarified further this perspective of quality by mentioning that "So again quality is a culture ... quality is not one department work. It should be part of everyone. It is not the department to ensure quality, it is everybody must contribute, and everybody is responsible for quality" (ABOU-QC-02). To address this perspective of quality, the university, in its QA manual, has clearly stated "Each [ABOU]'s staff should adopt common values in performing their tasks so that customer requirements were met satisfactorily" (ABOU, 2011, p. 30). The common values and work culture in this perspective of quality referred to integrity, professionalism, caring, innovation, and teamwork (ABOU, 2011).

#### **Theme 2: Quality refers to the standard criteria in learner support services**

The more specific perspective of quality in learner support areas was expressed by one KI (ABOU-PC-01) who asserted that QA referred to the conformity with the university's main goal which is "to provide quality products and services to its customers" (ABOU, 2011, p.8). According to another participant, quality in learner support areas

referred to various quality criteria to support student learning (ABOU-LC-06). These criteria might include physical characteristics of the place (classroom), equipment, infrastructure, and other facilities required for F2F deliveries. This participant, associated with the development of standards for F2F tutorials, explained that:

In general, quality can be said as ... keeping up with the standards that we are supposed to deliver to the students....The class should be very conducive, comfortable, and then convenient to the students. In terms of space and in terms of sitting, capacity should be convenient for learning. If the students need any space for discussion, of course we have to provide that space for discussion. If the students need space for exploring additional reading, we must have the library.... We should have enough space for students to have a break in between classes, so that the students have space for sitting down and discussing, we must also have discussion room.... We should have our place very informative meaning that we must have like prayer room, coffee table and such things like that. (ABOU-LC-06)

Different criteria of quality correlated with the importance of the quality in instructional deliveries. These included things such as tutors and students should come on time in their tutorial sessions; tutors should also commit to their classes and manage tutorial sessions according to time, procedures, and processes (ABOU-LC-06).

### **Theme 3: QA refers to the procedures to ensure expected outcomes**

Closely aligned to the perspectives of quality, QA had been regarded as mechanisms or procedures to maintain a consistency to ensure expected outcomes. One of the interview subjects reported that “Quality assurance is how we ensure the process to deliver the same kind of output all the time. That’s quality assurance” (ABOU-QC-02). The desirability of QA as procedures was also addressed by another participant as follows:

To ensure the quality of the program we need quality assurance. You know that work culture alone is difficult. That is why the SOPs come in to ensure everybody follows the same. So, quality assurance is needed to maintain the consistency. Without quality assurance we cannot deliver the quality of the program because you cannot ensure the consistency. (ABOU-FD-03)

This excerpt implied that QA as a mechanism was a key to produce expected outcomes as it was confirmed by two participants who mentioned that “Quality assurance is to

produce products to ensure the expected performance, you ensure all the time. How do you ensure that? You must put into the systems to deliver the products” (ABOU-QC-02). This perspective had been recounted by another KI who argued that “In terms of quality assurance, it means that we make sure that the programs have the learning outcomes, we must cross check within the process” (ABOU-AS-04).

## ***RQ 2: What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas at ABOU?***

### **Theme 4: The QA manual serves as the guide for implementation that has been regarded as the first document level in the hierarchy of the university’s quality management documentation system**

ABOU has had a formal quality manual for a long time that served as the guide for implementation. The university’s quality manuals have been regarded as the first document level in the hierarchy of the quality management system documentation system. The university’s quality manuals contained policies related to quality processes involved with university operations (ABOU, 2011). Therefore, quality manuals are an official document covering all important aspects of the university QA system as it was revealed by one the KIs as follows:

the [ABOU] quality manual on the [ABOU] Website explains various quality policies, philosophy, vision, missions, and objectives, the scope of quality systems, terms and definitions, objectives of quality program, procedures of quality, and Units/Departments certified by ISO including library, registry, CIDT, and CSM. (ABOU-QC-02)

The quality manuals have been developed with the objectives as follows:

- Clarifying the objectives, policies, planning and production performance data.
- Achieving the desired level of service quality.
- Identifying and controlling the flow of information necessary for these processes.
- Explaining the relationship between the various activities that form the process.
- Explaining ABOU's commitment to continuous improvement to ensure customer needs are achieved and exceeded requirements.
- Assessing the appropriateness and effectiveness of the system. (ABOU, 2011, p. 22)

As the major document in the hierarchy of the quality management documentation system, the university's QA manual has been supplemented by different quality procedures for all QA areas that have regarded as the second document level in the hierarchy of the university QA documentary system. SOPs highlighted step by step activities in the implementation of QA that should be regarded as the highest reference document for the procedure manuals for each department throughout the university.

**Theme 5: Institutional policies in teaching and learning provisions and support services serve as the guides for QA in learner support areas, with focus on students' needs**

ABOU has developed quality policies in learner support areas that focused on students' requirements. Students have been regarded as the university's major concern in developing academic services and employing necessary non-academic counselling. The university policies that support QA in learner support areas could be generally classified into two major areas, as follows.

1. Teaching and learning services:

- Provide a platform for open and distance learning quality by identifying and developing new programs to the latest quality to meet market needs.
- Develop quality modules for each academic program.
- Provide infrastructure and the latest teaching facilities to meet the needs of ODL system.
- Ensure the tutorials conducted by certified tutors / facilitators according to the schedule set through program development and management and monitoring of tutors from time to time. (ABOU, 2011, p. 32)

2. Support Services

- Provide efficient and high quality of support services and meet the expectations of students.
- Provide relevant programs to help students with problems in order to improve academic performance and to continue learning until graduation.
- Organise intellectual activities through workshops, forums or dialogue from time to time to increase the awareness and knowledge related to their studies at ABOU.
- Provide welfare services to students who need help.
- Acquire student feedback to improve programs and services available to students.

- Provide friendly, accurate, responsible and polite feedback, in accordance with the motto 'student-friendly'. (ABOU, 2011, p. 33-34; ABOU, 2012, p. 7)

These quality policies are established to support ABOU's goal stated in its quality manual, "[ABOU's] main goal is to provide quality products and services to its customers. [ABOU] accomplishes this goal by giving priority to customer needs translated through continuous improvement of products, processes, and services" (ABOU, 2012, p. 8).

***RQ 3: How do the key people at ABOU report that QA policies in learner support areas are being implemented?***

**Theme 6: The institution's internal environment supports the implementation of QA that addresses the establishment of the centralized QA management systems and the distributed learning centers**

It is the university's policy "to implement total quality measures in its operations to ensure quality programs are effectively delivered at reasonable costs through quality work culture" (ABOU, 2012, p. 8). To support this quality statement and QA in learner support areas in particular, the university has been equipped with a centralized QA centre, diverse departments to support QA program, and a number of the distributed learning centers to offer learner support at the local levels. In addition, human resources have also played key roles in implementing and maintaining QA programs.

The university has established different strategic units devoted to learner support areas, including faculty, Institute of Quality, Research and Innovation (IQRI), Institute of Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA), Center for Instructional design & Technology (CIDT) and Center for Student Management (CSM) (ABOU, 2011). Among these diverse offices, it was reported that the IQRI played a key role in managing QA at the university level, assisting the development of quality procedures (SOPs), promoting QA to the entire university and providing training, briefing, and in controlling QA (ABOU-QC-02; ABOU-PC-01). IQRI took a pivotal role in creating quality awareness and instilling quality culture within the university. The IQRI had to ensure that both internal and external quality audits were in place through planning, implementation, monitoring, and review of quality initiatives (Ali & Fadzil, 2012). While ITLA and CIDT are devoted to quality enhancement in teaching and learning areas, CSM has been designed for supporting student services including organising electronic customer relationship

management (e-CRM), counselling services, orientation programs, and study skills workshops and examination clinics (ABOU-FD-03; ABOU-CS-05).

Additionally, the university has also established a strong network of its learning centers (LCs) scattered throughout the country. Learning centers have played strategic roles in providing teaching and learning provisions and other learner support services. Regarding this strategic role of LCs, the Director of LC who has been assigned by management as one participant in this research reported that:

At this campus, I manage student tutorials. Tutorials should be held on time and then the tutors are supposed to be here on time and the subject matter is supposed to be in such a way as in the modules. The communication or the teaching part should be clear and the students can get the benefit from the face to face. So, my major responsibility is to manage tutorial programs and to provide learning support for students who have problems with the learning parts. (STOU-LC-06)

In order to support quality of teaching and learning deliveries, the LCs were fully equipped with tutorial rooms, computer laboratories, libraries, and Internet facilities (ABOU-PC-01). Currently, the university has 45 LCs managed by a team of administrators and supported by 3-5 academic staff members (ABOU-AS-04).

Human resources and academic and administrative staff have been regarded as major internal assets that support the implementation of QA. Therefore, the university's employees who handle the work related to quality of products and services should be qualified and competent based on their educational background, training, skills, and work experience (ABOU, 2012). In the implementation of QA, faculty members were involved in the developing of educational programs, conducting benchmarking, writing learning materials, managing courses, providing academic counselling and tutorial services, and monitoring student progress (ABOU-AS-04). Meanwhile, administrative staff were deeply involved in different supporting activities, including counselling programs, organizing orientation programs, implementing customer relationship management, organising and analysing students' feedback, organising study skills workshops, conducting examination clinics, and providing financial assistance for eligible students (ABOU-FD-03; ABOU-CS-05).

**Theme 7: The application of QA in learner support areas emphasizes the employment of blended learning pedagogy and learning skills workshops to support students' success**

***Blended teaching deliveries***

ABOU has been equipped with a blended pedagogy for its instructional deliveries, comprised of self-managed learning, F2F tutorial sessions, and online learning (ABOU-AS-04). Self-managed learning calls for students to study by themselves through self-contained textbooks supplemented by other learning materials such as audio video tapes. F2F interaction was conducted by tutors at the learning centers. In the tutorial sessions, different issues related to course materials and assignments as well as academic counselling were discussed to support student success. Meanwhile, online learning has been carried out using electronic communication tools to promote intensive communication and interaction among learners and tutors. Concerning these three major teaching deliveries, one of the KIs confirmed that:

We support students' learning by providing...face to face, e-Learning and then self-study to make the whole thing complete in order to ensure quality, quality of our tutors, quality of our delivery and so on; that is the way to increase quality. (ABOU-PC-01)

Another KI recounted the importance of blended pedagogy at some length as follows:

I teach one class, learning methods in Open University. That course to me is very important because we have to address to the students the forms of learning for distance learners: face to face, e-tutorial, printed materials (books), and then iLecture. So we have to make clear to the students that we provide four teaching modes to support their students to be successful. So when we stress to [students] and promote these learning modes, they have to come for face to face tutorial even though it is not compulsory. Then they have to go to e-Forum, online forum, to interact, they have to read the book, and get involved on iLecture. So they have a choice according to their working time table and their commitment to their family. So if they cannot go to face to face, make sure that they go online. If they don't go online, make sure that they bring and read the book wherever they go. If they still don't read the book, they should open iLecture on their CD. So, as a lecture at Open University we must emphasise to the students that they have various teaching delivery options and there is no excuse why they cannot pass. (ABOU-LC-06)

F2F tutorial classes were reported as one of the teaching delivery modes to support student learning because this mode provided opportunities for students to enhance their understanding, especially with regard to calculation-based courses (ABOU-FD-03). Besides, the tutorial sessions allowed students to share their problems with others. The importance of F2F tutorial session was explained by one KI:

I think face to face is very important. We can talk to our students one to one and they can actually give their views and share their problems in learning. So, we can get feedback from them. Face to face for certain course is still needed especially for tough courses, calculation based courses. We still need the face to face component. (ABOU-AS-04)

Currently, however, this mode of teaching was changing in line with the integration of advanced technology for educational purposes. This KI provided further clarification:

But now, it seems that we can move away from face to face if we have the support like by inviting students into the [online] forum and developing the supplement for the learning materials. It should work for the students. (ABOU-AS-04)

It was disclosed the the myVLE learning platform was used to deliver online learning with the primary aim of strengthening student learning. MyVLE supported virtual interaction and communication between tutors and students.

### ***Support services: Providing workshops to support students' success***

The university developed support services that complied with its main goal “to provide quality products and services to its customers” (ABOU, 2012, p.7) and its policy to “provide efficient and high quality of support services and meet the expectations of students” (ABOU, 2012, p.7). It was reported that the university provided support services in the following areas: study skills workshops, counselling, assignment workshops, and examination clinics (ABOU-FD-03; ABOU-CS-05).

Study skills workshops—these workshops were provided during orientation addressing a crucial issue for new enrolments, how to be successful as distance learners. This program was conducted at all ABOU’s learning centers to help new students into the distance education system. One of the KIs described that the university provided support services from the beginning of students’ enrolment:

We organize something like an awareness program or some sort of orientation program for new students. We call this program '*Bengkel Kemahiran Belajar.*' In this study orientation we explain to the students what is distance learning, how to study in distance learning, what you need to be prepared, etc. (ABOU-CS-05)

Counselling services—counselling services were available to all registered students for free with the aim to provide opportunities for students to explore issues of concern and to discover ways of learning in the distance education system (ABOU-CS-05). Counselling might include time management, motivation, and course content, including assignments. Students could meet in person with the directors of their learning center during operational hours or with counsellors during tutorial sessions (ABOU-LC-06).

ABOU provided assignment workshops as part of strategies to help students improve their grade point average (GPA). According to one participant this activity was carried out two weeks after study skills workshops for new enrolments. The participant informed as follows:

Two weeks after that [study skills workshops], we do another workshop, assignment workshop. Based on our study, we find that assignments are the worst barrier to new students. In this workshop the students can ask their tutors how to do assignments, how to write the assignment, and how to find library and references needed. They work in different places. The tutor will help the students connect to their myVLE and access the library for further knowledge. After the workshop, then the tutors will report to the CSM. (ABOU-CS-05)

In addition to the assignment workshops, the university has also provided examination clinics for students who might need special guidance on how to prepare for examination. The same participant confirmed further about these support services:

At the end of the semester, we will conduct an exam clinic for the students prior to sitting for final exam. In this program we will select subjects from the previous semester which have the highest failure rate. All these programs are conducted in [ABOU]'s learning centres and some of our faculty members (lecturers) may travel to different learning centres to help facilitate these workshops. (ABOU-CS-05)

All these workshops were conducted as part of the university's commitment to promote self-development for all distance learners (ABOU-AS-05). There were also other support

services for benefits of students such as learners' welfare (financial assistance) for eligible students and e-CRM or online help desk designed for keeping track all inquiries, complaints, compliments, and suggestions (ABOU-FD-03).

**Theme 8: The implementation of teaching and learning provisions corresponds to Holmberg's interaction and communication theory**

In line with the university's policy in learner support areas, the instructional processes conducted at ABOU are closely aligned with Holmberg's (1995) interaction and communication theory as the primary theory adopted in this research, and also correlating with the theory of autonomy and independence.

It was disclosed that the university has moved in line with Holmberg's (2007) teaching learning conversation format. Interaction and communication among students, tutors, and facilitators have been placed as core values in teaching and learning provisions through personal relationships, empathy, friendly student services, flexible access to communication channels, and remaining closer to students (ABOU-FD-03; ABOU-AS-04; ABOU-CS-05). One of the participants expressed the importance of empathy for distance learners as follows:

Empathy is very important in serving distance students. Without empathy I don't think they wish to study. Sometimes the students say that they don't want to study anymore. "I am going to quit. I give up." So I have to reach this student and encourage her. Then she comes back to study again and graduate. I have a lot for these cases... When we express our empathy to the students, they will trust us, they will share their feelings, don't care who you are. They believe that we are the ones who can share their feelings and problems. (ABOU-CS-05)

Developing personal relationship with distance learners was also expressed by this interview subject as an important factor for students to move ahead in studying at DTU:

[Working for a] distance education institution, it is important to develop personal relationships because we never meet [our students] until the day they graduate. If they feel like I am just next to you. This is as branding image in marketing. And this is a personal touch for branding image. (ABOU-CS-05)

This participant revealed that providing flexible time for students to communicate and being friendly were also conducted to serve distance learners.

They can email me. I ask them to email any time or call me by my name. The reason why, if you call me "puan" [Mrs.] you feel the distance. So please call me "Liza". The sound is changing and more friendly. This is an approach of psychology. If I call other people by name I feel like I am making friends with them. I think this is part of emphatic rapport, understanding of others. (ABOU-CS-05)

To support Holmberg's (1995) one-way traffic communication that used media heavily for learning, the university has promoted self-managed learning as one of the modes of teaching supported by other media, such as radio and television broadcasting. To support Holmberg's (1995) idea of communicating directly with the student through the printed learning materials and developing student independence, the university has developed printed learning materials consistent with Holmberg's idea. One respondent explained how modules have been prepared as a major source for learning and for supporting independent learners at ABOU:

For each module, we have a course guide. So the course guide will actually guide the students what is pre requisite for the course and the learning hours you should be studying, how many hours that you should be concentrating to do your assignment. So, everything is in the course guide... (ABOU-AS-04)

The designed modules allow students to self-exercise, self-check, and they can go through if they want to study by themselves (ABOU-AS-04). This participant explained further that in distance education F2F meetings are very limited due to 80% being self-managed learning. Therefore, modules are very important (ABOU-AS-04).

In order to support independence, the university has also built a digital library which provided more information for student learning as it was reported by one KI "in order to achieve quality, our students must have access to quality reference as learning materials that was our e-Library comes in. We subscribed to ProQuest and others, thousands of eBooks are there" (ABOU-PC-01).

### **Theme 9: The implementation of QA in learner support areas relates to the university's external environments**

There are five sub-themes under which external factors support the implementation of QA: socio cultural and technological factors, external QA agency, government, and students.

***Sub-theme 9.1: The implementation of QA in learner support areas correlates to socio-cultural environment, particularly language***

Except for Malaysia studies, English has been used as the major language for learning materials and instructional deliveries (ABOU-QC-02). The use of English for all instructional materials and teaching deliveries has strategic benefits allowing the university to serve not only the domestic market but also international demands. For some students, however, they preferred and asked the university to provide learning materials in bahasa Melayu instead of English. One participant noted that:

There is a request from students who need modules written in bahasa Melayu, but it is very localized, like in Pinang they prefer English, in Kuantan and Terengganu they prefer bahasa Melayu, for Johor both English and bahasa Melayu OK. So it is much localized. (ABOU-LC-06)

In response students' request, this participant recounted:

Now we are in effort trying to convert some of the courses into bahasa Melayu, but not totally. We are trying to translate our modules into bahasa Melayu and upload them onto our Website. So, students who want to read the modules in bahasa Melayu version they can read, download, and print. (ABOU-LC-06)

This language issue has also been confirmed by another interview subject who explained that currently students who wanted to study in Melayu versions could access and downloaded soft copy files of learning materials for free (ABOU-QC-02).

***Sub-theme 9.2: The implementation of QA programs in learner support areas is supported by educational technology, specifically for promoting e-learning***

The university has developed its own learning portal, known as my virtual learning environment (myVLE) to support various activities of student e-learning (ABOU-PC-01). These e-learning activities might include many features such as email, html modules, e-counselling, digital library, iLecture, online discussion forum for e-tutors and students (ABOU-FD-03; ABOU-AS-04; ABOU-CS-05). One of the KIs explained that there was an e-tutors community for guiding e-tutors and sharing what challenges they have in moderating online forum for students (ABOU-AS-04). They use technology for educational purposes not only for supporting academic services but also for facilitating support services, as it was noted by one participant, as follows:

We have students who call with problems, issues, or suggestions, or inquire. We also have students who need to use our online what we call 'help desk'. The students go into the portal, click the icon, and then they can actually put their questions. I need this document. I have this problem. My grades are different. Any questions they have, they can actually post them. (ABOU-FD-03)

In terms of the employment of information technology for supporting learners in some parts of remote areas, one respondent mentioned that “although Malaysia is very developed in industry and infrastructures of IT, there are some states, for example you go to Sabah and Sarawak remote area (*pendalaman*), [and] connectivity is not there. We cannot expect them to enrol online” (ABOU-QC-02). Therefore, students residing in remote areas are not able to utilise some support services for their benefits.

***Sub-theme 9.3: The implementation of QA in learner support areas aligns with the professional QA agency's standards***

ABOU has voluntarily adopted Malaysian Standards—International Organisation for Standardisation (MS-ISO) quality management system—requirements as a guiding principle for the university QA system (ABOU-QC-02). The university, however, did not employ the standards for the entire university, only strategic units within the university. One interview subject clarified this, as follows:

We don't use ISO as a whole. The event is department by department, like, for example: library, registry, Centre for Student Management (CSM), and Centre for Instructional Design and Technology (CIDT). They are certified by ISO. Not as the whole university, perhaps because they are the best approach at the time. Now we are in the direction to connect all the processes. So we want to go for the entire university to get one ISO but maybe for next year not this year. (ABOU-QC-02)

The ISO quality audit was carried out by the SIRIM as the agent appointed by the Department of Standards Malaysia (DSM). According to one KI “SIRIM, which is the National Institution for International Quality Assurance, will come once a year to look at our documentations and do an audit check on our processes and procedures” (ABOU-FD-03).

***Sub-theme 9.4: The implementation of QA in learner support areas must correspond with government quality standards***

Government has played a key role in directing the implementation of QA in learner support areas. It was required by law that the university “must follow COPIA [Code of Practice for Internal Audit] from MQA [Malaysian Qualification Agency]. The MQA is governmental body which regulate and monitor QA practices and accreditation of all the academic programmes for higher education (WOU, 2011b). They have a framework so we follow the framework to develop a new program” (ABOU-AS-04).

Another participant confirmed this as follows:

Academic quality must follow the Government requirements like Malaysia Qualification Agency. They set up the requirements.... [ABOU] submits the documents to the MQA for approval. Then, once they approve, of course there will be a lot feedback, changes required, and then you introduce the program. (ABOU-QC-02)

One KI addressed that “all programs must be submitted to MQA. If there is no quality, they will not allow us to offer the programs” (ABOU-PC-01). This Malaysian Quality Agency would come for quality audit, for the program accreditation covering different areas, such as the university vision, mission, educational goals, curriculum design and delivery, student selection and support services, and continual quality improvement.

***Sub-theme 9.5: Students are being involved in the implementation of QA in learner support areas by providing their regular feedback***

Students have been regarded as very important external stakeholders for the university. Students’ engagement and influence on QA in learner support areas complied with the university’s policy to be ‘customer focused’ (ABOU, 2011). The university ensured that “customer needs are identified and met through appropriate rules with business processes” (p. 28). One participant confirmed that there was:

...a lot of rooms for students to contribute. If the students do not like these policies they have opportunity to give their comments and feedback at the learning centres. And the learning centre will send back to us...the students go to e-CRM complaint, enquire whatever and I send this to all [departments]. So the head can discuss in their faculty’s meetings or departments’ meetings “what happened?” So this is for discussion and for quality improvement. (ABOU-FD-03)

It was expressed by one participant that the university has regularly employed student surveys, for example, at the end of every course, students can go online and give their feedback about the tutors, modules, and about the entire course, such as about environment for F2F tutorials (ABOU-QC-02). All students have a certain form regarding performance of the tutors after tutorial 4, the final tutorial sessions. Through this form, students provided their comments whether they like their tutors or dislike them (ABOU-LC-06).

***RQ 4: What are the challenges that key people at ABOU report they are facing in the development and implementation of QA in learner support areas?***

**Theme 10: Staff misunderstand QA**

Some of the challenges reported during the fieldwork could be classified into three different categories: human resources, educational programs, and infrastructure. However, human resources in terms of their misunderstanding about QA have been identified as a major one. One of the participants frankly expressed that:

In terms of implementing quality assurance, the only challenge I think [is] when the staff don't understand why the quality assurance is there. If the staff can understand why the quality assurance is there because we want to improve our processes, we want to improve our procedures, then they will give their support. (ABOU-FD-03)

The participant went on to explain at some length about this challenge:

They think quality is about the audit check, about finding who is making mistakes. A lot people think like that. So we have to change the mindset of the employee, we must tell the employee we are not here to find out who is fault. No, we are here to make sure what our plan is being done, what we documents, we actually doing, what is documented is done, what is done is documented. So I think if the staff can understand the logic behind why quality assurance is done, then they will give their support. If they don't understand, they will not give you their support. It is very difficult thing. (ABOU-FD-03)

This challenge was also recounted by another participant who mentioned that:

I am facilitator day-to-day looking at the process, procedures. People always think that quality is a matter of management, by my department, not as their responsibility. You manage quality and we

just do our things. They do not know that what they do is part of quality as a whole. (ABOU-QC-02)

According to one interview subject “A lot of people are afraid, they don’t want people to go underneath. I think it shouldn’t be like that” (ABOU-FD-03). This participant believed that external QA audit will help ABOU improve the quality of their educational programs (ABOU-FD-03).

### ***RQ 5: How are the results of the current QA processes in learner support areas used to inform practice at ABOU?***

#### **Theme 11: Continuous quality assessment is done through continuous monitoring and evaluation programs**

Quality has been placed at the very heart of all ABOU activities (ABOU, 2006a) involving continuous quality assessment in order to enhance its quality of educational services. Quality assessments have been carried out through different forms of monitoring and evaluation programs. One of the KIs reported that the Center of Student Management conducted weekly staff evaluation as internal self-assessment activities:

Every week we open the box and see what the students wrote about which agent, we don’t want name, I always say to my staff, I love you very much but this is about work, not about the personality, not the person.... So we open the box [where students put their feedback] and we sit down together, we open we share. Ok, this is what students said. We discuss it in a good way. Then we keep [these students’ feedback] because we want to improve ourselves. (ABOU-FD-03)

Learning centers were also involved in continuous evaluation & monitoring. According to one KI there were two ways to use current QA processes to inform practices and to support the implementation QA in learner support areas as follows:

Number one, we evaluate and monitor our tutorial program and other support services for future improvement... We have problems in classes for example we have problem with tutors. They come late, they cancel classes, or they don’t finish the modules. Based on this quality report then what we do is that we will atomise the most frequent in absences, you have lists of things that you expect. From the result of the quality report we can identify problems and weaknesses, so we must create a backup system.

Second, based on our experience, for future improvement, we have to make sure that tutors are committed. Please don’t cancel your class,

please don't come late, please stick with the modules, with the materials in the modules, because questions in the final exam are about 99% from the modules. If you talk about something else then the student will become very upset, because the module is very important to pass the exam. (ABOU-LC-06)

The participant confirmed that "all this monitoring must go on all time. We monitor in terms of commitment of the tutors including attendance ... We also monitor our equipment whether it is running well or not (ABOU-LC-06).

**Theme 12: Various actions are taken to ensure quality improvement, particularly based on students' feedback**

Many respondents expressed how the current QA processes have been used to inform practices, specifically based on students' feedback. The implementation of QA has led the university to consider several activities for continual quality improvement. The current QA process also informed the university's future planning, based on students' feedback. One of the KIs reported that:

We ask the directors of learning centres to monitor our learner support program in that semester. We ask them what they have to do, monitor, and then report back to [ABOU] to be analysed. From there we will know in what areas we can help our new and existing students for the next semester. Some of the students need help in doing assignments, some of them have stress, and some of them have financial problems. So we know what our plans are for our new students. (ABOU-CS-05)

Students' feedback has been regarded as very important inputs for quality improvement. An interview subject expressed how students' feedback has been identified as a crucial element for immediate solution.

When we receive complaints from our students through phone calls, we will take action immediately. Let's say, students complain that tutors do not come in for their face to face tutorial, they are angry because they have paid for airfare tickets and other things. They will tell us by phone or email and then we will advise that tutor or the person in charge of them to resolve this student complaint. (ABOU-PC-05)

The current QA practices have also been used to improve quality of teaching and learning provisions, such as tutor competencies and commitment and learning materials learning materials. One participant reported that she revised her printed materials based on students' feedback:

Now I am doing my 5th module, how to do assignments efficiently and effectively. You know why? ... because they are not able to do assignments. They are not able to complete the assignments.... So now I am working on the 5th module: how to write assignment effectively. This is all feedback from the students. We see! Oh ... this is the problem. So we have to do something. We develop ourselves. (ABOU-FD-03)

Another interview subject explained that the current implementation of QA would be used as a baseline for advancing quality standards.

The standard could be changed to support continuous improvement in our quality program. Once we achieve our target then we will make our new target for our continuous improvement. Let say, now I have to reply to email within three days and for the future I have to try to respond within 24 hours. (ABOU-CS-05)

This participant also noted that the results of QA practice have been used by relevant units at ABOU to improve learner support services such as determining different types of training needed for enhancing staff's' competencies (ABOU-CS-05).

### ***Summary from Case Study of ABOU***

The university has employed quality policies to implement total quality measures in its operations to ensure quality programs are effectively delivered at reasonable costs through quality culture. With regard to the perspectives of quality representing by the KIs in this study, most respondents from the institution reported that quality referred to the work culture involving all staff in relevant departments to achieve customers' requirements. This perspective of quality implies two dimensions. On the one hand, it reflects the importance of an internal work culture to ensure the implementation of QA in order to achieve the desired degree of quality of their products and services. On the other hand, this perspective addresses a customer focus orientation as a strategic principal for ABOU to stay as a competitive DTU. These two dimensions closely align to:

- 1) the specific perspective of quality as referring to a number of quality criteria in learner

support areas, and 2) the perspective of QA as being referred to the internal mechanisms (processes) to ensure expected outputs.

The institutional QA policies have been regarded as guidelines for implementing academic and operational activities. The university has developed quality manuals at the university level which contain all strategic and general guidelines for quality adoption. The university's QA manual has been regarded as the first document level in the hierarchy of the university's quality management documentation system, followed by different quality guidelines in different quality areas at the second level of the university's documentary systems. The manual clearly states the institutional QA policies and performance indicators that must be executed in QA implementation. All QA manuals, including their quality guidelines in department levels, must refer to the university QA manual. Regarding the university policies in learner support areas, it is disclosed that the university's quality policies focus on a blended learning pedagogy and support services. ABOU has developed blended pedagogy involving self-managed learning, F2F tutorial sessions, and online learning to support students' success. Besides, the university has also implemented diverse support services to promote students' progress during study, including providing a series of academic workshops that are necessarily important for independent learners in the context of distance learning system.

To ensure teaching and learning provisions and its support services, the university not only invites the Malaysia Qualification Agency (MQA), as required by law, but also voluntarily requests that the SIRIM-ISO assess the implementation of quality in different areas. The implementation of QA in learner support areas has also been supported by the university internal environment. Internal QA management systems and human resources have been identified as major aspects that significantly contribute to the implementation of QA programs. For the implementation of QA programs, especially in learner support areas, the university has established different support units, including ITLA, CIDT, and CSM, at the university's head office. In addition to faculty and learning centers, these divisions have played key roles in implementing QA programs for learner support areas.

The implementation of QA in learner support areas also has also related to the university's external environments. The general university environments including local culture and technology have been identified as major general environments that supported the implementation of the QA program. In addition, the government, external QA agency, and students are among the other factors that must be regarded as ABOU's specific stakeholders. In line with the university's main goal to become a customer focus institution, students have been placed as a fulcrum above all other considerations. The university is dedicated to serve its students through diverse quality academic programs and friendly student services. Online help desk and other communication channels are developed for students' inquiries, complaints, and compliments.

It was reported that the practice of teaching and learning provisions and support services at ABOU corresponds to the existing theories in distance education. It was disclosed that learner support services at the university closely parallel Holmberg's (1995) interaction and communication theory and resonate with the autonomous and independent study. The university has promoted interaction and communication among teaching learning participants using different modes of instructional deliveries. The core postulates of guided didactic conversation proposed by Holmberg (1995) have been translated into different academic services. The academic staff who have been involved as tutors are actively engaging in developing personal connections with students in order to promote student learning. The university has also provided quality environments for students' F2F tutorial sessions supported by friendly staff to support students' success. Additionally, the administrative staff have also maintained Holmberg's (1995) empathetic feelings and personal approaches to serve the students through different interaction channels such as F2F and e-CRM application.

The university encounters some challenges in the implementation of QA programs; these include staff misunderstandings about QA. Some actions have been taken to overcome these problems, such as conducting talking sessions to introduce and promote the QA programs to all staff and involving staff in management review meetings. The university has moved ahead to compete in national and international education markets through quality. The university has taken continuous quality assessments to improve quality and provide efficient and quality world-class distance education (ABOU, 2006a).

## Part 3: Universitas Terbuka

Part 3 of this chapter presents the individual case study of Universitas Terbuka (UT) in Indonesia. This study explores some issues relating to the policy and implementation of QA at the university as its effort to ensure continuous improvement.

### *Major Themes from UT*

Similar to the previous case studies, a thematic analysis will be used to discuss the findings. The identification of codes, categories, and themes from UT also follows a similar pattern to that of the STOU and ABOU case studies. The first cycle of coding from the combined data, interviews and official documentary analysis is presented in the appendix E1. Subsequent to the organisation of the list codes from the first cycle of coding, the second step of ordering codes through categorisation is presented in the appendix E2. The categorisation for identifying the emergent themes is necessarily delimited by relevant research questions. The consolidated major themes from the appendix E2 are presented in the following table.

**Table 5.** *List of the consolidated themes from the case study of UT*

Research questions	List of the consolidated themes related to the research questions
<p>RQ 1: How do key people involved in the QA programs in learner support areas at UT conceive of quality in general?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways do they see quality in learner support areas?</li> <li>• Given their understanding of quality, how do they conceive of QA?</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Quality refers to the compliance with quality audit standards and corresponding to the customer's expectation</li> <li>2. Quality as meeting criteria in learner support services</li> <li>3. QA as procedures or mechanisms to ensure expected outcome</li> </ol>
<p>RQ2: What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas at UT?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. The QA manual serves as the guide for implementation containing ten quality areas of the university QA framework</li> <li>5. The institutional policies in teaching and learning provisions and support services serve as the guides to make sure that learner support services fit students' needs</li> </ol>
<p>RQ3: How do the key people at UT report that QA policies in learner support areas are</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. The institution's internal environment supports the implementation of QA that</li> </ol>

being implemented?	<p>addresses the importance of the centralized QA center and the roles of distributed regional offices to support students' learning</p> <p>7. The application of QA in learner support areas emphasizes the employment of a blended learning pedagogy and the implementation of e-CRM</p> <p>8. The implementation of teaching and learning provisions corresponds with Holmberg's interaction and communication theory</p> <p>9. The implementation of QA in learner support areas relates to the university's external environments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The implementation of QA in learner support areas responds to the local culture, particularly language and learning habits</li> <li>✓ The implementation of QA programs in learner support areas is fashioned by educational technology to support both academic and administrative programs</li> <li>✓ The implementation of QA in learner support areas aligns with the two professional QA agencies' standards</li> <li>✓ The implementation of QA in learner support areas must correspond with government QA standards</li> <li>✓ Students being involved in the implementation of QA in learner support areas through regular student surveys</li> </ul>
RQ4: What are the challenges that key people at UT report they are facing in the development and implementation of QA in learner support areas?	<p>10. Lack of access point and IT infrastructures</p> <p>11. QA is perceived as being too demanding and time consuming</p>
RQ5: How are the results of the current QA processes in learner support areas used to inform practice at UT?	<p>12. Continuous quality assessment is done through self-evaluation</p> <p>13. Various actions are taken to ensure quality improvement, based on internal and external quality assessments</p>

Some interesting issues relating to the QA programs at UT, including policy and implementation, were captured through the diverse responses from different KIs supported by documentary analysis. The following discussion presents 13 major themes drawn from the case study of UT.

## ***RQ 1: How do key people involved in the QA programs in learner support areas at UT conceive of quality and QA?***

To address the issues of the perspectives of quality, respondents from different clusters have been invited in this case study. Respondents at UT gave their perspectives on quality and QA in fairly different ways. This section presents their general perspectives on quality and how they perceived quality in learner support areas and QA.

### **Theme 1: Quality refers to the compliance with quality audit standards and correspond to the customers' expectation**

Quality standards at UT have evolved and been revised to the requirements of internal quality criteria and external QA standards. Amendments to Rector's Decree Number 160/J31/KEP/2003 and subsequent policy changes have contributed to the university involvement in standardization of quality in different core business activities (UT, 2012). These quality standards have been developed into UT's formal quality assurance system known as *Simintas* as guidelines and in university quality manuals for their QA implementation. Later, a decision to employ external quality standards has also been taken by inviting three external quality agencies. These include the National Accreditation Board of Higher Education, the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), and the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) (UT, 2010). This continuous revision of the quality standards demonstrated the university's attempts to align quality with external quality standards and correspond to continual changes of students' expectation. One of the key participants explained:

There are many perspectives about quality, we can define it from an academic point of view or from stakeholder dimensions and both can be applied. To me, it is very important to respect what quality is in terms of stakeholders, specifically in terms of students. Therefore, quality should refer to customer satisfaction and compliance to the external quality auditors' standards that include BAN-PT, ICDE-ISA and ISO. These quality reviewers have their own quality criteria that we should see. They have universal quality standards that are usually applied for higher education institutions. For example: BAN-PT conducts quality assessment for study program in Indonesian higher education, ISO focuses on quality of management or processes and ICDE-ISA addresses the universally accepted of good practices of open and distance education. (UT-PC-01)

Another interview subject confirmed the desirability of quality as compliance with standards:

Quality is compliance to the external auditors' standards that we have chosen. To assess quality of our educational programs, we select BAN-PT because it is mandatory. For assessing quality within the framework of open and distance education, we select the ICDE. Then in terms of internal management, we employ ISO standards. (UT-QC-02)

The perspectives of quality also refer to customers' expectation which have been reported by another respondent who stated that, "In general quality refers to the achievement of customers' expectations, especially students. For example, when students come for help, quality is achieved if we can meet a student's expectation" (UT-CS-08). The importance of customers' expectations was also recounted by one participant by mentioning that quality is about fulfilling customer expectation (UT-LC-09).

## **Theme 2: Quality as meeting criteria in learner support services**

Closely aligned to the fulfilment of customers' requirements, most respondents described quality in learner support areas as various characteristics related to teaching and learning provisions and support service dimensions. These quality criteria included promptness and accuracy of support services, delivered excellent quality support services, provided self-contained learning materials, provided favourable classrooms, and employed qualified tutors for F2F tutorial sessions. The point was further contextualised by one participant as follows:

Quality refers to the timely and accuracy of services that we provide for our students. For example, through the application of online CRM, students' complaints can be handled in a timely manner because it does not use a correspondent letter anymore. Through CRM, students can more quickly communicate their problems. We can also provide prompt response to the students' problems and the results can be immediately delivered. This is what the quality of the student services is about. (UT-CS-08)

Meanwhile, quality criteria for learning services have been identified by another respondent addressing printed materials and F2F tutorial services.

Learner support is a very broad term. In terms of learning materials, modules, for example, must be good, the quality of paper and cover should be good; the content must be correct and not outdated. So

modules can actually be used as learning sources for supporting independent learners. Secondly, dealing with tutorials, F2F tutorials should be taken in strategic places meaning that are easily reached by participants; classrooms including their environment should be advantageous for learning; tutors should meet the standard requirements and tutorials must be organised in accordance with the designated procedures and guidelines. (UT-AS-07)

These excerpts indicated concerns regarding quality for both teaching learning and provisions and support services as important components in distance education.

### **Theme 3: QA as procedures or mechanisms to ensure expected outcomes**

One of the major changes in UT after adopting a QA system was the introduction of various quality guidelines or SOPs for different quality programs. The development of QA procedures was aimed at providing guidelines to ensure expected outcomes. These guidelines were used by all staff and units in implementing QA covering all core business activities within the university. One of the KIs stated his desired focus of QA as procedures or mechanisms to ensure expected outcome as follows:

QA refers to a mechanism. This is a tool; if you don't have a mechanism you don't know exactly what to do. A mechanism guides us in terms of steps, procedures to be followed to achieve the target of quality. Working is a process. However, more important are the sense of responsibility and the spirit of people. They deal with the awareness of the people about the importance of quality, the spirit of people to do quality and implement quality assurance. (UT-PC-01)

Another interview subject revealed the importance of quality procedures when the organisation employs a QA system. This respondent stated that:

Quality assurance is about procedures that we set. Quality programs should be supported by procedures that we follow with the assumption that if we follow these procedures we will produce good outcomes according to what we defined. (UT-QC-02)

Different KI recounted this perspective by mentioning that QA referred to "procedures that allow people to work by following the same workflow in order to achieve expected outcome" (UT-FD-06).

## ***RQ 2: What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas at UT?***

### **Theme 4: The QA manual serves as the guide for implementation containing ten areas of the university's quality framework**

The implementation of QA was guided by the university's QA manual, covering ten quality areas and supplemented by diverse QA policies and best practices, including QA in learner support areas. This university's manual was a major reference for further development of different quality procedures, or SOPs, at unit or department levels. The university's QA manual described ten components of quality areas within the university QA framework and integrated into what they call '*Sistem Jaminan Kualitas Universitas*. Universitas Terbuka shortened this to '*Simintas-UT*.' The *Simintas-UT* has been regarded as a major reference for continual improvement in implementing quality. These 10 quality areas closely corresponded with the AAOU's QA framework discussed in the literature review. These included: policy and planning, human resources, internal management, learners and learners' profiles, program design and curriculum development, course design and development, learner support, infrastructure, media and learning resources, learner assessment and evaluation, and research and community services (UT, 2012). For implementation purposes, these ten components in the university' QA manual were elaborated further into different quality criteria or statements of best practice to guide all people and departments in implementing quality programs.

### **Theme 5: Institutional policies in teaching and learning provisions and student support serve as the guides to make sure that learner support services fit students' requirements**

It was disclosed that the university policies that supported QA in learner support areas were developed in such a way that meets students' needs. The university policy that supports QA in learner support areas could be identified from two main components within the UT QA framework: 1) the learner and learner' profiles component and 2) the learner support component. The university policy learner support clearly stated:

UT ensures quality learner support services that promote student learning facilitated in accordance with the needs of students by utilizing a variety of information and communication technologies in a variety of forms that can be accessed by students. (UT, 2012, p. 9)

For the purpose of this study, the university's QA policies in learner support areas were classified into two major areas as follows:

1. Quality policies in teaching and learning provisions
  - Various forms of learning support services are provided to support students' freedom to take advantage of learning services according to their abilities and conditions.
  - A variety of teaching modes are designed and delivered that are easily accessible by the students through different media.
  - Learning support services are designed according to the principles of open and distance higher education.
  - Learning support services are organized according to standardized guidelines.
  - Tutorial sessions are delivered by accredited tutors.
  - Students' progress is monitored with clear and consistent mechanisms including obtaining feedback on learning outcomes in a timely manner.
  - Tutor' appraisal is conducted regularly by relevant parties accompanied by the provision of feedback on their performance.
2. Quality policies in student support services
  - The institution provides support services for learners who are socio-economically, physically or psychologically disadvantaged, and have special learning needs and preferences.
  - Support services are provided to support student success.
  - Support services are provided before and during the learning process through a variety of methods and media that are easily accessible for students.
  - Support services are provided by qualified staff.
  - Monitoring and evaluation of all learner support services are performed using a clear mechanism. (UT, 2012, pp. 7-9)

These quality policies served as guidelines for all relevant units/departments and people involved in the implementation of QA in learner support areas.

### ***RQ 3: How do the key people at UT report that QA policies in learner support areas are being implemented?***

#### **Theme 6: The institution's internal environment supports the implementation of QA that addresses the importance of the centralized QA center and the roles of distributed regional offices in supporting students' learning**

To ensure the implementation of QA, UT has been equipped with a Quality Assurance Center since 2004. The initial function of this center is to facilitate the units and a number of teams in developing QA manuals. One of the participants explained the role of UT's Quality Assurance Center as follows:

In general, the Quality Assurance Center is to coordinate all activities in order to enforce our quality assurance system. Specifically, the Quality Assurance Center is to coordinate all activities and programs in order to support our quality assurance system. (UT-QC-02)

The implementation of QA is also bound by the organisational structure of UT as a distance teaching institution. The implementation of QA in learner support areas called for an integrated system of teaching and learning provisions involving different departments such as Faculty, Institute of Learning materials Development and Information System, Center for Learning Material Distribution, and UT's Regional Offices.

The university' regional centers have played strategic roles in providing learner support for local students. Currently, UT has been equipped by 37 regional centers scattered all over the country. Under these regional offices, teaching and learning provisions, including F2F tutorials and online learning services and different non-academic services, such as counselling and student enquires, were managed and provided to support students' success (UT-LC-09). These centers developed local partnerships and networks with different external agencies, such as public and private universities, to run learner support programs (UT-FD-05) and to obtain the necessary human resources. They include tutors, instructors, and teaching supervisors. Tutors and administrative staff have been regarded as key players for these learner support areas. One KI explained that a number of roles must be performed by administrative staff in implementing QA in support services, such as serving students' complaints, inquiries, compliments, and suggestions (UT-CS-08). The university has standard quality guidelines of how to provide services to students through telephone, walk in, or online support (e-CRM) (UT-CS-08; UT-FD-05).

Meanwhile, academic staff members are involved in different activities in learning and support services, such as delivering tutorials, developing curriculum, providing academic counselling, developing study programs, supervising and monitoring online tutorials. One respondent expressed his experience as a tutor as follows:

I am a tutor. I have various tasks and one of them is serving F2F tutorials. You know that we have different kinds of tutorials, including F2F, online, correspondence through magazine, and radio and television broadcast. When I come to my class for F2F sessions, my

task is not only to facilitate the instructional process for my students but also to provide support services, including encouragement and motivation to my students to support their learning and timely success. (UT-AS-07)

In addition to this, academic staff should also engage in developing scripts for F2F and online learning materials. As the university adopted a new policy to equip all courses with online learning modes, online tutors should be involved in preparing two types of scripts: lesson plans for tutorial sessions and units of tutorial activities. These two types of documents were then used as guidelines for all tutors in the same subject (UT-FD-05).

**Theme 7: The application of QA in learner support areas emphasizes the employment of blended learning pedagogy and the implementation of e-CRM**

From the interview data, supported by official documents, it was found that another emerging theme was related to the application of QA in learner support areas. This theme emphasized the employment of blended learning pedagogy to support teaching and learning provisions. In addition, diverse support services were also provided to support students' success.

***The employment of blended learning to support teaching and learning provisions***

As a DTU, UT is very focused in developing numerous blended teaching deliveries to support students' independent learning. Blended teaching activities involve developing and self-explanatory printed materials supplemented by study guide. The university also developed audio-video cassettes, F2F and online tutorials, correspondence tutorials through UT magazine (*Komunika*), and broadcasting tutorials via radio and television programs. In general, however, there were three major instructional delivery methods: self-directed learning using printed learning materials, F2F tutorials, and online learning.

According to one respondent, UT has developed modules that were specifically designed for independent study (UT-LC-09). This respondent explained further, "it is expected that students can understand the teaching materials without help from others because all the information necessary to understand the teaching materials is available in their modules" (UT-LC-09). Another respondent recounted that:

We all know that distance education modules are designed differently with textbooks commonly used at conventional universities. So the fact that UT instructional materials have been developed in such a way in accordance with the principle of self-contained so that they can be studied independently by individual students.... By reading their modules, students can fully understand the content without getting help from instructors, because modules represent their lecturers in distance education system. (UT-AS-07)

F2F tutorial deliveries were provided based on the course requirements and students' requests. F2F tutorial services were organised by regional offices and conducted on weekends. The key respondent from regional office described these F2F tutorial services as follows:

The major mode of learning support services that we provide are face-to-face tutorials. To ensure the quality, we start with planning that includes selecting the subjects, identifying qualified tutors and determining locations that are easily reached by participants. The implementation of F2F tutorial sessions are controlled by regional office and audited by external auditors. The results of these quality assessments are recorded and analysed for appropriate improvement. (UT-LC-09)

Furthermore, to ensure the quality of F2F tutorial sessions in promoting students' learning, the university has developed tutorial kits since 2007. The main purpose of this tool was to standardise the understanding and organisation of F2F services (UT, 2010).

Meanwhile, online learning deliveries were now becoming the more popular mode of teaching. UT has implemented online services, including those designed for tutorials, web-based supplementary materials, self-exercise tests, and online counselling. Online learning services were used to decrease the constraints of distance and time. The number of online courses increased in response to students' demand and so did the availability of access points in different regions all over the country (UT-FD-05; UT-FD-06). When the researcher visited for fieldwork, it was reported that all academic staff were very busy in preparing the implementation of new policies to offer online learning services for all courses in 2013. These preparation steps included developing online tutorial scripts and conducting online tutor training for internal and external academic staff.

***Support services that address the importance of e-CRM to provide timely and effective response to students' inquiries and problems***

UT established an important unit, the Office of Student Service, in providing support services at UT's head office, under which e-CRM services were managed to provide timely and effective response to students' inquiries and problems. It must be noted, however, that support services at UT were delivered through different channels. According to one participant, "students may file their complaints by phone, email, or come straight to UT's head office or to UT's regional offices spread out all over Indonesia. We have a form of customer complaints that have been integrated into our QA system" (UT-QC-04). UT has developed an e-CRM application to support continuous efforts in improving quality of student services. One of the KIs explained that:

[The] e-CRM is an online information service system that we set up as an alternative channel of communication and interaction for students to submit their problems and concerns. By using e-CRM applications, students can ask for help on the issue at hand or ask questions, requests their academic records. (UT-CS-08)

To use this application, students logged into the program and wrote their concerns on the New Ticket Gate provided. The program would automatically give the students a ticket number for further use for checking responses from relevant people or units at UT (UT-CS-08).

**Theme 8: The implementation of teaching and learning processes corresponds with Holmberg's interaction and communication theory**

The eighth main theme that emerged from the data refers to the implementation of teaching and learning processes at the institution. The instructional processes at the university correspond to Holmberg's (1995) interaction and communication theory. In addition, the teaching and learning provisions employed at UT also are related to the theory of autonomy and independence.

Holmberg's (1995) interaction and communication theory has become a major principle in distance education institutions, which has required significant efforts to organise learner support services. Since its early operation, UT has been equipped by a learner support system in order to establish communication among all learning parties. In line with the advancement of ICT, UT has also put forward different strategies to

integrate current technology for instructional purposes that support interaction and communication among teaching and learning parties. One of the KIs highlighted this as follows:

To establish the social relationships, we provide F2F activities. UT also provides good online forums, including online forums in different courses, informal online discussions that are open to all students at the faculty and university level. It seems to me that there is no obstacle for students to interact with peers. For PGSD students, for example, they come every weekend during tutorial sessions in their study group [*Pokjar*]. They can talk and share with tutors and other peers. (UT-PC-01)

The practice of learner support services at UT resonated with Holmberg's (1995) ideas about the importance of communication. It was confirmed by another participant who was a long-time tutor; he argued that in distance education:

Students and tutors do not always have the opportunity for face-to-face. So it is possible there are students who feel lonely and isolated, no friends to talk to. So communication between tutors and students is needed. Not all students are able to learn relying on modules or other learning resources that we prepared. Two-way communication is necessary to motivate students' learning. (UT-AS-07)

This participant, however, addressed that not all students need to foster intensive communication with tutors. Some students were more experienced and independent. When the researcher asked about Holmberg's (2007) feeling empathy and personal relationships, this KI expressed that feeling empathy and developing good relationships, based on his experience as tutor, were beneficial for students:

By establishing good communication, empathy, and maintaining a close relationship, tutors can help students to more openly express their problems they face. Good relationships promote student success. In every tutorial session, I always try to establish friendly communication and establish good relationships with my students so that they trust, are open and willing to express their problems during study. I can see that empathy motivates my students to study. (UT-AS-07)

This participant expressed further:

In developing personal relationship with students, I always say to them 'as long as you do not ask me for a grade, I will serve you'. I do

not sell marks or grades. That's my principle. If they are only consulting as to why their score is low or something else, I am happy to serve them. I feel so much empathy for my students who live in remote areas. (UT-AS-07)

According to one participant responsible for student affairs, good relationships with students could be facilitated by various means such as telephone calls, email, online forums, or F2F consultation (UT-FD-06). This KI argued that “for us, developing communication with our students was needed not only for motivating their learning but also to decrease feelings of distance between students and ourselves as teaching providers (UT-FD-06).

Further, it was disclosed that Instructional processes at UT have been designed in line with its nature as a higher education institution that adopted a distance learning system. Through this learning system, the delivery of its instructional processes has been developed in order to promote autonomous and independent learning, emphasising the dynamic role of students in organising their studies and reducing the role of instructors as well as that of the university. Therefore, self-managed learning or self-directed learning has become an important aspect. One of the key informants (KIs) addressed this as follows:

Self-direction or self-directed learning is important in distance education. Students have freedom to decide whether they want to learn through modules and do not want to be involved in tutorials. It's up to them. Therefore, any instructional process whether it is self-study, study groups, tutorials and others should be able to raise student self-direction and autonomy. Students' autonomy is in terms of how fast they want to finish their study. What teaching and learning deliveries do they want to choose? When do they want to learn? When do they want to graduate? It is absolutely up to them. However, they must achieve the same standards of competencies. (UT-PC-01)

This participant recounted this self-directed issue by mentioning, “In distance education, students must have a drive for self-direction. They must develop their self-directed learning by themselves. If they cannot, it is our responsibility to make sure they have self-direction for learning” (UT-PC-01). To promote students' self-directed learning, for example, the university provides orientation sessions and study skills workshops at each regional office.

Inspired by the separation of students and instructors during the process of instruction, the university has engaged in different methods in order to provide choice for students to be involved in learning based on their own time and learning methods. As articulated by one respondent:

Vice Rector in Academic Affairs has done a lot to make sure students have the opportunity to develop their independent learning skills. Numerous efforts have been set involving a variety of learning resources delivered online such as iTV. Learning support services have been integrated and enriched to promote better student learning. Many media are used to ensure that students can learn according to their conditions and pleasure. (UT-PC-01)

Another participant noted that all learning materials and various instructional deliveries have been developed “in order to support student learning independence. We develop self-contained modules, audio-video cassettes, web supplements and study guides in order to promote independent learning” (UT-QC-04).

It was further disclosed that UT initiated online learning to provide different learning modes for students who have Internet access. The online learning instructions have been developed to support what Holmberg (1995) called two-way traffic communication. The increasing access to Internet along with decreasing cost in using Internet has steered new demand for intensifying interaction and two-way communication through UT online (UT, 2010). Online learning has been considered a crucial component in learner support areas, specifically for promoting communication among instructional parties and supporting the idea of a community of inquiry through online collaborative learning.

### **Theme 9: The implementation of QA in learner support areas relates to the university’s external environments**

UT is the only higher education institution that fully adopts a distance learning system in the country. UT has proven itself in meeting the far-reaching goal of promoting lifelong learning in the context of Indonesia’s educational environment. Indonesia is the world’s largest archipelago with over 17,000 islands and demographically the fourth most populous country after China, India, and the United States of America. The country represents a mosaic of ethnic and regional cultures with over 1,000 local languages and dialects spoken among different ethnic groups. The Indonesian people use *bahasa*

Indonesia as a national language. Operating in this educational environment, there are a number of external environments that relate to the implementation of QA at UT. These external environments include local culture, educational technology, external quality agencies' standard, government, and the most important clientele of the university (students).

***Sub-theme 9.1: The implementation of QA in learner support areas correlates to local culture particularly, language and learning habits***

Language and students' learning habits were identified as crucial elements that contribute to the implementation of QA in learner support areas. One respondent addressed how these two aspects correlated to the learning support services designed by UT:

Language factor greatly influences learning abilities. Therefore, all our modules use Indonesian language and are not written in English or any other language, except for modules in English language courses. Then to help students' proficiency in online learning especially for teacher students, our curriculum is equipped by Computers and Learning Media. I tell you that online learning has not become about learning habits for many students (especially teacher students living in remote areas) and many of them lack of computer literacy. (UT-AS-07)

Another respondent from a regional center frankly admitted that besides the use of national language, during F2F tutorial sessions, tutors and students use their own vernacular. This respondent explained that:

Sometimes, local culture (especially local language) influences learning support services. The use of mother tongue is to harmonize services to be more easily accepted and understood by students. In my opinion the use of the national language in the teaching materials and tutorials is more appropriate to support optimal student learning. (UT-LC-09)

The issue of learning habits was also noted by another KI who mentioned that mostly teacher students took professional development program. They preferred to attend F2F tutorials than being involved in online learning programs. This student's dependence on tutors was confirmed by one key participant, as follows:

In fact there are many students who depend on face-to-face tutorials. The request for F2F tutorials even now tends to be increasing. Although we have already offered online tutorials, F2F mode based on

students' requests seem to be increasing from different regional offices. It seems that students' dependency on tutors is still high and in our culture there is a perception that study means meeting with instructors or teachers. (UT-FD-05)

It was reported that teacher students' participation rate in online learning programs was still low due to their computer literacy level and access point problems (UT-FD-06). In general, however, students' participation rate, including non-teacher students (non-basic education program), since 2006 up to 2009 tended to fluctuate (UT, 2010).

***Sub-theme 9.2: The implementation of QA programs in learner support areas is fashioned by educational technology to support both academic and administrative programs***

UT has made IT investments to enhance management communication between UT's head office and its 37 regional offices and to support distance teaching and learning. UT's Internet network is provided through two Internet service providers (ISPs) with bandwidth capacity of 45 Mbytes Clear Channel (UT, 2010). UT's head office and regional offices have also been equipped by a virtual private network (VPN) for data transactions and video conferencing with bandwidth capacity of 100Mbytes. The bandwidth for each regional office is 1024 Kbytes (UT, 2010). The student record system (SRS) has been upgraded to allow for user-friendliness and capacity to store information on a large number of students on one database.

The university's ICT infrastructure development has been designed to provide active assistance in widening learner support services, including online learning and counselling programs. One of the KIs addressed how ICT provided a positive impact on learner support areas:

The advancement of ICT has a major and positive impact on distance education. At UT now, we have a new policy on learning support services, especially dealing with online learning. It is now compulsory to equip all existing courses with online tutorial services starting next year, 2013.... Interaction and communication among tutors, administrative staff and students have been facilitated by UOnline. (UT-FD-06)

Addressing this new policy, one respondent confirmed that "next year all courses must be completed with online tutorial services. Besides, our internal academic staff, we hire

many lecturers from other institutions to become our online tutors. Now we are preparing a lot of training for the prospective online tutors” (UT-FD-05).

Another interview subject noted that ICT has also allowed UT to provide online registration services and online examination. Examination items were uploaded and the participants took the online examination in their regional office or in a selected place under the supervision of regional office’s staff (UT, 2010; UT-PC-01).

***Sub-theme 9.3: The implementation of QA in learner support areas aligns with two professional QA agencies’ standards***

The university has invited two external QA agencies to assess its quality achievement: ISO and ICDE-ISA. In 2004, UT’s QA manuals were updated in line with the university target for the ISO 9001 in some UT core business activities such as course material services, academic services, regional offices’ learning services and academic administration services (UT-QC-04).

One KI clarified that the adoption of ISO was aimed to “assess management processes that we define by ourselves” (UT-QC-02). This decision to employ the ISO 9001 has been taken to improve the quality management in different units including UT’s 37 regional offices. To support the adoption of the ISO quality management system, the university has revised 112 job quality manuals, used for initial self-quality assessment, and reduced up to 76 undated quality procedures representing a more efficient use of manuals (UT, 2010).

In addition to adopting the ISO, UT has also involved the ICDE Standard Agency (ICDE-ISA) in 2005. UT invited ICDE-ISA to conduct assessment with the goal of achieving the International Certificate of Quality. One of the participants explained that the focus of the assessment was to examine “the quality of administration and practices in the field of distance education. ICDE wants to see that we are doing what we said concerning various core businesses in open and distance learning” (UT-QC-02) such as course development and learner support services. This participant added that every external quality agency, including ICDE, has its own quality criteria. This KI addressed this issue as follows:

ICDE has its own criteria that are different from quality standards requested by BAN-PT and not necessarily exactly the same as our quality assurance system.... [ICDE] gives a list of questions that we have to answer in a portfolio. From the list of questions, we will know what the ICDE concerns in assessing quality. When ICDE conducted a quality review, they also examined what actions were taken following their previous recommendations five years ago. (UT-QC-02)

The university undertook various actions as its response to the recommendation of ICDE quality auditor, such as improving capacity building in external communication, tracking students' study progress, and developing digital library services.

***Sub-theme 9.4: The implementation of QA in learner support areas must correspond with government QA standards***

The influence of Government on UT's QA system, specifically in learner support areas, could be classified into two dimensions. The first dimension has to do with the establishment of study programs and the second aspect concerned the government's role in accreditation. With regard to the role of the government in controlling study programs offered by all Indonesia higher education institutions, one respondent noted that "UT and all higher education institutions were required by law to follow the guideline developed by the DGHE [Directorate General of Higher Education]. This guideline provided quality standards to be taken in proposing new study programs" (UT-FD-06). For this purpose, UT should confirm its quality standards of study programs referring to the Director of DGHE's Decree Number 108/DIKTI/Kep/2001 and the Minister of National Education's Decree number 234/U/2000. Another respondent recounted that "all new program developments must be submitted to DGHE for getting their approval. We could not establish and offer new study programs without permission from DGHE" (UT-PC-07).

Concerning the government role in accreditation, UT has long been involved in quality assessment by National Accreditation Board of Higher Education (*Badan Akreditasi Nasional-Perguruan Tinggi* or *BAN-PT*). In addition to the ISO and ICDE-ISA Certificate of Quality, the university also requested accreditation from BAN-PT. Regarding the adoption of national quality accreditation, one interview subject asserted that:

At the initial stage, UT just conducted self-quality audits that we called *Simintas*; this is from us, by us, and for us according to quality standards that have been set by us. However, we know that we need to verify what we are doing by others. Therefore, we invite external parties and our first external auditor is BAN-PT in the name of government. We invite BAN-PT to certify all our study programs. (UT-QC-02)

Another respondent confirmed that in the previous quality assessment there were many quality standards that did not correspond to quality characteristics employed by distance teaching institutions because the quality standards were commonly used for conventional universities. From the university's official document, it was found that:

... 17 study programs of four faculties were accredited in 2007; four study programs were accredited "B", while the other 13 study programs were accredited "C". The accreditation marks received by UT were based on the instruments used to evaluate the face-to-face teaching and learning process. UT has submitted an appeal for a re-evaluation and accordingly, UT is collaborating with BAN-PT in the developing the instruments suited for open and distance education system. (UT, 2010)

When this research and site visit was conducted, one of the respondents noted that the new instrument for accrediting distance higher education had been completed. This respondent expressed that "We are lucky now because BAN-PT has developed a specific instrument for distance higher education" (UT-QC-04). The respondent further explained, however, that some criteria do not correspond to the context of UT. For example, one quality criteria suggests that students must complete their bachelor degree within four years. UT is a DTU that provides a lifelong education for the nation. Unlike students in conventional universities, it is not necessary for students at UT to take 15-20 credits per semester and to complete their study within four years (UT-QC-04).

***Sub-theme 9.5: Students are being involved in the implementation of QA in learner support areas through regular student surveys***

The university conducts regular student surveys to allow students to give their feedback and express their level of satisfaction with regard to the teaching and learning and other support services. This student feedback for quality improvement was addressed by one participant as follows:

Students have their space to comment and provide input for our policies in learner support services. We continue to review our policies in learning support areas and improve our SOPs based on input from students organized by UT's regional offices located in different parts of the country. (UT-QC-04)

When the researcher asked another participant in a regional office to confirm this information, the participant explained that:

Yes, we ask students to provide their feedback related to learning support services. Students not only assess the performance of tutors but should also provide feedback to all UT services including registration, learning materials, support services, implementation of final examinations, and administrative services. The evaluation of student satisfaction level is conducted every semester and the results will be analysed for our discussion in our management review meeting. (UT-LC-09)

Students' influence on the quality of learning support areas was also noted by one respondent who reported that the development of UT current policy to employ Webinar was actually based on students' input (UT-QC-02).

***RQ 4: What are the challenges that key people at UT report they are facing in the development and implementation of QA in learner support areas?***

**Theme 10: Lack of access to the Internet**

Serving students in remote areas spread out all over 17,000 islands without access to Internet and IT infrastructure in some parts of the country has become a serious challenge for the university. Although Internet kiosks have been developed in some districts and sub districts all over the country, access to the Internet is relatively expensive and difficult for many students residing in rural parts and remote regions of the country. One KI expressed this challenge as follows:

To reach students in remote villages is very difficult. We need information technology infrastructure across Indonesia to support our learner service programs. In fact, many students, especially those who live in remote areas cannot access our UToonline. They have to go to districts and sub-districts for Internet kiosks. (UT-CS-08)

Another KI confirmed the scarcity of technology infrastructure in remote areas. This participant noted, "not all students can enjoy the online tutorial services, especially for

teacher students who live in isolated areas. However, they have opportunity to follow F2F tutorial ... to communicate with tutors and peers” (UT-AS-07).

### **Theme 11: QA is perceived as being too demanding and time consuming**

Most of respondents expressed that managing a QA system for a large part of the student body and complex distance teaching institution was absolutely demanding. Besides, involving three external quality standards (BAN-PT, ISO, and ICDE-ISA) is very demanding for documentation activities. One of the respondents frankly admitted:

The main challenge in implementing quality programs in learner support services is documentation. We have to spend a lot time handling documentation. At the beginning, the external quality auditor focuses on the existence of documents that support relevant activities .... Now, auditors not only examine the existence of these documents but also assess the validity of these documents. We in the regional office find it very difficult to check the validity of the content for all documents due to the limitations of human resources ... there are many documents to be maintained. (UT-LC-09)

Since 2010, the university has faced a serious challenge in terms of how to maintain compliance to different external quality standards with different focuses and integrating these various standards into internal mechanism. One respondent highlighted that the university has tried to integrate the quality criteria required by BAN-PT, ICDE, and ISO (UT-QC-02).

### ***RQ 5: How are the results of the current QA processes in learner support areas used to inform practice in UT?***

#### **Theme 12: Continuous quality assessment is done through self-evaluation**

Since the adoption of QA programs in 2002, the university has employed continuous self-evaluation as part of their QA programs. Quality assessment of the learner support services and priority setting for improvement were conducted both unit-by-unit and university-wide. Managers in relevant departments at UT' s head offices as well as every director of 37 regional offices were required to conduct quality assessment using the university's quality framework as instruments. One respondent noted that:

Internal quality assessment is part of our program. We invite all departments and different team at the faculty level to present and

discuss their findings and problems they face.... In this management review meeting, we identify various strategies necessarily for future improvement. (UT-FD-05)

Another respondent recounted the implementation of quality assessment as follows:

We conduct self-evaluation every six months by referring to quality standards set by the UT's head office. Based on the results of these measurements, we know our weaknesses and strengths in achieving our standard criteria. We will discuss these findings in our management review meeting. We will take corrective action based on our previous weaknesses. (UT-LC-09)

The QA system was a cycle of continual improvement needing regular monitoring and evaluation. A KI mentioned that quality assessment was conducted every month in order to examine and update the status of every student's complaints and inquiries (UT-CS-08). A different KI recounted that monitoring and different levels of management have performed evaluation programs regularly. The results of the evaluation were important information for management review meetings at the unit and national levels (UT-QC-02).

**Theme 13: Various actions are taken to ensure quality improvement, based on internal and external quality assessment**

Internal and external quality assessment generated positive feedback for UT in its efforts to improve UT's systems in different quality areas. Supported by the results of quality assessment, various actions in learner support areas were taken for continual quality improvement, such as revising QA manuals, SOPs and quality criteria, enhancing tutor competencies (UT-FD-05; UT-FD-06), revising printed learning materials, and developing an online application as a new channel for support services (UT-QC-02). The current processes of QA used to inform practice in learner support areas was revealed by one participant as follows:

QA has greatly helped us in improving quality of our learning support services. For example, as we know that QA requires records or documents that underlay all activities. Before the implementation of the QA system, we do not have documents regarding tutors' activities when they are involved in tutorial classes. Tutors often make mistakes in writing students' names and students' ID numbers. Sometimes, tutors also make a mistake in using a formula for calculating students'

scores. Now, through the implementation of QA, all these weaknesses are greatly reduced. (UT-LC-09)

The recommendations from the external quality auditors, specifically the ICDE quality auditor, have also encouraged to UT to take various actions as follows:

Development of digital library services. UT has been equipped with digital library services in response to the increasing use of Internet and widening access for eligible students residing in different regions.

Customer relationship management (CRM) application. Online CRM has been developed in order to improve support services efficiently and effectively. Through this service, students can easily send their inquiries, compliments, and complaints and receive responses in a timely manner. (UT, 2010, pp. xi - xiii)

The implementation of the current QA system has also inspired UT to address future plans for digitising all learning materials as a response to the global movement for the use of Open Educational Resources (OER). As the university grew, UT's QA system provided a platform for UT in developing the quality of education in line with its mission to provide and widen access to higher education for all economic levels of society, with different ethnic groups and regional cultures.

### ***Summary from the Case Study of UT***

From the forgoing discussion and findings from this case study, it is clear that to survive and prosper, UT has observed its students and thus defined quality as standards or criteria of their educational services that meet students' requirements. In addition to this, the university has also employed their quality standards to comply with the three external standards. The university has involved BAN-PT, representing the Indonesian government, and has voluntarily invited ISO and ICDE-ISA to assess the following three different areas of focus: educational programs, management processes, and the standardized practices of distance education.

The university has had a formal quality management system, Simintas, since 2003, adapted and contextualised from the Asian Association of Open University (AAOU) QA framework. AAOU's Quality framework has been regarded as a leading model for the university self-assessment and shared by all staff at UT head office and regional centers. These quality guidelines clearly explain quality standards for different

quality areas. Along with the use of this quality manual, it is clear that the perspective of quality in the university has been stirred by this quality manual in which quality has been viewed by different respondents as referring to compliance with standards in general and meeting quality criteria in learner support areas more specifically.

UT's quality manual also constitutes the university's QA policies that must be regarded as a major reference for all units or departments in developing internal mechanism and implementing quality. With regard to the implementation of QA in learner support areas, it was found that the application of QA has been supported by internal environment, emphasizing the important role of the centralized quality assurance center and the strategic roles of the university's regional centers in managing QA in learner support areas for local students. The implementation of QA also correlated with external environments, including socio culture variable, particularly language and learning habits, educational technology, two professional quality standards (ISO and ICDE-ISA), government, and students. From interview the data, supported by official documents, it is also noted that the learner support services provided correspond to Holmberg's (1995) interaction and communication theory as the primary distance education theory adopted in this research. In addition, the academic services developed at UT also resonated with the autonomy and independent theory as derivative theory in distance education used in this study.

Some themes also emerge when dealing with the challenges of QA process and how it has been used to inform practices. Lack of access to the Internet in some parts of the country and QA being perceived as too demanding are identified as major challenges. To ensure the benefits from implementing QA, the university is periodically involved in quality assessment as an important step to be taken for identifying various actions that must be pursued to ensure quality improvement.

## **Chapter 5.**

# **Cross-case Analysis and Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This study of QA in DTUs is a comparative study involving three DTUs in Southeast Asia, STOU Thailand, ABOU Malaysia, and UT Indonesia. This chapter addresses cross-case analysis drawn from these three individual case studies followed by a discussion of the main findings. This cross-case analysis is taken to enhance the researcher's capacity to understand how relationships may exist among individual cases. It is hoped the integration of cross-case analysis and discussion in one chapter will provide more light on how QA programs has been interpreted and implemented in DTUs especially in the Southeast Asian contexts, which have been modeled by STOU, ABOU, and UT. Based on the previous data analysis for individual case studies, it was decided that emerging themes from individual case studies will be renamed and used in this cross-case analysis section.

This chapter provides a comparison of similarities and differences of emergent themes relating to the QA programs at STOU, ABOU, and UT, which deserves critical reflection. It is presumable that these three DTUs share common similarities, strengths, and challenges in adopting QA programs. To strengthen the discussion, cross-case analysis is presented with reference to relevant literature and interpretation of data from individual case studies that support relevant thematic analysis. Similar to the presentation of data analysis of the individual case studies, the cross-case analysis concentrates on the emergent themes under five categorisations reflecting research questions employed for this study. These categories include: perspectives on quality and QA, institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas, implementation of QA

in learner support areas, challenges encountered in implementing QA, and the use of current QA process to inform practice.

## Perspectives of Quality and Quality Assurance

The in-depth interview with different KIs at STOU, ABOU, and UT indicated that the perspectives of quality and QA have been expressed differently. The concept of quality in particular has been perceived with particular reference to stakeholders. The emergent themes of quality in general, quality in learner support areas, and QA from these three DTUs, identified in the previous chapter, are renamed and presented in the following table.

**Table 6. Comparison of the emergent themes for the perspectives of quality and QA**

Research question	List of themes		
	STOU	ABOU	UT
<p>How do key people involved in the QA programs in learner support areas conceive of quality in general?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In what ways do they perceive quality in learner support areas?</li> <li>Given their understanding of quality, how do they conceive of QA?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meeting customers' needs and government QA standards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work culture involving everyone within the organization in achieving customers' requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compliance with quality audit standards and corresponding to customers' expectations</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quality of learning materials and instructions to support student learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meeting quality criteria in learner support services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meeting quality criteria in learner support services</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>QA as a system involves different activities to ensure expected quality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>QA as procedures or mechanisms to ensure expected outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>QA as procedures or mechanisms to ensure expected outcomes</li> </ul>

### General Perspective on Quality

At STOU, quality has been regarded as meeting customers' needs and government QA standards. Meanwhile, at UT quality has been interpreted as compliance with quality audit standards and corresponds to customers' expectations. The differences between these two general perspectives on quality seem very subtle.

These perspectives address two major stakeholders in quality, i.e., direct customers and their external quality auditors' standards. In the STOU case study, in addition to students' requirements, government's QA indicators have been identified as critical external quality standards as the university has invited OHEC and ONESQA for internal and external quality audits with both of them representing government QA bodies. Both OHEC and ONESQA have diverse QA standards and have been equipped with different QA components and key performance indicators (Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012b).

Meanwhile at UT, the concept of quality as compliance with external quality standards has been derived from the fact that the university has not only invited the National Accreditation Board of Higher Education to assess quality of study programs but also has voluntarily employed ISO and ICDE-ISA to assess its quality processes and practices in distance education. This could be inferred to mean that the desirability to conceive quality as compliance to a standards orientation refers to the quality standards set by National Accreditation Agency, ISO, and ICDE-ISA.

These three DTUs, however, share similar perspectives in looking at quality when customers' requirements or expectations become the critical orientation. Within this perspective, STOU, ABOU, and UT place customers as the center of their focus within a general quality perspective. At ABOU, students are regarded as the vital point above all concerns and the university has been totally devoted to a 'customer focus' as it is stated in its quality manual (ABOU, 2011). The university has developed and maintained five shared values as their unique work culture that involves everyone across the university working to achieve quality. These values include professionalism, teamwork, caring, innovativeness, and integrity (ABOU, 2011; ABOU, 2012). These five values should be shared not only for permanent staff but also subject to all non-permanent staff including tutors hired from other institutions.

In spite of the problematic nature of defining quality as discussed in the chapter two from this cross-case study, it seems fair enough to note that there is a common understanding on how respondents in the selected research sites viewed quality. In some ways, KIs involved in this study agree that quality is more about standards or criteria of their products and services that meet students' requirements as major

customers. These three DTUs demonstrated examples of this point of view. The desirability of quality as meeting these students' requirements is discussed in the following section, which focuses on the specific perspective of quality in learner support areas.

### ***Perspective on Quality in Learner Support Areas***

Based on emergent themes of quality in learner support, it was apparent that STOU, ABOU, and UT provide examples of how learner support areas have been emphasised in these institutions. Major respondents in this research confirmed that quality is about how to meet the quality criteria in learner support services (represented by ABOU and UT) by developing quality learning materials and instructional delivery to support student success (exemplified by STOU).

To promote its strong commitment for customer focus, ABOU has been equipped with physical infrastructure that supports students' learning processes, including providing classrooms, seating capacity and space for students' learning, providing a certified digital library and Internet access to promote independent study (ABOU-PC-01; ABOU-LC-06). Further, the university is also concerned with the quality of instructional deliveries. Blended instructional services through self-managed learning, F2F, and online learning modes were provided to support students' flexible access according to their own time and space. A number of certified tutors, academic advisors and different channels for support services are also employed to support students' success and enhance ABOU's image as a customer focused institution.

The interest in meeting quality criteria in learner support areas was also reported at UT. Since the adoption of QA program in 2003, the university has set quality criteria in learner support areas covering different activities in learning and support services. The learner support quality criteria (statements of best practices) have revised to respond to external QA standards and to meet students' expectations (UT 2012; UT-PC-01). The university has expanded its support services through the development of an e-CRM application in order to provide promptness and accuracy of response for students' complaints, inquiries, and compliments (UT-QC-02; UT-CS-08). New quality criteria, such as the employment of online learning and online registration for all subjects, have

been set and will be introduced in 2013 as response to a new student demand (UT-FD-06).

Another example from STOU also offers a different perspective of quality as being concerned with student orientation. The university has used its internal and external sources to develop high quality learning materials supported by various instructional deliveries to support student success. As the oldest DTU in the Southeast Asian region, STOU has had long experience in the development of high quality, different multimedia learning materials for students. To ensure the quality of learning materials, instructional deliveries and learner support areas in general, the university has set performance indicators in two major components of its quality framework: teaching and learning provisions and student development activities (STOU, 2011).

Corresponding with the working definitions of quality and QA in this study, the perspectives of quality emerging from these DTUs reflect two basic messages. Firstly, quality can be regarded as the standards or criteria of their products and services that meet inherent requirements of their students and external quality standards such as ICDE-ISA, ISO, and Baldrige Award. Secondly, these basic perspectives, in turn, shaped their QA policies and strategies.

### ***Perspective on Quality Assurance***

Closely aligned to the emergent themes about perspectives on QA in this study (see Table 6), Melton (2002) asserted that:

Quality assurance depends on two essential requirements: the first is the specification of standards for whatever it is you want to produce – materials, services or systems – and the second is the development of systems or procedures that will enable you to produce what you have in mind to the standards specified. (p. 2)

Melton's idea of QA in distance education seems to be correlated with the perspectives of QA that have been reported by different interview subjects at STOU, ABOU, and UT. At these universities, QA has been regarded as the procedures or internal mechanisms designed to ensure expected outcomes. These perspectives of QA addressed two important aspects out of three interrelated key components in implementing QA programs: input, process, and output. The first component, process, refers to internal

mechanisms or procedures that are used as quality guidelines. The second component, output, refers to the expected outcomes (products or services). With regard to the internal mechanisms to ensure expected outcome, Harvey & Green (1993) believed that QA is not about “specifying the standards or specifications against which to measure or control quality. [QA] is about ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality ... is delivered” (p. 20).

A series of findings from ABOU and UT confirmed that these DTUs have been significantly involved in developing and reviewing a number of quality procedures or SOPs, or quality guidelines (the term used at STOU), to ensure the implementation of their QA programs. These SOPs described a detailed explanation of how their quality policies should be implemented. They contained a set of written instructions or guidelines that should be followed by departments or units or people in charge. At UT for example, the quality procedure of study orientation for new enrolments consisted of: objective of the program, scope of the quality procedures, definition of terms, general regulations, related documents, and was equipped by a series of activities from start to the end. Obviously following the ISO model in many respects, ABOU shared with UT common characteristics of SOPs. The ABOU’s SOP for academic counselling for example explained the objectives and scope of the program, references, definitions and abbreviations, responsibilities, procedures, inputs/sources, output/destination, quality records, and key performance indicators. These SOPs clearly communicated who would perform the tasks, what sources (materials or information) were necessary, where the activities would take place, when the processes should be done, and how relevant people would execute the task.

The perspectives of QA as being referred to the mechanisms or quality procedures have been regarded as a contentious issue. The debate about different perspectives in using the SOPs in the context education institutions appears to be an enduring discussion. On the one hand, the SOPs support institutions to minimize variation and promote quality through consistent implementation of a process. On the other hand, however, the use of these SOPs has been regarded as a stumbling block for teaching and learning invention. This issue is addressed by Nicholson (2011) who argued that “quality assurance processes tend to inhibit innovation in teaching and learning rather than advance it” (p. 8). The same vein had also been expressed by

Harvey and Knight (1996, p. 68) who asserted that “there has been very little linkage between quality policy and the encouragement of innovative approaches to teaching and learning.” Others, such as Barnett (1992) argued that the implementation of QA systems and procedures that lead to a check-list approach to maintaining quality in higher education is misguided, ineffective, and pernicious.

Despite these criticisms, this cross case analysis confirms that there is no evidence that has been reported regarding the impediment of QA for innovative activities in learner support areas. Respondents’ interests in QA as being referred to as internal mechanisms for ensuring expected outcomes have been driven by the fact that STOU, ABOU, and UT have deeply engaged in strong internal mechanisms for their QA programs. UT (2010) confirmed that “UT operational activities have been systematically supported by documented procedures and work instructions in core operational activities” (p. x). It was reported that the development and the implementation of these quality guidelines lead the university to prevent students’ attrition rate (ABOU-FD-03) and develop better organization performance (ABOU-FD-03), increase students’ satisfaction level (UT-LC-09), enhance a high quality rating for knowledge transmission to students and successfully address its core mission of making education accessible to all (STOU-PC-01).

## **Institutional Policy that Supports QA in Learner Support Areas**

The adoption of QA programs addresses the importance of institutional policies that fully support the development and implementation of the program. These institutional policies provide a fundamental platform on how QA policy texts will be implemented. These policies will also guide the institution in controlling, regulating, and maintaining its QA system. This section will examine the available documents regarding institutional QA policy requirements in the three selected DTUs of this study. The emergent themes from individual case studies are presented in the following table.

**Table 7. Comparison of the emergent themes for the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas**

Research questions	List of themes		
	STOU	ABOU	UT
What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The QA manual serves as the guide for implementation that emphasizes the employment of internal and external QA audits</li> <li>• The institutional policies in teaching and learning provisions and student development activities serve as the guides for QA in learner support areas that focus on the development of student self-learning skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The QA manual serves as the guide for implementation that has been regarded as the first document level in the hierarchy of the university's quality management documentation system</li> <li>• The institutional policies in teaching and learning provisions and support services serve as the guides for QA learner support areas, with focus on students' needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The QA manual serves as the guide for implementation containing ten quality areas of the university QA framework</li> <li>• The institutional policies in teaching and learning provisions and support services serve as the guides to make sure that learner support services fit students' needs</li> </ul>

***The QA Manual Serves as a Blueprint for Setting the Universities' Quality Program into Practices***

The QA manuals have been regarded as important official documents at STOU, ABOU, and UT 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.

When the fieldwork at STOU was undertaken, the university's Quality Assurance Manual (2011) was identified as related to STOU QA framework that integrated internal and external QA policies requirements equipped with instructions and guidelines to

achieve these quality standards. The manual has clearly defined the guidelines for SAR outlining the purpose, structure, and elements of SAR that should be followed by all departments across the university. Therefore, this document was truly important. On one hand, it served the STOU QA framework in implementing its QA program. On the other hand, it provided guidelines for evaluating QA conducted by government QA bodies.

The QA manuals of ABOU and UT in many respects share similar characteristics to that of STOU's quality manual, which outlines a general framework of a quality program. The latest version of ABOU's quality manual, ABOU-MK-2004, effective date in 2011, has been used as a major reference and must be followed by other subsequent QA manuals for department levels. For implementation purposes, the university's QA manual has been supplemented by different documents of quality operations for different quality areas, such as CSM-MOP-2009 effective 2012, the operation manual of the Center for Student Management (CSM). This operation manual provided the detailed guidelines about quality criteria and how support services should be organised and delivered to the students.

Meanwhile, manuals for the implementation of QA at UT have been revised several times. The latest version of the university quality manual, JKUM UT00, has been used as the new guideline for QA programs. The QA manual also served as a major reference for a number of quality manuals in different quality areas. The university QA manual sketched a general background of UT's quality framework, structure, and components of QA, covering 10 quality areas equipped by a number of best practices that served as the university's quality policy.

Based on the forgoing discussion and the findings from research sites, this study confirmed that the use of quality manuals as the guide for the implementation is definitely important. Belawati, Zuhairi, and Wardani (2012) addressed the importance of a quality manual as the guide in QA implementation as follows:

The QA Policy Manual ... explained the job descriptions and performance standards/ criteria, how feedback would be provided, the appeals process and how various incentive systems related to performance. It was found that these not only helped staff in performing their daily tasks, but also triggered the realization that their knowledge and skills could always be

improved upon and that targets and performance indicators could always be raised. (p. 116)

The cross-case analysis of this study also confirmed that the development and implementation of quality manuals in these three DTUs required various actions to be taken to develop, maintain, and change desired appropriate work culture to support the implementation of their QA programs.

### ***Institutional Policies in Teaching and Learning Provisions and Support Services Serve as the Guides for QA in Learner Support Areas that Address the Importance of Students' Requirements***

From the forgoing discussion in Chapter Four, it revealed that STOU, ABOU, and UT have set different QA policies involving different areas of concern, including QA policies in learner support areas that focused on the importance of students' needs. Although there were different QA policies in learner support areas, these three DTUs shared similarities in terms of area of focus. Referring to their QA policy texts stated in quality manuals and the evidence drawn from interview data, the overall quality policy in learner support areas can be classified into two dimensions: teaching and learning provisions and support services. Teaching and learning provisions refer to the different academic supports provided by the university to promote students' learning. Meanwhile, support services include a variety of non-academic kinds of support developed by these universities based on students' requirements. For example, some students preferred to be involved in F2F sessions and self-directed learning using modules than online tutorials.

In this cross-case study, it is obvious that STOU, ABOU, and UT have been deeply involved in designing various quality policies in both teaching and learning provisions and support services that serve as the guides for implementing QA in learner support areas. The findings from these DTUs disclosed that QA in teaching and learning provisions and support services provided clear policy equipped by quality standards that enable people to fully understand and contribute to the program. Quality policy standards refer to indicators and benchmarks in STOU's quality manual (STOU, 2011), or key performance indicators (*petunjuk prestasi utama*) in ABOU's quality manual (ABOU, 2011), or the statements of best practices in UT's quality manual (UT, 2012).

## Implementation of QA in Learner Support Areas

The major concern that DTUs have encountered is finding effective ways of reaching educational quality for successful learners. For this purpose, it seems that the DTUs' quality policies and practices, specifically in teaching and learning provisions and support services, can be used considerably as a platform in the search of learner support improvement. This section addresses the implementation of QA in learner support areas based on the emergent themes from STOU, ABOU, and UT as presented in the following table.

**Table 8. Comparison of the emergent themes for the implementation of QA in learner support areas**

Research questions	List of themes and sub-themes		
	STOU	ABOU	UT
How do the key people report that QA policies in learner support areas are being implemented ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution's internal environment supports the implementation of QA in learner support areas, addressing two levels of QA bureaucratic systems and the important role of the centralized Educational Quality Assurance and Coordinating Center</li> <li>• The application of QA in learner support areas emphasizes the employment of a blended learning pedagogy and the important roles of the Office Educational Services and the distributed student clubs</li> <li>• The implementation of teaching and learning provisions corresponds with Holmberg's interaction and communication theory</li> <li>• The implementation of</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution's internal environment supports the establishment of the centralized QA management systems and the distributed learning centers to support QA in learner support areas</li> <li>• The application of QA in learner support areas emphasizes the employment of a blended learning pedagogy and e-CRM to promote students' success</li> <li>• The implementation of teaching and learning provisions corresponds to Holmberg's interaction and communication theory</li> <li>• The implementation of QA in learner support areas relates to the university's external environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution's internal environment supports the implementation of QA that addresses the importance of the centralized QA management and the roles of distributed regional offices to support students' learning</li> <li>• The application of QA in learner support areas emphasizes the employment of a blended learning pedagogy and learning skills workshops to support students' success</li> <li>• The implementation of teaching and learning provisions corresponds to Holmberg's interaction and communication theory</li> <li>• The implementation of QA in learner support areas relates to the university's external</li> </ul>

	<p>QA in learner support areas relates to the university's external environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The implementation of QA in learner support areas responds to the local culture, particularly language</li> <li>- The implementation of QA programs in learner support areas is fashioned by Educational technology to support academic services and online QA systems</li> <li>- The implementation of QA in learner support areas aligns with the professional QA agency's standards</li> <li>- The implementation of QA in learner support areas must correspond with government QA standards</li> <li>- Students are being involved in the implementation of QA in learner support areas through regular student surveys</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The implementation of QA in learner support areas responds to the local culture, particularly language</li> <li>- The implementation of QA programs in learner support areas is fashioned by Educational technology for promoting e-learning</li> <li>- The implementation of QA in learner support areas aligns with the professional QA agency's standards</li> <li>- The implementation of QA in learner support areas must correspond with government QA standards</li> <li>- Students are being involved in the implementation of QA in learner support areas by providing their regular feedback</li> </ul>	<p>environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The implementation of QA in learner support areas responds to the local culture, particularly language and learning habits</li> <li>- The implementation of QA programs in learner support areas is fashioned by educational technology to support both academic and administrative programs</li> <li>- The implementation of QA in learner support areas aligns with the two professional QA agencies' standards</li> <li>- The implementation of QA in learner support areas must correspond with government QA standards</li> <li>- Students are being involved in the implementation of QA in learner support areas through regular student surveys</li> </ul>
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***The Universities' Internal Environment Supports the Implementation of QA that Addresses the Important roles of the QA Center and Distributed Learning Centers and the adoption of the PDCA Quality Cycle***

All interview subjects in this comparative study revealed that the implementation of QA in learner support areas has been significantly supported by internal environments that addressed the important roles of their offices in QA centers and their learning

centers scattered all over their countries. It was further disclosed that the internal environments of these three DTUs also addressed the adoption of Shewhart's PDCA quality cycle to promote their quality programs. Based on the categorisation proposed in each individual case study, it was also reported that the three DTUs shared common similarities in which QA management systems and human resources have been identified as major internal aspects that played key roles in implementing QA programs. The following section explains these universities' internal environments and begins with the discussion of the quality assurance centers and the universities' learning centers that have been regarded as being strategic units in their QA management systems.

### **QA Management System: The Important Roles of the QA Centers and Learning Centers and the Adoption of PDCA Quality Cycle**

It was disclosed that STOU, ABOU, and UT have been equipped with centralized QA centers to manage their QA programs at the university level. Through the use of different office names, these three universities have been equipped by the office of QA to manage and coordinate QA programs across departments within the university, faculty or schools to perform learning support activities, and by the office of student management to provide support services. At STOU, the Office of Educational Quality Assurance and Coordinating Center played strategic roles in diverse activities that included getting involved in reviewing QA policies and organizing training sessions to implement SAR, and coordinating all departments in executing quality standards (STOU-QC-02). Meanwhile, the centralized QA management system has been carried out by the Institute of Quality, Research and Innovation (IQRI) that played strategic roles in promoting quality within the university and providing necessary training for academic and administrative staff and promoting quality culture across departments (ABOU-PC-01; ABOU-QC-02). Closely aligned to the roles of IQRI, the Quality Assurance Center (Pusmintas) of UT has played important roles in organizing quality initiatives and managing quality processes within the university. The Quality Assurance Center was also responsible for coordinating internal and external quality audits.

It was also very important to note that all of these DTUs have been supported by the development of their study centers (STOU version) or learning centers (ABOU and UT version) throughout their countries to implement learner support services for local enrolments. Learning centers at these three DTUs have played strategic roles in

providing learner support at regional levels, including performing academic and non-academic counselling, managing F2F tutorials and practicum activities (STOU-AC-04; ABOU-LC-07), and managing learning materials distribution (UT-LC-09).

Inspired by Shewhart's PDCA Cycle and later popularized by Deming (Gabor, 1990) as commonly used for QA management, it was disclosed that these DTUs employed the PDCA (Plan – Do – Check – Act) cycle as a strategic tool for implementing QA programs. Whilst UT and ABOU have integrated the PDCA format into their ISO quality methods, STOU has also employed this PDCA quality cycle to ensure the implementation of QA programs. The PDCA cycle as an important pillar of ISO 9001 (Quality Management Systems) was not only adopted by ABOU and UT, which institutionally espoused these QA standards, but has also been successfully applied by STOU. Altogether, the main steps of the PDCA cycle have provided the road for these universities to achieve their standards of educational quality. In the planning steps, a series of information sharing, training, and management meetings were held to ensure that all people understand the QA policies and get involved accordingly. Further, all faculties and other supporting departments executed the work of their respective QA areas in accordance with quality policies and performance indicators. STOU, ABOU, and UT conducted self-assessment as their internal drive and commitment to promote and check their quality programs. Management review meetings at the department and university levels were also conducted to identify weaknesses and challenges during the implementation and to take necessary action for future QA programs. It was reported that the adoption of the PDCA cycle in the universities' QA system is significantly beneficial to the universities by attesting to the quality of distance education (STOU-PC-01).

### **Human Resources**

There is no doubt that the implementation of QA in learner support areas in the three DTUs has been extremely supported by academic and administrative staff. Academic staff and administrators, who are often referred to as human resources, are the most valuable assets who manage, implement, and evaluate all of the activities of QA programs at STOU, ABOU, and UT. Human resources have played key roles particularly when they are connected with the implementation of learning and teaching

provisions and support services. This remaining section discusses the involvement of human resources at the three selected DTUs in implementing QA programs.

### ***Academic Staff***

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. A major contribution of academic staff at the three selected DTUs for supporting QA in learner support areas can be identified in the following discussion.

Corresponding to Holmberg's (1995) ideas about administering course development, academic staff at STOU, ABOU, and UT were very involved in course development. Academic staffs at the three DTUs have implemented Holmberg's (1995) ideas, particularly in terms of his suggestion of learning material development; they have applied the course-team approach to produce and organise their QA programs in developing learning materials. Holmberg asserted that this "course-team model has been very influential. Its main advantage is that the various tasks are divided between a group of highly specialized team members ... the professional standard can then be very high" (p. 135). In the case of UT, for example, this course-team consisted of course authors, course reviewers, instructional designers, media specialists, and course managers. The different roles of the course-team members have been clearly defined; for example, the course authors were commonly responsible for developing the manuscript and content of course materials. Course authors were subject experts who were commonly hired from other institutions. The course reviewers were responsible for reviewing course materials and ensuring the quality criteria based on the course outline. Meanwhile, instructional designers ensured that learning materials met all requirements of quality criteria of self-contained learning materials. Instructional designers ensured that the learning materials developed allowed distance learners to study independently or with a minimum of assistance from others.

Aligning with Holmberg's (2007) teaching learning conversation, this research also found another important role of academic staff in supporting QA in learner support areas. They have been regarded as key players in performing and maintaining learning

support for their students, especially with regard to F2F, online learning, and academic counselling services. Respondents at STOU, ABOU, and UT also confirmed shared similarities: to facilitate tutorial services these universities have mostly employed non-permanent staff from other institutions, particularly from public and private local universities since these DTUs serve a very large number of students in different regions. Being equal to the role of professors in conventional universities, tutors or instructors have been regarded as a very critical component in these three DTUs. With regard to the importance of tutoring services in DTUs, Holmberg (1995) noted that:

Tutoring at a distance is by far the most important form of tutoring activity in distance education. It derives its particular importance from the fact that it is a basic component of the system of distance education.... It is the only form of contact with tutors that all students can make use of and benefit from. (p. 106)

Parallel to Holmberg's argument, ABOU has treated its tutors as a pivotal aspect to support its quality in teaching deliveries, as it was stated as follows:

Tutors play a crucial role in the provision of open and distance education at [ABOU]. They are the main agents responsible for delivering courses and supporting learners. The quality of teaching and learning depends on tutors. (Ali, 2009, p. vii)

Tutors from permanent academic staff and hired from external universities at ABOU and the other two DTUs are involved in facilitating instructional services that actively engage students in an intellectual activity. To do so, these three universities are regularly conducting training sessions for new tutors that allow them to have appropriate skills and attributes besides their subject matter competency.

To promote students' learning, academic staff must also perform academic counselling through different channels. As part of academic support services, faculty members at STOU, ABOU, and UT also have responsibility to provide academic counselling. Faculty members at STOU, ABOU, and UT who were involved in this research clearly admitted that they should provide their time to students for academic consultation through email, telephone call, and texting. At ABOU, for example, the university has assigned a number of academic staff to sit at the regional centers and provide academic counselling during the break of tutorial sessions (ABOU-LC-06). It was also interesting to note that academic staff who were involved in this study have used

social networking media such as Facebook to provide academic counselling for students (STOU-AS-05).

### ***Administrators***

Compared to conventional universities, the administrative component in DTUs is far more complicated, involving a diverse network of participation (Zuhairi, 1994). STOU, ABOU, and UT have to manage their administration systems encompassing the central office and their regional offices and learning centers scattered all over their respective countries and overseas. Besides, these universities also manage various administrative works to incorporate other participating institutions. These included such entities as local private and public higher education institutions to provide supply of tutors, post offices or shipping companies to deliver their learning materials, commercial television and radio broadcasting, telecommunication corporations, commercial banking, and regional and local universities' libraries.

In day-to-day operations, internal administrative activities have involved a diverse area of concerns. Administrators must serve in widely dispersed activities regarding general and legal affairs, finance, human resources, and academic administration. Additionally, they must also be involved in multi-media production, learning material distribution, and other support service activities. Administrators at the three DTUs must manage all existing resources, including people, funds, and time in ways that support the universities' core business activities. Administrators must ensure that personnel, funds, and time have been managed effectively and that numerous works fit together.

This comparative research also disclosed that administrators have as much responsibility for the success or failure of the system. At STOU for example, administrative staff at the Office of Educational Services have principal responsibility in implementing different activities of student support services, including organizing information services, students' complaints, inquires, and organizing teaching learning provisions to support students' learning at STOU head office and its regional centers (STOU-CS-06). Meanwhile, administrative staff at ABOU have main responsibility to performing the university's support activities under the Center of Student Management (ABOU-FD-03). Administrative staff at the Learner Service Center must be responsible for providing student administration, including course registration, canceling and adding

courses, and credit transfer. They must also respond to student complaints, problems, issues, comments, and compliments through telephone, e-mail, fax, walk in, and e-CRM application (ABOU-CS-05). In preventing high student attrition rates, a number of administrative staff have been appointed to make telephone calls to students who did not re-enrol to continue their studies. These students were encouraged to have guidance and academic counselling from the Retention and Counseling Unit (ABOU, 2012).

Closely aligned to STOU and ABOU, administrative staff at UT has been employed in different responsibilities. Administrative staff have been employed to perform support services both at UT' head office and at regional centers. Administrative staff at the Student Service Center and regional offices must provide information for students regarding administrative matters. They must also organize and respond to students' inquiries, complaints, and problems through various channels, including F2F (walk in), telephone, e-mail, mails, fax, and e-CRM application. Additionally, administrative staff in regional centers were also responsible for supporting F2F tutorial services. They must administer tutorials, organizing preparation for tutorial sessions, and get involved in monitoring learner support services.

From the series of evidence exemplified by STOU, ABOU, and UT, it seems there is no doubt that administrative staff has played a role as an essential element in QA programs particularly in learner support areas. They have made significant contributions to help the three universities to achieve consensus in implementing and maintaining quality.

### ***The Application of QA in Learner Support Areas Emphasizes the Employment of a Blended Learning Pedagogy and Support Services to Promote Students' Learning***

Closely aligned to the institutional policies, as was discussed previously in this chapter, the application of QA in learner support areas at STOU, ABOU, and UT has been implemented in two broad areas. These universities have shared similarities in the application of QA in learner support areas that address the importance of blended learning pedagogy to support their teaching and learning provisions. In addition, these universities have also developed different programs of student development activities (STOU version) or support services (ABOU and UT version).

## **Blended Learning Pedagogy**

Holmberg (1995) argued that instructional processes in DTUs that support interaction between students and the supporting organization should be designed based on the insight that the student learning activity or student centered learning is more important than teacher centered learning. Holmberg's notion implies that the specific characteristics of DTUs are different from conventional universities. Specifically, teaching learning activities are characterized by the separation of students from their teachers and the extensive use of media in the instructional processes. According to Holmberg (1995) and Moore (1977), distance education is concerned with attempting to develop independent and autonomous learning. It is thus the task of tutors, instructors, course developers, planners, and administrators to develop learning support services that promote independent learning.

Parallel to Holmberg's (1995) theory, the three DTUs selected for this research have designed a blended learning pedagogy that promotes students' learning; STOU, ABOU, and UT have developed their blended learning services that emphasize the need for independent student learning. These three DTUs shared some common similarities in providing modified blended learning services for their students incorporating self-managed learning using self-instructional materials, F2F tutorial sessions, online learning, mobile learning (M-learning), and tutorials by radio and television. However, self-managed learning, the term used at ABOU (Abas, Sankaran, Bakar, Johari, & Ayob, 2009), or self-directed learning, the term use at UT (UT-PC-01), or self-guided study, the term used at STOU (STOU, 2012), F2F sessions, and online tutorials have been regarded as their major teaching deliveries.

Since their early operation, these universities have long been involved in employing self-instructional materials to promote self-directed learning. According to STOU (2004), self-instructional materials "enable students to study by themselves without having entered conventional classrooms" (p. 22). The university's distance system also allows students to study "in different localities with the opportunity to study by themselves in accordance with their individual circumstances and interests" (p. 22). To support self-managed learning, STOU has developed mixed media packets

comprised of textbooks, workbooks, cassette and video tapes, radio and television programs, tutorials, and practice in STOU's study centers (STOU, 2004; STOU, 2012).

Self-directed or self-managed learning requires distance learners to have initiative, self-discipline, and strong motivation to study. According to UT (2010), self-directed learning addresses the needs for students to initiate, develop, and manage their own learning approaches and strategies. Self-managed learning also acquires all distance learners to build their internal drives to become independent learners. With regard to this, UT (2010) noted that:

To facilitate students in their independent learning process and enhance their learning achievement ODL providers need to provide their students with robust and timely learning support within their systems. Learning support should be designed as an accessible and affordable system using various media to suit students' heterogeneous characteristics. (p. 72)

To promote self-managed learning, UT and the other two DTUs have produced specially designed modules supplemented by CD-ROM courseware, digital and physical libraries, peers, tutors, and subject matter experts. According to Abas, Sankaran, Bakar, Johari, and Ayob (2009), the university's blended pedagogy (self-managed learning, F2F classes, and online learning) requires distance learners to engage in self-managed learning most of the time. "However," the authors note, "even in this, tutors have a crucial role to play. [They] need to consistently provide learners with moral support and encouragement throughout their learning process" (p. 27). This moral support and encouragement have been regarded as important activities in motivating students to be able to manage their time for learning on a regular basis based on their own schedules (UT, 2010).

Whilst F2F tutorials have commonly been removed for DTUs in developed countries, this study disclosed that F2F tutorial sessions have been identified as major academic services provided at STOU, ABOU, and UT. The universities have moved on some scholars' ideas in distance education, such as Keegan (1998), Moore (1972), and Holmberg (1995) about the adoption of F2F tutorial sessions for distance learners. F2F provisions as one of the learning support services in DTUs have been addressed by Holmberg (1995) as follows:

In many distance education programmes there are also elements of face-to-face interaction between tutors and students .... [F2F] interaction as a supplement to distance study can be applied in more profitable ways ... the occurrences of [F2F] is dependent of the possibility, opportunity, and inclination of students to go to and take part in [F2F] meetings. (pp. 113-115)

Moore and Kearsley (2012) also stressed that although an increasingly large range of materials for students were delivered by the Internet, some learner support services were better provided in a F2F group setting. In this research, it was confirmed that F2F tutorial sessions at the three universities have commonly been conducted in their study centers or learning centers. At STOU, the purpose of F2F services is to expand students' knowledge and understanding of course content. These services are provided by qualified tutors from either STOU or other universities and agencies (STOU, 2004). According to one interview subject at STOU, the F2F tutorial for one course comprised three tutorial meetings per semester and was served by a team of instructors, not by one professor. The participant went on to explain in more detail, as follows:

For STOU, for the courses that have tutorial (but not all courses) we provide for the students three times. We have 15 units in our textbooks and we divide by three. So the first time we have face-to-face tutorial, students have to read the first 5 units before they go to the tutorial, and the professor will brief on these 5 units, and if they have any questions they can ask. For the second time, another 5 units and for the third, 5 units. (STOU-AS-04)

There were two types of F2F services, namely general F2F tutorials based on the course requirements and special F2F tutorials based on students' requests. Distance learners are sometimes asked to meet in conventional classrooms which provide F2F interaction and individualized attention during their self-instructional course block (STOU, 2012). These F2F interaction services were established in provincial study centers throughout Thailand (STOU, 2012).

Closely similar to STOU, UT has provided F2F services based on student requests and based on the course requirements. To ensure the quality of F2F services, UT has had its policies equipped with a number of quality procedures to achieve quality criteria. The University has developed F2F tutorial kits, including plans of tutorial activities and units of tutorial activities describing the objectives, strategies, and evaluation methods for each topic under question. Tutorial meetings at UT consist of

eight sessions per course per semester served by certified tutors from local universities and other relevant local agencies. It was apparent that students' participation in F2F tutorials was very high and was the most-preferred tutorial mode compared to online tutorials or others, such as radio and television tutorial sessions (UT-2010; UT-FD-06).

At ABOU, F2F provisions have been integrated into its blended pedagogy along with self-managed learning and online learning services (ABOU, 2009). F2F tutorial activities consisted of four meetings per course per semester and are served by certified tutors. The roles and responsibilities of tutors and other issues relating to teaching learning provisions have been highlighted in the university's tutor handbook to ensure the quality of tutorial services. Tutors played key roles in the name of the university to show their empathy and provide timely support in the most efficient manner (Abas, Sankaran, Bakar, Johari, & Ayob, 2009). Tutors at ABOU must also be involved in continuous quality improvement by looking out for innovative instructional strategies to enhance their tutorial practices, not only in performing F2F tutorials but also in moderating online discussion forums.

At STOU, ABOU, and UT, the implementation of online learning modes to support students' learning is not a new policy. The use of online learning services at these three universities is in line with the advancement of educational technology, economic development, and market or students' demands. One KI at ABOU confirmed that teaching learning provisions for distance learners now "move away from face-to-face ... by inviting students into the forum and developing the supplement for the learning materials" (ABOU-AS-04). The availability of online learning platforms at STOU, ABOU, and UT seemed very important in supporting students' learning. Online learning has empowered distance students to interact with tutors and other students in more flexible ways (Magano & Carvalho, 2010). At STOU, for example, online learning services have been delivered for graduate programs (STOU-AS-04). The use of online learning allowed the students to update teaching content from tutors and online discussion that fit with their own schedules (STOU, 2003).

At STOU, web boards have been operated to promote students' learning and support tutor – learner interaction (STOU, 2012). Meanwhile, ABOU has also developed myVLE (ABOU's "home-grown" learning management system) to support online learning

services (Ali & Fadzil, 2012; ABOU-AS-04). The employment of online learning services has strengthened student engagement and improved student experience in the instructional process (STOU-AS-04). The use of online learning provisions allowed faculty to invite student engagement in the instructional process, such as through a discussion forum. Since ABOU served students residing throughout the country, it seemed important to promote student engagement to address their interests, thinking, and contributions to the teaching learning process.

UT also shared a long experience, similar to that of STOU and ABOU, in involving online learning for promoting students' learning. UT-Online was launched in 2002, based on the assumption that this service could significantly extend students' access to UT's services. It consisted of online tutorials and online counseling. UT-Online could be accessed through any access points, including Internet kiosks, to extend access points to UT's students. Currently, a new policy to equip all courses with online tutorials has been established to supplement students' self-directed learning. A free source e-Learning software platform (Moodle) has been used to support these services. Currently, fully online programs have also been offered in response to market demands (UT, 2010). According to UT (2010), the university's innovation in the use of the Internet for instructional purposes could be seen as a pioneering initiative in the Indonesian higher education landscape. UT has implemented and continually improved its online learning services in line with an increasing trend of using these services by UT students and the availability of access points in students' local areas throughout the country (UT, 2010).

The implementation of online learning exemplified by UT, STOU, and ABOU has potential to bring learning opportunities to a larger number of students that meets the needs for mass higher education. Online learning services at these universities have offered significant contributions to expanding access, enabling universities to teach far more students than they would otherwise be able to do, to teach more students living at a distance from the campus (Holmberg, 1995). Perhaps Indonesia, the country with a very large population was a good example in this matter. UT, which has been equipped with various learning support services, has the advantage of enrolling a large number of students. In Indonesia, the problem of increased access and equality of opportunity at the university was a major challenge for which UT attempted to offer a viable alternative.

## **Providing Support Services that Promote Effective Distance Learners**

A hallmark of DTUs has been their reliance on learning autonomy and independence, involving the application of systematic and integrated interaction and communication among all parties involved in distance educational activities (Holmberg, 1995). This interaction and communication may include providing support services to support students to learn how to be effective as distance learners. Providing support services that help students to have learning skills as distance learners is needed for their success. The crucial aspect of supporting students in distance education has been addressed by some scholars in distance education, such as Simpson (2002), who noted that support services are important in terms of preventing a high dropout rate and removing feelings of isolation.

The importance of support services to promote effective distance learners was also relevant viewed from the perspective that most of them are working adults who were experiencing many difficulties, such as family problems. At ABOU, for example, its learners are mostly working adults; they are 30 – 45 years old, married with young children and parents to look after. In furthering their studies, these students have to juggle family and working commitment and their study responsibilities (Abas, Sankaran, Bakar, Johari, & Ayob, 2009; STOU-LC-06). Therefore, support services are necessarily important for morale reasons (Simpson, 2002).

In this research, it was confirmed that STOU, ABOU, and UT have put support services as critical elements of their educational quality. A number of support services to help students learn how to be effective distance learners have been developed in the forms of providing delivering information, handling students' enquiries and complaints, responding to students' compliments and suggestions and building students' learning skills. Students' learning skills were strategic issues for distance education systems to support students to initiate and manage their own schedule for learning, develop their reading skills and navigate the Internet for online learning, and build their ability to undertake assignments and final examinations (ABOU, 2006b; UT, 2010).

At ABOU, the major tasks of support services have been managed by the Center for Students Management (CSM). It was stated that the CSM was responsible for making sure that "the quality policy is understood, implemented and maintained at all

levels. This was done through training, monitoring and continuous improvement of CSM employees individually and collectively” (ABOU, 2012, p. 7). The major activities that have been implemented by this center include responding to all students’ inquiries, complaints, and compliments; providing counselling and maintaining student retention; building student development; conducting monitoring and investigation; providing financial support (learners’ welfare); and managing students’ and alumni connections (ABOU, 2012; ABOU-FD-03). In all of ABOU’s regional centers, the CSM has also implemented a series of workshops to help students adjust their learning habits in the distance teaching system. It was hoped that delivering a series of workshops such as study skills and pre-exam clinic workshops would support students’ success (ABOU-FD-03; ABOU-CS-05).

From this cross-case analysis, it was found that ABOU and UT shared similar characteristics in terms of providing support services, particularly with regard to handling students’ inquiries and complaints as well as students’ compliments and suggestions. Both ABOU and UT have been equipped with electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM) applications. The use of e-CRM at ABOU and UT has been regarded as an important tool to demonstrate their continuous effort to improve services and display their commitment to enhance quality in the support service area. Through the e-CRM application, these universities could serve students’ enquiries and complaints in a timely manner. This service has been managed under the Center for Student Management (*Pusat Pengurusan Pelajar*) at ABOU and under the Student Service Unit (*Unit Pelayanan Mahasiswa*) at UT. Through this application, students could ask for help to solve their problems efficiently (UT, 2010). According to Ali and Fadzil (2012), e-CRM was used to track learners’ requests, complaints and feedback. The e-CRM application forwarded issues that were raised to the relevant units and enabled learners to obtain timely responses and solutions.

As distance teaching institutions, these three DTUs have been concerned with the availability of support services from the beginning of new enrolments. They all conducted orientation sessions for new distance learners. According to one key informant from STOU, in the first year it was very important for the institution to invite new learners to come to orientation sessions. “We have to make these new students know how to learn—how to read, how to remember, and how to answer assignments

and exams” (STOU-CS-05). He went on to address the importance of orientation service as follows:

This is an opportunity for anybody to come and participate. We invite them. We offer this interaction. Will they come participate or not? Some will come, but some might feel that they can study by themselves so they don't come. [However], for some students they do need this. (STOU-CS-05)

Similar to ABOU and UT, STOU has provided support services both at STOU's head office and at its regional offices. The university also has assigned a number of staff who acted as personal counsellors for students. The Office of Educational Services sent letters to the students informing them who their personal counselors were; then they could contact these people at any time up until they graduate (STOU-CS-05). Since the students spent most of their time at home and have less opportunity to develop social contact with other fellows and instructors, the university has therefore supported the establishment of Students' Clubs in order to facilitate students meeting with others, developing friendships, and helping each other in their respective field of study (STOU, 2004). According to STOU (2004), these Students' Clubs were essential for distance learners to supplement their independent learning and promote interaction and communication. The next discussion illustrates how learner support services represented by STOU, ABOU, and UT correspond to the major theories in distance education.

### ***The Implementation of Teaching and Learning Processes at STOU, ABOU, and UT Correspond to Holmberg's Interaction and Communication Theory***

This comparative study disclosed that the implementation of learner support, particularly teaching and learning processes, in the three DTUs involved in this study correspond to Holmberg's (1995) interaction and communication theory. It was further disclosed, however, that the implementation of academic services at the three DTUs closely aligned to the theory of autonomy and independence. Evidence about how the theory of interaction and communication proposed by Holmberg (1995) and the theory of autonomy and independent study based on the work Wedemeyer and Moore (Keegan, 1996)(the theory that has been regarded as derivative theory in this research) has been

implemented at STOU, ABOU, and UT was discussed in the previous section. For the purpose of this research, this section focuses only on how the interaction and communication theory proposed by Holmberg (1995), as the primary theory adopted in this research, closely aligned to the practice of academic services in particular and learner support areas in general employed at STOU, ABOU, and UT.

From the three individual case studies as they were discussed in the previous chapter, it was disclosed that the implementation of QA in learner support areas, particularly with respect to the application of teaching and learning provisions in the three DTUs under investigation, corresponded to the notion of interaction and communication theory developed by Borje Holmberg (1995). Many interview subjects involved in this study, supported by data gathered from their official institutional documents, confirmed that interaction and communication involving different channels of media were very important elements in maintaining educational quality. Referring to Holmberg's (2007) ideas, these three DTUs have been deeply involved in building real communication (dialogue) through e-mail, telephone, and audio and video conferences. Meanwhile, simulated dialogue was also created by conversational course writing (Holmberg, 2007). The practice of academic services reflected Holmberg's (1986) principal argument to his theory that the "communication element is rightly considered a corner stone of distance education" (p. 54).

As DTUs which operated in developing nations, these three DTUs shared similar experiences in terms of how teaching and learning conversations have been maintained. STOU, ABOU, and UT, since their early operations, have been involved in using one-way communication in the form of pre-produced course materials, particularly self-contained modules, distributed for students in interaction with learning materials, described as Holmberg's (1995) simulated communication. Additionally, they also developed two-way traffic communications that referred to real communication between their students and their tutors and counsellors or advisors (Holmberg, 1995). These three DTUs have clearly exemplified and addressed Holmberg's (2007) conception about the importance of didactic conversation in the learning process.

Referring to the conceptual constructs of this research, particularly how Holmberg (1995; 2007) sketches out the practice of QA in DTUs, it was disclosed that in

many respects, the practice of providing academic services at these three DTUs corresponds to the core element of Holmberg's original theory: what he called "guided didactic conversation" (Holmberg, 1981, p. 30). His theory of distance education as a method of guided didactic conversation implied that a guided conversation, which was essential to fill the distance between all parties involved in teaching learning provisions, might include the instructors or tutors, counsellors, and the learners. According to Holmberg (1985), the presence of the typical traits of such a conversation facilitated learning processes. At STOU, ABOU, and UT, various academic services have been developed to facilitate this didactic conversation. The following discussion describes further how Holmberg's interaction and communication perspective points towards good practice of teaching and learning provisions and support services provided by these three DTUs.

### ***Academic Services for Simulated Conversation through Pre-produced Course Materials***

Designed modules—modules have been regarded as the major source of learning for students at these DTUs. As the primary media for instruction, modules have been designed by STOU, ABOU, and UT for self-managed learning. These universities have employed course-team approaches in developing these learning materials to ensure quality by involving internal resources and hiring various external experts. To maintain the quality and currency of the content, these printed materials were regularly revised. At UT, for example, the revision of modules was conducted every 6 years whilst at ABOU every 3 years or so. However, the revision of these printed materials might be carried out earlier for some reasons, such as obsolete content or some mistaken concepts.

Radio and television programs—it was confirmed that all of these DTUs have also employed radio and television programs to facilitate students' learning. At STOU, for example, radio programs have been produced by the STOU Educational Broadcasting Production Center, whilst at UT various TV and radio programs in different formats (talk shows, single presentation, dramas, discussions, and interviews) were produced by the Center of Multi-Media Production. Radio and TV programs were designed to enrich course content and support independent learners. At UT, which was the only DTU in Indonesia, radio and television programs were absolutely powerful in

reaching its remote students and enhancing the students' learning process. At UT, the radio programs were broadcasted by *Radio Republik Indonesia*, the state-owned national radio network. Meanwhile, at STOU, radio programs have been delivered from Bangkok through STOU's C-band satellite broadcast.

Audio-video programs—audio cassettes, video programs, and video interactive formats have been also developed to supplement printed learning materials to enhance further explanation, particularly for courses with difficult concepts. The use of these supplemented learning materials depends on some particular characteristics of the courses. For example, video interactive programs in the format of computer-assisted instruction were developed to “display richer examples, provide more precise explanations of concepts, and more interactive programs” (UT, 2010, p. 65).

Computer-assisted instruction (CAI)—CAI for academic services has been designed to contain interactive texts and images. The use of CAI programs allowed teaching providers at STOU, ABOU, and UT to provide further description about specific concepts presented in the printed materials and to engage their students in interactive exercises and get instant feedback generated by the computer program. In line with the advancement of educational technology, a number of learning materials have also been provided, such as learning objects, i-Radio, i-Cast, and web supplements. These various academic services have been developed at STOU, ABOU, and UT using their quality procedures to ensure these products meet their quality criteria.

According to Holmberg (1995), all of these pre-produced learning materials were developed to support independence in distance education. In relation to the autonomy and independence theory proposed by Wedemeyer and Moore (Keegan, 1996), Holmberg (1995) maintained that students in distance education were independent “in carrying through a program of study” (p. 15) in terms of time, course, and place. As distance learners have “*different capacities* for making decisions regarding their own learning” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 213; Emphasis in original), distance learners have choices to decide “where and when to learn [and] how much of a course to undertake at a time” (Holmberg, 1995, p. 15). Promoting student independence in distance education required DTUs to also develop variety of academic and support services that would maintain real communication. This issue is discussed in the following section.

### ***Academic and Support Services that Promote Real Communication***

Holmberg (1995) argued that the role of the second constituent element of distance teaching institution was to provide learner support services that promoted real communication and interaction. It was disclosed, in addition to the one-way communication, that the three DTUs selected in this study have also addressed the importance of various academic services that promote real interactive instruction. According to Holmberg (1995), the presentation of instruction should not rely only on the dissemination of information through distributing printed-learning materials to all students. The distance-teaching providers should also invite students' engagement in "an intellectual activity that makes them try out ideas, reflect, compare, and apply critical judgement to what is studied" (p. 45). With regard to this, one respondent asserted that:

Basically we have personal interaction in the forum. But we separate academic forum and [the] non-academic forum for interaction for each course. That means that interaction should be performed in distance education. It is not enough for us to just deliver our printed materials, the interaction must be there. (ABOU-AS-04)

For this reason, STOU, ABOU, and UT have developed different teaching delivery modes, including video conferences, Webinars, electronic learning, online discussion forums, and mobile learning. The universities have also designed F2F tutorial sessions, as was discussed previously. It was also recognized that faculty members created chatting forums using social network media. Among other things, F2F provisions and online learning have been identified as major teaching delivery systems to support real communication and interaction among tutors and students. Counsellors, advisors, and academic administrators have also actively engaged in providing F2F and online support services.

F2F tutorial sessions—informants at the three DTUs in this research disclosed that their universities were still heavily involved in providing F2F tutorial sessions to respond to their students' demands. According to some respondents, it was found that although these academic services were not compulsory there were many students who asked for them and were involved in this contiguous communication of teaching deliveries. The implementation of these F2F interactions paralleled with Holmberg's (1995) view that asserted, "many distance-teaching organizations find meetings

important either as a motivational device encouraging course completion or as a purely instructional element, or both” (p. 113). Regarding the importance of F2F tutorials for distance learners in the Southeast Asia context, this research corresponded to Jung’s (2012) findings who disclosed that “Face-to-face ... is particularly critical for Asian students who tend to be more teacher dependent as a consequence of their earlier schooling and high-context culture” (p. 36). It was discussed in Chapter Four that STOU, ABOU, and UT have been designed and integrated F2F academic services in their QA programs.

Despite the shared similarities in addressing the crucial element of F2F tutorial sessions, it was found that these three DTUs employed different applications in designing and executing the programs. At STOU, F2F sessions for one course were carried out by the team of professors with three meetings in one semester to discuss 15 units (5 units per meeting). One professor came to a particular group of participants at STOU’s Students Clubs or learning centers twice in one semester. For the third session, this professor would provide F2F provisions to another group of participants at different learning centers. Meanwhile, ABOU and UT assigned one tutor for the whole semester with four meetings at ABOU and eight sessions of meetings at UT. It was confirmed that tutorial sessions at STOU, ABOU, and UT were conducted during the weekends.

Online learning—according to Holmberg (2003b), the advance of educational technology, particularly with regard to the online use of the computer in education, allowed distance teaching institutions to offer subject-matter presentation and interaction. With regard to this, the use of online learning helped the three DTUs not only to provide one-way content presentations but also to support two-way interactions. The use of online learning formats has then also allowed these three DTUs to engage students in active learning. The online learning services in these universities have been regarded as a strategic choice to meet the challenges for their future; STOU, ABOU, and UT have continuously developed their Internet networks and various formats of Internet-based learner services.

The implementation of online learning at these universities has also been beneficial in terms of inviting their students to be involved in collaborative learning that supported the idea of a Community of Inquiry theory proposed by Garrison, Anderson,

and Archer (2000) or Garrison and Anderson (2003). According to one of the KIs at ABOU, to be able to use this theory tutors should have instructional skills, such as communicating and presenting information to the learners, and moderating learners in the learning process. For promoting collaborative learning, the tutors must also have skills in questioning learners to direct learning processes, clarifying learning processes and outcomes, providing feedback about performance, knowledge transfer and retention, and motivating and engaging learners (ABOU-AS-04).

In addition to these general requirements for implementing Col format, online tutors should also have capabilities in implementing three core values of this Col model: cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence (Abas, Sankaran, Bakar, Johari, & Ayob, 2009; ABOU-AS-05). To increase cognitive presence, tutors created different strategies, such as creating quality topics that were engaging for discussion. Tutors should also question and challenge their learners in the discussion. According to respondents (ABOU-AS-05; UT-AS-07), it was very important for tutors, in relation to their roles in developing teaching presence, to encourage participants to be involved in the discussion in using the Col format. All students should be inspired to take opportunities to express their ideas or comments. Besides, tutors should also be available for responding to their learners' requests and for providing feedback. As online learning involving students in their own space, with non-contiguous interaction (Holmberg, 1995), tutors should create and increase a sense of community by such things as encouraging learners to post short introductions about themselves and creating a discussion thread for non-subject related discussions (ABOU-AS-04).

In relation to the Holmberg's (1995) interaction and communication theory, three 'guiding operational values' in implementing learner support areas could be identified at the three DTUs as follows.

Personal relationships—from the interview data, it was confirmed that developing personal relationships as was suggested by Holmberg (1995; 2007), was maintained at the three universities. Tutors and administrative staff who were involved in providing support services were involved in developing a 'personal touch' with their students through various channels of interaction and communication. In his recent publication, Holmberg (2007) argued that a feeling of personal relations between the learning and

teaching parties promoted students' learning, pleasure, and motivation. To address the feelings of personal relation, one of the participants expressed the following:

There is a theory saying that [you] make your customers feel [at easy] by being personal. So, in a distance education institution, it is important to develop personal relationships because we never meet them until the day they graduate. If they feel like I am just next to you, this is a personal touch for branding image. A counsellor is like a marketer, without that feeling of '*hati*' [empathic rapport] you cannot provide counselling. You must give your heart to people. (ABOU-CS-05)

Most respondents confirmed that developing personal relationships was extremely important in distance education, as it was very easy for students to leave the programs without any clarification. STOU and ABOU have assigned their staff in the Office of Call Center to stay close to their students. They called students who did not re-enrol and provided help for developing solutions to students' problems. The favourable influence of personal approaches in teaching and learning has also been expressed by tutors as follows:

During their classes, I talk to them if they have problems [and say] please come to me directly. Normally if we are close enough to the students, close means that we are very concerned with them, when they are hanging around they just talk to us and they are willing to come and open up. So, we maintain closeness to our students to provide open communication. If people are psychologically close, they will come to you. He just sits here and talks and says that he has problem with his class because he has to work on Saturday. So, we try to accommodate his problem. (ABOU-LC-06)

From these two passages which closely corresponding to Holmberg's (2007) theory, it was fair enough to note that developing personal relationships with the distance learners was not only important to encourage students' learning but also to maintain and keep them in the program to attain their educational goals.

Empathy—corresponding to Holmberg's (1995) ideas which addressed an empathetic approach in distance education system, tutors and counsellors who were involved in this research confirmed that empathy has been regarded as a crucial characteristic to serve adult and distance learners. It appeared to be critical when counsellors or academic advisors encountered distance learners with either academic

problems or their non-academic problems. The empathy approach was evident as they were presented in the previous chapter of this thesis, and confirmed that empathy remained a desirable quality of learner support providers. Some key respondents who were involved in learner support areas at STOU, ABOU, and UT have reported their empathy through providing flexible access for their students who wanted to discuss their problems (ABOU-AS-04; STOU-AS-04; UT-AS-07). One of the respondents who was involved in this study shared this experience:

One student told me that she get sick and was going for an operation for cancer and left the message, if I die please help for funerary arrangements. I left your number [Phone #] with my doctor.... So, when we express our empathy to the students, they will trust to us, they will share their feelings. They believe that we are the ones who can share their feelings and problems. (ABOU-CS-05)

Another respondent at UT has also addressed that articulating empathy has prevented his students from dropping out and motivated them to continue their study and success (UT-AS-07).

Friendly conversation—this comparative study disclosed that the implementation of learner support services at STOU, ABOU, and UT corresponded to one of the postulates Holmberg's (1995; 2007) Interaction and Communication theory. According to Holmberg (2007), "[t]he atmosphere, language and conventions of friendly conversation favour feelings of personal relations [that eventually] promote study pleasure and motivation" [p. 70]. One of the respondents at STOU addressed this issue as follows:

I try to be friendly to them, .... I tell them if they have any questions, don't be ashamed to ask. Any question is welcome, I would like to answer. And lunchtime, I also have my lunch and I sit with the students and talk with them: How are you, what are your study problems, something like that. [We] have lunch together.... They can tell you anything—not only just study problems, but even family problems, personal problems. Some students ask me and if I have some comments I will tell them. (STOU-AS-04)

According to the same respondent, creating friendly conversation and developing personal relationship with students were coherently important to encourage distance learners to progress in their studies. One respondent exemplified this as follows:

Right now I've got one advisee, and she's not good at studying. Some professors refused to be her advisor, and I said "Oh that's OK" and I asked her to work hard because she's not strong in her academics. But right now she's almost finished with her work. We have to give encouragement. (STOU-AS-04)

These excerpts and forgoing discussion confirmed that guiding operational values for interaction qualities identified by Holmberg (2007) in some ways sketch out the practices of learner support areas at STOU, ABOU, and UT. Developing personal relationships, showing empathy to the students' feelings, and creating friendly conversation have been maintained to promote student retention, remove student isolation, and support students' success.

### ***The Relationships between the Implementation of QA in Learner Support Areas and the Universities' External Environments***

Without doubt, today's ever-quickenning cycle of change is unprecedented. A collision of technological, social and cultural pressures forces DTUs to continuously adapt to new situations if they want to sustain themselves and flourish. As mentioned at the outset that external forces originated from: 1) general environmental forces, including socio-culture and educational technology elements, and 2) specific environments, including external QA agencies, government, and students. These general and specific environments push DTUs to continuously evaluate their strategic directions in implementing QA programs. STOU, ABOU, and UT must confront these all-encompassing forces that pervade every aspect of their business. This remaining section discusses the relationship between the implementation of QA, particularly in learner support areas, at STOU, ABOU, and UT and their external environments. Referring back to the five subthemes identified in every individual case study, five major external environments (socio-culture, educational technology, external QA agencies, government, and students) and their relationships with the implementation of QA programs in learner support areas are presented in the following discussion.

### **The Implementation of QA in Learner Support Areas Responds to the Local Culture, Particularly Language**

This international comparative study disclosed that the implementation of QA in learner support areas in the three DTUs operated in the South Asia tended to vary and

were bounded by their particular local cultures. Among other things, the learner support areas have been designed to meet the need of their students, including their common learning habits, religion, and their language. In this study, language has been regarded as the most critical aspect in designing teaching and learning provisions and support services.

With regard to the importance of language in designing support for students, Simpson (2002) warned that “anyone providing support should be aware that ... students might be more at risk in situations where their language skills are under stress” (p.160). Therefore, the decision in using language for pre-produced learning materials and other support services has been considered as a strategic aspect. It was disclosed that STOU and UT have decided to use their national languages, Thai and Indonesian, in designing and implementing their learner support services. It was reported that the use of their national languages allowed their faculty, administrative staff, and especially students to express their understanding and participate in meaningful thinking (STOU-AS-04).

Different to STOU and UT, ABOU has decided to use English for the entire area of learning support. The use of English as a second language was more favourable than using the national language, bahasa Melayu. All learning material instructions and support services have been developed in English. This has been clarified by one respondent who mentioned that there was no obstacle for ABOU's students dealing with the use of English instruction; they understood English well (ABOU-QC-02). However, according to this respondent and recounted by another respondent at the learning center who intensively interacted with students, there were some students who want to study in Melayu and they asked to have printed learning materials in Melayu versions. For this reason, ABOU developed soft copy learning materials in Melayu versions provided online to be accessed by their students for free.

These case studies also disclosed that ethnicity and religion of the students have influenced the support services that must be provided by these DTUs. For example, ABOU Malaysia and UT Indonesia have been particularly concerned with Muslim students; they provided an interfaith room, ‘*surau*,’ at their learning centers to serve students during tutorial and final examination sessions. To address these issues, the

university employed local people for administrative and academic staff as well hired faculty members from local universities for tutorial services. According to one respondent at UT, local languages might be used during F2F tutorial sessions and in other interaction and communication settings but this was not the university policy (UT-PC-01).

### **The Implementation of QA in Learner Support Areas Relates to Educational Technology to Support both Academic and Administrative Works**

Instructional design and pedagogical deliveries in DTUs have progressed in line with the advancement of technologies. Technologies have created new opportunities and possibilities for learning and instruction (Halverson, 2009; Inoue & Bell, 2006; Pelgrum & Law, 2003). It was disclosed that current technology has supported these three DTUs in delivering their academic services and diverse administrative works, such as online enrolments. The delivery modes of teaching and learning provisions in DTUs have been changed from the paper-based learning materials to web-based instructions and other kinds of online learning programs. These delivery modes of academic services have also been conducted as an integral part of instructional process to enhance student learning at the three DTUs under investigation.

There is a relationship between the policy and practice of QA in learner support areas at the three DTUs (STOU, ABOU, and UT) and the advent of educational technology, such as through the adoption of online tutorials. It was also disclosed that the investment in information technology has been made to maintain stepwise improvement in their management communication between their head offices and their regional offices throughout the country. UT for example has installed a virtual private network (VPN) to support data transaction and video conferences (UT, 2010). As the only DTU in the country which served a mandatory mission from the Indonesian government to broaden access to higher education for Indonesians, UT has developed ICT-supported offices in both its head office and its 37 regional offices. Similar to that of UT, ABOU has also been equipped with its own learning portal, known as my virtual learning environment (myVLE) to support various activities of e-Learning. MyVLE has been supplemented with multimedia capabilities featuring e-mail, digital library, learner connexions (ABOU, 2006b). As the oldest DTU in the Southeast Asian region, STOU has also led various innovations in adopting technology. Education through satellite

since 2000 allowed STOU to broadcast academic services via four TV channels (STOU, 2004; STOU, 2012).

As ICTs such as computers and mobile phones, have advanced in the twenty-first century, it has made online learning programs more attractive to some students and tutors (STOU-AS-04; ABOU-AS-04; UT-AS-07). The use of hand-held tools, such as cellular phones and iPads with Wi-Fi and other sophisticated technology, has increased the attractiveness of mobile learning. At STOU for example, learning materials have been converted to a small size to promote students' learning via mobile phone. The adoption of these educational technologies was significantly helpful for promoting academic quality, since these modern tools allow students to have personalised instruction that seems to be effective and efficient for distance learners. The technological advances in telecommunications have helped make the delivery modes of educational opportunities more diverse and accessible for students at the three DTUs.

### **The Implementation of QA in Learner Support Areas Aligns with the Professional QA Agencies' Standards**

In line with their internal efforts to establish a rigorous QA system, STOU, ABOU, and UT have shared similarities in seeking external validation to ensure that all efforts have indeed resulted in better quality performance. STOU, ABOU, and UT have voluntarily invited private external QA professional bodies to evaluate and provide necessary feedback for continuing improvement. QA professional bodies have played a strategic role to help these universities in developing, implementing, and assessing the practice of QA in different components and particularly in learner support areas. In addition to this, it was disclosed that the implementation of QA programs at these universities was also required by law. The policies and practices of QA should comply with the quality standards employed by QA bodies in the name of their governments. The involvement of government QA bodies will be discussed later. This present section focuses on the involvement of private external QA bodies on the QA programs at these three DTUs.

STOU involves in the initial stage to apply the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award model from the United States of America (STOU-PC-01; Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012b). Referring back to the QA methodologies discussed in the

literature review (see page 61), this Baldrige model covers seven core components including: leadership; strategic planning, customer and market focus; measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; human resources; process management; and business results. When this research was conducted, STOU was on its way to developing rules and adjusting them to the university's QA systems and mechanisms (Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012b). STOU's intention to adopt this model was expressed by the university's top management as follows:

I would like to get the world-class standard. This is the highest goal of STOU. At present, I [have] applied for the Malcolm Baldrige award (that I showed you with seven components) to all departments at STOU in order to upgrade in any aspects.... This is the first year for the project. (STOU-PC-01)

Compared to the other two DTUs which adopted ISO 9001 (ABOU and UT), the top management of STOU confirmed that the university was more favourable to adopting the Baldrige Award for the reason that "ISO standards are focused on some aspects, but Malcolm Baldrige is focused overall—we call it the total quality management. It's a good system" (STOU-PC-01).

Meanwhile, ABOU and UT were on similar pathways to achieving quality; as was discussed at the previous chapter, they adopted the ISO QA standard for judging quality in some core business areas, but not for the whole university. At UT, the preparation for ISO accreditation was started in 2005, and in March 2006 UT was awarded certification for ISO 9001:2000 for the quality management process of course material distribution from the UT headquarters to regional offices. Later, UT gradually earned ISO certificates for: development of learning and examination materials in 2007; academic administration services in 2008; promotion and cooperation in 2008; and students/ learning services for all regional offices starting from 2007 to 2011 (Yuniati, Hardini, Sunarsih, Meilani, & Belawati, 2012).

Although UT and ABOU have shared similarity in terms of adopting the ISO QA standard, it was disclosed that there were differences in practices. As UT currently used business process approaches in assessing quality, ABOU adopted ISO standards based on unit-based approaches. Four strategic units at ABOU have been certified by ISO; these units included: 1) Registry, 2) Center for Instructional Design and Technology

(CIDT), 3) Center for Student Management (CSM) and 4) Digital Library (ABOU-QC-02; Ali & Fadzil, 2012).

The adoption of the ISO QA standard helped ABOU and UT to develop their QA manuals and thus ensure the quality of processes and expectation. These universities were confident in their internal processes through the use of quality procedures (SOPs) that helped maintain the consistency of the processes and support the commitment of all staff involved in their respective quality areas. UT's staff and top leader expressed the benefit of adopting ISO as follows:

Based on the experience of the past five years of using the ISO system, a positive impact on staff and university performance has been observed, resulting in a significant decrease in students' complaints and problems. It is of course a 'bonus' that having ISO certificates also helps to strengthen public confidence in UT. (Yuniati, Hardini, Sunarsih, Meilani, & Belawati, 2012, p. 88)

In addition to the implementation of ISO, UT and ABOU have also adopted different QA standards. Since 2009, ABOU has been actively involved to periodically carrying out self-assessment using the Commonwealth of Learning (COL)'s QA Toolkit for Distance Higher Education institutions (Ali & Fadzil, 2012). Meanwhile, UT has also invited the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE)—the International Standards Agency (ISA) since 2005.

As it was mentioned at the outset, the government or private groups might establish QA professional bodies. In some countries, a QA agency has developed as a mechanism independent of the government and some have been government initiatives and clearly serve government purposes. This following discussion focuses on the issue of government involvement in the implementation of QA programs at the three DTUs selected in this research.

### **The Implementation of QA in Learner Support Areas Must Correspond with Government QA Standards**

Based on the interview data supported by official documents, this study disclosed that STOU, ABOU, and UT shared comparable practices in implementing QA programs. Their QA framework should comply with their government's educational quality criteria. In this regard, it was required by law for STOU to follow two dimensions of QA, namely

internal QA and external QA. The internal QA process has been carried out by OHEC and focused on two variables: inputs and processes. Meanwhile, the external QA was under ONESQA that focused on outputs of QA (STOU-QC-02). Meanwhile, ABOU should ensure that all academic programs and qualifications should comply with the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) (ABOU-AS-04; ABOU-QC-02). The top management level of the university, who currently published their journal regarding QA in distance education in Asia, addressed this as follows:

In Malaysia, the national quality assurance (QA) or accreditation framework for higher education is under the purview of the MQA [Malaysian Qualifications Agency], a statutory body established under the Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007 to accredit academic programs provided by HEIs and facilitate the recognition and articulation of qualifications. It is an independent, autonomous body with a mandate to assess the quality of all tertiary level institutions, including universities. (Ali & Fadzil, 2012, p. 258)

For the purpose of QA assessment, the MQA has provided a set of guidelines, standards, and codes of practice to help higher education institutions, including distance higher education, enhance their educational programs through internal and external quality audit (Ali & Fadzil, 2012).

Similar to that of ABOU, the educational programs for all higher education institutions in Indonesia, including UT, should refer to the quality standards governed by the National Accreditation Board of Higher Education in the name the DGHE. The government interests in supervising quality of UT could be understood for the reason that Indonesian government financially supports for university. The establishment of UT as a public distance teaching university in Indonesia is a strategic and mandatory mission of the Indonesian government to serve Indonesian people to access higher education, regardless of time, place, age, and socio-economic background. Besides, it is also important to note that the government interest in directing QA program at DTUs is based on the reason that DTUs have more capacity to educate people who live in remote areas. DTUs play an important role in building a knowledge-based society and in economic development. In the case of UT, for example, the total number of the UT student body was 622,957 (as of February 28, 2010), of which 536,974 students were teachers, many of whom live in rural areas and some in remote villages. The following

discussion addressed the issue of students' engagement in the QA programs in learner support areas.

### **Students are being Involved in the Implementation of QA in Learner Support Areas through Regular Students' Feedback**

The three DTUs involved in this research confirmed that students were very important and have been regarded as their major customers. STOU, ABOU, and UT have addressed their students as part of their crucial stakeholders in developing and revising their quality policies and practices. The three DTUs have made different significant efforts to provide a comprehensive approach in designing and implementing QA programs in learner support areas through their students' involvement. A systematic mechanism has been developed to get regular students' feedback on their learner support services. A set of quality guidelines has been designed for assuring quality based on students' perspectives that allow the institution to make continual improvement.

As part of its commitment to students' affairs, ABOU, which declared itself as being a "customer-focused organization" (Ali & Fadzil, 2012, p. 263), has integrated students' feedback for quality improvement in its online systems (ABOU-FD-03). UT and STOU have also regularly asked their students to evaluate every tutor's performance (STOU-AS-04; UT-AS-07). It was reported that students have regularly been involved in assessing the level of quality achievement in four core areas: registry, learning materials, learner support services, examination, and academic administration (ABOU-FD-03; UT-LC-09). These different students' feedback samples were analyzed and reported in their management review meetings. Different levels of these meetings were carried out both at department and university levels.

From this comparative research, it was noted that the learners' engagement in a QA program in the three DTUs has been regarded as a very critical aspect because students were the final people who would judge the quality of their learning process. Learners have their own rights to have educational quality based on their own perspectives to achieve their own goals (Holmberg, 1995). STOU, ABOU, and UT might monitor the degree of students' satisfaction periodically. Management wanted to know whether their learners were really satisfied or not with the services provided under the

QA programs. These students' feedback could then be used for continuous improvement or reviewing the university QA program. The learners' engagement in the QA programs provides benefits for revising policies, standards and procedures, as well as upgrading human resource development.

Through this comparative study, it was disclosed that maintaining university commitment to apply QA in learner support areas was not an easy task. To provide the dynamic aspect of learning support services that fitted the learners' interests, these three DTUs should maintain their continual improvement by analyzing the learners' feedback regularly. Since DTUs served learners residing in cross-border areas with various cultural backgrounds, this study disclosed that there were some serious challenges that the DTUs encountered in implementing QA programs in learner support areas. The following section serves for the discussion of this issue.

## Challenges Encountered in Implementing Quality Assurance

While QA has long been implemented in manufacturing sectors with various degree of success, implementing rigorous QA programs in education, particularly in DTUs, has been regarded as a recent phenomenon (Chalmers & Johnston, 2012; Kanwar, 2012). This research disclosed that the three DTUs involved this study have encountered various challenges in developing, implementing, and continuously reviewing various QA policies and practices. Based on the individual case studies, a number of emergent themes, dealing with critical challenges that the three DTUs faced, were identified in this research as they are shown the following table.

**Table 9. Comparison of the emergent themes for the challenges encountered in implementing QA**

Research question	List of themes		
	STOU	ABOU	UT
What are the challenges that key people report they are facing in the development and implementation of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• QA is perceived as being too demanding and time consuming</li> <li>• Government quality guidelines do not correspond well to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff misunderstand QA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of an access point and IT infrastructures</li> <li>• QA is perceived as being too demanding and</li> </ul>

QA in learner support areas?	distance education institution		time consuming
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Based on the interview data and emergent themes, it was found that there were a number of challenges that DTUs faced in implementing QA programs in learner support areas. These challenges included: lack of staff' understanding about QA and lack of access points to Internet infrastructure in remote areas. Additionally, it was also disclosed that QA was perceived as being too demanding and time consuming by STOU and UT. Further, the documentary analysis from UT also confirmed that the university faced serious problems regarding government quality standards which did not fit for distance teaching institutions. For these reasons, this section will be more focused on two common challenges: 1) QA perceived as being too demanding, and 2) government quality guidelines do not correspond well to distance education.

### ***QA is Perceived as Being Too Demanding and Time Consuming***

Belawati, Zuhairi, and Wardani (2007), stressed that implementing QA in large distance teaching institutions like UT involving a complex interplay of separate elements is a monumental task. They further argued that:

It is all too easy to talk about quality, but it requires explicit and consistent commitment by senior and middle managers, a systematic approach and a great deal of commitment, effort, patience, awareness raising to ensure that every unit and every staff member is committed to changing the work culture. (p. 121-122)

Closely relevant to this quotation, a number of respondents who are involved in the QA programs expressed that the implementation of QA was extremely demanding. The application of QA in learning services has required not only that overworked staff produce teaching materials to support students' learning but also that they had to take care with documentation processes.

The implementation of QA which involved different stakeholders, such as different external quality agencies, has made the QA programs perceived as being very challenging. The invitation of the government QA body (BAN-PT) for evaluating the quality of all educational programs, ISO for assessing the management processes, and ICDE-ISA for accrediting the practice of world-class distance education have generated

a lot of documents for consideration. One of the respondents frankly admitted that too many external quality audits combined with internal quality assessment had led to excessive administrative work (UT-LC-09).

Additionally, the implementation of QA was also very demanding with regard to the role of the leaders. The head of educational programs, the dean, and other top university management levels played significant roles. Top managers at UT for example were not only primarily responsible for initiating and introducing the system to their subordinates, but they were also the first people who were trained for the QA program (UT-PC-01). Various actions have been taken by the middle and top management at UT in developing, maintaining, and changing appropriate cultures to support the implementation of QA programs. These included things such as creating new rules and policies that reinforce the desired performance of a new organizational culture and eliminating rules and policies that hindered the desired ways of operating simultaneously. In a particular unit, weekly or monthly meeting was conducted to evaluate the implementation of the QA programs (ABOU-FD-03; STOU-FD-03; UT-QC-02).

In addition to these internal challenges, the implementation of QA in DTUs also associates with other external environment. Another external environment that challenged the practice of QA in DTUs deals with the QA criteria developed by government that do not correspond well to distance education institutions. This issue is presented in the following section.

### ***Government's QA Guidelines and Standards do not Correspond Well to Distance Education Institutions***

Kanwar (2012) asserted that the frequently cited challenge in implementing QA in DTUs was that many ministries and accreditation bodies used quality standards and indicators that have been developed for conventional universities and did not serve well for the purpose of distance teaching system. DTUs have specific characteristics which were significantly different from F2F universities. Therefore, DTUs would potentially encounter very difficult quality agendas when their practices had to comply with their government conventional quality scenario.

It was clearly evident that the government had a direct and an active role in supervising the implementation of quality programs within the three DTUs under study. In the case of STOU, it was disclosed that the implementation of QA has been made more complicated since the government QA bodies apply quality guidelines designed for F2F universities. In this regards, major problems have been identified as follows:

Some quality indicators did not correspond to the context of distance education institutions. Both IQA and EQA quality indicators often disagreed with distance education contexts. For example, the indicator on library, instructional media and learning environment was difficult for the university to achieve. The only quality indicator for this quality policy has been set that each university should have one computer for at least every eight full-time students. This quality indicator was hardly suitable for distance teaching institutions. STOU has a large number of students without conventional classrooms. Thus, this indicator did not correspond well to the reality of STOU's educational system. (Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012b, p. 36-37)

Similar to that of STOU, UT Indonesia encountered dilemmas in adopting government QA standards as BAN-PT served for the Directorate General of Higher Education set quality indicators that did not correspond to DTUs. The problem was instigated by the fact that the national quality criteria have been established based on conventional university perspectives. From the university's official documents it was found that 17 study programs scattered in four Faculties were accredited by BAN-PT in 2007 with the resulting grades:

Four study programs were accredited "B" and 13 study programs were accredited "C". The accreditation marks received by UT were based on instruments used to evaluate the face-to-face teaching and learning process. (UT, 2010, p. 98)

In response to these results, UT was later involved in two projected actions; UT submitted an appeal for re-evaluation and collaborated with BAN-PT in developing the instruments that fitted the characteristics of distance education system. When this research was conducted, the draft of instrument for accrediting DTUs had been successfully completed.

## The Use of the Current QA Process to Inform Practice

This comparative study disclosed that the implementation of QA in learner support areas has been regarded as the universities' road to inform future practices and represent a learning organization. Based on the previous data analysis presented in chapter four, STOU, ABOU, and UT have shared similarities in terms of how their current QA programs have been used to inform better practices, as is listed in the following figure.

**Table 10. Comparison of the emergent themes for the use of the current QA process to inform practice**

Research question	List of themes		
	STOU	ABOU	UT
How are the results of the current QA processes in learner support areas used to inform practice?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuous quality assessment is done through self-assessment reports (SAR)</li> <li>• Various actions are taken to ensure continuous quality improvement through the use of the PDCA model and is based on stakeholders' feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuous quality assessment is done through continuous monitoring and evaluation</li> <li>• Various actions are taken to ensure continuous quality improvement, particularly based on students' feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuous quality assessment is done through self-evaluation</li> <li>• Various actions are taken to ensure continuous quality improvement, based on internal and external quality assessment</li> </ul>

### ***Continuous Quality Assessment is Performed through Regular Self-Assessment***

Corresponding to perspective of QA as being the university readiness to change or review their QA policy and practice, this comparative research disclosed that the three DTUs involved in this study have carried out continuous internal quality assessment as a strategic role for reviewing their QA policies and improving quality. Evaluation and monitoring programs in all areas of learner support services were conducted involving academic and administrative staff as well as students. The quality reports in different areas of the current support activities were produced and analysed to inform future practice.

Management review meetings involving people across divisions have been conducted regularly in these three universities. At STOU, for example, management review meetings in division levels have regularly been conducted every three months, followed by the quality reports to the university level management (STOU-CS-05). Similarly, UT also has addressed the importance of management review meetings at different levels. Each department has regularly been involved in review meetings every six months followed by a national coordination meeting for university level management every year. Emphasizing the importance of management review meetings, Ali and Fadzil (2012) stated:

Recognizing that teamwork and collaboration within and across departments are the mainstay of any quality management system, the university gives due emphasis to holding QA meetings that are attended by quality management representatives from all departments. This facilitates communication and encourages collective and coordinated quality initiatives. (p. 263)

Whilst COL's QA standard has become a dominant model for self-assessment at ABOU, this research found that AAOU's QA format has been adopted at UT and later was transformed into Simintas-UT for its self-assessment. Similar to ABOU and UT, STOU has also been involved in self-assessment prior to the internal and external quality audits. STOU has developed a QA management system that allowed every department to produce and send its self-assessment report (SAR) using an online system. The university has also been equipped by an internal quality committee to monitor the implementation of this SAR. The current results of QA inspection have been used as feedback to inform future practice and continuous improvement accordingly.

In addition to the self-assessment, continuous quality review has also been conducted by external QA agencies involving their government QA bodies and voluntary private QA agencies. This research disclosed that the ISO QA standard has been regarded as the dominant model at ABOU and UT. The adoption of ISO and other external QA standards, such as ICDE-ISA and the Baldrige Award, supported these three DTUs as learning organizations, and that enabled them to remain competitive in their educational business environments. STOU, ABOU, and UT have been totally involved in implementing self-assessment and external quality audits for evaluating the implementation of their quality policies. These continuous internal and external quality

assessments were also their strategic option to inform the practices of their quality arrangements.

### ***Various Actions are Taken to Ensure Quality Improvement, Based on Quality Assessment and Stakeholders' Feedback***

This comparative research disclosed that various actions have been taken at these DTUs to ensure continuous quality improvement. Reviewing QA manuals, revising quality guidelines, and establishing new QA policies were undertaken based on their regular quality assessment and feedback from different stakeholders, including students. Based on the interview data supported by published and unpublished documents, a number of actions to support continual improvement have been identified and discussed below.

1. Developing QA manuals—STOU, ABOU, and UT have developed a set of QA manuals equipped by quality procedures to guide the implementation of QA. The QA manuals emphasized the interrelationship among processes.
2. Establishing QA center—These three universities have been equipped by the office totally dedicated for managing the implementation of QA within the university. The QA center was a strategic player for these universities for planning and coordinating among departments within university and external QA agencies.
3. Developing and reviewing the institutions' policies—As the universities' internal and external environment and demands were in constant change, the universities developed and reviewed new policies and existing strategies that supported the implementation of QA that fitted the new trend of distance education.
4. Conducting training for selected staff to become internal QA auditors/ assessors—These three universities have trained their selected academic and administrative staff across departments in order to facilitate internal quality assessment. At UT all internal QA auditors have been certified by ISO 9001 training agencies. Meanwhile, STOU also pursued to develop the capability of QA assessors to help them check and promote QA. Similarly, ABOU also has conducted in-house workshops for their staff to develop human capacity in internal quality audit.

In addition to these general actions there were also many activities were taken to improve the quality of learner support areas.

## **Continuous Quality Improvement in Learner Support Areas**

Recognizing the importance of updating learning materials to support the quality learning materials, STOU, ABOU, and UT have established clear policies on the life cycle of their learning materials, specifically printed learning materials, as major learning sources for their students. Although learning materials have been developed by course teams with special expertise, comments and feedback from students and tutors were regularly invited and were considered during revision schedules.

Further, a number of activities have also been carried out by STOU, ABOU, and UT to address the improvement of quality in support services. The Office of Educational Services at STOU, the Center of Student Management at ABOU, and the Student Service Unit at UT have clear policies to engage students in improving quality by managing students' feedback. The students' feedback allowed the universities to revise existing policies and develop new strategies for better quality of learner support.

From the forgoing discussion, this comparative study identified that in many respects STOU, ABOU, and UT shared many similarities in terms of implementing QA programs in learner areas. Although QA policy and practices were apparently bounded by their local context, there was evidence that QA programs were enjoying some uniform acceptance facilitated by benchmarking one another. Sharing of best practices and experience were conducted through their regular AAOU conferences and other commitments.

## **Summary**

This chapter presents a comparative discussion of how QA programs have been developed and implemented at three DTUs in the Southeast Asia, STOU Thailand, ABOU Malaysia, and UT Indonesia. Cross-case analysis is employed incorporating five strategic issues derived from five research questions: perspective on quality, QA policies in learner support areas, the implementation of QA in learner support areas, challenges, and how the current QA process has been used to inform practices. In this regard, the theoretical foundation and conceptual framework, presented in Chapter Two, have been

used to discuss how this theoretical foundation in distance education, specifically Holmberg's (1995) interaction and communication theory, sketches out the implementation of QA in learner support areas. The internal and external environments are also discussed to examine the relationships between the implementation of QA in learner support areas and the universities' environments. Furthermore, the dominant QA models employed in the three DTUs are also disclosed based on the empirical evidence in each university. It is important to note that all the emerging themes related to every research question did not necessary arise separately since different lines of empirical evidence were obviously overlapped.

#### 1. Perspectives on quality and QA

It was revealed that perspectives of quality in general and quality in learner support areas in particular has been articulated differently, emphasising the importance of setting standards or degree of quality criteria for their educational products and services in order to satisfy their major customers. Whilst quality has been viewed as standards of their products and services that meet students' requirement at ABOU, respondents at STOU and UT shared similar understanding in looking at quality. They reported quality as students' expectations being met and also compliance with external quality standards. At STOU, external quality standards refer to OHEC, ONESQA, and the Baldrige Award; at UT, these external quality standards refer to the ISO standard and ICDE-ISA quality agency. Although these three institutions operated in different countries and have different educational settings with diverse QA agendas, respondents from STOU, ABOU, and UT shared fairly similar perspectives in looking at quality when customers' requirements became a strategic issue and were regarded as their critical quality orientation. These standpoints emphasise their perspectives on quality in learner support areas which have addressed the importance of meeting quality criteria for their products or services.

Further, respondents from the three DTUs have also impartially shared similar perspectives on QA which addressed two out of three strategic components of QA (input, process, and output). QA has been referred to quality procedures or mechanisms (processes) and expected outcomes that refer to quality criteria of products or services. Quality criteria of products and services developed in these

DTUs represent the university policies and practices in implementing their QA programs. In this regard, what constitutes quality criteria in learner support services in these three DTUs is different and will be certainly disputed. Each DTU set its own quality criteria based on its understanding of the dynamic concept of quality in education. Therefore, their perspectives of QA represent their QA policies and practices in order to achieve quality of their products and services. The universities' QA policies and practices may subject to adjustment in order to meet the dynamic demand of students' requirements that have been facilitated by different programs, such as asking students' feedback and conducting regular management review meetings.

2. Institutional policies that support the implementation of QA in learner support areas. This study disclosed that STOU, ABOU, and UT have shared similarities in many respects. They have developed QA manuals as their important documents to guide the implementation of QA programs in different components. These QA manuals covering all aspects of quality, including universities' profiles, QA policies, quality procedures, and quality indicators in different quality areas. These institutional QA policies and guidelines provided a fundamental platform for the universities' quality direction and implementation.

At STOU, ABOU, and UT, it was found that the university's policies in teaching learning provisions and support services or student development activities (at STOU) have been used as guidance for QA in learner support areas. The quality policies in support services cover different QA policies to support educational services including providing information, counselling, and student activities. Meanwhile, the university policies in teaching and learning provisions include diverse QA policies to support students' learning involving their blended learning pedagogy with printed materials as their major instructional mode.

3. The implementation of QA in learner support areas  
Findings of this comparative study indicated that the implementation of QA in learner support areas has been significantly supported by the universities' internal environment. QA management systems and human resources have been recognized

as major factors that contributed to the implementation of the programs. Particular attention has been reported that the universities' quality assurance centers and learning centers distributed all over the countries have played strategic roles in supporting the implementation of QA in learner support areas. The QA management system, in relation to QA in learner support areas, is about coherent management activities involving the universities' QA centers, learning centers and other sub-systems developed. The system is designed to ensure that the institutional policies that support QA in teaching learning provisions and support services were implemented. Meanwhile, human resources residing at learning centers and the universities' head offices have been regarded as strategic players to support the implementation of the QA programs. The academic and administrative staffs have been deployed in different quality areas and were responsible for their relevant activities.

STOU, ABOU, and UT have shared many similarities in implementing the broad area of QA in learner support into the diverse products and programs. Closely aligned to Holmberg's (1995) theory, these various components of learner support areas have been developed to enhance interaction and communication in order to promote the quality of student learning. Aligned to Holmberg's (1995) one-way and two-way communications, these three DTUs have been involved in two areas of learner support. First, teaching learning dimensions included various academic aspects, ranging from printed materials to multimedia learning resources. Second, support service dimensions encompassed all support services to promote students' success.

This research disclosed that, in some ways, these three DTUs have moved on Holmberg's (1995; 2007) core values of the teaching learning conversation. Developing personal relationships, maintaining friendly conversation, and being responsive to provide help for students have been identified as strategic values to encourage students' learning and to promote students' success.

The findings of this study disclosed that there is a relationship between the implementation of QA in learner support areas and the universities' external environments. Among other things, five external environments have been identified

as important and support the implementation of QA programs. These five environments include local culture, educational technology, external QA agencies, government, and students.

4. The results of this comparative study disclosed that the STOU and UT have encountered serious challenges with regard to the QA assessment by their government. It was disclosed that some QA indicators established as national standards did not correspond well to distance education contexts. The national QA standards were developed based on the concept and practices of conventional systems. In addition to these challenges, STOU, ABOU, and UT also faced another major challenge: the implementation of QA was perceived as being too demanding and time consuming. The application of QA in learner support has generated considerable administrative work. Conducting internal quality assessment and inviting different external quality agencies have created excessive administrative work for staff.

The three DTUs have shared similarities in terms of using of their current QA processes to inform practices. Implementing QA in learner support areas required STOU, ABOU, and UT to continuously conduct QA assessment for quality improvement. Quality assessments were conducted through self-assessment supported by external quality audits. Whilst STOU used online SAR to address the level of quality achievement for every quality indicator, ABOU and UT have employed trained and certified staff to conduct internal quality audits. The results of the current QA practices produced by internal quality auditors and external parties have been regarded as important feedback to inform practices. It was reported that the ISO QA model has been regarded as a dominant model for ABOU and UT for external quality audits. For the purpose of self-assessment, however, COL's QA framework was a leading model at ABOU; meanwhile, UT has moved and adopted AAOU's QA scenario as its road to quality.

Based on these results of QA assessment, various actions have been taken to ensure continuous improvement. These actions include reviewing QA manuals in order to meet current developments and conducting training for human resource

development. In addition, various actions have also been taken to improve the quality of learner support services, such as revising learning materials based on students' feedback and tutors' comments, developing new modes of learning materials, and conducting new teaching delivery services through the use of media technology. Supported by modern technology, STOU, ABOU, and UT as well as their students have gained substantial benefits. QA efforts increase student and tutor interaction, and enhance collaborative learning.

The foregoing discussion in this chapter has laid down evidence that QA has been regarded as a pivotal component for teaching and learning provisions and support services at the three DTUs involved in this study. The next chapter will present the conclusions of this research. The implications and contributions of this comparative study for STOU, ABOU, and UT will also be presented in accordance with the limitations of this study.

## **Chapter 6.**

# **Conclusions and Implications**

## **Introduction**

This comparative study has been designed with the principal aim of exploring and understanding the issues regarding the implementation of QA in DTUs. Three universities, which operate in Southeast Asia—STOU Thailand, ABOU Malaysia, and UT Indonesia—have been invited to participate in this research. With respect to the diverse dimensions of QA in distance education, this research has concentrated on the development and implementation of QA in learner support areas by highlighting the contrasts and similarities among these three institutions in adopting QA programs. The comparative analysis particularly addresses five key topics including the perspectives on quality and QA, the universities' policies that support the implementation of QA in learner support areas, the implementation of QA in learner support areas, the challenges encountered in implementing the QA programs, and how the results of the current QA processes have been used to inform practices. To investigate these issues, the QA policy instruments from the Universities' QA manuals and the interview data involving a number of key informants (KIs) from different clusters have been combined to illuminate the analysis and enhance understanding of the QA phenomena in these DTUs.

This final chapter presents four important parts of this study. The first section focuses on the findings in order to provide a final picture and useful lessons from the contexts on how QA has been interpreted and implemented differently in diverse educational settings. The second section discusses the implications and contribution of this research to both policy and practice with some limitations of the research that are highlighted in the third section. Finally, the last section focuses on providing some recommendations for further research.

## Conclusions

From the results discussed in chapters four and five, a number of conclusions can be drawn about the adoption of QA in the three DTUs.

1. The results of this research provide some understandings about the diverse perspectives of quality of education specifically in DTUs. For example, quality has been defined as maintaining academic standards, achieving student satisfaction, (Sallis, 2002), and conforming to specifications and purpose (Green, 1994). Further, quality in higher education has also been identified as exceptional and getting value for the money (Harvey and Green, 1993). Different interview subjects involved in this study also reacted in diverse ways in expressing their personal understanding of quality. Some looked at quality as fitting the customers' needs and satisfaction (STOU-FD-03; ABOU-PC-01; UT-PC-01). Others commented on the quality as being in compliance with the external quality standards (UT-QC-02; STOU-AC-04). These different perspectives of quality indicate that defining quality in education specifically in DTUs is very challenging and can be discussed from different points of views.

Despite the diverse perspectives of quality in general, this research confirms that there are shared commonalities among interview subjects in the three DTUS in looking at quality in learner support areas. This comparative study discloses that quality has been expressed differently by interview subjects emphasising the importance of standards or criteria of the universities' educational products and services for their customers, particularly students who have been regarded as their major stakeholder. Respondents at these three DTUs have shared similar insights in articulating quality in learner support areas in which many of them have addressed the importance of meeting "quality criteria" of their products or services for their students. What constitutes acceptable quality criteria for educational products and services is debatable as quality criteria is a dynamic concept and there is always interpretation in context. However, this perspective of quality provides a basic underlying structure in the search for comprehending the meaning of quality and it appreciates the basic importance of products and services.

With regard to these diverse participants' perspectives of quality, it is important to note that the different perspectives of quality represent the university's multiple perspectives of quality, as the people being involved in this study are representation of the university. It is to say that the diverse responses are taken as representations of the universities' perspectives on quality, in particular because the researcher does not have his own control to select key respondents. All respondents involved in this research are determined by the universities to represent them in the implementation of QA in learner support areas.

2. Closely related to the perspective of quality, quality assurance has been generally regarded by interview subjects at the three DTUs as 'quality guidelines' or 'internal mechanisms' that must be followed to ensure 'expected outcomes' or 'designated quality criteria'. Simply said, QA is more about putting quality into action. This perspective emphasizes two important elements of QA, process and output (Nicholson, 2011). In this perspective, respondents address the importance of internal mechanisms to guide the processes in different quality areas. Quality guidelines are regarded as crucial elements to generate a quality-oriented work aligned with the university's existing systems. In addition, this perspective also reflects the basic importance of outputs that meet their designated quality criteria in order to satisfy students. In regard to QA in learner support areas, these processes and outputs may refer to internal mechanisms in performing diverse academic services such as F2F sessions and online learning services. As these DTUs were heavily involved in employing self-managed learning, the quality of the outputs was also attached to their printed-based learning materials as major tools for student learning.

It was disclosed that QA policies at the three DTUs have been supplemented by different quality guidelines. While STOU has developed general quality guidelines to implement its QA policies, ABOU and UT have similarities in adopting standard operating procedures (SOPs) to carry out QA programs in learner support areas. These SOPs cover all information on how specific quality areas must be implemented. The use of SOPs may benefit these universities by for example maintaining the consistency of the management processes. However, there is a

debate surrounding the practice of SOPs that may also risk the universities' rigorous quality systems in terms of teaching and learning provisions. It is argued that quality guidelines provide clear processes to be consistently implemented to ensure the achievement of expected outcomes. However, this current practice will lead universities to disempower faculty and tutors in academic autonomy, and hamper the encouragement of innovative instruction. Therefore, the rigid implementation of quality guidelines in DTUs, especially in learner support areas, is contentious issue.

With regard to this problematic nature of adopting SOPs in DTUs, this study disclosed that there is no specific evidence being reported that the use of SOPs hampered and disempowered faculty in their innovative teaching and academic autonomy. While faculty report that QA is time consuming and demanding, they appear to maintain innovative teaching and academic autonomy. In line with the implementation of their quality program, faculty member support rigorous interaction through different activities in the class such as inviting students' opinion relating to their working experience, creating discussion forum dealing with students' problems in learning, and managing online learning forum to enhance interaction and communication (STOU-AS-04; ABOU-AS-04-UT-AS-07). The implementation of QA in learner support areas has enhanced faculty to learn and practice new teaching strategies and communication skills (ABOU-AS-04) to support student success. The use of QA program in learner support areas has also headed faculty to practice current modes of teaching using such as web board and D4L (STOU-AS-04), Moodle (UT-AS-07), and myVLE (ABOU-AS-04).

3. This comparative study confirms that the three DTUs shared similarities in developing and implementing QA in learner support areas. It was disclosed that 'language' has been regarded as a strategic issue in the implementation of teaching and learning provisions and support services. In a more general level, it can be said that the implementation of QA in learner support areas in these three DTUs corresponds to their local context. Despite the adoption of international QA frameworks, these universities' QA policies and their implementation are deeply embedded in their local and national cultures. The quality of academic services reflects the university's objectives to provide equity of access and to respond to the

diversity of their students' background. To reach these expectations, the development of academic services has been designed to be relevant and meaningful for all students so that they can engage in learning. It was reported by most of KIs that language used for instruction has been identified as a critical aspect in encouraging students in productive and meaningful learning.

4. The results of this research also provide some understanding about the government's role in controlling the quality of DTUs in order to meet the national policy objectives. It is evident that government has a strong regulatory control on quality in the form of accreditation. With regard to the role of government in quality assessment, ABOU is in a better position because MQA has been equipped by the QA framework established for DTUs. Guidelines for good practices of DTUs have been developed and serve as guidelines for higher education institutions that offer programs through distance learning systems (MQA, 2011). This official document has been supplemented with a number of 'benchmark standards' in nine quality areas that fit accreditation and program audit purposes in distance education. In contrast, STOU and UT face more difficulties since the government QA standards do not correspond well to the nature and context of DTUs. This problem is caused by the fact that STOU and UT have been assessed by QA instruments derived for conventional university concepts. Thus, in many respects, the quality guidelines and QA indicators cannot be applied to DTUs. Currently, however, BAN-PT Indonesia supported by UT has developed a new instrument for assessing distance teaching institutions which will soon be put into practice.
  
5. This study confirmed that Holmberg's interaction and communication theory was useful for pointing out the practices of QA in DTUs based on series of evidence as follows. The three universities have developed academic services that Holmberg (1995) called "self-contained courses" (p. 71), as their major instruction for students' learning. These self-contained-courses, commonly called modules, are developed and reviewed regularly to maintain and enhance their quality. Corresponding with Holmberg's ideas about two-way traffic communication, these universities also have advanced to facilitate real communication among tutors, counsellors, and students through different channels such as F2F tutorial sessions. The current advancement

of educational technology has also enhanced the quality of real communication among teaching-learning participants. The use of e-mail, telephone, video conferences, and Webinars has become common practice that support Holmberg's (2011) current work—teaching-learning conversations. The advancement and use of computer-mediated communication has gradually revolutionized the new practice of distance education in the three universities

The practice of QA in support services developed at the three DTUs have also addressed the importance of being responsive to provide help for students' problems and inquires. It was reported by some interview subjects that tutors and administrative staff in the three DTUs are concerned with providing help in a timely and effective manner in order to encourage students' learning and support their progress. Being responsive to students' inquiries and problems in timely and effective ways might be regarded as a strategic value in serving distance learners. In handling students' complaints, the universities assign their front line staff to take time to listen or to read students' concerns and ask questions to understand the problems, mostly followed by checking student databases for more student information. All front line staff, supported by other relevant people from within or other divisions, have the capacity to diagnose and define the students' problems. Further, frontline staff share this information with relevant units and inform the students of the time estimated for a response. The use of current e-CRM application has allowed ABOU and UT to provide a timely and effective response.

6. This study further disclosed that the adoption of QA programs in the DTUs, particularly in STOU and UT, presents additional challenges for staff and management. The implementation of QA involving internal and external quality auditors has been perceived as being too demanding. Some staff at ABOU have reacted unfavourably, misunderstood, and prefer to retain their timeworn, conventional work styles. At STOU and UT, the QA application generates additional worked for academic and administrative staff particularly in terms of documentation activities. Developing and reviewing QA manuals, including QA policies and quality guidelines, continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure QA implementation are among other activities that must be carried out. Top managers, academic and

administrative staff involved in this study confirmed and shared similarities that the implementation of QA in learner support areas requires strong commitment, effort, and active participation from all staff and top managers. It was reported by KIs at the three DTUs that quality was responsibility of everyone; all staff must undertake their roles responsibly and contribute to the QA processes.

7. These universities also have similarities; the adoption of QA has deeply involved STOU, ABOU, and UT in conducting internal and external quality audits to assess their current QA practices. The current QA processes at these universities have been used to inform practices in different QA areas to ensure that they continuously transform themselves and perform better. These universities employed two major quality audits: self-assessment (internal quality audit) and external quality audits to facilitate continuous quality improvement. These universities shared similar approaches in conducting quality self-assessments; they carried out regular internal quality audit through different forms of monitoring, evaluation programs, and management review meetings. For the purpose of these self-assessment programs, however, these universities have moved in different directions. STOU employed its own self-assessment instrument, ABOU has employed the QA format proposed by COL (2009), and UT adopted and contextualized the QA model established by AAOU. In order to validate their internal quality audits, these three DTUs have also shared similarities to involving external QA professional agencies as part of their QA programs. While STOU is in its initial stage of adopting the Baldrige Award, ISO QA standard has been regarded as a leading model at ABOU and UT for external quality audit purposes. Additionally, UT has also voluntarily invited ICDE-ISA to assess its universal standard in practicing distance education systems, including its student support areas. The adoption of quality frameworks from AAOU and COL, Baldrige Quality Award, ISO, and ICDE-ISA at these DTUs can be regarded as an exemplar of the implementation of QA agendas in DTUs specifically in the Southeast Asia context.

## Implications and contributions

Based on the findings and the limitations of this research, some implications and contributions to the policy, practice, and theory are as follows:

### 1. Implications for policy

Acknowledging that physical learning materials, specifically printed learning materials have been regarded as major sources of study, the institutional policy for quality course design then becomes very important for facilitating simulated interaction. In this respect, the quality of students' learning will rely on self-contained textbooks and their study-guides. Therefore, the quality criteria for course design may be seen as a vital point for the three DTUs in providing teaching and learning provisions. Careful planning and development of the course design not only makes teaching easier and more enjoyable, it also facilitates student learning that, in turn, leads to student success (Mellon, 2010). Additionally, to attain the quality of learning materials, it may also be useful for the DTUs to 'pilot' course materials to a group of students before sending them to all target audiences for two reasons. The first is to detect various weaknesses such as clarity of the content, material appearance, and printing quality. The second is to review all necessary weaknesses to reach a better quality of course materials. The QA procedures may be set up to review all components of the courses and revise them based on continuing feedback.

Recognizing the strategic role of the government in the implementation of QA program, it seems to be important for the alignment between institutional QA, particularly at STOU and UT, and government QA bodies to achieve a balance perspective of quality and QA in distance education institutions. This alignment is important for setting up key performance indicators (KPIs) or or best practices in learner support areas that fit with the distance education system.

From this comparative study, it was recognized that DTUs' learning centers played key roles in providing QA in learner support areas at the local level. Learning centers are the real place for distance learners to access F2F interaction with instructors and other students. Therefore, it is valuable to broaden QA policies that promote positive learning environments in all learning centers such as establishing these learning

centres near students' homes or workplaces, and encouraging students to develop study groups. It was reported that at STOU, ABOU, and UT, F2F tutorial sessions were poorly attended for various reasons. One of the most frequently mentioned reasons by students is that the locations of tutorials were considered too far from where the students live. Some of them claim that they had to travel for at least a day to be able to attend tutorials. With regards to the students demand for F2F tutorials on the one hand and respecting the need to improve academic quality on the other, it seems beneficial to STOU, ABOU, and UT to establish and manage learning centers in such a way as to provide a positive learning environment for student growth. To address this concern, DTU's regional centers may invite students into a discussion about developing and designing learning centers. This forum seems to be advantageous to ensure that students have a space for their own voices in decision making to create a positive learning environment based on their perspectives and needs.

## 2. Contributions to practice

The different reactions of KIs to the different perspectives of quality at the three DTUs provide some understandings that these three DTUs need to develop formal and working definitions of quality and quality assurance. Along with the problematic nature of defining quality, the perspectives and practices of QA also lack a universal definition. Learning from these diverse perspectives of quality and QA, DTUs may reformulate their quality and QA frameworks in such a way to balance the perspectives of their key stakeholders. It is presumed that agreed-upon working definitions of quality and any methodology for QA has to balance the different interests of stakeholders in order to achieve a common ground on the meaning of educational quality. It is also an implication for the DTUs to understand that when discussing quality, it is not only a question of setting quality criteria or standards but also very much an issue of who defines them on the basis of individual interests (Martin & Stella, 2007). This is a strategic challenge for ODL universities: how to integrate and accommodate those different perspectives of quality in order to make the definition and standards acceptable throughout the system. The institutional definition of quality must be explicitly stated in QA manuals to understand and measure their educational products or services. This is strategically important in

order to provide a clear direction and understanding of educational quality for all people.

The university's definition of quality may be shared and disseminated through existing communication channels. As quality programs are everyone's responsibility, it seems to be important for all staff members involved in the QA programs to have a clear understanding of their roles; they have to clearly know how to begin working with the program and how to contribute. It is fair enough to recommend that QA programs especially in learner support areas may be regarded as strategic and professional issues that require all academic staff and administrators working both at the universities' head offices and regional offices to fully commit to their roles. The adoption of QA in learner support areas requires the staff's total devotion to their responsibilities. The staff commitment and the role of leadership in implementing QA may be seen as critical parts not only for maintaining the universities' current competitive advantage but also for the universities' future direction. As an open system, the three universities interact with general and specific environments including their distance learners as their major clients. This comparative study discloses that the implementation of QA in learner support areas relates to the different external environments. Therefore, it seems valuable to invite all key stakeholders to reach an effective and acceptable balance of perspectives on QA programs. The three universities may find and obtain their stakeholders' interests and quality standards with regard to quality of education, interpret them and put them in the system. The universities require information about quality to help them benchmark and market their educational programs. Governments and other external bodies need information to assist with funding, policy development and accountability. For these reasons, QA has become an important part of the framework of many distance education providers. With regard to the current problems (the government's QA guidelines do not correspond well to the context of distance education institutions), it might be important for these universities, specifically STOU and UT, to be equally involved in developing a grand design of QA frameworks that represent a balance of interests and fit the nature of a distance education system. As the QA assessment of these DTUs is required by law, the initial step in establishing QA guidelines and standards based on the concept and

practice of distance education must be taken in order to reach a consensus on the meaning of educational quality and QA standards.

The implementation of QA is highly supported by internal factors, specifically human resources. Therefore, it seems useful to involve academic staff members (including non-permanent staff such as tutors and course developers) and administrators in the university's quality agenda. The findings of this research confirm that academic staff members have become strategic players in learner support areas. Teaching-material developers hold much responsibility for student learning. This, in turn, leads to the assumption that high quality teaching will have a significant contribution to high quality student learning. Considering the strategic roles of faculty members in performing academic services, it is important to integrate faculty's interests in the QA programs so that they have a clear understanding about the importance of the QA programs. The DTUs may achieve quality of learner support services and a sustained competitive advantage through faculty members. Faculty are a source of quality in teaching and learning provisions when their instructional skills, knowledge, and abilities are varied and can support the QA programs.

An addition to the involvement of academic staff, it is recognized that the implementation of learner support areas is also supported by the significant role of administrators in their head offices and especially at regional offices. They have much responsibility for the success or failure of the system. In integrating QA in existing organizational structures, there is no doubt that administrators will have their own ideas of how the DTUs should be defined and embody quality within the whole university system. Administrators are the front-line staff who are heavily involved in handling students' complaints, inquiries, and compliments. Thus, considering administrators' needs and interests in developing QA systems may be seen as an essential part. Administrative staff may help the DTUs achieve consensus in implementing and maintaining quality. The administrative staff at all management levels may provide the best support for implementing quality culture without obstructing their acceptance of a QA program. By getting involved in developing quality guidelines, administrative staff will understand how the work flows from the beginning to the end. They also may understand the interrelationship among units or individual tasks within the QA system. Perhaps from the beginning, the DTUs should

allow all administrative staff to be involved in vigorous discussion to achieve a common perception of quality as well as standards and procedures to achieve such quality. The process of sharing ideas and feelings around a quality program is important for all administrative staff before getting involved in the implementation of the QA programs.

Recognizing that the implementation of self-assessment and external quality audits generate burdensome of documentations and other administrative works for staff and particularly faculty (STOU-AS-04; UT-LC-09), it seems important for the three DTUs to map out and get more resources to implement QA programs. Getting more resources specifically human resources seem to be important as faculty and administrative staff at these three DTUs play central role in implementing quality programs. Getting more faculty and administrative staff can also be regarded as important contribution in order to build the DTUs' competitive advantages through the improvement of the efficiency and effectiveness of their QA programs.

## **Limitations of the Study**

This study has some limitations in addressing QA in DTUs. First, it only involves three universities that were investigated in an in-depth analysis. As a result, this comparative study cannot significantly represent the complexity of QA employed within other DTUs. In addition, the distant location of the three institutions, STOU, ABOU, and UT from the researcher's university base (SFU, Canada), also had a significant impact on the data collection. It was difficult to keep up to date with rapid changes within the institutions. Universities are always changing and renewing themselves in response to internal and external demands. QA policy soon becomes obsolete and is revised. It was impossible to spend an equal amount of time visiting the research sites at the three selected universities. However, communication with relevant people at the universities was maintained through the use of electronic mail so that up-to-date information was obtained.

Another very important limitation of this study deals with the possibility of the application of the findings to other cases. Closely aligned to the selection of the DTUs

being involved in this research, it is presumable that the findings of this study may not be applied to other DTUs since this study only involved DTUs which adopted internal and international quality standards. In this regard, STOU Thailand, ABOU Malaysia, and UT Indonesia have been identified as the only DTUs in the region that have adopted international quality scenario such as ISO, ICDE-ISA, and Baldrige Award to validate their self-assessment QA programs.

This study supports Robinson's (1995) findings based on the research and pragmatism in learner support which found that the research on learner support in DTUs was heavily contingent on local circumstances. Local customs and traditions have considerable implications for the generalizability of research findings. Robinson (1995) also revealed that models of 'good practice' for learner support developed in western institutions were not always appropriate for other countries and cultures. As this study only focus on QA program at DTUs which operate in developing countries, it seems very likely that the findings of this research are not necessarily relevant for other settings, like other DTUs in southeast Asia and beyond which have different educational and cultural contexts.

Being aware of the limitations of this research, hopefully, at the same time, the differences themselves likely reveal interesting patterns especially as to how different QA approaches are made in response to different demands within each educational, institutional, social, cultural, and political setting. Thus, there are common themes regarding problems, challenges, and more importantly unique experiences and achievements in employing the QA programs at the university level.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

1. An exploration and discussion has been made regarding the QA programs in the case of STOU Thailand, ABOU Malaysia, and UT Indonesia. On the basis of diverse findings from these three DTUs, some suggestions can be made about the direction for further investigation in this area. An investigation focusing on a specific area, such as student engagements in the QA program, would help to explain the relationships among these variables within the QA framework. The findings of such a

study would result in a better understanding of the implementation of QA in learner support areas at distance teaching institutions. In line with the fact that students at STOU, ABOU, and UT have been regarded as their major clientele, it would be valuable to study their perspectives on QA in learner support areas. Examining students' viewpoints seems to be useful in order to develop better quality of learner support areas that fit their requirements. We want to develop well-educated students whose education is meaningful to them and provides them with all the necessary skills and attitudes that will enable them to lead successful and productive lives as members of an increasingly complex Southeast Asian region and increasingly global society. Our QA efforts need to focus on all the activities and procedures that contribute toward these ends. Even more importantly, these QA efforts need to emerge from and rest on a foundation of concern for the all-round development and well-being of the students.

2. Further research needs to be conducted on how QA programs may have significant impacts on quality of teaching and learning processes. These three DTUs have employed internal and national QA standards. They have also been accredited by international QA professional bodies and received international recognition for quality excellence, this QA practices may lead these three universities to confirm the compliance of their process and output (products and services) to these QA standards rather than the improvement of their instruction to support students' success.
3. As the implementation of QA at these universities covers different areas, further exploration such as in the 'Course design and development' or 'Management, leadership, and organizational culture are needed. Research in the area of course design and development may expand our understanding as to how the DTUs establish and implement their policies in course design, consistency of course content and test/assignment, objective of the course, the use of a variety of media, learning material components, the employment of course team approach, course team training, and evaluation of courses (AAOU, 2010). Meanwhile, the further research on management, leadership, and organizational culture may enrich our understanding on how DTUs deals with the responsibility in calculating a desirable value system in all their stakeholders. The research should also focus on how the

institutions develop effective communication channels and efficient resource management and administration systems that enable the institutions to achieve their vision and missions (COL, 2009).

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## **Appendices**

## Appendix A.

### QA areas/ criteria

Institution/ Agency	QA Areas/Criteria
COL	For institution: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vision, mission, and planning</li> <li>• Management, leadership, and organizational culture</li> <li>• The learners</li> <li>• Human resource development</li> <li>• Program design and development</li> <li>• Course design and development</li> <li>• Learner support</li> <li>• Learner assessment</li> <li>• Infrastructure and learning resources</li> <li>• Research consultancy and extension services</li> </ul>
	For programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional planning and management</li> <li>• Program design and development</li> <li>• Course design and development</li> <li>• Infrastructure and learning resources</li> <li>• Learner support and progression</li> <li>• Learner assessment and evaluation</li> </ul>
AAOU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy and planning</li> <li>• Human resources</li> <li>• Internal management</li> <li>• Learners and learners' profiles</li> <li>• Program design and curriculum development</li> <li>• Course design and development</li> <li>• Learner support</li> <li>• Infrastructure, media, and learning resources</li> <li>• Learner assessment and evaluation</li> <li>• Research and community services</li> </ul>

Source: COL (2009) and AAOU (2010).

## **Appendix B.**

### **Quality Assurance Instruments**

PROJECT TITLE: QUALITY ASSURANCE IN DISTANCE TEACHING UNIVERSITIES:  
COMPARATIVE STUDY IN THAILAND, MALAYSIA, AND INDONESIA

Principal investigator: Ojat Darojat  
Senior Supervisor: Dr. Michelle Nilson Levisohn  
Co-Supervisor: Dr. David Kaufman  
Supervisor: Dr. Norm Friesen  
Supervisor: Dr. Alyssa Wise

Key informant categories:

1. The head of DTU's Quality Assurance Centre (STOU's Educational Quality assurance Coordinating Centre; ABOU's Centre for Quality Management and Research & Innovation; UT's Pusat Jaminan Kualitas)
2. Quality assurance policy contributors
3. The head of faculties or Vice Dean in Student Affairs
4. The head of DTU's regional centres (Learning centres) or Coordinator for learner support
5. Faculty (teaching providers or tutors)
6. Counselling staff

## **A. Interview Schedule for the Head of DTU's Quality Assurance Centre**

### **General question: Quality and quality assurance (QA) program**

1. What is your main area of responsibility within your university?
2. What is the nature of your university view on quality and how quality should be assured? And how this view has been reflected in your university QA program?
3. Please kindly describe the quality assurance cycle or process at your university!

### **Perspectives on quality and QA program**

4. How quality and QA have been understood at your university?
5. What are your perspectives on quality and QA if different? With regard to question #3 and # 4. [e.g. conformance to the specification, accountability, effectiveness in achieving goals, meeting students' stated or implied needs]
6. Defining quality and QA in your university may take different, sometimes conflicting, meanings depending on the understanding of various interests of different constituencies or stakeholders [Government may be more focus on efficiency and cost effectiveness whilst your institution may be more interested in learning process and outcomes]. How do you accommodate these different perspectives on quality and QA in your QA framework?

### **Institutional QA policy in learner support areas**

7. What university's QA policies do you have to ensure quality for learner support areas? Please kindly provide QA policy texts to support your statement!
8. How have the QA policies for learner support areas emerged within the institution? Do you have quality standards and standard operational procedures in place for learner support areas? Who develops the drafts? At level of committee or board is quality for learner support discussed? Do staff (teaching providers, tutors, counsellors) and students have opportunity to comments or contribute their perspectives of the drafts?
9. Who were the key players involved in the formulation of the policy requirements particularly in learner support areas? What role did they play in the policy development processes?
10. What internal and external stakeholders may have influenced the introduction of the quality policy in learner support areas? [e.g. Government, external QA bodies, students, faculty, and administrators]
11. Based on your involvement in QA program, how have the quality requirement of learner support areas been influenced by general environment [particularly local culture [e.g. language, religion, norms, values, etc.] and the current development of educational technology]? and how do you addresses these issues in your QA policies? Give your examples!
12. In what ways internal resources have impact on the development of the QA policy in learner support areas? Provide your examples! [You may focus on financial, physical, human or other resources]

### **The implementation of QA program**

13. What management systems are in place to manage your QA program in learner support areas?
14. Please briefly describe how your QA program in learner support areas correlates to other areas within your QA framework?

15. How do you develop and socialize your QA program within your university?
16. How do you apply your QA methods (models)? (e.g. accreditation, self-assessment, quality audit, or student survey)
17. What in your opinion the main characteristics of your QA model with respect to the learner support areas?
18. What was the role of the QA centre in the development and subsequent implementation of QA policy? Please share your stories how do you manage your QA program, particularly in learner support subsystem and how they relate to other subsystems?
19. Based on your experience in managing QA program within the university: are the academic, administrative, and supporting staff (if any) have adequate education and training to serve the university QA program? Please give evidence or share your stories with regard to this!

**Challenges and results in adopting QA program for learner support areas**

20. What are the main challenges faced by your institution in implementing QA program in general and quality in learner support areas in particular? How do you overcome these challenges? Please provide examples!
21. To what extent in your opinion has the university QA program led to improve quality of learner support for your university? What evidences?
22. How the results of the QA process in learner support areas are used in your institutions?
23. Based on your involvement in QA program, what suggestions could you make for future quality improvement in learner support areas?

## **B. Interview Schedule for QA Policy Contributors**

### **Perspective of quality and QA**

1. What are your main areas of responsibility within your university?
2. How in your opinion is quality and QA at your university understood?
3. What are your perspectives on quality and QA, if different? [With respect the question # 2]
4. Please kindly describe the quality assurance cycle at your university!
5. Faculty, administrators, students, government, and external QA professional bodies may have different perspectives on quality. How do you accommodate these different perspectives within your QA framework?
6. What is the overall policy of the university in terms of promoting quality of education? [Compliance to the standards? Accountability? Continuous improvement? Quality as processes, Quality as a culture, etc.].

### **Institutional QA policy**

7. What institutional policies do you have in place to assure quality in learner support areas?
8. How have these policies emerged within the institution? Who involves in the development of the draft? When does the draft become a policy?
9. The university interest in QA program appears to be very high. How and to what extent is this influenced by your internal and external stakeholders (faculty, administrators, students, government, and external QA bodies) and/or university macro environment (such as socio-cultural and the educational technology)? What examples?

### **QA implementation and results**

10. Introduction of internal QA self-assessment, national, and international enhanced quality of educational programs? Could you please comment on the impact these introduction have had in the university QA program in general and in its learner support dimension in particular?
11. What methods and systems are in place to monitor your QA program?
12. How the results of QA program have been utilised for further improvement within your QA framework (particularly in learner support areas)?

### **Specific questions of QA in learner support areas**

13. What systems are in place to implement QA program in learner support areas and how the interconnectedness between QA programs in learner support subsystem with other subsystems (e.g. human resources, internal management, and course design and development)?
14. What are the major inputs and outputs of the learner support areas within your QA program?
15. Why did the university introduce the QA policy in learner support areas? What internal factors influenced the introduction of the quality policy in your university? [e.g. administrators, faculty, tutors, and counsellors concerns for efficient and effective methods, reducing costs whilst maintaining or improving quality, students demand for better quality of learner support, etc.]
16. What external factors may have influenced the introduction of the quality policy in learner support areas? [e.g. the Government responsibility for applying

QA/accreditation to all higher education including DTUs (national) or requirements through participation in regional or international conventions such as AAOU or ICDE, etc.]

17. How was the university QA policy text in learner support areas developed? Who were the key players involved in the formulation of the policy requirements particularly in learner support? What role did they play in the policy development process?
18. What are the major obstacles in implementing QA program in learner support areas? How the university could overcome these obstacles?
19. What methods were taken to assess of the implementation of the quality program in learner support areas?
20. How the results of quality processes are used in your university?

### **C. Interview Schedule for the Head of Faculties or Vice Dean in Student Affairs**

#### **Perspectives on quality and QA**

1. What is your main responsibility within your institution with respect to QA program and managing quality in learner support in particular?
2. How quality and QA in learner support areas have been understood in your faculty?
3. What are your perspectives on quality and QA in learner support areas, if different with regard to question #2?

#### **Institutional QA policies and implementation**

4. What institutional policies do you have in place to assure quality of your learner support program? Please kindly provide QA policy texts (if possible) to support your statement!
5. What quality standards of learner support do you intend to achieve? Please show your pre-determined QA criteria, if any, as evidence.
6. In what ways your QA policies learner support areas have been influenced by your internal resources? What examples?
7. How have the quality requirement of learner support been influenced by macro environmental factors [e.g. local culture and the development of educational technology such as the use of e-learning and online learning]? What examples of specific local cultures need to be addressed in your quality program particularly in learner support areas?
8. In what ways the current developments of educational technology may contribute to your learner support services? [E.g. web based and online learning, video conference, Elluminate Live (e-Live) etc.]
9. What systems and processes are in place to implement the QA program in learner support policies?

#### **Specific questions on the implementation of learner support areas**

10. How to ensure that learner support is planned during programme development and is built into the design of the programme and course materials? What steps were taken?
11. Learner support services may take many forms such as counselling services and tutorials. What areas of learner support are you included within your QA framework?
12. Does your institution provide range of teaching delivery modes to serve different needs and interests of your students? [e.g. online tutorial, face to face tutorial, tutorial by phone, tutorial by radio and television, tutorial by mail, or others] What were the major teaching delivery activities? Why?
13. What mechanism in place to recruit tutors and counsellors? What steps were taken to train tutors and counsellors? Please share your stories dealing with this concern!
14. How do you control and monitor the implementation of your QA policy in learner support areas? What methods are employed to get feedback and assure your quality standards in learner support areas?
15. Do you have mechanisms to follow up and support learners throughout the duration of their study? What constraints are faced in applying such mechanism?

16. Within your QA framework, do you provide opportunities to your student for academic and social peer interaction with tutor, counsellors, and with other students? Why? How?
17. Within your quality scenario for learner support services, do you have mechanisms to facilitate student progression during their study process and thereafter towards gainful employment?

**Challenges and results of QA program used in the university**

18. What constraints did you face in employing quality program in learner support areas? What steps were taken to overcome these constraints? Please kindly provide examples or share your stories!
19. Do you have mechanisms for monitoring the performance of your academic staff/tutors/counsellors which informs future training program? If yes, what are they? How do they work? How the results of performance appraisal bounds to your reward system policies?
20. How the current QA program can be used for future need of continuous improvement in tutorials and counselling programs?
21. What are your current issues in implementing quality program for learner support areas?

#### **D. Interview Schedule for the Head of DTU's Regional Offices (Learning Centres) or Coordinator of Student Support**

##### **Perspective on quality and QA**

1. What is your main of responsibility within your institution?
2. How quality and QA in learner support areas within your university has been understood?
3. What are your personal perspectives on quality and QA in learner support areas must be defined? [if different with question # 2]

##### **Institutional QA policies and implementation in leaner support areas**

4. What mechanisms [standard operational procedures] are in place to manage your quality program in order to achieve your designated quality standards for learner support?
5. With regards to the different student background, do you provide a range of media within your learner support program? How do you provide and manage them?
6. Based on your involvement in quality program for leaner support areas, how local culture may have an impact on your quality program? What specific local cultures influenced the development of your QA program from learner support services?
7. How the current educational technology (such as the use of online learning) is important for your quality program in learner support services?
8. What is the major teaching delivery mode provided for your students? [e.g. online learning, face to face, and correspondence study] what steps were taken to assure the quality of your employed teaching delivery modes?
9. How do you promote autonomous and independent study for your students in QA policy?

##### **Tutorial program**

10. How do you manage tutorial program?
11. What mechanism or standard operational procedures do you have to conduct tutorial program?
12. Do you provide a variety of tutorial modes based on students' interests? If so, what are they? How to manage them?
13. How do you ensure that the tutorial modes provided are accessible by your students?

##### **Counselling program**

14. What kind of counselling services do your university provide to the students? [e.g. academic and personal counselling]
15. Do you have a specific guidelines and monitoring systems to support quality program in counselling program? If so? Who involves in developing the policy? Do counsellors and students have opportunity to comments or contribute to that policy?
16. Within your QA framework, do roles and responsibilities for students' counselling program clearly specified? If so, what are they?
17. Do you provide face to face or both synchronous and asynchronous channels for the counsellors to communicate with the learners? If so, How are they working?
18. How do you diagnose student problems to determine the individual counselling needs?

19. How do you evaluate the student learning support services?

**Benefits, challenges, and the results of the QA process in learner support used in the institutions**

20. To what extent in your opinion has the university QA program led to improve quality of learner support? What evidences?

21. What are the current challenges you face in assuring quality for learner support? (You may focus on the following issues: variety of media and the use of appropriate ICT for learner support; tutors, counsellors, administrative and technical staff; and quality mechanism or procedures, or others). What steps were taken to overcome these challenges?

22. How the results of the QA process in learner support areas are used in your institutions?

## **E. Interview Schedule for Faculty (Teaching providers or Tutors)**

### **Perspective on quality and QA**

1. What are your perspectives on quality for learner support?
2. What are your perspectives on QA in learner support areas? [e.g. a set of mechanism (standard operational procedures) to attain pre-determined requirements for learner support, continuous improvement of learner support services, or others]

### **Institutional quality policies and implementation in learner support areas**

3. What QA policies do you have to guide you in performing your daily task as teaching providers?
4. What are major inputs and outputs of your QA program in learner support areas? Please give examples!
5. How do you design program and course materials? Is learner support planned during programme development and built into the design of the programme and course materials? Why or why not? How? What evidence? Please share your stories with regard to this.
6. In regard to question #4, it was addressed by some scholars in the field that printed distance study course is basically different from text-books characterized by 'self-contained' or 'self-explanatory power' in order to support internalized conversation for distance learners. What is your opinion about this? If so, how is it implemented in your courses?
7. How do you provide on-going support for your student progression within your courses? Please provide your examples!
8. Based on your involvement in the QA program, do you provide a range of media and teaching delivery modes considering the different student learning habits? [e.g. correspondence, face to face, telephone, email, online, or others] Which are the most favourable modes on your courses? Why?
9. With respect to the current development of educational technology for DTUs, in your opinion how do online and electronic learning delivery modes can contribute to 'student-teacher interaction,' 'student-content interaction,' and student-student interaction?
10. In what ways do you provide opportunities for students (peer) interaction which empower them to share knowledge and information and develop collaborative learning?
11. Based on your experience, is it important to develop interaction and communication between students and educators in distance education context? Why or why not? Please share your stories or give examples!
12. Some argue that peer interaction and collaborative learning is important for distance students to promote meaningful and productive learning. What is your opinion about this argument? What evidence?
13. Within the existing QA program, do you have the opportunity to provide individual support to students? Does the tutor/learner ratio enable you to work with small group of students?
14. How do you provide access for your student to communicate with you and other students? How could your students reach you through various modes such as by telephone, email, online discussion, and appointment? Please share your stories with regard to this!

15. Based on your involvement and experience in tutorial program, do you think that feeling of empathy, personal relations between you and your students are important in order to promote study, pleasure, and motivation? Why? Why not? If so, how do you foster such feelings [e.g. through well-developed self-instructional material or by interaction] Please share your stories!
16. When do you conduct conversation with your students? Do you think atmosphere, language and conventions of friendly conversation favour feelings of personal relations? Why or why not?
17. Some argue that intellectual pleasure and study motivation are favourable in DTUs in preventing student attrition and to the attainment of study goals and the use of proper study processes and methods. What is your view on this context?
18. Some argue that distance education is the objectification of the teaching process that reduces the forms of shared learning, and keeps learners away from personal interactions and critical discourse. What is your opinion about this?

#### **Specific questions on online learning**

19. The University interest in quality assurance in online learning delivery mode appears to be very high among ASEAN DTUs.
  - a. Do your university have QA systems in place for your online learning program?
  - b. What in your opinion are the key factors in judging quality of your online learning?
  - c. What, in your view, teaching competencies required for offering quality of online learning?
  - d. Do you have specific guidelines for online learning programme development in order to maintain consistency?
20. What are the challenges or constraints on achieving quality in online learning?
21. What are the main criteria for evaluating your university online learning program? How can findings on QA program on online learning be applied to improve the quality of your QA framework and help to develop the culture of learning?

#### **Specific question on face-to-face tutorial**

22. Do you have specific quality guidelines (standard operational procedures) how to perform face-to-face tutorial services?
23. How important is face-to- face tutorials in motivating your students to learn or support your student success?

#### **Challenges and results of the QA program**

24. What are the main challenges in fostering tutorial program in developing interaction and communication with your students in particular? How do you overcome these challenges? Please share your stories!
25. How have the results of your QA program been used in your institution?

## **F. Interview Schedule for Counsellors**

### **Perspective on quality and QA**

1. What is your main area of responsibility within your institution?
2. What are your perspectives on quality in general and in learner support areas in particular?
3. What are your perspectives on QA in general and for learner support areas in particular?

### **The institutional QA policy and implementation in learner support areas**

4. What institutional policies do you have to assure quality of your counselling program? Who develops the policies? Do you and your students have opportunity to contribute comments? Please share your stories, if possible!
5. What systems or mechanism are in place to implement these policies?
6. What are the major inputs (internal resources) do you need to provide learner support program? And how do you transformed them into product or services for your students?
7. In what ways do you provide academic and personal counselling to the students?
8. Do you think feelings of empathy and belonging encourage student motivation to study and improve quality of learning? Why or why not?
9. Some argue that distance teaching requires a personal and emphatic rapport of students. What in your opinion about this finding and how it may or may not relevant to your context? Please share your stories!
10. Student autonomy and independence are often perceived as the major learning principles in distance education. What is your view on these?
11. In what ways do you provide support for the students' autonomy and independence? Please give me examples!
12. Distance education is often perceived as a rationalised method of providing knowledge by applying industrial principles (such as mechanisation, division of work, mass production, standardization and quality assessment. What is your perspective on this?

### **Challenges and results of the QA program**

13. What are the main challenges in developing interaction and communication with your students? How do you overcome these challenges?
14. Do you conduct regular and systemic monitoring and reporting of your quality consultation program? When? How? What examples?
15. How do you use feedback from your students for continuous improvement in QA framework in general and for counselling services in particular?
16. How the current practice of counselling program can be used for your future improvement? Please share your stories with regard to this!
17. Based on your involvement in QA program, what suggestion could you make for future improvement of consultation services in DTUs?

## Appendix C1.

### List of Codes from STOU case study

List of coding from different interview subjects				
STOU-PC-01	STOU-QC-02	STOU-FD-03-06	STOU-AS-04	STOU-CS-05
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University level</li> <li>• Department level</li> <li>• Setting QA policy &amp; monitoring implementation QA</li> <li>• Coordinate all departments in executing quality standards</li> <li>• Setting &amp; distributing QA calendar</li> <li>• Online QA MIS</li> <li>• Online monitoring for quality performance</li> <li>• Meeting the national standards</li> <li>• benchmarking for best practices in ODL</li> <li>• Internal QA focusing on process and inputs</li> <li>• External</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• QA cycle incorporating plan, do, check &amp; act</li> <li>• Developing system &amp; mechanism</li> <li>• Inviting external QA auditor</li> <li>• Disseminating information of quality</li> <li>• Plan – Do-Check- Act</li> <li>• Every unit must follow university QA policies</li> <li>• Lack of staff to support QA programs</li> <li>• Setting SOP in accordance with university's mission</li> <li>• Public's confidence</li> <li>• Setting a calendar for implementing QA in the systems</li> <li>• Developing policy requirements for</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing strategic planning to achieve QA indicators</li> <li>• Develop future planning based on the last assessment</li> <li>• Develop strategies for improvement based on previous assessment</li> <li>• Components, indicators, and standard criteria of quality</li> <li>• Performance by achievement</li> <li>• Measuring students' satisfaction regarding learner support</li> <li>• Maintaining curricula</li> <li>• Managing tutorial programs</li> <li>• Meeting the customer needs</li> <li>• Perspectives on QA\QA refers to input,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting the customer needs</li> <li>• Self-contained</li> <li>• Collaborative online learning</li> <li>• Small group discussion</li> <li>• Excessively tiring work for professors</li> <li>• Producing learnable learning materials</li> <li>• Writing textbooks</li> <li>• Producing courseware</li> <li>• Managing courses</li> <li>• Providing F2F tutorials</li> <li>• Scheduling for F2F classes</li> <li>• Every course is taught by team of tutors</li> <li>• Overload of teaching</li> <li>• Team teaching for F2F</li> <li>• Students must prepare before F2F sessions</li> <li>• Online exchange ideas among</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving quality of work based on weak areas</li> <li>• Correspondent to Government QA standards</li> <li>• Walk in counseling services are available but not a common mode</li> <li>• Phone call as major mode to support counseling program</li> <li>• Orientation</li> <li>• Provide different types of support services</li> <li>• Personal counselor program</li> <li>• Student club</li> <li>• Senior peer counselor</li> <li>• Intensive training for students</li> </ul>

<p>QA focusing on output &amp; impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual assessment for internal QA</li> <li>• Every five years assessment for external QA</li> <li>• Employing staff for QA programs</li> <li>• Annual student survey for their satisfactory level</li> <li>• Using Thai as the first language for instruction</li> <li>• Employing variety of media for study</li> <li>• Equipped by Printed learning materials for every subject</li> <li>• Audio-video learning materials</li> <li>• Broadcasting: STOU TV channel</li> <li>• Online participation for learning</li> <li>• E-Learning to facilitate online interaction</li> </ul>	<p>department levels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online self-assessment report</li> <li>• continuous improvement</li> <li>• Following top down direction</li> <li>• Following OHEC and ONESQA standards</li> <li>• Use every step of the PDCA processes</li> <li>• Organizing meetings to develop staff's understanding of QA</li> <li>• Develop planning for improvements based on QA assessment</li> <li>• QA online by OHEC</li> <li>• Required by law to undergo internal QA by OHEC</li> <li>• Required by law to invite external QA assessors by ONESQA</li> <li>• Quality assessment by ONESQA focuses on 18 KPIs</li> <li>• Quality assessment by OHEC focus on 23</li> </ul>	<p>process and output</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide tutorial sessions for difficult subjects</li> <li>• Provide a web board to support student learning</li> <li>• Provide online course guidelines for difficult subjects</li> <li>• Provide a special tutorial for students with special need</li> <li>• F2F only for selected subjects for financial reasons</li> <li>• Students must pay extra cost for attending F2F</li> <li>• Intensive tutorial for students who do not pass</li> <li>• Reviewing courses based on poor student achievement</li> <li>• Conducting feasibility study for curriculum development</li> <li>• Taking care for textbook production</li> <li>• Using A-Tutor and Moodle for e-learning</li> <li>• CD, VCD and</li> </ul>	<p>students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• F2F tutorial is not compulsory</li> <li>• QA refers to methodology to ensure expected quality</li> <li>• Using students' feedback for improving quality of teaching</li> <li>• Studying in group using T5 model</li> <li>• Adopting D4L LMS</li> <li>• Using Moodle software for teaching delivery of master degree</li> <li>• Using D4L for teaching delivery</li> <li>• Developing online group to support student learning</li> <li>• Electronic modules</li> <li>• Online assignment for Master students</li> <li>• Provide advisors at student club to support student learning</li> <li>• Information Center calls students who do not reenrollment</li> </ul>	<p>who fail their courses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management review meeting every three months</li> <li>• Building up students' capabilities and successfulness</li> <li>• Developing planning with planning division</li> <li>• Provide counseling service for students by appointment</li> <li>• Promoting orientation program via various media to achieve KPI</li> <li>• 80% of students involved in orientation have to be satisfied</li> <li>• At least 17% out of the number of new enrolments attend orientation</li> <li>• Recognizing the students' academic record and problems</li> <li>• Giving advice or</li> </ul>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopting PDCA cycle</li> <li>• Plan</li> <li>• Working based on annual quality indicators &amp; standards</li> <li>• Check</li> <li>• Act</li> <li>• SARs are produced by different faculty and departments</li> <li>• Supported by SAR card online</li> <li>• Continuous improvement based on previous quality inspection</li> <li>• Using balanced scorecard for planning &amp; monitoring</li> <li>• Developing balanced scorecard</li> <li>• Uploading KPIs &amp; targets into online balanced scorecard</li> <li>• Collecting KPIs &amp; targets from every department</li> <li>• Quarterly online report</li> <li>• SARs are produced</li> </ul>	<p>KPI</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invite ONESQA to assess quality of output</li> <li>• All universities must follow OHEC standards for internal QA</li> <li>• Internal quality audit by OHEC</li> <li>• External quality audit by ONESQA</li> <li>• University's MR is invited by OHEC to set KPIs</li> <li>• Departments</li> <li>• Supporting quality activities &amp; operations in second level</li> <li>• Following OHEC and ONESQA standards</li> <li>• Getting involved in setting quality indicators</li> <li>• Developing draft of policies and KPIs for quality assessment</li> <li>• Acting as internal QA auditor</li> <li>• Focusing on nine components of quality</li> <li>• Assess</li> </ul>	<p>CD-ROM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopting PDCA cycle</li> <li>• QA Committee meetings to develop strategies for meeting QA standards</li> <li>• Online assignments to support student success</li> <li>• Guidelines for learning material development</li> <li>• Communication channels for academic counseling</li> <li>• Remedial services to support student success</li> <li>• Provide variety of learning materials to support independence</li> <li>• Facilitating collaborative learning</li> <li>• Guidelines for conducting F2F tutorials</li> <li>• Students must evaluate instructional process for every tutorial</li> <li>• Tutor orientation for developing tutorial skills</li> <li>• Evaluation forms for evaluating tutors by</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acting as advisors at student clubs</li> <li>• Establishing student club in each province for student support</li> <li>• Be friendly with students</li> <li>• Develop personal relationship with students</li> <li>• Provide advice &amp; encouragement</li> <li>• Develop online chatting using social network</li> <li>• Develop webcasts for instructional processes</li> <li>• Printed material as major media for learning for undergraduate</li> <li>• Feeling of empathy is important for DE learners</li> <li>• Good relationship with students promotes student success</li> <li>• Never refuse students to come for help</li> <li>• Practicing empathy by provide help and encouragement</li> <li>• In DE systems faculty must be</li> </ul>	<p>response based on students' problems and need</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using PDCA cycle for every project</li> <li>• Supporting by different multimedia to provide student support</li> <li>• Student club provides personal connection to other students</li> <li>• Inviting students' feedback through e-counseling project</li> <li>• Survey for students' satisfaction level</li> <li>• Using students' feedback for better support services</li> <li>• Annually internal QA assessment</li> <li>• External QA audit is conducted once every five years</li> <li>• Each level of QA programs follow that level above</li> </ul>
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<p>by different faculty and department</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Top mgt. levels provide suggestions for future improvement</li> <li>• Overworked to produce teaching materials</li> <li>• Limited time to do research</li> <li>• Strategic planning</li> <li>• Customers</li> <li>• Human resources</li> <li>• Business results</li> <li>• Initial adoption of Malcolm Baldrige Award</li> <li>• Adopting MBNQA</li> <li>• Government sectors</li> <li>• QA refers to quality systems approach in different QA areas</li> <li>• QA policy for teaching &amp; learning</li> <li>• QA policy for art and culture</li> <li>• QA policy for art and culture</li> <li>• Adopting</li> </ul>	<p>university' QA program every five years</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ONESQA future direction of quality is not so clear</li> <li>• Focusing on 7 standards of quality</li> <li>• All higher education must follow OHEC 9 components and 23 KPIs</li> <li>• Equipped by 18 KPIs</li> <li>• Equipped by 23 KPIs</li> <li>• The current QA standards more appropriate for DE systems</li> <li>• Following OHEC and ONESQA standards</li> <li>• Lack of work commitment for QA</li> <li>• Organizing training sessions for assessors</li> <li>• Annually internal QA assessment</li> <li>• Every department is responsible for self-evaluation</li> <li>• OHEC &amp; ONESQA as key players</li> </ul>	<p>students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation forms for evaluating tutors by students</li> <li>• Providing academic counseling</li> <li>• Establishing student club in each province for student support</li> <li>• Using student feedback for promoting academic position</li> <li>• Tutor-student online interaction as a component of payment</li> <li>• Develop FAQs for student support</li> <li>• E-learning activities are compulsory for graduate students</li> <li>• Every curriculum equipped by courses for developing learning skills</li> <li>• Employing web board, email &amp; e-learning to support student learn</li> <li>• Following OHEC and ONESQA standards</li> <li>• Enhancing tutor performance</li> </ul>	<p>ready to provide help</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating friendly atmosphere with students</li> <li>• Develop personal relationship for mutual trust</li> <li>• Collaborative online learning using D4L software</li> <li>• Group assignment</li> <li>• network</li> <li>• Employing course team for developing modules</li> <li>• Revising content of textbooks based on student survey</li> <li>• First language allow people to express their thinking more deep</li> <li>• Overworked to produce teaching materials</li> <li>• Wasting time for documentation</li> <li>• Overwhelmed work leads to limited time for personal development</li> <li>• Evaluating tutorial services based on students' feedback</li> <li>• Student survey organized by Office of</li> </ul>	<p>it</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual meeting involving all regional centers</li> <li>• Quality is up to the expectations of government and educational</li> <li>• Group counseling as major student support for measuring KPIs</li> </ul>
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MBNQA • Online self-assessment report	for QA policy requirements • Quality involves everybody and works together • Every university must meet KPI of cultural aspects set by OHEC • Following OHEC and ONESQA standards	based on evaluation by learners	Educational Services • Improving quality of courses based on student achievement • Team teaching for F2F • Flexible access for helping students • Making sure that students can learn by themselves	
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List of Codes from STOU's QA Manual

Source of data	List of codes
STOU's Quality Assurance Manual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systems and mechanism for QA</li> <li>• Promote various quality committees to support quality of education</li> <li>• Invite external parties to take part in the university quality</li> <li>• Involve faculty, staff &amp; students to participate in QA systems</li> <li>• Dissemination of QA activities</li> <li>• Emphasis on students</li> <li>• Faculty &amp; staff must develop appropriate teaching strategies</li> <li>• Teaching and learning must be supported by quality staff</li> <li>• Curriculum is appropriate and flexible</li> <li>• Addressing individual differences of students</li> <li>• QA for all courses must focus on student learning</li> <li>• Promote student self-learning skills</li> <li>• Evaluation of learning for instructional improvement</li> <li>• Learners' evaluation for quality of teaching and support services</li> <li>• Provide academic support to graduate students</li> <li>• Provide useful information for students</li> <li>• Build activities for professional experience purposes</li> <li>• Provide services, guidance &amp; counseling both academic &amp; life</li> <li>• Provide useful information for alumni</li> <li>• Develop activities that promote student learning</li> </ul>

## Appendix C2.

### List of Codes, categories, and emergent themes from STOU case study

RQ1: How do key people involved in the QA programs in learner support areas at STOU conceive of quality in general?

- In what ways do they perceive quality in learner support areas?
- Given their understanding of quality, how do they conceive of QA?

Themes	Categories	Codes	F
Quality refers to the meeting customers' needs and corresponds to the Government QA standards	General perspectives of quality	Quality is up to the expectations of government and educational	1
		Public's confidence	1
		Correspondent to Government QA standards	2
		Meet the criteria set by the government (OHEC & ONESQA)	1
		quality involves everybody and works together	1
		Meeting the customer needs	2
		Setting SOP in accordance with university's mission	1
Quality of learning materials and instructional delivery to support student success	Specific perspectives of quality in learner support areas	Provide support learning activities for student learning	1
		Making sure that students can learn by themselves	1
		Contents of learning materials must be correct	1
		Building up students' capabilities and successfulness	1
		Producing learnable learning materials	1
QA as a system involving all people in different activities to ensure expected quality	Perspectives on QA	QA refers to input, process and output	1
		QA refers to quality systems approach in different quality areas	1
		QA refers to methodology to ensure expected quality	1
		The way of working to succeed at QA	1
		QA cycle incorporating plan, do, check and act	1

RQ2: What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas at STOU?

Themes	Categories	Codes	F
QA manual	University	QA policy for management systems	1

serves as the guide for implementation	five dimensions of QA	QA policy for art and culture	1
		QA policy for social academic contribution	1
		QA policy for research & development	1
		QA policy for teaching & learning	1
	University main policies to support QA	Systems and mechanism for QA	1
		Promote various quality committees to support quality of education	1
		Invite external parties to take part in the university quality	1
		Dissemination of QA activities	1
		Involve faculty, staff & students to participate in QA systems	1
		Univ. main policy is to meet internal & external QA standards	1
		Meeting the national standards	1
		benchmarking for best practices in ODL	1
	Institutional policies in student development activities and teaching learning provision provide guidance for QA in learner support areas	Support services	Develop activities that promote student learning
Provide useful information for alumni			1
Build activities for professional experience purposes			1
Provide useful information for students			1
Provide services, guidance & counselling both academic & life			1
At least 17% out of the number of new enrolments attend orientation			1
Teaching and learning provisions		Learners' evaluation for quality of teaching and support services	1
		Evaluation of learning for instructional improvement	1
		Promote student self-learning skills	1
		QA for all courses must focus on student learning	1
		Addressing individual differences of students	1
		Curriculum is appropriate and flexible	1
		Teaching and learning must be supported by quality staff	1
		Faculty & staff must develop appropriate teaching strategies	1
		Emphasis on students	1

RQ3: How do the key people at STOU report that QA policies in learner support areas are being implemented?

Theme	Sub-themes	Categories	Codes	F
Institution' internal	QA management	QA management	Following top down direction	2
			Each level of QA programs follow	1

environment supports the implementation of QA	level	that level above it	
		University level	1
		Faculty/Department level	3
	Educational QA Coordinating Center	Get involve in reviewing QA policy and standards set by OHEC	1
		Organizing training sessions for assessors	1
		Organising training sessions to conduct SAR	1
		Taking care of the University's QA systems	1
		Providing various accesses for people to know University's QA s	1
		Organising meetings to develop staff's understanding of QA	1
		Setting & distributing QA calendar	1
		Coordinate all departments in executing quality standards	1
		Summarising results of annually QA practices for assessor	1
		Setting a calendar for implementing QA in the systems	1
		Planning Division	Uploading KPIs and targets into online balanced scorecard
	Collecting KPIs and targets from every department		1
	Developing balanced scorecard		1
	Faculty/ Schools	Conducting feasibility study for curriculum development	1
		Taking care for textbook production	1
		Maintaining curricula	1
		Measuring students' satisfaction regarding learner support	1
		Developing strategic planning to achieve QA indicators	1
		Supporting quality activities and operations in second level	1
		Working based on annual quality indicators and standards	1
	Office of Educational Services	Managing tutorial programs	1
		Managing event for students' annual program	1
		Responsible for KPIs in orientation and counselling & guidance	1
		Working together with Planning Division to set targets	1
		Promoting orientation program via various media to achieve KPI	1
		Join developing planning with planning division	1
		Distributing schedule to relevant parties	1

			Preparing schedule for course delivery	1
		Learning Centers	Students take 2 or 3 classes in the learning center	1
			Annual meeting involving all regional centers	1
			Producing and sending a report to HO	1
			Looking after student club	1
			Provide counselling service for students by appointment	1
			Distributing teaching materials	1
			Providing F2F tutorials	1
			PDCA processes	Adopting PDCA cycle
		Using PDCA cycle for every project		1
		Use every step of the PDCA processes		1
		Continuous improvement		2
		Plan		2
		Do		1
		Check		3
		Act		2
		Main duties for adopting QA systems	Developing system and mechanism	1
			Promoting and supporting QA systems in faculty/departments	1
			Inviting external QA agencies to support and improve QA systems	1
			Disseminating information of quality	1
		QA procedures and guidelines	Using meeting reports and guidelines for executing strategy	1
			Guidelines for learning material development	1
			Guidelines for conducting F2F tutorials	1
			Every unit must follow university QA policies	1
	Human resources	Academic staff	Writing textbooks	1
			Producing courseware	1
			Acting as advisors at student clubs	1
			Preparing teaching materials for students	1
			Distributing electronic file of teaching materials online	1
			Sharing teaching experience with other professors	1
			Managing courses	1
			Developing planning document for teaching delivery	1
			Providing academic counselling	1
			Getting involve in executing quality indicators	1
			Involve in setting annual plan for	1

			learner support areas	
			Instructors as committee members of QA	1
		Administrative staff	Associate dean as committee members of QA	1
			Secretary group collects information to support QA	1
			The Dean as the chair of QA Committee	2
			The dean act as head of QA committee	1
			Developing policy requirements for department levels	1
			Setting QA policy and monitoring implementation QA	1
			Employing staff for QA programs	1
			Getting involved in setting quality indicators	1
			University's MR is invited by OHEC to set KPIs	1
			The application of QA in learner support areas is implemented in various teaching learning and provisions and student development activities	Teaching and learning provisions
Tutor orientation for developing tutorial skills	1			
Orientation session for external F2F tutors	1			
Tutor recruitment	2			
Intensive F2F seminars to improve learners' skills in different	1			
Facilitating collaborative learning	1			
F2F seminar for graduate students	3			
Normal tutorials for general students	1			
Intensive tutorial for students who do not pass	1			
Intensive tutorials under the Office of Academic Affairs	1			
Normal tutorials under Office of Educational Services	1			
Generally tutorial sessions is free	1			
Students must pay extra cost for attending F2F	1			
F2F only for selected subjects for financial reasons	1			
Provide tutorial sessions for difficult subjects	1			
Tutor observes students' behaviour during F2F sessions	1			
Duration for each class tutorial	1			
Course team's meeting for course delivery	1			
Team teaching for F2F	2			
Scheduling for F2F classes	2			

			Instructional strategy for F2F	1		
			Number of F2F meetings	1		
			Every course is taught by team of tutors	1		
		Self-managed learning			CD, VCD and CD-ROM	1
					Audio-video learning materials	1
					Employing course team for developing modules	1
					Reviewing courses based on poor student achievement	1
					Printed material as major media for learning for undergraduate	2
					Equipped by Printed learning materials for every subject	1
					Broadcasting: STOU television channel	1
					Every curriculum equipped by courses for developing learning skills	1
		Online learning			Developing online group to support student learning	1
					Tutor-student online interaction as a component of rewards	2
					Online assignments to support student success	2
					Electronic seminar	1
					e-learning activities are compulsory for graduate students	1
					Provide online course guidelines for difficult subjects	1
					Provide a web board to support student learning	1
					Online as major teaching delivery for master degree	1
					Equipped by web board of the school	1
					Do not provide OL services for undergraduate students	1
					Discussing research topic with PhD students	1
					Online assignment for Master students	1
					Fully online courses	1
					Using D4L for teaching delivery	1
					Using Moodle software for teaching delivery of master degree	1
					Utilizing social network media	2
e-learning to facilitate online interaction	1					
Online exchange ideas among students	1					
Student development activities	Support services		Provide different types of support services	1		
			Counselling modes	1		

			One stop service center for student support	2
			Intensive training for students who fail their courses	1
			Senior peer counsellor	1
			Personal counsellor program	1
			Orientation	3
			Online/ e- counselling project	3
			Phone call as major mode to support counselling program	2
			Walk in counselling services are available but not a common mode	3
			Student segment based on computer literacy	1
			Online training for students' computer and Internet literacy	1
			Provide counselling services both in regional centers and HO	1
			Recognizing the students' academic record and problems	1
			Giving advice or response based on students' problems and need	1
			Recording the counselling activities	1
			Employ counselling service for students	1
			Equipped by Information Center for support services	1
			Information Center develops projects to decrease dropout rate	1
			Information Center calls students who do not reenrolment	1
			Provide a special tutorial for students with special need	1
			Communication channels for academic counselling	1
			Academic feedback concerning weaknesses of students' exam	1
			Remedial services to support student success	1
			Develop FAQs for student support	1
			Call service for student support	1
			Group counselling as major student support for measuring KPIs	1
		Student clubs	Location of student club	1
			Provide advisors at student club to support student learning	1
			Student club provides personal connection to other students	1
			Equipped by head & committee to run student clubs	1
			Encourage students to come to student club for assistance	1
			Student club develops programs	1

			every year	
			Establishing student club in each province for student support	2
The implementation of learning provisions correspond with Holmberg's interaction and communication theory	Interaction and communication	Empathy	Concern to students' problems	1
			Provide advice and encouragement	1
			Feeling of empathy is important for DE learners	1
			Practicing empathy by provide help and encouragement	1
			Never refuse students to come for help	1
			In DE systems faculty to be ready to provide help	1
		Personal relations	Professional interaction as part of curriculum	1
			Provide flexible time for student to communicate with faculty	1
			Be friendly with students	1
			Develop personal relationship with students	1
			Bridging communication between students and other faculty	1
			Allowing flexible access for students interact and communicate	1
			Allowing students to call faculty for academic counselling	1
			Develop online chatting using social network	1
			Creating friendly atmosphere with students	1
			Good relationship with students promotes student success	1
			Develop personal relationship for mutual trust	1
			Arranging academic & non-academic activities to support personal net..	1
			Develop student personal connection with Professors and other s	1
			Promoting student personal networking within their last semester	1
	Student relationship with professors and other students	1		
	Community of inquiry	Instructional processes	Small group discussion	2
			Collaborative online learning	2
			Peer group assessment	1
			Group assignment	1
		Software	Moodle	1
	A-Tutor		1	
Studying in group using T5 model	1			
Adopting D4L LMS	1			
Autonomy and	Support services to	support services for different segments of independent learners	1	

The implementation of QA in learner support areas relates to the university's external environments	independence	promote independent learning	Individual support for distance learner	1
			Self-contained materials	1
			Provide variety of learning materials to support independent learning	2
		F2F tutorials as part of autonomous & independent learning	F2F tutorial is not compulsory	1
			F2F for selected courses	2
			Students need F2F for difficult subjects	1
			Students must prepare themselves before F2F sessions	1
		Socio-cultural environment	Quality policy and standards for cultural aspects	Every university must meet KPI of cultural aspects set by OHEC
	QA policy for art and culture			1
	Language		Using Thai as the first language for instruction	1
			Foreign language skills for staff development	1
			Language and sentences used is important for students	1
			First language allow people to express their thinking more deep	1
	Educational technology		The use of technology for supporting learner support	Employing variety of media for study
Online participation for learning				1
Employing D4L LMS to support instructional processes				1
Electronic modules				1
Conducting synchronous tutorials		1		
Supporting by different multimedia to provide student support		1		
Develop webcasts for instructional processes		1		
Provide video on demand for students and general audience		1		
Using A-Tutor and Moodle for e-learning		1		
FAQs online for student support		1		
Employing web board, email & e-learning to support student learn		1		
The use of technology for supporting QA systems		online self-assessment report	2	
	Online QA MIS	1		
	Online monitoring for quality performance	1		
	QA online by OHEC	2		
External private QA agency	Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award	Adopting MBNQA	2	
		Initial adoption of Malcolm Baldrige Award	1	
		Getting the world-class standard by adopting MBNQA	1	
		Government forces public	1	

			organisations to adopt PMQA		
			MBNQA focuses on total quality management	1	
			PMQA for public/Government sectors	1	
			The Productivity Institute of Thailand for private sectors	1	
		MBNQA components	The leadership role	1	
			Strategic planning	1	
			Customers	1	
			Measurement	1	
			Human resources	1	
			Process management	1	
			Business results	1	
		Government	Government QA Bodies	OHEC & ONESQA decide & regulate QA policy	1
				Following OHEC and ONESQA standards	5
				OHEC & ONESQA as key players for QA policy requirements	1
	OHEC & ONESQA standards of quality are now more suit for DE			1	
	Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC)		Required by law to undergo internal QA by OHEC	1	
			Internal quality audit by OHEC	1	
			Invite OHEC to assess quality of input and processes	1	
			Quality assessment by OHEC focus on 23 KPI	1	
			Internal QA focussing on process and inputs	1	
			Annually internal QA assessment	2	
			Focussing on inputs and processes	3	
			All universities must follow OHEC standards for internal QA of higher	1	
			All higher education must follow OHEC 9 components and 23 KPIs	1	
			Annual assessment for internal QA	1	
			Manage QA online for every university	1	
			University operates in accordance w/ OHEC' policy & components	1	
			OHEC's quality standards (components and KPIs) are reliable	1	
			Equipped by 23 KPIs	2	
			Focusing on nine components of quality	2	
Acting as internal quality assurance auditor			1		
Office for National Education Standards	Required by law to invite external QA assessors by ONESQA	1			
	Founded by National Education Act of 1999	1			

		and QA (ONESQA)	Focussing on output	2		
			ONESQA in the name of Government assess QA every five years	2		
			External QA audit is conducted once every five years	1		
			Inviting external QA auditor	1		
			External QA focusing on output and impact	1		
			Quality assessment by ONESQA focuses on 18 KPIs	1		
			Invite ONESQA to assess quality of output	1		
			External quality audit by ONESQA	1		
			Every university must follow Thailand Quality Framework	1		
			Every five year assessment for external QA	1		
			Equipped by 18 KPIs	1		
			Focusing on output and outcome	1		
			Focusing on seven standards of quality	1		
			Adjusting quality standards every five years	1		
			ONESQA future direction of quality is not so clear and changes	1		
			Acting Government external quality assurance	1		
			Having their own framework for measuring quality	1		
			Assess university' QA program every five years	1		
			Corrective adjustment based on comments from University MR	1		
			Inviting university MR to give comments on policies and indicators	1		
			Developing draft of policies and KPIs for quality assessment	1		
			Students	Student survey	Students must evaluate instructional process for every tutorials	1
					Sending 60,000 email per month to students	1
					Inviting students' feedback through e-counselling project	1
					Annual student survey for their satisfactory level	1
					Student survey by Government	1
					Evaluation forms for evaluating tutors by students	2
Students' feedback is sent to Office of Educational Service through LC	1					
Student survey organized by Office of Educational Services	1					

		Tutors get students' feedback via Office Educational Services	1
		Encourage students to evaluate tutors freely	1
		Survey for students' satisfaction level	1

RQ4: What are the challenges that key people at STOU report they are facing in the development and implementation of QA in learner support areas?

Themes	Categories	Codes	F
QA perceive as being too demanding and time consuming	Human resources	Overload of teaching	1
		Excessively tiring work for professors	1
		Overwhelmed work leads to limited time for personal development	1
		Professors could not able produce textbooks in time	1
		Do not have enough staff to support QA programs	1
		Limited time to do research	1
		Wasting time for documentation	1
		Overworked to produce teaching materials to support student...	2
		Many people don't see the importance of QA	1
		Working lackadaisically and less responsibility	1
		Do not have people assigned for QA as major responsibility	1
		Lack of work commitment for QA	1
Government guidelines do not correspond well to DE institution	Government QA standards	Notifying Government QA bodies to change KPIs	1
		Quality indicators set by OHEC do not correspond to DE	1
		Negotiating quality indicators	1
		University accepts Government's 41 KPIs	1
		The current QA standards more appropriate for DE systems	1

RQ5: How are the results of the current QA processes in learner support areas used to inform practice at STOU?

Themes	Categories	Codes	F
Continuous quality assessment is done	Quality assessment	SARs are produced by different faculty and departments	2
		QA Committee meetings to develop strategies for meeting QA standards	1
		Performance by achievement	1
		Must refer to university components and indicators	1
		Components, indicators, and standard criteria of quality	1
		Management review meeting every three months	1
		Every department is responsible for self-	1

		evaluation	
		Using balanced scorecard for planning and monitoring	1
		Top management levels provide suggestions for future improvement	1
		Quality performance is presented three times per year	1
		Three traffic colors representing achievement of quality level	1
		Quarterly online report	1
		Supported by SAR card online	1
Various actions are taken to ensure continuous quality improvement	Continuous quality improvement in different learner support areas	Revising content of textbooks based on student survey	1
		Evaluating tutorial services based on students' feedback	1
		Using students' feedback for better support services	1
		Improving quality of work based on weak areas	1
		Develop planning for improvements based on QA assessment	1
		continuous improvement based on previous quality inspection	1
		Analysing stakeholders' feedback for better performance	1
		Improving university management system based on its weaknesses & opportunities	1
		Terminating tutors based on student evaluation	1
		Enhancing tutor performance based on evaluation by learners	3
		Using student feedback for promoting academic position	1
		Improving quality of courses based on student achievement	1
		Using students' feedback for improving quality of teaching	1
		Develop future planning based on the last assessment	1
		Develop strategies for improvement based on previous assessment	1

## Appendix D1.

### List of Codes from case study of ABOU

List of codes from interview subjects					
ABOU-PC-01	ABOU-QC-02	ABOU-FD-03	ABOU-AS-04	ABOU-CS-05	ABOU-LC-06
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attracting new students through quality</li> <li>• Public accountability</li> <li>• Having strong institutional commitment to quality</li> <li>• Developing quality control to run quality program</li> <li>• Digital Library to support student learning</li> <li>• Having strong institutional commitment to quality</li> <li>• Employing Learner centered approach</li> <li>• Addressing good quality of students in IT and writing skills</li> <li>• Equipped</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality as meeting the university's vision &amp; mission</li> <li>• Assisting the development quality procedures</li> <li>• Socializing QA to the entire university</li> <li>• Quality is collective work</li> <li>• Quality as meeting the customers' requirements</li> <li>• QA is to ensure expected performance</li> <li>• Quality refers more to administrative processes</li> <li>• SOPs addresses the link among departments as a system</li> <li>• Misunderstanding of quality in education</li> <li>• QA is to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documentation for QA purpose</li> <li>• Preventing student attrition</li> <li>• Decentralized SOPs development</li> <li>• Learning skills workshop</li> <li>• Tutor training</li> <li>• Student feedback for quality improvement</li> <li>• Weekly staff evaluation based on students' comments</li> <li>• Staff misunderstanding and QA</li> <li>• Creating mock audit before inviting external quality audit</li> <li>• Evaluating tutor's performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality refers to the fitness for purpose</li> <li>• QA is to ensure learning outcomes</li> <li>• E-Tutor community</li> <li>• Demonstrating teaching presence to direct learning processes</li> <li>• Creating cognitive presence via quality topic for discussion</li> <li>• Developing social presence in the forum</li> <li>• F2F allows students to share their problems</li> <li>• F2F generates direct students' feedback</li> <li>• Preferred learning modes for</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study orientation</li> <li>• Academic counseling</li> <li>• Examination clinics</li> <li>• LCs write &amp; report the implementation of learning support</li> <li>• Counseling session for students with low GPA</li> <li>• SOPs to ensure consistency</li> <li>• Counseling session for passive students</li> <li>• Using Internet to support online services</li> <li>• Preventing student attrition</li> <li>• Walk in services</li> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Designed modules as major</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The classroom should be comfortable for students</li> <li>• Equipped by siting capacity for convenience of learning</li> <li>• Quality as meeting the customers' requirements</li> <li>• Quality refers to the keeping up with the standards</li> <li>• Readiness for providing support services</li> <li>• Quality must be client-oriented</li> <li>• Equipped by good quality of infrastructure and Internet access</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>by processes and procedures to ensure quality in place</li> <li>• Availability of modules</li> <li>• Understanding the local condition</li> <li>• Revising learning materials</li> <li>• Conducting regular trip to enhance staff's performance</li> <li>• Focusing on enhancing the quality of learning</li> <li>• Shifting academic staff from SQ to LCs</li> <li>• Moving away from F2F to online learning</li> <li>• Benchmarking to assure quality of OL</li> <li>• Hiring local people to accommodate local culture</li> <li>• ISO is recognized standard</li> <li>• Strategic units are</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ensure a consistency</li> <li>• Using English as major instruction</li> <li>• Employing QA coordinator to develop SOPs</li> <li>• Assisting the development quality procedures</li> <li>• Providing training, briefing &amp; controlling QA programs</li> <li>• Academic quality policy must follow requirements set up by MQA</li> <li>• ABOU's QA manuals &amp; policies to be adopted by all departments</li> <li>• Scope of quality</li> <li>• Procedures of quality</li> <li>• Everyone must follow University quality policy</li> <li>• Internal quality audit to monitor the processes</li> <li>• IQRI facilitates internal audit</li> <li>• Strategic units are</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ce</li> <li>• Conducting internal audit check for QA in LCs</li> <li>• ISO is invited to helps the ABOU better</li> <li>• ABOU manual for ISO 9001: 2008</li> <li>• MQA standard qualification for teaching providers</li> <li>• Annually quality audit by SIRIM</li> <li>• Promote efficient customer service</li> <li>• F2F is not compulsory</li> <li>• HTML modules</li> <li>• Online collaborative learning</li> <li>• Online help desk</li> <li>• Developing support services based on students' feedback</li> <li>• Tutor evaluation by learners</li> <li>• Availability of eCRM</li> <li>• Handling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>calculation-based</li> <li>• Examination clinics</li> <li>• Learning skills workshop</li> <li>• Online forum</li> <li>• Program development must refer to MQA quality framework</li> <li>• Provide F2F for each course</li> <li>• Code of Practice for Internal Audit (COPIA)</li> <li>• Moderating online forum</li> <li>• Developing guidelines for eTutorial</li> <li>• Student distance from campus</li> <li>• Personal interaction in the forum</li> <li>• Interaction to support student learning</li> <li>• Self-managed learning</li> <li>• Self-managed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>source for learning</li> <li>• Asking sample students to check their satisfactory level</li> <li>• Financial support</li> <li>• Phone call services</li> <li>• Promoting quality as a culture</li> <li>• Treating students as human being</li> <li>• Learning skills workshop</li> <li>• Quality must come from management policy</li> <li>• Quality must come from everyone</li> <li>• information</li> <li>• Internal auditor for checking improvement</li> <li>• Yearly quality audit</li> <li>• Reporting monitoring results to SQ to be analyzed</li> <li>• Knowing what plans for new enrolments</li> <li>• Writing &amp;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tutorial classes are conducted on time</li> <li>• Making sure that all instruments needed for tutorial working well</li> <li>• Tutor should not leave the class without prior notice</li> <li>• Providing academic advisors to all students</li> <li>• Tutors are really committed to their classes &amp; students</li> <li>• Academic counseling</li> <li>• Making sure tutorial running according to time &amp; procedures</li> <li>• iLecture</li> <li>• Using English as major instruction</li> <li>• Translating printed materials from English to Malay</li> <li>• Counseling session for students</li> </ul>
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<p>certified by ISO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing learning support</li> <li>• Quality criteria for F2F tutors</li> <li>• Learning centers (LCs)\Availability of LCs</li> <li>• Availability of e-CRM (myVLE)</li> <li>• E-learning as important component teaching delivery in DE</li> <li>• Addressing students' needs</li> <li>• Conducting tracer studies</li> <li>• Analyzing the inputs &amp; feedback to resolve problems</li> <li>• Compete through quality</li> </ul>	<p>certified by ISO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Submit documents to the MQA for approval</li> <li>• External party for ISO certification</li> <li>• Use SIRIM – ISO 9001: 2008 Malaysian standard as guidance</li> <li>• Following MQA in developing SOPs</li> <li>• Quality involves everybody</li> <li>• University quality policy statement</li> <li>• Alumni' s feedback about their experience during study</li> <li>• Access points to Internet in remote areas</li> </ul>	<p>learners' inquiries, complaints, suggestion &amp; compliment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calling passive students</li> <li>• Reviewing module based on students' feedback</li> <li>• HTML modules</li> <li>• iLecture</li> <li>• myVLE</li> <li>• E-Tutors community</li> <li>• Friendliness</li> <li>• Mixed delivery methods</li> </ul>	<p>learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online collaborative learning</li> <li>• Posting assignment questions to participate in online forum</li> <li>• Peer interaction</li> <li>• Creating study group in social network media</li> <li>• iTutorial</li> <li>• Modules are equipped by course guide to support self-study</li> <li>• Modules in very important to support self-managed learning</li> </ul>	<p>reporting QA implementation to SIRIM every three months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuous quality improvement</li> <li>• Convenience</li> <li>• Friendliness</li> <li>• Personal touching</li> <li>• Serve with whole-hearted</li> <li>• Counseling session for passive students</li> <li>• Changing practice of DE from F2F to OL</li> <li>• Management Representative for SIRIM – ISO certification</li> <li>• Immediate response for students' complaints</li> <li>• Asking sampling students for their satisfaction</li> <li>• QA as a culture</li> <li>• Availability of eCRM</li> </ul>	<p>with low GPA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convincing student commitment to adopt distance learning system</li> <li>• Facilitating prayer room for Moslem students</li> <li>• Quality refers to tutorial, space and delivery</li> <li>• Remain closer to the students</li> <li>• Online forum</li> <li>• Quality comes from tutors</li> <li>• Managing tutorial program</li> <li>• Modules and CD to support self-managed learning</li> <li>• Using evaluation &amp; monitoring results for future improvement</li> </ul>
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The list of codes from ABOU QA Manual

Source of data	The list of codes
ABOU-Quality Assurance Manual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University quality policy statement</li> <li>• University commitment to support its quality policy</li> <li>• University main goal in promoting quality</li> <li>• The role of top management to run QA</li> <li>• Provide platform for quality of instruction in ODL</li> <li>• Offering quality of programs that meet market needs</li> <li>• Developing quality of modules</li> <li>• Adopting current infrastructure that meet ODL</li> <li>• Ensuring quality of the tutorial services</li> <li>• Philosophy supports education open to all</li> <li>• Objectives of quality program</li> <li>• Scope of quality</li> <li>• Procedures of quality</li> <li>• Departments certified by ISO</li> </ul>

## Appendix D2.

### The list of codes, categories, and emergent themes from the case study of ABOU

Research question 1: How do key people involved in the QA programs in learner support areas at the ABOU conceive of quality in general?

- In what ways do they see quality in learner support areas?
- Given their understanding of quality, how do they conceive of QA?

Theme	Categories	Codes	F	
Quality refers to the work culture involving everyone within organisation to achieve customers' requirements	Quality is work culture involving everyone	Quality is collective work	1	
		Quality involves everybody	2	
		Quality must come from everyone	3	
		Quality is not one department works	2	
		Quality as a culture	2	
		Everybody is responsible for quality	1	
	Quality is meeting customers' requirements	Quality refers to the fitness for purpose	Quality as meeting the university's vision & mission	1
			Quality as meeting the objectives	1
			Quality as meeting the customers' requirements	2
			Quality must be client-oriented	1
			Quality refers to the keeping up with the standards	1
Quality refers to the quality criteria in learner support services	Physical characteristics	The place (classroom) should be comfortable for students	2	
		Equipped by siting capacity for convenience of learning	1	
		Equipped by space for discussion	2	
		Having library for exploring additional reading	1	
		Equipped by good quality of infrastructure and Internet access	1	
		Making sure that all instruments needed for tutorial work well	1	
		Equipped by other support facilities (prayer room...)	1	
	Tutorial delivery	Tutorial classes are conducted on time	Quality refers to tutorial, space and delivery	2
			Tutor should not leave the class without prior notice	1
			Making sure tutorial running according to	1

		time & procedures	
		Tutors are really committed to their classes & students	1
		Quality comes from tutors	1
		Providing academic advisors to all students	1
		Readiness for providing support services	1
QA refers to procedures to ensure of expected outcomes	Ensuring consistency of expected outcomes	QA is to ensure learning outcomes	1
		QA is to ensure expected performance	1
		QA is to ensure a consistency	2

Research question 2: What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas at ABOU?

Theme	Categories	Codes	F
QA manual serves as the guide for implementation	University blue print for QA	University quality policy statement	2
		University main goal in promoting quality	1
		Philosophy supports education open to all	4
		Objectives of quality program	2
		Scope of quality	2
		Terms and definitions	1
	Management commitment to QA	University commitment to support its quality policy	1
		The role of top management to run QA	1
		Units/Departments certified by ISO	3
		Procedures of quality	2
	Importance of control and regulation	Every SOP must use the University' quality manual	1
		ABOU quality policy is an umbrella	1
		ABOU's QA manuals & policies to be adopted by all departments	1
		Everyone must follow University quality policy	1
	Institutional policies in teaching and learning provisions and support services serves as the guide for QA learner support areas	Quality policies for support services	Provide efficient and high quality of support services
Promoting student friendly			1
Students' feedback for quality improvement			1
Provide financial assistance			1
Organizing intellectual activities to support student learning			1
provide ongoing, friendly and quality support services			1
Provide relevant programs to support students success			1
Quality policies for teaching and learning		Provide platform for quality of instruction in ODL	1
		Ensuring quality of the tutorial services	1

	provisions	Adopting current infrastructure that meet ODL	1
		Developing quality of modules	1
		Offering quality of programs that meet market needs	1

RQ3: How do the key people at ABOU report that QA policies in learner support areas are being implemented?

Theme	Sub-themes	Categories	Codes	F
Internal environment supports the implementation of QA	Quality management and bureaucracy	Role of Institute of Quality, Research and Innovation (IQRI)	Promoting quality in all aspects	1
			Managing quality initiative	1
			Assisting the development quality procedures	3
			Socializing QA to the entire university	2
			Providing training, briefing & controlling QA programs	1
		Role of Faculty	Ensuring quality of curriculum	1
			Carrying out national and international benchmarking	1
			Setting up Board of Studies meeting	1
			Developing content (curriculum)	1
			Conducting feasibility study	1
			Submitting proposal of program development to MQA	1
			Considering learner support during learning materials dev.	1
		Role of Center for Student Management (CSM)	Calling passive students	2
			Handling learners' inquiries, complaints, suggestions & compliments	1
			Controlling all documents of learner support	1
			Addressing students' needs	1
			Giving financial support for students	2
		Role of Institute of Teaching & Learning Advancement (ITLA)	Managing learning support	1
			Recruiting tutors	1
			Tutor training	1
			Managing eTutoring	1
			Developing guidelines for eTutorial	1
			Organizing F2F tutor community	1
		Learning centers	Providing learning support	1
			Managing tutorial program	2

			Taking care of students residing in remote areas	1		
			Employing academic staff at LCs to support student learning	1		
			Availability of LCs	2		
		SOPs/ Quality procedures	SOPs to ensure consistency	1		
			Decentralised SOPs development	1		
			Every aspect of learner support must follow procedures & ...	1		
			SOP for responding email	1		
			Guidelines for eTutorials	1		
			Procedures for calling	1		
			SOPs for online learning	1		
			Guidelines for F2F tutorial	1		
			SOPs for learner service management	1		
			Interrelatedness of SOPs as a system	1		
		SOPs addresses the link among departments as a system	1			
	Human resources	Academic staff	Brainstorming involving all faculty	1		
			Faculty involvement in QA	1		
			Providing tutors & eTutors to facilitate teaching services	1		
			Employing faculty as tutor and key player in academic quality	2		
			Employing Program coordinator to manage the program	1		
		Administrative staff	Involving sub ordinary staff in discussion and decision making	1		
			Participative management	1		
			Promoting information sharing among ABOU staff	1		
			Involving staff to attend QA meeting	1		
Inviting staff for QA decision making			1			
Administrative staff involvement in QA			1			
Employing QA coordinator to develop SOPs			1			
Inviting LC director in developing SOPs & implementation			1			
Pointing MR as a document controller			1			
Involving administrative staff in QA processes and auditing			2			
The application of QA in learner			Support services	Support services areas	Awareness program/ study orientation	2
					Academic counselling	3

support areas is implemented in various teaching provisions and support services			Learning skills workshop	4
			Financial support	1
			Examination clinics	2
			Counselling session for students with low GPA	3
			Counselling session for passive students	3
		Support services deliveries	Online help desk	1
			Email for supporting individual support	2
			Availability of eCRM	4
			Communication channels	3
			Phone call services	2
			Walk in / face-to-face services	4
			Teaching and learning provisions	Self-managed learning
	Digital Library to support student learning	1		
	Modules are equipped by course guide to support self-study	1		
	Modules have links to other digital materials to support...	1		
	Availability of modules	1		
	Modules and CD to support self-managed learning	1		
	Modules in very important to support self-managed learning	1		
	F2F tutorials	Availability of tutors		2
		Number of meetings		2
		F2F serves small group discussion		1
		Time table		2
		Distributing time table to all relevant parties		1
		Identifying the tutors from existing data-based		1
		Selecting courses		1
		Provide F2F for each course		1
		Preferred learning modes for calculation-based		1
F2F generates direct students' feedback		1		
F2F allows students to share their problems		1		
One to one communication		1		
F2F benefits for DE learners		1		
Quality criteria for F2F tutors	2			
Part time tutors	1			
Building F2F tutor community	1			
Advertising for tutor recruitment	1			
Interviewing session for tutor selection	1			
Tutor training	1			

		Online learning	Moving away from F2F to online learning	1
			eTutor community	2
			Teaching materials as key factor for OL	1
			HTML modules	2
			iLecture	3
			iTutorial	3
			myVLE	2
			Benchmarking to assure quality of OL	1
			Learner-centered skills	1
			Electronic forum	1
			Teaching skills	1
			Communication skills	1
			e-learning as important component teaching delivery in DE	1
			The implementation of teaching and learning provisions correspond to Holmberg's interaction and communication theory	Interaction & communication
Bridging the distance	1			
Branding image	1			
Student distance from campus	1			
No other students to share their study problems	1			
Students living in remote areas	1			
communication removes feeling loneliness	1			
Interaction to support student learning	1			
Approaches for interaction and communication	Empathy	2		
	Flexible access	1		
	Friendliness	2		
	Convenience	1		
	Personal touching	1		
	Counsellor as a marketer	1		
	Serve with whole-hearted	1		
	Calling by name to remove personal distance	1		
	Having F2F communication to know each student	1		
	Remain closer to the students	1		
Conversation during F2F sessions	1			
Ice breaking during conversation	1			
Personal interaction in the forum	1			
Autonomy and Independence	Learning services for supporting independence	Modules are different from text book		1
		DE learner more independent compare to conventional students	1	
		Encouragement from tutors	1	

			Greater flexibility and autonomy for students to study	2	
			F2F is not compulsory	1	
			Self-managed learning supported by OL and F2F tutorial	1	
			Students learn by themselves	1	
			Self-managed learning	2	
			Designed modules as major source for learning	1	
			Guidance from lecturer to support student learning	2	
	Community of inquiry	Social presence		Online collaborative learning	2
				Developing social presence in the forum	1
				Peer interaction	1
				Creating study group in social network media	1
		Teaching presence		Demonstrating teaching presence to direct learning processes	1
		Cognitive presence		Creating cognitive presence via quality topic for discussion	1
				Posting assignment questions to participate in online forum	1
			Cooperative learning in group assignment	1	
	The implementation of QA in	Socio-cultural environment	People	Hiring local people to accommodate local culture	1
			Religion	Excluding religion from academic dimension	1
				Facilitating prayer room for Moslem students	1
			Language	Using English as major instruction	2
Translating printed materials from English to Malay				1	
Educational technology		Telephone		Employing Solidus e-care telephone systems	1
		Internet		eTutors community	1
				Online help desk	1
				Digital library to support student learning	1
				HTML modules	2
			Employing online enrolment	1	
			iLecture	2	
			Electronic forum	1	
			myVLE	2	
	Changing practice of DE from F2F to OL	1			
	Using Internet to support online services	1			

learner support areas relates to the university's external environments			Online forum	2	
	External quality agency standards	ISO MS 9001: 2008 Malaysian Standard	Yearly quality audit	1	
			All procedures are audited by ISO Panel	1	
			ABOU manual for ISO 9001: 2008	1	
			Strategic units are certified by ISO (1)	1	
			ABOU plans to get one ISO for the entire University	1	
			Annually quality audit by SIRIM	1	
			Following external quality agency when developing SOPs	1	
			Developing procedures referring to ISO 9001: 2008	1	
			Writing & reporting QA implementation to SIRIM every three months	1	
			ISO certification	1	
			Use SIRIM - ISO 9001: 2008 Malaysian standard as guidance	1	
			Management Representative for SIRIM -ISO certification	1	
			Annual quality audit by SIRIM	1	
			Strategic units are certified by ISO	1	
			ISO 9001: 2008 as guiding principle	1	
			Reasons for Adopting ISO MS 9001: 2008 Malaysian Standard	ISO is invited to helps the ABOU better	1
				Inviting external quality agency for ISO certification	1
	ISO is recognised standard	1			
	Having ISO 9001 is good to convince our claim on quality	1			
	Government	Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA)	MQA standard qualification for teaching providers	1	
			Must follow MQA to get approval	1	
			Code of Practice for Internal Audit (COPIA)	1	
			COPIA-MQA quality framework for program development	1	
			MQA Panel visits the program and provides feedback	1	
			Programs must be submitted to MQA	1	
			MQA will not allow to offer the programs without quality	1	
			Submit documents to the MQA for approval	1	
Accreditation by the regulatory body			2		

			Following MQA in developing SOPs	1
			Following Government (COPIA-MQA) in developing a program	1
			Academic quality policy must follow requirements set up by MQA	1
			Program development must refer to MQA quality framework	1
	Students	Student survey	Enquiring students' complaint, compliment and suggestion	1
			Student feedback for quality improvement	1
			Student survey at the end of every course concerning...	1
			Online tutor evaluation by learners	1
			Online form for evaluating tutors by students	1
			Providing rooms for students' contribution to University's policies	1
			Asking sampling students for their satisfaction	1
			Alumni survey	Alumni' s feedback about their experience during study
		Conducting tracer studies		1

RQ4: What are the challenges that key people at ABOU report they are facing in the development and implementation of QA in learner support areas?

Theme	Categories	Codes	F
Staff misunderstand QA	Human resources	Lack of staff understanding of QA	1
		Staff misunderstands QA	1
		Lack of knowledge in terms of psychology and counselling	1
		Misunderstanding of quality in education	2
		Working with different people to support QA	1

RQ5: How are the results of the current QA processes in learner support areas used to inform practice at ABOU?

Theme	Categories	Codes	F
Continuous quality assessment is done	Quality assessment	Weekly staff evaluation based on students' comments	1
		Using evaluation & monitoring results for future improvement	1
		Developing monitoring programs for learner support	1

		Monitoring goes on all time	1
		Conducting monitoring every morning when tutorial classes	1
		SQ staff conducts evaluation and monitoring	1
		SQ staff sits in class to assess tutors' teaching competency	1
		Reporting monitoring results to SQ	1
		Performing daily monitoring to all e-tutors	1
		SQ staff ask LCs to send their report for F2F & relevant info	1
		LCs report the implementation of learner support	1
		Developing quality control to run quality program	1
		Creating mock audit before inviting external quality audit	1
		Establishing quality committee circle	1
		IQRI facilitates internal audit	1
		Internal quality audit to monitor the processes	1
		Random LCs will be audited based on negative feedback	1
		Conducting internal audit check for QA in LCs	1
		Internal auditor for checking improvement	1
Various actions are taken to ensure continuous quality improvement	Continuous improvement in different learner support areas	Evaluating F2F tutors based on students' feedback	1
		Investigating the cancelation of class (if any)	1
		Creating backup systems based identified problems & weaknesses	1
		Developing support services based on students' feedback	1
		Immediate response for students' complaints	1
		Reviewing module based on students' feedback	1
		Advancing quality criteria based on current QA achievements	1
		Selecting area of focus for improvement based on data	1
		Maintaining and analysing data to improve quality of educ...	1
		Improving quality based on external quality audit	1
		Using students' feedback for module revision	1
		Making sure the competency and commitment of the tutors	1
		Analysing the inputs & feedback to resolve problems	1
		Revising learning materials	1

		Shifting academic staff from SQ to LCs	1
		Facing out the program with no strong demand	1
		Determining future training for ABOU staff	1
		Improving quality of tutors based on students' complaints	1
		Addressing support areas needed for helping students	1
		Quality reports allow for knowing what plans for new enrolments	1

## Appendix E1.

### The list of codes from the case study of UT

List of coding from different interview subjects					
UT-PC-01	UT-QC-02-03-04	UT-FD-05-06	UT-AS-07	UT-CS-08	UT-LC-09
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customers satisfaction</li> <li>• Meeting with auditor quality standards</li> <li>• Quality as meeting direct stakeholders' requirements</li> <li>• QA as mechanism involving internal &amp; external assessment</li> <li>• Refers to mechanism to guide process and responsibility</li> <li>• Internal &amp; external stakeholders contribute to QA</li> <li>• Decision making for QA policy</li> <li>• Driving QA system</li> <li>• Coordinating business</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrating quality criteria into one QA system</li> <li>• Documentation on problems</li> <li>• Meeting with auditor quality standards</li> <li>• Learning services that support student success</li> <li>• Public confidence</li> <li>• Quality as meeting the university's mission</li> <li>• Quality refers to continuous improvement</li> <li>• Quality refers to the keeping up with the standards</li> <li>• QA refers to designated procedures</li> <li>• Developing study program</li> <li>• Coordinating business</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting auditor quality standards</li> <li>• Meeting target quality in learner support areas</li> <li>• QA as mechanism to produce expected outcome</li> <li>• QA refers to strategy or procedures</li> <li>• Developing script for OL materials</li> <li>• Faculty involvement in QA</li> <li>• Provide academic counseling</li> <li>• Staff in ROs develop OL materials based on blue prints</li> <li>• Performing support services</li> <li>• Maintaining</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class-rooms and surrounding environment are conducive for tutorial</li> <li>• Learner support services provided are excellent</li> <li>• Learning services are organized following designated guidelines</li> <li>• Quality as meeting the users' wants</li> <li>• QA refers to designated procedures</li> <li>• F2F tutor meetings before tutorial sessions</li> <li>• Output F2F tutorials</li> <li>• Developing curriculum for new</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing F2F support services</li> <li>• Providing support services by telephone calls</li> <li>• Providing support service through online CRM</li> <li>• Receiving students' complaint</li> <li>• Providing information</li> <li>• Online CRM</li> <li>• Quality as meeting customer's expectations</li> <li>• Promptness and accuracy of support services</li> <li>• QA as guideline</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing F2F tutorial program</li> <li>• Managing lab and practicum activities</li> <li>• Providing academic counseling</li> <li>• Managing learning material distribution</li> <li>• Managing learner support at regional level</li> <li>• Quality as meeting customers' expectations</li> <li>• Meeting students' expectation</li> <li>• QA as mechanism to produce expected outcome</li> <li>• Procedures for learning support</li> <li>• Using national language support</li> </ul>

<p>processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing QA processes</li> <li>• Organizing quality initiative</li> <li>• Units for supporting the implementation of QA</li> <li>• DE providers must help students to develop their self-direction</li> <li>• Distance learners as autonomist</li> <li>• Greater flexibility and autonomy for students to study</li> <li>• Independence as foundation of DE</li> <li>• Learning materials for supporting independence learning</li> <li>• Modules are different from text book</li> <li>• Learning services for supporting independence\Student autonomy</li> </ul>	<p>processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinating internal audit</li> <li>• Maintaining documents</li> <li>• SOPs describe steps and goal</li> <li>• SOPs to ensure work standards</li> <li>• SOPs to support QA as a system</li> <li>• Independence as core value in DE</li> <li>• Reading module is compulsory</li> <li>• Academic counseling</li> <li>• Communication channels</li> <li>• Online counseling</li> <li>• Regional counselors</li> <li>• Using SMS for greetings</li> <li>• Tutor recruitment</li> <li>• Student access to online learning</li> <li>• Student access to technology</li> <li>• Provide various learner support</li> <li>• Employing Webminar</li> <li>• Online tutorials</li> <li>• Texting for</li> </ul>	<p>documents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing F2F tutorial program</li> <li>• Managing online tutorial services</li> <li>• Monitoring online services</li> <li>• Supporting learning support activities</li> <li>• people have their own relevant QA manuals</li> <li>• Academic counseling</li> <li>• Assigning staff for counseling services</li> <li>• Build teamwork for support services at faculty level</li> <li>• F2F academic counseling with faculty</li> <li>• FAQs</li> <li>• Picket for handling academic counseling</li> <li>• Orientation</li> <li>• Evaluation of tutor accreditation</li> <li>• F2F is monitored by HO staff</li> </ul>	<p>program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study programs must be approved by DGHE</li> <li>• Modules to support self-managed learning</li> <li>• Modules are designed different from common textbooks</li> <li>• motivate students to study during tutorial sessions</li> <li>• Not all students have access to Internet</li> <li>• Technology support student learning</li> <li>• Employing Moodle e-learning platform</li> <li>• Encourage students to build study group</li> <li>• Initiate collaborative learning</li> <li>• Online collaborative learning enhance student understand</li> </ul>	<p>s, rule &amp; designated way of working</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' complaint</li> <li>• Monitoring online CRM</li> <li>• Reminding relevant units to handle students' problems</li> <li>• Distributing students' problems to relevant units</li> <li>• Providing support services by telephone calls</li> <li>• Providing F2F support services</li> <li>• Student data-based for support services</li> <li>• Producing data or information for students</li> <li>• Good relationship supports mutual trust and student success</li> <li>• Providing</li> </ul>	<p>meaningful learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using ISO as guiding principles</li> <li>• Quality audit every three years</li> <li>• IT removes students' isolation</li> <li>• Technology support student learning</li> <li>• F2F as major teaching delivery modes</li> <li>• Steps taken to ensure quality of F2F tutorials</li> <li>• Various activities to support students' independence</li> <li>• Modules to support self-managed learning</li> <li>• Build Co-operation with other external parties to support F2F</li> <li>• F2F number of meetings</li> <li>• Steps taken to ensure</li> </ul>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Various learning sources to support independent learners</li> <li>• Using F2F to develop empathy &amp; relationship</li> <li>• Using F2F to facilitate empathy &amp; relationship</li> <li>• Using online forum to facilitate communication</li> <li>• IT support interaction and communication</li> <li>• The role of education is interaction and communication</li> <li>• Online forum</li> <li>• Web tutorial</li> <li>• Mixed delivery methods</li> <li>• Radio and TV programs</li> <li>• SDL support students autonomy</li> <li>• IT lead UT to adopt new policy online learning</li> </ul>	<p>greeting purposes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cut off for final examination score</li> <li>• Portfolio for ICDE</li> <li>• Focusing on DE system</li> <li>• Inviting ICDE-ISA</li> <li>• Compliance with ICDE standard</li> <li>• Accreditation for learning materials</li> <li>• Focusing on internal management</li> <li>• ISO for quality audit</li> <li>• ISO leads UT better</li> <li>• Accreditation agency assigned by Government</li> <li>• New instrument for HDE</li> <li>• Invite BAN-PT</li> <li>• Using Indonesian as the basis language</li> <li>• Student' contribution on quality policy</li> <li>• Instrument for student feedback</li> <li>• Self-evaluation</li> <li>• Self-evaluation is</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tutor training and accreditation</li> <li>• Innovative presentation</li> <li>• Guru Pintar Online</li> <li>• Moving away from F2F to online learning</li> <li>• Recruitment for online tutor</li> <li>• IT leads UT to adopt new policy on OL</li> <li>• IT support instructional processes in DE</li> <li>• IT supports online CRM</li> <li>• IT supports online forum</li> <li>• Accreditation every 4 years</li> <li>• Quality standards for learner support</li> <li>• All HE must follow DGHE regulation</li> <li>• Using national language for learning materials</li> <li>• F2F tutorials</li> </ul>	<p>ing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online forum</li> <li>• Communication can motivate students' learning</li> <li>• Developing social presence through collaborative learning</li> <li>• Small group discussion during F2F sessions</li> <li>• Keeping up students to get involve in OL</li> <li>• Developing personal relationship with empathy</li> <li>• Remaining closer to the students</li> <li>• facilitating tutorial services</li> <li>• Online learning is integrated in curriculum</li> <li>• IT promotes independent study</li> <li>• Procedures for online tutorial</li> <li>• Developing OL materials for initiating</li> </ul>	<p>excellent service to all students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide various study guides to support self-directed learning</li> <li>• Lack of access point to Internet</li> <li>• Monthly quality assessment for support services</li> <li>• Students' Inquires</li> <li>• Developing learner support activities based on quality assessment</li> <li>• LSC provides regular support service report</li> <li>• analyzing the inputs &amp; feedback for future quality improvement</li> <li>• Creating friendly and convenience to</li> </ul>	<p>students' access to learning services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing non-academic counseling services</li> <li>• Employing staff for customer service at RO level</li> <li>• QA support quality of service for learner support areas</li> <li>• Documentation</li> <li>• Overwork for supporting QA</li> <li>• Conduct continuous improvement based on previous results</li> <li>• Conduct quality assessment every 6 month at RO level</li> <li>• Regular monitoring for every F2F tutorial sessions</li> <li>• HO assigns staff for monitoring F2F tutorial program</li> <li>• Measuring</li> </ul>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accreditation agency assigned by Government</li> <li>• Must listen to DGHE</li> <li>• Local culture enrich learning materials during F2F session</li> <li>• Using national language for learning materials</li> <li>• Continuous improvement as spirit of the people involved in QA</li> </ul>	<p>an important part in QA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Starting QA using self-evaluation</li> <li>• Continuous revision of QA manuals</li> <li>• Quality improvement based on internal audit and Management overview</li> <li>• Revising module based on students' feedback</li> </ul>	<p>more popular than OL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners dependence on tutors</li> <li>• Continuous monitoring for F2F services</li> <li>• Evaluating staff performance every month</li> <li>• Reviewing tutor accreditation program</li> <li>• Taking over online tutorials by supervisor</li> </ul>	<p>online discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving competencies based on students' feedback</li> <li>• Online learning management</li> <li>• F2F is a major teaching delivery mode</li> <li>• Revising learning materials</li> </ul>	<p>support students' openness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing help to support students' success</li> <li>• Serving with whole-hearted</li> <li>• Establishing support services based on students' feedback</li> <li>• Responding students' ideas</li> </ul>	<p>students' satisfaction level every 6 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management overview meetings every 6 months</li> <li>• F2F serves peer tutoring</li> <li>• Communication is important to support student learning</li> </ul>
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List of codes from UT quality manual

Source	The list of codes
Simintas-UT 2012	Learner support are developed based on DE principals
	Learning support services is implemented based on guidance
	Monitoring tutor performance
	Ongoing monitor student progress
	Student flexible access to learning support services
	Students access to various support services
	Tutorial services are supported by accredited tutors
	Counselling services are delivered by qualified staff
	Counselling services are provided to support student success
	Monitoring and evaluation for all learner support...
	Provide counselling services
	Support services are provided to eligible students
	Philosophy supports education open to all
	Principles of quality
	Scope of QA
University background in adopting QA	

## Appendix E2.

### The list of codes, categories, and emergent themes from the case study of UT

Research question 1: How do key people involved in the QA programs in learner support areas at UT conceive of quality in general?

- In what ways do they see quality in learner support areas?
- Given their understanding of quality, how do they conceive of QA?

Theme	Categories	Codes	F
Compliance with quality audit standards and correspond to customers' expectation	General perspectives on quality	Quality as meeting the users' wants	1
		Quality as meeting direct stakeholders' requirements (students)	1
		Quality as meeting customers' (students) expectations	2
		Customers satisfaction	1
		Meeting with auditor quality standards (ISO, ICDE-ISA, BAN-PT)	3
		Public confidence	1
		Quality refers to continuous improvement	1
		Quality as meeting the university's mission	1
		Providing educational services that support student success & satisfaction	1
		Quality refers to the keeping up with the standards	1
Meeting quality criteria of learner support services	Perspectives of quality in learner support areas	Meeting students' expectation	1
		Meeting target quality in learner support areas	1
		Promptness and accuracy of support services	1
		Learning services are organised following designated guidelines	1
		Learner support services provided are excellent	1
		Modules must fulfil self-contained requirements	1
		Classrooms and surrounding environment are conducive for tutorial	1
		Tutors must be meet the requirements	1
QA as procedures or mechanism to ensure expected outcome	Perspective on QA	QA as guidelines, rule & designated way of working	1
		QA as mechanism to produce expected outcome	2
		QA refers to strategy or procedures	3
		QA refers to designated procedures	2
		QA as mechanism involving internal & external assessment	1
		QA refers to Mechanism to guide process and	1

		responsibility	
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Research question 2: What are the institutional policies that support QA in learner support areas at UT?

Theme	Categories	Codes	F
QA manual serves as the guide for implementation	University blue print for QA	Philosophy supports education open to all	1
		Scope of QA	1
		Principles of quality	1
		University background in adopting QA	1
Institutional policies in teaching and learning provisions and student support services serve as the guide for learner support areas	Quality policies for teaching and learning provisions	Student flexible access to learning support services	1
		Students access to various support services	1
		Learner support are developed based on DE principals	1
		Learning support services is implemented based on guidance	1
		Tutorial services are supported by accredited tutors	1
		Ongoing monitor student progress	1
		Monitoring tutor performance	1
	Quality policies for student support services	Monitoring and evaluation for all learner support...	1
		Provide counselling services	1
		Counselling services are delivered by qualified staff	1
		Counselling services are provided to support student success	1
		Support services are provided to eligible students	1

RQ3: How do the key people at UT report that QA policies in learner support areas are being implemented?

Theme	Sub-themes	Categories	Codes	F
Institution's internal environment supports the implementation of QA	QA system and bureaucracy	Quality Assurance Center ( <i>Pusmintas</i> )	Units for supporting the implementation of QA	1
			maintaining documents	2
			Coordinating internal audit	1
			Organising quality initiative	1
			Managing QA processes	1
			Coordinating business processes	2
		Role of Faculty	Monitoring online services	1
			Coordinating academic and non- academic services	1
			Supporting learning support activities	1
			Managing online tutorial	1

			services	
		Role of Learner Service Center	Producing data or information for students	1
			Providing F2F support services	2
			Providing support services by telephone calls	2
			Providing support service through online CRM	1
			Providing information	1
			Receiving students' complaints	1
			Distributing students' problems to relevant units	1
		Regional Office (ROs)	Providing non-academic counselling services	1
			Managing learner support at regional level	1
			Managing F2F tutorial program	2
			Managing lab and practicum activities	1
			Providing academic counseling	1
			Managing learning material distribution	1
		SOPs/ Quality procedures	SOPs to ensure work standards	1
			SOPs to support QA as a system	1
			SOPs describe steps and goal	1
			Developing various SOPs for achieving quality target	1
			Units/people have their own relevant QA manuals	1
			Procedures for online tutorial	1
			Procedures for learning support	1
	Human resources	Academic staff	Understanding UT systems	1
			Internal & external stakeholders contribute to QA	1
			Supervising and monitoring online tutorial	1
			Developing curriculum for new program	1
			Provide academic counselling	1
			Developing study program	1
			Faculty involvement in QA	1
			Facilitating tutorial services	1
			Developing script for OL materials	1
		Staff in ROs develop OL materials based on blue prints	1	
		Administrators	Decision making for QA policy	1
			Driving QA system	1
			Organising various academic and administrative activities	1
			Performing support services	1
			Providing counselling services	1

			at faculty level	
			Monitoring online CRM	1
			Reminding relevant units to handle students' problems	1
QA in learner support areas is applied in various teaching and learning provisions and support services	Teachings and learning support provisions	Self-directed learning	Provide various study guides to support self-directed learning	1
			Moving away from correspondence to collaborative learning	1
			Encourage students to build study group	1
			Various learner support are provided to support student learning	2
			Radio and TV programs	1
			Provide various learner support	1
			Mixed delivery methods	1
			Various activities to support students' independence	1
			Learner support are considered during learning materials	1
			SDL support students autonomy	1
			Modules to support self-managed learning	2
			Modules are designed different from common textbooks	1
			F2F tutorials	Tutor training and accreditation
		Tutor recruitment		1
		F2F serves peer tutoring		1
		Evaluation of tutor accreditation		1
		Monitored by HO staff		1
		F2F tutor meetings before tutorial sessions		1
		Output F2F tutorials		2
		Motivate students to study during tutorial sessions		1
		Small group discussion during F2F sessions		1
		Briefing and training before tutorial sessions		1
		F2F as major teaching delivery modes		1
		Steps taken to ensure quality of F2F tutorials		1
		Build Co-operation with other external parties to support F2F		1
		F2F number of meetings		1
		Steps taken to ensure students' access to learning services	1	
		Online learning	Online assignment must be submitted in week 3 & 5	1
			Online learning management	1
			Competencies for online tutors	1

			Keeping up students to get involve in OL	1		
			Web supplement	1		
			Moving away from F2F to online learning	1		
			Web tutorial	1		
			Student access to online learning	1		
			Student access to technology	1		
			Encourage students to be involved in OL	1		
			Increasing number of student participation rate	1		
			Tutor develop materials for initiating discussion	1		
			quality criteria for developing online materials	1		
			Encourage innovative presentation	1		
			Online forum	2		
			<i>Guru Pintar</i> Online	1		
			Recruitment for online tutor	1		
			Online learning is integrated in curriculum	1		
			Support services	Support services areas		Study skills in DE
	Students' complaints	2				
	Students' Inquires	1				
	Academic counselling	2				
	Support services deliveries				Build teamwork for support services at faculty level	1
					Picket for handling academic counselling	1
					assigning staff for counselling services	1
					Counselling services are provided both HO and RO	1
					Study orientation	1
					Employing staff for customer service at RO level	1
				Online CRM	1	
Using SMS for greetings				1		
Online counselling				2		
Regional counsellors				1		
Communication channels				1		
FAQs				1		
The implementation of teaching and learning provisions correspond to	Interaction and communication	Reasons for interaction & communication	Good relationship supports mutual trust and student success	1		
			IT support interaction and communication	1		
			The role of education is	1		

Holmberg's interaction and communication theory		interaction and communication	interaction and communication	
			Communication is important for removing student isolation	1
			Communication is needed to support student learning	1
			Communication can motivate students' learning	1
			Communication is important to support student learning	1
			Communication is needed for supporting student success	1
		Approaches	Providing good service to support student independence	1
			Providing excellent service to all students	1
			Developing personal relationship with empathy	1
			Using F2F to facilitate empathy & relationship	2
			Developing relationships through academic counselling	1
			Using online forum to facilitate communication	1
			Allowing students to call tutors anytime	1
			Using cell phone to support student service	1
			Providing various communication channels	1
			Serving with whole-hearted	1
			creating friendly and convenience to support students' openness	1
			Intensifying communication through various modes	1
			Remaining closer to the students	1
	Providing help to support students' success	2		
	Autonomy and Independence	Learning services for supporting independence	Learning materials for supporting independence learning	1
			Modules are different from text book	1
			various learning sources to support independent learners	1
Student autonomy			1	
Greater flexibility and autonomy for students to study			1	
Distance learners as autonomist			1	
Independency as core value in DE			1	
Providing support services to			1	

			promote students' independence	
			Independence as foundation of DE	1
			Reading module is compulsory for students	1
			DE providers must help students to develop their self-direction	1
	Community of inquiry	Social presence	Initiate collaborative learning	1
			Online collaborative learning enhance student understanding	1
			Developing social presence through collaborative learning	1
		Teaching presence	Responding students' ideas	2
			Directing learning process	1
			Demonstrating teaching presence to direct learning processes	1
		Cognitive presence	Developing OL materials for initiating online discussion	1
			Posting questions to support student's thinking & discussion	1
			Presenting ideas and appreciate peers' arguments	1
The implementation of QA in learner support areas relates to the university's external environments	Socio-cultural environment	Language	Using national language support meaningful learning	1
			Using Indonesian as the basis language for instructional process	1
			Using national language for learning materials	2
			Local culture enrich learning materials during F2F session	1
			F2F is a major teaching delivery mode	1
			Indonesian learners dependence on tutors	1
			F2F tutorials more popular than Online for many students	3
	Educational technology	IT removes students' isolation	1	
		IT promote independent study	1	
		Employing Moodle e-learning platform	1	
		Technology support student learning	2	
		IT supports online discussion forum	1	
		IT supports online CRM	1	
		IT support instructional processes in DE	1	
Support by government to enhance computer literacy	1			
IT support Online tutorials	1			
Employing Webinar	1			
Texting for greeting purposes	1			
IT lead UT to adopt new policy online learning	3			

		Online registration		1
		Using digital printing		1
	External QA standards	ISO	Quality audit every three years	1
			Using ISO as guiding principles	1
			ISO leads UT better	1
			Accreditation for learning materials and examination test scripts	1
			Focusing on internal management (processes)	1
			Inviting ISO for quality audit focusing on process	1
		ICDE-ISA	Cut off for final examination score	1
			Develop portfolio for answering ICDE's list questions	1
			Measuring its quality compliance with ICDE standard	1
			Focusing on DE system	1
	Government	BAN-PT	Inviting ICDE-ISA for international certification	1
			Accreditation every 4 years	1
			Quality standards for learner support	1
			Develop new instrument for HDE	1
			Focusing on academic quality	1
			Invite BAN-PT for national accreditation	1
		DGHE	Accreditation agency assigned by Government	2
			Must listen to DGHE	2
Study programs must be approved by DGHE			1	
Students		All HE must follow DGHE regulation	1	
		Measuring students' satisfaction level every 6 months	1	
		Feedback to evaluate tutors and all learner support areas	1	
		Have room to contribute for quality policy	1	
		Instrument for student feedback	1	

RQ4: What are the challenges that key people at UT report they are facing in the development and implementation of QA in learner support areas?

Theme	Categories	Codes	F
Lack of access point and IT	Infrastructures	Lack of access point to Internet	1
		Infrastructure in remote areas	1

infrastructures		Not all students have access to Internet	1
QA perceived as being too demanding and time consuming	Internal management	Integrating quality criteria into one QA system	4
		Too many QA audit that call for overload of documentation	1
		Documentation problems	2
		Overworked for supporting QA	1

RQ5: How are the results of the current QA processes in learner support areas used to inform practice at UT?

Theme	Categories	Codes	F
Continuous quality assessment is done	Quality assessment	Starting QA using self-evaluation	1
		Self-evaluation for every best practice	1
		Establishing support services based on students feedback	1
		Management overview meetings every 6 months	2
		Conducting continual internal audit	1
		Internal audit for maintaining ISO	1
		Self-evaluation is an important part in QA	1
		Revising module based on students' feedback	1
		Performing daily monitoring to all online tutors	1
		Taking over online tutorials by supervisor	1
		Continuous monitoring for TTM services	1
		Discussing and solving problems in review management meetings	1
		Evaluating staff performance every month	1
		Monthly quality assessment for support services	1
		LSC provides regular support service report	1
		Conduct quality assessment every 6 month at RO level	1
Various actions are taken to ensure continuous quality improvement	Continuous improvement in different learner support areas	Regular monitoring for every F2F tutorial sessions	1
		HO assign staff for monitoring F2F tutorial program	1
		Continuous revision of QA manuals	1
		Continuous improvement as spirit of the people involved in QA	1
		Integrating QA policies from ICDE, SMPT, BAN-PT and ISO	1
		Providing new teaching deliveries based on students' feedback	1
		Quality improvement based on internal audit and Management overview meetings	1
Revising SOPs based on students and RO' staff feedback	1		
Replacing tutor based on quality assessment	1		

		Quality improvement of F2F tutorial services	1
		Reviewing tutor accreditation program	1
		Refreshing program to enhance quality of tutors	1
		Improving quality based on quality assessment	1
		Revising professional teaching development program	2
		Improving competencies based on students' feedback	1
		Analysing the inputs & feedback for future quality improvement	1
		Revising learning materials	1
		Developing learner support activities based on quality assessment	1
		QA support quality of service for learner support areas	1
		Conduct continuous improvement based on previous results	1