

Construction of Distance Education Quality Guarantee System for Open University (UK) and Its Enlightenment*

Ping Mao

School of Marxism
Sichuan Agricultural University
Ya'an, China 625014

Xi Zhang

College of Information Engineering
Sichuan Agricultural University
Ya'an, China 625014

Abstract—Distance education quality guarantee system plays an important role in the development of distance education. In certain sense, this system is the lifeline of the development of distance education science. In the long-term practice of running schools, Open University (UK) has always adhered to the student-oriented open school running concept, established and perfected the teaching management mechanism, taken the long cultural tradition as the foundation of restriction, enhanced the construction of faculty, and constructed a relatively sound education quality guarantee system. This experience provides a beneficial enlightenment for constructing an education quality guarantee system for open universities in China.

Keywords—enlightenment; guarantee system; quality; distance education; OU

I. INTRODUCTION

Distance education is an open study mode that emphasizes students' independent and individualized learning. Therefore, distance education quality guarantee system plays an important role in the development of distance education. In certain sense, this system is the lifeline of the development of distance education science. 2019 is the 50th anniversary year of The Open University, UK (OU for short). In the past 50 years of practice in running school, OU has always adhered to the student-oriented open school running concept. It has been well known worldwide and become a model for distance education in the world due to its grand school running scale, complete setting of specialties, innovative school running forms, advanced teaching media, reasonable training costs and excellent education quality. This paper analyzes the construction of OU's education quality guarantee system from several aspects such as school running concept, teaching management mechanism, cultural tradition and team building, in order to provide enlightenment and reference for the construction of education quality guarantee system for open universities in China.

II. THE OPEN SCHOOL RUNNING CONCEPT IS THE FOUNDATION OF THE EDUCATION QUALITY GUARANTEE SYSTEM

At the inaugural ceremony of OU in July 1969, the first honorary president, Mr. Crosser, announced the mission of OU: "open to people, open to place, open to method, and open to idea". The "four open" laid a solid ideological foundation for the construction of education quality guarantee system for OU.

A. Open to People

Reflected in school running, "open to people" is open to the subjects of learning. OU's only condition for enrollment is that students are willing to be registered and enrolled in the school. Students can be enrolled in the order of registration if only they apply to the local education center of the school. Age, gender, occupation, nationality, ethnicity, religious beliefs, educational level, social background, economic conditions, political stand, physical condition and family environment may not constitute obstacles in enrollment. On the one hand, this open enrollment system guarantees the continuous flow of students being enrolled in the OU; on the other hand, it provides a convenient condition for lifelong education in the UK. Since the founding of OU in 1969, more than 2 million people worldwide have achieved their learning goals through the OU platform. By the end of 2018, more than 7,000 international students studied directly at the OU, and more than 1.2 million teachers benefited from the OU's TESSA program. OU provides learning opportunities for 24,709 disabled people; 32% of the students were only eligible for level A or lower level at the time of enrollment, and 76% of OU students are engaging in part-time or full-time works.¹

B. Open to Place

Reflected in OU school running, "open to place" is to break the regional limitation of traditional education and give students more free space for learning. No matter where you

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¹ <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy-and-policies/facts-and-figures> (June 2, 2019)

are in the UK or Europe, you may learn courses at the Open University. At the beginning of OU, the open to place was only limited to the local area. In the early 1990s, OU began to face toward the world. At present, 2 million students from 157 countries have participated in the learning at OU.² In particular, it is worth mentioning that in 2005, under UNESCO's initiative of Open Educational Resources Movement, OU opened the Moodle as a learning environmental foundation and created free open learning resource websites; among which a large free learning resource website called OpenLearn has received 58 million visits since the launch in 2006. A large amount of data on iTunesU of OU has been downloaded for 73 million times³. OU have worked with the BBC professional production team for more than 40 years, at a production rate of about 25 TV and radio programs per year, and covers 260 million people worldwide in 2017/2018.⁴

C. Open to Method

The "Open to Method" is mainly reflected in the fact that students can learn independently in learning place and time and decide their learning schedule and content according to their own learning conditions. Learning is conducted in spare time so that student may not quite the job to learn and their personal income may not be affected. To facilitate students' learning, in the application of teaching information technology, OU uses a variety of medium including the Internet, DVD, learning kits, television, audio and video tapes, etc., as well as face-to-face teaching, full-time study, so that students can learn at any time. On the one hand, emerging media is used in advance. For example, in 2008, OU not only launched the iTunesU program, but also established an independent OU channel on the influential YouTube, and also established its network on the social network Facebook. On the other hand, not any media is ever regarded as the only way to spread. At present, OU still inherits the "Supported Open Learning" mode, and preserves the traditional live-on-campus system and the humanized support from tutor team to students' learning.

D. Open to Ideas

The "Open to Ideas" is embodied in the fact that school running concept is based on actual demands of adults such as their knowledge, practical skills and development potentials rather than be based on academic degree, educational background and credits. Professor Alan Besendale, the Vice President of OU, believes that "the purpose of OU at the time of its establishment is to allow more people receiving education... Up to now, this aim is not changed"⁵. Therefore, complete and throughout openness is the most core and basic feature of OU, the fundamental distinction between modern

university and traditional university in true sense, and also the basic cause of its great success and global reputation. This open view of education caters to the development needs of the times and is based on the innovation taking learner as the subject. This view not only eliminates the barriers of traditional education such as class, identity and test, but also breaks the regional space and time limitations in traditional education by virtue of the superb information technology network, and reflects the idea that all people can be provided with education without discrimination and can make something different.

III. A SOUND TEACHING MANAGEMENT MECHANISM IS THE CORE OF EDUCATION QUALITY GUARANTEE SYSTEM

A. "Student-oriented" Course Team

Course team is a curriculum construction mechanism of OU and mainly has the following four characteristics: First, the course team is composed of extensive personnel. The course team is composed of the chairman, technical specialists for education, TV multimedia producers, media designers, software designers, editors, course managers, tutors, and so on. In addition, reviewers and evaluation experts are also employed to insure the textbook quality and academic level of OU. Second, course construction lasts for a long time. In need of course construction, the subject group should submit detailed course report to the academic committee of the department for preliminary review and approval and then to the academic committee of the school for final approval if passed preliminary approval. Generally, a course shall take 2-5 years for construction and be upgraded at an interval of 5-6 years. Third, the course content arrangement reflects the effectiveness. In addition to including specific teaching contents, each course also includes course descriptions, assignment requirements, practical guidance, and study schedule recommendations. The formulation of textbooks for a course focuses on the dialogue in text materials, the interactivity in practice links, the relevance of assessment and evaluation, and the practicality of media. Fourth, a textbook quality tracing system is established. Experts and scholars of this discipline field from other universities are employed to serve as external evaluators and commentators of OU to make review and comment on the textbooks formulated by the course team and submit review and evaluation report; then the course team may again make discussion and revision on the basis of this report; those actions will be repeated for at least more than twice in order to ensure the quality of the textbooks.

B. Highly Flexible Curriculum Setting

OU has a complete teaching system, can provide education for different degrees such as professional training, undergraduates, postgraduates, doctoral students and so on, and can issue corresponding diploma.⁶ Wherein, postgraduate education and undergraduate education

² <http://www3.open.ac.uk/documents/1/vs19080444243116.pdf> (June 3, 2019)

³ <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy-and-policies/facts-and-figures> (June 2, 2019)

⁴ <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy-and-policies/facts-and-figures> (June 2, 2019)

⁵ Alan Bassindale. The shaping of Open University (UK) brand [J]. Journal of Beijing Open University. 2012 (06).

⁶ Zhang Chunyan, Ren Hong. Characteristics and Enlightenment of UK Open University. Adult Education. 2018 (1).

implement credit system. Postgraduate students can be granted master's or doctor's degree only after completing the required credits, completing a research project or submitting a thesis for the degree and passing the thesis oral defense; students can obtain credits only after finishing the specified learning tasks and requirements, completing homework and taking exam. OU's students can be fully free to choose courses according to their demands, flexibly arrange their learning schedule; and the credits obtained can be exchanged with that of similar course in other universities. The flexibility of OU's curriculum setting is also reflected in the design of professional courses. In addition to some relatively stable courses, OU can reasonably add, delete and adjust courses at any time as per the social needs. Because OU's students come from a wide variety of sources and have tremendous difference in learning motivations and basic levels, it is especially important to pay full attention to the special needs of various students, and to implement various measures through modern information technologies.

C. Perfect On-campus and Off-campus Teaching Quality Management and Monitoring System

OU believes that teaching quality directly determines the real destiny and future development of distance education. Therefore, OU always pays attention to the combination of on-campus and off-campus educations, and strengthens the monitoring of teaching quality. On campus, each college has a full-time vice dean responsible for teaching quality guarantee, and also has systematic and complete monitoring methods and processes for the curriculum from construction to implementation. An evaluation committee is set up within the school to conduct regular evaluation and test on the development of courses. Each time, an officer will be assigned to put forward problems and improvement measures to the evaluated object. After a period of improvement, a review will be conducted. Some important test results are also subject to expert review to ensure the accuracy of the evaluation and promote the effectiveness of the improvement. Outside school, the UK Higher Education Quality Committee may annually make sampling check and evaluation on OU's textbooks, teaching standards, teaching services, exam proposition quality, and the work of regional teaching center to assess whether they meet the standards. The school may timely adjust and improve the course on the basis of the sampling check and evaluation result. It is precisely because the course check and evaluation system is so strictly implemented that OU constantly perfects its teaching management and administration work and ensures the normal operation of distance teaching and the improvement of teaching quality.

IV. THE LONG CULTURAL TRADITION IS THE CULTURAL CONSTRAINT BASIS OF THE EDUCATION QUALITY GUARANTEE SYSTEM

Culture is an important cause for the differences in education systems, models, and quality guarantee systems between different countries. OU's excellent quality guarantee system and methods for distance education have won worldwide reputation and have also been studied and

imitated by many countries and universities. The formation, development and reform of its education quality guarantee system are deeply affected by UK's humanism, liberalism, conservatism and gentleman cultural traditions.

A. Humanism Guides the Construction of Education Quality Control System

Humanism emphasizes the full exertion of human's personality, talent, uniqueness and individuality. It is reflected in the influence of education, namely emphasizes "people" orientation, promotes rationality and pursues knowledge. Therefore, OU places great emphasis on the importance of students' feedback in the improvement of teaching and curriculum quality. It establishes a central mechanism for making systematic collection, reporting, and consideration of students' feedback through the learning process survey, focuses on the reuse of feedback from a variety of channels, including the data in aspects of enrollment, exams, students' performance statistics, surveys, interviews, and counseling, as well as the employment information of postgraduates and the employer's comment. On the basis of those feedback data, it is available to make an overall understanding of the changes in education supply including the changes in curriculum elements and design with small influential range and the changes in curriculum with large influential range, as well as the changes in partial or overall curriculum arrangement or learning guidance and support of the school.

B. Liberalism Builds up the Education Quality Guarantee and Self-discipline Tradition

Liberalism is the spiritual barrier that protects British universities to make academic exploration freely. As one of the universities, OU adopts a school running concept in the same strain as British tradition, namely the independent autonomy and academic freedom of university, emphasizing academic self-discipline and self-control of internal quality. Jennie Lee, one of the founders of OU, said: "I know that at the beginning of this university, there should be no relaxation in quality standards. I have been rigorously trained for obtaining a degree. I know that the traditional academic circle may not give up at this point a little. Therefore, I believe that we can succeed only if we strictly control the quality standards". A series of institutions and norms formed by OU in the process of autonomy and the associated academic self-discipline rules, have been continuously carried forward, and played a defensive role in the external intervention of higher education system.

C. Conservatism Promotes the Adherence to the Academic Self-discipline Tradition

Conservatism is a political ideology opposite to liberalism; but it is not generally opposed to the goal of liberalism. On the contrary, it is often defending the most basic goals of liberalism. The broad conservatism belief in the society has enabled OU to adhere to the tradition of "academic self-discipline" since its birth, and discipline itself as per the quality standard of traditional universities and never make a concession in the face of quality. The founders

and designers of OU all put academic self-discipline and quality assurance in the first place. Over years of hard work, OU finally developed step by step from the status of being doubted by traditional universities. Since 1990s, OU has repeatedly achieved good performances in the evaluation of higher education. According to the statistics of HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency), in 2017/2018, OU's total number of academic staff, number of registered academic staff and scientific research achievement indicators (including the number of students obtained doctor's degree, and the research fund and contract amount obtained) all ranked top ten in the whole UK and became a model for distance education in the world.⁷

D. Gentleman Culture Helps Maintaining the Elite Value of Education Quality

Gentleman culture is a concentration and conciseness of British social and cultural values. Under the influence of gentleman culture, especially the elite complex contained in it, British universities generally attach great importance to the quality of teaching. First of all, the selection of teachers is emphasized. OU's teachers are divided into staff tutors and associate lecturers. 60% of staff tutors have Ph.D. degrees. The teaching staff is just next to that in Oxford University and Cambridge University, and ranks third in the UK. Associate lecturers must be openly recruited and fairly and rigorously selected, and must have relevant professional knowledge, have the sense of being responsible for students, know how to help students doing teamwork, and are willing to serve students. Second, students' school work is under rigorous evaluation. In detail, the evaluation has the following characteristics: formative evaluation is adopted; student's usual homework is also an essential part of the evaluation; the scoring is conducted by multiple personnel in multiple rounds under the uniform scale to strive to be fair; compared with the professional feature of the content, the evaluation pays more attention to students' attitude to finishing homework; special software FirstClass is used to carry out various in-time and not-in-time communication among the scoring teacher team; the evaluation on the final score will be made under external academic monitoring.

V. HIGH-QUALITY FACULTY IS THE ORGANIZATIONAL GUARANTEE FOR EDUCATION QUALITY GUARANTEE SYSTEM

The faculty of OU consists of staff tutors and associate lecturers. Wherein, staff tutors are divided into three parts: full-time teachers, academic and technical staff, logistics and secretarial staff, each of which essentially account for 1/3. They also play different roles in quality control because of their different division of labor.

A. Adhering to the "Cultivating New Teaching Staff Under Guidance of Old Teaching Staff" System to Upgrade the Level of Full-time Teachers

OU has more than 1,300 full-time teachers. Full-time teachers are mainly responsible for providing academic

support services, writing course textbook together with the course development team, and managing associate lecturers. OU's full-time teachers play a key role in teaching and quality monitoring, and their level and ability determine the teaching quality of OU. OU not only emphasizes the role of those full-time teachers, but also attaches great importance to cultivating them. One of the important measures is the system of "cultivating new teaching staff under guidance of old teaching staff"⁸. In the first year of employment, new teacher must work under the leading and guidance of mentor. The role of mentor is undertaken by advanced members among full-time teachers. Mentors may work together with newly-recruited full-time teachers and constantly guide them in practice. This way of cultivating teaching and research counselor is very effective, get the excellent style of OU inherited and carried forward, and plays an invaluable role in the quality assurance of OU.

B. Adhering to the Workload Restriction System to Ensure the Quality of Guidance Provided by Associate Lecturers

In OU, students' tutors are not full-time teachers but associate lecturers. OU currently has about 5,000 associate lecturers and is an important force in OU. OU has specific provisions for the number of students under the guidance provided by an associate lecturer. For example, each associate lecturer is responsible for the full-process follow-up guidance service for 20-25 students during their study period.⁹ The associate lecturer's work is mainly to answer questions and check the assignments by E-mail or phone. Students can ask associate lecturer questions at any time by phone or email. In order to ensure quality, associate lecturers can only provide guidance to students for 1-2 courses not more than 90 credits. At the same time, OU places great emphasis on the supervision and management on associate lecturers. Full-time teachers and academic staff are managers of associate lecturers; each full-time teacher or academic staff is responsible for the management of one course. Full-time teacher generally supervises the guidance work of associate lecturers in the form of observer, and supervises their assignment review status. Full-time teacher is more possible to observe the work scene of newly-recruited associate lectures and may also follow up those having long working time. For associate lecturers received claims from student, full-time teachers may make corresponding surveys and feedback.¹⁰

C. Adhering to the Establishment of a Specialist Tutors System to Help Students with Learning Difficulties

In modern distance education, including distance learning in network environment, the focus problem to be solved by

⁸ Bai Bin, Chen Li. Interpreting the OUUK Quality Assurance System. *Distance Education in China*. 2009 (11).

⁹ Sun Ping. Faculty Characteristics of Open University and Its Enlightenment — A Perspective of In-depth Interviews with Open University. *Journal of Open University of Guangdong*. 2017(5).

¹⁰ Chen Juanjuan, Liang Min, Yan Wenyao. The Management Style of Teachers in the Open University of UK and Its Enlightenment. *Journal of Hubei Correspondence University*. 2018 (2).

⁷ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis> (June 5, 2019)

universities is to eliminate distance learners' sense of alienation, loneliness and helplessness. To this end, OU also has specialist tutors. This post in OU is to provide students with learning support services, and is specially set up for those who want to learn but have difficulties in learning. Taking students majoring in computer as an example, they may have difficulty in learning math again after having abandoned the study for many years; in this case, OU may invite specialist tutors to help them making up missed lessons at OU's cost. This practice of OU has generated a good social response, which not only preserves students but also attracts more students.

VI. ENLIGHTENMENT TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF OPEN EDUCATION QUALITY GUARANTEE SYSTEM IN CHINA

A. *Adhering to the "Student-oriented" School Running Concept to Improve Labor's Quality*

First of all, teaching should focus on students rather than teachers or textbooks, and students' role should be transformed into active constructors of knowledge and ability. Secondly, the setting of professional curriculum must pay attention to helping learners better and more quickly cultivating their vocational capacity on the basis of their demands and conditions. It is necessary to further expand the direction of school running from the aspects of students' learning knowledge, enhancing skills, updating knowledge structure, and adapting to social development demands. Thirdly, it is necessary to attract students to enter and learn in the school by serving students, facilitating students, and meeting the learning demands of students. Only by establishing a people-oriented free elective system, promoting the credit exchange system, and providing students with more flexible and diverse curriculum learning methods suitable for individual needs, can it be available to transform the teaching-oriented mode to learning-oriented mode in true sense and practically ensure the distance learning effect.

B. *Improving the Teaching Management Mechanism to Provide an Important Institutional Basis for Guaranteeing the Teaching Quality*

Firstly, it is necessary to enhance the quality awareness in open distance teaching, further strengthen basic works such as curriculum and textbook constructions, enhance process assessment on students' learning, and rely on applicable system to ensure the teaching quality. In particular, it is necessary to establish a credit accumulation and conversion system for open education to achieve mutual recognition and convergence among different types of learning outcomes. Secondly, it is needed to establish an internal and external supervision and evaluation mechanism for teaching quality, so as to timely correct the professional orientation, make clear the professional characteristics, reform the professional connotation, optimize the curriculum system and finally reach the talent cultivation specification on the basis of evaluation and feedback on the discipline setting, talent cultivation objective and curriculum system construction. Thirdly, it is needed to timely improve the professional

curriculum system and enhance the professional characteristics as per the demands for economic and social development and students' needs, to create professional and excellent courses having the characteristics of distance education and strong competitiveness on the market and promote the regulation and optimization of structure of the professional course system.

C. *Formulating a Strict Teacher Admission System to Strengthen the Construction of Teaching Staff for Open Distance Education*

First, attention should be paid to selecting open education teachers and strengthening the cultivation and training of such faculty. A regular training mechanism should be established to encourage young and middle-aged teachers to pursue further academic degrees and further study. Second, it is necessary to implement the academic leader training program, set up special professor post, create a policy environment and academic environment for cultivating excellent and outstanding talents, and improve the overall quality of the open education faculty. Third, it is necessary to establish a process management system for the teaching guidance provided by open education teachers and a teaching quality assessment mechanism to enable competent teachers to remain in relatively stable teaching level, and to provide a basis for timely dismiss any incompetent teacher. Fourth, it is also necessary to limit the number of students under the guidance of each open education teacher to guide students, in order to ensure the quality of guidance provided to students from perspective of guidance time, guidance process, guidance methods, and guidance content.

VII. CONCLUSION

Education quality guarantee system is the lifeline of the development of distance education science. OU constructs a sound education quality guarantee system on the basis of its open school running concept, constantly perfected teaching management mechanism, long cultural tradition and high-quality faculty, and provides a perfect model for open education in the world. At present, China's open education is in the initial stage and has many problems in practice such as the biased teaching concepts, unreasonable setting of curriculum system, low quality of textbooks, insufficient teaching staff, unclear division of labor for special and part-time teachers, and inadequate training. As pointed out in The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China's "Decision on Several Major Issues in Making All-round Deepening Reform", it is necessary to vigorously promote education equity and construct an effective mechanism for using information technology to expand the coverage of high-quality education resources. Therefore, in the information time, the practical demands of China for developing open education are to actively learn from the school running experience of OU, construct an open education quality guarantee system, strengthen the development of textbooks, and construction of faculty, and promote making reform and innovation on open education in China.

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