International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning

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The Case of the Open University of Mauritius

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Résumé de l'article

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Abstract

In recent years, quality assurance (QA) in higher education has received increasing attention by academics, learners, institutions, and governments alike. Many open universities (OUs) have taken steps to re-define or re-orient their systems and practices to integrate quality. While there is a growing body of literature on QA best practices, there has been little investigation into the factors that influence institutions to improve or adopt QA and how these factors impact on the specific manifestations of institutional QA. This paper examines the challenges of QA implementation in OUs and, using a neo-institutionalist lens, it advances a framework for understanding drivers of institutional QA implementation. The framework is applied to the case of the Open University of Mauritius (OUM). Existing literature, institutional records, interviews and reports are analysed to assess how exogenous and endogenous factors have influenced QA implementation at OUM, with a focus on addressing the specificities of open and distance learning (ODL). A better understanding of the drivers of change for QA can help OUs plan the implementation of QA mechanisms in a more comprehensive way and to systematically develop a culture of quality that responds to the ideological and practical context of ODL.

Keywords: quality assurance, open and distance learning, higher education, neo-institutionalism, Mauritius, open universities

Introduction

In recent years, quality assurance (QA) in higher education has received increasing attention by academics, learners, institutions, and governments alike. Many open universities (OUs) have taken steps to re-define and re-orient their systems and practices to integrate quality. While there is a growing body of literature on QA best practices, there has been little investigation into the factors that influence institutions to improve or adopt QA and how these factors impact the specific manifestations of institutional QA. This paper examines the challenges of QA implementation in OUs and, using a neo-institutionalist lens, it advances a framework for understanding drivers of institutional QA implementation. The framework is applied to the case of the Open University of Mauritius (OUM). Existing literature, institutional records, interviews, and reports are analysed to assess how exogenous and endogenous factors have influenced QA implementation at OUM, with a focus on how the specificities of ODL have been addressed. A better understanding of the drivers of change for QA can help OUs plan the comprehensive implementation of QA mechanisms, and to systematically develop a culture of quality that responds to the ideological and practical context of open and distance learning (ODL).

Literature Review

Quality Assurance in Higher Education

In higher education (HE), QA refers to the policies, actions, standards, and procedures that enhance quality and meet predetermined quality criteria (Stella & Gnanam, 2004; Tait, 1997). The concept of QA has evolved from quality control (QC) in the manufacturing industry, from a retrospective perspective that verifies product quality, to a proactive one in which activities are deliberately undertaken to ensure that the product meets predetermined standards (Green, 1994). From the time of its introduction in HE, QA focused on inputs like enrolment, staff qualifications, and infrastructure. However, over the last few decades the focus has shifted to quality of learning and educational experience. Governments and stakeholders are requesting evidence of student participation, completion and attainment, and assessment. Suitability of graduates for the labour market is increasingly viewed as a measure of quality (Latchem & Jung, 2012). A modern challenge for QA is to demonstrate that graduates can thrive in a diverse and dynamic labour market (Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development, 2012).

Challenges facing open universities. OUs aim to break the "iron triangle" of access, cost, and quality that constrains traditional universities. In the iron triangle, traditional models of education cannot make improvements in one of the three sides without diminishing another (Daniel, 2009). It is envisioned that OUs can "reconfigure the access-quality-cost triangle...through the division of labour, specialization, and the economies of scale created by media and technology" (Daniel & Kanwar, 2008, p. 6). The agendas of OUs are fundamentally different from traditional universities in that they target underserved populations. Yet, despite fewer resources and the mandate to increase reach, OUs are expected to deliver the same certification, and undergo the same QA processes as conventional universities. This assumes that the accreditation, systems, and standards for conventional higher education institutions (HEIs) can (and should) be applied to OUs. While this application is intended to ensure quality, the concept of quality differs

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between conventional institutions and OUs. Traditional conceptualisations of quality, based on "an insidious link between quality and exclusivity...[that] define[s] ... quality by the people they exclude" (Daniel, 2009, p. 2), are at odds with the OU agenda, which promotes openness and inclusivity.

Moreover, logistically, there are pedagogical, methodological, organisational, academic, and technical differences between ODL and traditional delivery. These differences include: geographic distance from the learner (Commonwealth of Learning [COL], 2004); less rigid admissions requirements (COL, 2004); involvement of different actors in development and delivery (COL, 2004; Roberts, 2018; Trindade, Carmo, & Bidarra, 2000); additional administrative tasks for ODL (Roberts, 2018); greater use of Web and ICT in ODL (Bates, 2000; Van Zyl, Els, & Blignaut, 2013); distinct academic workload models (Council on Higher Education, 2014); and more temporary staff at ODL institutions (Baumann, Shelley, Murphy, & White, 2008). These differences should inform QA approaches at an OU and may limit the applicability of conventional QA frameworks in the OU context.

QA in open universities. The specificities of ODL, both ideological and practical, mean that conventional QA frameworks may not be adequate for OUs; as a result, many OUs have adapted or developed their own frameworks, according to their distinct governance structures and cultural contexts (Kanwar & Clarke 2012).

While there are multiple frameworks implemented by OUs, a holistic QA framework for ODL (Figure 1) should include provisions on the inputs, processes, and outputs of an institution (COL and Asian Development Bank [ADB], 1999). At present, such a framework is not implemented consistently across OUs.

Figure 1. Quality assurance framework for ODL. Adapted from *Quality assurance in open and distance learning: Trainers' kit 005* (p. 82)*,* by COL & ADB, 1999, Vancouver: COL. Copyright 1999 by Commonwealth of Learning.

The evolution of OUs and the diverse ways they attempt to address quality gives rise to multiple questions:

- Can a system built for traditional instruction assure quality of nontraditional providers? (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2011)

- Should national QA agencies apply the same sets of standards regardless of mode? (Latchem, 2016)

- How will OUs ensure quality higher education and fulfil their mandate to provide open education with 'limited' entry requirements?

Neo-institutionalist approaches to understanding QA. Over the past 20 years, neo-institutional theory has been increasingly applied to higher education research (Cai & Mehari, 2015). Neo-institutionalism explores how structures, norms, rules and cultures constrain or drive change. In neo-institutionalism, change may be driven by forces within an institution (endogenous drivers), or as a response to external factors (exogenous drivers). According to Palthe (2014), neo-institutionalism recognises the complexity of institutional change:

[It] emphasizes the fact that not everything that happens is necessarily intended and that not all outcomes are the result of conscious and rational decision processes… external entities influence the creation and implementation of practices that come to attain a level of legitimacy. (p. 63)

Universities are susceptible to external pressures, such as regulatory, accreditation and legislative variables, which can impact their functioning (Ramirez & Christensen, 2013; Shattock, 2010). QA can be a means for governments to maintain control and, "ensures not only accountability, but can be used to encourage a degree of compliance to policy requirements or to control a burgeoning private sector" (Harvey & Newton, 2007, p. 225).

While neo-institutionalism has been critiqued for its "top-down" approach, modern theory demonstrates a burgeoning focus on the individual (Bitektine, 2011; Voronov & Vince, 2012). According to Wiseman and Chase-Mayoral (2013), "the ability to shift the discourse about neo-institutional theory from a largely macro-level framework to one capable of investigating educational changes occurring at the micro level is vital to understanding the comprehensiveness of national educational systems," (p. 101). While extrinsic forces may drive compliance, regulations may not be implemented if they are not accepted by staff. Similarly, internal processes may drive change independent from external actors. Parkes and Blewitt (2014) assert that "human praxis, interests, power dependencies and capacity for action are…important endogenous dynamics" (p. 7).

According to Palthe (2014), external regulative drivers are associated with rapid, episodic change, whereas intrinsic drivers result in longer-term change. However, Trow (1996) suggests that both can drive meaningful change, and universities may make changes both to improve their performance and to respond to evaluation criteria. Liu (2016) adds that institutions are more likely to meet external requirements when "the external norms of what constitutes good higher education… are compatible with the internal cultures" (p. 40).

Endogenous and exogenous drivers can be classified into regulative, normative, and cultural/cognitive social systems (Scott, 1995). Table 1, adapted from Scott (1995) and Palthe (2014), outlines a framework for understanding drivers of change, and is a heuristic for understanding QA adoption and implementation in HEIs.

Table 1

An Institutional Framework for Drivers of Change

	Regulative	Normative	Cultural cognitive
Exogenous	• National and international laws/policies/regulations	• Network ties • Resource dependency • Roles, habits, norms	• National and regional tradition/legacy of QA • Cultural systems, values, beliefs
Endogenous	• Institutional policy/ regulations	• Internal network ties • Internal dynamics and perception of/response to change	• Institutional legacy of QA • Institutional and individual identity and desire

Note. Adapted from *Institutions and organizations: Ideas and interests* (pp. 54-65), by W. R. Scott, 2008, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Copyright 2008 by Sage Publications Inc., and "Regulative, normative, and cognitive elements of organizations: Implications for managing change," by J. Palthe, 2014, *Management and Organizational Studies, 1*(2), p. 61. Copyright 2014 by the Sciedu Press.

Methodology

The present paper uses an explanatory case study method. The case study method is an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2014). The method has been selected based on the assumption that it can illuminate the decision-making process including why a decision was taken, how it was implemented, and with what results (Yin, 2014). While case studies are useful in providing an in-depth understanding of change processes, there are issues of external validity, and findings may not be generalizable to other cases or contexts, which are limitations of the present study (Yin, 2014). Similarly, construct validity may be problematic in this method. To address this concern, multiple evidence sources were used, and the report was reviewed by institutional representatives. Institutional approval to undertake and publish this study was sought and granted.

Qualitative document analysis was conducted. Bowen (2009) recommends an approach which excludes "the quantification typical of conventional mass media content analysis" instead consisting of "a first-pass document review, in which meaningful and relevant passages of text or other data are identified" and separated "from that which is not pertinent" (p. 32). Although qualitative document analysis has limitations, such as insufficient detail or biased selectivity, "given its efficiency and cost-effectiveness in particular, document analysis offers advantages that clearly outweigh the limitations" (p. 32).

Purposive and snowball sampling was used to select documents. The first document consulted was Patten and Chadee (2018), as it provided an overview of QA at OUM. A list of additional documents was generated based on the Patten and Chadee (2018) document and the literature review. Key documents selected for analysis were:

- OUM's Institutional QA Policy (2018a)

- OUM's Self Evaluation Report (2017b)

- Tertiary quality assurance (TEC) QA audit reports of OUM (2015 and 2018a)

To provide clarification on specific points in these documents, an email interview was conducted with a key informant, Professor Vinesh Sannassee, Director of Academic Affairs, who was selected purposively based on his central role in QA at the institution. After the respondent provided his informed consent, he was sent a list of questions and submitted his responses by email.

Using the "extraction approach" (Bowen, 2009) relevant information from the texts was extracted using a pre-established category system. The six categories were established a priori, based on the framework in Table 1: Endogenous regulative; endogenous normative; endogenous cultural-cognitive; exogenous regulative; exogenous normative; and exogenous cultural cognitive. Key words for each category were identified to guide the authors in the extraction, although authors also used their discretion to fit information into the categories. Extraction was conducted independently by two authors and categorised information was compared and collated.

Background: Overview of QA Milestones at OUM

OUM was established through the *Open University of Mauritius Act 2010* and opened in July 2012. The Mauritius College of the Air (MCA), established in 1971 to offer education through mass media and distance methods, was integrated into the new OU (Patten & Chadee, 2018). Since its inception, OUM has built on its inheritance of distance learning from MCA, offering nearly all its courses in blended mode (Open University of Mauritius, 2018b). As the only OU in the country, OUM has a distinct role within the HE landscape, providing undergraduate, professional and applied programmes to more than 5,000 students (Patten & Chadhee, 2018). As a public HEI, OUM's operational guidelines were developed according to statutory/regulatory requirements and directives from various authorities, namely the Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research (MoE), Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), Ministry of Civil Service Affairs (MoCSA), Pay Research Bureau (PRB), and Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED). The QA instrument used at OUM, ISO9001, was introduced in 2014. OUM adopted the plan-do-check-act cycle of ISO9001 (Deming, 1993; OUM, 2018a). OUM developed its *Quality Policy Manual* (2015; 2018a) for the University, and all staff was trained on ISO9001 and internal quality audit practices (Patten & Chadee, 2018). Yearly external audits were conducted to assess compliance to objectives and measure improvements. All processes at OUM were documented and led to the organisation of units/divisions. As a result, OUM became the first ISO-certified HEI in Mauritius in July, 2015.

The TEC carried out the OUM's first QA audit in 2015, resulting in several recommendations. Following the audit, OUM sought to address these recommendations (Patten & Chadee, 2018). It developed a new strategic plan for 2017-2025, which reiterated the "fitness for purpose" objective in its vision and mission (OUM, 2018a). In 2017, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) assisted OUM in its *Self-Evaluation*

Report (2017b); *QA Policy* (2018a); and other documents in preparation for the upcoming TEC audit. In April 2018, the QA policy was approved and communicated to staff. The implementation plan was circulated to heads of divisions/units in July 2018. In March 2018, the first cycle audit was conducted by TEC. COL is currently supporting OUM in addressing recommendations from the 2018 audit, including an academic workload model. Table 2 summarises QA milestones at OUM from 2010 to 2018.

Table 2

QA Milestones at OUM: 2010-2018

Year (Month)	Event
2010	Open University of Mauritius Act
2012	OUM opened
2014	ISO introduced
2015 (July)	ISO certification
2015 (October)	TEC audit
2017 (July)	*Strategic Plan, 2017-2025*
2017 (November)	*Self-Evaluation Report; QA Policy; Implementation and Monitoring Plans*
2018 (March)	TEC audit
2018 (April)	**QA Policy** approved
2018 (July)	Implementation plan circulated; Identification of areas for support as per TEC recommendations

Discussion

Exogenous Drivers of QA Adoption at OUM

Exogenous regulative drivers. The extrinsic regulative factors that shaped OUM from its inception are important drivers of QA. As a public institution, OUM must conform to statutory and regulatory directives issued by numerous external bodies. OUM must adhere to a variety of frameworks and guidelines related to human resources and pay structure set out by the PRB. The 2016 PRB report on OUM aims to, "further consolidat[e] the existing structure to enable the organisation to meet its objectives... [and to] provid[e] specific incentives and conditions of service in line with what prevail in other public universities" (recommendation 62.4, p. 367), recommending "consistency and uniformity across the Public Sector" (p. 73). However, while the PRB aims to ensure consistency, the academic workload models for ODL are fundamentally different from those of conventional universities and necessitate a distinct approach to organisational structure, and financial and human resource management. The required positions, profiles, and workloads of OU staff and faculty differ from those of a conventional institution. This may pose problems in defining positions, schemes of service and pay grades that are consistent with other public HEIs. According to Patten and Chadee (2018) external schemes of service constrain human resource management. They note that external requirements make recruitment complex and time consuming. The

2016 PRB report also acknowledged delays in the approval process (p. 73). Consequently, OUM has several empty posts, creating a barrier to QA implementation (Patten & Chadee, 2018).

The TEC is responsible for QA guidelines, self-assessment audits and academic audits in Mauritius. All HEIs are required to submit self-evaluation reports and undergo quality audits on a five-year cycle (Tertiary Education Commission [TEC], 2017). OUM must meet the indicators and criteria, designed for conventional universities, outlined in TEC's *Quality Audit Handbook for Tertiary Education Institutions* (TEC, 2010). In October 2015 the TEC conducted a review of the newly established OUM. It was in anticipation of this review that OUM introduced ISO9001 (Patten & Chadee, 2018). Furthermore, the recommendations of the review drove subsequent action. While the 2015 report commended OUM for the ISO standard, it noted that "relying on the ISO procedures is not adequate for assuring quality at the University (p. 21)," stating that "there is need for a quality assurance structure with clear processes" (p. 21). According to Patten and Chadee (2018), these recommendations spurred OUM to develop the *Self Evaluation Report* in 2017 and the institutional QA policy. With a second audit on the horizon in 2018, these documents also addressed the criteria of the impending TEC review.

While the 2015 TEC report considers many specificities of ODL, it also highlights the tension between quality (defined by traditional models) and access (a mandate of OUs). The report commends OUM for "meet[ing] the objective to open access to learners (p. 5)," but notes that "academic entrance requirements are sometimes lower than for conventional universities (p. 5)" which they urge should "not deflect OU from providing an education…that is relevant and of high quality, so that the learners are at par with learners of other universities," (TEC, 2015, p. 5). The implication is that by widening access, or making entrance less exclusive, OUM may jeopardize quality, reflecting the iron triangle in which increased access results in decreased quality. However, as Daniel (2009) asserts, this tension results from the association of quality with exclusivity, common in conventional systems. The 2018 TEC audit recognises this tension, suggesting that "increased access has to be considered in its relationship to cost and quality" (TEC 2018a, p. 8). However, rather than suggest stricter entry requirements, they encourage OUM to clarify its pedagogical and learner support models, particularly as they expand. This demonstrates a positive evolution in the recognition of the distinct OU context and promotes alignment of QA with the mission of open education.

Exogenous normative drivers. Resource dependency is an important exogenous driver of QA at OUM. Unlike regulative factors, resource dependency spurs QA implementation out of perceived necessity rather than enforcement (Palthe, 2014). Like other HEIs in the country, OUM relies on the MoE for funding. In 2017/2018, OUM received approximately 28 million Rs- around 5,600 Rs per student—which is low compared to 640 million Rs – around 58,000 Rs per student - for the largest public university in Mauritius (Ministry of Finance & Economic Development, Government of Mauritius, 2018). Within the iron triangle, the tension between cost, quality, and access is exacerbated by resource scarcity. Outside of the government funding that they receive, OUM depends on student fees, consultancies, and industry collaborations for revenue (OUM, 2017a). According to Patten and Chadee (2018) OUM is pursuing, "alternative …funding since the government grant for the institution has decreased considerably" (p. 15). The TEC 2018 report (TEC, 2018a) highlights that OUM must develop new funding strategies, particularly as the institution expands. This is echoed in OUM's strategic plan (OUM, 2017a). In addition to short courses, OUM is collaborating with partners to offer programmes targeting healthcare professionals (OUM, 2017a). OUM

also plans to open six regional centres across Africa (OUM, 2017a). These initiatives will help to ensure the sustainability of OUM in a resource scarce environment, while expanding its reach.

Due to resource scarcity, OUM must appease not only the TEC (by meeting its regulative requirements), but also attract and retain students. While ISO9001 helped OUM address the requirements of the TEC, it is also a powerful marketing tool, which projects an image of quality. According to Patten and Chadee (2018), the ISO9001 certification is a "marketing advantage...since [OUM] is the only public university which is ISO-certified" (p. 10). The certification is advertised to prospective learners throughout OUM's website and marketing materials (OUM, 2018b). In a competitive market, the adoption of QA measures can demonstrate comparative advantage.

While resource scarcity may drive QA implementation, it can also impede it. Patten and Chadee (2018) note that OUM, "requires continuous investment in modern ICT infrastructure, website, learner platform and software to ensure quality service to learners since the University offers courses in ODL mode" (p. 12). While ODL offers cost advantages in economies of scale, initial technology and infrastructure investments can be high (Daniel, 2009). Yet, this investment is necessary to achieve the advantages of economy of scale. OUM is faced with managing the significant investments required to scale-up, in an environment of declining public investment, and increased competition.

Exogenous cultural/cognitive drivers. National culture is another factor driving QA implementation at OUM. In 2006, the Government of Mauritius made significant strides to solidify its reputation as a continental leader in education, announcing plans to position itself as a knowledge hub. A feature of this plan was tertiary education:

> If Mauritius wants to position itself as a knowledge hub and as a key player in the Region, considerable emphasis should be laid on the postsecondary education sector, making it of a world class status. (Human Resource Development Council, 2006, p. 10)

Government investment and planning are driven by this ambitious agenda. According to Bailey, Cloete, and Pillay (2011), higher education features strongly in the national development plan of Mauritius. These plans create an environment in which quality is linked to national identity.

Cultural/cognitive drivers also impact the regulative environment through the establishment of various governing bodies. The TEC's regulatory framework was developed to align with the national plan to position Mauritius "as a world-class Knowledge Hub and the gateway for post-secondary education" (TEC, 2018b, para. 2). National culture creates an environment wherein the public expects high quality education. In a resource scarce environment, HEIs must prove that they can deliver quality education in line with the national vision; otherwise, they will not attract learners and the much-needed revenue. Thus, a national culture of quality is not only a reflection of public demand for continuous improvement, but also drives this demand (Ardi, Hidayatno, & Zagloel, 2012; Doval & Bondrea, 2011).

Endogenous Drivers of QA Adoption at OUM

Endogenous regulative drivers. While institutional QA adoption may be driven by exogenous factors, implementation occurs at the micro-level of praxis. The ISO9001standards used by OUM as their

guiding framework act as an internal regulative driver of QA. According to Patten and Chadee (2018) "The ISO certification defines the procedures used by Administration. In line with the ISO procedures, a step-by-step process is used at all levels of administration" (p. 3).

While ISO9001 provides a broad framework for quality management, studies have highlighted gaps when applying it to higher education, which may limit its efficacy (Becket & Brookes, 2008; El Abbadi, Bouayad, & Lamrini, 2011). One critique is that ISO9001 focuses on services, rather than functions like research, teaching and learning, positioning the learner as the "client," rather than the "product." This separates quality management from outcomes, such as employability and improved livelihoods.

OUM's "fit for purpose" QA policy was developed in consultation with heads of divisions/units in 2017 and serves as an internal regulative document (OUM, 2018a). The policy is tailored to the ODL context stating that it "should be seen within the context of strengthening internal quality controls by developing more explicit measures to assure the quality of ODL" (OUM, 2018a, p. 2). The policy addresses salient features of ODL, such as technology, learner support systems, and pedagogical models. Patten and Chadee (2018) note that the policy, besides addressing TEC recommendations, is a regulative force and that "all staff will have to imperatively work towards these policies" (p. 13). While not all policy translates into praxis, OUM has taken concrete steps to ensure that staff members address the aims of the policy. An implementation plan was developed and circulated to head of divisions/units in July 2018. Additionally, a methodology for evaluating the policy strengthens its efficacy by outlining clear monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

Endogenous normative drivers. Daft (2006) suggests that the role of leadership in organisational change is crucial; claiming that implementation of institutional QA requires continuous support from leaders through ongoing consultations and communication with staff. According to Patten and Chadee (2018), "there is commitment at leadership level regarding quality assurance (p. 13)" and OUM management supports the implementation of QA activities. They note that "this has led to the organization of workshops and the [QA] policy document has been approved for implementation" (p. 13). The TEC 2018 report commends OUM for involving staff in the development of the institutional mission, aims, and objectives, which has led to ownership for the plan and its implementation.

However, inadequate human resources in key positions may have a negative impact on leadership for QA. According to Patten and Chadee (2018), staffing in the QA division is a challenge, and a crucial position (Director of Quality Assurance) remains vacant. Other vacant posts, including the Director of Academic Affairs Division and Director ICT, create a leadership vacuum, which can adversely affect QA (TEC, 2018a). Patten and Chadee (2018) note that expertise in QA is scarce in Mauritius and staff have limited opportunities for exposure, further limiting leadership.

Endogenous cultural/cognitive drivers. The OUM vision and mission are: "To be among the best open universities in the world; and, to use technology and flexible mode of teaching to serve society, transform lives, and make high-quality education, lifelong learning, and training accessible to everyone while promoting excellence in research" (OUM, 2017a) These statements establish the importance of quality and lay out the fitness for purpose objectives, which are the crux of OUM's QA approach. They also link the institution's identity to its quality agenda. As previously noted, staff at all levels was involved in the

development of the University's mission, aims, and objectives, and have participated in QA workshops, which has helped foster a culture of quality.

From its outset, the QMS at OUM included all divisions/units (Patten & Chadee, 2018); in 2014, staff was trained on ISO9001 standards and internal quality audit practices (OUM, 2017b). The 2015 TEC audit confirmed this, stating that "ISO procedures have been well accepted among the staff," a conclusion echoed in the 2018 report (TEC, 2015, p. 21). QA has thus been mainstreamed amongst staff, creating a pervasive culture, rather than isolated pockets, of quality. The inclusive approach strengthens the culture of quality, emphasising personal responsibility for QA.

Despite the acceptance of QA and the ISO framework in principle, at OUM "it is often a challenge to get involvement [in QA] at all levels … [QA] is often perceived as additional work and there is, in some cases, resistance to change," (Patten & Chadee, 2018, p. 13). According to Daft (2006) how staff interprets QA documents is a challenge, particularly when there is ambiguity. While ISO9001 offers a broad framework, "the processes themselves are defined by OUM" (V. Sannasee, personal communication, December 11, 2018). According to the 2018 TEC report, despite the acceptance of ISO9001 principles "there was no formal quality assurance framework in place" at OUM (p. 29). Thus, the ISO9001 standards must be translated into a practical framework that is well understood and easily implemented by staff. Figure 2 illustrates the relationships between various drivers of QA at OUM.
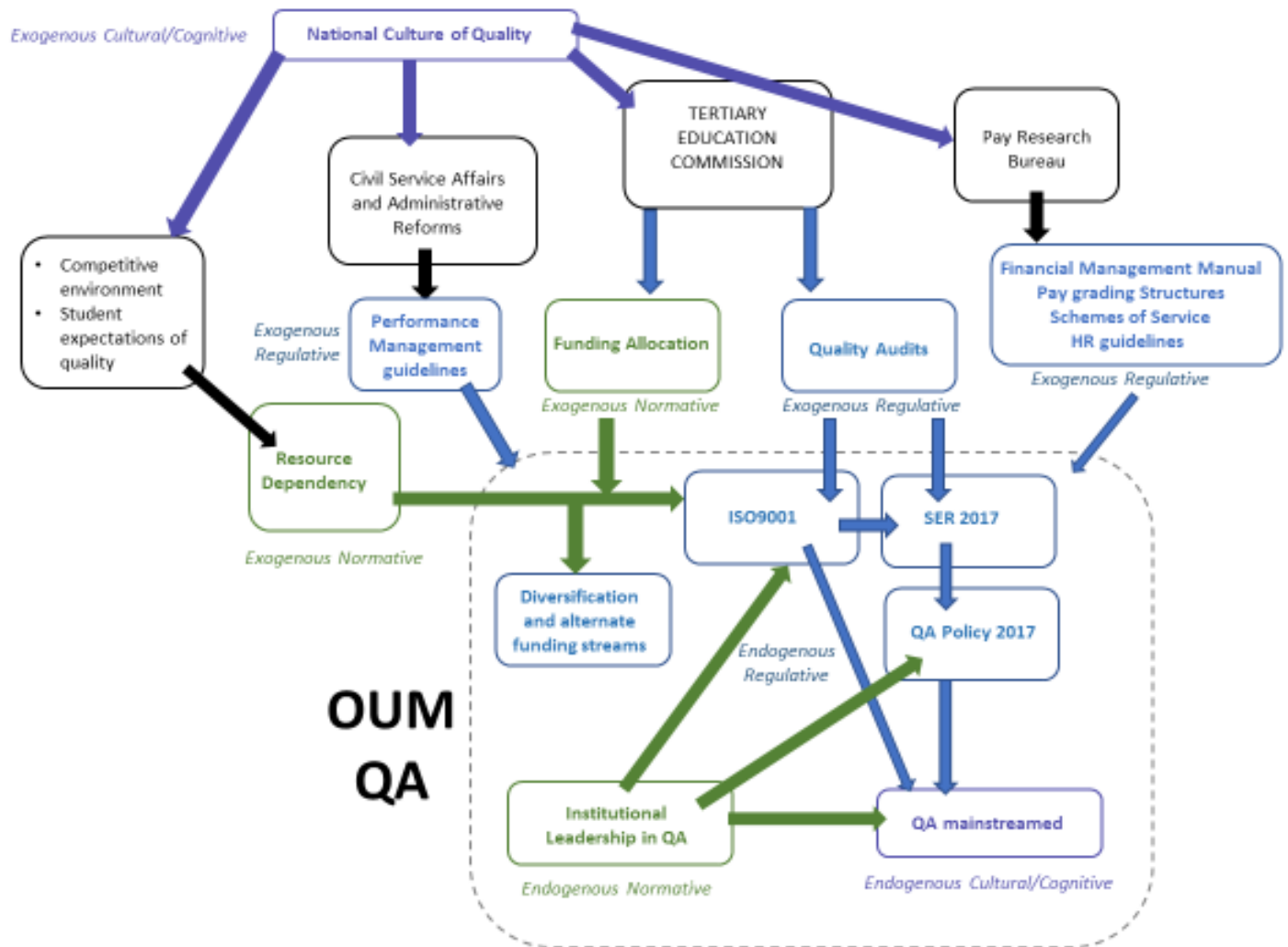
Figure 2. Endogenous and exogenous drivers of QA at OUM.

Lessons Learnt

Based on the analysis presented and the review of literature the authors raise the following observations and recommendations.

- Exogenous. Regulative drivers. A challenge in implementing QA at OUM is that external bodies, such as the PRB and TEC, have requirements or guidelines that do not fully align with the OU context. To support QA of ODL institutions, the authors recommend that national QA frameworks span the range of delivery methods, including flexible guidelines that can accommodate individual institutional solutions. According to Woodhouse (2006), criteria for judging inputs and processes and their correlation with quality outcomes are similar in both face-to-face and ODL programmes; however, because people and resources are dispersed or online, different questions and enquiry

methods to assess quality may be necessary in an OU. A separate set of instruments to accredit ODL programs should be developed and form part of the requirements of national qualification agencies. As per Liu's recommendation (2016), ensuring that national frameworks are compatible with institutional praxis helps align endogenous and exogenous forces, increasing the likelihood of adoption.

- Exogenous. Normative drivers. As government investment in tertiary education declines, outcomes-based QA measures will be essential for OUs to attract learners. Resource dependency means that OUs must be more accountable to society and responsive to the labour market. OUs should align curriculum with labour market needs and competencies to increase graduate employability. Moreover, it will be increasingly important for institutions to involve learners in quality processes. For example, learner feedback can be facilitated by technology, such as social media review systems. In a competitive market with decreasing funding, OUs must have plans for alternate funding and seek innovative ways to ensure that they meet stakeholders' expectations.

- Endogenous. Regulative drivers. The alignment of internal regulative QA frameworks to the specificities of ODL must be considered. The ISO9001 standards are not designed specifically for quality management in HE. The recently developed ISO21001 standards for educational management systems may be a more appropriate tool for QA in open universities and should be assessed and adapted for the OU context, considering the specificities of ODL. Internal regulative frameworks should also address emerging technologies. Increasingly, OUs are taking up open educational resources (OER), MOOCs, and open platforms for publications. The characteristics of these open tools must be recognised in institutional quality systems. Innovations pertinent to the future of OUs must be addressed within QA policies and frameworks, so that internal regulative drivers of QA are relevant to the evolving landscape of ODL.

- Endogenous. Normative and cultural/cognitive drivers. Koul and Kanwar (2006) describe a *culture of quality* as an institutional culture that promotes the introduction of an internal QA system and its ownership at all levels, values capacity building, stresses accountability to stakeholders, and focuses on learning rather than instruction. Kanwar (2013) highlights the difficulty in creating a culture of quality through a top-down process. The responsibility of quality must be close to the department/unit responsible for particular functions and leadership in QA must be fostered at all levels. This can be achieved by the setting-up of QA committees at several levels, with reporting lines to monitor and evaluate QA. Awareness workshops for staff should be conducted frequently to promote understanding and ownership of QA. At OUM, the involvement of staff in the creation of the vision and mission, regular capacity-building workshops, and the dissemination of QA documents are examples of inculcating a culture of quality. However, specific efforts should be made to ensure frameworks align with the realities of ODL. An important step will be for OUM to clarify the on-the-ground practices associated with their QA policies and frameworks, and to incentivize implementation amongst staff. Additionally, ODL institutions will benefit from dedicated, well-staffed QA units, with the leadership and skills to implement the QA agenda. Recruitment of leadership positions will be essential for providing strategic direction in QA.

Conclusion

Both internal and external forces influence the adoption of QA measures at OUs and determine whether adoption is for the sake of compliance, for improvement, or for both. Since its inception, OUM has undertaken multiple interventions in QA, driven by both endogenous and exogenous factors. These include extrinsic factors such as: requirements/directives of government bodies and institutional regulations; normative forces like resource dependency and institutional mission and mandate; and cultural/cognitive factors such as a national culture of quality, and institutional leadership and legacies. While these drivers have facilitated QA implementation at OUM, the analysis reveals gaps and tensions, particularly in terms of the applicability of regulations and processes to the OU context, as well as a lack of resources, capacity, and buy-in, which may act as barriers to effective implementation. The forthcoming *Higher Education Act*, which provides for a Quality Assurance Authority to ensure QA aligns with international standards, enhance QA mechanisms, and promote good practices, will undoubtedly impact QA in Mauritius. This exogenous, regulative force will likely drive QA interventions at OUM, which will need to comply with these enhanced standards. While institutions have little control over their exogenous environment, they can determine their reaction to external forces and pressures. Moreover, institutions can drive QA adoption and improvement through endogenous regulative, normative, and cultural/cognitive mechanisms. Internally, the development of QA policies and plans, together with the ISO9001, has helped to inculcate a culture of quality at OUM. To move beyond a compliance approach, the continued involvement of all staff will be crucial. To meet the dynamic needs of a sector increasingly shaped by technological innovation, innovation in QA for higher education is essential. This will require the involvement of diverse stakeholders, and a re-thinking of traditional roles and responses. A culture of quality relates to a culture of care, and such a culture must look beyond compliance and aim for improvement.

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