

**QUALITY ASSURANCE OF DISTANCE HIGHER  
EDUCATION IN THE ARAB REGION: FOCUSING  
ON EGYPTIAN EXPERIENCE**

*A Dissertation Submitted to*

**Department of Education,  
Graduate School of Education,  
Hiroshima University**

*In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of*

**Doctor of Philosophy**

*In*

**Education and Human Science**

*By*

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**2007**

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to *my husband*. Without patience, understanding, and sacrifice, I would not have achieved this goal.

It is also dedicated to *my children* who have endured my anxieties in accomplishing this thesis.

Finally, it is dedicated to *my mother* who has supported me to embark in this long journey since my primary education.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to take this opportunity to appreciate the encouragement, support and effort that some people have contributed towards the completion of this dissertation and my doctoral program.

First of all, words are not enough to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Akira Ninomiya. His great efforts in providing me with encouragement, sound advice, and lots of good ideas throughout the construction of my study, made this thesis possible. This thesis would not have been without the support of my sub-supervisors, Professor Gengo Koike and Professor Kazukiyo Kono. I am deeply indebted to them for their suggestions and feedbacks which refined this thesis. My appreciation also goes to Professor Yutaka Otsuka for his constructive advice.

I am also indebted to my colleagues at the Institute of International and Comparative Education for providing warm support, outright kindness and comfortable environment which enabled me to complete this thesis and to have wonderful time along the way. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Ayami Nakaya, Aya Watanabe, Masashi Urabe, Takayoshi Maki, Yumiko Kanai, Johanna Diwa, Kozue Tsunoda, Sato Hitoshi, Jian Xiu PAN, and Tomoko Shimomura. I would also like to express my gratefulness to the secretaries, librarians, and all administrative staff members in Hiroshima University for assisting me in many different ways. Many thanks to all of them whose efforts have created a comfortable place for international students to study. I am also grateful to many Japanese people who over the couples of years had welcomed me into their homes, offices, as a student or friend.

I would like to thank the subjects who provided me with the data that were essential for accomplishing this study. Finally, I am forever grateful to my country for giving me the opportunity to carry out this study, especially to the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education which has funded my doctoral program in Japan.

Hiroshima, 2007

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## **Abstract**

In the Arab region, concerted efforts to adopt distance education mode had been exerted by various providers in meeting the dynamic demands of Arab society. Unfortunately, the absence of quality assurance procedures or mechanisms is one of the major obstructs in the development of distance higher education in the Arab region. Given that both distance education and quality issues are new in terms of concepts and practices, there seems to be an urgent need for continuous researches on distance education quality. Seeking to address this unexplored area through investigating the quality of distance education in Arab region, with a specific focus on Egypt from diversified stakeholders' perceptions, could be a helpful way in ensuring the quality of such programs. Thus, the main purpose of this study is to develop a quality assurance framework for distance higher education in the Egyptian context.

For that purpose, exploring the perceptions of various groups – such as students, faculty members, and administrators – on quality distance education and what quality mean for them, is a critical step prior to putting in place any quality assurance mechanisms. Accordingly, three various instruments were developed to outline what quality is. An 86-item questionnaire was delivered to 496 distance education students; a 91-item questionnaire was distributed to 53 faculty members; and a semi-structured interview was conducted with 10 administrators including 2 Deans, 6 Vice-deans, and 2 coordinators of open education centers. In spring semester of 2005, participants for this research were drawn from three Egyptian universities: Ain-Shams University, Alexandria University, and Assuit University.

In dealing with students' data, factor-analytic techniques were employed to identify the latent factors of distance education quality. Therefore, data analysis was split into two steps: exploratory and confirmatory. Using SPSS 14.0, exploratory factor analysis resulted in a 39-item instrument within nine components that accounted for 50.58% of the total variance in the scale. They were named as material design, assessment and evaluation, media, student preparation, involvement and supplementary materials, institution policy, course evaluation, enrolment procedures, and materials delivery. The second phase of data analysis was confirmatory factor analysis using Amos 6.0 path diagram. It was employed to examine the validity of a model where “quality” represents a second-order factor with nine first-order factors extracted in previous phase. The estimation process indicated that the model provided an acceptable level of model-fit.

Descriptive results of faculty data analysis revealed that setting up consistent well-developed policies and mechanisms that address staff-related issues was the primary concern for participants. The second important issue was training area indicating that the faculty need to be sufficiently trained in pedagogy, technology, and communication so that they will be comfortable with this method of instruction. The third one was to support faculty during course development and course delivery as well. The second section of faculty questionnaire included staff responsibilities in ensuring quality of distance education. On developing materials, staff members see themselves as developers of self-study core materials in the first instance, then comes their roles in selecting media, followed by preparing course outline, and finally as developers of supplementary materials. In terms of supporting students, responses were ranked as follows: providing sufficient personal pre-registration counselling; providing students with timely academic support; providing an orientation prior starting the course; providing students with counselling support; and finally encouraging interaction. With regard to interview, administrators' opinions were almost consistent with the results of students and faculty data analysis in terms of providing various services to support students at a distance, and providing faculty with appropriate support and sufficient training.

These perceptions on distance education quality guided the process of developing a quality assurance framework that may serve as a means of organizing a series of interrelated-activities which support the design, development, and delivery of distance education. From their points of view; this framework encompasses the responsibilities of the administrators and faculty members toward providing quality learning experience for distance education learners. This quality experience could result in investing much effort in nine main areas: material design, interaction and supplementary materials, students' preparation, media, assessment and evaluation, material delivery, enrolment procedures, institution policy, and course evaluation. In view of this, quality distance education experience stems from two types of support that can be delivered to students. The first type is non-academic as offered by distance education providers through administrative staff members. The second type is academic as provided by faculty members. For the second type to be effectively provided, the faculty members also need appropriate support to fulfill their responsibilities in distance education environment.

