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INTER-CULTURAL COMPARISONS OF STAFF PERCEPTIONS ON QUALITY IN ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING

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As online education has become firmly embedded in the international higher education landscape, considerable concerns and problems have arisen all around the world, particularly in relation to the quality of this mode of instruction. However, 'quality', like 'freedom' or 'justice', is an elusive concept. People all have an instinctive understanding of what quality means but they find it difficult to articulate. Quality is a value-laden term: it is subjectively associated with that which is good and worthwhile. But that means that people from different social and culture backgrounds are likely to have different views on what constitutes quality. This in turn is likely to impact on the form of online education that will be acceptable in a particular location.

In order to provide online education that is effective in different contexts, more needs to be known about this diversity of attitudes to quality. This research aims to identify and explore the perceptions of quality among distance education professionals and is a collaborative work between UK and China. We intend to find out staff conceptions and perceptions on quality in online education and the critical factors to ensure quality in the two countries. The UK Open University (UKOU), Chinese Central Radio and Television University (CCRTVU) and a number of Chinese online colleges are providing the case material and the practitioners around which the study is based.

The study has initially involved face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 15 interviewees. The participants were all staff members of the UK Open University. The role of each individual may be critical in their view of quality in online education. We therefore decided to categorize the groups of interviewees as a basis on which to analyse their responses. Information was gathered about each individual's role in the UKOU, subject background, duration of employment and gender. From this the following groupings were formed: central academic staff, academic related support staff, staff tutor (regional academic manager) and associate lecturer (tutor). This organizational principle has subsequently been used to choose interviewees in Chinese online institutes. We have now completed ten interviews in China and the initial observations about perceptions of quality has shown up some interesting contrasts with those obtained from the interviews in the UKOU.

Contrasting perceptions of quality in online distance learning in the two locations

In the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) provides independent assessment of how higher education institutions maintain their academic standards and quality. So the UK Open University belongs to the same assessment and funding system as other, conventional universities. The UKOU regards the range of standards and guidelines from the QAA as important quality references and uses these to ensure that the quality of the University's programmes can be directly compared with those from all conventional UK universities. Interviews show that most of the UKOU's staff perceive quality as a measure of "fitness for purpose". They identify the critical factors in the quality assurance of online education as the processes and procedures governing course development, student support, assessment of student learning and effective interaction with learners.

In China, the online education system is composed of CCRTVU, and online colleges which are affiliated to key national universities. Online learners are adults in employment. The quality standard is different from conventional Chinese universities. In our interviews, the quality perceptions of staff in China are different from their UK counterparts. The perceptions mainly focus on the *two* factors of "fitness for purpose" and "value added". Most staff feel that it is inappropriate simply to compare the quality of online education with that obtained from a conventional university. Quality, they suggest, lies instead in the degree of personal and professional development that will have been achieved by a student from enrolment to graduation. And the critical factors of quality assurance are course development, student support, the learning process, assessment and feedback, and staff development.

The underlying reasons for these differences in perception are being explored with the aim of establishing whether they can be reconciled in common frameworks and benchmarks that recognize the different social contexts within which the institutions are operating.