


Open distance and e-learning (ODEL) assessment indicators for quality learning

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Citation: Lifuka, E. (2025). Open distance and e-learning (ODEL) assessment indicators for quality learning. *International Journal of Professional Development, Learners and Learning*, 7(1), e2505. <https://doi.org/10.30935/ijpdl/15733>

ABSTRACT

This paper is aimed at identifying indicators of open distance and e-learning (ODEL) assessment for quality learning in higher education. The demand for university education in higher learning institutions has continued to grow and hence there has been a phenomenal expansion in enrolments that are not matching with the expansion of facilities. As institutions of higher learning step up to offer their academic programmes by ODeL mode of instructional delivery, there are concerns from stakeholders about the quality of the certificates and degree awards. This can be attributed to inadequate quality assurance standards to assess the quality and value of ODeL academic programmes. The concept of quality, in general, is debated to a high extent, even though it is a common word, it is not a well-understood concept and is defined differently by different individuals in different contexts at different points in time. The implications of poorly assessed students in most cases result in half-baked graduates who may fail to grasp the concepts, skills and knowledge in their area of specialization. On the same score, it is envisaged that the process of assessment requires students' full engagement with clearly explained criteria that includes peer-reviewing of each other's work and the necessary support that is provided to the students on the programme. The process of assessment is an iterative process and benefits both the lecturers and students. Although assessment demands a synergetic approach by all the players in the delivery of a programme, there are other critical indicators of assessment that promote quality teaching, and these must be taken into serious considerations. Therefore, the paper contends that there are various indicators of ODeL assessment for quality learning. Additionally, the paper presents Evans' assessment tool (EAT framework) that could be used to improve quality e-assessment feedback of ODeL and move away from the more traditional methods of providing feedback to the learners under this mode.

Keywords: ODeL, assessment indicators, open and distance learning, e-learning, quality learning, formative assessment, summative assessment

Received: 19 Jul. 2024 ♦ Accepted: 21 Nov. 2024

INTRODUCTION

The current level of interest and concerns in the delivery of programmes through open distance and e-learning (ODEL) by various higher education (HE) institutions demands for quality learning through rigorous means of students' assessment. Currently, e-learning has become a popular way of learning, it has increased exponentially in recent years. In order to support the improvement of e-learning quality, a variety of quality measures are developed by researchers and organisations. Several assessment factors need to be considered. Assessment models and frameworks vary from one context to another according to the specific output and purpose they measure. They focus on technological aspects, on pedagogical views, on the training course or on increasing learner's satisfaction. On the one hand diverse assessment criteria and dimensions are proposed and used for evaluation. With the growing availability of educational technologies, educators want to know how to make the best use of them. With the

expansion in e-learning adoption by institutions comes the demand for quality and accountability.

A significant issue in this regard is that while there is a free and growing market in e-learning, there is also a proliferation of benchmarks and quality guidelines. Therefore, indicators of ODeL assessment could be identified through (assessment activities) that institutions of higher learning put in place to maintain and continuously improve their quality learning. In other words, indicators for ODeL are the necessary features present and describe the efficiency and effectiveness of assessment activities for quality learning. According to Evans (2015) assessment is the lynchpin that helps in maximising the potential of pedagogical innovations and keeps pace with disciplinary knowledge. It is regarded as valuable and relevant within HE and its wider contexts to accurately measure meaningful learning. The process of assessment requires students' full engagement with clearly explained criteria that includes peer reviewing of each other's work and the necessary support that is provided to the students

on the programme. Consequently, students level of grasping the concepts is to a great deal enhanced and appreciated.

Quality is defined as that which appropriately meets stakeholders' objectives and needs, which are the result of a transparent, participatory negotiation process within an organisation (Ehlers & Pawlowski, 2006; Nikiforova, 2020), while Sabur (2015) says, quality is the total feature and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. This shows that quality can be seen differently in conjunction with knowledge, information and educational technologies.

In this case, the indicators for ODeL in terms of assessment should reveal and guide quality of learning. It is important to state that indicators for ODeL assessment for quality are contextual and equally depend on several factors that include internet connectivity, programmes being run, infrastructure and facilities available as well as knowledge and skills of the academic, tutors and technical staff. Conversely, assessment is an integral part for any design of e-learning. In fact, the curriculum, programme and course design are expected to state clearly the forms of students' assessments.

CLASSIFICATION OF ASSESSMENT

HE institutions that offer programmes through ODeL mode should aim at developing and implementing robust quality assessment systems for their students. There are two forms of assessment, which includes formative and summative. These forms are employed in various modes of delivery of programmes including ODeL. This section presents a set of activities under each of these two forms. Further, provide indications for quality learning based on these same activities. As earlier indicated, it is necessary that learners be engaged in their learning by ensuring that they understand fully how to tackle assessment given to them and the underpinning principles which must be clear (Evans, 2016).

Formative Assessment

In ODeL (tertiary level), formative assessment provides feedback to students and in most cases, take different forms that include online self-assessment texts, quizzes and other formal items that contain feedback comments from the lecturers and tutors (Gilbert, 2004). Depending on the structure of the course or programme, these formal items could be regarded as summative, and feedback is given to the learners for them to know what progress they are making. Conversely, the role of formative assessment in the delivery of programmes through ODeL is crucial to ensure students' needs are considered to minimise the limitations that independent learning poses. Formative assessment enables stated aims or objectives of an educational programme to be met within a framework as it highlights students' progress (Williams et al., 2012). Once this is designed appropriately it helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses, hence enables them to improve their-regulatory skills so that their education is managed by themselves in a less haphazard fashion than is commonly found (Kulasegaram & Rangachari, 2018). Moreover, the most outstanding principle in this form of assessment is feedback. It is advisable that academics in ODeL provide short, clear and concise feedback to their students; as this enables learners to identify their challenges and how they should be addressed by them.

In a way, formative assessment is diagnostic assessment, and it is difficult to distinguish the two. However, in real practice the two have

different emphasis and are applied differently. Diagnostic assessment is a detailed enquiry and can lead to re-checking what student needs are. On the contrary, Gilbert (2004) accentuates that in some cases formative assessment is not detailed in assessing students as well as their challenges and problems. On the same score, Hollins (2011) uses 'diagnostic' to explain formative assessment as a process by which academics tune into thinking of their learners, diagnose their progress in learning and use this information to come up with more practical measures to enhance students' learning. Like in any other mode of learning, students under the ODeL mode of education delivery have an important role to play apart from being honest and open on the difficulties they face; it is advisable they take part in the process of assessment (Evans, 2013, 2016; Hollins, 2011).

Summative Assessment

This form of assessment is used in evaluating students' skills and knowledge acquisition as well as their general achievement at the end of their prescribed programme. Using ODeL HE Institutions set up specific goals and criteria in their respective courses, modules or programmes in terms of summative assessment (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013). According to Chaudhary and Dey (2013), some of the HE institutions give more prominence in terms of weight to the final examinations that takes place either at the end of the term, semester or programme. This practice has a negative implication on the students that fail to perform as required for them to move to the next level despite their good performance in formative task. Furthermore, summative assessment helps in determining the level of student knowledge as well as the effectiveness of the study programme (Hildén et al., 2022).

Therefore, summative assessment should be explicit in terms of requirements for successful completion by the students (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013; Evans, 2013). Summative assessment must be fair to all the students in ODeL so that no student is given more latitude or advantage than the others are. Further, this form of assessment should be valid to measures the skills and knowledge that students are expected to attain. Internal consistent of assessing the students under ODeL mode is necessary for purposes of reliability. Having different activities within this form of assessment helps in reducing over dependence on one and makes it difficult to strike a balance.

In cases where various examiners are involved in the marking exercise and they are widely dispersed, the institution involved should come up with a programme to co-ordinate the assessment criteria where all markers come together. This could be in the form of a meeting or workshop. The idea is to harmonize the marking so that the judgement of the students is not seen to be different as well as avoiding what may be termed as impressionistic marking or grading. Such an exercise could be followed by external moderation of summative assessment as a quality assurance measure.

It is important that measures should be undertaken at institutional level in ODeL that students adhere to ethical academic practises by not getting involved in any form of cheating or plagiarism. One of the software applications that could be used is 'turn it-in' to check the amount of plagiarism in students' work before marking is done. Students' code of practice should be clear and explicitly explained in their handbooks. Students must be aware of the institutions' policy as well as sanctions for those who are found culpable of faulting the regulations. The use of technology would offer options and opportunities for assessment of students through using 'intelligent

flexible learning model', which puts together the students and instructors. For example, video conferencing, interactive multimedia, online, internet-based access www resources and computer-mediated communication could be employed to avoid cheating by the students (Ansari, 2002; Aoki, 2012).

In designing programmes through ODeL, there is need for institutions of higher learning to make sure that opportunities that are available in this mode provide platforms that are necessary for feedback to the students for proper assessment (Williams et al., 2012). In this case academics might require technical complex support systems both design and development of learning activities such as formative and summative assessments that can utilise virtual learning environments. Regarding students' feedback on assessment, this paper proposes EAT that will be discussed later in the paper and how best institutions and academics could use this framework.

INDICATORS OF QUALITY FORMATIVE AND SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN ODeL

There are various ways of ensuring quality formative and summative assessment in ODeL. In a way, some of the measures have earlier been mentioned such as explicit, fairness, validity and reliability of assessments combined with proper co-ordination of marking students' work. The following are some of the indicators of ODeL assessment for quality learning at institutional level:

- Curriculum design at institutional level should be robust and create a balance for formative and summative assessment that considers various methods of online assessment in giving timely and prompt feedback to the learners.
- Assessment activities and procedures should be clearly stated and documented with straightforward guidelines and all those involved must undergo specialised training to make proper judgement of the students' work. These processes should include monitoring and moderation of results before publishing them to the students as part of quality assurance.
- All academic staff must be aware of challenges and problems of students particularly those identified to be having problems. Employment of appropriate security measures is necessary.
- Innovative ideas that promote students' engagement in assessment as well as feedback (Williams et al., 2012). It means therefore that students should be encouraged to be involved in stimulating learning activities that promote reflection.
- Assessment tasks should always aim to match with the expected learning objectives and these tasks should measure higher order thinking skills, deep understanding of the domain knowledge and graduate attributes (Oliver, 2003).
- Assessment should be varied and measure a wide range of learning outcomes. Assessment tasks for the students should also be designed in such a way that they are contextualised.
- Assessment under ODeL should include clear and focused feedback on how students can improve their work including signposting the most critical areas (Evans, 2013). There is a need for effectiveness of assessment feedback (AF) in programmes under ODeL mode. This feedback can be asynchronous or synchronous, face to face or indeed at a

distance. Evans (2013) states that advocates of such kind of feedback argue that it encourages students to adopt deeper approaches to self-regulation and independence of learning.

EVANS' (2016) ASSESSMENT TOOL (EAT FRAMEWORK)

The framework in **Figure 1** could be used to ensure effective e-assessment feedback to maintain and continuously improve quality learning in ODeL. In this case, formative feedback should include all the resources useful to students' progress in their learning for immediate and long term (Evans, 2013). This means that the learner and the lecturer within the context of the programme and future gains in employment can apply EAT.

Elements of EAT

Quality formative assessment should aim at supporting ODeL students to self-monitor and regulate their own progress in terms of learning. EAT consists of assessment literacy (AL), AF, and assessment design (AD).

Assessment Literacy

In any given assessment, it is a requirement that learners are fully engaged in their learning processes so that they appreciate what is expected of them. What this means is that in any given assessment lecturers and students should speak the same language. It is prudent that students are encouraged to believe in themselves, give opinions and motives in AF.

AL1. Clarify what constitute good

It is important that in any module or programme a clear explanation should be given on what constitutes 'good' and how this shared understanding should be achieved. This means that students should be made to not only understand what is good but the many ways of attaining this with regard to the assessment given.

AL2. Clarify how assessment elements fit together

When an assessment is given students should map the way they think the AD is and therefore confirm and possibly revisit all the elements how they fit together with the support of lecturers at regular intervals. Most importantly is the way shared understanding and how an assessment fit together.

AL3. Clarify student and staff entitlement

Student support is key in ODeL as this motivates them to manage their assessment. Whatever support is available to the students should be made clear as well as their role in the assessment process, this is necessary for feedback givers and feedback receivers. In other words, the engagement of students in assessment is more meaningful with clear guidelines.

AL4. Clarify the requirements of the discipline

Assessment is given to students for them to meet prescribed learning outcomes of a programme or course. It for the same reason that in supporting students' retention there is clarity regarding the core concepts and threshold. Students' induction in the programme is vital for them to appreciate the challenges and strategies that could be used is their assessment. This approach promotes students' independent learning and for them to remain focused.

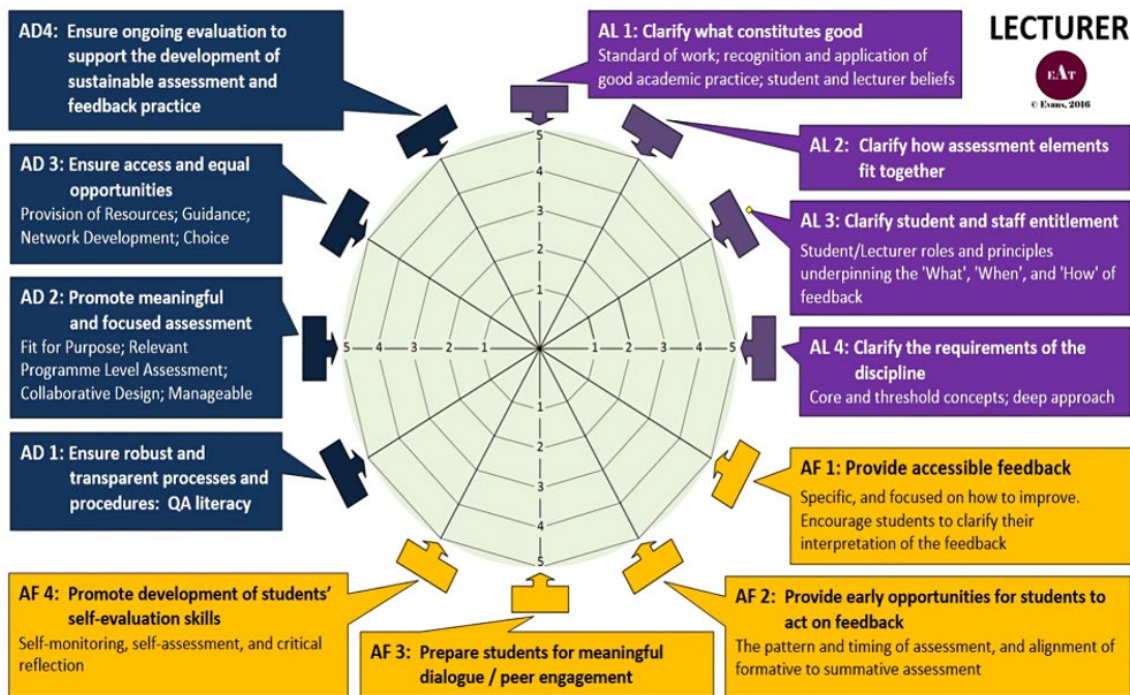


Figure 1. EAT framework (Source: Evans, 2016)

Assessment Feedback

AF emanates from the actual tasks given to the students and provides solutions for the immediate context and for the future. The aim of this feedback is to support students by extracting the main concepts or principal ideas from such feedback. Students will only actualise their beliefs and effort once they develop and maintain motivation. Students understanding of feedback depends on gestures they receive towards knowledge skills and disposition over and above their module.

AF1. Provide accessible feedback

Assessment should remain focused and ideas of how it could be made clearer be taken on board. Emphasis on the overarching concepts should not change anyhow in the giving feedback to the students.

AF2. Provide early opportunities for students to act on feedback

From the onset, 'needs assessment' should be conducted to identify the kind of support that students might need. The idea is to give feedback to the students as quickly as possible to create early opportunities to explain complex tasks. As indicated earlier, formative feedback should have a link with summative assessment so that there is no mismatch.

AF3. Prepare students for meaningful dialogue/engagement

Students must be encouraged to work together as peers as this promotes self-regulatory skills, a sense of collaboration, build confidence and autonomy. Students should be organised to effectively contribute and work together in the design and delivery of programmes. The roles of the students should be clearly explained to all of them so that they appreciate their engagement.

AF4. Promote development of students' self-evaluation skills to include self-monitoring/self-assessment and critical reflection skills

ODEL students need to be supported in their self-monitoring and self-assessment independent from their instructors. The support given

to students in terms of self-monitoring and self-assessment help them to navigate and find their own resources and networks. Students' reflexivity is important and helps the lecturers appreciate the support structures that are in place.

Assessment Design

Comprehensive approach to AD is required to address important concerns regarding; relevance of assessment, volume of assessment, inclusive nature of assessment and collaborative design of assessment to ensure shared understanding, sustainability and manageability. Conversely, it is important to address fundamentally the contribution of technological support in operationalisation of EAT and development of each of the 12 sub-dimensions. The EAT is adaptable and easy to make adjustments that would fit in any context.

AD1. Ensure robust and transparent processes and procedures (QA literacy)

Quality assurance essentially helps HE institutions to achieve their goals and aims in an efficient and effective manner and ensure goals and aims reflect the requirements of all the stakeholders in an adequate way (Vroeijenstijn, 2004). Therefore, Quality assurance is an approach to manage quality, focuses on the management processes, and aims to apply agreed procedures to achieve defined standards as a matter of routine. In this case, the EAT's emphasis is on developing lecture QA literacy and innovation demands proper understanding of quality assurance and collective responsibility by all those involved in AD.

AD2. Promote meaningful and focused assessment

Students' assessment should aim at sorting out future challenges and problems in the field. Therefore, there is need to make sure that assessment activities relate with developments within real context. The idea is for students to make meaningful connections to what they have practiced before and provide solutions to such. There is a need to make it clear to the students the reasons why certain tasks are given to them so that they see immediate and future relevance. AD should embrace all those who are involved and each academic staff or indeed the students

must meet their obligations. Academic staff are key in this process and therefore it is prudent that they appreciate and understand where and how their module fits in with a specific programme.

AD3. Ensure access and equal opportunities

The objective principle of AD is to make sure that all the students under ODeL mode are given the same leverage in terms of activities and resources. Students must be given the same opportunities and various options to choose from. Once students are given resources from the inception, it is quicker to decide the actual resources and assistance that they need. It is such steps that aid students in improving strong resource networks using the internet or other virtual learning tools. In this case students will be able to create knowledge and share it with their peers.

AD4. Ensure on going evaluation to support the development of sustainable assessment and feedback practice

A valid feedback system should result from the intersection between lecturers and the students. Although this kind of process may not be easy and takes time, it also helps in the teaching and learning processes. Feedback should not be complex but straight forward and justifies the use and application of certain teaching pedagogical processes. Most importantly is the promotion of feedback among the lecturers to contribute to the entire programme.

CONCLUSION

The advancement of education in many ways depends on Assessment. Quality assessment in the provision of programmes in ODeL demands for more collaborative effort from the various stakeholders involved in this process to improve and maintain quality learning. For this reason, eLearning has become a particularly attractive educational method, as the use of web-based tools reduces the costs of sharing vast amounts of data. In addition, it reduces communication barriers and geographical distance gaps between individuals and increases academic mobility in HE.

Quality assessment through ODeL provides people with disabilities to have better access to HE and allows smaller institutions to gain international visibility through study programmes online.

However, Assessment demands that lecturers/ tutors and students perform their specific roles for effective feedback that consequently improve the quality of learning. The process of assessment is an iterative process and benefits both the lecturers and students. Although assessment demands for a synergetic approach by all the players in the delivery of a programme, there are other critical indicators of assessment that promotes quality teaching, and these must be taken into serious consideration.

Funding: The author received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Ethics declaration: The authors declared that this study was exempt from ethical committee approval since it was a theoretical study, and no human subjects were used during the study. All the sources used were appropriately cited.

Declaration of interest: The author declares no competing interest.

Data availability: Data generated or analysed during this study are available from the author on request.

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