Text for Video – OUC Course on Online Learning

Sir John Daniel

As a Senior Advisor to the Open University of China, it is a pleasure to introduce this course on Online Learning. I am delighted that the course uses the *Guide to Quality in Online Learning* that we produced in 2013.

Why did we produce this Guide? We created it because universities all over the world now realise that online teaching and learning will be an important part of their future.

MOOCs, the Massive Open Online Courses that began to make news in 2012, have suddenly brought online learning to public attention. But online learning has a much longer history than MOOCs.

You are from the Open University of China, so you know that using technology and media for distance education began a long time ago. Even online learning has twenty years of history. Over that time the number of students taking courses online has grown steadily.

For example, in 2009 some 44% of American university students took some of their courses online. The forecast for 2014 is that 80% will study online. Around the world university administrators, professors and students are asking how they should prepare for online learning.

That is also true for Open Universities. Experience in offering traditional distance education is an excellent foundation for offering online learning, but online learning is different in important ways. Some universities have found it helpful to go into partnership with commercial companied to offer online learning. I work part-time work for one of those companies.

This company is called *Academic Partnerships* or AP. It has already helped 50 American universities to go online and now has partners in other parts of the world as well. As AP's university partners multiplied it became clear that we needed a short guide, aimed particularly at university officers like you, to explain what online learning is and how to do it well.

Two South African experts, Neil Butcher and Merridy Wilson-Strydom, wrote the Guide. As South Africans they have the advantage of knowing about online learning in both rich countries and developing countries. This dual perspective is important. Online learning is now a global phenomenon and the Guide draws on experience from all over the world.

My role, with my DeTao Masters Academy colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, was to edit the English version of the Guide. The CCTRVU Press did a beautiful job translating the Guide and the Chinese translators raised questions that helped us improve the English version as well.

The Guide is structured around 16 Frequently Asked Questions that provide the framework for your course.

Before we look at those questions let me say why the Guide will be useful to you in China. China is a large country. Over the coming years you will develop your own Chinese approach to online learning. However, in China you are also very good at learning from experience around the globe and adapting it to your own needs. The Guide contains examples of online learning from all over the world, so it is a rich resource.

The Guide is based on questions that everyone doing online learning must answer, so it has universal value. It is as useful to universities in China as it is to universities in the United States, France or India.

Let me give examples and look with you at some of the questions that you will explore in the course.

The first question is obvious: what is online learning? The Guide defines it simply as a method of delivering educational information using the Internet. This covers a wide range of uses. However, the Guide focuses particularly on fully structured online courses that include assessments of student learning and the awarding of qualifications.

The Guide is also useful to universities offering informal learning like MOOCs, even though they do not usually lead to a qualification. However, its main aim is to help universities that offer full courses and degree programmes online.

The Guide notes, as I said, that many universities partner with commercial companies in order to do online learning effectively. But the university must always be responsible for the quality of the qualifications that it offers, so the Guide stresses that it must also ensure the quality of the partners' work.

So what is quality in online learning? This is the key question. You cannot answer it in one sentence. The Guide begins with three points about quality.

First, quality assurance is a means of accountability. It is a way of reassuring governments, students and the public that the university is doing online learning in an effective and professional way.

Second, quality assurance is a way to improve quality. The first version of any course will always have room for improvement. Quality assurance helps ensure that the course gets better each time it is offered.

Third, the student perspective is the starting point for quality in online learning. Some say that online learning is a process of co-production between the online learning environment and the student. They mean that students have to engage more intimately and individually with online learning than when learning in the classroom.

In order to ensure quality you must build it into every aspect of the university's work in online learning. The Guide identifies key areas that need attention.

A basic requirement is that the institution embeds online education in its mission. University leadership must make online learning part of the institution's vision, make a commitment to doing it well, and put good planning and quality assurance processes in place.

This commitment will ensure that institutional structures are adapted to the needs of online learning and resources are made available where they are needed. This means having processes in place for activities such as course development, student support, managing technology, staff training, and student assessment.

The questions in the Guide address these and other issues in more detail, giving examples from around the world.

For example, two questions explore the resources and structures needed for online learning.

Another key question asks how students should judge the quality of online courses. Online learning is not something that is delivered to a passive student. Students like to have clear information about the course and good tutorial support. They react very negatively if the technology does not work properly. Another question looks at how you can create good interaction within a community of students online.

Several questions deal with the learning resources used in the course, the instructional design and the structure of the virtual environment. One advantage of online courses is that they can include open educational resources from around the world. But again, the university offering the online course must take responsibility for the quality of everything in the course.

Other questions look at web design and usability and using the range of multi-media materials and simulations that are now available. The Guide insists that you integrate such materials into the basic design of the course and not use them as an add-on for entertainment, because students don't like that.

The Guide ends with questions about student support, student assessment and examination security.

To sum up, the Guide provides a good structure for your course and I hope that you find it stimulating. Your task is to create effective online learning systems for China. The Guide can point you in useful directions, but you will have to apply the lessons that it brings you from around the world to your own situations.

The fact of being online learners yourselves as you take the course will lead you to your own conclusions about what is quality in online learning. That is very important. Study with a critical frame of mind, asking yourselves how you would improve the experience.

I wish you success and enjoyment in your studies.