# Public Policies for Quality Assurance in Distance Learning Towards Territory Development

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**Abstract.** This paper is about public policies for quality assurance in distance learning towards territory development. The study was based on the literature review which enabled an overview of the key concepts for a better understanding of the theme and documental analysis to bring experiences from Mozambique. Challenges for distance learning pubic policies that recognize different contexts are also presented, as well as suggestions for quality policies conducive to the local development; and a short note for further work is also included.

**Keywords:** Distance learning · Public policies · Quality assurance · Territory development

## 1 Introduction

Distance Learning (DL) as a flexible mode can contribute to the territory development through settlement of inhabitants on their own environment, avoiding displacement in search of educational opportunities, which very often are in the cities, as is the case of Mozambique. DL can also lessen the demographic pressure over urban areas from people seeking academic institutions, as well as better socio-economic conditions. Through DL people can acquire contextualized qualifications based on the specific needs of a territory. This paper presents public policies for quality assurance in distance learning towards territory development through literature review, which enabled an overview of the key concepts for a better understanding of the theme, as well as documental analysis to bring experiences from Mozambique. The following section (Sect. 2) is an overview of the concepts on quality assurance, public policies and distance learning; Sect. 3 is about the contribution of DL in the territory development, followed by Sect. 4 that deals with the challenges to quality public policies towards territory development, including future work.

## 2    Quality Assurance, Public Policies and Distance Learning

There is no doubt that discussing quality assurance public policies in DL is extremely important because education plays a huge role in preparing people for life and for the efficiency and effectiveness of all socio-economic sectors. Quality in education is the center of attention at the global level and is a recommendation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2015–2030 (UNDP 2015).

The growing concern in quality of education provided has led to different interpretations of what quality is and how should it be maintained, and even increased. Regarding the first issue, quality is perceived as a "philosophical concept" (Green 1994, 27) and "quality is often referred to as a relative concept" (Harvey and Green 1993, 10). Authors believe that quality is everything with perfection, excellence, fitness for a certain purpose, value for money and transformation (Harvey and Green 1993; Green 1994; Harvey 2006). In the context of education, such view may not be appropriate due to the dynamics that occur and involve people interactions, though the concepts may serve as the basis for the understanding of quality assurance mechanisms in educational settings.

As raised by Harvey (2006, 1) "Quality assurance is about checking the quality…". Vlăsceanu et al. (2007) advanced the meaning of quality assurance as an internal process to achieve the vision, mission and objectives of the institution. However, considering quality assurance only from an internal perspective of the institution would be neglecting the government's responsibility for provision of DL programs.

Indeed, quality assurance in DL involves both internal and external processes. Internally, it is an endogenous monitoring mechanism to verify the degree of achievement of the vision, mission and objectives of the institution, to improve the offering of programs. Externally, quality assurance is primarily the responsibility of government or non-governmental regulatory institutions that play an important role in safeguarding the standards of education established through respective public policies.

Based on different perceptions of quality due to the different interest groups, such as government, teachers, students, parents, employers and the community in general, it would be sensible for quality assurance mechanisms to accommodate these different quality focuses. In this sense, depending on the specific context in which public policy is defined, we may find different models, especially in relation to established quality standards, although all models tend to share basic procedures and principles.

With the rapid development of communication technologies, which contributes to the emergence of new approaches to education, leading to enrichment of the development of DL, in the coming years is estimated to account for 30% of the educational supply (Ossiannilsson et al. 2015). Indeed, the development of technologies has driven the evolution of social media networks, which in turn have a great impact on the way of approaching DL practices (Peters 2004; Bates 2008). In teaching and learning in a digital context, the user has the possibility, from self-instructional and other materials, to interact dynamically with the study contents. The student passes from a passive subject, becomes active and participates individually and collectively in the process of knowledge production. The electronic availability and the possibility of combining the various support tools allow the creation of more integrated learning environments, which facilitates distance study. These dynamics require provision of responsive quality public

policies, which in DL generally its implementation is carried out through accreditation processes.

In Mozambique, the full process of accreditation involves three main governmental institutions, namely: *Instituto Nacional de Educação à Distância* (INED), a public and regulatory body that among other assignments must define policies, undertake the audit and review of DL institutions and programs at all levels of education (Conselho de Ministros 2006). Another body is called *Conselho Nacional de Avaliação de Qualidade* (CNAQ) which is responsible for academic compliance of programs. The third is *Direcção Nacional do Ensino Superior* (DINES) which caters for the legal aspects of the establishment and running of all higher education academic institutions. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the three key stakeholders in the full cycle of DL accreditation.
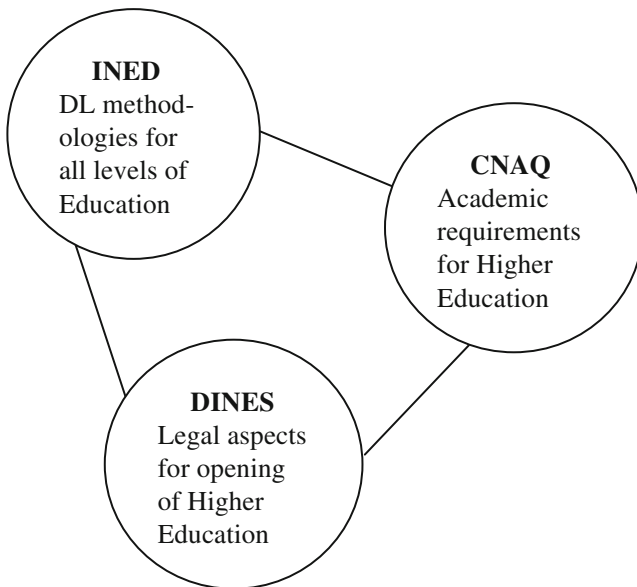


**Fig. 1.** The three key bodies for full distance learning accreditation process in Mozambique.

In 2009, the Regulation of ODL was approved and it is applicable to all levels and types of education. According to the regulation, accreditation is defined as quality certification awarded by the accrediting body, INED, based on the results of the external evaluation to the institution, course or study program (Conselho de Ministros 2009). The accreditation system in Mozambique consists of seven key DL dimensions applied in a systemic approach to evaluate both institutions and programs. Each dimension is given a relative weight resulting from the need to respond to the type of irregularities most frequently committed by institutions. For example, the dimensions' *pedagogical organization*, *study materials* and *student support services* hold a greater percentage (20%) each, than the *institutional strategy for distance education* (6%) and *monitoring and evaluation* dimension (7%); as they are the areas that have the greatest impact in

the provision of DL courses nowadays in Mozambique. Below the seven key dimensions for quality assessment in DL and their respective relative weights are presented (INED 2014):

Dimension 1:  Institutional strategy for distance education (6%)
Dimension 2:  Pedagogical organization (20%)
Dimension 3:  Physical and technological resources (10%)
Dimension 4:  Study materials (20%)
Dimension 5:  Student support services (20%)
Dimension 6:  Human resources (17%)
Dimension 7:  Monitoring and evaluation (7%)

## 3   Distance Learning and Smart Territory Development

What is known today as DL goes back as far as the 1880s with the emerging of correspondence education. People willing to study at home or at work were able to do so through printed material, which reached them by postal services that took advantage of the railways network (Moore and Kearsley 2007). As other media became available and used to offer courses at distance, correspondence education became known as distance education (Holmberg 2003). "Distance Education is a suitable term to bring together both the teaching and learning elements of this field of education" (p. 38) (Keegan 1996). There is therefore an element of teaching and learning in this mode of education, happening separately from each other being this the main characteristic of this mode of education. In DL "(…) teachers and students are in different places for all or most of the time that they teach and learn. Because they are in different places, in order to interact with each other they are dependent on some form of communications technology" (Moore and Kearsley 2012, 1).

World over, DL has been used for different reasons. For instance, DL has been an opportunity for those with jobs, family responsibility and social commitments, but they can study at home or at work at their own time. People living in remote areas or where there is no school at all can as well benefit from DL and, in that way, not prevented from education. In some countries, the educational problems have part of their solution embracing DL with many countries in Africa establishing structures to run educational programs through this mode of education (Perraton 2012).

Mozambique introduced the National Education System in 1983 and adjusted it in 1992 under the law 6/92 to meet the new political and social transformations that the country was faced with. The National Education System contemplates DL as part of the System and can be used on its own or as component of a certain educational program.

Before independence, Mozambique experienced DL programs run from Portugal. The programs were very practical and people learned skills through short courses such as cooking, sewing, electricity, radio and TV repair among others. People acquired knowledge and skills that enabled them to deal with practical issues of daily life providing solutions for them and people surrounding them contributing in that manner to the betterment of their lives and families and ultimately of the community in which they were living. Through DL and without having to leave their environment, families

and community, people learned a profession that enabled them solving practical problems and also generate some income for their families.

The first DL experience under the National Education System was with the in service training of unqualified primary school teachers. The program started in 1984 through printed material, radio and occasional face-to-face sessions. Around 1,200 teachers from six (6) provinces were registered for training with the program. Due to the flexibility of DL these teachers did not need to leave their schools to attend training. While working they took training that enabled them to put into practice in the classroom the new skills, which contributed to improve their professional capacity and facilitating students learning.

Since then, many other programs followed that experience. In 2013 there were around 14 institutions offering DL programs and courses, 52.389 students and around 50 courses (Ministério da Educação 2013). DL is enabling people to get education without having to abandon their jobs, families and community; and in some cases not having to miss education because of the lack of educational opportunities locally.

Through DL people stay in their villages, towns and communities avoiding travelling and moving to other places to get education. This helps families remaining together and reduces the burden of the costs of education in other places far from their region providing them the opportunity to contribute to the development of where they live. While in Mozambique in every town and village there is a primary school, the same does not happen with secondary schools or higher education institutions, which are mainly located in provincial capitals and in some major towns.

Education is key to development. In "(…) the late 1950s and early 1960s there was general agreement among politicians, educational and social planners, and scholars that education was a key agent for moving societies along the development continuum" (Fagerlin and Saha 1989, 40). In the beginning of the 1960s the world started investing in education (formal and informal) with the believe that by educating and training people would impart skills, knowledge, attitudes and motivation to contribute to economic and social development (Psacharopoulos and Woodhall 1985).

Since the early days of independence, Mozambique invested tremendously in education and, as a result, the education system grew considerable. From 1974/1975 to 2016, primary schools went from 5,261 to 12,527; secondary schools went from 9 to 703; vocational and professional schools went from 29 to 120 and at the tertiary level from one (1) institution to 49 institutions. In the same period, the number of students in total went from 709,299 to 7,276,981 (Ministério da Educação e Desenvolvimento Humano 2016).

Although the tremendous improvement in education since independence more needs to be done, so that access to education could become available to most of the population. The expansion of education, obviously, requires resources. Resources are not always available which could pose a problem in the provision of education for the population.

The Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2012–2016, which will be prolonged until 2019 to ensure the fulfilment of the planned activities, highlights "(…) the continued expansion of the Education System, within the possible limits to guarantee the quality of the educational services offered, through exploring several delivery modalities, including

distance learning and benefitting from the potential of new technologies" (Ministry of Education 2012, 2).

Education is crucial for development. With education people are better prepared to contribute with their knowledge and skills for the development of the society and the country. The National Education System in Mozambique recognizes DL as a delivery mode of education opening opportunities for everyone to learn no matter the condition ensuring, therefore, expansion and access to education. Through DL Mozambique is delivering primary education, secondary education, vocational education and higher education programs to those in need. With these programs, people are getting the knowledge and skills without having to abandon their jobs, leaving families and abandon their communities to get education. They are acquiring knowledge and skills to deal with the challenges they are faced with and come up with well-informed solutions contributing to their economic and social development as well as of the country. DL with its main characteristic of being a flexible mode of learning can contribute to the local smart development by enabling people to remain in their environment, villages and towns avoiding pressure of the already overcrowded urban areas in search for academic institutions.

## 4   Challenges to Quality Public Policies Towards Territory Development

In general, the challenges of DL public policies leading to the development of the territory accompany the stage of socio-economic development of a space. Although diversification of sources of knowledge and the way it is accessed is a valuable form of preparing people to actively participate in the development of a territory; it is still a challenge to have acceptable mechanisms that can guarantee quality of education provided. The extension of sources and forms of knowledge are somehow a major challenge worldwide for the development of public policies conducive to the provision of quality DL.

In the context of developing countries and Mozambique, in particular, although political enabling environment is visible there are still major challenges in the provision of the basic technological infrastructure, such as power supply, bandwidth and equipment; qualified personnel to deal with technology; experts on the DL quality public policies and financial resources for a number of initiatives including research.

It is also a challenge to develop policies that promote development of territories since it would be necessary to avoid the "one size fits all" approach but taking into account particular contexts to allow people not to leave their places of residence and/or work in search of educational opportunities, which are often found in the big cities, as in the case of Mozambique. The rural exodus very often contributes not only to the delay in the development of the countryside, but also to the demographic pressure in urban areas. The challenge is to make a public policy caters for different realities in order to achieve the desired development of a space made up of differentiated contexts.

The spectrum above briefly presented usually is mitigated through definition of strategies in order to focus and overcome the main challenges. In Mozambique, the issue

of quality is one of the three pillars of education. The ESP recognizes that "the sector will continue to improve the quality and relevance of post-primary education to strengthen its role in the economic, social and political development of our society" (Ministry of Education 2012, 33). In addition, as recognized in the DL Strategy for the period 2014–2018 (Ministério da Educação 2013) the government advocates for a DL system that guarantees citizens access to the different levels and types of education through expansion of institutions and programs that meet the needs of socio-economic development with quality and equity. With this approach it is expected from the government policies for quality assurance in DL to cater not only for people well-being but also for smart territory development nationwide as well as beyond borders

Due to the rapid increase of DL providers, including the diversification of courses offered, as a response to the government strategy, there was a need to regulate the use of this educational modality in the country. To this end, the government created INED, in 2006, as a public and regulatory body. Among other assignments must create and develop the system of quality assurance and accreditation in ODL (Conselho de Ministros 2006). Regarding government quality assurance mechanisms for DL to face accreditation of transnational DL programs, it is suggested that countries work closely in the recognition of a program in the country of origin.

In the near future, it is worth to mention that studies need to be carried out to recommend what DL public policy should address to accommodate different needs of different people in different contexts, as in the case of Mozambique. With quality public policies that recognize context differentiation, DL would contribute to the promotion of territory development since people would access quality education and training remaining in their communities, and thus responding to the local socio-economic demands.

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