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CHAPTER 7 • MARKETING OF ODL

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1. INTRODUCTION

Marketing is a set of activities and tools that support the success of a product in the market. But it is not merely an instrument for support; it is an absolute necessity for the success of ODL. It helps ODL courses and the implementation of e-learning in adult education significantly. Marketing is important because it allows the definition of target groups and helps to discover and identify their educational needs. It also plays a role in planning and identifying necessary resources and finance. In cases where ODL courses are sold, marketing is expected to explain the advantages to potential participants to help them decide if the course is right for them.

We can look at 8 of the 10 steps recommended by the British Learning Association (formerly the British Association for Open Learning), which can help guide education and training providers in setting up a marketing plan for ODL.

Step 1: Benefits - what does your organisation hope to gain?

- Flexibility to update and deal with change
- Opportunities for learner involvement
- Low delivery costs for large numbers of learners
- Opportunities for monitoring and evaluation of outcomes
- Access for all
- Expand your geographical target area
- Reach new learners

Step 2: Outputs - what measurable outputs do you expect?

- Delivery of a specific programme
- Learners reporting high satisfaction
- Proven cost effectiveness
- More people involved in learning
- A shift in attitudes towards learning

Step 3: People inside and outside the organisation

This step emphasises that implementing e-learning is a big project and can only be successful with the support of the whole organisation. Relevant categories of people in a training/education provider are:

- managers
- personnel/human resources staff
- teachers/trainers/tutors
- learners

External institutions may also be relevant in developing marketing activities. For a training/education provider these include:

- Funders
- Accreditation bodies
- Social partners
- Governments at various levels.

Step 4: Strategy

- Is the approach flexible enough to deal with change?
- How does it relate to existing learning programmes?
- How will the initiative be managed?
- How does e-learning fit in to the organisational culture and mission statement of the organisation?
- What strategies will be needed to get the necessary resources to implement e-learning?

Step 5: Delivery solution

- Generic vs. bespoke materials
- Bought in vs. in-house development: if bought in, which providers may be useful? If in-house, who will create the content and who will deal with instructional design?
- Blended learning
- Does the organisation already have the skills to do this and if not can people with the relevant skills be hired?

Step 6: ICT issues

- Does everyone in the target group have access to a PC?
- Will learners need initial training in IT before they can begin the e-learning programme – if so, how will this training be supplied?
- Is the IT manager aware of potential issues?
- Does your network have enough bandwidth/storage space?
- What IT standards are you working to? Will the target group's computers be able to operate at the required standard?
- How much investment are you prepared to make in IT?

Step 7: The human touch - what personal contact will be made available to learners?

- Can existing tutors provide online support? Can online personal support be provided to all learners?
- How much training do existing trainers need?
- Can learners work in groups? Is there a facility for online collaboration?
- Will there be an option for blended learning? Will face-to-face opportunities be available?
- Will off-line assignments and assessments be part of the course?
- What new relationships between learners, materials and tutors can be developed?

Step 8: Starting - final steps before launch

- Specify the programme
- Be clear about the strategy
- Keep others on your side
- Manage the development phase
- Involve learners in the pilot
- Evaluate the results
- Publicise success

Adult education continually presents new challenges coming from several directions:

- For various existing sub-groups of adults
- For newly defined sub-groups of adults

- For new forms of life-long learning
- For the search for optimal ways of combining formal and informal learning in adult education

ODL can be implemented only if those who decide on national and regional strategies in adult education are convinced of its usefulness. It is also important that all relevant people in organisations implementing ODL are convinced that it is an appropriate strategy for the organisation to follow and are willing to take the necessary steps towards implementation. This type of commitment can be shown through the mention of ODL in the organisation's mission statement or if it is otherwise made clear in official policy. The application of ODL in adult education is broad, but is not always practical nor is it necessarily the best method in all cases. The purpose of this chapter is to inform users of this manual about marketing activities that are useful in supporting ODL in life-long learning.

Marketing in support of ODL needs to:

- Recognize the previously defined benefits of ODL for adult education
- Influence decision makers in favour of ODL implementation
- Define the most likely target groups for ODL - course participants (learners)
- Identify and define their needs for education.
- Inform potential learners about ODL courses being offered
- Identify resources needed to implement ODL and ways of acquiring resources not already available within the promoting organisation
- Evaluate the quality of the ODL course being offered

If we want to perform educational activities, we should realise that we need to advise potential participants and decision makers that:

- ODL courses exist
- What they mean
- What they offer
- What their advantages and disadvantages are
- What their benefit is for the participants themselves, as well as for the organisations where they work, or for society

It is useful to think about marketing for support of ODL in adult education at three different points in time:

1. before the course starts - the preparatory phase
2. while the course is going on - the implementation phase
3. after the course has been completed - the evaluation phase

2. PREPARATORY PHASE

The following considerations help a provider decide on appropriate marketing activities:

Mission statement

Does ODL feature in the mission statement of the organisation? How open will the organisational culture be to ODL? How will the structure of the organisation work with/adapt to an ODL programme?

Operating Environment - includes a short summary of the environment in which the organisation operates. STEP and SWOT analyses are useful to look at the relevant issues. (More information is available in the IAML3 training materials.)

Service Information

A lot of factual information may be available on a service but it is also important to think about the features and benefits that differentiate it and make it valuable to potential learners. This information will help the provider to communicate effectively and interest the people who need to be attracted. If the target groups/potential learners are unfamiliar with the benefits and features, the marketing materials may need to provide background to help them understand what makes your programme/course stand out from others.

Marketing issues and marketing objectives

Identify the key marketing issues that you need to address and set some clear, unambiguous, marketing objectives that are achievable within the period of the marketing plan. These objectives will provide a focus for your marketing activity. Use the information elaborated in the first 4 sets of questions to develop your understanding of your objectives. It can be useful to have numerical targets as well as general ideas of activity (see section 2.3 on benchmarking, below).

Marketing activity

Marketing activity needs to be appropriate and cost-effective, and should take into account whom you need to reach, what you need to tell them, and what you want to achieve.

Budgets and resources - see section 2.2 below⁴⁹

There are several reasons for developing and offering ODL courses. For example, one may want to train a bigger group of people than is possible in a face-to-face setting, offer a comprehensive set of courses, or the group of people to be educated may be spread over a large geographical area making face-to-face learning more difficult.

When undertaking a decision to offer ODL you need to consider:

- Who is to be educated?
- What is the aim of the education?
- What sources of funding (if any) will your participants be able to access?
- What existing sources of education are available? Who are your competitors?
- How will the effectiveness of education be guaranteed? How will you monitor this?
- What is the expected return on investment for the individual and society?

It is true that ODL activities are not the optimal solution for types of education that require people to gain certain types of practical skills. ODL can be enhanced through the use of items such as CD-ROMs, DVDs, or video cassettes with visual and audio demonstrations of the skills to be obtained, but it is often better to offer this kind of course through an attendance-based class or at the least through some form of blended learning. For more on this see chapters 4-6.

From the standpoint of marketing support, education is a product, just like any other kind of goods and services, which will have a certain life cycle over the course of which marketing will fulfil different tasks at different times.

In putting together a marketing plan for a new ODL course, an organisation must create an inventory of its existing resources in order to decide how much can be done in-house and how much outside expertise or resources must be acquired. The quantity of resources available should be carefully weighed against the expected resources needed to run the planned ODL course or courses.

Market research is a tool that enables an organisation to define both the target groups and their learning needs. After a learning needs analysis and definition of the target groups (how many people), decisions about the preparation of an ODL course can be taken.

2.1 Target Groups

It is important to define the people or organisations that you are targeting with your ODL. It is generally useful to sub-divide them into groups that have similar characteristics and who are likely to behave/respond in the same way, as you are likely to require different approaches for different groups. You should also try to identify key individuals in the organisations i.e. decision makers.

When thinking about target groups in ODL you will need to ask some questions:

- How will the target groups for ODL differ from the existing target groups of the organisation?
- What difference will this make to the way marketing materials address each group? For instance, target groups for ODL might come from a wider geographical area than target groups in traditional educational settings – marketing may need to be targeted/implemented differently to reach the full range of the potential target group.
- How much do you know about the organisations or people at whom you will be targeting your marketing? The more information that you have about them, and their priorities and expectations, the more easily you can match their needs to your service.

Identify the information that you have and what you still need. This is really much the same for ODL as for any other educational programme.

The target group for ODL is specified by the answer to the first question asked above, namely: Who is to be educated?

However, in marketing ODL there are actually two target groups, the primary target group: those to be educated and the secondary group: those who affect the implementation of ODL in adult education and who will promote, recommend or reject it. Thus, marketing must be targeted at two different groups of people:

- Potential ODL training course participants
- Decision makers.

Both of our target groups have the same general need: appropriate educational courses targeted at adults. However, the specific needs of each target group will be different.

For marketing, it is important to identify the needs of the target group and then to formalise them into specific requirements. Marketing then works with these requirements.

Decision makers need or want to have a certain number of people educated in a certain area of education, for example in order to:

- have educated people in the region who will find adequate jobs there
- reduce unemployment
- support the establishment of small and medium-sized enterprises in the region which will pay taxes and thus support development of the region
- accelerate implementation of new technologies and increase labour efficiency
- train existing employees to use new technologies or to work in new fields
- provide leisure activity for people living in a certain area
- raise the overall skill base of the region to attract inward investment and increase the number of jobs available
- make up for poor initial education

People who want or need to learn, may do so because they:

- want to get a job
- want to get a more interesting job
- know their career cannot grow without acquiring further skills
- want to develop their social skills
- want to learn a language for travel, work or personal reasons
- have an interest in the subject being taught
- want to learn a new skill or hobby
- need additional training as a requirement of a profession (e.g. continuing legal education or other in-service training)
- wish to gain a qualification to validate existing skills⁵⁰

Each target group has different needs which are complementary in that they lead to the same requirement: further education for a certain number of people in a certain period of time with necessary respect for various pedagogical and andragogical approaches as addressed in the previous chapters of this manual.

It is not easy to identify members of the primary target group. Their educational needs depend on many external conditions that have to be taken into account (development of the region, what jobs are available, changes in legislation, etc.) Also internal motivation to participate in adult education differs from case to case and can change over the course of a person's life. Consideration of both internal and external influences is important when identifying the learning needs of any target group.

2.2 Resources for ODL Courses

For an organisation wishing to offer ODL, the following types of resources should be identified with respect of the whole programme of education training operated by that organisation:

- human resources (people, expertise)
- material and technical support resources, equipment
- financial resources.

Human resources

Using ODL in adult education, it may be possible to educate more people with the same number of lecturers (through this is not necessarily a feature of all ODL courses).

There are several reasons for this:

- Some of the learning is self-directed
- the lecturer is not a mediator in one-way communication, but becomes a partner and advisor - the character of an ODL course may be different from a face-to-face course

Principally, the organisation should look at its staffing situation and determine how much time existing staff can devote to a new programme of learning. In many cases it may be necessary for outside staff to be brought in either as developers of the course or to run it once it gets started. It is a common error to underestimate the amount of staff time that will be needed to maintain an ODL system once it is running. An organisation which is considering ODL mainly or exclusively to reduce the cost of teaching staff should be especially careful in drawing up a realistic expectation of the staff time needed to run the course in a manner that will be effective for learning.

The expertise of staff must also be inventoried. ODL can require specific ICT skills and it is essential to know how well such tasks can be handled by the organisation. This is also a time to look at the expertise available in existing partnerships or to form new partnerships in order to bring in any expertise and knowledge that may be lacking within the organisation.

Material and technical support resources, equipment

Demands for training premises and equipment for training rooms are much lower than in the case of traditional methods of study as the trained group of people gathers for face-to-face discussions only occasionally or not at all and meets only virtually. Even when blended learning is used, instead of learning entirely through distance methods, the demand on premises will be lower than if all the learning were being done entirely using face-to-face methods.

As many ODL systems are ICT based, the level of technical support will be an important determining factor. Institutions should look realistically at the amount of support available and decide whether additional support systems will be required to cope with the increased ICT burdens. Support may be needed both in setting up the course and in a more long term sense for the maintenance of any ICT system that is set-up. Like underestimating the amount of teaching staff time needed to run an ODL course, it is a common mistake to take into account only the first of these considerations without understanding that the IT support burden will likely be an ongoing concern.

The organisation will need to decide whether to use existing teaching or training material available commercially, to commission bespoke teaching or training materials from external providers or to develop teaching or training materials in-house. The least expensive method may appear to be the last one, but the time it takes for non-specialists to become familiar with all of the issues raised by ODL may mean that in the first instance it is actually less expensive to buy-in already available materials because of the amount of staff time needed. Bespoke materials are the most expensive, but depending on the situation in which the organisation finds itself, they may be the best alternative. The other chapters of this manual will help acquaint you with the issues faced in ODL teaching and learning which should help you decide what kinds of teaching or training materials you wish to use. The website associated with this manual ⁵¹ will help you find out more about existing methods of ODL in your country.

Financial resources

As it has been already mentioned, ODL should not be considered merely a way to economise on teaching staff. High quality ODL (both in the pedagogical and technical senses) is even more expensive than classroom teaching. Many organisations choose to use ODL approaches in the mistaken belief that it will automatically save them money. A more realistic approach acknowledges that even though there may be long-term savings to the organisation, without an initial investment a programme cannot succeed. Organisations should be encouraged to take a realistic view of budgets and resources needed and plan for these accordingly.

A part of marketing decisions is, therefore, adding up all the necessary costs from internet connections to staff training. These costs should be laid-out in a budget, identifying the expenditure against the potential revenue sources. If the plans are ambitious, then it may be necessary to look for sponsorship or in-kind contributions. A good marketing plan will make it easier to get support.

Courses need clear financial management strategies to succeed. Preparation of materials including assessments, audio-visual aids and logistics, which is crucial for ODL, requires the involvement of many specialists. ODL courses are therefore not generally cheaper but may actually be more expensive than comparable learning using face-to-face methods. The costs per participant in the course are often quite high. ODL courses may be paid for by the participants, often together with contributions from companies and institutions; their financing can also be supported by local governments or other government grants.

Again, with respect to finance, it is important to account for both the costs of developing an ODL course and the costs of running it over the longer term. If an organisation does not have

sufficient financial resources to cover the costs of the course on its own, various sources of public or private funding may be available. These should be investigated thoroughly, with reference to the two issues of funding for setting up a programme and covering ongoing costs. It may be that the course will be self-sustaining through course fees once it is running, and careful consideration should be given to the number of learners necessary to sustain the course.

2.3 Benchmarking

The Benchmarking Exchange's website defines benchmarking as:
"a tool to help you improve your business processes. Any business process can be benchmarked. Benchmarking is the process of identifying, understanding, and adapting outstanding practices from organizations anywhere in the world to help your organization improve its performance. Benchmarking is a highly respected practice in the business world. It is an activity that looks outward to find best practice and high performance and then measures actual business operations against those goals"⁵².

For our purposes, benchmarking is the process of identifying and setting the targets you hope to meet as part of the implementation of your ODL course. Setting benchmark targets should be part of the preparation phase of your marketing plan. In industry, benchmarking is concerned not just with setting internal targets, but comparing internal performance to comparable organisations undertaking the same or similar functions.

Benchmarking usually takes one of two forms: performance benchmarking or process benchmarking. The former is usually a numerical process where various indicators across an organisation are studied. The latter is a more qualitative approach that looks at what factors and techniques are most appropriate and how best practice can be identified and applied⁵³. It is hoped that the database attached to this handbook will help potential ODL providers with process benchmarking.

Benchmarking is likely to involve talking to other education and training providers to get a sense of what standards they work to. This can be done in a formal or informal manner depending on your existing relationship with such organisations. In ODL key indicators may include the cost of the course per learner, the proportion of learners passing the course, and the proportion of learners dropping out of the course. As should be evident from this list, benchmarking is not just about the financial side of ODL practice; benchmarks can equally be set for indicators relating to pedagogical aspects of the course.

Having a clear benchmarking process may be helpful with obtaining funding for your course. Private and public funders may want to know what your benchmark targets are and further funding may depend on meeting the targets.

3. IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

Moving from the preparatory phase of marketing to the implementation phase, which takes place when the ODL courses are running, requires different issues to be examined.

In this phase, the following key aspects are important:

- Putting the case in favour of ODL
- Promotion of the ODL course, organising publicity (using websites, leaflets, prospectuses, informational meetings and networking with relevant people and institutions including decision makers and partners, etc.)
- Identification of bursaries or other sources of funding for learners and the organisation providing the learning (maintaining a diversity of financial resources, involvement of national or regional governments, private sponsors, etc.)
- Involvement of experts, partnership

3.1 Putting the case in favour of ODL

When an educational institution has decided to provide ODL courses it can begin the implementation phase. The implementation includes creating the right conditions for implementation (including assuring adequate time, space and money), solving problems as they arise, testing content and format and even, potentially, crisis management.

One of the most critical components of this phase of marketing is to motivate the learners to complete the whole of an ODL course despite there being little or no direct contact between the learner and their tutor. Lifelong learning is not mandatory in the way that initial education is; therefore, the motivation of those involved differs. Marketing must help answer the question: how do you motivate learners to keep studying? Motivation for ODL is more difficult to sustain. Motivation can be positive (professional career growth) as well as negative (loss of job in the case of not passing the training course). It is, however, very important to provide continuous motivation, because motivation decreases the longer the course continues. Motivation is a critical part of marketing in the implementation phase.

Therefore, it is important to inform people at the start of the course that they can overcome the difficulty of self-motivation by knowing how to study efficiently in an ODL setting. ODL training courses should provide a manual - a guidebook for learners with help on how to be successful in the course. This booklet should include the information that is discussed in the induction to the course, especially in longer ODL training courses, in order to reduce, as much as possible, the number of people who do not complete the course due to difficulties including loss of motivation. It may include information like:

- How to pace the study
- How to revise previously gained knowledge
- Tips on how to increase memory
- Information on being an active learner
- Identification of problems that may be faced by learners and suggested methods for coping with them
- Information about the point(s) of contact within the organisation including tutors and course organisers for learners who want to make direct contact for any reason
- Support for "learning to learn" (L2L) as appropriate for the course

The pedagogical method, especially important for adults who have not studied for a long time and lost their educational habits, is another critical element of the information to be provided when marketing in support of ODL training courses.

Further, learners should be informed about sources of funding they may access to cover course fees, childcare costs, travel and also living expenses if the course is more than a couple of hours per week. Information on funding may be available from local, regional or national governments, students' unions, or organisations set up to help learners. Some learners may be funded on the course by their employers and organisations should set themselves up to take these payments with as little difficulty as possible.

Participants on courses may be part of the marketing activities themselves. This can be direct if they discuss their experiences with other people or more indirect through bringing their new knowledge and skills to their work or being able to explain something better than before. This behaviour may increase the interests of other people to attend the same ODL course. Word of mouth advertising can be an invaluable tool in a "marketing toolkit". To further harness word of mouth, records should be kept, when possible, of student comments about the course. If positive, these comments can be used in other marketing materials to create interest in the course by sharing real experiences of past learners and can provide encouragement for people who are wavering about completing the course.

3.2 Marketing During Education

Marketing defines all products and services that have a certain duration or lifespan. The lifespan of a product or service can be divided into several different phases. It is important to note that there are different financial requirements for each phase. The life of an ODL course is also related to resources (see section 1.2 above).

Participants' experience can be used for promotion of ODL training courses offered by an institution. This can extend the growth and maturing phases of the course's lifecycle (fig. 7.1).

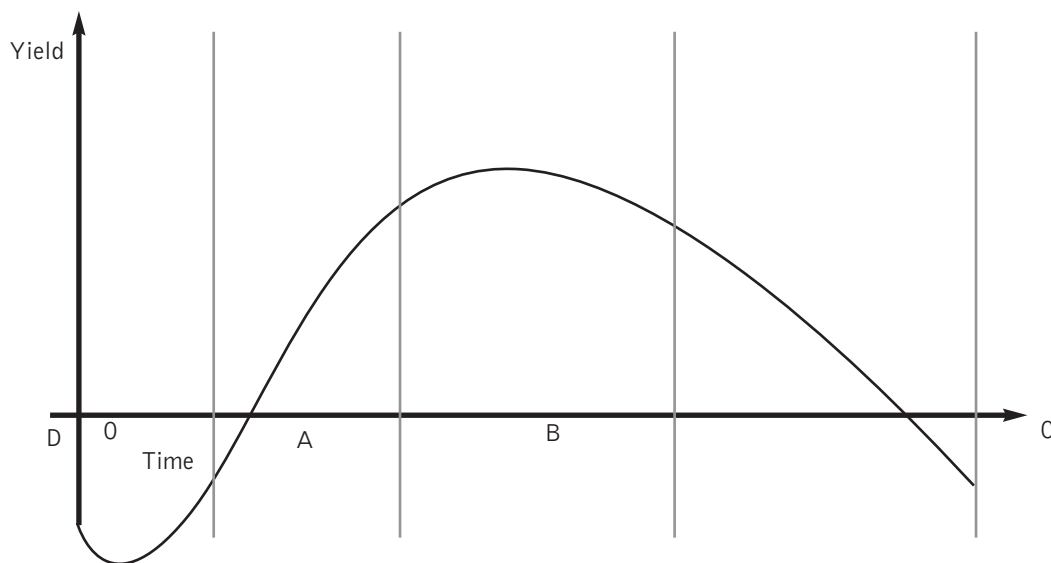


Fig. 7.1 Different phases

Phase 0 - A: product implementation: initial investments are huge; profit is negative (financial loss)
 Phase A - B: growth: the return on investment is already positive, profit goes up
 Phase B - C: maturing: return on invested funds is based on the phase's duration; however, costs of marketing measures increase

Phase C - D: dying: lifetime of course ends; additional expenses in marketing would not pay off.

The relative lengths of these phases and the total lifetime of the course will vary greatly depending on the type of course, the size of the target group and many other factors. From this diagram, it is clear that putting effort into marketing ODL (e.g. publishing positive experiences of the participants, examples and demonstration) only makes sense for a certain period of the ongoing training course, so that as many members of the target group as possible are influenced or become participants on the training course.

Marketing is done at different levels in each phase of the lifecycle of the ODL course. While the implementation phase requires extensive promotion and substantial financial investment, the activities in the growth and maturing phases are less extensive, however, the target is being met here - involvement of the required number of participants. In the dying phase, marketing can focus on other target groups and utilise positive experiences from the present training course for evaluation. This can start the life cycle for a new product - ODL for a different target group or a different course.

What is significant about marketing in the implementation phase is the need to ensure that information about ODL in general and the course being offered in particular is comprehensible for target groups and the benefits and user-friendly characteristics of ODL made clear.

4. EVALUATION PHASE

Evaluation of the ODL process and its results is another important marketing tool. It is extremely important to know the level of learners' and consequently of decision makers' satisfaction. After the course has finished the course provider has to find out (by means of an interview or a questionnaire) whether the learners like the format or the system that has been offered. Of course performance is also an important factor but in this chapter we are taking a 'commercial' not a pedagogical perspective. Performance matters even from this perspective as the learner's perception of their performance will influence their satisfaction. On the basis of the analysis the course format can then be modified, if necessary.

There is one last question asked at the beginning of this chapter left to be answered: What is the return on investment in education to the individual and to society?

ODL offers solutions not only for the individual (who could not otherwise learn), but also for society, because it provides access to learning for

- people who live or work far from one another (e.g. various subsidiaries of one company)
- populations in rural areas or remote islands
- areas of course content that are so specialised that it would be hard to find a viable learning group even in a heavily populated area.

In ODL, it is often best to offer a modular course system as different target groups can use the modules, combining them at their own discretion and to meet their individualised needs. This increases the number of potential users of individual modules, thus improving the return on investment expended in the preparation and marketing of ODL activities.

The ODL provider should investigate the opinions of learners, tutors, management and any other stakeholders directly involved in the implementation of an ODL course. An internal assessment should be carried out to gauge opinions about strengths and weaknesses of the course. Members of these groups should be asked about whether the course satisfied their expectations. All feedback received will form part of the complex answer about the success and quality of a course. Comments should be analysed carefully and they may be an important source for improvement to the course. From this perspective, evaluative activity can form part of the market research for the preparatory phase for a new course. The principles of evaluation need not differ

from that used in face-to face courses.

There is also the possibility of getting external feedback as part of the evaluation. This will usually cost the organisation money but may be worthwhile if the feedback can help make future programmes better.

Benchmarking⁵⁴ can also form part of the evaluation phase of marketing. The targets set as part of the benchmarking exercise should be revisited and the organisation's performance evaluated in reference to them. When preparation begins for the next ODL course, then the results of the benchmarking should be taken into account when new targets are set for the new course. An organisation that fails to meet any of its benchmarks and is clearly behind other learning providers might want to re-evaluate its positioning in ODL altogether or figure out how to best work collaboratively with those organisations achieving results closer to the benchmark targets.

At this point reports to funders are often needed if you have received public or grant-based funding. Funders will be interested in how well the organisation has done in comparison to its benchmarks and how their financial contribution was used to achieve this.

5. CONCLUSION

Marketing is a very important set of tools and activities that should be employed in keeping with good practice to support the effective implementation of ODL courses. Probably the most important and biggest part of it takes place in the time when an ODL training course is being planned and prepared. For an institution that is thinking about offering an ODL course it is necessary to ask certain questions that will help make the decision for or against offering such courses. There are many questions that should be answered in advance so that all further activities may lead to a clear definition of the aims of the course; of the target group; of technical matters like the duration of a course, the planning time, the structure of the course, the number of people involved; of all necessary conditions and circumstances (resources and external environment).

The institution should be able to define its target groups; it should know how to investigate the market – conduct market research, be able to analyse its findings and know how to prepare and manage finances of ODL courses. It means being able to define, analyse and cope with all kind of resources. Marketing also includes the preparation of a budget or financial plan in advance.

In the implementation phase there are different marketing activities focused mainly on promoting the ODL courses, the support and maintenance of learners' motivation and remaining realistic in all activities. There are several different phases of the marketing life cycle of an ODL course, like that of other goods and services. Therefore during the whole life of a course (from the first moment the course is launched to learners to the last moment of the last repetition) there are different marketing activities to be carried out. Marketing is closely connected with finances - in the last phases of the marketing life-cycle it is not reasonable to put a lot of resources into marketing because they will not bring back an appropriate return like in previous phases, especially the growth phase.

In the evaluation phase marketing concentrates mostly on collecting feedback from stakeholders and on analysing their relevant information in order to improve future ODL courses.

CHAPTER 8 • QUALITY IN ODL

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today quality plays a major role in educational systems. During the last few decades, it has also become one of the most discussed issues. However, awareness of the institutional and social benefits that arise from the development of tools and instruments for quality management in educational programmes is recent in Europe. Most European education and training organisations, as a result of both social and political pressure, have started to implement quality management systems based on standards issued by dedicated institutions or bodies.

The recent edition of ISO 9000:2000 which favours a wider vision of quality management applicable to any type of organisation has facilitated the implementation of quality systems at universities all over Europe.

The specific characteristics of the pedagogical approach and the supportive networked technology used in distance learning make it almost mandatory for providers to establish and maintain an excellent quality management system for the learning process. In fact, a good reputation is vital for ODL training organisations, especially if they operate in the Lifelong Learning (LLL) market.

This chapter is intended to present the definitions and terminology used in quality evaluation systems, as well as to describe universally accepted quality management systems, omitting any partial or national system. An overview of the most relevant quality systems dedicated to ODL is presented, focusing on the American and British systems due to their recognised consistency.

2. QUALITY DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

The modern concept of quality derives from the Latin word *qualitas*, a word used to express "that by which things are said to be as they are"⁵⁵. Philosophically, quality can be defined, in general, as the essential or distinctive property, characteristic or attribute that makes differentiation possible. In this sense, something's quality is whatever makes it special. That it is why quality has become synonymous with distinctiveness.

In its application to the field of evaluation of consumer products and organisational procedures, this notion of quality as distinctiveness has also developed throughout the last few decades. From a simple definition as "adequateness for use", the concept became ever more complex evolving into the current notion of "Total Quality Management". In the last edition of ISO 9000:2000 56