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# Quality Assurance Report



TERTIARY EDUCATION COMMISSION

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## 1. Overview of the Quality Assurance exercise

### 1.1 Background

The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) is the statutory body under the aegis of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research responsible *inter alia* for ensuring and monitoring quality in tertiary institutions in Mauritius.

Publicly-funded tertiary institutions are required to undergo institutional academic quality audits. This quality assurance (QA) exercise was carried out prior to the first cycle quality audit of the Open University of Mauritius (OU). The report is an outcome of the QA exercise conducted at OU.

Appendix A defines abbreviations and acronyms used in the report. Appendix B gives a brief on the institutional context. The list of commendations and recommendations is at Appendix C.

### 1.2 Objectives of the QA exercise

The objectives of the QA exercise were to:

1. Assess the institution's performance against its objectives and external references and also to assess its performance and outcomes in relation to national and international academic standards;
2. Establish whether the institution is embracing the concept of fitness for purpose as well as fitness of purpose through fulfilling its mission and achieving its objectives in an efficient and effective manner and demonstrating relevance of its undertakings;
3. Determine, in conjunction with other mechanisms, the promotion and enhancement of high quality in teaching and learning;
4. Ensure that the awards and qualifications meet national expectations in respect to academic standards and quality;
5. Provide a means of securing accountability for the use of public funds received by institutions;
6. Evaluate the systems in place to ensure that measures taken to maintain and enhance quality are appropriate and effective; and assess the strength of quality culture.

### 1.3 The Quality Assurance Process

Prior to the QA exercise, the Chairperson of the QA Panel accompanied by other TEC members had a preliminary meeting with the Chairman and Director General of OU. During that meeting, the objectives of the exercise, confidentiality issues and the QA programme were discussed.

The QA exercise at OU took place between 05 and 09 October 2015. On 09 October 2015, two members of the Panel accompanied by the Secretary carried out a site visit to the Curepipe campus of OU (ex-MBC building) In all, the QA Panel spoke with approximately 80 persons from OU in the course of the QA, including,

- Chairman, OU
- Board Members
- The Director General and the Management team
- The QA team
- Members of the Advisory Committee
- Academic and administrative staff

- Students
- The Staff Union

An open session was available for any member of the OU to meet the QA Panel. The Head of Academics and the Deputy Registrar seized that opportunity to meet the Panel again. The Panel also called back the Human Resource department in the open session for further clarifications.

This report relates to the situation at OU at the time of the QA exercise and does not take account of any changes that may have occurred subsequently. The report records conclusions reached by the QA Panel based on information gained through interviews and discussions as well as documents provided by OU during the exercise.

It is expected that OU will use the findings of the Quality Assurance Panel to strengthen its QA system and, thereby, facilitate the improvement of its core activities. While every attempt has been made to reach a comprehensive understanding of the University's activities within the scope of the exercise, the report does not identify every aspect of the activities of OU and the QA system, and their effectiveness or shortcomings.

The QA Panel would like to thank Mr Duva Pentiah, Chairman OU, Dr K Sukon, Director General, Mr V Patten, Head of Graphics, Publishing & Printing and other staff of OU for their cooperation during the QA exercise. The University is also thanked for its prompt production of requested information and its warm hospitality.

## 2. Governance

### 2.1 Vision and Mission of OU

The visit commenced with a presentation by the Director General of the OU providing a welcome and comprehensive overview of the history and developments of the OU. This included a review of progress and challenges to date. As a new institution the OU has made much progress. During the course of the visit the Panel met with the senior management team, board members, members of the advisory Panel, QA team, examinations unit and academic team, printing and graphics unit, library staff and support staff, the IT department, HR department and registrar, senior academics, the staff union and a range of students studying on the OU programmes.

It was evident from the discussions with staff of OU that there is a commitment to making OU successful. To date it appears there has been a focus on the quality of the administrative processes. OU is now in a position to review and focus on the quality of learning materials and pedagogy that aligns best to the mission of providing effective DL.

#### Commendation 1

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended for the commitment and vision of its management and staff.**

The OU is on the right track with regards to implementing one of its objectives that is to “*provide wider opportunities for education and training to the population, through open and distance learning, and promote lifelong learning.*” The OU recognise their unique role to cater for different types of learners and to provide learning opportunities to those who are usually not the main target of more conventional universities. The OU achieve this objective by being responsive to the needs of local learners, who are mainly adult learners. In fact, it was noted that most of its programmes are mounted on learners’ demand, or following requests from Ministries to provide training to officers.

An Open University has a social responsibility to cater for those who cannot follow standard university programmes, usually because these learners are employed full time, have families to support or have other commitments and restrictions. Meetings with different learners of OU have shown that OU are fully committed to provide a learning experience that is flexible and supportive. The method of distance learning adopted by OU; the blended learning method comprises DL through print-based materials and minimal face to face sessions (10 hours per module). This method meets the needs of the different learners as the contact classes of OU were necessary to enhance the learning experience.

OU being a new university in the ODL Mode, it is advisable that more members with experience in ODL forms part of the Board to ascertain that the goals and objectives are met.

The OU cater for different categories of learners, from housewives who do not have an opportunity to study because of family responsibilities, to convicts, who are unable to get access to learning because of freedom restriction, and to senior learners who are deemed too old to join conventional universities. By providing these learners with opportunities to access tertiary education, to get a new qualification or to upgrade their qualifications, at an affordable price, OU fulfil their objective of lifelong learning provision.

Improving access and democratising education should however not be synonymous to a lowering of the quality of education. The Panel noted that, while OU meet the objective to open access to learners, the academic entrance requirements are sometimes lower than for conventional universities and some students, who do not meet the general entry requirements, are required to enrol on the foundation programmes of the University before joining the undergraduate programmes. This should not deflect OU from providing an education, whether at foundation level or at undergraduate level, that is relevant and of high quality, so that the learners are at par with learners of other universities.

#### **Commendation 2**

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended for developing a clear strategic plan and the explicit statement of goals and objectives.**

#### **Commendation 3**

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended on the fulfilment of one of its objective of lifelong learning through widening access and giving opportunities to people of different backgrounds, age groups, and needs.**

#### **Recommendation 1**

**It is recommended that the Board of the Open University of Mauritius include more members with experience in ODL.**

#### **Recommendation 2**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius is supported by deliberative Committees and structures aligned to its strategic objectives to enable effective implementation, review and monitoring as the existing committees at the level of the Board are only ratification ones.**

## **2.2 Organisational Structure**

The OU Act includes a structure of the organisation. The structure gives an indication of the different units identified in the Act. All the lines report to the OU Board through the Director General. It appears that the lines have been added to fit the overall structure of the OU following the dissolution of the MCA. The Panel is of the opinion that a new structure should evolve in line with the strategic objectives of OU. Several core activities at times not related have been lumped in one unit. For example, Capacity Building is more of an HR function and QA relates to overall quality enhancement initiatives related to the management and delivery of the academic programmes. These two activities need to be considered separately and should have been reflected in the structure of the OU. Moreover the Panel is of the view that additional consideration needs to be given to enhance the collaboration between the various units in the structure in order to achieve the strategic objectives of the OU. For example the Audio Visual Unit and the IT Department should work more closely with the Academic Affairs Unit. The Panel is of the view that the structure need to be given due consideration to simplify its complex nature to allow the proper and effective functioning of the OU and in particular the line structure should be further simplified to reflect the structure of a modern University. The Open University is not a conventional University. It offers courses by distance mode and has a specific goals and objectives which should be further developed in the coming years.

It is also advisable to have a committee to ensure collaboration between private sector and the OU and to meet the demand of the world of work.

**Recommendation 3**

**It is recommended that the complex nature of the present organisation structure of the Open University of Mauritius be simplified to allow proper functioning of the organisation.**

**Recommendation 4**

**It is recommended that appropriate consideration be given to effective collaboration between the different units of the Open University of Mauritius to enhance the overall strategic objectives.**

**2.3. Internal communication**

The Panel gathered that organisational/ internal communication was not happening the way it should have been and is leading to frustrations and apprehensions. It appeared that very few people are aware of what exactly are the mission and vision of the organisation implying that a majority of staff members are detached from the core activities and there is no proper sense of belonging to the organisation. Communication of the mission and the vision and other important aspects of the OU to all stakeholders and in particular to the staff members should be done on a regular basis. Core activities are concentrated within a group of people in the organisation. Relationships with Trade Union members would benefit from regular meetings with Management

**Recommendation 5**

**It is recommended that Open University of Mauritius develop an effective communication strategy to disseminate its mission and vision to staff and all other stakeholders.**

### 3. Staffing

#### 3.1 Vacancies at OU

People contribute to the achievement of the strategic objectives of any organisation and human resource management is an important aspect of the entity. A strategic approach to human resource planning is a must for success. The Panel noted that for the year 2015 there are 339 posts on establishment and only 146 staffs are in post out of which 17 are academics, such that the majority of posts are administrative. The actual number of academic positions is 33 out of 339. The Academic Affairs Division is headed by the Academic Head, who is the only associate professor at OU. The other academic divisions, as provided in the organisation chart of 2014 and the Open University of Mauritius Act 2010, namely the Language Institute, the Confucius Institute are not in place at present. The OU have projected to have on its roll 106 Academic staffs by the year 2020 which is a positive sign. At present there are only 10% academic staffs on the total employee roll of the OU. It was also noted that the Academic Affairs Division is manned by 16 lecturers and other than the Academic Head who is an Associate Professor, there are no senior lecturers or Professors at OU. Management reported that the scheme of service of these academic staff has only recently been approved and that they would be recruiting these staff soon. In fact, there should be 25 lecturers, 4 senior lecturers, 1 Professor and 1 instructional designer as per establishment. There is thus a huge bias towards administrative posts at OU since open universities usually require a larger administrative body to cater for the diverse functions. Due to the shortage of staffing that was reported, OU resort to employment of many temporary staff, or trainees, who are providing considerable support to the permanent staff, at all levels, in all departments.

If OU wish to focus on their objective to advance and disseminate learning and knowledge through a diversity of means, with emphasis on information and communication technologies, and their plan on using LMS such as MOODLE for DL, their Human Resource Plan need to be adapted accordingly. The staffing requirement will depend on the areas OU propose to focus and on the operational model chosen. OU already has the advantage of having staff that are qualified and skilled in material production, namely the printers, copy editors and graphic designers. The administrative staff from ex-MCA, are trained in distance education (print based), and the technicians and producers are also trained in production of audio, video and other communication materials. The focus of OU should therefore be on its educational staff. Key staff such as subject experts, instructional designers, educational technologists, and facilitators have to be appointed if teaching and learning is to be effectively conducted at OU, by online distance learning.

The OU should have more staff in its key departments which contribute to the attainment of their main objectives. The Panel is of the opinion that OU should reconsider its HR planning in line with their strategic plan to bring an appropriate balance between different staff categories. Thus appointment of key staff like subjects experts, instructional designers should be considered as a matter of priority to contribute effectively to the development, production and review of ODL materials. Moreover 8 key senior management staffs at the level of Directors of different Units are not in post and the responsibilities are partly being shouldered by officers lower down the line. The Panel was informed that out of 112 schemes of service for different grades only 40 have been finalised and 72 are still in the process of being finalised at the level of the Ministry. For the organisation to operate effectively, the Panel is of the view that senior management posts should be filled as soon as possible.

#### **Recommendation 6**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius reconsider their HR Planning to bring an appropriate balance between different staff categories.**



**Recommendation 7**

**It is recommended that vacancies at senior management level be filled to ensure proper functioning of the Open University of Mauritius.**

**3.2 Transition from MCA to OU**

The OU, following the transition from the MCA, had to engage in an exercise of redeployment of their existing staff to integrate them in the new organisational structure. Coordinators of the MCA, who had required qualifications, were thus nominated lecturers. The schemes of service for the senior coordinators were also revised to allow them to integrate the academic division of OU. Management reported that some technical and production staff of the ex-MCA had some issues fitting in the new structure, however the skills and competencies of these staff, who were mostly involved in media production, could be used in other areas at OU, provided that the institution focus on their objective to integrate ICT in the delivery of programmes, thus making optimal use of all their resources.

**Recommendation 8**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius develop a Staff Development Plan to ensure that all the existing staff are contributing effectively to the functioning of the organisation.**

**3.3 Staff Development**

The Human Resource Plan should also take into consideration the training of staff at OU. At present, short training sessions on distance education, such as local workshops, have been provided to academic staff. These trainings are provided by the Commonwealth of Learning. In order for OU to achieve their objective of provision of distance learning, enhanced by use of ICT, an effective staff development plan has to be set up. The training plan has to be aligned with the objectives of OU and needs to be communicated to all staff. For instance, it was noted that OU use MOODLE as a platform to communicate with its students, rather than as a learning platform. Support staff are given on the job training on how to upload materials on the LMS, however, the features of MOODLE are not being effectively used to enhance the learning experience. Furthermore, part time tutors should also be trained in using the LMS to communicate with students. It was noted that use of MOODLE by the part time academic staff is not harmonised. Many tutors prefer to communicate with their learners via emails. Some lecturers make use of the interactive features of MOODLE to enhance the learning experience, but this is not an institution wide practice. Therefore, proper training on the use of MOODLE as an LMS rather than as a notice board should be provided to all staff involved in facilitating learning. All students should benefit from the same standard of learning, and from the same type of support on MOODLE. Hence, if MOODLE is used as the LMS of OU, an induction programme on the use of MOODLE should be set up for students. Those who are not IT literate could benefit from special training sessions from the support staff.

The training of lecturers has to take into consideration the pedagogical model used by OU. At present, some full time lecturers benefit from scholarships to upgrade their qualifications by registering for PhD/DBA at OU. There is no guarantee that the research undertaken at PhD/DBA level would benefit OU in terms of expertise acquired by their own staff to better equip them to engage in distance education and online learning. Hence, OU can decide on the priority fields of study when it provides scholarships or discounted tuitions to its lecturers.

**Recommendation 9**

**It is recommended that academic staff of the Open University of Mauritius have certified training in ODL and higher education pedagogy.**

**Recommendation 10**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius consider within their Staff Development plan the need for succession planning across the organisation.**

**Recommendation 11**

**It is recommended that a formalised and transparent staff Promotion Plan be developed for academics. The Open University of Mauritius may consider the setting up an Appointment and Promotion Board as part of succession planning, staff development and staff retention strategy.**

**Recommendation 12**

**It is recommended that training be given to both full-time and part-time tutors, and learners to use the Moodle platform, especially for learners who are not IT conversant.**

**Recommendation 13**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius increase the number of staff in the Student Support Unit and provide appropriate training if Moodle becomes the preferred learning platform.**

## 4. Infrastructural Services

The OU has its main campus at Réduit, hosting the core of its administrative, student support and academic university functions. The OU has been allotted infrastructural space at the Knowledge Park of Mauritius in Curepipe. The total space at the disposal of the University is 2000 sq feet.

The University has set up infrastructural amenities at Curepipe and this space makes up for an essential part of its teaching and learning environment. The infrastructure is used to conduct courses for full time students and face to face tutorials as part of its blended mode approach for delivery. The Panel noted that the OU had renovated part of this infrastructure and convert it into classrooms. The University has also provided for a library and Wi-Fi connection at both its campuses.

The Panel raised serious concerns about the quality of the physical environment. The walls of the classrooms are covered with carpet and were in very poor sanitary conditions. Moulds and water leakages were apparent in most places. The Panel is of the view that the air conditioning and other physical facilities at the Curepipe campus needed urgent renovation. Exposure to the fungus and mildew may lead to health hazards. Hence, the University must engage into urgent discussions with appropriate authorities to ensure that this learning space is in compliance health and safety norms as prescribed by law.

The OU has invested significantly in the renovation of the building, on the basis of the information gathered, the panel is of the view that since the ownership of the building is not vested to the OU, the University must work with the concerned parties in a structured manner and within an approved time frame to ensure that the learning environment is conducive prior to admitting staff and students thereat.

It was also noted that few support and administrative staff are posted on a permanent basis at the Curepipe campus. Academic staff move to the Curepipe campus as and when required.

### **Recommendation 14**

**It is recommended that Open University of Mauritius work with the authorities in charge of the Curepipe campus so as to ensure the learning environment is fit for purpose and meets health and safety requirements.**

## 5. Teaching and Learning

### 5.1 Tutor-Learner Interaction

Online interaction between tutors and learners is done mainly through the Moodle Platform and email. However, it was noted that the preferred means of communication was email. Features inherent to Moodle and which promote interaction and group discussions (e.g. Forums) are not being used. Instead, students tend to create their own groups on Social Media Platforms for group interaction. It was also understood that some tutors preferred to deal with printed copies of assignments and other documents.

#### **Recommendation 15**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius encourage tutors and learners to use features inherent in the Moodle platform to promote interaction and group discussions.**

### 5.2 Curriculum Development

OU delivers distance learning through print-based materials, and minimal face to face sessions. The programmes of OU are mounted by external subject experts, who are appointed on an ad-hoc basis. These subject experts also form part of the Advisory Committee, however, the terms of reference of this Committee is not clear, since it appears to be in-lieu of a Curriculum Development Committee. Once a programme is mounted by the Advisory Committee and approved by the Academic Council, the module manuals are prepared by the (same) external subject experts. There are no other external validation of the manuals prepared, and the Academic Council, which have the final say in programme approval, do not usually comprise experts in the relevant fields.

At present, the OU have adopted this model of operation, that is, outsourcing of its core academic activities, including curriculum development and manual preparation. This is a viable model, given the issues raised by Management regarding lack of funding at OU to appoint academic staff, including subject experts.

However, the whole system of curriculum development and programme design has to be revised and the processes formally documented. The Panel noted that the composition of the Advisory Committee mounting the different programmes are quite limited. In one case, the Committee was composed of only two subject experts. Thus, the programmes and the distinct modules need to be developed by curriculum development committees comprising of multi-disciplinary teams which would include subject experts/academics, experts from industry, educational technologists etc. The committee members would be expected to contribute their technical expertise as well as pedagogic input. In addition, all programmes have to be externally validated by experts, distinct from the external subject experts who have mounted the programmes. Programme managers of OU should also be more involved in programme mounting. They should include feedback from students and the outcome of the analysis of learning data when programmes and manuals are reviewed.

The Panel was presented with documents and course handbooks for a range of programmes at different levels ranging from foundation to doctoral. In addition, meetings with the senior management team, academic staff, support staff, IT staff and students allowed the Panel to discuss the programmes and teaching, learning and assessment approaches in more detail. The Panel was able to assess the provision of the OU and it was evident that there is a commitment to supporting students in their learning.

It was noted from the programme documentation that there were differences in the presentation of materials, learning outcomes and the teaching strategies. A number of programmes that were offered

by the OU used material provided by external sources and these provided good examples of linking theory and practice with a clear DL component. Other programmes delivered by the OU did not have clearly defined learning outcomes and there was no evident progression over the course of the programme. The link between learning outcomes of programmes, units and assessment was not clear in the programme documentation. The programmes and students would benefit from clearer articulation of learning outcomes to local national and international qualification frameworks. This would allow comparison with other programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Currently there is no indication of the level of attainment of students; the curriculum appears to be based on an accumulation of knowledge with less focus on assessment of higher level skills and interpretation. Programme and unit learning outcomes should be linked to assessment and the demonstration of the skills and competencies required at each level of learning. The Panel could not ascertain the link between the assessments and learning outcomes in the manuals. This should be clearly presented in the course material for the benefits of the students.

#### **Recommendation 16**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius consider the local NQF and the international qualification framework when designing programmes at all levels clearly emphasising the learning objectives and outcomes to reflect the skills and competencies to be achieved by all learners from foundation to doctoral levels.**

#### **Recommendation 17**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius reconsider their assessment strategy to align learning outcomes with each assessment component and these should be communicated to the learners in the learning materials.**

It was noted that all of the assessments were very traditional and relied heavily on an unseen examination and coursework for all units. The OU should consider using a wider range of assessments to ensure that students can demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes including skills at all levels. An overarching assessment strategy that takes account of the type of students, the mode of delivery, DL and blended learning approaches, the importance of feedback and feed forward for effective learning and progression of students would also be beneficial.

#### **Recommendation 18**

**It is recommended that different modes of assessments should be used by the Open University of Mauritius to demonstrate attainment of learning outcomes in line with the overall philosophy of distance-learning.**

### **5.3 Instructional Design**

The online learning platform provided is Moodle based but does not take advantage of the interactive nature and the range of activities available. Currently this is being used as a repository for information rather than a learning platform. A number of security issues were also noted as currently all students could see the results of all other students on every programme. Academic staffs use a range of methods to communicate with students; uploading additional material to the platform; Email communication; providing printed material or face to face tutorials. It would be useful to ensure a minimum level of

support and a clear communication channel that all staff use when communicating with and supporting students.

There appeared to be heavy reliance on face to face contact. All of the students agreed that the face to face sessions were effective and staff were supportive but the Panel felt that for an Open University there was a need to consider how students could also be supported if they were not able to attend the face to face sessions.

The preparation of the print-based manuals is also carried out by the external subject experts, without any input from an instructional designer. Though it is understood that subject experts would contribute content to the manuals, however for distance learning, all contents have to be instructionally designed, so that these can be used as effective learning guide by students to manage their own learning process. There is no evidence that the subject experts have training in the preparation of distance learning materials. It is also essential that the materials produced are properly tested and piloted. Subject experts and material developers should also play an important role in the continuous monitoring of programmes, especially when it is offered to learners for the first time, so that problems can be identified and improvement proposed to ensure students' success. OU could also consider appointing external resource persons/staff with experience in educational skills, open and distance learning to contribute significantly to the development and use of materials that goes beyond provision of content.

#### **Recommendation 19**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius consider appointing key staff such as subject experts, instructional designers, and technologists to strengthen the mounting, development and production of ODL materials.**

#### **Recommendation 20**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius review all learning materials developed and owned by OU to take advantage of an interactive online learning platform or guide the learner more effectively through the materials provided in a written format.**

### **5.4 Programme Delivery**

The OU also outsources the delivery of the programmes. Due to a shortage of academic staff/internal facilitators, OU resorts to appointing part-time tutors for the conduct of the face to face sessions. In some cases, the same subject experts who have mounted the programmes and have prepared the learning manuals teach on the modules. Tutors are not appointed through interviews, but are drawn from a database of lecturers that OU has. It is also noted that many of these tutors are employed on full time basis at conventional universities and it is not clear whether they have prior expertise as distance learning facilitators.

The above model chosen by OU, taking into consideration the financial restrictions and shortage of staff the institution is facing, might be the right model, however, it is important that all processes, namely appointing of external subject experts, curriculum development, approval of programmes by Committees, preparation of manuals, approval of tutors, are revised so that quality of the programmes, of the materials and of delivery is ensured. At present, OU has limited control on the quality of programmes, manuals and delivery, but it is supposed to have educational and pedagogical responsibilities. Innovation, rigour and quality have to be clearly established in all processes. Internal

staff of OU, including the QA Division, have to be more involved in all these processes. This model of operation has also to be aligned with a pedagogical model which OU needs to develop, and which should be clearly communicated to all stakeholders, including the Board of the University. The pedagogical model should take into consideration that adults have distinctive approaches to learning as compared to fresh school leavers and this model needs to be taken into consideration in their new strategic plan for proper implementation.

### **Recommendation 21**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius identify the model that they will use in future to develop the courses to be delivered given that reliance on the current outsourcing model may not fit well if they wish to meet the QAA Quality Code.**

The Panel was interested in the doctoral programme and found it to be innovative for Mauritius as it has a taught component and introduction prior to undertaking the major thesis. The students were very positive about this approach and felt well supported and able to complete their studies. This is an effective means of ensuring students have the required skills to complete their programme of studies and is commended. The Panel would have welcomed the opportunity to see the progression of students via this route. The Panel asked the OU to consider marketing a one-year doctoral preparation programme with successful students then moving to their doctoral studies. It was felt that this would make the selection and progression of students more robust.

### **Recommendation 22**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius should capitalise on the excellent practice of providing a taught introduction to doctoral studies by introducing and marketing a one year doctoral preparation studies programme and the current duration of the doctoral programmes be continued after the students have cleared the pre doctoral studies.**

The Research Degree Committee (RDC) should be reinforced with members who are research active and are holders of PhD. Presently, the composition of the Research Degree Committee are as follows:

- (i) Chair – Director General or the Director/Head of Academic Affairs Division
- (ii) Two designated members of the Academic Council
- (iii) Two designated members of the Board
- (iv) Two representatives of the Academic Affairs Division
- (v) Two representatives of the Open School Division
- (vi) Two members with a doctorate, who are not members of the staff of the OU, recommended by the Chair of the OU Research Degrees Committee and approved by the Academic Council and Board.

As seen above, apart from the Director General and the two members with a doctorate, none of the members have a doctorate and are research active. Furthermore, the approval of MPhil/PhD or PhD Research Proposals seems to be automatic with no amendments. In order that the RDC performs efficiently, its composition needs to be reviewed so that all members are PhD holders and research active.



**Recommendation 23**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius review the composition of its Research Degree Committee to ensure that members are research active.**

Most of the supervisors appointed by OU are not research active and some of them have no publications in peer-reviewed journals or conferences. For MPhil and doctoral supervision, the research proposals of the MPhil/PhD student should be related to the research fields of the supervisors. More so being given that most of the main supervisors are from outside, it is still more imperative to have the second local supervisor to be in the same field as the research proposal of the MPhil/PhD students so that he/she can supervise the students on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, the Director General should stop acting as Administrative Supervisor for all the MPhil/PhD students registered at OU. The administration of MPhil/PhD research could be delegated to an Administrative Assistant who can easily fulfil this task. OU should develop a Guideline for Supervisors where the experience of the supervisor, his or her academic qualifications and number of MPhil/PhD successfully supervised should be clearly mentioned. At present several of the local supervisors are not research active and have not published any research papers for years or have not published at all.

**Recommendation 24**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius appoint supervisors for doctoral programmes who are actively involved in research and they should hold relevant qualifications and be conducting research in the field of study in which they will act as supervisor.**

There should be a limit on the number of MPhil/PhD students allocated to a supervisor. It is proposed that Professor/Associate Professor/Senior Lecturer/Lecturer may not be allowed to have more than 8/6/4/2 MPhil/PhD students respectively for supervision.

The intake of MPhil/PhD students per supervisor should be staggered over a period 4 to 5 years. For example, in the case of Associate Professor, not more than 2 MPhil/PhD students may be allowed to register for year 1 and gradually increase it to another 2 MPhil/PhD students when the first batch is promoted to year 2, and then recruit 2 new MPhil/PhD students when the second batch has been promoted to year 3. This means at any time, there will be not more than 6 PhD students allocated to an Associate Professor. MPhil/PhD students should be encouraged to publish their research findings. This will also ensure that another researcher does not publish the same research findings before the PhD students submits his thesis. A typical PhD research must result in at least two good journals of publications. To facilitate recognition of the Doctoral qualifications, all the processes including examinations of PhD thesis associated with the PhD programme must be aligned with those of UoM, UTM and UDM. It is important for the examiners of the thesis are from recognised international universities and at a Professorial level. Under exceptional circumstances an Associate Professor can be accepted as an examiner.

**Recommendation 25**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius ensure that all learners have adequate supervision by monitoring the number of learners per supervisor.**

In line with the recommendations R34 and R36, OU is recommended to set up a Research Coordination Unit (RCU) which will be dedicated to the day-to-day administration of MPhil/PhD research including answer queries, complaints from MPhil/PhD students. The RCU may consider the following, amongst



others, to bring the necessary changes to create a vibrant research environment to help the doctoral level students:

- (i) Organising Research Seminars at least once a year encouraging MPhil/PhD students to present their research through oral presentations.
- (ii) Increasing access to on-line journals and publications.
- (iii) Organising workshop once a year on “Publish or Perish” to encourage MPhil/PhD students to publish in peer-reviewed journals.
- (iv) Reinforcing the mentoring process to reduce drop-outs.
- (v) Ensuring that all progress reports submitted by the students in respect of their MPhil/PhD research have received feed-back from the supervisors concerned.
- (vi) Monitoring the time line for submission of MPhil Transfer Report or PhD thesis.

#### **Recommendation 26**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius set up a dedicated research coordination unit to take forward its identified research strategy.**

## 6. Assessment / Examinations

All procedures for examinations are described in the Manual of procedures. Examination papers are presently prepared by examiners (paper setter) who are the external lecturers teaching the relevant modules. Moderation of examination papers is also carried out by external moderators. Both the examiners and the moderators are appointed from the lists of subject experts of OU. Thus the University has limited control over issues of quality and relevance it is supposed to have with regards to the examinations papers, since no permanent staff is involved in the preparation of examinations papers, except in minority cases where the lecturers are employed full time at OU.

### **Recommendation 27**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius academic staff be actively involved in the preparation of examinations papers.**

At present, no external examiners have been appointed for the assessment of the academic standards of undergraduate programmes at OU. This is a major weakness that needs to be urgently addressed by OU. External examining is an integral and essential part of institutional quality assurance, to ensure that academic standards are maintained within the University and to ensure parity with similar local and international programmes. The external examiner's role in providing an independent view of the assessment process will also help OU to better review and plan its assessment strategies. The views of external examiners will also help OU to revisit their programmes.

### **Recommendation 28**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius appoint qualified and experienced external examiners at the appropriate academic level for their undergraduate and post graduate programmes.**

It was noted that OU does not have an examination management system in place. At present, the paper setter submits the examination paper on a pen-drive to the Examinations Unit and this is saved on their mobile hard-drive, which is kept in a safe. Papers are formatted by the Examinations Unit and the appointed moderators will access the papers through the Examinations Unit. Once the moderator has approved the paper, it is finalised. The University should ensure that the system in place and that all processes have to be duly monitored by the Examinations Unit to ensure security in the administration and conduct of examinations.

### **Recommendation 29**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius develop a comprehensive examinations management system to ensure security aspects related to proper administration and conduct of examinations.**

## 7. Support Services

### 7.1 Information Technology

The OU has setup appropriate mechanisms such as firewalls to secure its IT infrastructure. Moreover, their Moodle Server is hosted at the Mauritius Telecoms which provides all Internet Security features required.

Students' password are generated in a regular pattern hence making it easy to guess a person's password. The Password management policy for Information Systems at OU should be more rigorous.

#### **Recommendation 30**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius adopt and implement an effective password management policy for all its information system including Moodle platform.**

In addition, the support services provided by OU can be improved to better benefit students with different needs. This can be achieved by carrying out a formal study when learners enrol at OU, to better align their learning experience with their needs, expectations and their competences/skills, for instance, provision of basic IT classes for learners who are technologically challenged.

### 7.2 Support to Doctoral students

MPhil/PhD and PhD students registered at OU pursue the following modules in Semester I of Year 1 which have helped them to grasp the necessary concepts and equipped them with the tools for pursuing research at doctoral level:

- (i) Systematic Literature review
- (ii) Quantitative Methods for Business
- (iii) Research Methods I: Quantitative Research Methods for Business
- (iv) Research Methods II: Qualitative Research Methods for Business

The above modules were praised by OU doctoral students who unanimously assert that without these modules they would not in a position to write their research proposal in Semester II of Year 1. The learners enrolled on the DBA and PhD programmes also stated that their choice to enrol on the doctoral programmes of OU was driven by the unique taught classes that are on offer at OU, which better equip them to embark on their research work. The final research proposal was submitted to the Research Degree Committee for consideration. The above modules indeed prepare the students to obtain the basics statistical and probability knowledge for analysing large scale data and at the same time prepare the students to understand the various quantitative methods available for data analysis. Furthermore, these modules are taught by the Director General himself who is well-versed and experienced in the subject.

They also praised the support that they have from the programme managers and tutors, who provide feedback to queries within the required period.

#### **Commendation 4**

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended for the success of the tutorial sessions, the taught component of doctoral programmes and the support provided to its students.**

The recruitment and admission procedure for MPhil/PhD and PhD students should be reinforced. For the moment, the admission procedure is based on a one page synopsis of the MPhil/PhD research the applicant wishes to undertake. Though the minimum entry requirements for the MPhil/PhD programme and doctoral programme are specified in the document “Regulations for the Degrees of Master of Philosophy (MPhil) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)”, many of the students admitted do not meet these entry requirements. It is also not clear how selection of students for MPhil/PhD and PhD are made. The composition of the Selection Panel and the selection criteria for MPhil/PhD and PhD programmes have not been defined. It is therefore crucial that OU sets up an Admission Committee with clearly defined terms of reference, to review its admission policy for doctoral and MPhil/PhD students. It is proposed that admission policy for doctoral and MPhil/PhD be aligned with those of other public universities in Mauritius.

### **Recommendation 31**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius set up an admission committee to review the admission policy for doctoral students to ensure that every enrolled learner has the best chance of success.**

### 7.3 Online journals

To access on-line journals using Science Direct, OU is recommended to make proper arrangement with University of Mauritius so that doctoral students are not penalised to access specific journals falling under Science Direct. In this regard, OU may be requested to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with University of Mauritius or make some other collaborative arrangement so that doctoral students from OU can access Science Direct from OU campus. In this context, it is recommended that the OU’s Réduit campus be used as station to access Science Direct given its proximity with University of Mauritius.

### **Recommendation 32**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius make proper arrangement with other institutions for accessing specific journals for doctoral students.**

### 7.4 Library Support

The OU has invested significantly in the library, which is an essential learning resource for its staff and students. The Panel was impressed by the large collection of books and journal subscriptions which the library had put at the disposal of its learners. The Panel noted that the library is up to date with the use of technology and that adequate mechanism is in place to cater for ODL provision. Interviews with users of the library revealed that the library staff is committed to meeting the needs of the learners.

The Panel was informed that students enrolled on doctoral programmes benefit from Rs 3000 every semester to purchase learning resources required for their research. The Panel noted that this measure was helpful to the students and compensated for specific requirements of learners.

Although the OU has provided for adequate library facilities, the Panel is of the view that as the University matures, the functions of the library will have to be more structured. An appropriate library

system will have to be implemented which will allow for structured processes. This will ensure that the library continues to be responsive to the needs of learners and staff in an effective manner.

**Commendation 5**

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended for the commitment of its library staff to meet the needs of learners in sourcing a wide range of resources.**

**Recommendation 33**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius set up a Library Committee to manage the learning resources requirements of staff and students.**

OU have an Open School which offer programmes for public officers. These programmes are mounted on demand from the different Ministries, to upgrade the skills of the employees on need basis. Employment Skills programmes are also offered to prepare learners to join the work market. Meetings held with the academic staff of the Open School division provided the opportunity to learn about the training opportunities provided by the OU for public officers and provided an excellent example of the work that is being done. In the past the team have been involved with a range of different employability skills trainings and have worked with local government on training needs analysis before designing the programmes which may be offered as educational videos, distance learning or face to face training.

**Commendation 6**

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended for the setting up of the Open School in meeting needs of local learners and development of Employer's Skills Programme.**

## 8. Quality Assurance/ Student Feedback

As an awarding body, OU have the responsibility to assure the standards of its degrees. The Panel was informed that the University shall be using the Quality Code of the QAA, UK as their internal benchmarks for quality assurance. During the various interviews, the Panel had the opportunity to discuss the University's quality agenda with various categories of staff and stakeholders. The Panel also consulted sample documents from the various decision making instances at the OU. On the basis of evidence and feedback gathered on the processes in place, it was evident that then OU is committed to delivering quality education. The Panel appreciated the commitment of staff in assuring that the learners are well supported. The OU have also endeavoured to instil a quality culture across their organisational structure by complying with the ISO standards. The Panel noted that the ISO procedures have been well accepted among the staff in general and is already an important tool for assuring the quality of administrative processes across the organisation.

### Commendation 7

#### **The Open University of Mauritius is commended for the implementation of quality standards ISO 9001:2008.**

As a newly established University, significant efforts have been made to create an academic ethos at the institution. The OU have implemented a committee structure which is in the process of being consolidated further. The Panel is of the view that since the OU are still at their budding stages, it is the appropriate time for the institution to develop their internal QA system. This system will further consolidate the quality culture at the institution by providing a quality framework for academic processes. The internal QA system should seek a participatory approach from all units of the University and must cover all the core academic activities of the University. Given the high level of receptiveness demonstrated by staff in accepting the ISO procedures, the Panel does not foresee much difficulty in the implementation of such a framework.

The Panel noted that there is provision in the organisation structure of the institution for a Quality Assurance Division. It was also noted that this Division is also responsible for capacity building. At the time of the visit, the Panel was informed that, the QA Division was not functional. The OU have plans to recruit staff in the division as a matter of priority. Presently the responsibility for quality assurance is vested to an informal unit, which despite their willingness to enhance quality, are operating on an ad-hoc basis. The Panel is of the view that relying on the ISO procedures is not adequate for assuring quality at the University. The OU have to prioritise the setting up of its QA Committee, which shall act as the focal point and also drive quality across the University. There is need for a quality assurance structure with clear processes that will uphold standards in relation to all the core academic instances of the University. Because the OU have been newly established, they must set up appropriate mechanism to generate feedback on process on a regular basis with a view to continuously improve on weaknesses and institutionalise best practices. The internal quality assurance system must comprise unitary sub systems that have direct oversight on the core academic functions of the University. Given that the University use the blended mode for the delivery of its programme, significant emphasis must also be laid on the development of subject benchmarks and learning materials, the quality of student learning experience and support. The OU should consider setting up an Internal Quality Assurance Committee to look at the academic processes and not only on the administrative processes as outlined in the ISO Quality Manual. Moreover it should develop an internal Quality Assurance Model and benchmarks with emphasis on standards development required for the award of academic qualifications.

OU should also formalise the student feedback form which was recently developed and is part of the annual review of programme delivery and consider the inclusion of progression, retention, and achievement of learners as part of the overall quality monitoring and enhancement mechanism while taking into account the ODL nature of the provision.

**Recommendation 34**

**It is recommended that the Open University establish an internal quality assurance system that is effective and enables the institution to ensure fitness of purpose.**

The Panel met the advisory committee that approve all new programme submissions and also had the opportunity to review the minutes of the committee and of the Academic council. The minutes indicated that the Panel approves all programmes. It was noted, however, that changes suggested by the Panel and recorded in the minutes do not then return to the Panel for final confirmation. The selection of experts to review and develop programmes is made by the senior academic. It may be helpful to consider creating an internal Panel of experts from academia, IT and learning development to ensure all learning materials meet the required standard for the particular mode of delivery of each programme. The appointment of external examiners to approve assessment and moderate the assessment process would also strengthen the credibility of programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

**Recommendation 35**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius set up a formal process to review and quality assure all learning materials it produces.**

## 9. Partnerships

International partnerships in the higher education sector bring the right type of synergy to effectively contribute to the growth of a University. In particular collaboration with partners with similar goals and objectives help to align the activities of a University in the international arena. The OU during their three years of operation have effectively sought membership of international institutions of repute like the Association of Commonwealth Universities, the International Association of Universities amongst others. OU have signed about sixteen memoranda of understanding with international partners which include renowned Universities worldwide. The Panel commends the achievement made in OU's short span of existence.

### **Commendation 8**

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended for the successful development of partnerships and number of linkages they have made in the higher education sector locally and internationally.**

It has been observed that the OU have entered into collaborative arrangements with local private post-secondary educational institutions. Out of the four known collaborative arrangements only one has students enrolled on few programmes. Such collaborative arrangements entail significant reputational risks in the current context. OU have been recently established and are still on their learning curve and more so they do not have a fully operational QA Department. Thus ascertaining proper management and delivery of the programmes by the local partners might prove to be a difficult task from a quality assurance perspective. The Panel is of the opinion that OU should reconsider, for the time being, entering into collaborative arrangements for delivering programmes by local partners. OU need a proper department with senior academics prior to entering into collaborative arrangements with local post-secondary educational institutions to deliver its programmes.

### **Recommendation 36**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius reconsider the decision of entering into collaborative agreements with local private post-secondary education institutions in view of the significant reputational and academic risks they entail.**



## 10. Appendices

### Appendix A: Acronyms and abbreviations

DL	Distance Learning
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IT	Information Technology
LMS	Learning Management System
MCA	Mauritius College of the Air
ODL	Open Distance Learning
OU	Open University of Mauritius
QA	Quality Assurance
SFQ	Student Feedback Questionnaire
TEC	Tertiary Education Commission

## Appendix B: Institutional Context (*Source: www.open.ac.mu*)

The Open University of Mauritius was established on 12 July 2012 according to the Open University of Mauritius ACT 2010. The Mauritius College of the Air (MCA), which was established in 1971, integrated the Open University of Mauritius in July 2012. OU aims at delivering quality education to learners who are unable to be physically present on campus. It provides flexible study options so that learners can study from home, work, or anywhere in the world, at a time that suits them and their lifestyle. Induction session and tutorial sessions where learners meet tutors are organised at the University and its campuses.

The vision of the Open University of Mauritius is to be among the leading open universities recognized worldwide for providing high-quality education and training. The mission of the Open University of Mauritius is to provide quality education to people of all backgrounds from Mauritius and around the world with the ultimate aim of developing their intellectual, moral, civic, and creative capacities to the fullest so that they can lead a life full of dignity while contributing meaningfully to the socio-economic development of their nation. Therefore the Open University of Mauritius endeavours to

- Expand the scope and scale of quality higher education available to school leavers;
- Provide greater access to continuing professional education, skills development and training;
- Provide more opportunities for lifelong learning;
- Play a leading role in research and development and application of learning technologies for education and training;
- Facilitate national, regional and international partnerships and collaborations for the optimal use of resources for open and distance learning; and
- Provide quality open and distance learning programmes in Mauritius and the region in a learner-centred environment using state-of-the-art information and communication technologies.

The OU has been founded to open up quality education to all, regardless of their socio-economic status, background, age, place of residence, race, colour and creed. The OU welcomes school learners wanting experience of higher education, school leavers who choose to join the world of work while studying for a degree, employees wishing to enhance their skills, or switch career, and retired people wanting to study in order to keep them mentally active. OU provides a blend of distance learning, supported by innovative study materials and videos, so that the learner gets the learning experience in his/her own time, at home, work or wherever s/he chooses reading, watching or listening to materials supplied, working out course activities and assignments with support from the tutor who is reachable via email.

Tutorials are also organized but they are mostly optional and give a chance to meet the tutors and fellow learners. OU also offers many short courses that help to improve the employability skills.

## Appendix C Commendations and Recommendations

### Commendations

#### Commendation 1

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended for the commitment and vision of its management and staff.**

#### Commendation 2

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended for developing a clear strategic plan and the explicit statement of goals and objectives.**

#### Commendation 3

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended on the fulfilment of one of its objective of lifelong learning through widening access and giving opportunities to people of different backgrounds, age groups, and needs.**

#### Commendation 4

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended for the success of the tutorial sessions, the taught component of doctoral programmes and the support provided to its students.**

#### Commendation 5

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended for the commitment of its library staff to meet the needs of learners in sourcing a wide range of resources.**

#### Commendation 6

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended for the setting up of its Open School in meeting needs of local learners and development of Employer's Skills Programme.**

#### Commendation 7

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended for the implementation of quality standards ISO 9001:2008.**

#### Commendation 8

**The Open University of Mauritius is commended for the successful development of partnerships and number of linkages it has made in the higher education sector locally and internationally.**

## Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1**

**It is recommended that the Board of the Open University of Mauritius include more members with experience in ODL.**

### **Recommendation 2**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius is supported by deliberative Committees and structures aligned to its strategic objectives to enable effective implementation, review and monitoring as the existing ones at the level of the Board are only ratification committees.**

### **Recommendation 3**

**It is recommended that the complex nature of the present organisation structure of the Open University of Mauritius be simplified to allow proper functioning of the organisation.**

### **Recommendation 4**

**It is recommended that appropriate consideration be given to effective collaboration between the different units of the Open University of Mauritius to enhance the overall strategic objectives.**

### **Recommendation 5**

**It is recommended that Open University of Mauritius develop an effective communication strategy to disseminate its mission and vision to staff and all other stakeholders.**

### **Recommendation 6**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius reconsiders its HR Planning to bring an appropriate balance between different staff categories.**

### **Recommendation 7**

**It is recommended that vacancies at senior management level be filled to ensure proper functioning of the Open University of Mauritius.**

### **Recommendation 8**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius develop a Staff Development Plan to ensure that all the existing staff is contributing effectively to the functioning of the organisation.**

### **Recommendation 9**

**It is recommended that academic staff of the Open University of Mauritius have certified training in ODL and higher education pedagogy.**

### **Recommendation 10**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius consider within its Staff Development plan the need for succession planning across the organisation.**

#### **Recommendation 11**

**It is recommended that a formalised and transparent staff Promotion Plan be developed for academics. The Open University of Mauritius may consider to setting up an Appointment and Promotion Board as part of its succession planning, staff development and staff retention strategy.**

#### **Recommendation 12**

**It is recommended that training be given to both full-time and part-time tutors, and learners to use the Moodle platform, especially for learners who are not IT conversant.**

#### **Recommendation 13**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius should increase the number of staff in its Student Support Unit and provide appropriate training if Moodle becomes the preferred learning platform.**

#### **Recommendation 14**

**It is recommended that Open University of Mauritius work with the authorities in charge of the Curepipe campus so as to ensure the learning environment is fit for purpose and meets health and safety requirements.**

#### **Recommendation 15**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius encourages tutors and learners to use features inherent in the Moodle platform to promote interaction and group discussions.**

#### **Recommendation 16**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius considers the local NQF and the international qualification framework when designing programmes at all levels clearly emphasising the learning objectives and outcomes to reflect the skills and competencies to be achieved by all learners from foundation to doctoral levels.**

#### **Recommendation 17**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius reconsiders its assessment strategy to align learning outcomes with each assessment component and these should be communicated to the learners in the learning materials.**

#### **Recommendation 18**

**It is recommended that different modes of assessments should be used by the Open University of Mauritius to demonstrate attainment of learning outcomes in line with the overall philosophy of distance-learning.**

#### **Recommendation 19**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius consider appointing key staff such as subject expert, instructional designer, and technologist to strengthen the mounting, development and production of ODL materials.**

**Recommendation 20**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius review all learning materials developed and owned by OU to ensure it take advantage of an interactive online learning platform or guide the learner more effectively through the materials provided in a written format.**

**Recommendation 21**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius identify the model that it will use in future to develop the courses to be delivered given that reliance on the current outsourcing model may not fit well if they wish to meet the QAA Quality Code.**

**Recommendation 22**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius should capitalise on the excellent practice of providing a taught introduction to doctoral studies by introducing and marketing a one year doctoral preparation studies programme and the current duration of the doctoral programmes be continued after the students have cleared the pre doctoral studies.**

**Recommendation 23**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius review the composition of its Research Degree Committee to ensure that members are research active.**

**Recommendation 24**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius appoint supervisors for doctoral programmes who are actively involved in research and they should hold relevant qualifications in the research subject.**

**Recommendation 25**

**It is recommended that the Open University of Mauritius ensure that all learners have adequate supervision by monitoring the number of learners per supervisor.**

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**Recommendation 36**

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