



## QUALITY ENHANCEMENT AND STANDARD OF DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN INDIA: A DISCUSSION

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*The number of distance teaching is steadily increasing, and so, it is very important to maintain the standard. In order to improve the quality of distance education, both external control and internal evaluation should be combined together. The performance indicators are also used to determine the standard of an educational system. The different areas of performance indicators have been discussed in this paper. Finally, the system of accreditation has been explained. For distance teaching institutes, accreditation is important because it gives credibility and recognition to the institute.*

*Key Words: Distance teaching, Standard, Evaluation, Performance indicators etc.*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The system of distance education has developed very rapidly in recent years due to various causes. The growth of the system requires that its quality should be maintained rightly; otherwise, this mode of education will be misused and remain ineffective. Thus there is a need for quality assurance in distance education. However, the effectiveness of distance education cannot be properly measured by using the norms of conventional education. Quality assurance activities in distance education are different and all such activities should stringently scrutinise the various processes of distance education. In this paper these facets of quality assurance are to be discussed from global perspective as well as from the Indian point of view. Quality in distance education is very much important since the market economy has introduced many for profit institutions of distance learning. These institutes should not be allowed to charge high fees from the students and parents without giving quality education. Hence, controlling the quality of distance education and maintaining optimum standard are imperative in distance learning. The distance teaching institutes should be judge against some indicators of performance and accordingly, recognised by some accreditation agencies. In order to ensure quality in distance education it is important that the process of evaluation be extensively used. The findings of evaluations help the practitioners to

understand the weakness of particular areas of development in open and distance learning. The objective of evaluation is to find out effects to educational activities and judge their values. To assess the existing quality and standard it is necessary to evaluate not only the programmes introduced by the distance teaching institutes but also the overall evaluation of the institution itself. So in this paper, evaluation of distance education programmes will be discussed.

The most important objective of cost analysis is to evolve an acceptable measure of optimum use of resources. Distance education system is developed as an alternative system of education, and so it is necessary to develop an economic perspective of distance education to understand its financial credibility. In recent years, it is being observed that there is a great demand for higher education with expanding enrolment but available resources in terms of money and men are limited. The government's policy regarding state funding of higher education has changed considerably. Obviously it is expected that distance education institutes can be developed as financially self-sufficient and can cater to the needs of a large number of aspiring students. In this way, financing of distance education and its cost analysis are of great importance. The findings from cost analysis are likely to help the distance education management in framing policies and decision making. The present paper mainly deals with the various aspects of quality in distance education viz, quality assurance for distance education, quality assurance programmes of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), mechanisms for maintenance of standards in distance education, cost analysis in distance education etc.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

The following are main objectives of the study:

- To know the concept of Quality Assurance of Distance Education;
- To analysis the Mechanisms of Maintenance of Standards in Distance Education;

### **METODOLOGY OF THE DISCUSSION:**

We know there are different types of methodology for any study. Here the historical method of research/study is used as well as the present study and the approach is qualitative in nature. The work has been conducted in the following ways:

- Collection of primary and secondary sources
- Detailed of the reliable and valid sources

- Comparison of different sources
- Making generalization from the sources.

### **SOURCES OF THE DATA:**

Here two Types of data were collected. These were:

- I. Primary sources of Data: Interviewed with the students and teachers of distance mode.
- II. Secondary Sources of Data: Different types of books on distance education.

### **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSION:**

#### **Quality Assurance of Distance Education:**

Quality movement in education is a new phenomenon. The movement started in the eighties of the last century especially with the advent of internationalization of higher education. As a result, quality-related policies were introduced in many countries with quality assurance as important issue within these policies. The term 'quality' should be explained before quality assurance is properly defined. Green and Harvey (1993) had defined quality in education in terms of the following:

- Highest standard;
- Without any defects;
- As fitness of purpose;
- As value for money and
- As transformative process that is transformation of the learner.

According to Bureau of Indian Standard 1988, quality is the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. The various quality related terms are quality control, quality assessment quality audit and quality assurance.

Quality Assurance has been defined as the mechanisms and procedures designed to reassure the various 'stakeholders' in higher education that institutions accord a high priority to implementing policies designed to maintain and enhance institutional effectiveness (Green and Harvey, 1993).

According to Warren et.al, (1994), quality assurance in both higher and distance education refers to a continuous process that is proactive rather than reactive, and that, though involving all actors and many facets of the institutions, is integrative.

It is to be noted that quality assurance is dynamic in nature and it is about taking corrective measures whenever necessary by close observation of the performance of the institutions. Quality assurance programmes ensure that quality of the institutions is maintained and improved on a continuous basis.

### **Quality of Distance Education:**

The growth of distance education during the last few years had been tremendous. As a matter of fact, the system has gone through five generations (Marmar Mukherjee, 1996) from classical correspondence to courses offered on the Internet. This rapid development invariably raise the question of quality which is however, not always practiced. In the developed countries, the programmes of quality assurance are integrated with open and distance learning but in developing countries like ours quality assurance is often uncertain, under the impact of market force, quality of many institutes is advertised to the public but absent in reality. In a global competitive market, it is absolutely necessary to assure quality of distance education. The good quality of distance education should focus on needs and aspirations of the distance learners and along with it the appropriate delivery services. In order to achieve higher quality, attention should be paid on the following aspects of distance education.

- Admission requirements and procedures;
- Development and production of instructional materials;
- Structure and management of the delivery system;
- Student assessment procedures;
- Quality of materials used for teaching and promotion of learning;
- The student support services;
- Monitoring evaluation and feedback system and
- Availability of adequate human and material resources for the operation of the programmes (Akinpelu, J.A. 1995). Upgrading secondary school teachers in Botswana by distance education: The challenge of quality, *Journal of AALAE*, 9 (2), pp. 1-14.

The quality of distance education can be effectively assured if regular evaluation is conducted on all the above-mentioned aspects of distance education.

### Code of practice for quality assurance or Mechanisms of quality assurance:

It has been mentioned that to assure the quality of distance education, some areas of activities are to be monitored and evaluated on a continuous basis. However, there cannot be any fixed number of mechanisms to assure quality as the types of institutions and courses vary widely. There are single modes as well as dual mode institutes of learning catering to the needs of the varied types of distance learners. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 2003 in the United Kingdom has given some guidelines in this respect, which may be adopted by the distance learning institutes. The following areas are identified by QAA for continuous improvement of standard.

- ✓ **Delivery of materials:** One of the key aspect of distance learning is timely distribution of the materials so that the distance learners are not inconvenienced. The distribution should be planned with due regard to geographical spread of the learners with minimum of cost incurred. The following are the responsibilities of the host institution in this context:

- Describe course components accurately;
- Specify learning outcome;
- Describe teaching, learning and assessment methods and
- Schedule for materials delivery.

Operational aspects of materials delivery also include packaging the materials properly, generating addresses and pasting them on materials, obtaining receipts from learners, updating inventory, establishing a system to receive undelivered packages and initiating action to know the causes of non-receipt etc. All these activities should be important part of quality assurance plan.

- ✓ **Appropriateness of media:** In distance mode of teaching, a number of media is used to support learning. But the effectiveness of distance learning depends much on the use of appropriate media. Technology just for the sake of technology should be avoided. The following considerations should be taken into account while selecting the media.

- Access of the students to the medium in question;
- Cost associated with the medium for that institution and learner;
- The teaching function of the medium;
- The interactivity fostered via that medium
- Organizational issues associated with its design, production and delivery and

- Novelty of the media to learners.
- ✓ **Learner support:** The different issue of learner support in distance education is a key factor in determining its quality. The particular institute must be able to assure the students that it is really concerned with the needs of the students and is ready to extend all possible assistance to them. The following activities encompass learners' support in distance mode of teaching;
  - Initial orientation of the students explaining fundamental issues and sensitizing the students about the requirements of the course;
  - The students are to be made aware of the process of learning. They should know about different approaches to study (surface learning and deep learning), different styles of learning (from holist to serialist). It is also necessary to ensure that the students posses necessary skills and abilities to start the course so that the students at risk can be identified in the beginning.
  - It is necessary to estimate the work-load and identify over the length of the material so that many students may not drop out.
  - Interaction is a vital aspect of e-learning. But students are sometimes unrealistic about interaction and expect instant responses. So the large number of messages often delays interaction.
  - There should be opportunities for the students to identify the contact persons who would provide constructive feedback on academic performance and guide them to progress. It is also necessary to survey of failure and takes necessary actions in this respect.
  - The network of support apart from the tutor is important in distance learning. The students should be made aware that a network of friends, colleagues and fellow students can help them to learn.
- ✓ **Assessment of students:** The quality assurance in distance education requires a system of assessment to be as objective as possible. The following points have been cited in this case.
  - There should be proper criteria against which the students are to be assessed.
  - The weight age given to the constituent parts of the course should be specified.
  - The formative and summative parts of assessment are to be clearly defined.
  - Reliability and validity of assessment system must be of high order. Detailed marking schemes will help to improve reliability and validity. Instead of a single examiner, it is better to have a team of examiners. To make the system cost-effective, part-time examiners may be hired and they are to be briefed and trained.

- ✓ **Cost-effectiveness of distance education:** The two more issues associated with quality assurance are cost-effectiveness of distance education and the copyright of the learning materials. If the institute is wasting its resources then surely it is not functioning efficiently. Copyright of the materials is also an important issue especially in the internet. A related issue is intellectual property rights. An effective distance education institution should be concerned with copyright of the materials and should ensure that its copyright is not infringed.

### **Quality Assurance Programmes of IGNOU:**

In India the system of distance education received a new dimension when Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) came into existence since then; this institute is acting as an apex body and is trying to improve and control the standard of distance education. The quality assurance programmes undertaken by IGNOU encompass the following major activities of the distance teaching and learning. The quality assurance mechanisms are incorporated through the following:

- Planning the course or the programmes.
- Developing the course programme.
- Producing the learning materials.
- Implementing the course or the programmes.
- Reviewing the course and follow-up activities and
- Developing human resources.

### **Planning the course or programme:**

The planning of a course is organized by very meticulously and to ensure its effectiveness. Every school or division prepares a perspective plan covering five years and the plan is to be approved by the co-ordination committee. After necessary modification, the plan is again to be approved by the planning board. The school or the division, then, prepares projects within the perspective plan on the basis of which the new course or programme is launched. In this way considerable effort is given from the very beginning to ensure quality of the course. Apart from new course, the faculty may also propose to introduce a new academic programme which is again to be approved by the coordination committee. The final approval of the academic programme will come from the highest statutory academic authority of the university i.e., the academic senate.

### **Developing the course programme:**

The two important activities in this respects are developing curricula and learning material. Once the course is approved, the following steps are taken to develop the course programme:

- An expert committee is made up of the internal faculty members and external subject experts to prepare the curricula.
- Curriculum prepared by the committee is then sent to academic senate for approval.
- The approved curriculum is now passed on to the course team comprising subject experts and audio-visual producers. Language is edited by the language expert.
- Depending on the nature of the course the field experts are also associated with course team.
- Audio-visual materials are previewed by the internal faculty and coordination between internal faculty and audio-visual producers is ensured.
- Internal faculty read the proof for error-free publication and
- The technical advisory committee looks into the quality of paper, card and tapes. The agreement with printers ensures the quality of printing.

### **Implementing the course or material:**

Implementation of the course encompasses various processes like dispatch of material, counseling, tutoring, conducting practical at study centres, assignment handling, feedback, evaluation etc. There are in-built processes to assure quality at each step. The following aspects are to be noted:

- Despatch of materials, availability of the materials in the ware house, adherence of schedules and quality of packing.
- Counseling , tutoring and practical work, availability of schedules, adherence to schedules, punctuality, regularity availability of resources, attendance of the learners, quality of learners, quality of counseling, use of audio-visual material.
- Assignment handling should ensure availability of schedules, adherence to schedules and quality of assessment. Quality handling involves pre-admission services, on-course services, and post-course services.
- Feedback to be received on quality of materials, quality of counseling and tutoring, quality of support services.



- The quality of evaluation is also ensured by the availability of schedules, adherence to schedules, the manner of conducting examination, turn-around time for assessment, proper handling of students' appeal, maintenance of discipline, timely declaration of results and awarding of certificates.

The regional centres of IGNOU are expected to play an important role in quality assurance by strict adherence to the rules and regulations on the above mentioned issues.

### **Reviewing the courses and follow-up activities:**

The follow-up activities regarding a particular course depend on the feedback received by the regional centres and the head quarters. At the beginning of the course, a review document is prepared. It contains a time table for receiving feedback and the areas on which feedback is prepared. It contains a time table for receiving feedback and the areas on which feedback will be solicited. On the basis of the feedback, a course is modified, expanded or withdrawn.

## **MECHANISMS OF MAINTENANCE OF STANDARDS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION:**

Following are the main mechanisms of maintenance of standards in distance education.

- a) **Maintenance of Standard:** The standard of any system of education should be considered adequate if the following criteria are met:
- The institutes should have competent and adequate staff with high level of motivation.
  - Lessons prepared with proper planning and after deliberation.
  - Students' assignment evaluated, corrected and returned in time.
  - Instead of depending only on print-material, modern technology of communication is used considerably.
  - Library and laboratory facilities are available.
  - Unlike conventional education, it should not be right and must not be a replica of conventional educational institutes.
  - The institute should have an identity of its own.
  - Regular efforts should be taken to check the standard of education.

Besides maintenance of standard, also required that distance education institutions should have the following features:

**Openness-** The concept of openness is based on the principles of humanitarianism, equal educational opportunities and access. Thus adequate standard implies that these principles are taken into consideration.

**Flexibility-** A standard of distance teaching institute should be flexible in matters related to curricula, about learning time and places, about age-groups etc. In other words, the students are allowed to adopt their learning process with that of the institute.

Other features are based on the principles of **industrialisation** process like division of labour, planning, design, production and delivery of pre-prepared printed courses.

For maintain the standard of education, external control by some accrediting agencies is necessary. But at the same time, the institution, too, introduce various measures as self-assessment and control.

**External Control:** External control means that distance educational institutes are given recognition or affiliation by external agencies depending on its performance or standard of education. Another related term is used in this connection, which is accreditation. Its purpose is to ensure the standard of distance education and help the institution to improve and for continuous improvement. Accreditation on the part of an institution ensures its credibility, integrity and status among other similar institutes. In other words, the standard of the institute depends on whether it is accredited by some appropriate agency or commission. It is a voluntary process which the institute itself seeks for its own benefit.

The five important criteria for accreditation are as below:

- i) The institution should have an appropriate educational mission. Its stated purposes of education should match this mission;
- ii) Human, financial and other physical resources are to be effectively organised to pursue these objectives;
- iii) The institute is achieving the educational and other purposes;
- iv) This achievement should be on a continuous basis and ensure educational effectiveness and
- v) Integrity of the institute would be manifested through its various activities and relationship.

Mechanisms of maintenance of standard of distance education should not be sharply divided into external control or internal evaluation. Ideally, the two processes are complimentary. The internal practice is a combination of self-evaluation by the institution based on pre-determined criteria and peer review following self-evaluation.

National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) has introduced a three-step process:

- i) Preparation of self-study and self-analysis report by the institution;
- ii) On-site visit of the peer team for validation of the reports and
- iii) The scrutiny and approval of the peer team report by the Council (Gnanam, 2003).

**Internal Evaluation:** We know that external control and internal evaluation processes are interconnected in practice. Historically, external control is introduced for controlling the pre-profit private institutions so that a minimum standard is set up by the institutes. This type of control acts as a safety-net for the users. The objective is to create a recognised and respectable framework within which the institution can operate. But external inspection of courses is often carried out by the conventional academics without experience in distance teaching. The problem has become more complex with the introduction of computer-based media in open learning as the existing standard for assessment is no longer appropriate. So, gradually, there is a shift in emphasis on internal quality assurance or maintenance of standard. The modern practice is the formulation of criteria for standard. The individual institution is responsible for maintaining the standard and these criteria are its guideline. The Distance Education council (DEC) has incorporated this practice in our country.

The four important areas in this connection are:

- Information and counselling;
- Course development;
- Course delivery and
- Organisation

Within these four areas, the aspects are to be covered. These are:

- Conditions and constraints;
- Implementation
- Results and follow-up.

b) **Performance Indicators in Distance Education:** The two terms, performance indicators and assessment of standard are often closely related. Sometimes they are used synonymously. According to Ramsden (1991), the idea of performance indicators is derived from economic models of the education system as a process within a wider economic system which converts inputs (such as academics' salaries) into outputs (such as research papers). Performance indicators are actually quantifiable variables used in decision-making process.

Morris Report (1990) of United Kingdom states that Performance indicators are statistics, ratios, costs and other forms of information which illuminate or measure progress in achieving the mission and corresponding aims and objectives of the Government or agency or of a University or other institutions.

**The characteristics of Performance Indicators:** Performance Indicators, to be effective, must be relevant, verifiable, and free from bias, quantifiable, economically feasible and acceptable to the institution which is to be evaluated. A Committee of Vice chancellors and Principals I UK (1988) recommended that Performance Indicators should have the following characteristics.

- i) Relate to the objectives of the universities, especially, teaching and research.
- ii) Be specific, quantifiable, and standardised so as to enable comparisons within and between institutions.
- iii) Be simple so as to aid understanding of activities.
- iv) Be acceptable, credible and free of bias and
- v) Provide information about the activities and operations of the institutions.

Thus it is evident that Performance indicators should be flexible, problem-oriented and policy- relevant and quantitative rather than qualitative.

Types of Performance Indicators: Three types of Performance Indicators were proposed by the Jarrat Report (1985) in UK. These are:

- **Internal indicator:** It is based on the information related to institution e.g. number of application for admission, graduation rates, examination results, attraction of research grants etc.
- **External indicator:** It has to deal with external performance like acceptability of the graduates for employment, publication by staff, overall reputation, external review etc.

- **Operational indicator:** It is concerned with student/ staff ratio, unit cost of education, class size, availability of library and computers or other facilities.

The performance indicators may also be classified into input indicators, process indicators and output indicators. For distance education specifically, Chandrashekhara Rao (1997) proposed three types like performance indicators, namely:

- **Micro indicators:** It relates to the performance of sub-system which has a bearing on the overall performance of the institution e.g. identification of course materials to develop learning materials.
- **Macro indicators:** It has to do with performance in aggregate e.g. entry-exit performance of the students.
- **Mega indicators:** These indicators are related to distance teaching institutes' interaction with social system like relationship with formal education system, or with industries.

#### **Importance of Performance Indicators in maintenance of standard:**

Basically performance Indicators are utilised to maintain overall standard of the institution. With the help of the Performance Indicators, it is possible to assess the functioning of the distance teaching institutes and at the same time the quality of it can be enhanced. The Performance Indicators are not only used to maintain standard but also for various other purposes which include the following:

- i) To measure the accountability of the institute;
- ii) To compare the performances of similar institutes;
- iii) To improve the performance of the staff by giving feedback;
- iv) To develop and improve the performance of the staff by giving feedback;
- v) To provide relevant information to the students about the programme;
- vi) To improve image of the institution and
- vii) To seek grants.

We know the Performance Indicators are often held with suspicion. Not all the institutions are agreeable to this practice. It is right if Performance Indicators are used for self-evaluation and policy formulation, but institutions are afraid of its being used as external control or for curtailing educational grants.

c) **Accreditation:** The term accreditation is linked to the concept of quality assurance of a Distance Education institute. It adds value to an educational system. In the context of globalisation, the system of accreditation has become all the more important because cross-border distance education system requires the degree to be recognised widely and the transferability of the qualification. Thus to maintain adequate standard and to be recognised, the distance education institutes must be accredited. Accreditation is generally a part of government regulatory framework, though private agencies are coming up.

The Open and Distance Learning Quality Control (ODLQC) in United Kingdom in its website gives details of their standard and how to apply for accreditation. The process of accreditation involves the following steps:

- i) Transparent criteria which are communicated in advance; often they are develop in consultation with the distance education institutes;
- ii) Application procedure is communicated;
- iii) Briefing meeting between the accrediting agency and the distance education institutes;
- iv) Capacity building that is training people belonging to both the organisations and
- v) Self-study.

The accreditation in distance education system requires that the institute employ, experienced distance education staff, has appropriate resources, provide, information and support to students, undertakes programme development and review process, introduces system of monitoring students' satisfaction and valid reliable assessment system. Recently, the accrediting agencies have laid down specific on-line delivery standard used to develop Information and Communication Technology (ICT) learning standard.

## CONCLUSION:

In this paper, the term quality has been defined along with the meaning of quality assurance. The quality assurance is an objective of an organisation which is concerned with the stakeholders. It introduces various measures so that the clients of the organisation continue to receive quality service or product. In the context of distance education, the various aspects of quality assurance programmes have been analysed. These measures are related to the various areas like course planning, course development, tutoring and counselling of the students, assessment of the students, student support system. Examination, use of appropriate media, cost effectiveness of the course, maintenance of standard, control on education, performance indicators of distance education and

accreditation. Finally, the measures taken by the IGNOU to up hold the quality of distance education in India has been analysed.

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