



QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN INDIA

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Summary

1. *Higher education including open & distance learning is an instrument of transformation. This transformation cannot come about without high quality of the system and what the system offers. It is difficult to define quality. In the distance learning system, quality is best defined as fitness for purpose in combination with exceptional high standards, perfection and consistency, value for money, and transformation capabilities. Quality assurance must cover areas such as curriculum design, content and delivery organization; teaching, learning and assessment; etc*
2. *India has always been quality conscious in education. From olden times Indian peers have laid great emphasis on quality. In recent times, several national level efforts are made to ensure quality, like the National Education Policy of 1968, the National Policy on Education of 1986, setting up of National Assessment and Accreditation Council, Several higher education regulatory bodies including the Distance Education Council.*
3. *The case study given in part 2 indicates the quality concerns expressed in the working of Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning, a leading private sector provider of distance learning in India. Quality assurance is brought to bear in practically all the aspects of the Institute's functioning, like academic, assessment and evaluation, student care & support, etc.*

This paper is divided into two parts: The first part deals with the emergent need for quality assurance in the Indian open & distance learning, the policy framework developed over the years for assuring quality in education, and the efforts made towards attaining it. The second part presents a case study on quality concerns and practices in the Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning, Pune, India, where I work.

Part I

I. Introduction

It is well recognized that higher education including open and distance learning, is an instrument of social and economic transformation. It is the most important source of HRD all over the world. One cannot think of this transformation without a quality-conscious education system. Quality in higher education is synonymous of well developed HRD scheme. I would go a step further and say that education without quality is no education at all.

How does one define quality? In particular it is not easy to precisely decide what constitutes quality of education. Different persons may have different perspectives of quality. There are two aspects of quality in the educational context: quality of the system as a whole and quality of what the system offers to the students or the learners. In relation to conventional education quality covers various components of face-to-face teaching like the infrastructure and basic amenities, social & geographical environment, professional competence of the teaching, administrative and finance staff, appropriateness and relevance of the curriculum, teaching-learning materials, teaching and learning processes, community support to the institution, performance evaluation of the teachers, students and the system as a whole.

However, ODL is not the same thing as the conventional education. The profile of the distance learner is much different; her/his main objective of taking to higher education through the distance mode may also be much different than the 17-23 age-group of tertiary college students. In a country like India which has a huge backlog of adult illiterates, semi literates and the educated unemployed, all in search of new knowledge and new skills including professional skills, ODL is a *god-send* opportunity. It is against this background that the Government of India has planned to raise enrolment in the ODL system from the current 20-22 % to 40 % during the Eleventh Development Plan (2007-12).

II. Quality in Education Defined

Quality is often defined as embracing effectiveness, efficiency and accountability. These terms, however, have connotations with terms used in trade, commerce and industry. Education *per se* and higher education in particular, is much different; every element therein - input, process and output - is a human being, which is a very complex and highly individualistic phenomenon. Education is no more a sheer effort to become "learned". It is a means to prosper in personal life and achieve higher living standards. It reflects needs and aspirations of the beneficiaries. Hence quality in higher education is defined as "fitness for the purpose". But this is somewhat an elusive criterion. I would group quality in education as a combination of:

- Exceptional high standards
- Perfection and consistency
- Fitness for purpose
- Value for money, and
- Transformation capabilities

III. Application of Quality in ODL

Open learning removes barriers in access like admission pre-requisites, physical attendance at a particular place and time, possession of prescribed equipment, books, journals, and so on. Distance learning means that the learners are physically separated in space and time from the teaching institution and its staff. Nevertheless, the broad

criteria of quality concerns mentioned above apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to open and distance learning also. A special feature of ODL is the application of well-tried principles of division of labour and specialization operating more systematically and self consciously than in the conventional system. The five areas of quality concerns need to be vigorously applied to the following elements of ODL to ensure that no element lacks the expected degree of quality:

- Curriculum design, content and organization
- Teaching, learning and assessment
- Student progression and assessment
- Student support and guidance

The panoply in quality education has a three-pronged approach: internal quality assurance mechanism; evaluation by peers; and accreditation by an independent and competent organization. Quality measurement of education institutions rests on this panoply. A good and serious ODL institution will ensure that the three-pronged approach is adopted to ensure the best quality in all the aspects of distance learning.

The concept of quality is complex and value laden. But in the ODL system, quality means attainment of the expected levels of knowledge and skills which are tools for further learning by actual work experience necessary for managing the learner's personal and social transaction in day-to-day life. This quality is to be attained by all distance learners, in a given time-frame.

IV. Quality Concerns in India

India has always been quality-conscious in education. From times immemorial, Indian peers have laid great emphasis on quality education, and evolved systems and concerns for ensuring quality. Some of the national-level efforts in the recent past are given below:

- 1968 National Education Policy.
 - Radical reconstruction of the education system.
 - Rapid expansion in coverage.
 - Improving **Quality**, utility, financial outlay, and access.
- 1986 National Policy on Education
 - Constitutional amendment (1976). Education brought into the Concurrent list.
 - Central Govt: Reinforce national and integrative character of Education, maintain **quality and standards**, monitor educational requirements, **promote excellence**.
- 1986 NPE, Two recommendations
 - Excellence (Institutes and individual) to be recognized.
 - Award autonomy to select institutions.
- 1986 NPE and Programme of Action (POA) recommended a National Accreditation Body. After several discussions in Committees, Sub-committees, national/regional debates, and consultations, finally NAAC was set up on 16th Sept. 1994. A totally autonomous organization.
- NAAC: The National Assessment & Accreditation Council is an independent autonomous body with a mandate to assess the quality of all facets of tertiary level institutions including universities. The NAAC has developed strict norms for

assessment & accreditation. Institutions receiving high grading from the NAAC certainly raise their credibility and acceptance in the community.

- The Distance Education Council set up under the Indira Gandhi National Open University Act has been assigned the regulatory role for the open & distance learning universities and the higher educational ODL institutions. The DEC examines the working of these universities and institutions in all its aspects before granting recognition. This has had a salutary effect on their working. It is likely that the DEC also undertakes assessment and accreditation of the open & distance learning institutions in India in the near future.

Part II

A Case Study on Quality Assurance effort at the Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning, Pune, India

The Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning (SCDL), Pune, is the leading private sector provider of open & distance learning in India. Its learners, numbering more than 200,000 are drawn from all the nooks & corners of India, and also, from more than 40 overseas countries. Quality is the hallmark of SCDL's working. The quality concerns adopted by the SCDL are presented below:

- The learning programs are selected very carefully, taking into consideration the market demands as well as the felt-needs of the learners. Once a tentative decision is taken to introduce a new program, its various pros & cons are discussed in the Academic Council, which is the principal body for taking all academic decisions. If the AC approves the proposal to introduce the program, an Expert Committee is appointed which draws a well-considered curriculum for that program. Great attention is paid on the latest trends and developments relevant to the subject. The Expert Committee may also suggest detailed course-contents for which the Self Learning Materials have to be prepared.
- The next step is to allocate the work of writing the Self Learning Materials. For this purpose the SCDL has enlisted more than 400 visiting faculty who are all well qualified and long experienced teachers from reputed universities and colleges as well as persons with practical experience in industry. Orientation programs are arranged for these faculty. The curricula approved by the Expert Committees are discussed and then they are required to provide the Table of Contents and also write one model unit or chapter. The TOC and the model unit are thoroughly examined by the Expert Committee members and improvements, modifications etc., if any, are suggested. Orientation of the faculty is held from time to time to ensure that the guidelines are properly followed.
- Once the soft-copy of the SLM is received, it is subjected to different types of editing, like the content editing to ensure that the most modern developments are incorporated in the content, the mode editing to ensure that the specified distance learning mode of writing is followed, the language editing to ensure that the language is simple, free of jargon and easy to understand by the distance learners who come from a large variety of social, economic and regional backgrounds. The volume and size of each unit is predetermined such that the remotely located distance learner is able to study it.
- Electronic learning materials in the form of e-learning modules and pre-recorded DVD lectures are also prepared. These are complementary to the SLMs to further enrich the learners' knowledge. Case studies based on live-experiences are used in these materials. The faculty preparing the electronic learning materials may, or more likely may

not, be those who had prepared the SLM in the print form. While the e-learning modules are supplied free of cost as a part of the study kit, the DVD lecture disks are sold at a nominal price. These electronic materials have become very popular with the learners.

- An important aspect of the academic functioning of the SCDL is its constant endeavour to update the materials supplied to the distance learners. Whether it is the print or the electronic learning material, content-review is a regular feature for ensuring that the latest in the subject matter is incorporated. For this reason the SCDL does not keep large stocks of materials but arranges fresh production every year.
- Self assessment is an important system adopted by the SCDL. All the learning materials sent to the distance learners – whether print or electronic – contain self-assessment questions. In fact the learning material contents are broken down into sections and sub-sections, and at the end of each the learner is expected to take a pause and attempt answering the self-assessment questions. This way, the learner will come to know whether she/he has understood the content of the section or the sub-section. This process builds up the learners' confidence.
- A distinguishing feature of the SCDL is the use of most modern technology in the student progression and assessment system. Each learner is required to complete two **online** assignments per course per semester. The online assignments are based on the thoughtfully prepared and exhaustive Question Banks which are **uploaded on the web** for accession by the learners. For the term-end examinations also questions are uploaded on the web and learners access the website by use of their individual log-ins. The SCDL has adopted the system of **online and on demand** examination. Both are evaluated automatically by the use of electronic devices, and the results are available instantly.
- Last but not least of the quality assurance measures cover the Student Support & Guidance System. This system has three important planks: the Personal Contact Programs (PCP), the Data Support Department and the system of quick response to students' queries and requirements.
- The PCPs are held at different centres where the learners from that area gather and seek assistance in better understanding of the study materials and on the spot clarification of their doubts. Subject experts are available through out the duration of the PCPs for interaction with the learners. In a specially blended diploma program for the Corporate executives, week-end lectures at the premises of the corporate office are arranged. These lectures cover most of the important topics covered in the SLM, besides answering doubts and queries of the corporate executives.
- The Data Support Department uses a fully computerized system for building a thorough data base wherein all the relevant information and facts & figures related to the large number of learners, as well as various other activities relevant to the functioning of the SCDL, are stored and made available instantly. The online registration data are also carefully recorded.
- Under the system of quick response to student queries, the SCDL has set up a Call Centre and a Student Support Centre at its Head-quarters at Pune. The queries, difficulties etc. raised by the learners are attended to within 24 hours. Likewise, the queries etc. raised through e-mails are answered by the Student Support Centre, again within 24 hrs. The staff of the CC and the SSC are well informed and trained in dealing with the FAQs which account for a large majority of the queries. If necessary, some queries are also referred to the departments concerned and the information thus collected is passed on to the students.

- In the end it may be reiterated that quality is the hallmark of SCDL. Over the years it has earned a reputation as an institution with high concern for quality. The courses are constantly reviewed, revised and updated.

Conclusion

It is not easy to define quality in relation to education. There are two aspects of quality in education: Quality of the system as a whole and quality of what the system offers to the students/learners. Unlike trade, commerce or industry where the inputs, processing and the output are independent elements, in education every element – input, process and output – is the human being which is a very complex and highly individualistic phenomenon. Quality in education should necessarily reflect on the purpose for which the learners spend 20 years of life, which in India is almost one thirds of the expected life span (60 years). Therefore, quality in education is best defined as Fitness for Purpose, with high standards, perfection, consistency, value for money and transformation capabilities.

It may be added that without rapid spread of real quality education, there can hardly be any scope for sustainable development. As a matter of fact education has to be quality education only; no education without quality is education in the real sense of the term. There is no gainsaying the fact that without improving the quality of education, there is no hope for a real sustainable development of India. There is a significant relevance of improving education quality to sustainable development in India. If the ODL system, which has a far better reach to the interior rural areas and the disadvantaged sections of population, has to play its expected role in India's sustainable development, it must raise the quality of all aspects of its working.

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