

# Validation of Programmes and Courses Offered by the Indian Open Universities

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Academic credibility and quality control are major problems which the distance education system in the developing countries faces and which the DE professionals are beginning to acknowledge — albeit reluctantly! While the recognition of a problem is moving half way towards solving it, it still remains to be seen as to what one can do to ensure checks on quality.

This discussion reviews the steps taken to achieve quality control in an institution which has now become the classic success story in the history of distance education — the UKOU. It then proceeds to set out priorities for our own context and how they may be achieved. A highlight of this discussion is that it maps out in detail an analysis of various components in the process of maintaining performance standards such as accreditation of courses, validation and review which includes within its purview areas like quality of teaching, student support services and evaluation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Potent and revolutionary forces are permeating through the Indian higher education scene. The global ideological climate has suffered a sea-change, and with the winds of change buffeting cherished economic shibboleths, there is a burgeoning and strident demand for accountability in all spheres of national activity. Higher education is no exception. Warnings of impending doom in the form of shrinking grants have been plentiful. Increasingly, higher education is being asked to earn at least some portion of its keep. Only a deliberate attention to the quality of their pedagogic pursuits can help higher education institutions to maintain the vigour of their intellectual leadership. Practical methods must be evolved to deal with these developments. A programme to encourage improved performance would appear to be a logical component of such methods. However, no programme for improved performance is possible without a clear picture of the existing levels of institutional performance.
- 1.2 Educational justice for the post-secondary age group was one of the more important reasons for the establishment of the open and distance education system in the country<sup>1</sup>. Equally important, however, was the need of the Government to develop a cost-efficient system. It is now commonly accepted that the distance education technique can reap the benefits of the economies of scale<sup>2</sup>. In other words, the higher the student numbers, the lower the per capita cost of educating them. It thus becomes crucial that the system attracts large numbers of students to be genuinely cost-efficient. It is logical

to propose that improved pedagogic performance on the part of the open/distance education organisations will lead to the emergence of high quality programmes. Availability of high quality programmes will result in greater numbers being attracted to the system, ensuring not only its survival but also its flourishing growth. Attention to improved performance and a search for quality are thus not mere embellishments but vital to the future of the open distance education system.

- 1.3 The proposal for the validation of the programmes and courses offered by the Indian open universities is made as one component of the total quality assurance activity and as the first important step. This is not intended to be a call to accountability stemming from dissatisfaction with past performance. It is simply the recognition of the future that open/distance education may have to face once its years of artificial affluence have run out.

## 2. THE INDIAN OPEN UNIVERSITY SCENE

- 2.1 The concept of open distance education at the college/university level has now taken firm roots in India. In addition to the Indira Gandhi National Open University (estd 1985), four State Level Open universities have been functioning in Andhra Pradesh (Dr B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad-estd 1982), Rajasthan (Kota Open University, Kota-estd 1987), Bihar (Nalanda Open University, Patna-estd 1989), and Maharashtra (Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nashik, estd 1989). An open university has recently been established in Madhya Pradesh (**Madhya**

Pradesh Bhoj University-estd 1992) and plans are afoot for open universities in Karnataka and Gujarat. In addition about 41 universities have correspondence/distance education units<sup>3</sup>.

- 2.2 The National Policy on Education, 1986<sup>4</sup> and its subsequent reviews have all supported the establishment of open learning systems and the Programme of Action (POA) 1992 supports the recommendation of the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) that each state should have an open university. Although this seems to have been challenged by some writers<sup>5</sup>, there is general agreement that open learning opportunities are necessary.

### 3. NEED FOR MAINTAINING STANDARDS IN OPEN/DISTANCE EDUCATION

- 3.1 With the multiplicity of organisations handling open distance education at the college/university level, it is necessary to ensure that the education available to the present and future learners is of the highest possible quality. Since the concept of open education and the techniques of distance education are relatively new in India, the availability of genuine expertise in the field is scarce. It is therefore necessary that the open distance education system addresses itself to the problem of standards and evolves a set of guidelines with regard to various components of the system so that a certain basic level of standards and quality can emerge.

- 3.2 Maintenance of standards and assurance of educational quality can become crucial to the future of the open distance education system in the country. There is still, albeit largely unfounded, a belief in the country that correspondence education is a less respectable system of acquiring education and it is true to say that the modern distance education system inherits some of these perceptions, and prejudices. Unless a conscious effort is made to demonstrate the distance education system's commitment to quality and standards, such prejudices will persist, harming the future of the concept.

- 3.3 In common perception, university education is synonymous with excellence. This accounts for the attraction brilliant minds have for university level teaching and research positions and the relatively favourable status they enjoy in the society. This has been achieved as a result of more than a century of excellent dedicated work. The open distance education system will need to make special efforts to achieve a similar stature.

### 4. MAINTENANCE AND COORDINATION OF STANDARDS IN CONVENTIONAL UNIVERSITIES

- 4.1 Maintenance and coordination of standards are the

statutory responsibilities of the UGC under Section 12 of the UGC Act. Over the years the UGC has taken a number of steps the most prominent amongst which are the following<sup>6</sup>:

- 4.1.1 Rules regarding the qualifications of teachers at the time of recruitment.
  - 4.1.2 Minimum number of days (180) per year that the classes must take place
  - 4.1.3 Guidelines for examinations reform
  - 4.1.4 Modernisation of curriculums and methods of teaching
  - 4.1.5 Publication of journals
  - 4.1.6 Academic staff training
  - 4.1.7 Establishment of a National Educational Testing procedure for Junior Research Fellowships (JRF)
  - 4.1.8 Restructuring of courses
  - 4.1.9 COHSSIP (College Humanities and Social Science Improvement Programme)
  - 4.1.10 ULP (University Leadership Programme)
  - 4.1.11 Panels in Humanities, Social Sciences, and the Sciences
  - 4.1.12 COSIP (College Science Improvement Programme)
  - 4.1.13 Centres of Advanced Study
  - 4.1.14 Special Assistance to Selected Departments
  - 4.1.15 Establishment of curriculum Development Centres
  - 4.1.16 Preparation of University level books.
- 4.2 Section 12(B) of the UGC Act empowers the UGC to declare universities fit to receive Central Assistance, if they meet certain criteria. Section 3 of the UGC Act confers upon the UGC the power to recommend to the Government of India institutions which can be deemed to be universities. Through Section 12 (ccc) of the UGC Act, the UGC is empowered to establish inter-university centres as regional facilities. These centres need to register themselves under the Society Registration Act and function as autonomous institutes. From time to time, the UGC also lays down guidelines for the development of the colleges affiliated to various universities.

### 5. QUALITY CONTROL MEASURES IN CORRESPONDENCE/DISTANCE TEACHING ORGANIZATIONS

- 5.1 Council for the Accreditation of Correspondence Colleges, U.K.<sup>7</sup>

This Council was formed in 1969 as an independent

body. The principal objects of the Council were as follows:

- 5.1.1 To promote education by setting standards for all aspects of tuition, education or training carried out wholly or in part by post, to investigate the manner in which such activities are carried out and to grant, where appropriate, the award of accreditation stating that the activities of the college so investigated conform to such standards.
- 5.1.2 To make known requirements of standards set by the Council from time to time and to promote interest in the benefits arising therefrom.
- 5.1.3 To give effect to the standards set with a view to raising standards of postal tuition, to furthering its development on sound and progressive lines, to improving existing methods and introducing new techniques in postal tuition and to linking, where appropriate, correspondence courses with other forms of education.
- 5.1.4 To protect the interests of students and colleges having regard to the distinctive characteristics, traditions and needs of both.

Panels of independent qualified assessors carry out the process of accreditation and their reports, often supplemented by other reports, are considered by the full Council. Accreditation is subject to periodic reviews. A look at the list of institutions accredited by the Council reveals the entire range of educational and training activities ranging from agriculture, aviation, optometry through chartered accountancy, estate management, law to grocery distribution, theological studies and creative writing.

## 6. COURSE EVALUATION : STUDENT RESEARCH CENTRE, UKOU

6.1 The UKOU Student Research Centre has brought out a case study<sup>8</sup> of the evaluation of one of the UKOU courses (S325 Biochemistry and Cell Biology). A summary of the method used is given for illustrative purposes. This evaluation obtained the judgement made by the following:

- students
- staff
- external academics

## 7. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

7.1 The concept of constructing performance indicators for educational organizations has been gaining ground for some time. In the U.K., the Jarrat Committee report (1985)<sup>9</sup> proposed the following performance indicators:

### 7.1.1 *Performance indicators proposed in the Jarrat Report.*

Internal performance indicators include

- market share of undergraduate applications (by subject)
- graduation rates and classes of degrees
- attraction of masters and doctoral students
- success rate of higher degrees (and time taken)
- attraction of research funds
- teaching quality.

External performance indicators include

- acceptability of graduates (post-graduates) in employment
- first destination of graduates (post-graduates)
- reputation judged by external reviews
- publications by staff and citations
- patents, inventions, consultancies
- membership, prizes, medals of learned societies
- papers at conferences.

Operational performance indicators include

- unit costs
- staff/student ratios
- class sizes
- course options available
- staff workloads
- library stock availability
- computing availability

7.2 Johns and Taylor (1990)<sup>10</sup> used the following five indicators to rate the performance of U.K. universities:

- 7.2.1 the non-completion rate (NCR)
- 7.2.2 the percentage of graduates obtaining a first or upper second class honours degree (DEGREE RESULT)
- 7.2.3 the percentage of graduates obtaining permanent employment (EMPLOY)
- 7.2.4 the percentage of graduates proceeding to further education or training (FURTHER)
- 7.2.5 the average research rating obtained by each university in the University Funding Council's (UFC) 1989 Research Selectivity Exercise (RESEARCH)

7.3 Interestingly, Oxford ranked first and Cambridge second. Ulster, whose unit cost per student was the lowest, emerged last at rank 45. London, with the highest unit cost, came 26th in the overall ranking.

7.4 Crooks (1987)<sup>11</sup> suggests twenty-three performance indicators suitable for open learning systems. Some of which are:

- Finally registered students
- Undergraduate output in terms of the awards given
- Assistance to disadvantaged groups in population
- Cost per student
- Student satisfaction with course content
- Input qualifications of students for professional, updating and retaining courses
- Amount of external funding obtained
- Community service
- Amount of course material used by other higher education institutions

## 8. COUNCIL FOR ACADEMIC AWARDS, U.K: ANALYSIS OF ITS PRACTICES

8.1 To promote and maintain high academic standards in education through the granting of academic awards, the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) was established in the U.K. in 1964. The Council's basic function was to determine the conditions governing the approval of courses.

8.2 An analysis of the practices used by the CNAA<sup>12</sup> is presented as an instance of a viable system of validation which was actually used for more than a quarter of a century.

### 8.3 Principles

#### Approach

8.3.1 The approach is partnership-based in that the institution willingly submits its courses for validation.

#### Standards

8.3.2 Academic awards (i.e. degrees, diplomas, certificates) should be consistent and comparable in standards.

8.3.3 Awards should be defined in terms of standards, objectives, duration and level of entry.

8.3.4 Bachelor's degree with Honours was used as a fixed point against which other awards were to be measured.

#### Multiple Routes

8.3.5 Although the standard and objectives of a course should conform to existing acceptable standards, the routes by which they are achieved by students should

not be rigid. A variety of modes of study and course structures should be available.

### Mode and Structure of Courses

8.3.6 The curriculum, structure, teaching methods and forms of assessment of a course should be such as to ensure the realisation of its aims and objectives.

### Aims and Objectives

8.3.7 The aims and objectives of the programme/course should inform and indicate the direction of the curriculum structure, teaching methods and forms of assessment.

8.3.8. The "objectives" of a course should specify in detail the knowledge and skills to be developed by the programme.

### Quality of Teaching

8.3.9 Teaching staff should be properly qualified and experienced and their teaching should be invigorated and informed by their participation in research and related scholarly or professional activities.

### Student Support

8.3.10 An institution will need to ensure the provision of adequate learning resources and appropriate support services.

### Peer Review

8.3.11 The decision on whether a course meets the institution's requirements should be made by a group of responsible and experienced people drawn from:

- A) inside and outside the field of study.
- B) inside and outside the institution.
- C) inside and outside higher education.

8.3.12 The group should

- A) be able to make impartial judgements on the comparability of a course with similar courses offered elsewhere.
- B) include persons who are familiar with current developments in the field of study concerned.

### Admission of Students

8.3.13 The admission of students should be based on the institution's reasonable expectation that the student would be capable of handling the learning challenges involved.

### Assessment of Students

8.3.14 Assessment devices should be consistent

with and based on the aims and objectives of the course. Examiners must be impartial and competent.

#### Opportunities for Further Study

8.3.15 The range and levels of courses offered by an institution should be such as to provide opportunities for students to gain the highest level of award of which they are capable.

### 8.4 Definitions of Terms

#### 8.4.1 Validation

Validation is the process whereby a judgement is reached by a group including external peers as to whether a course designated to lead to an academic award of a specified level meets the nationally accepted requirements for that award as determined by the institution's degree-awarding powers/authorities.

#### 8.4.2 Approval

Approval is the outcome of validation where a course is judged to meet the institution's requirements.

#### 8.4.3 Review

Review is the process whereby the progress of an existing course is critically appraised at pre-determined institutions by a group of people, including external peers.

#### 8.4.4 Monitoring

Monitoring is the regular internal process by which an institution critically appraises a course between reviews.

#### 8.4.5 Recognition of Credit

Recognition is the process whereby the institution makes a judgement about the extent to which qualifications or experience gained elsewhere may be accepted in partial fulfilment of the institution's requirements for a given award.

### 8.5 Information Required for Validation and Review

#### 8.5.1 New Courses

8.5.1.1 Relevant background information: context of the course in terms of institutional policies and plans as well as assumed demand.

8.5.1.2 The course specification and regulations.

8.5.1.3 Details of the curriculum (aims/objectives, list of content areas/topics, teaching/learning

materials and methods, system of assessment).

8.5.1.4 A list of teaching, technical and professional staff involved.

8.5.1.5 Information about the qualifications of the academic, technical, professional staff, including research work.

8.5.1.6 Constitution and operation of course committees, and information about the course leader(s).

8.5.1.7 Information about available resources:

A) Capital and revenue budget proposed for the support of the course.

B) Library, computing and other relevant support.

C) Any special accommodation, field or equipment needs.

#### 8.5.2 Review of Courses

8.5.2.1 Describe information about the course discussing past progress and the future intentions.

8.5.2.2 Brief curriculum outline.

8.5.2.3 Reports from external examiners and statements of the action taken on any recommendations.

8.5.2.4 A critical appraisal of the operation of the course based on the institution's own monitoring and evaluation, including the views of students.

8.5.2.5 Up-to-date information on resources, including any changes in staff, capital and revenue expenditure, the development of the library, computing and other learning resources provision.

8.5.2.6 Up-to-date information on staff research, consultancy and other relevant scholarly or professional activity.

#### 8.5.3 Definitive Course Documents

Definitive course documents provide the institution with a comprehensive course archive and facilitate the gathering of information, the development of good practice based on experience and management of academic quality within the institution.

8.5.3.1 A definitive course document should provide information which covers:

- A) Basic Course data: Name of course/programme; academic awards (e.g. degree, diploma, certificate) to be conferred (including duration and mode of study, availability of distinction, date of first conferment (if new), titles of courses/programmes to appear on award certificates), date of final validation/review event, date to start/continue from, detail of any delegated authority to make changes, next periodic review date, supervised work experience, conditions attached for approval, main subject/discipline components.
- B) The curriculum: aims/objectives; content areas/topics; teaching/learning materials and methods; system of student assessment.
- C) Rules/Regulations: For the admission of students; for progression through the course; for assessment.

## 9. CONCLUSION

The following important points emerge from this review of certain select initiatives in the quality assurance activity:

- 9.1 That the concept of quality assurance in education has had a long history.
- 9.2 At the macro level, the concept of performance indicators has been gaining ground.

9.3 At the micro level, course evaluation, course validation, course review and course monitoring have been taking place in both the open and the conventional systems.

9.4 Systematic collection and provision of information are crucial to any quality assurance programme.

9.5 The development and archiving of definitive course documents is necessary for the quality assurance programme.

9.6 The fundamental approach to validation is that an effort is made to find out whether the course meets the institution's own aims, objectives and expectations about a course.

9.7 The approach to any course validation is partnership-based in the sense that the exercise is aimed at illuminating important aspects of a course for the benefit of the institution.

9.8 The group conducting a validation exercise should be a peer group consisting of established academics/practitioners both from within and without an institution.

9.9 Validation and quality assurance are ongoing processes and periodic reviews are necessary even after a first validation is conducted.

9.10 Distance education institutions come in all hues and colours. Often, the organisational structures, staffing patterns and the organisational processes in these institutions have a wide range of variability. Effort however must be, as Professor V.C. Kulandai Swamy<sup>13</sup> points out in his Preface to the IGNOU Financial Code, to devise an administrative structure conducive to the realisation of the goals of the organisation.

9.11 It may be extremely desirable for the Distance Education Council to take up or support an initiative to develop a list of specifications or guidelines on various aspects of open/distance education in India. Attention is drawn to two existing publications setting out guidelines on open learning in the U.K.: National Guidelines on Open Learning<sup>14</sup> and Standards of Performance for Open Learning Staff<sup>15</sup>.

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