

COMMUNICATION

Student Support and Quality Indicators in Distance Learning

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Abstract : *Student support service (SSS) has been recognized as an integral and essential component of distance teaching-learning and provision of SSS predominantly guides the learners for self-study and maximises the learning outcome of distant learners. Therefore, fundamentally the focus should not be merely in strengthening SSS but also in extending quality service to the learners. The aspect of quality is not in-built in the system but is achieved by continuous improvement and innovation for which the thrust should be towards the process of planning. In order to plan the quality, the planners need to be supplied with relevant information and quality indicators. In this article, quality indicators for SSS in DE at the micro level, for Indian context, have been designed which also exhibit the dual function of standard or norm for measuring the quality. This study underpins the role of quality indicators in providing new direction to the policy makers and other stake holders in assessing the performance of the distance learning institutions in the area of student support.*

Introduction

Distance education (DE) has begun to revolutionise the concept of higher education throughout the world and is considered as an attractive mode to democratise higher education. DE has emerged to be a popular non-formal channel to provide answer to equity, access, flexibility and cost-effectiveness. In Indian scene, there are at present 60 odd distance learning institutions (DLIs) catering to about 12% of the learners in the relevant age group in higher education. The growth rate of enrolment in DE in our country continues to be phenomenal due to the fact that the formal system is not able to cope with the ever growing demand vis-a-vis the declining resources for higher education.

As we approach 21st century, all the activities are becoming highly knowledge based and there is also a shift from industrial era to information era. Moreover, globalisation, liberalisation and market-oriented economy have added new dimension and as a result knowledge and skills need to be continuously updated. This, of course, can happen only if the learning is life-long and continuous which is possible only through the distance learning/ education.

Consequently, the growth of DE in any country is expected to produce the following transformations (Khan and Mc Williams, 1998):

- Shift from classroom learning to independent learning
- Institutional - based learning to life-long learning
- Fixed curricula to flexible curricula
- From teaching to learning
- Supply-driven to demand-driven courses

Relevance of Student Support in DE

The DE system is found attractive for the multitude of learners as it has the ability to reach the learners living even in remote areas. The main aim of the DE is to promote self-study or independent study in the absence of regular face-to-face or human contact. For self-study or independent study, continuous support to meet the varied needs of the learner is essential and the support extended by the distance learning institution (DLI) is called student support services (SSS). The functions of the SSS in DE are well documented (Burnt and Bugbee, 1993; Dillon et.al.1992 and Peters, 1992) are as follows:

- Motivate and guide learners for self-study
- Providing answers to administrative queries
- Making individualised study a reality
- Promoting effective study skills
- Providing access to resources

The DE will be socially acceptable only if the focus is not merely on enrolling more number, relaxing entry rule and supplying good quality instructional material but in adopting multimedia strategies to support the learner during the course of study. The key role of student support service is to act as substitute for face-to-face classroom teaching which is minimal in the non-formal channel. The success of the of student support service lies in acknowledging the identity of the learner by complementing the mass produced print material with support services (Tait, 1993). Now-a-days, much thrust is also being attached to integrate course production (subsystem) with the student support (subsystem) for the effective and efficient management of any Distance learning institution (Sewart, 1993).

Directly or indirectly, the of student support service activities (ranging from study centre, counselling/tutorial support to administrative problem solving) must assist the learner to learn, interact and communicate (Rumble 1992). Moreover the recent developments in the field of communication technologies have given a new direction to the percept and practice of of student support service by the Distance learning institution of the advanced countries. The implication of these developments are the introduction of gadgets like audio and video cassettes, radio, television, telephone, computer and teleconferencing in the gamut of of student support service the ultimate aim is to bring together the learner and teacher across time and distance to facilitate interactivity. Even though in many advanced countries, the

integration of technologies has restructured the student support service activities effectively, the same is not the case with developing countries like India. The new paradigm shifts in SSS have not been well conceived in developing countries mostly due to lack of initiatives on the part of the policy makers and financial constraints. It is also not surprising that in many DLIs all over the world financial support for the student support service has been subject to wild fluctuations. (Paul, 1988; Brindley and Fage, 1992). The repercussions in general are that student support service concepts have not percolated and continues to be neglected area in may of the DLIs in our country except in the institution like Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) since it happened to be an apex body for co-ordinating and maintaining standards in distance education in India.

However, student support service cannot afford to be neglected in the event of further expansion, diversification and consolidation of distance learning in the years to come. Therefore, it is imperative for the DLIs in our country to strengthen the student support service which involves reviewing the whole student support service from time to time by adopting functional changes.

Student Support: Need for Quality

Quality is a buzz word be it in industry, commerce or service sector. Effectiveness of an organisation depends upon both quality and quantity (Rumble, 1986). Quality is a difficult but a wide concept to define. It is considered as guiding factor for the success of any venture or programme. Any organisation can be effective and accountable to its customers only by constantly innovating to improve standards.

The concept of quality has its origin from the principles of industrial management and is considered as giving the clients standard product and services (Nunan and Clavert, 1991). On similar lines in DE, the clients, the products and services become respectively students, course material and support services. Quality in student support service is understood as the maximisation of learning outcome due to interaction among the learner, the print material and the facilitator (Viljoen et al, 1990). Besides, the satisfaction of the learners in receiving the support also decides quality. Moreover, quality is measured in terms of acceptability and accessibility of the support to the learners which are crucial in favouring or disfavouring standards. In nutshell, the quality in student support service can be identified with the following:

- Maximising the learning outcome
- Satisfying the learners needs and expectations
- Continuous improvement during operationalisation of the support
- Institutional commitment towards the provision of support and
- Recognizing the learner as central point for the service

In reality, for maintaining quality, total activities must be examined, documented and reflected upon with a view to plan them carefully. Moreover, the quality and in turn the overall image of the institution is determined by the strength or weakness of the student support service.

For the balanced and successful functioning of any DLI, it is to be ensured that the student support is not only given due significance but also gets integrated with the system-production of print material. Apart from this, the learners access to various resources is also a crucial factor from the learners perspective for deciding quality.

Therefore, the thrust towards planning lies in identifying the needs of the learners; managing a sustainable service, assessing the cost of service extended-all of which are deciding factors for achieving quality in SSS.

Planning for Quality—Quality Indicators

Quality is not inherent in the system but what one strives to achieve. Though, the distance education in the country has undergone considerable expansion in recent years, the concern for quality in SSS has been found lacking in many of the Distance Learning Institutions. However, if a DLI decides to improve quality in SSS, the first step has to be towards planning for it (Levin et al, 1990).

Planning SS is always a difficult task. But provision of qualitative student support is always viewed as an institutional commitment and such a provision should be guided more by educational instinct rather than by theoretical understanding. Consequently, in the construction of a suitable model for planning student support, the practical considerations which need to go into it in any DE should focus on the following:

- Who are the learners?
- What are their needs?
- How to meet their needs?
- How to manage the support services?
- How much will be the cost of services?

The task does not end only in finding answers to these questions but also in using the information/guidelines collected by the decision makers in fine tuning the support to be organised specifically tailored to the needs of the target group(s) identified.

Likewise, one of the pertinent information which is of interest to the planners is knowing about the cost of support services. This information is required for apportioning the financial resources for the SSS sector so as to manage the available financial resources of a DLI efficiently. This is a vital information as the cost of SSS is directly dependent upon student number(enrolment) and the cost would show progressive upward trend with increase in student enrolment and is considered as variable cost.

On similar lines, the relevant information collected about all aspects of students support should serve as useful database for the planners, besides exhibiting the function of indicators of quality.

Quality Indicators for Student Support Service

Quality is not an absolute but a relative concept and is achieved through continuous improvement, innovation as well as change in ethos/attitudes of all those involved in imparting DE (Sallies, 1992). Also, the concern for quality originates by trying to meet the varied needs of the learners in DLI (McIlroy and Walker, 1993), the focus being towards the centrality of the distance learner. Therefore, in total quality management (TQM) terms, the customer of DLI—the learner—deserves the highest quality of products (course material) and services (student support).

Normally quality relies on input—process—output function (Levin et al, 1990) and the fundamental elements which constitute (at the macro level) in the construction of quality indicators for SSS are as follows:

- Educational inputs: the infrastructure, human and financial resources form the key inputs
- Educational process: Teaching-learning strategies viz., guidance, motivation and didactic communication besides the methodologies adopted like multimedia for imparting knowledge and skills
- Educational output: Learning outcomes and success rates form the vital outputs.

All the indicators are inter-linked to one another and act as broad framework for the planners in (i) planning and implementation of quality and (ii) allowing to set up possible standards for assessing quality.

In practical terms, quality is said to be achieved if the standards are surpassed. For the continuous improvement of quality in any sector, it is imperative to establish standards (Levin et al, 1990). Perceptibly planning and assessment of quality cannot be viewed separately but go together which call for designing of a single standard. Therefore, for maintenance of quality in SSS, adoption of a single standard or norm acquires significance for the purpose of both planning the quality and assessment. In such a scheme of things, it is desirable to construct quality indicators at macro level too for planning as well as assessment. The details and type of information which constitute the quality indicators at the micro level for SSS—encompassing educational inputs, processes and outputs (macro level indicators)—can vary from learners profile to resources and costs. The major domains of coverage in Indian context which act as quality indicators include learners profiles, support facilities, study centres, assessment and learning outcome, resources and costs and staff training and development. The quality indicators developed for SSS covering all these domains are documented in Table 1

Table 1: Quality indicators for student support service

Major domains	Sub domains/type of information
1. Learners demographic profile	Age groups Gender (%) Employed/unemployed Income Family background Level of education completed.
2. Support facilities	Number of Study centres: Accessibility Enquiry and information service Media support: Availability and accessibility Work centres for laboratory/technical courses Mobile study centres: reaching rural/backward areas
3. Study centres	Proximity and access Learners per study centre Functioning: convenience and learner-friendly attitude Counselling and contact programme: frequency, utility and interactivity Library and multimedia facilities: availability Utilisation of study centres: effectiveness and efficiency Women and disabled groups: special support Motivation and guidance: improving study skills
4. Assessment and learning	Assignments and continuous evaluation: measuring students progress Assignment submission and grade distribution profile Assignment evaluation: turn around time. Knowledge and skills gained Persistence rate: curtailing drop out rates. Summative evaluation Pass percentage/success rate: feedback for policy review

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5. Cost and resources	Cost of support activities Per student cost for SSS Optimisation of resources Cost effectiveness and cost efficiency. Effective support through new technologies: cost analysis
6. Staff training and development	Manpower requirement at delivery and: assessment Identifying training needs of functionaries of student support Training of counsellors: in distance education practices, tutorial services, student evaluation Training of Study centre functionaries: awareness about DE, its courses and public relations.

The quality indicators developed (Table 1) can act as a convenient mechanism and ensure in assessing the quality of SSS in any DLI. This can be done by collecting data pertaining to all sub-domains and comparing them with the standard data constructed or established. This process manifests itself in measuring the performance of a DLI in the area of student support. However, to ensure comprehensiveness while assessing quality, the standards need to be more balanced and reliable for which all the six major domains (Table 1) should have more or less equal weightage or contribution in the construction of the standard. Beyond these, the ingenuity of the educational planners in utilising the quality indicators also decides the impact of these indicators as they are ultimate users aiming to improve quality of SSS in DLIs.

Conclusion

The quality indicators for SSS can be a framework and set to provide direction for assessing the quality of services extended by the DLIs. Moreover, the indicators, underpin and illuminate the role of SSS in the gamut of DE so that the desired learning outcome produces successful learners as output. The establishment of standards based on the quality indicators also allows to grade the DLIs in respect of their performance in the area of SSS, as well as paving the way for more accountability on their part. If adopted by policy makers, quality indicators can have lasting implications in improving academic and service standards at the delivery end of these institutions. Quality support service is giving to become hallmark for sustaining distance learning system in our country.

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