

Quality and Research in Distance Open Learning

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Abstract: *The linkage between quality assurance and research is often ignored or given a perfunctory treatment in many of the distance teaching institutions in India. What is true of India is also true of the developing in world in general. Quality assurance is not simply possible, if proper understanding of the issues concerned is not reflected in the early stages of the distance open learning practices by the institutions. This paper focuses on two sets of quality requirements and analyses the possible repercussions, if the requirements are not met in distance open learning. Finally it suggests a few steps to be taken to generate the necessary awareness about the issues related to quality and research in those institutions which are yet to wake up.*

Context

Quality is contextual. It is difficult to define, and it is complex. The best quality food served by a five star hotel of a developed Western Country may drive mad a person from an Indian family, if his or her taste has not already been cultivated to relish the smell of Amsterdam cheese or tuna fish. The best *sambar* and pickles of a South Indian lunch may cause instant diarrhea to a Western stomach not habituated to the spices of the East. The best distance education course in a certain country may end up as a disaster in another. So will be the fate of 'good', 'better' and the 'best' models and practices of distance open learning available anywhere in the world. What is piety to Paul may be blasphemy to Peter.

Definitions

Next to the contextual relevance, it is the definition of the quality that baffles those of us who are in the educational 'business' but without the necessary 'business acumen' and pragmatism to accept the existing industrial definitions of quality. However, till such time when parameters to measure, if at all, the quality of education, the industrial definitions will have some relevance as points of reference. The necessary modifications of the industrial parameters are not only inevitable but necessary, if we have to value the unique character of education which defies mechanical standardization.

“Quality” is a term commonly understood in the academic world as ‘standard’ and ‘excellence’ of the processes as well as the products. In turn, standard and excellence are judged in relation to the expectations both internal and external to the educational process that has to respond to the changing socio-academic environment. The interaction between the educational process and the social dynamics makes it imperative for the actors involved in the practice of education to accept or reject some of the norms determining the status or the quality of education in their respective contexts.

In the context of education, including distance open learning, quality assurance is seen as a complex issue because education is concerned with human beings and the human situation. When human beings need to be described as “products” the description cannot encapsulate all the characteristics of learners or the teachers and their standards and excellence in the same way one would describe the quality of commodities. For the same reason, the definitions and interpretations of ‘quality’ and ‘quality assurance’ of educational programmes too vary in the given educational situation depending on the individuals, institutions, and the social or national contexts.

Standards and excellence are set by educational institutions over a period of time. New standards are set forth when the nature of demand for educational programmes changes in response to the change in the social climate. Institutions respond to social changes in many different ways. Some may aim at the macro level issues of change which require more time, energy and efforts as one can see in the cases of nation building and cultural movements. Some others may respond to the needs of individuals who have set achievable short term goals.

In higher education in general, and in distance open learning in particular, quality issues are becoming more prominent than before because of the stakeholders’ concern for accountability of educational institutions; The stakeholders may be students, parents, teachers, educational managers, funding agencies and the state. The reason for taking quality issues seriously in recent times in India at least, is the state’s insistence on showing results by educational institutions for the funds they received from the government.

Quality of education offered by the distance teaching institutions of the developing world assumes significance in the context of the poor or lack of resources, limited expertise and larger commitments. Quality, in industrial terms, is defined as ‘error-free, totally reliable products or services’ and customers measure the quality of a product by ‘how well it fulfills their expectations at a given price’ (Holt, 1990). It refers to a product’s ‘fitness for purpose’ produced according to a set of required standards (Guri, 1989). Quality control, says Guri, “is primarily an action which adjusts operations to predetermined standards”. Total quality control, according to Holt, implies a total “involvement by everyone in the organisation” to provide customers with reliable products and services that fulfill their needs.

In the context of distance education, the ‘organisation’ is the university/institution, the ‘customers’ are the students primarily, but would include other stakeholders too. The ‘products’ are the courses or the graduates depending on the choice of our focus and the ‘services’ are the student support services. The total involvement of all the functionaries

of the institutions, of course, is an issue which has many thorny sides and therefore we have to assume that distance teaching institutions must ensure the involvement of people upto the expected level. 'Fitness for purpose', 'customers satisfaction', 'adherence to standards', 'value for money', 'continuous innovation' and other benchmarks of quality assurance of the business model may be acceptable parameters to determine and assure quality of a detergent or a brand of whisky, but these parameters have their limitations when applied to education or distance education, because there is no complete control over the so called 'inputs', 'process' and 'outputs' in the educational 'transaction'.

Quality Requirements: Two Levels

Having recognized the need to appreciate the complexity of quality issues in their contextual and definitional aspects, we have the obligation to attempt at a comprehensive framework within which our practices can be assessed, often intuitively, but when necessary with evidence. A comprehensive framework to make judgements about quality issues in the context of Distance Open Learning in India must address the issues which are cardinal for any meaningful debate. The issues may be defined in terms of requirements at least at two levels.

The first level quality requirements are mainly related to certain categories of human agents, and, of course, the material resources involved in the practice of distance open learning:

- Quality of Policy Making
- Quality of Management
- Quality of Academic Staff
- Quality of Support Staff
- Quality of Students
- Quality of Material/Physical Resources

'Quality of Policy Making' would essentially mean the political process of taking a decision to have a distance education system in the country and the actors involved in taking decisions at different stages. This is at the initial stage. At a latter stage, when the institutions start operating with a degree of autonomy, 'quality' refers to the quality of the various decision-making bodies or statutory authorities. 'Quality of Management' refers to the functional efficiency of the top management of a given institution (e.g. the Vice-Chancellors, Pro-Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Directors, Rectors, and Heads of Departments or Divisions). 'Quality of Academic Staff' refers to the attitudinal and academic suitability of teachers and others involved in the design, development and delivery of the academic programmes. Quality of support staff refers to the services given by the various administrative and secretarial staff of the institution in the teaching-learning process. 'Quality of students' refers to the previous knowledge and the preparedness of the students who join a Course/Programme. 'Quality of resources'

actually refers to both adequacy and suitability of funds, space, buildings, equipment etc, necessary for the smooth operations of a system.

The second level quality requirements which flow from the first set could be stated as follows :

- Quality of Courses/Programmes
- Quality of Delivery Systems
- Quality of Support Services
- Quality of Evaluation Schemes
- Cost-effectiveness/Justification for the money spent

Quality of all the above is dependent upon the quality of the first level requirements.

'Quality of courses and programmes' broadly would mean the ability to meet the aims and objectives set for them. 'Quality of delivery' here means the suitability of the media such as print, audiovisuals, computers etc, and the instructional media in terms of languages. 'Quality of support services' means the quality of the entire range of services to the student advertisement of courses to the post-completion advice and counselling. 'Quality of evaluation' means the appropriateness of the evaluation procedures to be adopted at different stages covering the formative and summative evaluation. Cost effectiveness becomes important in assessing the overall justification of expenses incurred in the development and implementation of educational programmes and their impact.

Let us examine how the two sets of quality requirements should normally operate in the process of quality assurance.

Quality of policy making, as we have said earlier, would depend on the knowledge and understanding of policy makers such as the political leaders, planners and experts who initially conceive of the kind of system of distance education that should operate in a given social context. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Open University was established as a political response to the growing demand for university level education that was to be made available to those who did not have access to the face-to-face systems. The demand came from the working class and those who for some reason or other could not continue their education in the early stage of their life. The major consideration was 'access' or provision. Provision of higher education had to be made without disturbing the normal life setting of the working adults. Secondly, the structures of the open university were to be designed appropriately to address an array of issues related to the academic and the administrative tasks involved. Thirdly, adequate resources (both human and material) were to be mobilized. Finally, till the open university reached a stage of stability unstinting political and financial support had to be assured. In all these, the planning process played the key role.

Walter Perry (1976) reports:

"The Planning Committee, being as it was of immense academic distinction, brought an aura of respectability and of authority to the concept of an Open University, which had been looked on as a 'gimmick' in the academic world as a whole. This was all in line with Jennie Lee's main aim of making sure that the University was a university in all senses of the term and was launched in

accordance with that style. She had worked very hard to gain the co-operation of these powerful educationalists, a number of whom have confessed that they were by no means supporters of the idea until they joined the committee" (p. 27).

When we look at the policy making and planning for distance education in India in general, and the promotion of open university system in particular, we see the ups and downs, promises and inaction, slow and tardy procedures, whimsical political mood, fluctuating fortunes bureaucratic hurdles and delays, skepticism of the academic world and a series of setbacks in the establishment of individual institutions and shaping of the system of distance education. In the words of Professor Ram Reddy, the founder Vice-Chancellor of the first open university (1982) and the Indira Gandhi National Open University (1985) in India:

"The story of the establishment of Andhra Pradesh Open University is a fascinating one. It is an interesting case study in public administration of how a proposal to set up a public institution receives a set back if there is no general public demand for it or if government policy making bodies do not evince interest in it. It also throws light on how a proposal is processed with lightning speed, if the head of the government takes interest in it" (Ram Reddy, 1997 : 109).

When the political process and the planning process do not reflect the necessary enlightenment, understanding and commitment but depend on the whims of powerful individuals, then, the rest of the processes inevitably suffer in their quality aspects. The management of the system or an individual institution for instance, would fail to assure quality from the beginning because it would not have the sufficient freedom and flexibility to shape and put into practice its internal policies and plans, if the political exigencies and not the professional requirements become the priorities. For example, after establishing an institution of distance open learning, if the chief executive has to please the political bosses and therefore is compelled to make series of compromises at every stage of his/her planning and execution of programmes, there is no way to assure quality in any of the operations. Most often quality is compromised at the time of appointing the chief executive himself/herself, as the appointment becomes political in the narrowest sense.

Possible Compromises and the Inescapable Fallout

In the politically and socially backward countries the appointments of all top level functionaries are usually political in nature. Quality in such situations is more dependent on 'luck' rather than a conscious attempt to assure it. And if the first chief executive is persuaded to compromise the key aspects, the successive regimes, so to say, will have little choice to alter the course of events and they may oblige to live with the inherited weaknesses rather than attempt high risk reforms to assure quality.

In the context of distance open learning, failure to formulate sound policies and planning strategies would inevitably affect the further processes negatively. All kinds of excuses and justifications would be given for not going in for professional approach, and the most common justifications would readily be given in the name of 'pragmatism', 'the given situation', 'teething troubles', 'limitations', 'the social reality' and the rest of euphemisms for professional opportunism. What would be the implications of these compromises for the quality of other aspects of distance open learning?

The first important implication is for the selection of the teaching and the support staff. In a situation where the practical experience in distance open learning is extremely limited, it would be imperative to select and appoint the right kind of staff. Two factors cannot be compromised, if there is concern for quality: the right *qualification* and the right *attitudes*. While the qualifications could be judged with a fair degree of certainty, attitudes need to be carefully identified and continuously cultivated. The academic qualifications of distance teachers must be judged with special attention to their communication skills, particularly the writing skills. The attitudinal factors that need to be assessed are the readiness to accept distance teaching as different from classroom teaching, the ability to adapt oneself to the new teaching environment and the willingness to acquire new skills required such as working in teams, attending to assorted nature of work which demands time and patience, and learning the skills to teach through technological means of communication. In short, the teaching staff must be ready to be *trained*, if they are not already trained. For whatever reasons, if compromises are made at the time of selection of staff, the inevitable fall out will be this: instead of the staff working for the growth and development of distance open learning system, the system would be working for the sheer maintenance of the staff at the cost of itself, more importantly at the cost of students. Similar reversal of purpose would occur in the case of the non-teaching support staff too, if the selections are not made thoughtfully.

The reversal of purposes happens concretely in the development of teaching materials and the implementation of the educational programmes. Untrained and ill-trained staff who do not appreciate the requirements of distance open learning would tend to view it as unnatural and taxing and therefore approach the issues of distance teaching in a mechanical way rather than wrestling with the concepts and ideas in an intellectual fashion. Flexing of muscles rather than clash of ideas would become the order of the day, and the course materials (whether in print or in other media) developed under these circumstances would be anything but learner friendly.

Every pedagogic principle of self-learning materials can be circumvented and easily clever substitutes would be found to meet the formal requirements, if any. Quick fix solutions would frustrate the academics with genuine professional concern for the system as well as the learners and they would either leave the system or turn their attention to things which interest them. In the process, the dominant thinking in the system will be one that is professionally antithetical to the healthy growth and efficient functioning of the system. There will be a perfect understanding between the unprofessional policy making and equally unprofessional distance teaching practice. Ultimately, the unprofessional will be calling the shots, and the professional will be on the run.

When the three of the five quality requirements of the first level are found wanting, the quality of the remaining two is predictable. 'Openness' of the 'open learning' concept would be interpreted in a loose way to mean that anybody can learn through any of the open learning courses with or without formal educational requirements insisted upon by the face to face education system. In the name of democratising education and opposing elitism, attempts may be made to show the growth of the system only in terms of numbers. Curricular issues may be treated casually and the characteristics of distance learners in general, and the special requirements of specific learner groups in particular,

may be ignored. Expectations of learners may be raised very high without a thorough preparation to meet those expectations at least in the mid way. Formal presence of regional and study centres may not go beyond making a few uncoordinated symbolic gestures reflecting only a tokenism in place of well thought out substantial support to back the learners in their difficult journey of self-learning. A clear divide between the promise and the reality would soon be visible, and the gap would be widening as more and more students join the system. The increase in their enrolment need not necessarily mean the credibility and quality of the system but may mean absence of alternative provision, which forces students to go for the only option, despite its weaknesses.

Often in the developing countries, certainly in India, the enhanced enrolment is viewed as the criterion to talk about the growth, legitimacy and credibility of the system. This mistaken notion has a clear but unstated hidden agenda. The more numbers of students the greater the chances of generating income, particularly in the context of dwindling state subsidies. The projected growth of the institutions and systems have repeatedly been questioned and challenged in their quality aspects (Mulay, 1986; Arger, 1990; Dunbar, 1991; Ramanujam, 1997; 1999). But there is little evidence that the harmless academic statements and research findings have made any impact on the well entrenched bureaucratic management systems with different sets of goals and priorities which rarely match the real needs of the system of open learning.

Precisely because of the above reasons, the quality of the physical and material resources is rarely taken seriously by many of the managers even when funds are available. The quality is assured only in a selective manner to satisfy the powerful sections or individuals in the system. Whereas the face to face system suffers from lack of infrastructure such as buildings, furniture and machines because of poor funding, the open learning system in India seems to suffer with much of unspent money because of poor management of financial resources by those who have little understanding about the system's requirements. Often the administrative angle takes precedence over academic requirements in allotting space and other resources. Comparison of number and egoes rather than the rational assessment of the actual requirements of the system determine resource allocations and facilities.

We may find in many institutions of distance open learning in India the staff with much work languishing in dark cells with old, uncooperative equipment while the latest equipment perfectly fitted in the spacious and luxurious rooms of 'senior officers' and 'politically important' staff. These equipments and other facilities may not have anything to do with the actual work of the 'Officers' except being there as ornamental pieces standing as testimony to their status and importance in the highly bureaucratic and hierarchical system. Such a mismatch as the above kills the enthusiasm of committed staff (both teaching and nonteaching), distracts their attention every now and then and inevitably tells upon the quality of their work. A rational allocation of physical facilities would easily motivate the staff to work more and at the same time would enable the committed management to differentiate the worker from the non-worker. In the business model of quality assurance, a non-worker is eased out, but in the unprofessional systems of distance open learning the non-worker is rewarded which, in itself, is the punishment for the worker. Marshall's dictum 'the bad penny drives the good penny out' operates

perfectly well in the ill-managed system of distance open learning.

If the first level requirements of quality are not met, the quality of the second level requirements can hardly be met. There may be sporadic and individual attempts to create quality learning materials but these attempts would become ineffective in assuring the quality across the programmes and courses. What would be more disappointing is that eventually due to 'quantity consciousness' and the compulsion to meet the unrealistic deadlines, many of the curricular issues may be simply ignored. Without even making an attempt to validate the learning materials, institutions may pack hastily written materials in print and equally hastily prepared materials in other media, and send them to students on the assumption that the weaknesses could be tackled at the tutorials and counselling sessions or at the time of revision. The assumptions may be wrong.

Revision may not take place for years, sometimes for decades. The pressure to add new programmes may create further chaos. Tutorials and counselling sessions may end up as mere rituals. Assertions about their usefulness or otherwise may be made only on the basis of impressions and subjective judgements. The need to show results may lead to dilution of evaluation schemes and the pedagogic purposes of the same may be turned into mere technical requirements. While talking about cost-effectiveness, very simplistic calculations like unit cost or per student cost may be made to justify the claim, ignoring the *per-graduate* cost and other deeper realities of costs and their implications.

What kind of Research for Distance Open Learning?

The foregoing analysis of the possible hurdles in assuring quality in distance open learning could be removed, if the institutions concerned make research as an integral part of their activities from the beginning. For some reason, the institutions in the developing countries, including India, have neglected research as such and focused on dissemination of the existing knowledge made available by the much decried 'conventional' classroom teachers. Since, the Open University, UK is often shown as *the* model, there is no harm in looking at what kind of research is promoted there. Perry (1976) says:

"There was never any doubt in the minds of those concerned with the creation of the Open University that it should be a University not only in name but in fact. The distinctive feature of a university as opposed to other educational institutions is that it engages in research, giving it as much priority as teaching; and that it is funded and staffed at a level sufficient to enable the research function to be satisfactorily pursued. It was made abundantly clear in the Report of the Planning Committee that the Open University,... academic staff will... be expected to devote a significant fraction of their time and energy to private research so that they can keep pace with the advances in their subjects, and suitable arrangements will be sought to provide them with adequate facilities, both library facilities and, where necessary, laboratory facilities" (p. 245).

Much later, with 25 years of history of research at the Open University, John Daniel (1996) informs:

"The UKOU was placed in the top third of universities in Britain's 1992 national research assessment exercise. Research of national or international eminence was found in all of its faculties and, with more than 1,300 doctoral students, UKOU is heavily involved in research training" (p. 18).

Both discipline based research and systemic research are indispensable for the academic quality and credibility of the distance teaching universities. Calder (1997) lists 16 characteristics that should mark excellence in higher education, including the one offered by the UK Open University. Thorpe (1988) has given an exhaustive account of research that is needed to validate distance open learning. Burt (1999) has effectively questioned the quality of open learning through an examination of a range of relevant issues and variables. As a matter of fact, the history and the quantum of systemic research in the distance teaching institutions of the developed world are daunting. But their counterparts in the developing countries have done very little, in spite of the pleas and appeals made by some (Koul, 1995).

Concluding Remarks

In the research agenda for the distance open learning institutions in the developing countries, the first priority is to create an awareness about the need for both the types of research—systemic and disciplined based. This need should first be realised by the policy makers and the senior Managers, though at present there is little evidence to hope that this will happen soon. Strong research groups must emerge from among the distance educators and researchers to push the agenda for research ahead even if there is not much institutional concern because of the other preoccupations of the institutions to show some quick and visible results for whatever reasons. Policy and theoretical research should be given importance at the initial stage. While discipline based research must be encouraged in all possible ways, attempts must be made through experimental and action research to strengthen the linkage between the discipline based knowledge and its dissemination and delivery through distance mode. Greater interaction between face to face classroom teachers on the one hand and distance teachers on the other should be encouraged, particularly in carrying out research programmes. Systemic research should start, even in the most elementary form at the very beginning of the institutional activities. A reasonable degree of knowledge and skills to conduct systematic research should be acquired by the distance teachers through some form of training at a very early stage without which quality cannot be assured either in course materials or in student support. But, then, the difficult question has to be asked again: If the policy makers and academic/institutional leaders do not see the vital link between quality and research, who else will?

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