Self-Assessment of Distance Education Institutions : Identification of Parameters for Programme Assessment

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Abstract: *In this paper we have identified and explained the parameters relevant for self-assessment and accreditation of programmes in distance mode institutions. We have explained in detail the reasons for choosing programme as an unit of assessment in distance education and have described the characteristics of each of the parameters relevant for programme assessment.*

Introduction

Over the years Distance Education has become an important mode of transferring knowledge to the ever increasing number of aspirants in various fields of education. At present there are ten open universities in India - one National Open University and the remaining nine State Open Universities. The Open Universities, though a few in number, have created an impact on higher education system in the country offering about 290 programmes consisting of 2000 courses in general, professional, technical/vocational areas at different levels i.e. certificate, diploma, degree, post-graduate and research level programmes The annual enrolment in Open Universities is 618,295 in the year 2000-2001.

In addition to the Open Universities, 64 Universities of dual mode are also offering programmes through distance mode. The Correspondence Course Institutions together offer over five hundred and fifty programmes and have enrolment of 963,980 in the year 2000. As the system grows, quality assurance and maintenance of standards becomes an important feature.

General Perspectives on Quality

Almost in every country there is an increasing pressure on the higher education system to equip students with not only the expertise derived from 'traditional' academic programmes, but also to provide them with sufficient range of transferable skills to enable them to play more rounded role when they enter employment. Thus, the institutions of higher education need to have a very clear understanding of what they are seeking to achieve through their academic programmes. In addition, whatever they

do, need to be of quality. Now-a-days in the education sector much of the discussion and debate, which hitherto was focused on standards, is now shifted towards quality.

Defining Quality

Quality is most often defined "fitness for purpose" related to the needs of the user. According to Harvey and Green (1993) quality means different things to different people. There are a variety of 'stakeholders' in higher education (students, employers, teaching and non-teaching staff, parents, government and its funding agencies,   accreditors, validators, auditors, and others) who have their views but with a different perspective on quality. Quality, thus, is a value judgement interpreted by stakeholders and evaluators. On the other hand to assess and assure quality we must have a clear notion of what it is. Another definition could be that the **products comply with defined requirements**. Consequently, purpose and requirements should be defined by the significant stakeholders.

Harvey and Green (1993) have identified five different approaches for viewing quality in higher education. These include the definition of quality:

● In terms of the exceptional (higher standards);

● In terms of consistency (zero defects and getting it right the first time);

● As fitness for purpose (meeting stated purposes);

● As value for money; and

● As transformation (transformation of the participants).

A sum total of all these aspects leads to the definition of quality as "The totality of features and characteristics of product or service, that bear on its ability, to satisfy stated or implied needs".

Defining Quality in Open Learning and Distance Education Mode

The general concept on quality in higher education is also applicable to open learning and distance education mode. This means one has to take into cognizance the interests and aspirations of all the beneficiaries namely students, teachers, staff, parents, funding agencies, employers and the society in general. The fitness for purpose is the true yardstick for distance education mode in open learning but two more factors become important. They are the quality of the learning material and the delivery of services to learners. A variety of methods and systems are used to deliver distance education and the effectiveness and quality of these innovative means of delivery become crucial while assuring quality in open learning through distance education mode. Learner outcomes in three major domains – cognitive, psychomotor and affective need to be looked into carefully. One has to seek evidence for the effectiveness of distance education methodology to achieve cognitive outcome. In addition, it becomes important to observe, particularly for science and professional subjects, the effectiveness of distance education with respect to affective and psychomotor outcomes. Besides learner outcomes, the

evidence on the other aspects related to distance education namely access, drop out rate, cost effectiveness, efficiency in delivery, relevance to needs, and generation of knowledge are also important.

In view of the above, there cannot be a unique definition of quality in open learning through distance education mode. One needs to consider several aspects related to distance education mode while making the judgement on the quality on the working of these institutions of higher education. We, therefore, need to consider in detail the organization and working of the open university system in India.

Organizational Structure of Open Universities

Open universities are innovations of the late seventies and were established to augment opportunities for higher education. The distance education mode is used by these open universities for imparting instructions and their entire organization structure can be put at two levels:

Level I: Main Body

This deals with the following core activities:

- Administrative Limb: University Central Administrative Structure which in fact is an apex body dealing with academic, administrative and financial policies.

- Academic Limbs: Schools or Faculties which are directly responsible for initiation, design and development of programmes and instructional material. They are directly responsible for evolving an approach for the academic counselling and evaluation of learners.

Level II: Support Limbs

This deals with the following support activities:

- Registration and evaluation

- Production of instructional material: Print, Audio and Video

- Delivery mechanism

- Academic counselling support to students

- Declaration of results and award of degrees

- Administration and management of finances

There is a coherent link between the two levels and the entire functioning of the open university system is dependent upon the effective and efficient working of the various support activities.

Approach for Measurement of Quality

The call for increased accountability began, all over the world in the 1980s, focussing on campus level educational quality and assessment of teaching and learning. Assessment

and accreditation of institutions of higher education helps to maintain and improve the quality of higher education. Accreditation is certification by an external agency showing where the accredited institution stands. Accreditation is a process that gives public recognition to institution that meet certain standards. Assessment is basic and pre requisite to accreditation and forms an important part of accrediting procedures.

Erwin and knight (1995) say "…unless the purpose of assessment is clear and appropriate quality is compromised." It is important to devise parameters on the lines of fitness of purpose of assessment.

For assessment of institutions it is imperative that a uniform assessment procedure is laid down by the certifying agency.

Piper (1993) defines quality assessment as evaluation of the quality of a product or service and says it can be undertaken by internal (self assessment) or external agencies (peer team review).

Self assessment is usually preferred by institutions as it helps the institutions to know their strengths and weaknesses. The first and most significant stage in the process of assessment and accreditation is the preparation of a self study report. Self-study is carried out for quality assurance of the institution as a whole by setting up internal mechanisms. It helps and encourages institutions in improvements of their services through rigorous self-analysis. A careful self evaluation is crucial to any institutional effectiveness. It has to be an integral part of an institution's on-going planning and evaluation efforts.

Accreditation is essentially a procedure of quality assessment (Powar, 1996) and according to Vlascuanu (1993) it is necessary to

- Identify the unit of assessment (this could be institution, school, department or a programme)
- Specify the criteria and process for assessment and
- Define standards indicating both minimum acceptability and desirability.

'Availability of information for judgement is an important issue. The information needs to be relevant and focussed for the purpose. Judgement is the next step, says Pillai (1996).

The open and distance education system is relatively new and is growing steadily. It is, therefore, desirable to identify parameters and unit of assessment which may help the institutions in self assessment.

Unit of Assessment in Distance Education

Unit of assessment is an important factor as assessment revolves around it. Institution as a whole or a department or a programme can be considered independently as a unit of assessment. Each independent unit and activities associated with it such as programmes on offer, activities of divisions, schools or faculties, administrative structure may serve as input and contribute to the total assessment of the institution. In case of department as unit of assessment, the faculty, programmes on offer and the management may

contribute to the assessment. However, for a programme as unit of assessment the basic content, its development and delivery mechanism become important. A department/ School or a programme of study as a unit compared to the institution, can provide better idea to all the stakeholders (parents, learners, prospective employers etc.) and may help to identify its strength and weakness. The assessment and accreditation information can be used by the aspirants for seeking admission to such programmes and prospective employers can look to it for getting products i.e. students of high calibre from such division/department of the particular institution for employment.

Distance Education Institutions usually have lean infrastructure facilities. All the activities of the distance mode institutions are usually organised for delivery of programmes including support services. The success of the distance mode institutions is usually judged from the quality of programmes on offer. A distance mode institution may survive on successful offer of a few programmes only. Therefore, a programme as unit of assessment is more reasonable and pragmatic for distance mode. Its planning, development, delivery process, choice of media mix and student support services are important parameters to take into consideration.

An institution looks at the success of a programme from the point of view of 'fulfillment' of a pre-determined purpose, specific to the institutional objectives. However, here the idea of programme assessment would be to get a holistic picture from the point of view of what is expected out of the programme and what is being done.

Parameters for Assessment

The parameters used should be able to assess what the institution is striving for, what is being done and what needs to be done to achieve the desired success.

Salient Features in Programme Assessment

Goals and objectives

Goals are descriptions of what is planned to be achieved. They are usually stated in broad terms and identify the main functions of the institutions as also the accompanying administrative functions (Powar, 1996). Objectives are operational statements which indicate the status or position that is sought to be achieved in the future. The objectives can be both long-term and short-term and need to be clearly defined.

Mission statement should be clearly defined. It should clearly reflect the contributions of and expected benefits to all institutional constituencies and be appropriately worked for the intended audience. It should also be consistent with information of similar institutional documents. Objectives should be written in operational terms. A working document providing details of strategies and plan of action needs to be developed. Plan of action reflects contemporary and continuing needs of education at regional and national levels. Arrangements need to be made for periodic review of the plan of action so that identified goals are translated into plan of action. Time frame for realization of

goals should be strictly adhered to enable completion of work as per schedule. A review committee should be formed to examine and review the progress of work regarding development of the programme as per strategies identified and in consonance with mission and goals. It may also help to monitor the progress. Goals and objectives should be stated to reflect sound pedagogical practice and revised periodically – and should be clearly articulated. The programme goals and objectives should be in consonance with the goals and objectives of the institutions.

Programme Design and Development

The key aspect of planning is preparation of a document that succinctly outlines key strategies, needed resources and future directions crucial to communicating internally and externally. Such a document is also essential for the successful integration of technology into the curriculum. The programme planning takes into considerations: learning objectives and desired outcomes, academic rigour of content and delivery strategies, choice of media and quality of self learning materials, student evaluation, provision of student support, delivery mechanism, staff requirements and appropriate review process for maintenance of quality.

Programme planning is based on need assessment surveys and takes into consideration the national and regional needs. It articulates the missions, goals, objectives and the pedagogical foundation of the programme. Nature of prospective target group/projected learning groups and their requirements are kept in mind for deciding the content of the programme, delivery mechanism and use of technology. Mechanism to ensure that the programme articulates recent developments with existing curriculum should be identified. Clear identification of resources both financial and human and necessary arrangements for the same should be indicated. Planning should take into account current and projected staffing levels. Structure of the programme and sound reasoning for choice of media are identified. Life span of the programme and mechanism and time for updating of the programme should be decided. The stated programme objectives are feasible and the programme contributes to the fulfillment of the institutional mission. The programme should be structured in small modules to allow for modularity and has multiple entry and exit points. It helps also in reaching the un-reached and gives value addition to the learners. The programme promotes collaborations between institutions and provides opportunities to individuals for self-employment. Programme meets professional expectations of the learners. Adequate physical facilities and resources are available for development and sustenance of the programme.

Curriculum Design

Instructional development provides a process and framework for systematically planning, developing, and adapting instruction based on identifiable learner needs and content requirements. This process is essential in distance education, when the instructor and students may share limited common background and minimal face to face contact. Delineation and identification of learning goals and achievements and desired student outcomes are the important foundation for instructional design, development, delivery and assessment of the programme. Learning goals and desired outcomes should be clearly linked to content and learning processes for the course and its individual units.

Because most of the instruction in distance education is carried through the learning materials, they should be carefully designed to structure and facilitate learning as student work through them. Students should be given the opportunity to build confidence and competence with the distance education process and supporting technologies. Specialist assistance in knowledge and skills in curriculum development and preparation of distance learning materials are essential foundations for demonstrating the quality of the course. Learning goals and desired outcomes should be clearly linked to content and learning processes for the course and its individual units.

The curriculum design takes into account realization of aims and objectives of the programme, objectives of the institution, requirements of the projected target group including location factor and socio-economic needs. Where possible, learning goals are performance based which helps to determine students attainment of course goals and objectives. Curriculum design should ensure that courses develop and assess transferable skills, communication skills, skills of working in groups, problem solving skills etc. A systematic design model guides the process of defining learning goals, determining content and learning resources, choosing media of instruction and preparing the materials. Curriculum design identifies prior learning competencies. Provision should be made and procedures be identified for revision of curriculum and modifications of the study materials. Adequate financial resources are available. A variety of learning activities are provided to accommodate differences in learning styles and life experiences of the students. Strategies for models of material development such as workshop model, writer-editor model, adoption/adaptation model are identified. Curriculum development team involves expert professionals in the field. Experts may be drawn from within institution and outside institution also. Sequencing of contents, map of the programme with units, blocks are predetermined and followed. Placement of appropriate activities and graphic illustrations in learning materials are to be finalised. Audio, video topics are identified. Plans and nature of evaluation for assignments, term end examinations and projects are laid down properly. Action plans are drawn for orientation of staff involved in development of print material, audio/video and multimedia components.

Learning Materials

Material development is an important process of distance education system. Here the quality maintenance refers to the continuous concern to sustain the 'usefulness' and the usability of a course. The quality of distance education courses is conditioned by three considerations — the learner-group, its ability-level, motivation and aspirations etc. As learners are the receivers and users of the course materials, their attributes have decisive influence on course development. Content coverage is the other important factor. The veracity, relevance and adequacy of contents have got to be ensured without them course loses its purpose and applicability. The third consideration is content presentation. It is essential that it has to be presented in such a way that the learner would be able to follow it easily. In other words, the educational technology that is employed in this regard needs to be effective. Distance Education course has a life span. It is to be used by successive learner groups. Over the life-span of a course, the three factors conditioning the quality maintenance are subject to change. Impact of the change in these determining factors, affects the quality of a course if suitable amendment

or revision is not carried out. Hence, maintenance of quality becomes an ongoing concern, lasting through the duration of the course.

An open learning package should enable learners to learn at their own pace and become more independent. The objectives/competence elements required are clearly defined. The activities to be undertaken by the learners prior to start of the package should be clearly mentioned. The list of other resources required for learning need to be specified. The content should be at an appropriate level for the learners. The language should be clear and of an appropriate level and style for the learners. The learning is arranged in manageable chunks. Enough learning activities are included to involve the learners. Learning should be designed in such a way that learners are able to apply to their own experience. The learning package may be designed in such a manner that it may draw upon previous experience of the learners. Clear and helpful designs and signposts are given for activities.

Availability of academic staff with proper qualifications are ensured who can successfully develop quality materials. Training needs of the staff and other persons engaged in development of materials are identified and arranged. On time orientation programme is arranged for course contributors to develop self learning materials and to prepare audio/video script to prepare multimedia learning packages. Innovation in SLM development may be encouraged. The material type and its style of communication should be decided taking into considerations and background/profile of the learners target group. The opinion of the peers from within and outside the field of study, experts should be taken in deciding the final package of learning. Comparison with similar courses offered elsewhere in respect of content and quality may be undertaken. The learning package should comprise of print, audio, video, experimental kits, multimedia and interactive communication technologies, broadcast and telecast and webcasts. The use of multimedia package and application of new technologies should be encouraged for better interactivity and enhancement of the learning. Procedures are in place for reproduction and multi-copying of the materials. Each copy should have the same quality. Reproduction should be in time as per projected requirement. Production system and processes are dependable and easily expandable to meet growing demands. A production control system is used to track all components of each course unit and its strategies of production. Timetable for each production cycle is negotiated in advance with academic staff. An efficient warehousing and stock control system is designed to suit the particular range of course materials and programme of updating and producing materials.

Use of Print Medium

Study material in the print form is the most important and prime means widely used in distance learning. Therefore, special care needs to be taken in the development of the same. Some characteristics of the print material which require attention are

- Self-explanatory, self contained, self-directed, self-motivating, self-evaluating , self-learning nature of the material
- Clearly stated Objectives of each unit
- User-friendly "You and I" style of writing

- Plenty of helpful examples
- Illustrations for better   explanations
- Exercises to help learner to use the material
- Feedback to help learner check his/her own progress.

Use of Media in Delivery of Programmes

The combination of different media is found to be very effective to supplement the print materials and enhance the teaching-learning process. The following factors need be taken into consideration to decide the choice of media:

- Availability of technology, equipment, finance, human expertise,
- Accessibility,
- Acceptability and Viability of the medium,
- Economics and,
- Validity with respect to the expected target group, life expectancy of the programme.

The following check list may be used to evaluate the media use:

- Media choice is based on pedagogic requirements,
- Each multimedia, audio-video and broadcast and telecast programmes have clearly stated objectives,
- Quality of media programmes production is ensured,
- The process of planning, development, production adoption/adaptation of media is clearly stated,
- Appropriate mechanisms for delivery and use of media are ensured,
- Staff are properly trained in the use of media,
- Learners' feedback on the effectiveness of the media collected, and
- Mechanisms for updating and revision of media material developed.

Delivery of Programmes

The process of delivery which helps the learners to achieve specific level and service provided by the institutions are important factors which need to be evaluated for programme success. The following are some important parameters to be taken into consideration:

- Time schedule for dispatch of learning materials prepared, and strictly adhered to,
- Availability of personalized services ensured,
- Support services on continuous basis ensured,
- Provision for timely responses to learner queries,

- Provision for face-to-face contact,

- Timely evaluation and feed back on assignments,

- Feedback to students on their performance.

Programme Review

Programme review is an important activity and main step in maintaining quality in a programme. The inputs received and observations made from learners, employees, parents etc. are critical for further improvements. There is a need to integrate decision making processes with programme review. Chaffe Stengal (1992) note the 'desirability of combining programme reviews with student outcomes, assessment to enhance programme and instructional improvement'. Programme review should relate to the decision making processes of the institution such as planning and budgeting.

Wider access: A major objective of the distance education system is to enlarge the outreach of higher education to a large cross section of society and to reach the un-reached. This may be achieved by increase in the number of learners through diversified groups such as people in service, adult learners, especially women, part-time students, old people, handicapped, economically and socially disadvantaged sections. Access to remotely placed villages and hilly areas, wider access may be increased through diversity in programmes, and discipline and target oriented programmes on offer.

Summary and conclusions

In this paper an attempt was made to provide a list of parameters which may be helpful for assessment of programmes in distance and open education system in general.

Parameters here provide a number of sub-parameters in assessing the programmes. Each sub-parameter by itself can form a major point for assessment. However, the details on how one wants to go depends solely on what extent to probe the assessment. It is imperative that assessment can be useful in seeing what is happening and hence what can be done for its betterment. The outcome of assessment is important to see where the improvements can be done. The institutions can constitute a small core group which from time to time can carry out programme monitoring and evaluation. It should relate with the research wing for providing research topics and receive inputs for quality improvements and thus help the institution in carrying out its assessment for quality.

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