

Student Participation Circles: An Approach to Learner Participation in Quality Improvement

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Abstract: *In any educational system, students are the most important stakeholders. All the activities of any educational institution should revolve around providing quality education to the students. Open distance education system is no exception for this. In fact quality education and quality service are more important in open distance education systems, since the students and the institution are separated in this system. Quality is an outcome of continuous pursuit. There are many ways to improve the quality in an organisation. Quality circle is one of the important ways in improving the quality through the participation of people. Student Participation Circle (SPC) is an extension of quality circles concept to an educational institution and involving students as partners in improving the quality. This paper is an attempt to apply student participation circles concept to the open distance education institutions.*

Introduction

In any educational system students are the most important stakeholders. Any activity in an educational institution should focus and centre around providing quality education and quality support services to the students. In distance education system, providing quality education and quality services become all the more important, as there is a physical separation of students from the teachers. In order to bridge this gap many open distance educational institutions are providing a variety of student support services through a network of Study Centres and Regional Centres. The quality of this service would decide the effectiveness and efficiency of the relationship between the student and the Institution.

'Quality' is never by accident. It is an outcome of continuous pursuit. There are many ways to improve the quality in an organisation. Quality circles (QC) is one of the important ways of improving quality through the participation of people.

The concept of 'Student Participation Circles' (SPCs) is an extension of quality circles concept to an educational institution and involving students as partners in improving

the quality. In this paper an attempt is made to apply this concept to the Distance Education Institutions (DEIs).

What is Quality?

Modern quality methods have their roots in Aerospace engineering. In management literature quality has been defined in many ways such as 'excellence' (Peters and Waterman, 1982), 'value' (Feigenbaum, 1951), 'fitness for use' (Juran and Gryna, 1988), 'conformance to specifications' (Gilmore, 1974), 'conformance to requirements' (Crosby, 1979) 'defect avoidance' (Crosby, 1979), 'meeting and/or exceeding customers' expectations' (Parasuraman et al., 1985), etc. There seems to be no consensus definition even though most of these definitions are highly correlated. Similarly quality in education is a rather vague and at times controversial concept in research and policy discussions (Cheng, 1997).

What is Quality in Distance Education ?

Generally when we talk of 'quality' we are reminded of the consumer-supplier relationship of industry, business and commerce sectors. Then what this concept has to do with distance and open learning institution. In any sector/area the spirit behind quality adherence mechanism is that to realise the expectation of consumer and make efforts to fulfill the same to the extent possible. In case of distance education institutions 'learner' is our consumer including other stakeholders in that sense. The complex nature of the distance education institutions, its diversified operations (which are similar to that of industrialised features) warrant quality assurance mechanisms as an essential component rather than a simple slogan. As Tait (1997) pointed out modern open and distance learning institutions have been practising many elements of quality control and assurance systems with an aim to rule out bad practice. But he felt that measures represent more quality control and less quality assurance, the latter should be the focus to continuous improvement of any operation/system.

The other significant aspect of quality assurance in an institution is, it operates in its own socio, economic and cultural context. Accordingly the functioning of an institution is always influenced by these factors. This aspect indicates that quality control or quality assurance mechanisms borrowed from other context may not be effective or appropriate. Hence attempt has to be made to make quality assurance mechanism institution specific.

With this macro view of quality assurance mechanism let us concentrate on the specific definitions. Though there are several definitions to quality, the following are the most relevant to the distance education system.

"Whether we are helping people or improving service process, we must work to prevent the re-occurrence of problems" (Kennedy, 1991).

"Education quality is the characteristic of the set of elements in the inputs, process, and output of the education system that provides services that completely satisfy both internal and external strategic constituents by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations" (Cheng, 1995).

Quality in Distance Education may be defined as improving the efficiency of the element in the input, process and outputs and working towards preventing the re-occurrence of problems in these and providing services that completely satisfy the learners by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations.

In other words, preventing re-occurrence of the problems and satisfying the learners implicit and explicit expectations is what quality means in distance education system. This is very crucial as the learner is separated from the institution and the teachers. Therefore, in order to prevent the re-occurrence of the problems, we have to first identify the problems. Venkaiah (1986) has identified the following problems commonly faced by a student in a distance education system. These problems are classified into five categories as listed below:

Admission and Registration

- Non-availability of adequate information at the local Study Centres regarding admission rules, regulations, procedures, etc.
- Absence of Information Booklets outlining the programme details, registration procedures, fee particulars, etc.
- Non-receipt and late-receipt of admission communication from the University
- Complex admission and documentation procedures

Course Materials

- Late receipt and non-receipt of course materials and assignments
- Receipt of the course materials other than their own
- Receipt of materials in a bad condition
- Factual printing errors in the course material
- Listening to or watching audio/video lessons once at the Study Centres does not help students much
- Difficulties arising out of the language of the printed course material
- Difficulties in understanding exhaustive information included in some Units

Study Centre Infrastructure

- Poor communication network
- Inadequate infrastructure/equipment in the Study Centres
- Lack of well trained staff
- Total dependence on host institutions and part time staff

Academic Counselling

- Non-availability of good/willing counsellors for some subjects
- Unwillingness of counsellors to attend Orientation Programmes

- Irregular turn up of counsellors at counselling sessions
- Unwillingness of some counsellors to evaluate assignments
- Not writing proper tutor comments on assignment responses
- Non returning of evaluated assignments in time

Examinations and Evaluation

- Non-receipt/late receipt of assignments
- Lack of communication regarding schedules and non-receipt of examination applications
- Non-receipt/late receipt of hall tickets
- Delay in the Publication of results
- Issue of marks memoranda with erroneous data.

Venkaiah (1996) also identified some strategies which would help in improving the quality of student support services. Besides these, involvement of the stakeholders like employees, part-time staff and students in the quality improvement efforts is very crucial to make it a success. In order to make these stakeholders partners in the quality improvement the concept of “Quality Circles” as available in the management literature, which is widely applied in industrial sector, can be adopted by the distance education systems.

In a similar exercise as that of Venkaiah, a committee appointed by Norwegian Association for Distance Education (NADE) identified the following four main categories which would cover wide range of activities in any distance education institution. These are (i) information and counselling (ii) course development (iii) course delivery and (iv) organisation. Each category is again divided into four phases i.e. — conditions and constraints, implementation, results and follow up. The categories and phases are combined in a matrix of 16 elements which are called quality areas in distance education. Under each quality area certain factors have been identified, which have to be taken into consideration by any institution’s evaluation of its own quality (Ingeborg, 1997).

Philosophy of SPC

The concept of quality circles is essentially Japanese. This was conceived by Dr. Kaoru Ishinanta in 1961. Quality Circle may be defined as a group of people who voluntarily meet together on regular basis to identify, analyse and solve quality related problems in their work area. Ideally each circle may contain 7-8 members from the same work area, who will be assisted by a trained facilitator. Once the problem is identified, analysed and solution is found, the same is presented to management for communication and recognition.

Student Participation Circle (SPC) is an extension of the quality circle concept to a distance education institution involving students as partners in improving the quality of the delivery process. The philosophy behind this concept is that the people who are really at work know better, the problems related with that particular work and the most suitable solutions for those problems. Therefore, if their thoughts are pooled and channelised, they would provide the best solutions for the problems and would ultimately contribute to quality improvement. The other main reason for involving students in quality improvement is that "the student-centred approach is the most accepted premise within international discussion about quality in distance education" (Baumeister, 1997).

As indicated earlier the basic philosophy behind this concept in applying to a complex organisations like DEIs, is to make the students as partners in the quality improvement efforts of university in its inputs, processes and outputs. Particularly, a learner in the Distance Education System is an experienced and matured individual and he/she would be able to analyse the problems and suggest solutions. The whole effort behind this is to provide the learner an opportunity and a forum to present problems, discuss solutions and enable him/her to contribute towards quality improvement. The generation of many such innovative ideas and implementation of some of them, if not all, will, in the long-run benefit the organisation substantially.

Benefits of SPCs

There are many tangible and intangible benefits of SPCs . Some of them are explained below:

i) Quality Improvement

The SPCs movement is a voluntary movement and students participate willingly in it, and the students genuinely study the problems and suggest the solutions. When these suggestions are implemented they contribute towards the improvement of the system. Therefore, it can be believed that the SPC movement will contribute in the quality improvement.

ii) Peer Group Interaction and Learning

When SPCs are formulated and meetings are held, there would be peer group activity and the students are motivated to interact among themselves. This would contribute towards group learning.

iii) Sense of Belongingness

When the students are involved in system building, they feel satisfied and they start thinking that the university belongs to them and therefore, they should contribute in building the university. This would help in developing the university and would create a great reputation.

In the light of the above points , it is very essential to create SPCs in order to improve the quality of the system.

Early Efforts

The early efforts made in applying the concept of QC to the field of education was at the College of Engineering, Anna University, Tamil Nadu in India around 1990. They have established quality circles for improving the academic performance. After formulation of these circles, the college has implemented various suggestions made by these circles and achieved benefits both intangible and tangible.

In order to appreciate the application of this concept better, a case study of a QC implemented at Anna University has been presented below:

Case Study on Quality Circle

1. Organisation College of Engineering, Anna University
2. Members Faculty
3. Problem An exercise to bring down Academic rejects in Engineering students and work towards Zero failure

a) **Description**

1. Concerned over the declining standards of engineering students, the university has embarked on an ambitious project of establishing Quality Circles for Academic Performance.
2. A Q.C. for a class of students in a semester has its members and the teachers handling the subjects for that batch of students of that semester

b) **Analysis**

Performance of students of IV year Civil under the care of this QC in their first test for the semester was analysed in order to find the problems and to find the following solutions.

c) **Solutions**

- 1) Parents were informed about their wards' problems;
- 2) Boys and girls study together in order to encourage competitive spirit;
- 3) Increase of contact hours;
- 4) Candid discussion on quality of some faculty members.

d) **Benefits**

Tangible

- 1) Shortfall in attendance at the end of semester = 32% (drop from 58%)
- 2) Failures at the end of semester = 37% (drop from 42%)

Intangible

A feeling of friendliness in students towards faculty and confidence in students that faculty are for their Improvement. Faculty also realised that unduly liberal or indiscriminately strict internal assessment defeat the motive of teaching - learning process.

Why Quality in Delivery System?

Like people centeredness in democracy and consumer-centeredness in business, learner centeredness is considered as a very important parameter in Distance Education System (Prasad, 1996). The learning process in distance education has to be devised by keeping the requirements and the convenience of the learner in view. The quality in delivery system is the most important issue as this is the mechanism which bridges the distance between the student and the institution. Besides, having a delivery system of high quality provides the following advantages:

a) Builds Image and Credibility

A high quality of material and support services bring the image and credibility to the distance education institution system which is essential in the era of globalization and its competitiveness. This is very essential in order to prove that the distance education system is viable and is as competent as that of the conventional system. Distance teaching universities have to “prove that the education they offer is valuable and on a high level and even more qualitative in some respects, as compared to some conventional universities” (Guri-Rosenblit, 1993).

b) Social Obligations

Distance education system has greater social responsibilities in educating the people. In fact, its primary objective is to provide educational opportunities for the people and places hitherto unreached. If the Distance Education System is not able to provide quality services it can not attract the people and may fail in fulfilling the social obligations placed on it.

c) Successful Fund Raising

Education systems by and large are non-profit organisations. Besides their own fund generation, these institutions largely depend on external funds like government grants and aid from foreign and international bodies. If the distance education institution can not provide quality services and build their reputation, the funds from external sources may be curtailed or even stopped. Institutions cannot attract students without offering quality services to quality conscious society. This may cause problem in generation of funds in terms of student fees, etc. Therefore, the Distance Education Institutions have to keep a continuous watch on the quality.

d) Economic Reasons

It is a known fact that the education system is also required to generate funds and provide atleast partly the budgetary support. This is becoming more and more visible in the liberalised economy of India. Therefore, there is a need for generating more and more resources in order to meet ever increasing budgetary demands. In order to generate more funds the institutions have to either increase the fee or the intake of the student. Both of these would be possible, only if the institution provides quality education and quality services. Therefore, there is a strong case for quality.

It is said that the companies which provide services for profit, loose approximately 35% of their operating budgets in doing things that were done wrong the first time

(Crosby, 1985, p.2). There is no reason to believe that even in the non-profit sector the percentage would be any lesser. Every time someone performs work that does not cause the client's requirement to be met, the costs go up (Kennedy, 1991, p.3). Experiences indicate the need for providing quality services in such a way that the errors are eliminated and the best service is provided.

It is very clear from the above points that there is a strong need for quality awareness and consciousness not only in commercial enterprises but also in non-profit organisations like educational institutions and particularly in learner oriented systems like distance and open learning institutions.

Operational Mechanism

An attempt has been made in this part of the paper, to apply and illustrate the SPC concept to a Distance Education Institution in general and Indira Gandhi National Open University in particular. As the university operates at three levels, these SPCs can also be operated at each of these levels i.e., Head Quarters, Regional Centres and Study Centres.

At the Study Centre Level

At this level circles are to be formulated and operationalised to involve the students in the system and to get their contributions to improve the quality of the system. Taking remedial actions to solve the student problems will improve the quality of the delivery system in an Open University.

SPC members can meet periodically and discuss all their problems and suggest suitable remedial changes which would improve the delivery system. As the students are generally grown up and mature and they are closely associated with the institution and face the problems, they would naturally be able to suggest appropriate solutions. Therefore, involving the students would bring out valuable suggestions. There could be a circle for each of the centre or there could be a circle for each of the programme. Exact number of circles could be decided basing on the need, interest and number of the students. One of the Assistant Coordinators could be asked to act as a facilitator and he/she shall be responsible for facilitating the circle meetings and their presentations.

At the Regional Centre Level

At the Regional Centre (RC) level one of the Assistant Regional Directors (ARDs) could be incharge of these circles who will coordinate and monitor these circles. He would preside all the circle presentations and place them before a committee which may comprise of all ARDs, Regional Director (RD) and other senior officers. This committee would scrutinize all the circle presentations and forward them to HQ for further scrutiny and decision making purpose.

Head Quarters Level

At the HQ level a Deputy Director who may be under the direct control of the Vice-Chancellor (VC) may receive all the SPC presentations from all the RCs and place

them before a committee under the chairmanship of the VC, for final selection, decision making and implementation.

Structure of SPCs

As this would be a new experiment and purely works on voluntary participation, these circles call for the active involvement of the learners and the employees at different levels of an organisation. The top management should spread the philosophy behind this so that more and more members may involve themselves in this movement willingly. It should also have a genuine faith in the intrinsic ability of the students in the identification and analysis of problems to find solution. With the proliferation of a fairly large number of these circles across all the study centres, in course of time, there is a need to have a structure conducive to the functioning. The different components of a SPC structure could be as follows:

Apex Steering Committee

This is an apex committee with the Vice-Chancellor as Chairman and the Pro-Vice-Chancellors (PVCs) and the Director (Student Support Services) as Apex Coordinator and some other Directors as members. The extent of interest and seriousness of the institution in these SPCs should be reflected by the composition and the activities of this committee. The members of the committee are expected to:

- a) evolve policies and guidelines for the formation, functioning and growth of SPCs;
- b) appoint Regional Coordinators;
- c) attend the presentation sessions of SPCs before implementation;
- d) make decisions on the viability of solutions suggested by the circle members;
- e) provide support for the implementation of accepted SPC suggestions.

Apex Coordinator

Apex Coordinator is a Deputy Director level officer who would directly report to the Vice-Chancellor. His/her primary job is to coordinate the range of activities of the SPCs and bring them to the notice of the Apex Steering Committee. Some of his/her responsibilities should include:

- a) Coordinating with Regional Centres and appraising various activities of the SPC to the Apex Steering Committee;
- b) Communicating with the SPC members regarding accepted and rejected suggestions and giving reasons for rejections;
- c) Reviewing the performance of SPC regularly on the basis of the report from the coordinator and facilitator;
- d) Developing guidelines for recognising the good performance of SPCs.

Regional Level Steering Committees

This committee would be chaired by the Regional Director with all Assistant Regional Directors (including Regional Coordinator), Assistant Registrars as members. The need for this Regional level committee arises because of two reasons: i) issues relating regional centre level can be settled immediately, and ii) the screening of the presentations can be done and only viable presentations can be sent to the Apex steering committee at Head Quarters. By and large this committee also performs the same functions as of the main Apex committee, besides appointing facilitators in their region.

Regional Coordinator

The Regional Coordinator will coordinate all the SPC activities and facilitate the operations of these circles in that particular region. He/she will be primarily responsible for :

- Arranging Regional steering committee meetings
- Facilitating the SPC activities in the Region
- Coordinating with Apex Coordinator

The Regional Coordinator would work as a link between the SPCs and the HQ.

Facilitators

Facilitators play a very important role in the functioning and the success/failure of the SPCs. As they are the catalysts and play the role of change agents they should be adequately trained in the concepts and techniques of quality circles so that they should be able to apply them to SPC. He/she should be a person who has the concern for human dimension of the organisation. He/she should have a strong faith in the philosophy that only human beings make or mar the organisation. The major responsibilities of a facilitator would be:

- a) to coordinate the activities of SPCs at SC level
- b) to train the SPC leaders and members
- c) to attend the SPC meetings regularly as observer
- d) to organise the meetings of SPC leaders regularly
- e) to encourage students to form more SPCs
- f) to inform the Regional Coordinator about the activities and performance of SPCs of that particular Study Centre.

Besides the above the facilitator should provide all physical facilities that are required in order to conduct SPC meetings. It is natural that the SPC movement may start with only a few circles. It is the interest of the facilitators that make SPCs as a real movement. Therefore, the role of a facilitator is very crucial. As one of the Assistant Coordinator at Study centre will be acting as Facilitator, he/she may be given adequate time and resources to perform this function.

Leader

In the successful functioning of SPC, the role of the leader is equally important, if not more important than, the facilitator. The performance of SPCs depend on the qualities and capabilities of the leaders. One of the learners and member of SPC can act as Leader. The basic responsibilities of the SPC leader are:

- a) to ensure that the SPC members work as a motivated and cohesive team,
- b) to interact with the concerned facilitator to provide facilities for the SPC members.
- c) to collect and provide relevant data and other particulars during the meetings for analysis and to find solutions,
- d) to train the SPC members in behavioural and technical skills,
- e) to ensure active participation of all the members in the SPC meetings,
- f) to prepare the agenda of SPC meetings and make a summary of the proceedings of the meeting, and
- g) to arrange for the presentation of circle findings and solutions before the Management.

It is desirable to rotate the SPC leadership either at regular time intervals or after the completion of projects. This is needed because, the whole concept of SPC is a voluntary movement and nobody should be perceived as a 'leader' in that sense. A deputy leader is also appointed, sometimes, to share the work load of the circle and to ensure that the SPC meetings are not postponed due to the absence of the leader. However, SPC members should be given all freedom to choose their own leader. It is desirable to avoid voting and arrive at a consensus while electing a leader.

Members

Members are the most important segment of the whole SPC structure. Because they are the ones from whom the suggestions come and whose participation makes this movement a success. The major responsibilities of the members are:

- a) to attend the SPC meetings regularly and in time;
- b) to participate actively and productively in these meetings;
- c) to make efforts to create a cohesive and purposeful group culture;

They should also motivate non-members to become members and create a positive and responsive culture.

The non-members also have an important role to play in the success of this SPC movement by watching the functioning of SPC. When a suggestion by the SPC is implemented it will effect all the students, hence non-members cannot be indifferent to SPC movement.

Conclusion

With increasing emphasis on learner-centredness at every stage of teaching-learning process, in any form of educational transaction, one cannot simply avoid the key component in the total process i.e., “learner”. This attains more significance in distance and open learning system where teacher and learner is separated by physical distance. A teacher in the classroom can involve his/her student/learner whenever he/she wants, discuss the issue and solve their problems, who are always present with him/her. In distance open learning system unless one (educational provider) makes a special effort to involve, learner participation is not always possible. Keeping this limitation in view an attempt was made in this article to involve distance learner with the help of Student Participation Circles (SPCs) as an instrument to present their problems, identify solutions and place the same for consideration in the decision making level.

This process results in (i) students’ participation in decision-making process, and (ii) continuous improvement of the systems leading to quality service provided by the institution. In addition to the involvement of learners, this concept of Quality Circles can be extended to the following other groups of staff in a distance education institution.

This concept can be applied to part-time staff, (in order to motivate them and solve their problems), and full-time staff both academic and others (in order to improve the performance and the quality of the system and to provide better services). Similarly this concept can be implemented at all the levels of the organisation and across all the activities of Schools and Divisions. This has been experimented very widely in the industrial sector including the service sector and the results are phenomenal.

In the management of higher educational institutions where participatory management is emphasized, concepts like quality circles will be of immense help. Particularly in DEIs where many features resembles to that of industrial operations, QCs will be appropriate. One of the key factors for implementation of QCs in DEIs is ‘Trust’ - between management and employees. Both should feel that they have the responsibility in building the institution and improving the quality. To conclude, the voluntary movement like ‘quality circles movement’ should be encouraged and implemented basing on that ‘trust’.

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