

Distance Education : Concerns for Quality

*Dr Romesh Verma**

Globalisation, the mass expansion of educational opportunity and technological developments are creating a changing environment for higher education systems across the world. This environment is, in its turn, creating pressure for concerted action by institutions and government agencies within and across countries to improve the way they approach quality assurance. International organisations such as the OECD have called for new structures and new approaches to quality assurance and accreditation, with the USA, the United Kingdom and New Zealand being examples of countries where quality assurance and enhancement have become a major focus. A number of multilateral bodies and agreements (ASEAN, APEC, NAFTA, GATS) are actively dealing with the issue of inter-country recognition of each other's qualifications and with the student and labour market mobility issues that are linked to educational quality. A range of bench-marking initiatives are being implemented with the goal of enabling universities to be assessed against various quality indicators by country, by region and even globally.

Government of India is hopeful to raise standard of education to capture global job market by encouraging our educational and technology based institutions but the practical realities as reported by Deshpandy: 1999, Srivastava: 1999, Bhandari: 1999, Mohanty: 1995, Faruque et.al: 1994, Desai et.al: 1987, Hommadi: 1985, Sukhdev and Mehta: 1999 reveals that standard of higher education in India is declining because of erosion of ethical values, moral standards among the teachers, the students and society as a whole. The prime factors responsible for the declining standards of education are non-recognition of talent, receding professionalism, entry of non-serious students in the institutions, unionism at different levels, declining reading habit and following the backdoor ways to get good marks by the students. The second order factors such as: less emoluments, expensive children education, inflation and improper accommodation ultimately deflated the teacher's interest in providing quality education. The social factors squeezing the standard of education namely, intensified nepotism, corruption, regionalism and entry of mediocre in teaching profession turned to be major features of social factors. The third order factors such as: psychological, political fundamentalism, personal tension, increasing conflicts in the families and colleagues, ingress of politics in academics at the time of appointments and promotion, no say of intelligentsia in politics, lack of

* *Dr Romesh Verma, Reader in Education, Directorate of Distance Education, University of Jammu, Jammu India. E-mail : romeshv@yahoo.com*

research facilities turned out to be the other important factors affecting the quality of Indian education. Persistent decline in standards of Indian education calls immediate attention of our policy makers, the politicians and the administrators, to work out ways and means to check further deterioration of quality of education and to promote quality in education because quality education is the prime drivers for progress of a society.

Developing Quality in Education

Quality is a dynamic phenomenon. Quality improves every moment with the new developments in technology and management techniques. To keep pace with International Quality Standards (ISO - 9000), is one of the most widely recognised quality management tools, which is being adopted by quality conscious industrial organisations in the world. Most important International Organisation Standardisation elements used by the industrial organisations for quality maintenance and improvement of products are: i) Management Responsibility; ii) Quality System; iii) Contract Review; iv) Design Control; v) Document Control; vi) Purchasing; vii) Purchaser Supplied Product; viii) Product Identification and Tractability; ix) Process Control; x) Inspection and Testing; xi) Inspection Measuring and Test Equipments; xii) Inspection and Test Status; xiii) Control of Non-conforming Product; xiv) Corrective Action; xv) Handling Storage, Packing and Delivery; xvi) Quality Records; xvii) Training; xviii) Servicing; xix) Statistical Technique; and, xx) Internal Quality Audits.

Beyond doubts, we need to develop elements of quality in education because education in an information age is entering into the stage of transition from individual education to group education, to mass education, to global education meaning there by a shift in its approach from service to industry. The adoption of industrial approach in education therefore, has central concerns for developing quality in education. The existing debate of educational quality has however, been replaced with the slogan like “standards”, “quality control”, “total quality management”, “consumer rights”, and “appraisal”. Furthermore, Harvey and Green (1993) have outlined five alternatives of quality such as: a) Exceptional; b) Perfection or Consistency; c) Fitness for Purpose; d) Value for Money; and e) Transformative. All these alternatives of quality are interrelated and they can be considered as discrete in nature, as such they need to be measured in different ways.

Prime concern to inculcate quality in education means to make education users friendly, i.e. taking care of the learner, the cost effectiveness and inculcation of employment market oriented skills among the learners. For instance, Schrock and Lefever, (1988) advocates that quality in education demands the adoption of pragmatic approach, i.e. development of following primary, secondary and specialised skills with their assessment tools to assess core and specialised skills of quality education among the learners.

Developing Core Quality Skills for Education

Knowledge Skills	Thinking Skills
<p>Learner should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have an appropriate level of literacy and numeric skills • be able to identify, access, organise and communicate knowledge in both; written and oral English • have good listening skills • have an international awareness • have the ability to use appropriate technology to further the above 	<p>Learner should :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be willing to challenge current knowledge and thinking • have conceptual skills • have problem solving skills • be creative and imaginative thinkers • be able to combine theory and practice • be able to reflect on and evaluate their own performance
Developing Practical Skills	Developing Personal Skills and Attributes
<p>Learner should :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be able to use information technology • be able to apply technical skills appropriate to their discipline • be able to initiate and participate in organisational and social change 	<p>Learner should :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have a commitment to lifelong learning • be able to function in a team • be adaptable and flexible • have leadership skills • be independent learners • be self-reliant, practical and enterprising • understand the concepts of ethical action and social responsibility

Developing Special Skills for Quality in Education

Knowledge Based :	Thinking Based:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • love of learning • sense of self • ability to adapt knowledge to new situations • social and environmental responsibility • understanding of indigenous issues and history as they relate to specific disciplines • completion of part of education in industry, the community or overseas • seek imaginative approach to problems and attempt to set the agenda rather than follow a well trodden path • be agents of positive change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • profound respect for truth and intellectual integrity and for the ethics of scholarship • openness to new ideas and unconventional critiques of received wisdom • international awareness and openness to the world based on understanding and appreciation of social and cultural diversity and respect for individual human rights and dignity • ability to plan and achieve goals in both the personal and the professional sphere • tolerance and integrity • acknowledge personal responsibility for value judgements and ethical behaviour towards others • an awareness of sustainability and its social benefit

Developing Professional Skills for Quality in Education

The concern for quality in education mainly focuses our attention for the development of quality of skills among the learners in three paradigms: 1) Academic Standards of the Course. 2) Teaching Quality. 3) Student Achievement. The quality of education in a particular course depends on the potential measures associated with the quality of educational inputs, such as: a) Student entry qualifications; b) Teacher assessment; c) Class size; d) Student time tables and library expenditure; e) Research value added in the course; f) Student to staff ratio; and g) Unemployment rate.

Assessment Tools for Quality Education

Assessing the Skills of Quality in Education Studied by Jhon. J Spark (1999), points out that we can develop quality in education by infusing important learning skills effecting at cognitive, cognitive and affective domains (Jhon J. Spark: 1999). He further added that mere infusion of quality based educational skills cannot prove useful to improve our teaching learning process until we are able to assess: the level of attainment of the learner, assess teaching effectiveness to develop and refine the quality skills in a course. The assessment of quality in education *i.e.*, development of special skills among the learners is commonly termed as the Performance Indicators (PI). Jarratt Committee recommended three types of Performance Indicators for institutions of higher education, namely, (1) Internal performance indicators, (2) External performance indicators; and, (3) Operational performance indicators. In simple terms, the performance indicators for an institution can be further classified into three categories: a) Input Indicators, b) Process Indicators; and, c) Output Indicators.

Input Indicators : Input indicators indicate the resources, infrastructure, and other basic inputs of an institution to inculcate skills required for quality education. Well-qualified experienced teachers, good library, well-equipped laboratory facilities that constitute the inputs of an institution, have their influence on the teaching-learning activity and on the quality of the students. The institutional environmental activities in the campus also effect in developing quality education. Skills among the learners. For instance, what happens in the classroom and outside the class in the campuses of educational institutions gives an idea of the functioning of the institutions. The academic and extra-curricular activities in the institutions determine the quality of education imparted or the quality of the students. Despite the inputs being good, if the academic process is not effective, the outcome from such institutions is not likely to be impressive.

Process Indicators : Process indicators drag our attention towards the teaching-learning process in the institutions. The teaching-learning process cannot be quantified. We cannot have quantifiable indicators to evaluate the central academic activity in an institution however; we can assess the quality of process of developing quality education skill among the learners. A simple and easy yardstick to evaluate the work of an institution by knowing its number of working days in an academic year. The U.G.C. has prescribed 180 working days in an academic year. It is common knowledge that many universities and colleges do not have even 100 working days in a year. On the basis of the working days, the performance of the institutions can be categorised. Institutions which work for more than 180 days may be considered as very good institutions, those which work for the stipulated 180 days may be classified as good institutions and the performance of institutions which work for less than 180 days can be considered unsatisfactory.

The number of classes taken in each subject can also be a Performance Indicator as that is related to the central activity in the educational institutions. The number of tutorials and seminars held, the use of audio-video equipment and the use of new innovative strategies for teaching with the active involvement of the students in the academic activity, are also factors which should be reflected in the Performance Indicators. Educational institutions have to develop the talents of the students in various faculties like sports and cultural activities. They should also develop human values like integrity, compassion, tolerance, love for fellow human beings, etc. The development of positive and proper attitudes among the students is also a responsibility of the educational institutions. Programmes and activities conducted to develop the above mentioned talents and values and attitudes among the students should also be reflected in the process indicators.

Out Put Indicators : The Output indicators describe the outcome of the inputs and the process. Examination results, services rendered to the community, etc. Many people use examination results as an indicator of the performance of an educational institution. Examination results are considered as a simple standard and verifiable indicator to evaluate the performance of an educational institution. Jill Johnes and Jim Taylor points out these examination results can be considered as tool to assess performance indicators in higher education for measuring the quality of education. Examination as output indicator for an institution has greatest drawback that it does not totally reflect the ability or achievements of the students (K. Suberamanium, 1999, *The Hindu*). "Rampant malpractices in examinations in certain universities and colleges, vagaries in the valuation of the examination papers also depreciate the value of results. However, with all its limitations it is one of the few quantifiable Performance indicators in the field of education. As such, its use for assessing the performance of the institutions of higher education cannot be questioned.

Employability : The demand of pass outs in the employment market is an effective performance indicator of quality education in an institution. If many of the students are employed after the completion of their course, it can be taken as an indicator of the effective functioning of the system. The increasing number of educated unemployed in our country is a pointer that our higher education system does not provide the right type of education for the youth to gainfully employ themselves.

Admission into Higher Courses : The percentage of pass out students absorbed for higher studies in research institutions / research labs and qualified for UGC Test, NET and joined research in their respective field is one of the effective parameter to assess the quality of the education of an institution. The quality of education of an institution can be assessed by the nature of research conducted. The relevance of the research in practical life and the standard of publication etc.

Now in our country, with the axe falling on Government funds for higher education, the U.G.C. has started the process of devising performance indicators to evaluate the performance of the universities. One of the intentions in developing the performance indicators is that the performance of the universities should be taken into consideration while allocating funds to them.

Thus, a university, which performs very well, may get more funds from the U.G.C., than a university, which has not performed well. Similarly, Distance Education Council an apex body has been assigned the task to allocate funds to Distance Education/ Open Learning Institutions to promote quality in distance education. The Distance Education Council is allocating funds to State open universities, DDE's and CCI's to extend facilities for the disadvantaged learners and for the upliftment of quality of distance education in the country.

Developing Quality in Distance Education

Distance education in India came to existence in seventies. The system started growing in eighties and gained momentum in nineties with the establishment of National Open University. During the end of twentieth century, the system added good number of State Open Universities to promote education for the disadvantage learners in the country. Presently we have one National Open University, ten State Open Universities and seventy eight DDE's / CCI's serving about twenty per cent of the total India's student population. The demand to develop alternative system of education has emerged because of the reason: the diversity of learning needs, diversity of learners frames, diversity of learner's context, diversity of the learner's age, diversity of learner's place of access, the rapid increase of body of knowledge, obsolesce of knowledge and skills. Therefore, we need to develops a distance education as a system of life long learning. The system gained popularity because it is most flexible and has client centred approach for the learner even in the diverse learning conditions. It is hoped that within the first decade of the present century open universities will be functioning in every state so that about 50 per cent of the future intake in the country will be catered through the distance education/ open education system (Powar, 2000).

Developing Micro Specialization and Global Specialization in Distance Education

Keeping in view the growing demand of the system, it is imperative for the distance education practitioners to 'think globally and design locally' the courses making a shift from quantity education to quality education with specialisation i.e, from specialisation to micro-specialisation, from interdisciplinary to multidisciplinary education encouraging global application of knowledge, skills and immediate technologies in developing courses. Mere designing of multidisciplinary courses in distance education can't help distance education until we adopt an independent socially relevant quality based courses and avoiding duplication of the conventional courses through distance mode.

Developing Self-based Learning & Web-based Learning

Distance Education has wider scope to improve quality of its courses in modern era of information technology. Efficient and effective utilisation communication technology and information technology in distance education can facilitate the learner to learn simultaneously through Self Based Learning and Web Based Learning (Training /Teaching). In other words, distance education allows access to higher education to those who live in areas that do not have adequate educational facilities, or do not have adequate financial support to undertake full-time education through Web as delivery medium. By Using the Web, the teachers and the designers can generate instructional delivery mechanisms or Web Based Training (WBT) which are a collection of instructionally sound and well-designed Web Pages. Web Based Training is very recent instructional technique /method since Web itself emerged in the early 90's. Web can be used as the strongest and most effective medium for distance education. Using Web Based Training (WBT) techniques makes the communication more attention attractive, clear, lively thought provoking and interesting. The Internet mostly use inquiry-discovery model which creates interest and enthusiasm among the learners to gain knowledge and skill on self-pace. Beena Shah (2000) is of the view that Web Based Teaching (WBT) techniques can adopt to encourage promoting quality of distance education courses in the following ways:

- Learners can access course materials through internet/CD (Web instruction emulated on CD).
- CD based video support.
- Tutor support to the learners through Internet.
- Contact Programmes may be organised at little identified study centres to give support to complicated content/subject.
- Web access through dial up connections, Internets, Cable modems etc. can be used.
- Learners can send their queries to the tutor through Internet.
- Mode of evaluation can both summative and formative and can be carried out through study centres and Web respectively.

Developing Quality Teachers in Distance Education

Twenty-first century will transform our traditional society into knowledge society. The transformation of our social structures will also revolutionise the role of a teacher. A teacher in knowledge society will work as facilitator of the learner to promote knowledge. In addition to attend teaching work he/she will have to promote computer literacy, handle curricular implications of teaching, learning, evaluation, selection and adaptation of software. The distance education teacher will not only be a source of

knowledge but will work as a collaborative work team. The distance education teacher is expected to master Web Based Teaching (WBT) techniques to cater to the growing needs of his/her students. Therefore, in Web Based Teaching/Training the teachers' role will invite the following responsibilities :

- *Respond to the queries of the students/learners.*
- *Send assignments to the students and the resource persons. Receive complete assignments on the dates from the students.*
- *Collect the assignments.*
- *Send corrected assignments back to the students.*
- *Organise and lead chat room discussions, participate in new group discussion, Organise contact sessions, etc.*
- *Responsible to course co-ordinator.*
- *Provide feedback on curriculum/instructional material, fast access queries, etc.*

In brief, education today is in search of quality. As a matter of fact the concept of quality is known to us in a traditional way. But during the last fifty years, the industrial revolution accompanied by mass production has impelled us to perceive quality totally a new way. The concept of quality, quality of inspection, quality assurance and total quality have come up. Industry has been compelled to go in for quality and excellence due to globalisation, open economy and privatisation. It is now the turn of education to follow in the footsteps of industry. Hence, the need for those involved in education, particularly in distance education to understand quality and its adoption in distance education.

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