

Quality Assurances in Distance Education – Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Distance education in the recent past has been an accepted method of study. Any citizen who was unfortunate not to go through the regular stream of education but had the desire to learn and flair for education, had no opportunities. The Government decided to erase this sad state of affair and wanted a literate crowd. The Government felt the need to have people who can read and write, and this was impossible in the old system of learning. Hence they developed a system where any person with a particular age and zeal to learn without disturbing his livelihood, could learn and there emerged the system of distance education. This paper tries to understand the very system of distance education, the importance and the challenges in this field and whether quality is ensured in distance and open learning. The paper also tries to analyse the need for quality assurance in distance education.

Key words: *Importance, need, challenges and quality assurance in Distance Education*

Introduction

Nearly one billion people, one-sixth of the world's population, have little or no education, either because they have never been to school or have had less than five years of schooling and left before acquiring key areas of knowledge and many useful skills.¹ In formal settings, the convention (face-to-face school instruction) and distance education (offered with separation in terms of physical location of instructors and students) have been used to provide educational opportunities to recipients.² Distance education has its genesis in the need to provide instruction to those who are not in a position to avail of traditional oral type of instruction because of low income, age or involvement in an occupation. Almost invariably the users of the distance education mode are relatively older people, their age-range varying from young adults to the elderly.³ Distance education cannot be the substitute but it can be a supplement to formal education. By distance education, we can achieve the aim of education for all and equal education opportunities.

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It will prove an effective way to meet the demand of higher education.⁴

Distance education was developed primarily for commercial reasons to provide alternative access to formal education and training.⁵ Open University is the latest innovation in the field of distance education programmes. It is known by different names such as ‘university of the air’, ‘tele university’, ‘university without walls’, ‘correspondence universities’, etc. The principle of Open University is life-long and individual need-based learning. It keeps its doors open for those who have the desire to learn and acquire academic qualification.⁶

In 21st century, distance education has changed a lot in form of online or e-learning and with increasing online presence, open learning opportunities, and the development of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) has taken a giant leap. MOOCs are basically courses which are in online mode; provide 24 x 7 support to the learner on computer/mobile or any other such device connected with internet.⁷ With advance in multimedia and communication technologies, distance education is being adopted by corporations as well as universities. Television broadcasting became one of the pioneering technologies for distance learning.⁸

Objective of the Study

1. To study aims to understand the need and importance of distance education.
2. The study and analyse the challenges in distance education
3. The quality assurance in Distance Education.

Method of Analysis

The research carried is Doctrinal, analytical and descriptive method. Sources of data for the most part of this research paper are secondary. The secondary sources such as books, journals and the online data base materials are extensively used to bring out this research.

History of Distance Education

One of the first universities to offer a distance learning degree was the University of London which established an External Programme in 1858. It was soon to be followed in 1873 by the programs at the Society to Encourage studies at Home in Boston and the University of Australia’s Department of Correspondence Studies in 1911. In the United States, the forerunner in distance education was the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which was funded, by the Carnegie Foundation and it brought together a variety of communication technologies to help provide learning to students who were off-campus.⁹ In 1840, Isaac Pittman started using postal tuition to teach persons scattered all over England. Gradually Postal tuition became a recognised mode of teaching various subjects. Thus, the beginning of Distance Education was made with the introduction of correspondence education.¹⁰

Distance education in India, in formalised form, has its genesis in a recommendation of the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), made in 1961, that a detailed study of correspondence courses be made. The University Grants Commission decided to encourage part-time and own time education, and the University of Delhi, Delhi was asked to undertake a pilot project by instituting correspondence courses.¹¹

In India, the first correspondence course at the university level was launched by the University of Delhi in 1962. The objectives spelt out for starting courses through correspondence are:

- a. to provide an efficient and less expensive method of educational instruction at higher education level in the context of national development in India;
- b. to provide facilities to pursue higher education to all qualified and willing persons, who had failed to join regular university courses due to personal and economic reasons or because of their inability to get admission to a regular college and
- c. to provide opportunities of academic pursuits to educate citizens to improve their standard of knowledge and learning through correspondence instruction without disturbing their present employment.¹²

Further development in this direction was made by the State of Andhra Pradesh which set up in 1982 the first Open University of the country (Andhra Pradesh, now renamed Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad). It was followed by the establishment of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) at New Delhi in 1985.¹³

Importance of Distance Education in India

Open and distance learning system is the only system that can reach the door step of every section of the society irrespective of class, creed, gender, race and geographic location. The characteristic features which make the system so important are:

- i. Cost effective
- ii. Learning satisfaction
- iii. Equal access
- iv. Dual degree
- v. Migration problem
- vi. Assignment marks.¹⁴

The major objectives of distance education system are:

- To provide a system of learner centred self paced learning;
- To provide a flexible, diversified and open system of education;
- To develop wider access to higher education for persons of all ages, particularly for working persons and for economically or otherwise handicapped persons including those residing in remote areas;
- To provide opportunity for up gradation of skills and qualifications; and
- To develop education as a lifelong activity so that the individual can replenish his or her knowledge in an existing discipline or can acquire knowledge in new areas.¹⁵

Controlling Agencies for Distance Education:

International agencies engaged in distance education are:

- a. The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE)
- b. the International E-Learning Association (IELA)
- c. Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU)

d. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

National Bodies for Distance Education:

- a. Distance Education Council
- b. University Grants Commission
- c. National Commission for Higher Education and Research.¹⁶

Why Quality Assurance in Distance Education?

Many open and distance students across the globe are in rural, remote, or marginalized communities. They lack any tradition of formal education, role models, or access to the kinds of knowledge and resources taken for granted in more privileged settings. The curricula, teaching styles, delivery and assessment methods and support systems needs to be designed so as to help these learners find pathways out of their disadvantage and there is a call for special effort and arguably, special performance indicators.¹⁷

Knowledge and other intangible assets emerge as keys to job performance in the economic system. Intangible assets and intellectual capital are sources for improving efficiency and economic growth (Augier and Teece, 2005).¹⁸ Open learning and distance education tends to have a wider public presence, because its resources are available for all to access and assess, therefore it faces the demand for greater social accountability than the conventional system.¹⁹ Experts all over the world have pointed out that the education of young human beings should involve much more than simply moulding them into future workers and citizens. The purpose of education is holistic or all-round development of young people. Qualitative education is necessary else education become meaningless as it loses its connectivity to the ultimate – potential nature of human beings.²⁰

To ensure quality in distance education, one of the first issues that must be addressed is whether your organisation wants to take an educational or industrial approach. In other words, will your organization define guidelines for programs and courses, or for learning objects and assets? Or, is a combination of approaches more appropriate? After establishing the basic approach, one must also determine which set of guidelines or specifications to adopt.²¹

Quality Concept in Distance Education

Purpose of quality improvement programmes at Open and Distance Learning Institutions

- Equitable access to benefits of higher education to all
- Optimization and integration of modern methods of teaching and learning
- To ensure continuous improvement of total institutional performance
- To ensure stakeholders of institutional accountability
- To evolve mechanisms and procedures for effective and progressive performance
- Credibility of evaluation procedures
- Proper allocation of support and services and
- Resource sharing through networks of collaboration.²²

Need for distance education

- Rapid growth of education:²³ Despite tremendous growth in the number of educational institutions, the demand has far exceeded the availability of educational provisions. Because of population explosion and limited financial resources of the state the formal system is unable to meet the needs of all the learners. It is imperative to seriously examine the potential alternative that can cater to be more flexible.²⁴
- Since educational opportunity cannot be denied just because of a poor secondary school infrastructure, planner shave been forced to look for an alternatives.²⁵
- Mandate of open university is to reach out to students who are disadvantaged by limited time, distance or physical disability in attending a regular programme.²⁶
- Education for all ages and Desire to work and study: Distance learning can provide a way out for the aged, rejected, deprived and reluctant to turn on their computers and learn.²⁷ You can work at your own convenience: Since all the classes are asynchronous, you have the liberty to review your assignments or do your homework during office hours or at home.
- It saves a lot of time, money and energy by cutting down on travel. The time saved can be judiciously used for personal and professional time.²⁸
- It helps career prospects and promotional benefits of already employed people.
- It helps women and needy to work from home as well and earn a suitable living
- It helps housewives to practice education which helps them to empower themselves by making their leisure time motivating.²⁹
- Speedy and efficient training to key and target groups
- Development of multiple competencies through recurrent and continuing education
- Learner centred approach with greater flexibility and choice of content.³⁰
- Rapid growth of education
- Population
- Geographical limitations
- Qualification improvement
- Financial circumstances
- Faster promotion
- Flexibility factor.³¹

Challenges of distance education:

- The difficulty of applying quality control mechanisms in distance teaching universities because of the concepts of academic freedom and professional autonomy.³²
- The principle that flexible provision should widen learning opportunities without damaging or compromising the academic standard of the award or the quality of what is experienced by students. The arrangements for assuring quality and standards should be rigorous, secure and open to scrutiny. There is a potential risk associated with flexible and distributed learning which include security of information and assessment/grades, distance between the student and the institution and assuring the identity of the learner.³³

- Mostly, adult working individuals take distance education for professional growth. They want to get something out of distance education program for professional growth. To such students, acceptance by the employers of the course credits and diplomas is very important.³⁴
- Distance education institutions do not have their own independent faculty empowered to frame syllabi, prescribe conditions of eligibility for different courses, and innovate a system of evaluation relevant to distance education, the distance education institutions have no option but to follow the syllabi of the conventional universities and adhere to the rigid frame of their eligibility and examination conditions.³⁵
- Mushrooming growth of distance education institutions, universities, particularly in private sector; increasing student enrolment without proper infrastructure, issues related to equivalence of degrees, job opportunities for distance learners and the most important institutional autonomy are major challenges, which need immediate attention.³⁶
- Technological Literacy – including computer literacy, the target population will require training in the use of the tools and so will the providers.
- Alienating instructors: Distance education technologies are not alternative to teaching.³⁷
- Comparative gap between outcomes in conventional education system
- High rate of drop-out
- Low status of Distance Education institutes (DEIs)
- Student's assessment criteria
- Lack of support and motivation by the faculty.³⁸

The distance education system follows a multimedia approach for instruction, which comprises:

- a. Self instructional Written material
- b. Audio-Visual Material aids
- c. Counselling sessions
- d. Teleconferences
- e. Practical's/Project work.³⁹

There is a strong recognition that teacher education and professional development need to be integrated in ways that operationalise lifelong learning for teachers, the resources allocated to it are usually inadequate.⁴⁰ Distance education has the some specific characteristics, which separate it from the traditional system of education and provide it with unique feature as parallel to formal education such as there is no direct interaction or face-to-face activity between teacher and students but compensated by contact or counselling sessions (CS).⁴¹ In an Open University, there is a three tier system of evaluation (i) self-education, (ii) education by the tutor, (iii) education by the university. After completing three stages a certificate is awarded to the candidate.⁴² This flexibility is not available in the formal education and hence distance education is sought by people who have an urge to learn.

Conclusion

The Government of India has taken a leap in the recent past by introducing the Universal

Education Programme. Under this scheme, the aim of the Government is to promote education for all. The aim is a long term plan and it cannot be achieved in a short span of time. Though the adoption of such programme cost the government, the government is promoting it with the only aim that India remains a literate nation. Indians are known for their knowledge. India has contributed enormously to the field of education. Our Gurukul system is classic examples to prove Indian were an educated lot. Due to British rule and foreign invasion, Indian was introduced to formal English education and for few centuries Indians remained indoor, due to various exploitation by the rulers and we became an illiterate nation. To change this scenario, Distance education is major step adopted and only the future centuries to come would prove how effective distance education is and how seriously the distance education is perceived by the citizens. Though distance and open education was started with an aim to provide education to people who could not have an access to education due to various factors, quality assurance of such learning is also an important feature to be ascertained, as education leads to employability and further, to the contribution of the economy. Does the distance education cater to the expected quality has remained an elusive question.

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