Quality Assurance in Distance Higher Education in India: Some Conceptual Issues

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of quality assurance from different dimensions and an attempt has been made to deal with some critical issues related to the quality assurance in distance higher education in India. India has progressed in leaps and bounds. Distance education can be invaluable to learners, educators and educational institutions alike. Education is dynamic in nature and it passes through different stages of development. The evolution of Indian system of education can be studied based on the basis of the development. Today learning has a greater challenge in the university level which advocates good decision making and effective evaluation of the needs of the industry. The findings of the paper have focused on the various improvements in the distance learning methods. The paper concludes with some suggestions for implementation of a technology enabling open and distance learning by developing a model leading to momentum for distance education.

Introduction:

"***Distance education is beset with a remarkable paradox-it has asserted its existence, but it cannot define itself.***"

Shale, 1988, p. 25

Education is a key factor which determines the nation's progress. It provides ample opportunities to develop skills in addition to the knowledge it creates. University education in India has been characterized by large expansion of facilities, particularly in terms of institutions and enrolments. In developing countries like India, the primary objective of education is to increase the percentage of literates in the country. Therefore, every country developed its own system of education to express and promote to its socio-cultural identity (*D'Souza, 2007*).

Distance learning is the learning methods in which students can study at his/her own convenience, without the need of being physically present at the classroom. Distance learning has come as a boon for people who want to pursue their education further but are otherwise not able to do it through a regular education medium for various reasons such as want of time. To fill this gap many distances learning educational establishments have come up in India offering quality education through the online medium. The distance learning education directory provides an overview of the leading distance learning educational institutes in India. Distance education in the country got a big push during the seventies, more and more Universities took distance education as an alternative mode of education and the educational administrators realized to make an experiment to test the efficiency of the correspondence education system at post graduate level, thereby generating a path for state Open University system in the country. The State Open Universities came into existence in

response to social need for designing innovative educational structures, which could overcome the limitations of the conventional system of education. Open learning in open system of education is a mode for acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instructions, encompassing all technologies for learning anywhere at any time.

Literature review:

Today, India is on war footing and heading towards economic success and modernization. There has been a steady growth in number of students enrolling every year for higher education. However, the quality and quantity of faculty at the Institutes of higher education continues to remain a major area of concern. Most premier higher educational institutions in India are facing an acute faculty shortage and they are failing to meet the guidelines regarding the student-teacher ratio specified by the statutory and regulatory bodies for higher education like University Grants Commission (UGC) and All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). A major challenge developing nations face today is that of creating an environment conducive to the cultural, economic and social development of their people. Historically, education has been a determining factor of the progress of human civilization (*Dutta, 2007*).

According to the National Knowledge Commission, for the first time in this decade, the total number of illiterates decreased from 329 million to 304 million. The literacy rate also increased from 18.3% in 1951 to 67.3% in 2004, as per HRD statistics. The National Literacy Mission aims at achieving 85% literacy at the end of the Eleventh 5-year plan (2007-2012). The higher education in India has witnessed many fold increase in its institutional capacity since independence. During 1950 and 2008, the number of universities has increased from 20 to about 431, colleges from 500 to 20,677 and the teachers from 15 thousand to nearly 505 thousand. Consequently, the enrolment of students has increased from a mere 100 thousand in 1950 to over 11612 thousand. In India, education has always been a subject of heated discussion and deliberation. While on the one hand India is still grappling to provide basic primary and secondary education to many, higher education in India has progressed in leaps and bounds (*Business World, 2009*).

Main Players in the Higher Education Systems in India

University Grants Commission (UGC) is responsible for coordination, determination and maintenance of standards, release of grants. Professional Councils are responsible for recognition of courses, promotion of professional institutions and providing grants to undergraduate programmes and various awards. The statutory professional councils are:

- All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE)
- Distance Education Council (DEC)
- Indian Council for Agriculture Research (ICAR)
- Bar Council of India (BCI)
- National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE)

- Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI)
- Medical Council of India (MCI)
- Pharmacy Council of India (PCI)
- Indian Nursing Council (INC)
- Dentist Council of India (DCI)
- Central Council of Homeopathy (CCH)
- Central Council of Indian Medicine (CCIM)

Development of open and distance education in India

The distance education is used with different names. Few of them are:

- Correspondence education
- Independent study
- Distributed learning
- Flexible learning
- Open learning, etc.

In India, open and distance education had its beginning in the form of correspondence education in:

- Higher Education in 1962 in Delhi University.
- Secondary Education in 1965 in Madhya Pradesh Board of Secondary Education
- Elementary Education (Bridge Course) in 1979 in Open School of Central Board of Secondary Education.
- Upper Primary Education in 1991 in Andhra Pradesh Open School.
- Primary Education through Open Basic Education Project of National Open School in 1995-96.
- Open University – B. R. Ambedkar Open University in 1982 in Andhra Pradesh.

Comparison between: Traditional Classroom Learning vs. Distance Learning

Sl. No.	Traditional Classroom Learning	Sl. No.	Distance Learning
1	Learning puts physical presence to acquire knowledge in the classroom.	1	Learning puts the classroom at home, office and linked to computer and internet.
2	Traditional students finds it easier to to acquire knowledge, skill and to maintain a job, a family etc.	2	Non-traditional students find it easier to acquire knowledge, skill and to maintain a job, a family etc.
3	Classroom teaching enhances the physical and psychological closeness with the student and the instructor.	3	Distance learning lacks the physical and psychological closeness with the student and the instructor.
4	Classroom learning does help the students to enjoy the homour way of teaching methodologies by the teacher.	4	Distance learning does not help the students to enjoy the homourous way of teaching methodologies by the teacher.
5	Traditional classroom teaching also provides students with the opportunity to have real social interaction with one another.	5	Distance learning does not provide students with the opportunity to have real social interaction with one another.
6	The interaction in the traditional classroom allows the students to help one another in terms of academics or in terms of personal issues.	6	The interaction in the distance learning does not allow the students to help one another in terms of academics or in terms of personal issues.

Why to study through Distance Education?

1. Achieving higher levels of performance with consistency.
2. Creating more career options and increase employment areas.
3. Fulfilling the requirements of the employers for basic qualifications
4. Insufficient marks to qualify in the entrance
5. Lack of adequate time to pursue full time course
6. Lack of sufficient money towards the cost of the course

Advantages of Distance Education:

1. Afford to acquire multiple qualifications simultaneously
2. Exposure to e-learning, satellite education etc.
3. It builds self discipline and self confidence
4. It fulfills social, works and family obligations in effective time management

5. People are much more comfort in their own home
6. People can study at their own pace
7. Provides education at home which recognizes globally
8. Study flexibility and no travel expenses
9. Study is affordable, as providers allow students to pay as they study

Distance Education and the WWW:

The 21st century is about the management of all the knowledge and information we have generated and the value addition we bring to it. We must give our students the skills with which they find a way through the sea of knowledge that has been created and continue with lifelong learning. Today, we have the ability through technology to really and truly teach ourselves to become the life-long learners (*Dutta, 2007*). The traditional as well as internet based learning model are given below:
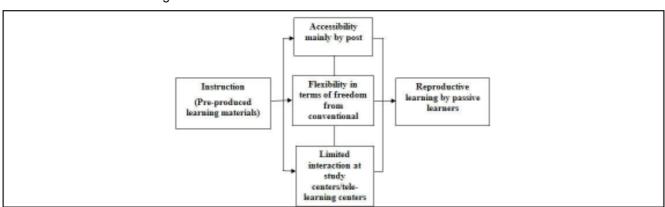

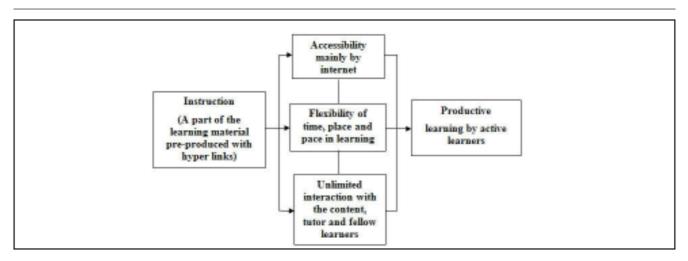**Figure 1: Traditional distance learning**
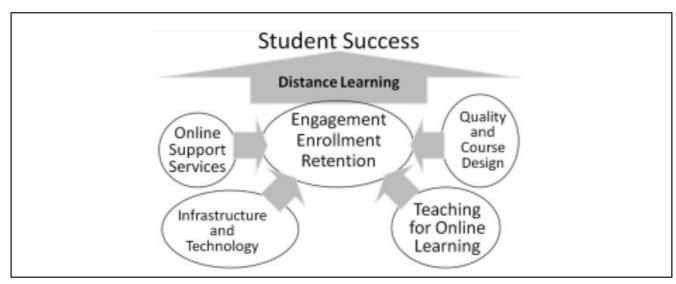
Figure 2: Internet based distance learning

Methods:

"Learning can and often does take place without the benefit of teaching-and sometimes even in spite of it - but there is no such thing as effective teaching in the absence of learning."

Angelo & Cross, 1988, p. 3

Albert Einstein once said, "I never teach my pupils; I provide only conditions in which they learn." Learning is an adjustment on the part of an individual, which actively constructs one's own knowledge by connecting new ideas to existing ideas, on the basis of the experiences. Learning is generally considered to be any change in an individual's response or behaviour resulting from practice to experience. It is difficult to understand the inner workings of the mind in learning, only the results of the learning process are observable. Learning is the process by which individual acquires various habits, knowledge, skill and attitudes that are necessary for meeting specific objectives. Learning also changes the behavior of individuals. The psychology of learning has been divided into three categories such as learner, learning process and the learning situation. The various learning processes are learner, learning materials, learning methods, methods of instruction, environment, psychological factors, individual differences etc. A model of student's success in distance learning is given below:

ICT approach of Distance Learning

01.   E-Learning

E-learning is defined as learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communications technology (ICT). E-learning includes web-based instruction, virtual learning, online learning etc. Online Learning is synonymous to web-based learning where learning is fostered via the www only, in an Intranet or Internet. Various e-learning based includes Web-Based Learning (WBL), Web-Based Instruction (WBI), Web-Based Training (WBT), Internet-Based Training (IBT), Distributed Learning (DL), Advanced Distributed Learning (ADL), Distance Learning, Online Learning (OL), Mobile Learning (or m-Learning) or Nomadic Learning, Remote Learning, Off-site Learning, a-Learning (anytime, anyplace, anywhere learning), etc.

02. E-Pedagogy

It is the learning design that incorporates educational quality, values and effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment activities supported by technology. In particular it is based on the use of web based learning environments, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) methods and materials that make the most beneficial use of the audiovisual dimension of pedagogy. Research and the evaluation literature suggests that new modes of teaching and learning are emerging through the use of online networks, access to remote experts and, more recently, mobile technologies. Pedagogical learning consists of individual learning, facilitated learning and collaborative learning. The term "e-pedagogy" refers to a recent human endeavour representing an embryonic situation which is not, as yet, an established area of knowledge like other disciplines that have been the object of study for many years.

03. Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement

Higher education institutions have embarked on e-learning as a means to support their teaching and learning activities through quality assurance and quality enhancement.

Quality assurance focuses on teaching where as quality enhancement focuses on learning.

04. Evaluation of performance

It is the process of judging the excellence, abilities and qualities of the students. It includes formal procedures used to evaluate personalities, contributions and potentials of students through internal as well as external evaluations. Internal evaluations are done through mid-term examination, quiz, personality development programs, etc.

05. Standardize higher education curricula

It is not only curriculum that is important, proper evaluation system plays a major role in the quality of the output. Indian higher education curriculum has made substantial progress in increasing the literacy and access to basic education. Demand for latest curriculum in higher education arises primarily from two sources i.e., from the actual beneficiaries and from expected industrial growth.

Future challenges of Distance Education in India

- Curriculum design has to be made as per industry requirements.
- Developing Research and Development to promote creative research.
- Establishing a National Engineers Registration and Licensing Board (NERLB)
- Exercising sufficient controls over franchising arrangements to ensure supervision by parent institutions, quality, appropriate financial arrangement and genuine institutional links.

- Internal Quality Assurance Initiatives and Quality Sustenance by Accredited institutions.
- Introducing regulatory framework for distance learning programmes
- Moving towards international standards and reducing divergence of standards within country-common curriculum.
- Obtaining international equivalence of degrees and diplomas.
- Periodic monitoring to ensure compliance of norms and standards.

Conclusion

"Learning can and often takes place without the benefit of teaching - and sometimes even in spite of it - but there is no such thing as effective teaching in the absence of learning."

Angelo & Cross, 1988, p. 3

India's higher education sector presents an interesting scenario of challenges and contrasts. Due to emerging globalization, liberalization and open economy, competitions are not only between individual, organizations or within a country but also all over the world. Considering the above emerging challenges, Indian educational institutions are building strong relationship with the industry to produce quality professionals for the industry as a whole. India today encompasses not just science-the Indian space program, atomic energy research, biotechnology, but also the social sciences and the humanities as well including world-class centers of excellence in Indian universities and in the IITs. Though India has made tremendous strides in the field of education, the fundamental goal of education i.e. character building is still in the process. Character is built through values, which forms the foundation for any harmonious society. Finally, a learning system is meaningful to institutions when it has a sound return-on-investment (ROI), a moderate to high level of learner satisfaction with both the quality of instruction and all support services and a low dropout rate.

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