Quality Assurance in Open Distance Learning: IGNOU a Case Study

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Abstract

Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is becoming increasingly important due to the large-scale expansion in modes of educational delivery. In India ODL was introduced in its most primitive form as correspondence education in the 1960s. Over five decades it has evolved and taken on different forms from corresponding education in the 1960s and 70s to Open and Distance Education in the 1980s, and Virtual Education and Online Education in the last decade. In fact, all three generations of ODL are co-existing in the form of Correspondence Course Institutes/Directorates of Distance Education attached to conventional Universities; State Open Universities; National Open University; Professional Associations; Private Universities and Institutions and Foreign Universities. The quality of open and distance learning (ODL) varies, like any other form of education. Its quality (however you define it) can be the result of a variety of factors, both internal and external to an ODL organization for example, the levels of skills and expertise of staff, the amount of resources available, weak or strong leadership, efficiency of its administrative systems, or the communications infrastructure in a country.

Keywords: *Quality Assurance*

1. Introduction

1.1 Indira Gandhi Open University

The Indira Gandhi National Open University(IGNOU), established by an Act ofParliament in 1985, has continuously strive into build an inclusive knowledge society throughinclusive education. It has tried to increase theGross Enrolment Ratio (GER) by offering high-qualityteaching through the Open and DistanceLearning(ODL) mode.The University began by offering two academicprogrammes in 1987, i.e., Diploma in Managemendand Diploma in Distance Education, with a strengthof 4,528 students.

Today, it serves the educational aspirations of over2.6 million students in India and 36 other countriesthrough 21 Schools of Studies and a network of 62regional centres, around 3,000 learner supportcentres and 67 overseas centres. The Universityoffers about 445 certificate, diploma, degree anddoctoral programmes, with a strength of nearly 420faculty members and academic staff at theheadquarters and regional centres and about36,000 academic counsellors from conventional institutions of higher learning,

Professional organisations and industry among others.The mandate of the University is to:

- Toprovide access to higher education to allsegments of the society;

- Tooffer high-quality, innovative and need-basedprogrammes at different levels, to all those whorequire them;

- reach out to the disadvantaged by offering programmes in all parts of the country at affordable costs; and

- promote, coordinate and regulate the standards of education offered through open and distance learning in the country.

Variety of media and latest technology inimparting education. This is reflected in theformulated vision of IGNOU, keeping its objectivesin focus, which reads:
The Indira Gandhi National Open University, theNational Resource Centre for Open and DistanceLearning, with international recognition andpresence, shall provide seamless access tosustainable and learner-centric quality education,skill upgradation and training to all by usinginnovative technologies and methodologies andensuring convergence of existing systems forlarge-scale human resource development,required for promoting integrated nationaldevelopment and global understanding.The University has made a significant mark in theareas of higher education, community educationand continual professional development. TheUniversity has been networking with reputedpublic institutions and private enterprises forenhancing the educational opportunities beingoffered by it.

The University is committed to quality inteaching, research, training and extensionactivities, and acts as a national resource centrefor expertise and infrastructure in the ODLsystem. The University has established the Centrefor Extension Education, National Centre for Disability Studies and National Centre forInnovation in Distance Education, to focus onspecific learner groups and enrich the distancelearning system.The Distance Education Councilof the University helps in regulating andmaintaining the ODL system in the

country.With the launch of EduSat (a satellite dedicated onlyto education) on 20th September, 2004, and theestablishment of the Inter-UniversityConsortium,theUniversity has ushered in a new era oftechnology-enabled education in the country.Today, there are 134 active two-way videoconferencingcentres; all the regional centres andhigh enrolment study centres have been providedwith network connectivity, which has made itpossible to transact interactive digital content.Emphasis is now being laid on developinginteractive multimedia and online learning, andadding value to the traditional distance educationdelivery mode with modern technology-enablededucation within the framework of blendedlearning. As part of this endeavour, severalprogrammes are being offered full-time oncampus, at the headquarters, some regional centresand at other institutions of repute with whichIGNOU has agreements for this purpose.

The University also has a considerable internationalpresence, as has been said earlier. It encourages andfunds the participation of its faculty in internationalconferences and seminars, and organises severalinternational conferences too.

1.2 Academic Programmes

At present, IGNOU offers around 445 speciallyneed-based academic, professional, vocational,awareness generating and skill-orientedprogrammes, leading to certificates, diplomas and degrees (bachelor's, master's and doctoral). Thefocus of the programmes is to meet the variousacademic and employment needs of the people, especially those of the disadvantaged sections ofsociety. A number of programmes have been designed tomeet the requirements of continuing educationand training of employed people for professionalgrowth. The academic programmes are designedand developed by the faculty in activecollaboration with eminent experts from all overthe country, NGOs, international organisations,and in-house instructional designers and mediaspecialists. By providing good quality studymaterials (based on sound principles ofinstructional design) to learners, the University has succeeded in raising the standards of highereducation in the country.

The University, with its stress on being learner centric, has introduced a number of modular programmes in order to provide a greater andmore flexible learning environment. All academicprogrammes have been assigned creditweightage. In terms of study time for learners, onecredit is equivalent to 30 hours of study. In general,two-year master's degree programmes areassigned 64-72 credits, bachelor's degreeprogrammes are assigned 96-124 credits, oneyeardiploma programmes are of 24-36 creditsand six-month certificate programmes are of 12-18 credits. A policy for granting credit exemptionand credit transfer is also in

place.Being an open learning institution, IGNOUprovides considerableflexibility in entryqualifications, place, pace and the duration ofstudy. For example, a bachelor's degreeprogramme (i.e., B.A./B.Com/B.Sc/BCA/BTS/ BSW) can be completed in a minimum of three yearsand a maximum of six years. Similarly, a diplomacan be completed within one to three or fouryears; and a master's degree in two to five years.Learners enrolled at other universities can joinIGNOU programmes simultaneously. Additionally,the learners enrolled in degree programmes inIGNOU can pursue other certificate programmes simultaneously.

Yet another initiative is the Flexi Learn platform (www.ignouflexilearn.ac.in). This was launched on19th November, 2009 for free and easy access toopen courses of IGNOU. A major focus of IGNOUis research in all the academic disciplines as wellLearners during a computer literacy trainingprogramme in Meghalaya**.**Profile 2011as research about the open and distance learningsystem. There are several Ph.D./ M.Phil.programmes in place. Research and TeachingAssistantships (RTA) have been given to over 100 people so far, who are pursuing full-time researchand are also contributing to the development anddelivery of the University courses.Apart from regular projects, the Universitycollaborates with different organisations fordesign, development and delivery of its academic programmes. The Commonwealth of Learning,World Health Organisation, World IntellectualProperty Right Organisation, various ministries ofthe Government of India, National Council forHotel Management and Catering Technology andthe Indian Council of Agricultural Research aresome such organisations. The University has alsosigned MoUs with a large number of universitiesin India and overseas for collaborations.

1.3 Instructional System

The University provides multi-channel, multiplemedia, teaching/learning packages forinstruction and self-learning. The differentcomponents used for teaching/learning includeself-instructional print and audio-video materials,radio and television broadcasts, face-to-facecounselling/tutoring, laboratory and hands-onexperience, teleconferencing, videoconferencing, interactive radio counselling,interactive multimedia CD-ROM and Internetbasedlearning, and the use of mobile phones forinstant messaging.For courses in streams like sciences, computersciences, nursing, medical sciences, educationand engineering and technology, arrangementshave been made to enable students to undertakeintensive practical classes/practice teaching atselect study centres/work centres/programme centres. While the traditional distance educationdelivery through print and studycentre supportis being strengthened, the University isstrengthening the development of interactivemultimedia content and learner support throughvideo-conferencing and web-

based platforms, byutilising both the EduSat and the Internet.

The University is also offering some postgraduateprogrammes on-campus only tofull-time students. The design of the instructionalsystem, as well as teacher and learner capacitybuilding, are facilitated by the different schools,divisions and centres of the University.

1.4 Admissions

The University follows two academic annual cycles for most programmes, January to the following December and July to the following June. Learners can apply for admission through the yearoffline as well as online. However, the applicationsreceived from December to the following May areallocated to the July cycle, and those receivedbetween June and the following November areaccommodated in the January cycle.

1.5 Evaluation System

At IGNOU, a three-tier system of evaluation isfollowed:

- self-evaluation, through devices built into thecourse material;
- continuous evaluation, through anycombination of theory-based assignments, practical assignments, log books and contact programmes;
- term-end evaluation, through examinations, which are conducted at more than 600 centresall over the country and overseas twice a year,in June and December. In case of postgraduateprogrammes with a projectcomponent, the evaluation methodology alsoincludes a viva-voce.

Proportionate weightage is given to the variouscomponents for calculation of the final grade.Also, regarding the summative evaluation,IGNOU now offers the scheme of On-DemandExamination for a few programmes to provide anopportunity for learners to take up theexamination when they feel they are ready for it.Learners who successfully complete theprescribed credits in a particular programme are awarded certificates/diplomas/degrees at the Convocation, which is usually held inFebruary/March of every year at the UniversityCampus, and at select regional centres simultaneously through the tele conferencing mode. Some of the overseas partner institutionsconduct degree award ceremonies separately.Gold medals are also awarded in all diploma anddegree programmes of the University during theConvocation.

1.6 Student Support Services

The University has learners from a diverse rangeof social, economic and regional groups, viz.,rural, urban and tribal areas, the physicallychallenged,jail inmates,

personnel fromgovernment and non-government sectors,parents and home-makers, personnel ofarmedand paramilitary forces, the employers and theemployed. The University lays special emphasis on women, minority communities, socially and economically disadvantaged groups, the northeast region, and other tribal and low literacy areasof the country. Special study centres have beenopened exclusively for most of these groups oflearners. The University has an extensive nationaland international network of regional centres andlearner support centres, including work centres,programme study centres and partnerinstitutions in India (under the convergencescheme), through which it reaches out to itslearners.At these centres, learners are provided services inrespect of subject-specific academic counselling,listening/viewing of A/V programmes, libraryfacilities, teleconferencing, video conferencing,computer access, laboratory work and otherpractical work. For online programmes, theUniversity has established telelearning centresat its regional centres. Depending on therequirement, the University collaborates withprivate entrepreneurs to provide workexperience and telelearning facilities to its learners. Interactive radio counselling isbroadcast from the studio in the University aswell as from more than 37 FM radio stationsacross the country. Through EduSAT, interactivelectures and counselling is available to learners atthe terminals (SITs), as well as through a few DTHplatforms.A major quality intervention that has beenachieved is the introduction of the Student/Learner Satisfaction Survey, which has beenimplemented with the objective of gatheringinputs from each and every learner about theperformance of the University and the benefitsthey receive from the IGNOU system. In an effort to computerise all operations of theUniversity, various activities have beennetworked. Implementation of PeopleSoft (ERP)modules for Back Office integrated automationhas been taken up. The Back Office Automationcovers Finance and Accounts, Administration,Staff Training and Research Institute of DistanceEducation (STRIDE), Construction and Maintenance Division (CMD) and the CentralLibrary. It is planned to automate the processesin the Students' Evaluation Division, MaterialProduction and Distribution Division (MPDD),Regional Services Division (RSD) andInternational Division.

2. The Management of Quality in Open Distance Learning

The quality of open distance learning (ODL) varies, like any other form of education. Its quality (however you define it) can be the result of a variety of factors, both internal and external to an ODL organization for example, the levels of skills and expertise of staff, the amount of resources available, weak or strong leadership, efficiency of its administrative systems, or the communications infrastructure in a country. An

aspect receiving growing attention is how ODL institutions,whatever their structure, context or circumstances, manage their own quality. All institutions providing ODL will have some existing systems andprocedures for ensuring thequality of what they do. Most are concerned to achieve thehighest possible quality theycan-at least to the threshold of equivalence with conventional provision and preferably surpassing it. But not all have addressed the management of quality within their organizationsin a systematic way as much as they need to. Somecontinuing failuresof quality are avoidable. Procedures for ensuring quality can be ad hoc, piecemeal, unsystematic, too reliant on individual discretion, and standards of practice can be unnecessarily inconsistent and variable. In some cases, an institution's claims to quality fall to match the performance observed or experienced by those inside and outside of it (learners, tutors, course developers, dispatch clerks, sponsors, professional bodies and policy-makers).

So how can an institution providing ODL manage its own quality effectively? How can it improve the quality of the ODL it offers? These are large and difficult questions. This paper does not provide easy answers to them but seeks to examine some aspects of managing quality in general and of quality assurance in particular.

2.1 How can Quality be Managed

The adoption of 'quality' as an organizing principle for ODL systems and institutions seems to offer considerable potential for mobilizing people and resources. It enables the various policy and procedural strands relating to the management of quality to be brought together at an institution-wide level, within a structured framework and in a systematic way. It presents a guiding, value ('quality') which few would dispute. How easily does this principle translate into practice? How can it be achieved?

2.2 Defining Quality in an Institutional Context

To begin with, notions of quality in ODL will differ. It means different things to different stakeholders (course coordinators, students, media producers, local tutors) and also stems from their varying conceptions of quality:

This is not a different perspective on thesame hing, but different perspectives on different things with the same label.

Quality is not value-free. It is social and political construct, not a predetermined or static entity, and is therefore open to continual re-

examination and re-interpretation. Wide debate is needed to develop a shared discourse and language about it as a precursor toadoptingspecific approaches through this willalsohighlight conflicting ideologies. Definitions arrived at need to link the acceptable generalities to more uncomfortable, concrete interpretations of quality. So any institutional plan has to be responsive to the diverse legitimate views across the system as well as forming a clear strategy for action-no easy task. However, it is clear from other fields of activity that institution-wide action is needed at a strategic level if lasting and significant improvements in quality are to be achieved.

2.3 Aspects of quality

'Quality' in ODL is most often judged in terms of the learning materials, whatever the medium. These are the pivot on which the whole learning enterprise turns. However, a course is more than just the materials; it is also the totality of experience of the learner. Since the purpose of an ODL provider is to create the conditions for learning, its success depends on how well the course production, delivery andstudent systems function, and how well they all integrate in operational terms. Excellent materials are useless if not delivered to students; poor materials have limited value even if delivered on time. Underpinning the creation of products and provision of services are processes and operations which are not very visible unless they fail. They get less attention than they deserve and are a key area for attention in improving quality in ODL.

A framework for managing quality in ODL has therefore to accommodate all aspects of it, for example:

- Products: the learning materials and courses, media materials, the output (e.g. number of graduates, assessment outcomes such as examination pass rates, performance of competencies or practical skills);
- Services: registration and advisory services, tutoring, and counselling, feedback and guidance on learning (assignments), support for progress as a learner, career advice, provision and management of study centres;
- Processes that support both of the above: delivery systems, record keeping, scheduling, warehousing and stock control, quality assurance procedures;
- General philosophy: policy and mission statements, ethos and culture of the organisation, mottos (such as 'Nothing but the

best' as at IGNOU, or 'Students first'), attitudes of staff and levels ofcommitment, self-images presented.

2.4 Approaches to quality

The approaches used for managing quality in ODL reflect those developed for business and industry, for example,quality control ,quality assurance and total quality management. All are aimed at managing an enterprise in order to achieve a defined standard of performance for activities, whether the notions of quality revolve around conformance to specifications, fitness for stated purposes, or service to fellow-workers as internal clients or students as external ones. Such applications are not always easy to use in educational contexts and are often resisted by academic staff who come from a different culture, but they can offer useful strategies and new ideas for improving quality. In transferring these approaches, care needs to be taken in two respects: firstly, not to adopt them uncritically, and secondly, to find an acceptable balance between their utility and their potential for constriction.

An increasingly used approach to managing quality in education is quality assurance. This is the set of activities or procedures that an organization undertakes to ensure that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or service. Its goal is to create reliable systems by anticipating problems and designing procedures to avoid as many errors and faults as possible. By contrast, quality control operates retrospectively, 'inspecting out' or discarding defective products which fail to conform to a given standard. Quality control and quality assurance, together with the assessment of quality systems (that is, their monitoring, evaluation and audit) overlap. They all have a role in more holistic approaches to managing quality, such as total quality management. While quality assurance focuseson procedures, other approaches emphasize the 'people' aspect of managing quality. Forexample, the 'Investors in People' initiative, adopted by the UK Open University, sees participation in policy and decision-making, and staffdevelopment for all individuals at all levels as a major way of maintaining and improving institutional quality. Both approaches can contribute to the management of quality within the same institution.

2.5 From principle to practice

The adoption of approaches for managing quality should not begin and end with the procedural, the 'how to do it'. A dangerous temptation for an institution is to jump too quickly to a procedural stage before adequately addressing issues of context and value, especially in the face of academic concerns. A necessary starting point is an open examination of how quality comes to be on the

agenda, that is, the institutional, social and political factors at work. This can significantly shape policies and plans for quality in any given setting. Collaborative problem definition is as important as collaborative solutions. It must be openly acknowledged too that some persistent problems are not in fact caused by students (a convenient magnet for attracting blame) but by the institution itself. Critical debate is essential if more than mechanistic outcomes are to result and it is itself a vehicle for change and improvement. Without it the ownership of change needed to sustain continuing action is unlikely to develop. It also helps keep attention on the educational goals. Key questions are:

- what goals and standards of quality are we seeking to achieve as an institution? what are our guiding values and principles?
- what do departments, sections and work groups need to do to align themselves with these goals?
- what procedures do we need to have in place?
- what criteria will we use to judge our achievements in quality?
- what evidence will we need to demonstrate our achievements?
- what mechanisms do we have foridentifying and correcting poor quality?
- who will be responsible?
- what do we need to do in order to operate a cycle of continuous improvement?

At the very least, this kind of debate raises awareness about quality issues across an organization and improves communication and understanding about other people's work. It may also lead to the development of a more systematic approach to the management of quality, such as quality assurance. How can this help ensure quality in ODL?

2.6 Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is an approach to managing quality which focuses on the management of processes. It aims to apply agreed procedures to them to achieve defined standards, as a matter of routine. The purpose of quality assurance is to ensure consistency of services and products, and reliability in their delivery and quality (a reduction of variability and unpredictability). It aims to make processes and procedures transparent to the people using them (reducing uncertainty in staff), and to avoid errors as a consequence. It can facilitate the three things identified by Daniel as essential for managing distance education: communication, coordination and careful attention to detail. It does not guaranteethe value or worth of a product or service (different kinds of action and judgement are needed to achieve that), only the consistency and reliability of theprocesses which

produce them (a point often misunderstood). Some existing practices in ODL can bedescribed asquality assurance even if not called that, for example, the use of externalassessors in course development, the re-drafting and peer-review of course units in production. So an initial task in developing a quality assurance system is to map and review the quality assurance practices already in place. However, if they are to be more than mechanistic, procedures need to be linked to the aims and purposes for undertaking them and to their roles in achieving an organization's educational goals, chief of which will be enabling learners to learn. Quality assurance procedures need to be developed in a way that leaves scope for individual initiative and professional judgement while still achieving a baseline of consistency in standards of practice.

Quality assurance focuses on operational processes and systems in the following way:

- you set standards for a product or service (e.g., turnaround times for students' assignment work, the provision of accurate, or consistent and timely course-choice information to all students);
- you organize the development of a product or provision of a service so that the stated standards are consistently met;
- you develop, as a consequence, reliable and consistent procedures for essential activities.

It appears easily straightforward; it can prove surprisingly difficult to implement, not least because an apparently simple problem in ODL can be complex to untangle. It can also involve a large shift in organizational culture. However, this is not an argument for abandoning the use of quality assurance procedures. Their value is best demonstrated by illustrations of their absence.

3. Conclusion

This paper has proposed 'quality' as an organizing principle for ODL systems and has suggested ways in which this might translate into institutional practice.

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