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Quality Assurance and Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education

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Abstract

The success of open Distance learning(ODL)institutions has contributed to increased credibility and acceptance of distance learning systems as an effective mode of teaching and learning. Today there are 12 open universities in India,each contributing distinctly to the open and distance learning systems in the country.This genre of education has made significant contributions to human resource development.At least 40 percent of incremental student's population at post secondary level of the total of about 0.5 million students per year,prefer to study through distance mode.They opt for different types and levels of degree or diploma programmes that are offered by the open Distance Learning Institutions.This paper focuses mainly on the QualityAssurance and Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education

Keywords: Distance learning, institutions, education, development, programmes

Introduction

Open and Distance Learning is a way of learning that focus on releasing learners from constraints of time and place whilst offering flexible learning opportunities. For a lot of married and working adults, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a way of combining work and family responsibilities with educational opportunities.Distance education has been defined as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner. Open learning, in turn, is an organized educational activity based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimized in terms either of access, or of time and place, pace, method of study or any combination of these (UNESCO, 2001).

There is no ideal model of distance education, but several are innovative for very different reasons. Philosophies of an approach to distance education differ (Thach & Murphy, 1994). With the advent of educational technology-based resources (CD-ROMs, the Internet, Web pages, etc.), flexible learning methodologies are getting popular to a large mass of the population who otherwise was missing the opportunity of accessing formal education (Kochmer, 1995). Murphy (1995) reported that to reframe the quality of teaching and learning at a distance, four types of interaction are necessary: learner-content, learner-teacher, learner-learner and learner-interface. Interaction also represents the connectivity the students feel with their professor, aides, facilitators and peers (Sherry, 1996). Responsibility for this sort of interaction mainly depends upon the instructor (Barker & Baker, 1995).

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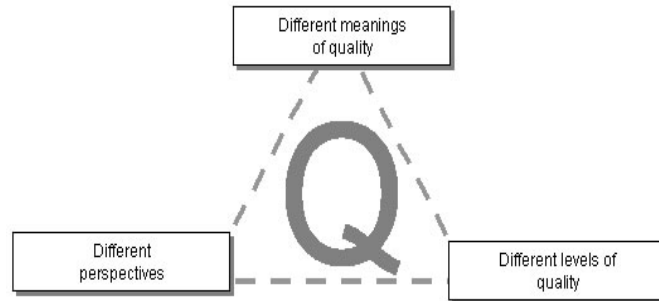
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Quality assurance

Quality assurance is another approach for organisational development that provides philosophy and tools to improve the processes continuously based on planning, implementation and systematic evaluation. Quality assurance typically takes constantly smaller steps to develop processes. In many cases the quality cycle of continuous improvement

is used to plan, implement, evaluate and improve such processes. Strategic planning produces strategic objectives for a better future, while the purpose of a quality assurance system is to safeguard that these objectives can be achieved. This interpretation thus integrates strategic planning into quality assurance in internal processes and information systems.



Multiple Dimensions of the Quality Concept in E-learning

Structure of Quality Framework

The degree or extent of quality assessed will depend on the structure and features of the framework used to assess quality. The structure and features of any framework used for measuring quality will depend on the concept of quality it is designed to measure. Therefore, it is critical to define first the concept of quality from multiple perspectives, at different levels of analysis, and with a view of quality that incorporates multiple measures. The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), in its document Quality On the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education (2000) has organized its guidelines into seven groups: Institutional Support Benchmarks, Course Development Benchmarks, Teaching/Learning Benchmarks, Course Structure Benchmarks, Student Support Benchmarks, Faculty Support Benchmarks, and Evaluation and Assessment Benchmarks.

Common Quality Indicators of Distance Education

- Student–teacher interaction
- Prompt feedback from instructor
- Program evaluation and assessment
- Clear analysis of audience
- Documented technology plan to ensure quality
- Institutional support and institutional resources
- Course structure guidelines
- Active learning techniques
- Respect diverse ways of learning
- Faculty support services
- Strong rationale for distance education that correlates to the mission of the institution
- Appropriate tools and media
- Reliability of technology
- Implementation of guidelines for course development and review of instructional

Materials Today’s discussion of international quality assurance cannot take place without attention to the growth of distance learning, with many countries around the world using distance learning technologies to enlarge their own

course, program, and degree offerings and to import and export education programs and services. Countries such as

India and South Africa are heavy importers of distance learning programs as they seek to expand educational opportunities for their own citizens.

Benchmarking

The three major areas of benchmark are:

- School commitment
- Technology
- Teaching and learning

Each area is broken down into the related units and elements shown as below

Leadership Commitment

Good practice includes ...

- A clear vision for the development of online learning
- A strategic plan to reflect a change to online schooling services
- Adequate resourcing

Management Practice

Good practice includes ...

- Strategies to manage the changes and risks associated with moving from an embedded culture of using HF radio to teaching and learning in an online environment innovation
- A strategic approach to the professional development of all staff involved.

Evaluation

Good practice includes ...

- Strategies to review and enhance the quality of teaching in a “live” virtual classroom
- A systematic process for gathering and analysing staff, supervisor and student feedback
- A plan to measure longer-term outcomes and cost-effectiveness Technology

Good practice includes ...

- Adequate measures to maintain the reliability of the hardware being used.
- Easy access to technical support for staff, supervisors and students.
- Alternative options when technology fails.

Student Support

Good practice includes ...

- Training to assist supervisors and students to use the “live” virtual classroom
- Tracking systems to monitor student activities.

Teacher

Good practice includes ...

- Understanding the differences between “live” online and teaching with HF radio
- Accommodating learners with a range of learning needs, styles and contexts
- Supporting and mentoring new and less experienced teachers
- Maintaining innovative practice through knowledge of current research and Trends

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT BENCHMARKS

- A documented technology plan that includes electronic security measures (i.e., password protection, encryption, back-up systems) is in place and operational to ensure both quality standards and the integrity and validity of information.
- The reliability of the technology delivery system is as failsafe as possible.
- A centralized system provides support for building and maintaining the distance education infrastructure.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT BENCHMARKS

- Guidelines regarding minimum standards are used for course development, design, and delivery, while learning outcomes not the availability of existing technology determine the technology being used to deliver course content.
- Instructional materials are reviewed periodically to ensure they meet program standards.
- Courses are designed to require students to engage themselves in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as part of their course and program requirements.

TEACHING/LEARNING BENCHMARKS

- Student interaction with faculty and other students is an essential characteristic and is facilitated through a variety of ways, including voice-mail and/or e-mail.
- Feedback to student assignments and questions is constructive and provided in a timely manner.
- Students are instructed in the proper methods of effective research, including assessment of the validity of resources

COURSE STRUCTURE BENCHMARKS

- Before starting an online program, students are advised about the program to determine (1) if they possess the self-motivation and commitment to learn at a distance and (2) if they have access to the minimal technology required by the course design.
- Students are provided with supplemental course information that outlines course objectives, concepts, and ideas, and learning outcomes for each course are summarized in a clearly written, straightforward statement.
- Students have access to sufficient library resources that may include a “virtual library” accessible through the World Wide Web.
- Faculty and students agree upon expectations regarding times for student assignment completion and faculty response.

STUDENT SUPPORT BENCHMARKS

- Students receive information about programs, including admission requirements, tuition and fees, books and supplies, technical and proctoring requirements, and student support services.
- Students are provided with hands-on training and information to aid them in securing material through electronic databases, interlibrary loans, government archives, news services, and other sources.
- Throughout the duration of the course/program, students have access to technical assistance, including detailed instructions regarding the electronic media used, practice sessions prior to the beginning of the course, and convenient access to technical support staff.
- Questions directed to student service personnel are answered accurately and quickly, with a structured system in place to address student complaints.

CHAPTER / SECTION NAME

FACULTY SUPPORT BENCHMARKS

- Technical assistance in course development is available to faculty, who are encouraged to use it.
- Faculty members are assisted in the transition from classroom teaching to online instruction and are assessed during the process.
- Instructor training and assistance, including peer mentoring, continues through the progression of the online course.
- Faculty members are provided with written resources to deal with issues arising from student use of electronically-accessed data.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT BENCHMARKS

- The program’s educational effectiveness and teaching/learning process is assessed through an evaluation process that uses several methods and applies specific standards.
- Data on enrollment, costs, and successful/innovative uses of technology are used to evaluate program effectiveness.
- Intended learning outcomes are reviewed regularly to ensure clarity, utility, and appropriateness.

Suggestions:

1. Access and equity, given the prevailing imbalances between regions and genders in terms of access to educational opportunity
2. Effective preparation of students for life, citizenship and the world of work
3. Development of training that is responsive and relevant to the needs of economic development
4. Improvement and maintenance of quality in the system of education
5. Enhancement of the performance and status of teaching as a profession
6. Effective management of the system of education
7. Cost-effective financing of education with emphasis on cost sharing
8. Use some on-line activities to go with the televised instruction.
9. There should be an on-site facilitator at each remote site who can help the students and instructor with technical problems and aide with other aspects of the course.
10. There should be phone-in office hours for students to contact the instructor with questions and concerns.
11. The instructor should visit the remote sites during the course and meet individually with students.
12. The Ministry of Education should hire full-time tutors to visit and assist teachers at their bases.
13. Seminars and workshops should be organized to familiarize tutors with appropriate strategies for assisting adult learners.
14. The duration of residential sessions as well as the number of contact hours between tutors and teachers should be increased to accommodate learners' needs.
15. The Ministry of Education should provide resources for practical subjects, such as art, music, and computer education, so teachers can gain practical experience.
16. Alternative modes of instructional delivery should be explored, such as Internet, telecommunication, videoconferencing, web conferencing, CD-ROM, audiocassette, and e-mail, instead of relying entirely on print media for course materials.
17. Customer evaluation of the program should be conducted on a regular basis.

Conclusion

Due to the recent development of information technology, educational courses using a variety of media are being delivered to students in diversified locations to serve the educational needs of the fast-growing populations. Developments in technology allow distance education programs to provide specialized courses to students in remote geographic areas, with increasing interactivity between student and educator. Although the ways in which distance education is implemented differ remarkably from country to country, most distance learning programs rely on technologies that are either already in place or being replicated for their cost effectiveness. Such programs are particularly beneficial for the many people who are not financially, physically or geographically able to obtain conventional education, especially for participants in the developing countries.

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