

**Perception about Quality Assurance in Distance Education Courses in India
(With special reference to AP)**

***Dr.M.Neeraja Venkat**

****M.Mohanlakshmi**

*Assistant professor, Dept. of Business Administration, Sridevi women's engineering college, Hyderabad.

**Assistant professor, Dept.of Computer Applications, Sri Kalahastiswara Institute of Information & Management Sciences (SKIIMS), Srikalahasti, Tirupati.

Abstract

Distance Education constitutes one of the education fields that are evolving rapidly around the world. So, it is possible to consider it as an important instrument to reach youngsters and adults whom learning needs were not satisfactorily met by the traditional educational system. Distance Education has a great potential in several levels and niches in the society. It has caused a serious concern to the governments and the quality assurance agencies all over the world about the safety of the national systems, legitimacy of the providers, protecting the public from fake providers, quality of the offerings etc. The common element being 'concern for quality'. Many quality assurance agencies have responded to this need and there is considerable dialogue about ensuring quality in distance education. Some think that quality assurance practices for distance education are essentially the same as those used for traditional education. Others argue that distance education tests conventional assumptions and hence the present mechanisms of quality assurance are not adequate to ensure the quality of distance education. This paper highlights the aspects & recent developments of distance education in India .It further sets out to investigate the actor's opinions about quality assurance in distance education courses with special reference to colleges/study centers located in Hyderabad city, Andrapradesh, India.

Key words: Distance education, Quality assurance, new forms of learning, online learning, E- learning.

Introduction

Integration of technology in all forms of education has narrowed down the gap between the on- and off-campus students and has resulted in the use of the more broad-based term 'distributed learning'. Consequently, distance learning is seen as a subset of distributed learning, focusing on students who may be separated in time and space from their peers and the instructor. The new forms and meanings it is acquiring, they include a wide range of provisions that overlap, notably

1. Distance Education programs that are delivered through satellites, computers, correspondence or other technological means across national boundaries
2. Twinning arrangements – in which a degree is gained through study in more than one country as a result of agreements between institutions in different countries to offer joint programs
3. Study abroad semester or credit earning arrangements similar to the twinning programs
4. Branch or satellite campuses set up by an institution in another country to provide its educational programs to foreign students

5. Sale of proprietary materials such as books, courseware or testing, together with associated services
6. Franchised operations – using a third party to give degree – for example a computer company delivering a university computer science degree
7. Partnerships for overseas offerings where institution A in one country enters into a collaborative arrangement with an institution B in another country to provide one or more of its programs to students in B's country
8. Free-standing programs operating outside the country of the provider with or without a combination of the above mentioned arrangements
9. Corporate Universities
10. Virtual Universities-origin gaining momentum due to the development of communication via e-mail and Internet and is still acquiring its meanings, is just one of the different forms of educational provisions made possible by technological developments. The above-mentioned forms are not exhaustive but they give a flavor of some variants.

Recent Developments in Distance Education

The certificates given by the George Washington University and many other universities in USA do not differentiate between the on-campus and off-campus students. Australian Universities of repute have been awarding indistinguishable degrees to on-campus and off campus students for decades (Jones 2000). In UK, Open University Degrees are recognized as representing a rigorous, thorough British education.

In India, there are ten open universities and around sixty-two distance education directorates in traditional universities. Some of them have gone global with overseas study centers. The Virtual University launched by the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS) is a notable development in the use of technology. Here too convergence of traditional and distance education programs are taking place. In the Pondicherry University, which is one of the pioneering institutions to try new innovations like five-year integrated master's programs and Choice-based Credit System, the students have the option to accrue credits through other delivery systems. The Indira Gandhi National Open University, the Community College of the Pondicherry University and the Distance Education Directorate of the Pondicherry University have been approved for such credit earning. While such instances are rare examples to be prided of in developing countries, they have already become an integral part of academic planning in the developed countries (Stella 2002).

In other countries only a minority does, but growth is rapid. The Mexican Virtual University of Monterrey uses teleconferencing and Internet to reach 50,000 students spread all over Latin America. In Thailand and Turkey, the national open universities enroll respectively 41 and 38 percent of the total student population in the home country (Salmi 2000). As the countries improve their communication capabilities and Internet facilities, their attempt for global impact is increasing. The growth of distance learning, the new forms and meanings it is acquiring, its convergence with traditional learning and its global impact create problems for quality assessors. The survey conducted in 1998 by the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC), a national agency of the US that undertakes accreditation of distance education institutions world over, revealed that the following are widely believed within DETC membership: "regulatory interests will increase, as hundreds

of new ‘providers’ create more activity and ‘problems’ for quality assessors” (DETC 1998).

The recent developments in promoting education as a trade in service are also adding pressure to the quality concerns. Commercial interests within higher education have received powerful support in the World Trade Organization (WTO) led negotiations over the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). GATS aim to liberalize trade in services by providing member countries with legally enforceable rights to such trade. Under the GATS, governments are asked to make commitments to two principles: market access (government should not discriminate between incumbents and new entrants to a market); and national treatment (governments should not discriminate between domestic and foreign service providers). By 1998, twenty-one countries had made some commitment to GATS and more and more countries agree to reduce obstacles to international trade in education (Marginson 2002). As this trend continues, higher education would be subject to all the commercial pressures of the market. With the bewildering array of new learning options available in the market, the consumers will expect the quality assurance agencies to provide more information about the quality of those educational services to make intelligent choices. This raises issues of quality assurance controls by the exporting and importing countries and whether quality assurance should discriminate between in-country providers and the transnational providers. In fact, it has caused a serious concern to the governments and the quality assurance agencies all over the world about the safety of the national systems, legitimacy of the new providers, protecting the public from fake providers, quality of the offerings etc. the common element being ‘concern for quality’.

Quality Concern

There is considerable dialogue throughout academia about what constitutes quality in distance education and how to ensure it. There was a time when courses through distance education were criticized on the counts of poor quality, not being on par with the regular courses, lower standards of students who enroll, and being detrimental to the planning of higher education in the country. The supporters of distance education used to argue about improving access, the wide choice of learning opportunities, the possibility of competitive pricing, the advantages of not leaving home to take courses and the healthy competition that could be promoted to offer quality courses. The adequacy of student support services and the missing element of interaction with teachers and other students were also issues of concern. But present scenario of distance learning institutes in India have witnessed a remarkable rise in student enrolment crossing the 10 million mark. While experts in the distance and online education domain agree that this mode is amongst the best to increase the gross enrolment ratio in higher education 30 percent by 2020.

Since the 1990s, quality assurance in distance education has gained serious attention by institutions, stakeholders, and scholars. The main idea of this study was to present the perception of students’, teachers’, tutors’ about quality assurance in Distance education courses in Hyderabad city, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Methodology

The primary data sources are the students, tutors & teachers, directors, course coordinators of the distance education centers located in Hyderabad, Ap. Since the study intended to assess the Perception about Quality Assurance of

professional courses in distance education centers, it is proposed to get the feel of the main Actors involved in education process supposed to answer it.

Secondary data sources included the published literature –books, journals, magazines and websites. The secondary data sources help understand the growth of Distance education in india.The respondents were identified using the convenient sampling method, giving attention to quota sampling. This was in order to obtain a representative sample of respondents.

Data collection for the study was unexpectedly a difficult task than expected. It is expected that the employees will respond freely without reservations, to the questionnaire designed to elicit information on Quality Assurance in Distance Education courses. However, citing several reasons the respondents did not give the expected cooperation. As such different approaches were adopted to obtain data to support the study. They include the following: Questionnaire, Interview, and Web postings

(i) Questionnaire

A questionnaire was adapted from Ana Alice Vilas Boas, Thair Hamtini, Patricia Aparecida Ferreira and Renata Pedretti Morais Furtado. (<http://www.admead.ufla.br/moodle>.) .The perceived feelings about Quality Assurance in Distance Education courses. The relevant items are taken and worded to suit the present inquiry. Pilot test was conducted by distributing the questionnaire to 15 respondents in a distance education centre. Based on the difficulty expressed by them in understanding and responding to the questions, the wording of questionnaire was modified.

In order to evaluate the quality of the distance education courses a different questionnaire with open questions for students, tutors, teachers, poles, directors and course coordinators was prepared .A structured questionnaire of 5 pages with 5 different sections of questions and the students had to tick one of the five graduation possibilities in the scale, which varied from Poor (1) to Excellent (5) covered with a covering note with a request to the respondents to give their views and perspectives. They are assured their responses will be kept strictly confidential and will be used to develop collective profiles was developed.

The first section was related to the regional pole infrastructure, which accessed and evaluated students' points of views about the place where they have direct contact with other students and mainly the presence tutorial; the next section was about the Platform. In this section the student was supposed to evaluate the tools that were available for their interaction to distance tutorial and all of the other facilities they have in it. Didactic Printed Material or the booklets were evaluated in the following sections of topics. This one was very important because most of the students place much more emphasis on the printed material then the other facilities provided by the system mechanisms of interaction between students, teachers and tutors; assessment about textbooks; students' perception about teachers' and tutors' performance; teacher's view about technology, students' involvement, didactic material, structure and management support, and their own involvement within the course.

(ii) Semi-structured interview & web postings

Email & Face to face Discussions were held with about 50 women and 20 men to understand their views.

Sample

Total of 15 universities offering Distance education in Hyderabad, Andrapradesh. About 53 study centers located in Hyderabad took part in the study (2012-2013). But unfortunately many centers had declined permission to conduct the study. In view of this rejection, A self administered survey Questionnaire was given initially to 42 identified respondents through the e-mail and also face-to-face. Using the snow ball technique, these respondents distributed the questionnaires to their acquaintances (With the help of network of friends and references, in all 53 study centers could be involved in the study.) and finally 266 questionnaires were collected. About 144 questionnaires gave usable responses. Among those 62 are working with private sector, 12 are working with government sector, 17 are self employed, 53 are unemployed. The data was systematized and analyzed using Excel spreadsheets and then the information was transferred into table for drawing conclusion.

Findings & Suggestions

Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile of respondents .Majority (66%) of respondents were female .44% of respondents belongs to age group of 25-30. 72% of respondents were married .when Students were asked to evaluate the forms of communication between the actors in this model of education.91% of students responded e-mail as major communication system followed forum & chat with, 54% and 42% respectively, as shown on Table:2.S.No.1 Video conference(88%),Chat(58%) were badly evaluated probably because of the poor quality of internet connection(One among the challenges for Distance education (Mundin K C (2006)) in certain localities where the students undertake the use of instruments

Table: 1 Demographic Profile

S.No.	Variable	Categories	Percent
1	Gender	Male	34
		Female	66
2	Age	Below 25	20
		25-30	44
		30-35	26
		Above 35	10
3	Marital status	Married	72
		Unmarried	28

Views about quality of Distance education are examined .Table: 2 .S.No.2. Shows that majority of tutors considered students' involvement (65%) and teachers' involvement (63%) as most important aspects for maintaining the quality of distance education. This reinforces that, although it is a course that relies on technology (54%), in a decisive manner the human component makes a difference. Respondents pointed textbooks or teaching materials as extremely important and significant in the process of teaching and learning at distance bases. All items questioned were Evaluated with agreement by a least 70% of respondents (Table: 2.S.No. 3).

Table: 2 Aspects considered defining Quality Assurance in distance Education

By comparing respondents view regarding stimulating interaction, each actor in educational process has a different perspective of quality among them (Table2.S.No.4). Teachers & Tutors emphasized the promotion of a learning environment and encouraging students' Participation through motivational elements to stimulate the interaction with the students. where as student's responded major (48%) to practical content. There is clearly a gap between the assessment of tutors and teachers about what is important and the Assessment of students on the same time. The importance of practice that is emphasized by the students does not meet the same expectations in responses of tutors and teachers. On the other hand, there is a convergence of ideas about personalized services to be offered for different students. In this case, all the actors involved in the teaching and learning process do not emphasize this topic.

Table 2.S.No.5, we may see that tutors & Teachers highlighted the absence of participation and involvement of the students as the most important difficulty in interacting with students following lack of face reaction of the students, with 47% & 29% of responses. Teachers pointed out lack of commitment of the tutors and absence of their participation as the major difficulties encountered in the interaction with them in order to warrant the quality of the educational process. Time management was considered meager difficulty in interaction.

Table 2.S.No.6 state that students and tutors have the same points of views about the limiters of quality on distance education. On this specific case, the team working with distance education should address these kinds of limiters during the definition of the pedagogical project to delimitate activities ensuring that different actors involved in the operacionalization of the course work together, as pointed out by Rezende F A. (2006) . Teachers, tutors and course coordinators have to work on participatory and integrative bases to decrease evasion during the courses.

According to the perspective of teachers, commitment of students and interaction of involved actors are the most limiting factors for distance education as shown on Table: 2.S.No.6. following these two limiters comes the lack of habit of working with interactivity as another important condition to improve quality in this educational process. From the above responses (Table: 2.S.No.6.)We can say that all the actors involved in the education process have almost the same perception about limiters in this modality of education. It helps to reinforce one of the challenges for improving quality of Distance Education presented by different authors. One of them states that "interaction among students, teachers, and other

actors involved in the learning process should be covered by trust, respect, freedom for stimulating the coming up of \weaknesses and strengths.” Rezende F A. (2006).

Students’ points of views about deficiencies of distance education courses in relation to percentile education courses have almost same pattern of responses to teaches views Table:3. Shows that communication between the parts involved in distance education courses are not as good as communication between parts involved in percentile courses (39%, 29% respectively). Around 25% & 24% of the student, teacher respondents informed that impersonality that happens on distance course & lack of stakeholder involvement as another Deficiency on distance education courses.

Table: 3 perceptions on about the deficiencies in relation to percentile courses

S.No	Aspect	Description	Percentage	
			S	T
1	perception about the deficiencies in relation to percentile courses	Impersonality	25	28
		Attachment to percentile paradigm	11	20
		Lack of stakeholder involvement	25	24
		Communication among the actors involved in the process	39	29

*S-Student, T-Teacher, Tu-Tutor

From table 3 we can say that their points of views are also similar. For this reason, one may state that information technology is relevant to improve the quality of distance education courses. It is necessary setting an appropriated virtual learning environment where all the activities are well connected and interrelated in an invisible and dynamic net, allowing the development of knowledge construction process.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Distance Education is showing a significant growth in the last few years in India and more institutions are getting enrolled in this kind of education. This new educational paradigm is meeting students' expectations because they may study and work at the same, and they do not need to spend money and time to move from home to school every day. This saved time can be allocated for reading, exchanging ideas and information with other students, tutors and teachers by the internet or a free phone line.

The results provided a useful amount of information to improve the quality of the course, including improvements on communication tools, printed material, and even the learning Evaluating system and the facilities of the system used to implement the course. It is also recommended that new researches should be carried addressing the Accreditation in public and private institutions in order to evaluate the appropriateness of the model and the difficulties faced by the institutions in order to attend quality standard desired for distance education.

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