Reflections on Quality Assurance in Open Distance Learning

Workshop on Performance Indicators for Quality Assurance in Distance Higher Education, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 14-16 August 2007

Reflections on Quality Assurance in Open Distance Learning by Professor Mohan B. Menon, Commonwealth of Learning

Introduction

Chair person, ladies and gentlemen. Let me at the outset express my happiness in being associated with this Workshop on Performance Indicators for Higher Education and bring greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning. COL has been facilitating the use of open distance learning in the Commonwealth developing countries during the last two decades and its mandate has been using ODL and technology for increasing access to education and training in an equitable and quality assured manner. It has been able to develop capacity in several institutions of higher education in the Commonwealth for developing and delivering ODL with the required emphasis on quality assurance. Its mandate in this aspect is well reflected in the fact that Quality Assurance is one of the five initiatives of the Education Sector in the ongoing Three-Year Plan of the organisation. All initiatives of the education sector are planned and implemented with the expected impact on policy formulation, system development and strengthening and developing models and materials in ODL application, and forging partnerships and networks among countries, institutions and personnel. There is now increased emphasis by member countries in assuring quality as they strive to broaden access and equity. COL has been helping them to formulate policies for quality assurance, building capacity among institutions in developing and using quality frameworks and indicators especially in areas of teacher education, alternative schooling and higher education.

Quality is a characteristic of the products and services an organisation offers. Quality in a higher education programme would thus mean quality of graduates it produces and quality of learning processes it provides for. Hence it is important to have the quality indicators related to the products and processes involved in higher education clearly formulated. Quality assurance (QA) is a process directed toward achieving that characteristic. It is the set of activities that an organisation undertakes to ensure that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or service. Quality Assurance involves proactive measures taken to avoid faults while quality control (QC) involves reactive measures taken to remove faults and assessment of quality systems includes the monitoring, evaluation, and audit of...
procedures. A total quality management - internal and external will be a combined mechanism of quality assurance, quality control and continuous monitoring and evaluation (M&E) (Menon, 2004).

Any education programme irrespective of the mode would require a total quality management system involving quality assurance, quality control and continuous monitoring and evaluation. Quality indicators related to the products and processes are to be clearly defined and formulated for a TQM to be successful. There would be a set of QIs common across modes of higher education (face-to-face or ODL) while some QIs could be specific to each mode.

There have been several perspectives regarding the components to be considered for quality assurance in higher education by ODL. While learning and teaching activities are core to any educational experience, indicators of quality in professional higher education tend to focus attention on organizational and administrative processes and the mode related learning components such as course materials and learner support. For example the focus of quality assurance in teacher education, in both open and distance learning settings, and in conventional systems, is more on organisational policies and practices and infrastructure, very few of these focus attention on the learning and teaching experiences. Naidu (2004) emphasizing this point says that 'at times when there is some attention being paid to learning and teaching, the emphasis is on the quality of the teachers, their training, and on the support that they might be receiving. The quality of the learning experience is seen to have been assured with qualified personnel'. This is not essentially true as the presence of required number of qualified teachers need not always ensure effective learning processes in the classroom and also course materials developed with mechanically following a ID template as well as adequate opportunity for learner support need not necessarily lead to effective learning.

Koul (2006) does give some emphasis to the learning design aspect. He identified ten factors grouped into three dimensions to contribute to quality assurance in ODL. The core dimension includes two factors viz. one, course materials, instructional design, teaching-learning including evaluation practices and learner support services and two, learner centricity of support services, and research and capacity building. While there are several factors under the 'systems' and 'resources' (Koul, 2006), the core dimension is critical to the effectiveness of any course. I would like to present a few thoughts here about the quality indicators pertaining to the core dimension.

**Design for Learning**

This is probably one of the critical quality indicators in any academic programme irrespective of levels and modes. Beetham and Sharpe (2007) defines this concept:"Design of Learning is phrase coined for the process or a design for a learning situation, designed for a specific pedagogic intension". The quality of the course depends on the extent to which the design corresponds with the learning processes and activities. The learning processes and activities could be presented using any appropriate combination of inputs using electronic or non-electronic media, the approach always has to be 'Pedagogy before technology' (Beetham and Sharpe, 2007).
Learner-Centredness

Inbuilt opportunities for learner-centred and learner-controlled learning is decisive to the quality of a flexible and open learning system. The extent to which the learning materials and learner support are centred on the learner and controlled by each learner according to one’s own learning needs determines this indicator. The course materials if suitable designed can have the required in-built access devices to provide the intended learner-centredness and the learner support system can be learner-negotiated placing the locus of control on the learner rather than the tutor.

Reflective Practice

This is a crucial indicator for courses intended to develop professional competence in learners. For example, in a management or teacher education programme there should be opportunities for learners to go through four critical processes viz. ‘experiencing’, ‘applying’, ‘reflecting’ and ‘conceptualising’ leading to reflective practice (Kolbe, 1984). While discussing the pedagogical architecture named Collaborative Reflective Practice for the Graduate Certificate Programme in Open and Distance Learning in the University of Southern Queensland, Naidu, et al (1999) refers to the Kolb Learning Cycle (1984) which involves four processes necessary for learning to occur. These are:

- *concrete experiences* (e.g. laboratories, field work, observations, films);
- *reflective observation* (e.g. learning logs, journals, diaries, brainstorming);
- *abstract conceptualisation* (e.g. lectures, papers, analogies); and
- *active experimentation* (e.g. simulations, case studies, home work);

Dialogue in Instruction

There can be three types of dialogue that can happen in a transactional situation. These are dialogue between:

- learner and content;
- learner and instructor; and
- learner and other learners.

While discussing about dialogue in teleconferencing Moore, (1991) feels that with the new form of dialogue (which is dialogue between learner and fellow learners) becoming prominent in distance education there is a need to change our theorisation about distance education.

The possibility of creating various transactional processes (discussed in the earlier section) in the instructional situation will depend on the three dimensions of dialogue that can happen in instruction which in turn is decided by the nature of the communication medium and instructional method adopted.
Conclusion

The four quality indicators highlighted here is core to any higher education course especially those which are aimed at developing professionals in various areas as well as leaders and decision makers in the society. These indicators are critical to any mode of education and are manifested in the learning processes. These processes in different modes could be generated through variety of media and methods. In the ODL mode, the expression of the required processes depends on the 'design of learning' with the appropriate pedagogy adopted for the course, the 'learner-centredness' in the materials as well as the locus of control allowed to the learner in the learner support system and the learner-learner, learner-teacher and learner-materials dialogue possible in the programme.

References


