Quality Control Measures at Institute of Distance Education, University of Swaziland, Swaziland

Professor Satish Rastogi, Coordinator (Research & Evaluation), Institute of Distance Education, University of Swaziland, Private Bag 04, Matsapha, Swaziland; Email srastogi@uniswa.sz

Abstract

Swaziland people have an opportunity to join any one of eight (8) Programmes offered by University of Swaziland through its Institute of Distance Education. There is a debate in Swaziland regarding product quality between Graduates of conventional mode and of distance education mode. In fact, the term quality is an adjective and not a noun, as it defines status of some object, incident, action, and activity, in comparison with other one. It may be a matter of bridging the gap between ‘Perception’ and ‘Expectation’ for various activities observed after systemic analysis of a Programme. The quality of output (Graduates) depends upon the process which again depends upon input being a combination of 5 M. These are Man, Machine, Money, Material and Method. A capacity building for strengthening these factors at Institute of Distance Education must be organised by the University of Swaziland. Full time and part time man power needs staff development in Tutoring, Research and Extension activities. The Process stage in Distance education system differs from Conventional system because the word of mouth is word of hand. Students need sample assignment, sample project report and a sample Question paper based on Bloom’s Taxonomy. The Orientation material given to students must cover all these activities. Distance Education mode may be used for staff development among full time and part time academics by providing Literature already developed by IDE entitled “Academic Counselling – A Human Support” and “Educational Technology for Effective Teaching” followed by personal contact sessions on Holidays. Programme Evaluation may help to justify the product quality. It may enlighten about material potential for generating motivation, sustaining Interest in study, and in altering an inferiority complex among distance learners, if any. Necessary financial requirements (Budget) be prepared and submitted to University of Swaziland authorities for funds allocation. The Programme Coordinators in IDE must organise a monthly meeting with concerned teachers to smell their academic and administrative problems and suggest for an amicable solution. Use of Email, Cell Phone, Fax, Landline phone would be beneficial for them. Contact & discussion with past IDE students for same programme on various academic and non-academic issues may also be initiated in such meetings.

Introduction

This is first draft of an action plan for Quality Control Measures at Institute of Distance Education, University of Swaziland. The purpose of presenting this paper is to seek a collective wisdom of other experts being participants from different countries before it is implemented. Basic philosophy behind the system of Distance Education is “Word of Mouth is Word of Hand.” Whole system of Distance education revolves around this philosophy. No doubt, Distance education has very rapidly changed its modes throughout world. In beginning, it was “Correspondence Education” based totally on Print material used to send by post in small units/lessons to students by organisation. The students were supposed to read the same and write assignments given to them. They were sending these assignments to their respective teachers/counsellors/tutors for examinations. Thus, this two way feedback was totally based on postal communication. It was later on supplemented with contact sessions to wash out Queries/ Confusions/Questions which might have come in the mind of learners at the time of learning. Later on, an explosion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has provided a wide variety of Electronic devices which have made this communication more easy, effective and economical too.
The birth of eLearning, use of Mobile Phones, Radio, Television, Social media, Mass Media etc. has become a very common in various countries offering programmes through Distance Education mode. The potential of Distance Education system for imparting Mass education has been witnessed at global level. Now, there is a global discussion to use Distance Education mode for Staff Development in various sectors. Recent conference by Commonwealth of Learning during 2-6 December 2013 at Abuja (Nigeria) had witnessed keynote addresses as well as some research papers about Staff Development using Distance Education mode. But, the society has recognised Distance Education mode as a secondary and alternative to the Conventional system of education. It is thought as a system which is for those who fail to join the Conventional system of education. The reason behind this idea is supported with an argument that the quality of product (students coming out with success) is inferior to that produced by the Conventional system of education. Such ideas have been generated by persons who think learning is an activity which can take place only in a face to face situation in classrooms. In fact, learning takes place when learner mind is ready to receive and retain information easily and use the same in future as and when needed. It needs a learning environment which may be generated by the teacher in classroom, or also, out of classroom, with the help of a Man-Machine combination. Distance education is a Multi-media approach for creating a learning environment. A justified use of Machines by competent persons may create this learning environment to produce a quality product being useful to society for various social requirements. A discussion and implementation of various ‘Quality control measures’ in Distance Education system is essential.

What is Quality?

It is an Adjective and not a Noun. It defines status of some object, incident, action etc. in comparison with other one. Therefore, Quality may be a matter of bridging the gap between ‘Perception’ and ‘Expectation’. Our discussion in this paper would make a systemic analysis of various activities and then examine the perceptions and expectations for various activities.

Systemic analysis of Distance Education System

The basic purpose of this system is to create a learning environment among distant learners mind by using a “Man –Machine” (Mix Media) combination. We know that a quality input will make process as expected and finally produce a desired product being competent to accept various roles as needed for various social activities.

INPUT → PROCESS → OUTPUT

We may go for a systemic Analysis of all these three stages and see how a gap between perception and expectation is bridged to bring quality.

According to Science of Management every Input covers 5 M being Man, Machine, Money, Material and, Method. It is expected that in a distance education scenario, these 5 M should be in perfect coordination with each other for an expected process and finally a competent product capable to work successfully in society. Man means a group of persons working full time as well as part time at IDE, UNISWA. They are from different fields being experts in Media, Technology, Material development, Making Multiple copies of learning material, Academic support, Student support, doing research on various systemic problems, as well as providing Human support to distance learners during Contact programmes. Machine covers the learning material and various teaching aids(Electronic and non-electronic).Money is needed everywhere .It may be in terms of Fixed Cost as well as Variable Cost too. Material is our students they come as raw material and go as product after programme
completion. These students may be considered as Customer of Education and customer satisfaction is a mark of Quality measure. In this case continuous feedback from these customers is essential to meet their queries/confusions/questions etc. The last but not least M is Method. It covers art of communication in a Distance Education scenario. Use of different available Media for communication with students is an Expectation. Feedback and Interactivity with students by using various media will make communication more effective. Peer Group interaction among students for same stage of every programme is an expectation for immediate feedback to meet the confusions/queries/questions among them. It will motivate them to involve in study and finally control dropout rate among them. Interaction is mother source of learning.

Giving strength to these 5M is “Capacity Building”. We have to work for the same to meet the expectation level. Following chart explains manpower role in Distance education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Attitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring/Material Development (Print, Electronic, &amp; eLearning)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on systemic Issues/problems.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in Extension work like Workshops/Seminars/Symposiums/ Conferences etc. within UNISWA and outside also.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We have to analyse Expectations as well as Perceptions at these 9(Nine) stages and organise Orientation programmes to enrich the Manpower to bridge the gaps (if any). All full time as well as part time academics have to interact among themselves about their problems in meeting learners’ queries/confusions/questions. Seminars/Workshops/ Symposiums/ Conferences etc. by inviting these academics, may try to find an amicable solution for the same. This is an observation that part time academics are delivering lectures on a topic of their own choice in the name of providing human support to distance learners. These academics are expected to diagnose learners Confusions/Queries/Questions etc. and make their deliberation in such a way that all these Confusions/Queries/Questions etc. are washed out. IDE has to short out academic needs of part time staff from time to time, and, accordingly organise Orientation programmes for them. Main purpose of all these is to tone and tune learner mind for an optimum learning in a Distance Education scenario.

The Process stage in Distance education system is different than that in conventional system. It is because the Word of Mouth is Word of Hand. The IDE Academics (part time & full time) and students have to communicate with each other in writing. UNISWA has allotted every student and every academic a unique Email address which may be used to communicate with each other as well as with a group at a time. Hardly anyone is using this free available facility for academic communication. The students are given ‘Assignments’ for writing answers. It involves them in learning through drill and practice. But, it has been observed that they copy from each other and submit for assessment. In fact, they receive same Question and so they copy with each other. They may not copy from each other, if they are given different Question for the same Lesson/Unit. This is possible if the teachers are oriented about Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive Domain. Also, Projects are allotted, but, chances for teacher guidance are little in comparison with that in conventional system. Some good Dissertations as a model/sample be made available to the Distance learners so that they may understand the trends and styles for their own Dissertation. Sunday and Saturday are two week days when they may meet their teachers during contact programmes. But, presence in Church is a common excuse for not attending contact sessions. The students should exploit all possibilities of
getting optimum teacher support to meet their questions/queries/confusions which might have come during learning alone by remaining at a distance. Learner Association for the same stage of every programme is an expectation. It would help them to meet or talk on phone or Email each other during free time. Interaction among learners may meet lot of confusions/queries/questions. The students which complete programme successfully are the Product of IDE at UNISWA. It is expected that the quality of this product should not be inferior to the product of conventional system. Programme Evaluation by a Third party and an opinion survey from the employers of these past students is desired. “Thus, ‘program evaluation’ has come into being as both a formal educational activity and as a frequently mandated instrument of public policy. Many private educational enterprises have similarly turned to program evaluation as a means of answering questions about the benefits received from monies expended on various educational programs.”

To define Programme evaluation, it is necessary to define its component parts. In an educational context, a programme can be thought of as any educational enterprise aimed at the solution of a particular educational problem or the improvement of some aspect of an educational system. Such a Programme would typically be sponsored by public or private funds, possess specified goals, and exhibit some structure for managing the procedures, materials, facilities, and/or personnel involved in the programme. Evaluation can be defined most simply as the determination of the worth of a thing. In its simplest form, therefore, programme evaluation consists of those activities undertaken to judge the worth or utility of a programme (or alternative programmes) in improving some specified aspect of an educational system. Examples of programme evaluations might include evaluation of a Teacher Training programme with reference to present information era. A university’s programmes utility for job seeking purpose. A Ministry of Education's staff development programme, etc. Evaluations may be conducted for programmes of any size or scope, ranging from an arithmetic programme in a particular school to an international consortium on metric education. A curriculum evaluation may qualify as a programme evaluation if the curriculum is focused on change improvement, as implied in the previous definition ‘Programme’.

**Purposes of Programme Evaluation**

Evaluation experts mostly agree that programme evaluation can play either a formative purpose or a summative purpose. Mainly there may be following six major purposes (which are necessarily mutually exclusive). They are:

(a) To contribute to decisions about programme installation.;

(b) To contribute to decisions about program continuation, expansion, or certification.;

(c) To contribute to decisions about programme modifications.;

(d) To obtain evidence to rally support for a Programme.

(e) To obtain evidence to rally opposition to a Programme.

(f) To contribute to the understanding of the basic Psychological, Social, and other processes.

**Alternative Approaches to Programme Evaluation**

There may be many approaches to Programme evaluation. But, for convenience these conceptual frameworks for evaluation are clustered into five categories, although some of the frameworks are sufficiently multifaceted that they could appear in more than one category. Most of these ‘models’ have focused broadly on programme evaluation, although some are focused more specifically on
curriculum evaluation. It should be noted that these frameworks deal with methods, not techniques. These may be as below.

1) Performance- Objectives Congruence Approach.

This approach was suggested by ‘Tyler’ an Educationist being expert in the field of Measurement & Evaluation. He advocated for conducting Pre-test and Post-Test to know Performance discrepancies between desired (Programme objectives) and developed (Performance). This method helps to know the extent to which the Programme Objectives had been achieved. But, this is practically difficult to adopt in Distance Education scenario. The reason is that normally we do not conduct Pre –test before a distance learner takes admission. Another reason is that the learners are variety in nature and they belong to different strata or groups. It is because of openness and flexibility in admissions, a heterogeneous group prevails in every programme launched through distance education mode.

2) Decision – Management Approach.

The science of management has given birth to this approach. ‘Stufflebeam’ was an expert in Management and had developed this approach. According to this approach every programme when launched, has three stages as Input – Process – Output. The Input covers five ‘M’ known as Man, Machine, Money, Material, and Method. These may be further divided into a fine distribution. Similarly the Process and Output can also be divided into a large number of fine activities. A detailed Questionnaire cum Opinionnaire may be developed and sent to students for their reactions to various activities. The duly filled in forms may be analysed to draw some item wise conclusions.

3) Judgment– Oriented Approach.

This method was developed by ‘Screven’ who advocated for expert’s Judgment about Programme. This is a goal free evaluation by actual outcomes of the Programme. Those, who have a long experience of running any programme, may be invited to examine various activities and their relevance to target group learners through distance education mode. This is also termed as third party judgment like auditors checking the balance sheets for money received and expenditures made by an organisation. The recommendations made by these experts are examined by the organization and implemented too if practically relevant.

4) Adversarial Approach

This is a planned effort to generate opposite points of view within the overall evaluation. ‘Woodworth’ suggested that a use of divergent evaluation practices is essential for reaching to a conclusion. Like a court hearing, this method covers one team putting positive points of the programme while the other team puts negative points for the same. It may reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the Programme. These two adverse views expressed by two parties give us a chance to conclude and reach a decision about the programme.

5) Pluralist- Intuitionist Approach.

‘Mac Donald’ suggested this method and advocated for collection of different values and needs of all individuals and groups served by the Programme. It will help the University to meet needs of divergent groups in a better way. There may be some persons who demand contact programme on Sundays as they are free from their office routine work. While, there may be some persons resisting this idea as they want to go church on Sunday. Therefore, the views expressed by a large number of course users should be analysed to reach a best suitable decision to implement the Programme.

All these methods have their own merits and demerits. These methods are not mutually exclusive, but, are mutually inclusive. We may use a blend of two or more methods as per needs arise. For this Programme Evaluation, the second method being Decision – Management approach by Stufflebeam was followed because, this covers a systemic analysis of various activities at the Input,
Process and Output stages. And then, based on this analysis was a Questionnaire/Opinionnaire sent to past students. The responses received were analysed to draw a final conclusion. The Distance Education is mode which imparts a need based mass education. Mass production of skilled manpower for various social needs, and, make a mass production of skilled manpower for various social needs. This man power, being large in quantity, is supposed to be of good quality being usable by society for various purposes. The product of distance education system are students. This product quality depends upon the process which again depends upon input. This input covers five M being Man, Machine, Money, Material, and, Method. Programme Evaluation is the process which helps in deciding the quality at all the three stages, Input, Process and, Output.

It would reveal short comings among our IDE students. There are some psychological needs of every learner. These may be – Motivation, Sustaining Interest in study, and Inferiority complex among students as they have failed to join conventional system and are studying through an inferior system. An interaction, from time to time, with some past (high achiever) IDE students be organised to meet these psychological needs. Programme Evaluation is needed by seeking past students opinion. The student is a customer of education and his opinion would be of much use for making necessary changes to make various activities as learner friendly. The learning material is also IDE product, and so, an opinion survey about this product from the past students being course users is essential for making the same more user friendly.

**Plan of Action**

The quality filters from top to bottom. Therefore, a firm determination to implement various measures is essential among UNISWA authorities. A monitoring committee be formed by IDE with someone as its Coordinator. Following may be a plan of action to bridge the gap between Perception and Expectation for various activities as well as for manpower.

1) Manpower deployed for providing Human Support to students be oriented about their role and responsibilities with Distance learners. A staff development programme may be chalked out for them using distance education mode. Following literature produced by IDE may be used for this purpose.
   a) **Academic Counselling – A Human Support**
   b) **Educational Technology for Effective Teaching**

Institute of Distance Education (IDE) at University of Swaziland (UNISWA) may organise Workshops/Symposiums/Conferences/Seminars for these academics. Full time academics at IDE may work as Resource persons during these activities.

2) Student Orientation must cover their role and responsibilities in Distance education system. For this purpose “Student Handbook” may be redrafted and few topics be added. These may be like- How to study in a Distance education scenario; Skills for writing Assignments; Generating Motivation and Interest for study; Optimum use of various Media like Email, Fax, Phone, Cell, etc. to contact Teachers, IDE Staff and fellow students for an early solution of the academic and non-academic Queries/Confusions/Questions. Sample Assignments and some tips for learner-learner interactions etc. are to be added.

3) Course maintenance of the learning material may be done by seeking the help of experts working either in UNISWA or outside. It will make the learning material more enriched with latest information and with more explanation by adding some Pictures, Charts, examples etc.
ISO 9000 for ODL- An Analysis explains a detailed programme for examining the quality of Distance learning material. A copy of the same is as annexure to this draft.

4) Necessary financial requirements (Budget) be prepared and submitted to UNISWA authorities for allocation.

5) The Programme Coordinators in IDE must organise a monthly meeting with concerned teachers to smell their academic and administrative problems and bring it before IDE staff meeting for an appropriate solution.

6) Students be motivated to form ‘Student Association’ for different stages of every programme. It would help for a peer group interaction among them as and when they feel so. Use of Email, Cell, and Phone etc. may be beneficial for them. A contact with past IDE students for same programme and discussion with them on various academic and non-academic issues may also be initiated in such meetings organised at local level. The students have not to see every time towards IDE for every problem.

7) A strong networking is needed among sister organisations (offering Programmes through Distance Education mode) in Southern African region. It would help each other to exchange views and accept best practices among them.

**Outcome of this Scheme**

The system of Distance Education has emerged for Mass Education. A large number of students can study at their own rate, pace, and, time. The success of this system depends upon the efforts of a ‘Man-Machine’ combination. It is essential to follow above cited plan of action to orient the manpower for optimum use of machines and fulfil the desired role and responsibilities. It will bridge a gap between Perception and Expectation from manpower working with IDE as full time as well as part time academics. Students who have joined as raw material would become as competent product when compared to Conventional learners.

The system of distance education is a ray of hope for mass education among people of Swaziland. It would attract a large number of students for different programmes in future, and, may fulfil the country’s requirements of competent manpower. This is possible only when the system imparts a quality education which is not inferior to that which is offered by Conventional system. It would not only bring quality in present programmes, but also, would help in launching new programmes in near future by the Institute of Distance Education. The University of Swaziland has accepted to adopt and adapt as well as develop Open Education Resources in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). Further work in this area needs a quality production and its use among Swaziland people. A large group of people need material in OER format in their own Swazi Language for their family health issues. They are farmers who need from time to time material for enhancing product quality. Open Education Resources (OER) developed in local Swazi language will be more effective if quality norms are followed by the course developers called by the Institute of Distance Education being part and parcel of University of Swaziland. Thus, it seems to be an urgent activity if the University of Swaziland has to bring distance education programmes at par with the conventional programmes.

**Bibliography**


