

Quality in Open and Distance Learning Institutes

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ABSTRACT— *Quality of education is the core of education system provided by any institute. Due to pedagogical differences, term quality is different for traditional and distance education providers. Quality education fulfills the learning needs of a learner; it is possible only when education provider is in a position to polish their student to such an extent that they can claim a brilliant output. Assessment procedures adopted by distance learning institutes are not compatible to their particular characteristic of teaching. Besides the differences, Higher education of Pakistan is using same standards to assess the quality of distance learning institutes as of traditional face to face teaching. There are certain standards that must be used to assess the quality of distance education. This descriptive paper discusses those standards that are not compatible with distance learning institutes. It will also identify the gaps in standards that are to be filled to make a comprehensive model of quality standards in distance education. For example, the distant educators need to concentrate on techniques that can help learners to cope with pedagogical differences rather than to judge them on presentation and communication skills.*

Keywords — Distance learning; e-learning; assessment tools in higher education; quality education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality is considered a vital component in academic institutes all over the world. Higher education institutes are of major concern to provide quality education, satisfy all stakeholders, be accountable for providing standard education and be competitive with other higher education institutes. For this a notion “quality assurance” has been introduced, which is although new concept for academics but gaining popularity to ensure competitiveness. There is a considerable literature available to define the concept of quality and its assurance and there exists a wide range of definitions. Quality parameters and their assurance strictly depend upon the type of institute, pedagogical approaches, student’s type, faculty requirements and overall institutional structural requirements.

There is a significant difference between Open Distance Learning (ODL)/Virtual mode of Education (VE) and conventional learning. Open Distance Learning and Virtual Universities are using same conventional assumptions to test the quality, sometimes ignoring the fresh questions with the advent of new technology. Pedagogical differences and institutional structural requirements make it unfeasible to map the quality assurance techniques of conventional learning on ODL and VE.

This paper is mainly concerned with the identification of nonviable practices adopted by ODL and VE to assure quality using conventional assumptions and definitions of quality. This paper, in future, will help in development of new model and framework for quality assurance in ODL and VE separating it from conventional mode of learning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Quality in higher education

A comprehensive definition of quality has always been a disagreement among the researchers (Stella & Gnanam, 2004) and same continues with higher education. There is no widely accepted definition of quality but as we look into the traditional industrial definitions which assume the quality as measurable concept we come to know that quality is basically concerned with the expectations and requirements of customers (Koslowski III, 2006). Quality in business can be mapped in higher education with a little modification in end result. Theorists of Higher Education (HE) view the quality as overarching theory as discussed by Koslowski III (2006), that quality in Higher Education (HE) can be viewed as a manner of thinking rather than a measurable end result. Definition of quality in HE has covered a long distance by traveling through different interpretations starting from resource based view to performance based view (Seymour, 1992). Performance based view which is usually termed as value added view (Astin, 1993) assumes that quality is

determined by its output, teaching and measuring student competencies that should be gained through a set of educational techniques (Bennett & Green, 2001).

Koslowski III (2006) has discussed the different definitions of quality in higher education from different perspectives (stakeholders) including students, politics, market, faculty and administration. Interestingly, quality definitions are different for all stakeholders from their perspectives, for example, students define quality through his/her experience and expectations (Koslowski III, 2006), political aspect is concerned with accreditations and public funding (efficient and low usage of finances), market perspective assumes quality education which is highly competitive (Bonvillian & Dennis, 1995), quality in faculty is concerned with individual reputation, number of research publications produced, and number of courses taught (Koslowski III, 2006), administrative aspect addresses the quality as successful coordination and execution of goals that are conflicting with obligations of institutes.

2.2 Quality in distance education

The definitions of online and distance education differ in scope and features (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006) but Holmberg (1986) perspective will be used here which states that distance education includes various forms of studies at all level which are not under direct supervision of teacher. Taylor (2001) in his paper has defined different generations of Distance Education (DE) and mentioned online education as sub-category of DE. Many researchers are of view that there is a significant difference between open distance and online learning (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005), but some argue that with the advance technological use we can map distance and open learning on online mode of education (Taylor, 2001). Although, distance education shares many characteristics of traditional classroom learning but one can easily differentiate them on the basis of pedagogical differences (Bennett & Green, 2001; Dabbagh, 2000). The purpose of both type of learning is same i.e. to deliver knowledge but the instructional level and technical use make them different. West (2010) is of view that main difference of Open Distance Learning (ODL) and traditional learning is student's ability to self-learn and they are more autonomous in learning capacity.

On several points, higher education, no matter in which mode {(traditional or Open Distance Learning (ODL)/Online Learning (OL)}, encounters with the question of quality (Van Damme, 2001). There is a considerable dialogue throughout academia about what constitute quality in DE and how to ensure it (Stella & Gnanam, 2004).

This paper is not concerned with the general definition of quality and its assurance in DL, rather is describing the matters that are specifically associated with quality issues and its measurement /assurance in Distance Learning Institutes.

There are different views about the quality of DL and its assurance. Some academicians argue that quality assurance practices are same for both traditional and DL while others are of view that the measurements used in traditional learning to assure quality are not adequate for DL (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). Due to the structural and pedagogical differences that are extended from the attributes required for faculty as well as for students, quality in DL should be assured in a little different ways. Stella and Gnanam (2004) argue that although there is a consensus at broader level that quality in education can be measured on same grounds but small modifications are required for DL.

Summers, Waigandt, and Whittaker (2005) are of view that quality of higher education includes three factors learning tasks, learner characteristics and instructors combined with the mode of delivery. In order to find the differences in quality assurance in DL and traditional learning and required level of modifications, we must know the basic differences between the two learning modes. If we use the system approach of system evaluation used by Rovai (2003), we can distinguish both modes of learning on the basis of three components i.e. input, process and output. Process, here is the instruction technique, which is instructorist (instructor generated knowledge) in case of traditional learning (Dabbagh, 2000) while constructivist (co-construction of knowledge by instructor-student) is used in DL mode (Bennett & Green, 2001; Dabbagh, 2000). The basic difference of "process" i.e. pedagogical technique makes it mandatory to provide "input" and expect "output" differently.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 How the quality is being suffered in distance learning

Pre-requisite for studying in online pedagogics is totally different than studying in a conventional setting. Tools and Techniques used for Teacher-base education are provided to online students who are called learners. They have different needs and requirements as contrast to conventional students. Problem arises when curriculum and way of teaching designed for conventional students are applied on distance learning institute.

Target customers in online teaching is a particular group of people who are self-motivated and mature enough to get the knowledge beyond the boundaries. Faculty support and student support carries more weightage instead of libraries and learning resources, these two traits are quite important for successful distance learning. Technical support is also important for successful operation of tools for distance learning. (Sherry, 2003)

As it has already been discussed in literature review that there is difference of learning process; so for a different process input should also be changed; in the same way we should expect changed output. Asynchronous environment of e-learning creates an environment for substantive critical thinking. Although it lacks gestures, non-verbal clues but all it says in discussions become the written document. That is read and re-read that can help to develop high level thinking skills. (Sherry, 2003).

Here we look quality from different perspectives, as discussed in literature review that stakeholders have unique parameters to define quality.

First of all we take the point of view of an online student that how he perceived quality? For him quality is achieved with easy access of internet which supports him to obtained high grades and up-to-date knowledge in allocated time period. For a constructivist approach, Internet with high bandwidth quality is required for transmitting information from one point to another. For virtual university it is important to carry high speed internet for smooth running of its activities, otherwise all fail.

For sake of quality education a student requires up-to-date knowledge but he is offered repeated lectures (ignore new ideas and current information). Clear, complete and timely information is required for students. Objectives are set as per the availability of the technology rather strategy should be adopted as per the need of the student/program. Technology should be updated as per the key trends.

Among the basic components of learning for a learner here attention is being paid to the last component that is “output”. Expecting high quality presentation skills, good eye contact, confidence from an isolated learner is not rational. During the whole session of online studies student never met teacher and he never learned all these things. So expecting the output like a conventional student is not fair while the input is not like that.

Student learning is a key component of quality; different strategies should be adopted to evaluate the learning of an online student. That should be different than the evaluation techniques adopted for conventional studies. Feedback from students is quite helpful in this regard (Ashlaghi, Zahir, Delavar, & Yari, 2013)

This issue is hot in business studies where we are making students executives. It is responsibility of the institute to build the confidence of the student and to teach body language in order to make him a good manager. Otherwise it is not possible that he would claim himself a brilliant output.

Second most important stakeholder is the teacher, unfortunately for a distance learning course; developer of a course is different than a person who delivers the lecture. So it is chance that objectives of the course are not met in true spirit. Creativity barriers (use of prerecorded and pasted material for replying MDBs) can damage the quality of course. Here teacher should understand the difference of teaching environment and learning environment. Teachers are facilitators in asynchronous learning environment.

Self-grooming is an important attribute of a teacher’s personality. In a DL environment, requirements for a teacher are different. He needs particular training and instruction techniques to meet the expectation of the employer and the students. Technology based assessment is required here. (Phipps, Wellman, & Meisotis, 1998).

Quality of a teacher is suffered in a sense that he is being selected by the evaluation techniques used same as for the conventional teaching. For a constructivist approach the selection criteria of a teacher should be according to the nature of the job of the teacher. So a teacher’ quality is being suffered here when the standards for the hiring are not as per the requirement of the job.

3.2 Criteria of Higher Education Commission to measure Quality

To determine the quality With reference to the Self-Assessment Manual of higher education commission of Pakistan; Self-Assessment criteria and related standards are set to determine the quality of education based on conventional studies. Secondly all those members who have formulated these criteria belong to the conventional studies. There is not a single member in the committee who belong to the distance learning institute. Then, how it is possible? That people who belong to the face to face teaching could set rules for a totally different paradigm, which is distance learning. Quality of the academic program is determined on the following criteria:

As per the 2.7 criteria of assessment-manual “*Oral and written communication skills of the student must be developed and applied in the program*”

It is not possible in an e-learning institute to polish the oral skills of a student. His written expression could be polished. So it is not fair to judge the quality of a student on the parameter of oral skills who belongs to the distance learning or e-learning institute.

So it would be better to consider the written expression of student who belong to e-learning or distance learning institute.

In distance learning institute especially in e-learning institute, to teach science subject for whom practical work is required is difficult yet. Therefore there is no laboratory. Therefore, clause related to laboratories should be included with some modifications in the criteria to measure quality of an e-learning institute.

For faculty credential, selection and training (a conventional teacher is a person who is expected to deliver the knowledge, to transfer the knowledge through his communication skills, while in distance learning, teacher is a facilitator, in a sense that students to whom he is going to teach are mature learners, they are already in quest of knowledge. In this case he must have such abilities that he can quench the thirst of knowledge of the student. Here a teacher should be equipped with certain instruments and software and abilities to transfer the knowledge through technology. (Phipps et al., 1998)

So the criteria to select the teacher should be totally different here in virtual university. But, same style of hiring has been adopted here as of conventional universities. Same types of interviews are conducted before panel of 8-14 members. These people judge their academic abilities, communication style. But basic element that is required in distance teaching which is *“to convey the message while sitting behind the screen”* is ignored.

As per Standard 6-1 “There must be enough full time faculties who are committed to the program to provide adequate coverage of the program areas/courses with continuity and stability. The interests and qualifications of all faculty members must be sufficient to teach all courses, plan, modify and update courses and curricula. All faculty members must have a level of competence that would normally be obtained through graduate work in the discipline. The majority of the faculty must hold a Ph.D. in the discipline.”

E-learning institutes used pre-recorded lectures to deliver knowledge to the students. Plan of study is being designed once that is used repeatedly. Teacher delivering the lecture is different than the person who handles the course. Person who handles the course can update his knowledge as per the current requirement but the lecture once recorded is not changed.

This standard cannot measure the level of knowledge of the person who handles the course so it should be updated accordingly. All changes made in the course and new material is being added by the person who directly deals with the student (Instructor). So, quality should be ensured by measuring the level of knowledge of the instructor as well.

As per Standard 7-3: “Class-rooms must be adequately equipped and offices must be adequate to enable faculty to carry out their responsibilities”.

Virtual institute do not need class rooms particularly. Some students are home based pupils awhile others opt to join private campuses.

So, it cannot be set as the criteria of quality for a distance learning institute when it does not deal actually in such activity where students come and get education.

As per Standard 8-3, “Financial resources must be provided to acquire and maintain Library holdings, laboratories and computing facilities”.

A virtual institute holds digital library, so there is no question of holding space for a digital environment. As per the question of laboratory; in Pakistan still e-learning institute are not in a position to start science subjects like biology, chemistry that require particular laboratories for experiments. So in quality measurement of a distance teaching institute this clause cannot be met.

4. CONCLUSION

Pedagogical differences in face to face and distance learning lead to establish different standards in quality of education. Evaluation of distance learning students must be done keeping in view the particular traits of learners. Distance learning students lack oral presentation skills and impressive body language. So the standards to measure the performance of distance learning students should not be based only on the communication skills of the students. Although written expression can be judged. For improving body language strong interaction with teacher must be developed. Criteria to measure the competence of the teacher should be adjusted. There should be clear cut direction to define the criteria to evaluate the lecturer who is responsible to record the lecture and the instructor who is responsible to manage the day to day queries of the students. Hence the standard should be defined separately to measure the capabilities of the lecturers and the instructors. An educational institute is considered to spread quality education while it is being accredited. For getting accreditation, a particular criterion is being fulfilled. But unfortunately to fall under the criteria to rank as w category, benchmarks are not as per the requirements of the distance learning institutes. Quality assurance practices should be adopted based upon the particular characteristic of the education provider.

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