

NOTE:

This case study has been used to inform Chapter 7 of the book,
Strategies for Sustainable Open and Distance Learning
(www.col.org/worldreview/volume6.htm)

The case study has not been subjected to an editorial process.
The views and opinions expressed therein are those of the author.

Chapter 7 Quality assurance in open and distance learning in the Indian context: A Case Study

Prof. VS Prasad

Director, National Assessment and Accreditation Council

1. INTRODUCTION

The case study, an examination of the implementation strategies and practices of quality assurance in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in the Indian context, is the focus of this chapter. The Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU), the first open university in India, founded in 1982, has been selected for the case study. The university has an annual enrolment of more than 100 thousand students and a cumulative enrolment of more than 500 thousand students. It offers programmes at different levels, i.e. at certificate, degree, post-graduate and research levels in Arts, Commerce, Social Sciences and Sciences. The reasons for the choice of the case study site are: (a) sufficiently long period in operation (22 years) to enable it to standardize practices; (b) large number of students and diverse operations which will enable the examination of the complexity of the processes; (c) variety of programmes and use of multiple teaching-learning modes and (d) familiarity of the author. The author is aware of the limitations of his familiarity and close association with the study site. The awareness of limitations, it is hoped, will temper the subjectivity and help in the objective presentation of subjective experience. It is more a reflective exercise, than a description of facts.

2. THE CONTEXT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ODL IN INDIA

The case study of BRAOU has to be seen in the context in which it operates, and two features related to quality deserve a mention here. Firstly, the beginning of ODL in India was mainly motivated by access concerns and policy makers encouraged it as a less costly option to increase access to higher education. As a result, large enrolment was considered a goal of ODL and quality did not get the attention it deserves. Secondly, in the 1990s higher education being treated more as a private than public good, ODL institutions have focused more on profit making. During the last decade many international players have begun operating in the ODL field in India, mostly guided by the profit motive. As a result quality has become a casualty and many unhealthy practices by ODL institutions have been observed. Even prestigious institutions are accused of diverting the profits generated by low quality ODL for strengthening their high quality conventional programmes. To cite an example, the Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Rajasthan and the Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University, Andhra Pradesh are two prestigious engineering education providers in India. Even though their conventional programmes are of world-class standards, the distance education programmes of one are not recognized by the other.

Such developments have resulted in a strong expression of public concern about the quality of ODL. To address these concerns the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), the University Grants Commission (UGC), the Distance Education Council (DEC), the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) and similar bodies have evolved norms to guide ODL operations in their areas of concern. In addition, many ODL institutions have strengthened their internal structures to ensure quality of their offerings. The

experience of BRAOU in the context of these external and internal quality assurance initiatives and the lessons learnt are discussed in the following pages.

3. EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE INITIATIVES

The DEC, a statutory body of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, is entrusted with the responsibility of co-ordination and maintenance of standards in ODL in India. The DEC has taken many initiatives for quality assurance. Some of these are: (a) development of norms and guidelines for development and delivery of programmes in ODL; (b) development of norms and guidelines for assessment and accreditation of ODL institutions; (c) development support for promotion of quality; (d) development of database on the system operations; (e) publication of quality promotion materials; (f) encouragement for sharing of materials; (g) training support for development of human resources and materials development; and (h) support for research on quality assurance.

The other agencies like the AICTE and the NCTE have formulated detailed norms to regulate ODL offerings of professional programmes in consultation with the DEC. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in collaboration with the DEC has developed the instrument for assessment and accreditation of distance education institutions.

Here four concerns deserve special mention. One, there is a lack of clarity about the role of the multiple agencies involved in this process and co-ordination among them is also lacking. Secondly, many institutions feel that they are burdened with regulations by too many bodies and some try to play one against the other to escape responsibility. Thirdly, the enabling systems are very weak to implement the norms formulated by regulatory and professional bodies. The guidelines and norms are more expressions of good intentions, formulated without paying sufficient attention to the operational framework required for the realization of the intentions. Fourthly, the regulatory framework is considered unrealistic, lacking the flexibility to adapt to the diversity of local contexts and emerging concerns. Due to these concerns, the external quality assurance efforts are yet to make a definite impact on guiding the ODL practices and BRAOU had to depend more on strengthening its internal quality assurance practices.

4. QUALITY PRACTICES AT THE BRAOU

In the initial years the university focused more on extending education opportunities, creation of infrastructure and launching of programmes to meet the needs of diverse sections of society. Quality, it was assumed, would be taken care of by the persons who were responsible for undertaking these activities. The academics who were associated with the design, development and delivery of learning materials were drawn from the conventional system and were expected to take care of quality concerns. Very soon it was realized that in the absence of well designed quality measures, the operations would not meet the standards of quality; Extensive training programmes were organized for the staff to equip them with competencies required for ODL systems. In recent years these measures have been more formalized. In 2002 the university established a Quality Assurance Cell (QAC) to promote, design, develop, and monitor quality assurance activities of the university. The quality of an institution is a result of quality consciousness and contributions of all units and functionaries of the institution. To get an overview of the quality practices of an institution, the practices followed by all its units must be examined. The quality assurance initiatives of the university are described below under six functional units of most ODL institutions.

- A. Programme Planning
- B. Development of Learning Materials
- C. Delivery of Programmes
- D. Learner Evaluation
- E. Governance
- F. System Development

A. Programme planning

University authorities like the Academic Board and Planning Board are entrusted with the responsibilities of programme planning. In practice the initiatives for new programmes usually originate from the Vice-Chancellor and other senior academics. No systematic need survey mechanisms are in place. The programmes are identified more by a general understanding of social needs and demand, than by systematic studies of market demand and social needs. Most of the time, the intuitive approach is nearer to the reality. But in some programmes like Environmental Studies, Women's Studies and Human Rights, the enrolments are very low though the areas identified are socially relevant. This raises the question of the quality criteria of programme planning from the points of view of programme relevance, optimum utilization of resources, goal orientation, target groups and feedback mechanisms. There is a strong feeling among the academic community that they are the right judges of all these criteria; there is also resistance to the systematic recording of the basis of their judgments. For the design of programmes, the DEC has advocated the project approach which includes information on goals, target groups, teaching-learning strategies, evaluation systems, outcomes, resources required, etc. It is an integrated view of programme planning. The Quality Assurance Cell (QAC) has developed parameters and performance indicators of programme planning. But by and large the academics are not enthusiastic about these parameters and approaches.

B. Development of learning materials (print and non-print)

The university's main teaching-learning mode is print material. Initially the print materials were developed in the essay form. In later years the self-learning formats were adopted. For this purpose extensive workshop, seminars and orientation programmes were conducted for the academic staff. Detailed guidelines were developed on the formats of learning material development and printing styles. Quality parameters and measures ensuring performance were identified. The materials were developed by course teams which consisted of distinguished academics. In some courses the material is subjected to developmental testing. The material is also vetted by external assessors as a quality check. Some of the quality concerns of the practice are: a) lack of appreciation of programmed learning formats by the large number of academics from the conventional classroom background who are associated with the development of distance materials; b) standardization of materials which may not be responding to the diverse needs of learners; c) failure to appreciate the abilities and requirements of learners; d) lack of regular updating of materials and e) casual application of quality norms and guidelines. To address these issues of concern, the QAC has developed a number of performance practices and is organizing workshops/discussions. However, quality concerns are viewed more as one-time attention activities. Feedback studies on learning materials are very few and irregular. The Centre for Evaluation, a unit of the university entrusted with the responsibility of evaluation studies, has undertaken some feedback studies of professional programmes. But appropriate systems and mechanisms are not available for utilizing the feedback in the improvement of materials.

The university uses the audio-visual mode as a supplementary teaching-learning mode. The satellite mode is also used for this purpose. The university has established an audio-visual centre for undertaking technology-supported learning. The centre has developed radio and video lessons for broadcasting/telecasting. The university's Centre for Staff Training and Development, a unit responsible for human resource development, has organized a number of training programmes to build the competencies of the staff in the development of audio-visual learning materials. The QAC has developed quality indicators for audio-visual materials. Some feedback studies were conducted on the effectiveness of the audio-visual materials.

Some of the quality concerns identified are: a) the materials do not evoke enough enthusiasm in learners; b) quality parameters are not effectively applied in the production of materials; c) the supplementary with the print material is not properly ensured; d) the quality of the delivery system is poor; and e) the delivery systems which are more group-based and study-centre based are not convenient to learners.

C. Delivery of programmes

The university has created a vast network of regional centres and study centres for the delivery of programmes and to provide quality support services to learners. At the university headquarters, the Student Support Services Branch takes the responsibility of the planning and monitoring of delivery of services to learners. The printing and distribution of materials is taken care of by the Materials Production Branch. The computer centre of the university provides all the technological support. The university in recent years has taken many initiatives for quality learner support services. Some of these initiatives are:

- The university proclaimed the year 2003 as the ‘Year of Learner Services’. This helped the university to re-focus its attention on all aspects of learner services including the quality of services.
- The Learner’s charter was developed clearly stating the university’s responsibilities towards learners and the learners’ responsibilities in learning.
- The infrastructure at regional centres has been strengthened to provide computer connectivity, audio-visual viewing facilities and learner guidance services.
- The university has established a Learner Service Centre at its headquarters as a single window clearance for all student problems. Technology-mediated communication facilities were created in this centre to ensure quick responses to student queries.
- The university has brought out a series of publications to bridge the gap in information dissemination. A number of folders were brought out on university programmes and systems for the information of present and prospective students and for the general public.
- The QAC of the university has developed detailed quality indicators and performance measures of learner support services.
- The distribution of print materials has been decentralized to ensure the timely supply of learning materials to students.
- The student records have been computerized for easy access to learner data.

Some of the quality concerns in the delivery of services are: a) limited use of technology and heavy dependence on traditional methods of addressing the problems of learners; b) lack of sufficient awareness on the quality parameters of delivery systems on the part of the staff associated with these activities; c) general inefficiency and insensitivity of administrative systems and d) lack of standard criteria to measure the quality of services.

D. Learner evaluation

The assessment of the performance of students by conducting examinations is an important function of the university. A reliable and valid assessment system is an important quality concern. The university follows the continuous and year-end examination system. Some of the quality measures implemented by the university are: a) preparation of an academic calendar to regulate the activities of admission, course material delivery, counseling and examinations; b) computerization of student data and processing of examination results for speedy declaration of the results of large numbers of students; c) online access to examination results; d) streamlining of procedures and mechanisms for the conduct of examinations at hundreds of centres for hundred of thousands of students and e) development of quality guidelines for the examination operations.

Some of the quality concerns in learner evaluation are: a) involvement of a large number of assessors without proper training; b) subjectivity in the evaluation; c) discrepancies in the machine mode operations and delays in the corrections of the same; d) delays in conduct of examinations, declaration of results, issue of certificates and responses to examination-related problems of students; and e) ensuring the integrity of operations.

E. Governance

Governance, organization and management arrangements for undertaking the activities of the institution, is a critical factor in the effective functioning of an institution. The university has taken a

number of initiatives for quality governance. The university has developed a document “Administration with a Difference” which advocates a Simple, Measurable, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent (SMART) administrative system. The procedures in many functional areas have been streamlined. Computer technology is used for data management. Training programmes have been organized to improve the competencies of the staff. The physical facilities and ambience have been improved to create proper conditions for efficient functioning. Institutional arrangements like co-ordination committees and management teams have been created to ensure a more participatory system of governance. Manuals have been developed defining the individual responsibilities of staff. Transparency has been introduced in the working of management bodies, procurement of materials and provision of service. All the records of operations have been made open. It is assumed that transparency is one of the driving forces of quality. The university practices many welfare measures for the staff including the establishment of a yoga centre to motivate the staff to give their best to the institution. The vision and mission statement of the university is widely disseminated for everybody to make sense of the activities of the university.

Some of the quality concerns in governance are: a) difficulties in developing a shared vision and mission of the university among all the staff. There is a tendency among a large number of staff to look at their roles in the limited perspective of their specific jobs and they are unable to relate themselves to the broader institutional vision and mission; b) the systems and procedures need quality checks; c) the rigid structures are not amendable for fast changes and d) negative attitudinal orientations.

F. System development

From the beginning the university has taken some initiatives for system development activities which have contributed to the quality of operations. The Centre for Staff Training and Development and the Centre for Evaluation have been established for undertaking human resource development and research activities. The activities of these units help in improving the quality of the system. In 2001 the university established a separate academy for research in ODL, may be the first of its kind in India, named after its first Vice-chancellor, Prof. G. Ram Reddy, as “Prof. G. Ram Reddy Research Academy of Distance Education” (GRADE). The activities of GRADE include research, consultancy, training and networking for system development. The Quality Assurance Cell of the university is located in the GRADE. In 2003 the DEC conducted an assessment of the institution and highly commended the quality of its operations.

Some of the quality concerns in system development are: a) the perception of the institution as a system has not percolated to all the levels in the institution; b) even though it is the first open university, with 22 years of experience, its contribution to system research is not significant; c) the link between research, evaluation studies, and review reports and the working of the institution is not properly established and realized and d) the assessment by the DEC was treated more as an examination by an outside agency, than as a process of self-examination and self-improvement.

5. LESSONS OF THE CASE EXPERIENCE

The examination of the experience of BRAOU is useful to draw some general observations relevant for sustainable ODL. Some of these are:

- The Indian higher education context shows that ODL is a response to the challenges of higher education, which was made possible because of the huge human resources and physical infrastructure already available in the conventional system, through partnerships for resource sharing. The BRAOU with a small academic staff of around 75 provides higher education to millions with the optimum use of human resources and the infrastructure of the higher education system in the state of Andhra Pradesh. It also has implications for quality concerns. The quality of distance education is partly determined by the quality of conventional higher education in the country due to the reliance on counselors, lesson writers and examiners who come from the conventional system. Further, the ODL system depends on the learning resource facilities that are

offered and managed by the conventional system, of course along the guidelines of the ODL system. This is more relevant when the convergence mode of delivery of education is becoming more common.

- The case experience shows that the sustainability of quality operations requires institutionalization of quality measures. The establishment of the QAC in the university is considered as an important development. The levels of sustainability may depend on the levels of institutionalization of quality measures. In spite of impressive quality assurance measures, the institutionalization of quality processes appears to be weak. The quality concerns are flowing more from above and are not uniformly spread. The quality of operations is more a reflection of individual initiatives and efforts, than an institutional response. In such situations sustainability becomes difficult. To enhance sustainability, the institutionalization of quality operations needs to be strengthened.
- The disturbing feature of the case experience is that, in general, the drive for quality is lacking in the academic and other staff. There is a passive response to quality initiatives. How to internalize quality as a value among all the staff of the institution is a major concern. Incentives for quality and disincentives for lack of quality may have to be thought of. More attention has to be paid to the strengthening of staff development programmes.
- The assessment and accreditation activities of the DEC or other agencies are in the initial stages of development and their few initiatives have not created much impact. There is a need to seriously consider the role these bodies could play in ensuring acceptable levels of quality in ODL programmes, especially in ensuring comparability of quality and standards of programmes offered by dual mode universities.
- The regulatory agencies and assessment and accreditation processes may help in developing self-regulatory mechanisms and transparency in the operations of ODL institutions. In the context of the profit-making operations of non-profit ODL institutions, the transparency of operations may result in more public pressure to maintain standards. More dissemination of information on the activities of ODL institutions to all stakeholders will play a positive role in sustaining quality.
- The case study interestingly reveals that there is not much pressure from students for quality materials and services. Most of them are more interested in the timely conduct of examinations and the award of degrees on time. The nature and orientation of students is a critical factor in the quality of education. The open university, in its desire to admit large numbers for various reasons other than quality, is not able to ensure minimum competency levels of admitted students. As a result there is a very low success rate and a high drop-out rate reflecting on the quality of the system.
- The case study indicates that in the national context where the research base on distance education is not sound enough, the establishment of GRADE to take up research initiatives has been a right step.
- The case study also shows that the institution is very slow in changing its priorities and modes of operations. The university is not able to diversify its programmes into innovative technical and vocational areas which may result in more employment opportunities for its students. This raises the question of relevance. The institution is also slow in responding to changes in technology. The use of technology for administrative operations is not extensive. E-learning methodologies also are not fully used. As one perceptive observer observed, “The university is yet to realize its full potential”. Experience shows that the realization of the full potential of the institution is necessary for sustainable open and distance learning.

6. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Quality of education is mainly the function of students, staff, learning materials, infrastructure and governance. This is true of all education modes and all levels of education with some operational differences. The ODL context in India is a complex phenomenon of co-existence of different operational systems in terms of ownership systems, management practices, teaching-learning practices, delivery systems and programme focus, all functioning under the generic description of distance education. In such a context any set of general observations will have a few exceptions. With that kept in mind, it is hoped that this case study of quality assurance measures and lessons of experience will have relevance in the understanding of the quality concerns of sustainable open and distance learning.