QUALITY ASSURANCE & DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEM: Problems & Challenges

Assist. Prof. Dr. Mushtaq Ahmad DAR
Directorate of Distance Education,
University of Kashmir, Srinagar, INDIA

Assist. Prof. Dr. Sabina YEASMIN
Open School, Bangladesh Open University
Gazipur, BANGLADESH

ABSTRACT

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system has been correctly identified as a panacea for the myriad of problems in the educational systems throughout the world. The pressing socio-economic compulsions, new multi-media teaching- learning system and globalization of education have paved the way for the growth of distance education at the national as well as international level. Education is a fundamental pillar of democracy for sustainable development and socio-economic justice. The rationale of distance education is to ensure equal opportunities of education to disadvantaged sections of the society who, because of financial, geographical or time constraints, are not in a position to upgrade their education, knowledge and skills. Education being a dynamic process, the need of the hour is to use it in a positive direction with the changing demands of the society and thereby improve the living standards of the people.

Keeping this in view, the purpose of this paper is to focus on the issues like: democratization of education through open and distance learning system, higher education and distance education system, and development of strategies for the autonomy of Distance Educations institutions (DEIs)working under conventional university set up. The objectives of distance education make it clear that this system was expected to play a key role in democratization of higher education in a country. However, one of the major problems in our country has been that distance education has to operate within the framework of a conventional university under hostile circumstances. The transition from conventional system to hi-tech model of open learning is still not digested by the advocates of the formal system within the conventional universities. The transition, therefore, will have to be slow until the administration and the academicians gradually start appreciating the ODL system and prepare itself for a change from conventional to non-conventional or open system. In order to shoulder social responsibilities the DEI's will have to respond not only to regional educational needs but also globally rooted challenges.

Keywords: BOU, Quality, equivalency, ICT, ODL, Flexibility.

INTRODUCTION

Education is both the means as well as the result of development. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system offers the promise of ushering in the knowledge society, especially in the context of the developing world. Trends such as globalization, liberalization, democratization of forms of governance, pervasive influence of science and technology and the convergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) fuel the growth of ODL system. We can anticipate the Open and Distance Learning would play a major role in reshaping education and training in the next century. Education in knowledge-based economies will not remain just a primary social sector concern; it will become a big business and that is why we are witnessing an explosive growth in the education industry. A significant number of Distance Education Institutions (DEIs) and Open Universities have been established in the country to shoulder the social responsibilities and share the burden of

conventional universities and are operating with varying degrees of success. Open and Distance Learning system is facing various problems and has crucial significance in addressing critical educational challenges, especially in developing countries, like: access; quality; cost effectiveness; uniform standard of flexibility; autonomy; use of ICT and reaching disadvantaged groups and communities (Khan, A.W, 2000). An analysis of distance education system raises several broad issues like quality assurance; equivalence of degrees and how it may be equated with conventional institutions; and autonomy of DEIs to ensure that the system works in a cohesive, efficient and sensitive way as per the statutory norms of the ODL system.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to high light these problems of DEIs operating within the framework of conventional universities and the challenges that need to be addressed in bringing quality in ODL system to protect the interests of distance learners. Bangladesh is a developing country and 40.9% of its population lived on poverty level (BER, 2005). According to the BER review report in 2004, the literacy rate is 65%. Infrastructure facilities for education are not up to the mark at a standard level. For this reason, a lot of students were dropped out or cannot take part in the conventional educational system. Distance education and open learning is the possible alternative way to educate mass people in the country.

Bangladesh Open University (BOU) is only one public university that offers education through open and distance mode. BOU launched SSC and HSC programs in 1995 and 1998 through OS, respectively. BOU has an e m p h a s i s upon the importance of modular form of textbooks and other printed materials where the learners can accept easily and comfortably.

Here the learners have a scope to attend tutorial classes and face to face counseling twice a month. Beside these, teaching is imparted through audio-visual methods even though these facilities are limited.

CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS

Mushroom growth of Distance Education Institutions (DEIs), Universities, particularly in private sector; increasing student enrolment without proper infrastructure, issues related to equivalence of degrees, Job opportunities for distance learners and the most important institutional autonomy -are some problems and challenges, which need the serious attention of academic mentors and administrators of ODL system. In open learning system, the learner gets the opportunity to educate them at any place or position of life irrespective their age and profession. In the other words, it can be called as continuing education.

To distinguish between the traditional face-to-face classroom teaching and the open learning system, it is essential to understand that the difference between pedagogy and andragogy (Knowles, 1980). The concept of teaching in pedagogy is dependent and andragogy is independent. Pedagogy is teacher concerned, where as andragogy are learners concerned. Pedagogy is uniform by age and level, but andragogy is a life task and problem directed.

Learners enrolled at BOU come from different age group and profession. Since, there is no age bar; it is convenient to impart education through andragogy method. The main objectives of the BOU are to reach education to these learners of different professions and levels through different mediums. Most of the learners of the SSC and HSC programs of BOU come from all societies and classes; that is, dropped out student, and poor to high society etc. Most of the learners have no access to technology like audio- visual facilities.

Distance learning is any type of education that occurs while location, time, or both separate the participants. In distance learning, the teacher, through the use of technology, delivers instructions to a student at a separate location (Siddiqui, H.M, 2004).

The term open and distance learning represents approaches that focus on opening access to an education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of the time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of the learners (Talesra, 2004).

Distance education, structure learning in which the student and instructor are separated by time and space, is currently the fastest growing form of domestic and international education (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 1996).

Above definitions of educationists refers to the following conclusions about the distance education as:
➢   Separation between teacher and student
➢   Free of time and space
➢   Use of technology
➢   Flexible learning opportunities to the learners
➢   Open access to education to every one
➢   Fastest growing type of education

SCOPE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance Education serves the persons living in the isolated areas with inadequate facilities of formal education system as presented by Rai, N.A (2000) "Distance education has taken systematic teaching - learning process to persons living in isolated areas where facilities for the traditional form of class room teaching cannot be developed. Further, as distance learning addresses the needs of specific target groups, there is a great variation in the range of programmes offered." Distance education also serves the dropouts, older students and disadvantaged groups. Distance system also serves the persons involve in the community commitments as indicated by S. Manjulika and Reddy V.V (2000) "The open Universities have also increased access for other disadvantaged groups, including older students, who may be geographically isolated or excluded from regular classes because of shift patterns, seasonal or other kind of work and family and community commitments." Distance system of education utilizes printed material and non-print media support as reflected by Rao, K.V (2003) "Distance education is the form of indirect instruction. It is imparted by technical media such as correspondence, printed material, teaching and learning aids, audiovisual aids, radio, television and computers." Distance education provides the desired education as highlighted by Ramaiah. R. Y (2001) as:

Distance education provides at least necessary technical organizational preconditions for a universal admission to continued higher education. An analysis of statistics about distance education reveals that millions of distant students indeed profit from this industrialized way of education. Often enough it offers them the only way towards the desired education as all other ways are barred by lack of funds or by other circumstances.

By the economic pressure governments are looking for an alternative to provide basic education and training to the illiterate masses, resented by S. Manjulika and Reddy V.V (1999) as:

Foremost among the trends noticeable at the end of the twentieth century the rapid increase of multi-mode and open learning educational institutions. Driven by problems of access and economic, governments are seeking alternatives forms of delivery to fulfill the demand for basic education, Continuing education and training.

Almost all types of the education are projected through distance education and distance education has become the host of education and training viewed by Panda, S (2005) "Today, a host of educational and training forms and processes are presented under the banner term distance education".

It is practiced through single-mode distance teaching institutions, distance learning/educational development/flexible Learning".

Hence the distance education serves as:
- ➢ more cost effective mode of education
- ➢ compensate the deficiency in the number of qualified teachers
- ➢ provide flexible programmes
- ➢ serves the remote areas
- ➢ educated the large masses
- ➢ provide alternative system of education
- ➢ provide high quality educational services on an up to date basis
- ➢ provide educational facilities on equal basis
- ➢ provide educational facilities to the students who cannot take advantage of conventional system of education
- ➢ updating and up gradation of employed persons
- ➢ educational facilities to the people who cannot leave their homes
- ➢ further training for teachers
- ➢ use of modern technology

Quality Assurance and Odl System

The concept of quality has been drawn from industry. 'Quality Assurance' is the achievement of desired standards through applications of agreed producers (Calder, 1994). Although there is a rapid proliferation in the system of distance education in India, yet the quality perspective needs serious concern by the DEIs. Education is general and higher education, in particular, is in a state of transition in its quality control and approach in almost all the developing countries of the world.

Despite the growing concern about the quality of education, its crystallizes definition is somewhat difficult (Aspin and Chapman, 1994) largely due to a wide array of stakeholders and consumers along with the complexities of the teaching-learning process which need to be unfolded continuously. Distance methodologies could be judged as a duplicate to classroom experience, if quality could be ensured by innovating new methods, it could be validated the quality of distance learning program.

Quality assurance also has been defined as "systematic management and assessment procedure adopted by higher education institutions and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives, and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements" (Harman, 2000, p.1).

Terms like effectiveness, efficiency, equity, equality and quality are often used interchangeably. (Adams, 1993) As societies evolve from the post industrial era to the information of age, Distance education in the developing country has got the central importance and subject to study. For instance, interactive communication between and among students and teachers is now being emphasized (Belwati, 1999).

The Open School of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) is presently imparting two educational programs, namely SSC and HSC. These programs are basically providing an excellent opportunity of continuing education to those, who were either dropped out from the basic education program, both in formal and non-formal education sectors or were unable to avail further educational opportunities due to various reasons. Recently, these two programs have earned recognition of equivalency to those of formal education sector, which has naturally raised a question of quality assurance of BOU programs. This has led to conduct this study where the state of quality of SSC and HSC programs of BOU has been reviewed. It also looks into the barrier/problem challenges of quality measures and has been identified to which BOU should converge on all its efforts for providing a quality education to its clientele groups.

According to the Indian Education Commission (1964–66);
"The density of India is now being shaped in her classrooms. In a world based on science and technology, it is education that determines the level of prosperity, welfare and security of people. On the quality of number of persons coming out of the schools and colleges will depend our success in great enterprise of nation."

The Education Commission further observed:
"it is important to recognize that the case of autonomy of the universities rests on the fundamental consideration that without it universities cannot discharge effectively their principal functions of teaching, research and services to the society and only an autonomous institution can build up its academics, sprit of inquiry, and habit of independent thinking".

The growth of ODL systems has been fostered by several factors: demographic; economic and social; political; methodological and technological. The advocates of formal system must accept that there is no other alternative to open and distance learning mode in meeting the learning needs of a rapidly growing population. There is no doubt that ODL as an alternative mode of learning has created educational opportunities for a vast majority of population even in millions and that too in far flung areas of the country and has opened doors of learning to such social groups, which had generally remained disadvantaged in terms of their location, time and financial constraints, and backwardness. However, it is also true that wider the door opens, it makes difficult to maintain the quality of education.

According to the Review Report, 2009 of MHRD (unpublished):
"forty deemed universities do not meet norms, most of them are private and do not deserve deemed status. The biggest inadequacy of deemed universities is the manner in which they have started hundreds of study centers all over India…Fee and administrative structure of private deemed universities are totally unregulated and are run in a whimsical fashion. A substantial section of the report deals with how higher education was being run as a business, and academic and administrative posts were held by family members and relatives of promoters…"(Times of India,Oct.30,2009)

Presently Indian higher education is in a state of crises. It suffers from several problems – deterioration in quality and standard of education, increase in the number of educated unemployed, lack of resources, increasing cost, problem of academic equivalence within the dual mode system, fast changing technology and so on. The quantitative expansion of higher education is being viewed as an international service. While one may view brighter side as easy excess to higher education and availability of institutions offering variety of courses in varied disciplines, one cannot shut eyes on the darker side of its characteristics like widespread dissatisfaction and disappointment about utility of higher education being devoid of quality, becoming more unwieldy, incompetent and static (Ali, N 2000). The contribution of DEIs in dual mode universities is under-rated. Disagreements emerge as a result of failure to agree on or even to understand the different roles and responsibilities of collaborating partners or other departments of the universities. Lake of teaching faculty and dependence on other departments in dual mode institutions is the biggest problem of DEIs. Quality promotion assurance and control mechanisms are required to ensure adherence to national and international quality standards of distance education.

Academic Equivalence
Firstly, there is a question of access and equity, especially linked to disadvantaged sections of the society who because of certain constraints are not in a position to go for higher education in formal system. In early days the key word of distance education was access. Once the access was no larger an issue, the key became the equivalence. The concern now is that students taught at a distance should receive an equivalent qualification to make distance education more respectable. The present development is based in access, equivalence and quest for excellence (Gough, 1980).

Although, providing access and equity in terms of educational opportunities is in many ways less of a challenge than that of establishing a reputation for quality teaching, professionalism in ODL system, better student support system and overall efficient management that will win unequivocal recognition from the society it serves.

In our opinion, no one in this august gathering can deny this fact that in our country the fate of distance learners is in dilemma. No doubt there may be some achievers also, but exceptions cannot become a rule. Their degrees are not considered equivalent to formal system degrees, now even by the judiciary. They face discrimination in job opportunities, admission to research degrees and in many other aspects of their career, even within the same university system offering both regular and distance mode courses. It may not be out of context to mention here that even private students (university degree holders) are given preferential treatment over distance learners in employment and research.

Let us not blame the ODL system. The system has been created by the policy planners of formal system to share the burden of conventional universities and provide educational opportunities to the maximum number of students or disadvantaged sections of the society. This is the right time to think that what needs to be done to save the system within which quality, integrity, credibility, and efficiency have a chance to prosper (Khan, A.H, 1993).

Institutional Autonomy of Distance Education Institutions

A university cannot remain cut-off from its social, economic and political ecology. In fact, the universities in contemporary times have become nerve – centers of social Tranformulations (Gosh, 1983). The rationale of a university is conceptualized as ' pursuit of excellence in knowledge', which pre-supposes academic freedom and autonomy. However, in practice the operation of favoritism, ideological alignments, institutional and personal jealousies undermine the academic autonomy and accountability of a university and its constituent units.

The power structure in a university is usually five –tier system, i.e., The Board(s) of Studies, Faculties, Academic Council, Syndicate and University Council. However, Indian experience indicates that academic decision marking in these bodies become immersed in institutional and personal Jealousies within the university system, and the ultimate sufferer is the student. In a way rules become more important than goals, for which the rules are formulated. Further the rules are interpreted with the changing times and according to the wishes and whims of the officers at the helm of affairs, which restrict both academic freedom and institutional autonomy within the university system. Secondly, clerks are ultimate interpreters of rules and regulations. The examples are glore that indicate the numberless cases of ego clashes between faculty members and administrative staff, which come in the way of a development process.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the word "autonomy" as "the right of self-government" and also gives personal freedom as an alternative. The institutional autonomy of DEIs working within a formal university set up is the only alternate solution to address the problems as mentioned in the preceding paras. The institutional autonomy of DEIs shall include academic, financial and administrative autonomy. The goal of institutional autonomy is central to the success of the system. Even the Directors need to be allowed a high degree of autonomy so that they can act quickly and effectively in the best interests of the learners.

The DEIs cannot operate effectively as academic institutions without good management and that will not happen without academic freedom. The open universities enjoy this quantum of freedom but DEIs within a conventional university seldom enjoy the freedom.

In practice only the universities are autonomous and no DEI operating within the university have been given any autonomous status. Even the academic autonomy to frame its own courses and its execution on ODL

pattern is not provided to the institution operating within the system. As far the administrative and financial autonomy is concerned these institutions operate within the limited control of the university system, and powers are to be exercised with the set norms of the conventional university system. DEIs have not freedom to move out of the limits set by the traditional bound Board of Studies and Academic Council packed with advocates of formal system. The composition of Academic Council or Board of Studies consists of members from the formal and conventional departments who lack the vision of the ODL.

In the academic matters, structural change in the Academic Council and Board(s) of Studies be brought as to provide due representation to the concerned teachers of DEIs and external experts from ODL system. The vertical delegation of 'powers in respect of academic, administrative and financial matters will generate a better sense of responsibility and accountability among various functionaries of the system.

If at all, the system is to be made meaningful then due representation must be given to the management of DEIs in all the university bodies to represent the matters pertaining to ODL system and its programmes. The institutions that are granted autonomy are known for their better performance, sound financial resources and adequate infrastructural facilities.

The impact of autonomy can be seen in teaching-learning process, decision making process, equality and excellence aspects, accountability of teachers and institutional responsibilities towards the beneficiary of the system.

The DEIs should be given freedom to adopt their own *modus operandi* for the smooth execution of its programmes as per the norms and guidelines of the Distance Education Council (DEC) which is the statutory body at the national level in Indian country. It may not be out of context to mention here that DEC has been created by an Act of Parliament for supervision, monitoring and maintenance of standards of quality distance education in India.

Therefore, the DEC itself should strive for its independent status as an apex body of ODL system in India.

CONCLUSION

The quality assurance is a key word, which is being seriously applied to the system of higher education. The concern for quality in distance education is a result of the realization on the part of DEIs that in highly competitive environment students can be attracted only by offering the best that is available. Due to rapid proliferation in the system of distance education in India in terms of- mushroom growth of institutions, particularly in private sector, increasing student enrolment, large number of programmes/courses on offer, poor student support services, problem of academic equivalence- the equality prospective calls for serious attention of the Distance Education policy makers and planners. Quality assurance has to be viewed as a continuous process of self and institutional development at each of the sub- systems as well as the system as a whole (Sharma 2003).

The role of an institution offering distance education programmes should not be undermined. In conventional education system a teacher teaches, whereas in distance education system an institution teaches (Koul, 2002). A system which is supposed to play a catalyst's role and be dynamic in nature has to have characteristics of autonomy, i.e., self – governance, of course within broader social objectives. As knowledge is always expanding, and unless we change our rigid systems introduced long ago, we cannot bring any good to the country. Thrust areas of our paper were quality assurance, autonomy of DEIs and academic equivalence of the degrees earned by distance education learners. All these have added to the woes of the students in distance education when it comes to seeking academic equivalence of degrees with those earned through formal system, despite the fact that eligibility, duration, syllabus, course contents are same. This jeopardizes the

merger of distance education with formal system. Quality assurance in DEIs is the key word in which lies the solution to all the problems. The Distance Education Council must come forward and play its role, otherwise the ODL system will cripple down, and the ultimate victims will be the students.

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BIODATA AND CONTACT ADRESSES OF AUTHORS

Dr. Mushtaq Ahmad DAR is working as Senior Assistant Professor of Law since 2003 in the Directorate of Distance Education, University of Kashmir, and Srinagar, India. He has started his career as faculty from the year 2000 in Department of Law, University of Kashmir. Beside his long teaching experience in the University of Kashmir, he also practiced as an Advocate at J & K High Court for 4 years from 1992-96.

His bar experience is seen in his interest of publications. He finished his Masters in Law on '*consumer protection'* in 1999, and then he was awarded a doctorate degree in law in 2003.

He has also qualified National Eligibility Test (NET) of University Grants Commission of India in 1998. His doctoral work on '*Panchayati Raj Institutions in India with Special Reference to J & k', was* well appreciated. His books include: *Law on Consumer Services (2003Edn), Panchayati Raj in India: Law and Practice in J&K (2009Ed)*. He has also worked on two research projection 'distance education' sponsored by DEC-IGNOU and SRC, KU. He has also published more than 23 research papers on the issues of women empowerment, Panchayati Raj, legal awareness, socio-economic justice, and rural development, decentralization in India and consumer protection. He has participated in various national and international seminars, conferences and workshops on women empowerment, panchayati raj, social justice and distance education.

Assist. Prof. Dr. Mushtaq Ahmad DAR
Directorate of Distance Education,
University of Kashmir, Srinagar-190006, INDIA
Mobile: 941908564
Email: haddimushtaq@yahoo.co.in

Sabina YEASMIN is an assistant professor of Open School of the Bangladesh Open University. I have obtained B.Sc (Hons.) and M.Sc degrees from University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. After graduating with excellent academic record I have joined BOU as a lecturer in January 1996. She has already submitted my M.phil thesis paper (Social Security and Working Women: A Case study in Dhaka City) to Dhaka University authority. Now she is doing her Ph.D (Study on Design and Development of Self-Learning Materials for Open Schooling with particular emphasis on Gender-Sensitivity: a Case of Bangladesh Open University) at IGNOU, Delhi. She has received many national and international training on distance education concept, instructional design, and preparation of audiovisual materials from International Extension College, Cambridge, UK.

Assist. Prof. Dr. Sabina YEASMIN
Open School, Bangladesh Open University
Gazipur-1705, BANGLADESH
E-mail: sabina_d@hotmail.com

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