

QUALITY EDUCATION IN INDIA: A MISSION REVISITED FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

India, one of the largest country in Asian continent, with a population of over one billion has been striving towards achieving sustainable development in all the spheres of the society through scientific and technological, socio-cultural and economic progress. It has been trying to bring about radical changes in the society through various modes and education remains one of the primary tools of accomplishing the developmental objective. In pursuit of this objective, the government has been establishing a number of educational institutions at all levels i.e. at school and at higher education level. It has also been supporting private and non-governmental organizations which are in this sector for reaching education to masses. Data show that distance education institutions are catering to much larger segment of population as compared to conventional mode of institutions. This large enrollment and the added responsibility of reaching education to the people with a diverse mode of delivery puts enormous responsibility on these institutions to maintain quality standards of education through distance mode. In the light of what has been stated above, the article identifies the various dimensions of quality in distance mode of education and proposes strategies for maintaining quality standards and quality control mechanism.

Key words: distance education, India, sustainable development.

India, with a population of over one billion has been making continuous efforts towards sustainable development in all the spheres of the society through progress in all the sectors. Significant changes have been brought in the society through various modes and education remains one of the primary medium for accomplishing the developmental objective. In pursuit of this objective, the government has been establishing a number of educational institutions at all levels i.e. at school and at higher education level. It has been very supportive towards all organizations including private and non-governmental organizations which are in this sector for reaching education to masses.

It has since independence has had a phenomenal growth in the literacy rate moving from merely 18.33% in 1951 to 64.84% in 2001. This has led to growth in the number of students at all levels including at higher education level. In last 20 years, development in education infrastructure and its related field has also positively impacted on students opting for higher

education. So the number of educational institutions setup catering to all spheres of society has been rapidly increasing with this rise in number of students enrolled.

Table1. Comparative Analysis of Trend in Enrollment in Conventional Universities, Open Universities and DEI

Year	Conventional University	% Growth	Open Universities	% Growth	DEIs	% Growth	Total Enrollment in DE Mode	% Share of DE Mode Enrollment of Cus
1999	7705520		450326		573419		1023745	13.29
2000	8050607	4.48	522506	16.03	613366	6.97	1135872	14.11
2001	8399443	4.33	560820	7.33	640227	4.38	1201047	14.30
2002	8964680	6.73	651867	16.23	770386	20.33	1422253	15.87
2003	9516773	6.16	728381	11.74	745026	-3.29	1473407	15.48

Source: 1. DEC (IGNOU) (2004). Information Base on Distance Higher Education in India, New Delhi.
2. UGC. (2004). UGC Annual Report 2003-2004.

As evident from Table 1, the enrollment in these institutions of both the modes i.e. conventional and distance education modes has been increasing continuously, 2003 being the exception for DEIs. The table also demonstrates that this growth rate in the number of students is more in distance education mode as compared to conventional mode. As seen here, it is 6.16% for conventional mode universities whereas it is 11.74% for distance mode institutions in 2003. If we further analyze the percentage share of enrollment of DEIs then we find that in 1999, total enrollment in DE mode was 13.29% of enrollment in conventional mode and it increased to 15.48% in 2003. The above analysis clearly indicates the growing acceptance and reliability to distance education mode in India towards providing education which is affordable and convenient for the learner. Moreover this also reflects that distance education mode is being more and more accepted as an alternative to conventional mode of education.

THE TREND SO FAR

In India, providing education through distance mode is in the developmental phase which commenced with the opening of first correspondence course institute in 1962 to now when there is one national open University, i.e., Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and ten state open universities. Besides these institutions of open and distance learning, there are 104 other institutes of distance education which are also offering a portfolio of academic programmes and courses in distance mode.

IGNOU, being the national open university having national jurisdiction, has been entrusted with the responsibility to promote, coordinate and regulate the standards of education offered through open and distance learning in the country. Presently with the enrollment of 366161 and 101 programmes, it is the leading educational institutions in India (IGNOU, 2005). The growth in student enrollment at IGNOU which admitted its first batch of learners in 1987 with total enrollment of 4528 has been phenomenal. The University has registered growth rate of 7986% in a span of 18 years i.e. average growth rate of 443% each year.

The learner support services have also expanded in equal magnitude from 1987 to 2004, as for instance, with 77 learner support centers in 1987, it rose to 1098 in 2004 demonstrating a growth rate of 6000% and average students per learner support center being 58.81 in 1987 to 304.57 in 2004. This clearly denotes the quantum of work that has increased at each of these learner support centers.

Table 2. Growth Trend of Support Service Network of IGNOU

Year	Enrol.	No. of SC/PSC	Average No. of Students per SC	Academic Counselors	Average No. of Students per Academic Counselor	Regional Centers
1987	4528	77	58.81	NA		8
1988	16811	111	151.45			12
1989	42324	132	320.64			13
1990	48281	164	294.40			16
1991	52376	173	302.75			16
1992	62375	212	294.22			16
1993	75666	220	343.94	10668	7.09	16
1994	84180	229	367.60	12774	6.59	16
1995	91398	247	370.03	13457	6.79	16
1996	130228	254	512.71	14542	8.96	17
1997	163307	315	518.43	16325	10.00	19
1998	163394	367	445.22	17711	9.23	20
1999	172550	376	458.91	18991	9.09	21
2000	196650	504	390.18	20000	9.83	26
2001	291360	626	465.43	20364	14.31	44
2002	301724	765	394.41	20500	14.72	46
2003	316547	1081	292.83	25500	12.41	48
2004	334415	1098	304.57	30745	10.88	48

Source: 1. IGNOU (2003). RSD Information Base 2003. New Delhi (for RC, SC/PSC and academic counsellor upto 1998).
2. IGNOU (1999-2004). Vice Chancellor's Report 1999-2004. New Delhi.

The distance learners are provided a whole range of services in order to facilitate in their learning process and to create a more friendly and quality learning environment. Face to face counseling is one such service at the learner support centers that is managed by part time academic counselors appointed by the University. As evident from Table 2, there were a total of 10668 academic counselors in 1993 that has risen to 30745 in 2004. This growth in the number of academic counselors is not commensurate with the enrolment growth trend because in 1993, average number of students per academic counselor was 7.09 which has increased to 10.88 in a span of 11 years.

Similarly, to decentralize learner support services, democratize education and ensure wider reach of the University across the country, IGNOU established regional centers which coordinate among student, study center and headquarters. As the Table shows, the average number of study center/ programme study center per regional center was 6.41 in 1987 which is now 22.87 in 2004.

Yet another direction of student support services is self learning material and the continuous evaluation of learners' performance. Since self learning material is one of the main pillars of distance education system in India, the University has not compromised on it and there has been a continuous growth in the number of self learning material prepared. As per Table 3, with 16.35 lakhs in 1989, it has risen to 76.5 lakhs in 2004. This increase is just not confined to material production, the university has made equal efforts to ensure timely dispatch of these materials to the students. The tremendous growth in enrolment has been accompanied by an equal growth in the dispatch of number of study material packets to the distance learners, the volume being 2.69 lakh packets in 1992 to 13.01 lakh packets in 2004 showing an overall growth rate of 383%.

Table 3. Growth of Student Enrollment and Support Services in IGNOU

Year	Enrol.	% Growth	Exam Centers	% Growth	TE Registration	Average no. of students per TEE Center	% Growth	Answer books processed	% Growth	Assignment evaluated #	% Growth	SLM printed (in lakhs)	SLM despatched (in Lakhs)	Audio Prog**	Video Prog**
1987	4528		31		1484	47.87									
1988	16811	271.27	80	158.06	4889	61.11	229.45								
1989	42324	151.76	115	43.75	25260	219.65	416.67			146243		16.35			
1990	48281	14.07	124	7.83	23303	187.93	-7.75			236070	61.42	25.85			
1991	52376	8.48	134	8.06	37342	278.67	60.25			295023	24.97	37			
1992	62375	19.09	156	16.42	69189	443.52	85.28	107711		401202	35.99	40	2.69		
1993	75666	21.31	184	17.95	70953	385.61	2.55	138796	28.86	460315	14.73	59.2	2.96	538	396
1994	84180	11.25	204	10.87	81808	401.02	15.30	177764	28.08	566179	23.00	42.1	2.65	573	476
1995	91398	8.57	223	9.31	99258	445.10	21.33	221143	24.40	623000	10.04	40	3	605	512
1996	130228	42.48	249	11.66	156845	629.90	58.02	292244	32.15	788781	26.61	70.33	3.19	645	554
1997	163307	25.40	241	-3.21	221091	917.39	40.96	404435	38.39	926817	17.50	60	4.02	659	606
1998	163394	0.05	279	15.77	261078	935.76	18.09	536938	32.76	953866	2.92	56.2	4.62	768	729
1999	172550	5.60	317	13.62	319004	1006.32	22.19	698010	30.00	1356043	42.16	73.6	5.33	834	863
2000	196650	13.97	370	16.72	370187	1000.51	16.04	847389	21.40	1631539	20.32	102.04	6.5	1012	1011
2001	291360	48.16	437	18.11	507395	1161.09	37.06	1295163	52.84	2148829	31.71	67.15	8.8	1246	1109
2002	301724	3.56	687	57.21	508541	740.23	0.23	1371519	5.90	2017301	-6.12	88.64	10.5	1175	1445
2003	316547	4.91	903	31.44	527683	584.37	3.76	1321012	-3.68	2992942	48.36	94.22	9	1248	1589
2004	334415	5.64	1006	11.41	510814	507.77	-3.20	1354000	2.50	-	-	76.5	13.01	1293	1792

Source: 1. IGNOU (2001-2004). Vice Chancellor's Report 2001-2004. New Delhi.

2. IGNOU (2004). IGNOU Annual Report 2002-2003. New Delhi.

** Cumulative

Continuous evaluation of performance of students and provision of feedback to the learners are also important quality dimensions of student support services. As Table 3 shows, the University has been undertaking significant effort in this direction also. The total number of assignments evaluated in 1989 was 146243 which increased to 2992942 in 2003 showing a growth rate of 1946.5% which is commensurate to number of academic programmes offered by IGNOU. The number of academic programmes was only two in 1987 whereas in 2005, it has risen to 101.

Besides continuous evaluation, the performance of students is also assessed with the help of term-end evaluation conducted by University twice a year i.e. in June and December every year. Conduct of month long examination twice a year at more than 1000 examination centers and processing of answer books thereupon, tells about the gigantic task undertaken by the University biannually. As the number of students increased, so has been the increase in

number of examination centers with 31 in 1987 to 1006 in 2004. The processing of answer books and timely declaration of results also contributes to the quality aspect of support services. With 107711 answer books processed in 1992, it is now 1354000 in 2004.

Audio-visual aids supplement the face to face counseling in distance education mode for which IGNOU has been developing audio-visual programmes from time to time. With 538 and 396 audio and visual programmes in 1993, they increased to 1293 and 1792 respectively in 2004. The analysis given here enlightens us about the continuous multi-faceted expansion of this Open University.

QUALITY SCENARIO

The growth in enrollment coupled with rapid expansion in the support service network should be accompanied by measures to ensure proper adherence to quality standards in these services. Based on the experiences at student support cell at the Regional Center and problems encountered at the student level, some dimensions related to students have been identified which are detailed below in Table 4.

Table 4. Quality Dimensions of Support Services

S.No.	Organizational Level of Support Services	Quality Dimension of Support Services
1.	Material Production & Distribution Division (IGNOU Headquarter)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Timely Despatch of Study material - Despatch of correct study material - Despatch of returned packets of study material - Despatch of complete set of study material
2.	Student Registration & Evaluation Division (IGNOU Headquarter)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Timely and complete declaration of result - Registration for Examination and dispatch of hall ticket - Reflection of assignment grades - Grade card and provisional certificate - Distribution of degree
3.	Regional Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pre-admission guidance and counseling - Confirmation of admission and issue of student identity card - Allocation of learner support center - Practical examination - Project Report evaluation and viva voce - Re-registration - RC/SC change, address change - Updation of assignment records
4.	Study Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scheduling and organizing of counseling sessions - Assignment evaluation and feedback to learners

The basic mandate of education through distance mode is to facilitate learning by ensuring easy access to services for the students and reducing inconvenience for the students. So to achieve this mandate, quality standards should be such that students have minimum problems in above mentioned dimensions of support services. To get a clear insight of present standard of support services, an analysis of student grievances has been done at the regional center level. This level has been selected for determining the quality dimensions based on the following assumptions:

1. The regional center is the main coordinating body between the student and the university.
2. The students get first hand acquaintance of the ODL system at the regional center.

3. For any kind of grievance redressal, students prefer to first approach the regional center because of it is comparatively approachable to them as to headquarter when seen countrywide level.

Based on the above assumptions, the students' grievances have been studied at one of the regional centers of Delhi. These are shown in Table 5 in descending order of their number of grievances.

Table 5. Nature and Volume of Queries Received at Regional Center

Rank	Nature of Queries/Grievances	Number of Queries	Percentage of Total Number of Queries
1	Programme Related/Admission Fresh	7320	20.00
2	Issue of Prospectus /Application Form	4556	12.45
3	Project Report Viva Voce	2993	8.18
4	Practical Examination Hall Ticket	2631	7.19
5	Duplicate Identity Card	2514	6.87
6	Non receipt of Self Learning Material	1879	5.13
7	Non Receipt of Admission Confirmation	1542	4.21
8	Study Center Change	1418	3.87
9	Examination Time Table	1271	3.47
10	Re-registration	1165	3.18
11	Address Change	1117	3.05
12	Study Center Information	1028	2.81
13	NOC for Regional Center Change	915	2.50
14	Non receipt of Assignment Grade/Marks	915	2.50
15	Non Receipt of Examination Result	885	2.42
16	Regional Center Change	832	2.27
17	Correction of Address	647	1.77
18	Project Training	613	1.67
19	Submission of Assignment	605	1.65
20	Correction of Name	422	1.15
21	Non-receipt of Counselling Schedule	327	0.89
22	Issue of Bonafide Certificate	300	0.82
23	Issue of Identity Card	177	0.48
24	Change of Elective	133	0.36
25	Non receipt of Hall Ticket	122	0.33
26	Correction of Medium of Study	120	0.33
27	Change of Medium of Study	91	0.25
28	Issue of Migration Certificate	32	0.09
29	Issue of Address Statement	20	0.05
30	Issue of Registration Certificate	15	0.04
Total		36605	

The table suggests that majority of the grievances / queries are either at regional center level or at headquarters level. Since it is not practically possible for every student to reach the headquarters, so responsibility for redressal of grievances and coordination in solving these grievances rests solely on the regional center. In order to manage these issues successfully and ensure timely and adequate solving of the student problems, steps need to be initiated in this direction.

STRATEGIES FOR MAINTENANCE OF QUALITY STANDAR

Education being a service sector, it is necessary that the expansion in the services should be commensurate to the quality of these services. Since students have varying objectives behind

pursuing programmes in the ODL mode, it is crucial that the services rendered to them are of certain quality standards that would save these students from hurdles and they are able to do their learning without any kind of interruption and inconvenience. Following strategies are being suggested for ensuring quality standards in the support services:

1. Every level in the DEI engaged in providing support services needs to identify all the activities that is required to be performed by them and accordingly establish parameters for quality standards based on response time to students against each activity.
2. Since Distance Education Council (DEC) in India is responsible for maintenance of standards in open and distance learning in the country, hence it needs to adopt quality certification mechanism in support services to develop a healthy competition amongst distance education institutions in India. It can provide accreditation to the DEIs based on their quality of support services.
3. The funding pattern needs to governed by the quality standards maintained by the DEIs.
4. Awards, prizes for the DEIs and its staff should be initiated for achieving quality standards in the support services.

India still has a long way to go in achieving the dream of democratization of quality education i.e. ensuring access and equity to quality oriented distance education for all irrespective of their location, area, socio-cultural background etc. With a vast population yet to be covered and trained through distance education mode, the objective of quality centered education seems to be difficult but not impossible if sustained efforts are put in through collaboration and networking of DEIs in India.

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