

Quality Assurance in Open, Distance and Online Education in Mauritius

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Abstract

Quality assurance in the education sector is the systematic review of educational programmes to ensure that acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being maintained. The current vision and strategic direction of many organisations has raised the importance of using technology to create flexibility in the teaching process. Quality assurance in open, distance and online education, aims at providing information to protect students from inadequate learning resources and low-quality provisions. It also aims to provide decision-makers at the governmental and institutional level with information and skills necessary to better navigate in the new higher education space. In order to ensure that the quality of this new approach to learning and teaching at tertiary level maintains the aspiration of excellence Universities need to be aware of and reflect on what it does and where changes are called for there need to be opportunities to adapt and revise. Quality is emerging as a key factor in assuring the success of online learning initiatives. Quality assurance is a difficult concept to discuss because everyone's picture of quality varies and this is particularly true of online learning. This paper will in its own way discuss the concept of quality assurance as applied to open, distance and online education.

Keywords: distance education, quality assurance, online learning

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1. INTRODUCTION

Distance education, or distance learning, is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy/andragogy, technology, and instructional systems design that are effectively incorporated in delivering education to students who are not physically "on site" to receive their education. Instead, teachers and students may communicate at times of their own choosing by exchanging printed or electronic media, or through technology that allows them to communicate in real time. Lack of supervision for continuous assessments tends to weaken the reliability of this particular education system. This issue can be addressed to some extent by adequate quality assurance procedures.

Distance education has been described as a disruptive technology—an innovation that, while initially posing no threat to established institutions, over time challenges conventional practices and contributes to new ways of thinking (Archer, Garrison, & Anderson, 1999). It has shaken up the educational establishment, especially at higher education and corporate levels. Nowadays there are major shifts in how education is being perceived, how it is designed, delivered and administered. Alongside, with rapid growth in information technology, distance education also is fast changing. On-line, web-based, delivery of information and interactions, seen by many as the key technological innovation of the last decade of the 20th century, has attracted the attention of mainstream educators to the idea of distance education in a way that no earlier technology managed to do. Furthermore it seems that such interest is likely to increase as the cost of bandwidth continues to fall, as the reach of the principal “pipes” for broad bandwidth – such as digital satellite transponders and fiber optic cable – increases, and “last mile” solutions such as digital subscriber lines and coaxial cable become more prevalent. A recent study undertaken by UNESCO (2002) recognised that open and distance learning is now a force contributing to social and economic development, and is fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of the mainstream of educational systems in both developed and developing countries.

2. DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education has been defined by the Commission on Colleges, Georgia, USA (2000), as ‘a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction occurs when student and instructor are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. Distance education may employ correspondence study, or audio, video, or computer technologies’. Because distance education is less expensive to support and is not constrained by geographic considerations, it offers opportunities in situations where traditional education has difficulty operating (Schmidt & Gallegos, 2001). Students with scheduling or distance problems can benefit, as can employees, because distance education can be more flexible in terms of time and can be delivered virtually anywhere.

Understanding the history of distance education is valuable in that it shows that the evolution of distance education has not been easy (Jeffries, 2000). Many of the same problems facing implementation and acceptance of educational innovations today have been faced by distance education throughout its history. The history of distance education could be tracked back in the united states to the early 1700s in the form of correspondence education, but technology-based distance education might be best linked to the introduction of audiovisual devices into the schools in the early 1900s.

The growth of distance learning has been stimulated in part by the interest among educators and trainers in the use of new, Internet-based and multimedia technologies, and also by the recognition that traditional ways of organising education need to be reinforced by innovative methods, if the fundamental right of all people to learning is to be realised. However, with the recent growth in web-based enhancements, distance education has taken completely different amplitude. It is not only growing very fast, but it is also changing very fast, as more attractive delivery media are coming up. Many universities have distance learning centres or are even offering same courses on both the conventional and the distance mode basis. The main issue which arises, is what about the quality of the distance education being delivered these days? Are the targeted audience getting quality education and are they making the most

of the education they are getting via distance learning? Who is protecting their interest and how can the interest of both the providers and the learners be protected to the best interest of all? Recent studies addressing this particular issue, noted that quality assurance is the key factor to ensuring quality education offered by distance education institutions and unless this is undertaken, students are likely to be misled by providers of such education.

3. QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

The growth of distance learning programs has heightened existing concerns about their quality. Although courses and programs have been offered through distance learning technologies for some time, institutions/systems of higher education, state governments, higher education coordinating and governing boards, regional and professional/ specialized accrediting agencies, and regional higher education organizations are just beginning to address the issue of quality assurance (WICHE, 1996). In countries where the open and distance learning educational systems have existed since long, quality assurance agencies have set their own guidelines for the D/E-Learning quality assurance such as the guidelines of Accreditation bodies (USA), QAA (UK). Established policies and practices provide helpful lessons to others who are developing appropriate policies.

Well structured quality assurance guidelines and accreditation systems are important tools which will provide a sound basis for ensuring quality education in open and distance learning. With these tools in place, higher education institutions will then be in a position to claim that their programmes offer quality learning experiences, governments or regulating institutions will then be able to provide the education consumers with information about how to identify quality programmes, accrediting agencies will be able to build strong quality review policies into program reviews and evaluation criteria and regional organisations will be in a position to facilitate the sharing of quality education.

Quality assurance guidelines for conventional face-to-face education system may serve as a sound foundation for distance education, but do not address even some of the main issues governing distance education. The QAA (1999) has defined a set of guidelines for institutions engaged in distance learning. These guidelines are structured around the following main issues: design principles governing the development of the learning materials, provision of appropriate training to faculties involved in distance education, provision of administrative and technical services to off-campus students, provision of adequate infrastructure and facilities through which the distance education is being provided, assessment procedures to check whether learning outcomes have been achieved, and provision of appropriate facilities to ensure that quality learning materials are being provided to students. In addition accreditation agencies also play an important role in ensuring good practice in implementing quality assurance guidelines at the level of the institution.

Many universities who are expect to follow well established quality assurance guidelines in their own country, have established distance teaching operations, seek to exploit the potential on offer to provide quality higher education to a wider audience whilst delivering economies of scale. Many of these universities make use of open and distance learning to reach out to students beyond their national boundaries, and this has been raising many issues in the countries where those students reside.

4. QUALITY ASSURANCE & DISTANCE EDUCATION IN MAURITIUS

Tertiary education in Mauritius is characterised by a wide range of institutions. Some provide all levels of tertiary education in a range of disciplines while others focus their activities on only one or two areas at certain levels. A number of the institutions are overseas with their provisions made available through the distance education mode.

The main actors involved in Quality Assurance in the tertiary sector and distance education in Mauritius are the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) and the Mauritius Qualifications Authority (MQA).

✍ Tertiary Education Commission (TEC)

As per the Education and Training (Miscellaneous Provisions Bill), April 2005 – all institutions wishing to offer post-secondary education and training should subject themselves to quality control measures administered by TEC.

The Tertiary Education Commission has as objects to promote, plan, develop and coordinate post-secondary education in Mauritius and to implement an overarching regulatory framework to achieve high international quality. It also has the responsibility to allocate government funds to the Tertiary Education Institutions under its purview and to ensure accountability and optimum use of resources. All institutions wishing to offer post-secondary education and training should subject themselves to quality control measures administered by TEC.

There are four tertiary education institutions falling under its responsibility namely The University of Mauritius, the Mauritius Institute of Education, The Mahatma Gandhi Institute and the Mauritius College of the Air, which is actually being converted to an Open University.

In addition to the above publicly-funded institutions, there are other institutions involved in the tertiary education sector namely the University of Technology, MALEM, Polytechnics... There is an estimated 35 private institutions and 50 overseas institutions/bodies are presently delivering tertiary-level programmes in Mauritius.

✍ Mauritius Qualifications Authority (MQA)

The mission of MQA is “To continuously enhance good practices & relevant expertise to safeguard public interest in quality education & training”.

All institutions, which do not fall under the responsibility of TEC, should subject themselves to the quality control measures administered by MQA. There are actually more than 300 institutions registered at the MQA.

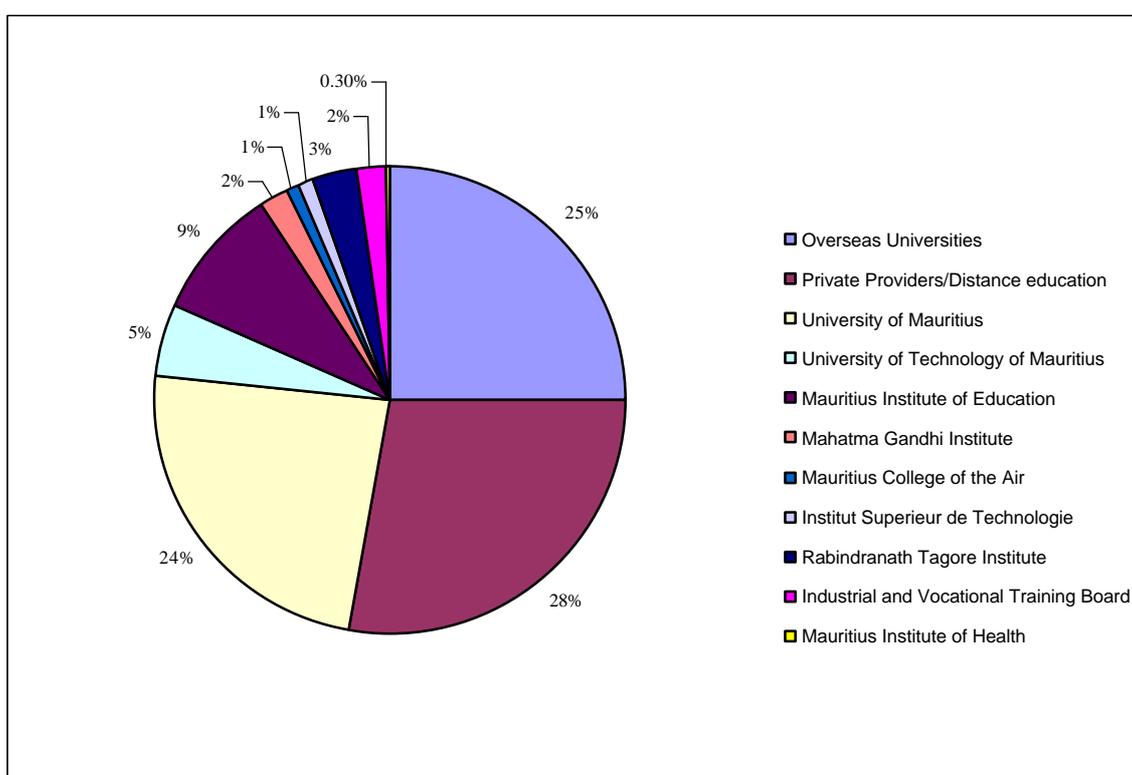
A point to be noted is that both the TEC and the MQA follow guidelines for quality assurance and accreditation according to the procedures of the awarding body.

According to TEC, there is a lack of statistics from private/distance education providers, operating in the country, owing to a lack of proper and systematic record keeping or where these are available, a reluctance from the operators to make available the information. Statistics emanate mainly from the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate (MES), which is

responsible for organizing and invigilating examinations on behalf of overseas universities and examination bodies nationally, as well as from those private organizations/institutions, which, in collaboration with overseas institutions, conduct their own examinations.

The student population engaged in tertiary level studies crossed the 26,000 mark in December, 2004 to reach 26,074 compared with 25,685 in 2003, representing a net increase in enrolment of 389 over the preceding year. The literacy rate in Mauritius has already reached 85% since year 2000. An important national priority is to increase participation in tertiary education from the present Gross Tertiary Enrolment Rate of 19.7% to about 30-35%, an objective which fits within the national strategy of developing Mauritius into a Regional Knowledge Hub and a Centre of Excellence.

Distribution of Total Tertiary Enrolment by Source, 2004



Source : <http://tec.intnet.mu>

As can be seen in the above chart, about 28% of students turn towards private providers / distance education and about 25% go abroad to overseas institutions for their education. In view of the high percentage of students having access to distance education it is very important to set up a quality assurance framework in Distance Education in Mauritius.

5. CONCERNS

More students are turning towards distance education due to the numerous advantages of this mode of delivery. But this situation is giving rise to many issues and concerns.

The main concerns are:

- ✍ The role of tutors is very important in distance education. But often these tutors are recruited on a part-time basis and they are not properly trained.
- ✍ There is a lack of control on the entry requirements for these distance education courses. Students with School Certificate and a few years experience are currently enrolled in master courses.
- ✍ Many open universities are making use of open and distance learning to reach out to students beyond their national boundaries. The degrees obtained via correspondence are not always recognised in the countries where those students reside.
- ✍ There is a lack of published information from the main stakeholders (government, private institutions concerned) about the reliability of the courses offered. As such students often devote their time and spend huge sums of money (as learning by DE is not always cheap) at their own risk.
- ✍ Once the private institutions are registered at TEC or MQA there is a lack of accountability and transparency on the part of these same institutions.
- ✍ TEC does not carry out a regular survey about the status of the students who have registered with these institutions or about those who have obtained degrees via the correspondence courses.
- ✍ In certain cases, it has been noted that the sole mode of assessment is coursework and there are no examinations. This can lead to cheating possibilities.

6. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The present study concludes that in Mauritius, like in other countries, open learning is gaining importance. More and more students over time are turning towards distance education and many educational institutions are promoting distance education via online learning platforms and through correspondence. The lack of local quality assurance guidelines in the Mauritian context results in the lack of reassurance and to some extent reliability of courses being delivered via this particular educational system.

To address the main issues and concerns about distance education, a study is being carried out under the aegis of the Commonwealth of Learning. The main objectives of this study are:

- ? To identify the main issues and concerns regarding quality assurance in distance learning in Mauritius
- ? To identify ways to address these issues from the students' perspectives and the institutional perspective
- ? To identify the role and responsibility of government and the institutions concerned in this process

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