INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY: QUALITY, ISSUES AND TRENDS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT:

This article explores current Quality Issues and trends in the field of distance learning indicate a radical shift in both instructional design and pedagogy. There is some urgency in being able to provide flexible learning opportunities without compromising the quality of instruction. And comparison in Indian institution and international, As technology evolves.

INTRODUCTION:

Distance education emerged in response to the need of providing access to those who would otherwise not be able to participate in face-to-face courses. It encompasses those programs that allow the learner and instructor to be physically apart during the learning process and maintain communication in a variety of ways (Keegan, 1986). It has evolved from correspondence schools to delivery mechanisms such as independent study, computer-based instruction, computer-assisted instruction, video courses, videoconferencing, Web-based instruction, and online learning. Technology has played a key role in changing the dynamics of each delivery option over the years, as well as the pedagogy behind distance education. Technology is responsible for distorting the concept of distance between learner and instructor, and enabling learners to access education at any time and from any place. Emerging technologies also facilitate the establishment of synchronous and asynchronous learning networks using the Internet.

The rapid growth of online distance education worldwide has prompted the need to revise delivery structures and re-think pedagogical practices that were once appropriate. As new

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technologies emerge, instructional designers and educators have unique opportunities to foster interaction and collaboration among learners, thus creating a true learning community. The existence of distance education relies on the creation of learning communities, according to Palloff and Pratt (1999). Through technology, interaction and collaboration are now attainable in either asynchronous or synchronous learning networks. The emergence of social software, software that enables a group of individuals to collaborate via the Internet, has added a new dimension to online learning. The versatility of social software and other collaboration tools available today support constructivist environments that seek to motivate, cultivate, and meet the needs of the 21st-century learner.

INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA :

 There are 14 open universities – 13 state open universities and one national Open University – Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). IGNOU now has a cumulative enrolment of about 15 lakh, offers a total of 126 programs and has a teaching staff of 325 and 1157. Distance education through correspondence courses is provided by other regular universities as well. As on date there are 119 Correspondence Course Institutes (CCIs) in conventional Universities. In 2010, open universities served only ten per cent of the total higher education enrolment, while correspondence courses constituted nearly one fifth of the total higher education enrolment. Correspondence courses must be made by universities to improve resources, delivery and modes of pedagogical assistance and assessment.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS:

comparisons: Most of the developing countries worldwide have realized the need for open universities. Developed countries such as France and UK have pioneered open and distance education. United States remains the undisputed leader in online education.

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QUALITY EDUCATION AT A DISTANCE:

The society is changing rapidly, and as educators we need to be sensitive to these changes and respond to them in a measured and thoughtful manner. As such the rules for quality education at a distance are not very different from those that work in a classroom. Since quality education is a concept that varies among individuals, it is hard to agree on a definition of quality in education. Aldag and Stearns (1991) suggest that quality is what a consumer wants from products and services and is willing to invest in. Moore and Kearsely (1996) discussed "quality assessment" as an important factor in the process of managing a distance education project. The authors stated that a distance education project should be assessed based on several factors. These include "quality of application and enrollment, student achievement, student satisfaction, faculty satisfaction, program or institutional reputation, and quality of course materials. Each of these factors reflect different aspects of quality". The most important factor for quality distance education is advanced planning. In distance education strategic planning is not an option but a necessity.

The planning process can be summarized in a five-step

• Analyzing the needs of the learner

• Designing instruction based on students' learning needs

• Developing instructional materials

• Implementing instructional sessions

• Evaluating the results systematically.

A genaral model for distance education:

• Must respond to the real needs of learners. As such, distance education is learner-   centered.

• Includes teaching and learning strategies, and activities that are based on the analysis of
   the subject matter at hand.

• Must specify teaching and learning strategies and activities in terms of cognitive and
   behavioral skills the learners need to acquire in order to master the subject matter.

• Must specify teaching and learning strategies and activities in a context familiar to
   students in order to maximize its affective appeal and motivation to learn.

• May be complex, but not complicated to implement, if students are scattered in a wide
   geographic area. Provisions for local library access, monitored tests and exams, and
   access to health-care must be provided.

TRENDS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education and advancing technologies are changing the relationships between institutes of higher learning. Just two decades ago, very few states promoted distance education, while today virtually all states have distance education programs and are promoting the use of computer-based communications for information transmission and interaction. As these new relationships develop and higher education institutes adapt to changes in educational technologies they are evolving new technological infrastructures that define the new environment. A new mainstream is developing in which the mission of higher education institutions is being defined more by the professional communities they serve than by their immediate geographic community. As distance education and traditional education converge through the use of computer-based communication technologies, students are being recognized as consumers of information that need access to that information no matter where in the world it is located. Self-motivated students will thrive in an environment that provides access to any amount of information they desire.

ISSUES IN THE CURRENT FRAMEWORK:

1. The same form and structure of degree programs: Open and distance education imparted in open universities system has evolved alternative delivery modes with a lot of edibility. However, it has retained the same form and structure, eventually culminating in a degree or diploma certification. Though this is followed to retain recognition from employers and acceptance from society, it has not made the system responsive to the dynamic developmental needs of the people.

2. Limited linkages with the workplace: The emphasis on people's education with a focus on work related skills and productivity as expected in the Report of Education Commission (1964-66) on Education and Development is yet to be achieved and built into the open and distance education system. Linking education with productivity demands linking learning with workplace based training and education for value addition.

3. Limited coverage and access: Although the existing size and the share of the open and distance education system in higher education is significant, it is still too small to support life-long learning for the citizens of the country.

4. Lack of access to media: Study texts form the main study materials for a large majority of students. Pedagogical use of various electronic media is yet very limited.

5. Lack of coordination: There is an overlap of target groups to be covered by the open schooling and open and distance higher education. The latter is for mature adults

and many open universities have reduced the age criteria from 21 years to 18 years to enable open admission for preparatory courses essential for admission to open degree programs, for those who have not class twelve graduates. Since open schools also cater to mature adults, it is essential to have coordination amongst the school and higher education programs to cater to diverse needs of mature adults.

CONCLUSIONS:

As distance educators seek to improve the quality of online courses, they face the challenge of meeting the needs of a diverse population that is more mobile and technology-savvy than any previous generation. The 21st-century learner requires educational opportunities not bound by time or place, yet allow interaction with the instructor and peers. Voice and videoconferencing, whiteboards, live presentation tools, application sharing, chats, and emails are just a few of the many tools available for interaction and collaboration. Blogs, wikis, and podcasts, as well as social software are emerging technologies that foster the sense of connectedness between the members of a group.

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