Staff Training and Development at Open and Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT   *Human life has two aspects. 1. Biological aspect of human life is maintained and transmitted by nutrition and reproduction, 2. Sociological aspect maintained and transmitted by education. Education is important for both the individual and the society. The more the human beings become educated, the finer persons they turn to be, the better families they establish, the healthier they are, the better work they do and the more progressive and stable communities. Hence the educational institutes try to impart qualitative and quantitative education. An institute/ university may be conventional or distance mode, but it aims to impart qualitative education to the large number of people. The elements involving in this process are, the teachers, the learners, the materials, the procedure, educational leaders, policy makers and so on. But in any system of education, teachers have pivotal role and are the key players. Though teaching is considered to be the noblest of all professions, it requires keenness, intelligence, practical skills and a high sense of duty and integrity. The more active, influential, resourceful and competent is the teacher; the more effective and useful is the education. The role of teachers as key players is much more important at Open and Distance education system. The present paper deals with the concept of Open and Distance education, Quality assurance of ODL and some suggestions for staff training and development.*

Key Words :   Open and Distance Learning, Quality Assurance, Staff Training and Development and Quality Assurance.

Introduction

Education is important to the both individual and society. Literacy has become a necessary prerequisite for appearing in public without shame and fully functioning in society. Particularly the demand for education is especially high in the developing world. Distance education is able to deal with large numbers more cost-effectively than traditional education and has proved to do so also in developing countries. It promotes educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realize their ambitions and fulfil their potential. *1

Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

Today two terms that are being used almost inter-changeably are 'Open Learning' and 'Distance Education' and they are often combined to be known as Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Open learning is a philosophy and Distance Education is the mode used for translating it into reality as the two are complementary to each other.

The Open University is open to people, places, methods and ideas. For most courses there are no previous qualifications required to study, one has to be aged 18 when joins the course starts but there is no upper age limit. Now-a-days all the conventional universities are being encouraged to take up distance education programme and every state is establishing an open university.*2. So, single mode (Open Universities), and dual mode institutions (Conventional and Distance mode)

are came into existence to provide quantity and quality in education.India has one of the largest Distance Education systems in the world, second only to China. There are the following types of institutions offering Distance Education today:

• National Open University

• State Open Universities

• Distance Education Institutions (DEIs) at-

  - Institutions of National Importance

  - Central Universities

  - State Universities

  - Deemed to be Universities

  - State Private Universities

• DEIs at Stand alone Institutions

  - Professional Associations

  - Government Institutions

  - Private institutions

Growth of ODL system

The growth of distance education has been exponential over the last four decades in our country. With the establishment of Dr BR Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad in 1982, a new chapter in the distance education system began when full-fledged Open University with the mandate to provide distance education was established. This was followed by the establishment of Indira Gandhi National Open University in 1985. The 17 Open Universities on date have a strong network of about 11000 study centres and about 70,000 academic counsellors to support the learning needs of students. The Open Universities offer all kinds of programmes ranging from vocational togeneral to professional to technical*17. Distance mode programmes in dual mode Universities started with the Delhi University which started offering programmes as correspondence courses in the year 1962. As on date there are about 250 distance education institutions in the dual mode universities and institutions which are offering programmes through distance mode There are about 22 lakhs students who have enrolled in the DEIs of dual mode universities.

ODL occupies a special place in the Indian higher education system because of its major contribution in enhancing the gross enrolment ratio and democratization of higher education to large segments of the Indian population particularly to reach out to the unreached and to meet the demands of lifelong learning which has become more of a necessity in the knowledge society.

Quality Assurance

Quality is a characteristic of the products and services an organisation offers. In the context of education, 'quality' has been placed high on the agenda of educational leaders, policy makers, and practitioners, and is in line with consumers ever increasing demand for quality education.Quality Assurance has been defined as "systematic management and assessment procedures 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). To be simple quality assurance involves pro-active measures taken to avoid faults. At a practical level, quality assurance involves a continuous cycle that comprises setting standards for a key activity, carrying out the activity, judging achievements against the standards, planning for improvement and taking action to implement desired changes. For this, RPTIM (Readiness, Planning, Training, Implementation and Maintenance) model is

best for identifies what happens before, after and during the planning and training and specifies the practices that should be used in designing staff development programs.

Quality Assurance Techniques in ODL

Over the past few years, there has been significant growth of quality assurance (QA) activities aimed towards improving higher education on institutional, national, regional and global levels. Numerous reports have been published to share ideas, experiences, and articulate the 'how and how not to' and 'best practices' of QA implementation in Distance Education contexts from around the world (Deshpande&Mugridge, 1994; Tait, 1997). The major quality assurance methods in most open and distance learning programmes are, peer review, performance indicators, customer feedback and a philosophy of continuous improvement.The experience of the Open University in the United Kingdom provides a number of examples of long-standing quality assurance activities that have become standard practice in a number of distance teaching universities around the world. These include: the course team, who collaboratively and without hierarchy work and rework drafts of materials; developmental testing of course materials before general availability; monitoring of correspondence teaching; monitoring of learner assignment turnaround times; inspecting and supporting tutorial and counselling staff face-to-face activities; and collecting feedback from learners.*4

Staff Training and Development

Since the roles of the distance education lecturer are crucial to the success of the distance education programmes, there is need to ensure that the lecturers are adequately prepared for these roles through quality initiatives. Beaudoin (1990: 21) argues that teachers used to traditional education practices have to "acquire new skills to assume expanded roles not only to teach distance education learners, but also to organise instructional resources suitable in content and format for independent study". One way of achieving quality in ODL is providing training and regular in-service education for lecturers to ensure that they can cope with the technological developments in open and distance learningby the following ways:

- Teaching in virtual environments demands mastery of several teaching competencies. Although the most accepted ones are pedagogical, in order to successfully teach online it becomes necessary to acquire and develop some other competencies, sometimes referred to as peripheral roles (social, evaluator, manager, technologist, advisor/counsellor, personal, and researcher) (Denis et al., 2004). So, professional development programmes should be based on a balance between central and peripheral roles to better train online teachers and increase the quality of their teaching.*5

- Though we are discussing about online, e-learning and MOOC, unless teaching assistance is available, it is not easy to afford online students the same right to speak as campus students.*6. So, the ODL institutes should provide live e- content classes or online discussions on the material provided to them. And for this the staff should be through and consideration of practice and performance for teacher teams and individual teachers to encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing.

- Extensive evidence of quality teaching for the teachers should be gathered by using peer assistance and review programs.

Because the researches indicate that partially Online courses will be satisfactory than fully online courses. Though convenience is there at fully online courses, but interaction will be lacking. Students will be benefited with partial online courses. *7

- Teachers who are more effective in increasing student engagement, learning and achievement should be identified and certification should be provided. The best practices of Effective administrator and teacher leadership, Job-embedded professional development and professional learning communities should be taken care of because, in an investigation of faculty perspectives on barriers, incentives, and benefits of the OER, the faculty opinion to publishing their course materials for free within open educational resources (OER) is positive in nature but legal issues were perceived as an obstacle to effective application.*8.

- The research on professional development for teachers has shifted in the last decade from delivering and evaluating professional learning and the conditions that support it. (Webster-Wright, 2009). Staff development can be viewed as the activities and programs (formal and informal and on or off campus) that help staff members learn about responsibilities, develop required skills and competencies necessary to accomplish institutional and divisional goals and purposed, and grow personally and professionally to prepare themselves for advancement in the institution or beyond the campus. *10 Professional development orientation and workshops to make teachers to be more effective should be provided. More experienced or senior staff those are trained in open and distance

learning techniques can be assists the new or junior staff.

Other Suggestions

- Training of both new and existing staff in open and distance learning programmes is essential to the development of the competencies. The universities should feel that training as an investment rather than a cost, and give high priority in organisational plans and funding allocations.

- Taking new roles by the staff, especially if open and distance learning is unfamiliar. And make clear role descriptions, expectations and reporting lines.

- Adapting to new ways of teaching and communicating.

- Using new technologies which alter familiar processes of teaching and communication.

- Providing training how to be responsible for supporting learners at a distance through induction and orientation.

- Developing better skills in teamwork, co-ordination, and the management of schedules and records.

- All staff periodically should get training to ensure maintenance of skills and standards and their continuing professional development.

- Courses on the aspects of open and distance learning should be studied by the staff.

- The effectiveness and efficiency of training programmes should be evaluated.

- Practice exercise by the staff on the aspect of the major issues facing organisations in assuring quality, the strategies and techniques available for assuring quality should be organised.

- Successful Collaboration, focus on student learning, continuous teacher learning, teacher authority to make decisions

regarding curriculum, the processes of their own learning, and aspects of school governance.

- Opportunities for face-to-face meetings.
- Frequent performance monitoring and review.
- Continual updating on changes in policies and procedures.

Conclusion

Without good teachers even the best system of education is bound to fail, whereas with good teachers the defects of the system can be largely overcome. So, well-coordinated and systematic step by-step processes of staff induction, staff development, caring for staff, adequate funding and results based incentives were vital to quality in an ODL institution.

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