

Performance Indicators for self-evaluation and quality enhancement

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Introduction

Internationalization of higher education following the breakdown of political barriers, excess demand for higher education, advent of free market economy and information communication technology led to “massification” of higher education. Explosion of the education system which has been fairly stable till the end of 19th Century and exponential growth of distance education and on-line education posed a threat to the quality of higher education.

Some stakeholders see the proliferation of Distance Education providers and the emergence of borderless tertiary education as a welcome relief. Others, while acknowledging the necessity of using distance education to promote equity and access, perceive the unregulated growth as a threat to the quality of distance higher education. The emergence of new types of tertiary education heralds important changes in the quality assurance needs and practices. “It is doubtful that the philosophy, principles and standards customarily applied in evaluating and accrediting campus based programmes can be used without major adjustments for assessing the quality and effectiveness of on-line courses and other modalities of distance education. Appropriate and reliable accreditation and evaluation processes are needed to assure the public that courses, programmes and degrees offered by the new type of distance education institutions meet acceptable academic and professional standards” (World Bank 2002). Also “very few developing nations have established accreditation and evaluation systems nor do they have access to necessary information on the quality of foreign programmes” (World Bank 2002). The countries that cannot afford to or do not have the capacity to develop their own systems should have the opportunity to participate in international accreditation and evaluation networks. There is a need for key competency standards and assessment standards set up a university recognized set of indicators against which all learning can be evaluated which will enable learners to have their achievements recognized across countries.

In this context it is an urgent need to have a common, quality assurance framework and an international evaluation process for quality assurance in distance higher education including procedures for quality audits, evaluation, review and accreditation of distance higher education institutions/programmes, which would guide the Nations in ensuring their people get a meaningful and quality education.

Quality Assurance (QA) System for Distance Higher Education

Performance Indicators for Quality Assurance

Quality assurance systems for distance higher education have been developed by many institutions in different parts of the world, both developed and developing. Most of the quality assurance processes involve external monitoring that emphasize accountability rather than continuous improvement. In view of the accountability issues and reducing the time and costs towards the QA activities agencies are looking at ways to move beyond external quality processes towards self assessment that promotes growth and sustenance of a culture of quality within institutions, particularly within the new

and emerging open and distance learning systems. Elements for such a culture include continuous monitoring and evaluation becoming part of all processes and systems and a device to make institutions reflect on their practice and commit to a continuous quest for excellence.

Every academic institution in its efforts towards actualizing its goals evolves its own functional modalities. These modalities represent the institution's characteristics and reflects its distinct environment. The goals of distance higher education institutions are varied and multi leveled. It has the specific purpose of preparing students coming from different cultural, social and academic contexts. As distance higher education institutions operates within a larger framework comprising of several agencies and national contexts and societal expectations each of these have a unique rendition of the goals. At the functional level, the effectiveness of the distance higher education institution is reflected in the extent to which all these layers of goals mutually concur. It was therefore felt that it is required to develop a QA process using Performance Indicators (PIs) which will help the institutions assure the quality of its processes leading to improvement. If this has to happen it is important that every one in the institution understand the process and undertake continuous and periodical introspection and reflection on the processes facilitating improvements. With this in the background it was felt that an appropriate model which could guide the distance higher education institutions through the QA process on a continual basis is made available It is expected to assist institutions

1. in prompt additional inquiry and filed data/information to measure the process and outcomes of the programme and make necessary adjustments and improvements for quality improvement.
2. as an appropriate tool for monitoring the processes for continuous learning and ongoing improvement.
3. in comparing and contrasting using the information across the institutions and countries for effectively identifying those aspects and processes that have a potential for improvement.

An important tool that would contribute to sustenance as well as enhancement of quality, particularly which can help Distance Higher Education Institutions in self-appraisal for continuous quality improvement is Performance Indicators.

Development of Performance Indicators (PIs)

Over a period of more than two years, Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP) of Sri Lanka, in partnership with Commonwealth of Learning (COL) developed Accreditation Standards' and Performance Indicators Distance Higher Education Institutions and for Programmes in Sri Lanka through a series of national and international workshops (Coomaraswamy Uma and Abeywardena N.S., 2007; Coomaraswamy Uma, Kondapalli Rama and Abeywardena N.S., 2008). The performance indicators developed build on all principles which apply generally to higher education and relate those principles to distance learning provision. They are generic statements made in such a way that they ensure comprehensive coverage of the most relevant domains of the quality and distance higher education institutions. Most of the performance indicators are a combination of inputs, processes and outcomes but are largely process based. They can be adapted for use by conventional systems and other levels of education. As the work progressed, other international agencies and institutions were invited to share their experiences to add value to the on-going PI development process. It became apparent that many developing countries are facing challenges in assessing the quality of distance education programmes. Following the success of the Quality Assurance Tool Kit for Teacher Education Institutions (NAAC – COL 2008), COL realized the potential of the use of PIs for quality assessment of distance higher education institutions and decided to internationalize the PIs developed by Sri Lanka for use across Commonwealth. The PIs were revised at a Pre-PCF5 workshop in July 2008 by a team of Distance Education and Quality Assurance Experts from Canada, Hong Kong, India, Jamaica, Malaysia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, South Africa, Sri Lanka, United Kingdom and UNESCO to make them internationally applicable.

The PIs were field tested in a number of institutions to test their usefulness and applicability in different institutional contexts. As stated earlier PIs are generic statements that can be adapted for use by conventional systems, specialized areas in higher education or even other levels of education. The adaptability of the tool with appropriate modifications to a specialized discipline is illustrated by its

application to Agriculture in Higher Educational Institutions through a interactive workshop in September 2008 with experts from Bangladesh, Canada, India, Kenya, Mauritius, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka and Uganda. The experiences were also captured as case studies in distance higher education institution across the Commonwealth to be published in due course.

Structure of the Performance Indicators

The performance indicators for distance higher education institutions are arranged under ten 'Criteria' and those of programmes under six criteria representing the various dimensions of practice. The scope of each Criterion is defined and expanded in a number of specific Criteria Standards which area in fact 'Accreditation Standards. The Criteria Standards are further split into performance indicators which are actual micro-events which could be measured quantitatively or qualitatively. For facilitating the application and use of PIs, each of them have been provided with sources of evidence (records/documents/interaction) and performance measure on a five-point scale. The Criteria or Key Areas of Distance Higher Education Institutions and Programmes, number of criteria standards for each criterion and the number of PIs for each standard are presented in Table 1 and 2.

Table 1 – List of Criteria indicating the number of criteria standards and performance indicators for Institutions

	Criteria	Number of Criteria Standards	Number of performance indicators
1	Vision, mission and planning	21	54
2	Management, leadership and organizational culture	27	79
3	The learners	7	19
4	Human resource and development	7	22
5	Programme design and development	13	33
6	Course design and development	13	37
7	Learner support	15	49
8	Learner assessment	12	38
9	Infrastructure and learning resources	8	35
10	Research consultancy and extension services	7	20

Table 2 –List of Criteria indicating the number of criteria standards and performance indicators for Programmes

Criteria		Number of Criteria Standards	Number of performance indicators
1	Institutional planning and Management	33	97
2	Programme design and development	13	33
3	Course design and development	13	37
4	Infrastructure and learning resources	7	22
5	Learner support and Progression	15	49
6	Learner assessment and Evaluation	12	38

Using the PIs as A Tool for Quality Assessment

The PIs are designed to enable institutions to:

1. conduct a summative self-evaluation of the performance of their processes in order to make necessary adjustments and changes for quality improvement; and
2. monitor the processes for continuous learning and ongoing improvement.

In this way, the PIs can help to achieve uniform standards and guide institutional agendas to address more directly the requirements for quality provision and to meet the expressed needs of learners.

The PIs can be used for assessment of a specific practice or process within the distance education programme/institution; an entire programme; or the entire institution.

An institution may choose to conduct a comprehensive self-assessment against all the Criteria or select a particular one. The selected aspect could be a regular activity in the institution or an innovative practice. The first step is to collect data and information about the activity. The PIs will help in indicating the kinds of data to be recorded while implementing the activity. On the basis of the analysis of the collected data, the institution will be able to position its performance in respect of that aspect on a five point quality scale. This will enable the institution to evaluate its performance objectively and identify the areas where improvement is required. The systematic documentation of the institutional effort reveals the strengths and nuances in the institutional processes. The information collected is also useful to inform future implementation strategies.

Each institution has distinct characteristics that dictate which internal processes are appropriate at a given time. Over a period of time, each institution must develop its own specific performance indicators and these need to be dynamic, changing from time to time as the organization evolves.

The greatest advantage of the application of PIs in self-appraisal is that they can be amended to meet specific institutional requirements. This flexibility allows an institution to set its own targets to improve effectiveness and efficiency and achieve excellence in performance.

Any inaccuracy or inconsistency in the identification and definition of the PIs or the appropriate sources of evidence will become apparent when they are actually used for assessment of the processes. Thus there is a need to continuously analyse and research the PIs and their application for quality improvement in the particular context.

The Benefits accrued by using the PIs framework for Self-assessment and Continuous improvement are as given below:

- Comprehensive investigation of organizational learning
- Coherent curriculum
- Identify realistic and challenging issues for improving policy and performance
- Make extensive use of external and internal data for improving or introduction of course and programmes
- Recognize institutional limitations
- Enable institution monitor progress and initiate timely remedial/corrective measures.
- Provides guidance to various aspects of institutional planning
- Assist in understanding objectively the success and failures of the various institutional activities/processes
- Sharing a common understanding of the institutional Goals
- Implementing effective support mechanisms to enable independent and self learning
- Position institutions to achieve their best

Challenges

It would be useful to continuously re-examine the PIs to ensure their relevance for quality sustenance and enhancement. Further it would also be essential to look at the whole process – How it can be improved? What happens between and after reviews? How can self-audit and external-audit be used to monitor the standards without burdening the institutions? Triangulate qualitative and quantitative information for generating comprehensive, valid and reliable data on all aspects of the programme and appropriately use it for decision making and continuous improvement. For this it is essential that we have a process in place to review the validity of the existing PIs and develop new ones on a continual basis. The Perceived Challenges for Implementation of such processes and use of PI's from the experiences of some of the institutions both in the context of the Institution and the Nation are given below:

- Availability of practioners who can use the PIs by basing their approach on a well founded theory.
- Lack of effective interactions and networking within the institutional constituencies and with other national and international institutions and regulatory agencies.
- Availability of Coherent policies at all levels
- Providing proper funding and facilities
- Issues of accountability to Funding agencies, students and society
- Databases – Keeping the data current and relevant
- Technology Deployment and Use
- Professional development and training of staff
- Teacher quality including Qualifications, Teaching methods, Research activities, publications and experience and workload policies
- Resistance to Quality Assurance implementation as an institutional practice or activity as it is perceived as a threat or increased documentation and workload
- Fear of using the outcome as a punitive measure both by the staff in terms of Promotions, retrenchments etc. and by the institutions in terms of reduced funding.
- Lack of clarity on issues such as Commitment, Empowerment, Accountability etc.
- Non-negotiable external requirements

Conclusions

Quality assurance in all features of distance higher education provisions will not only provide a guarantee to the distant learner on the relevance of the provisions but also establishes connections between various activities thereby informing and improving the practice. In other words QA is a positive collective and inclusive approach to ensure effectiveness of the institutional processes by generating or improving the existing processes so as to provide relevant continuance and modifications in the institutional functioning. Such a process should be an integral part of the overall functioning of the institutions. Thus each institution need to evolve its own internal processes to continuously ensure such quality concern in its functioning and adopt ramifications or even corrections

when needed. The process has to be part of the institutions continuous concern for maintaining quality and wherever possible enhance it.

The PIs are a beginning to bring in Uniform quality at least within National Contexts and position ODL institutions and their agendas in such a way that they address more directly the quality provision and the expressed needs of the stakeholders across borders. Each PIs thus implicitly or explicitly is concerned with looking at the developmental aspects of the provision in the context of quality.

Reference

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