

## **Implementation of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Policy in Open Distance Learning Teacher Education Programs in Pakistan**

Muhammad Ajmal\*

### **Abstract**

The study aimed to explore the existing practices in the implementation of accreditation and quality assurance measures of teacher education programs running through open distance learning in Pakistan and to probe dichotomy or policy disconnects in proposed implementation of an external accreditation and quality assurance system for teacher education program through distance education institutions. Currently the Higher Education Commission (HEC), a regulatory body of higher education is responsible for accreditation and quality assurance in higher education institutions in Pakistan. The National Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (NACTE) has been given authority to develop certain mandatory standards to be practiced by all higher education institutions of the country. It is found that distance education institutions of the country are also governed by the same accreditation and quality assurance rules/regulations which are in vogue for other higher education institutions of the formal education system that indicates an enormous dichotomy or policy disconnect. This research guided appropriate direction towards the implementation of the quality assurance and the accreditation process for institutions running through open and distance learning system.

**Keywords:** Open Distance Learning, Quality Assurance, Accreditation

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\* Associate Professor, Chairman Department of Distance and Non-Formal Education, Allama Iqbal Open University, Email :drajmal@aiou.edu.pk

## Introduction

Countries world-wide are paying greater attention to the regulation and promotion of quality within their higher education sectors. They have good reasons to do so. According to Blackmur (2007), governments' regulation of higher education quality is often associated with policies aimed at promoting economic development and equity, increasing accountability and transparency, responding to public opinion, preventing market failure, or protecting consumers. Faced with rapid globalization and economic uncertainty, governments and educational leaders also endeavor to ensure that the quality of their higher education systems meets international standards, and does so at minimal cost. An in-depth study of distance education institutional perceptions and practices related to accreditation and quality assurance policy could help to create a better understanding of the possible opportunities and potential challenges to implementing an accreditation system or emergence of any other type of quality assurance system for distance learning programs. This study can help to guide stakeholders and policymakers in distance learning programs in deciding whether the accreditation and quality assurance system should be revoked, amended, or implemented as it is. Additionally, research findings show that aspects of institutional culture, such as leadership perceptions and actions, may be more important in bringing about change and improvements in quality than establishing or adopting external standards and processes, and that attitudes, beliefs, and actions of key institutional personnel play a central role in determining whether accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms succeed or fail (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005). It makes sense to resolve or at least become aware of these contextual issues prior to developing and implementing a quality assurance system. Mizikaci (2006) advocates a three-pronged model for developing and implementing quality systems in higher education institutions.

A study on implementation of accreditation and quality assurance measures can prove to be valuable for policy makers to develop a completely different system for accreditation and quality assurance for non-formal/distance learning system in Pakistan. Additionally, the study can provide a starting point for Higher Education Commission (HEC) to develop a common position on the issue of quality assurance. Taken together with future studies involving other stakeholders and aspects of the issue, the study can contribute to the data needed by policymakers to develop and implement a workable and effective accreditation and quality assurance scheme for the distance education institutions of Pakistan. Quality Assurance (QA) standards may be constructed on principles which apply generally to higher education, regardless of

approach and level, and relate those principles to distance learning provision. They are general statements of good practice made in such a way that they safeguard comprehensive coverage of relevant domains of quality in distance higher education institutions.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Currently, the Higher Education Commission, (HEC) a regulatory body of higher education is responsible for accreditation and quality assurance in higher education institutions in Pakistan. The Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has been given authority to impose certain mandatory standards to be practiced by all higher education institutions of the country. It may be highlighted that distance education institutions of the country are also governed by the same accreditation and quality assurance rules/regulations which are in vogue for other higher education institutions of the formal education system that indicates an enormous dichotomy or policy disconnect. There is a need to undertake research to guide policy makers and stakeholders to the best appropriate direction forward in this regard. The decision to amend, revoke or to implement accreditation and quality assurance policy needs to be informed by a clear understanding of how accreditation and quality assurance is currently perceived and practiced in distance education institutions, one of the major stakeholders in education in Pakistan.

The information can promote understanding of some of the key issues relevant to the design and implementation of a viable accreditation and quality assurance system for distance education institutions in Pakistan.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To explore the existing practices for implementation of accreditation and quality assurance mechanism in open and distance education institutions in Pakistan.
2. To determine the efficacy of the prevailing accreditation and quality assurance system in open and distance education institutions in Pakistan.
3. To probe any dichotomy or policy disconnects in proposed implementation of an external accreditation and quality assurance system for distance education institutions.
4. To recommend measures to implement accreditation and quality assurance strategies in institutions of open and distance education.

### **Research Questions**

1. How are accreditation and quality assurance conceptualized in Pakistan's distance education institutions?

2. How do Pakistan's distance education institutions currently implement accreditation measures and assure (assess, monitor, improve) quality?
3. How do academic leaders in Pakistan's the distance education institutions regard the proposed implementation of an external accreditation and quality assurance system?
4. What implications do these conceptual and contextual issues have for the implementation of accreditation and quality assurance measures proposed for distance education institutions by Pakistan's Higher Education Commission?

### **Methodology of the Study**

This qualitative study used a case study approach. Multiple sites (individual cases/institutions) were studied to gain insight into the larger case which is Pakistan's distance education institutions. Pakistan's Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) was taken as the case study. The researcher used interviews of academic leaders and analysis of documents related to institutional policies and practices in this regard. The study has been designed as a multiple case study dealing with the distance education institutions of Pakistan, thus, the results of this study are only generalizable to the Pakistan context and its unique political, socio-economic, and cultural realities, especially in distance education institutions. Furthermore, only academic administrators at the level of Deans, Heads of Departments, and persons directly involved in implementation of accreditation and quality assurance activities or initiatives were included in the population. Participation of other key stakeholder groups within institutions such as faculty, students, and staff were included in the study.

### **Review of Related Literature**

The Distance Learning /Online/Virtual system is being considered as an economical and convenient way of giving an obtaining education. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) enable teaching and learning is becoming an important component of higher education. A growing number of institutions and companies are providing education through the internet. This is giving rise to new providers of higher education and leads to a global market for online higher education. Education is becoming borderless, as it now no longer knows territorial or state boundaries. Communications have provided powerful tools of knowledge. Distance Learning (DL) focuses on teaching methods and technologies with the aim of delivering teaching, often on an individual

basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional educational setting such as a classroom.

Comparatively dense populations in developing countries increasingly boost the need to explore unconventional solutions for education and, in this scenario, only distance education allows students from anywhere in the world to study at home. The main purpose of the institutions which started distance education is to deliver education at a distance to promote study.

The biggest and best example of a distance learning institution in Pakistan is the Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU). In Pakistan the open and distance education system is growing rapidly. HEC has planned and developed distance education directorates<sup>†</sup>. The official letter gave many formal institutions the impetus to start distance education programs. The establishment of the Allama Iqbal Open University (1974) and the Virtual University (2002) by the Government of Pakistan has opened up vast opportunities to increase the number of students who cannot afford formal education because of family, age, monetary or other considerations.

Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU, 2006) is the world's second Open University and the first of its kind in Asia. The idea of an open university in Pakistan was announced in the 1970-1980 Education Policy statement (Ministry of Education, 1972).

### **AIOU Regional Network**

Regional Services are a unique feature of AIOU that make distance learning different from the formal system. The regional network consists of 48 Regional Campuses and centers with part time regional coordinating offices in different parts of the country to provide guidance to the regional centers. The Directorate of Regional Services established 105 Study Centers in collaboration with well-known private institutions where guidance is provided to students of Computer Science, IT, Business Administration, Physics, Mathematics and Chemistry. Gujjar, (2009). Rashid (2003) stated that study centers at different places help to meet student academic needs. Zaidi (2008) recommended that AIOU regional centers should appoint tutors on merit and should intimate tutors in time and there should be need of comprehensive training of tutors for the betterment of tutorial support system.

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<sup>†</sup> via letter No-Ref. DG (QAA)/HEC/DDE/2015/392 Dated 9.7.2015.

## **Quality Enhancement Cell**

The Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) was established at AIOU, on 14 May, 2007. The purpose of this quality enhancement cell is to enhance education through active management of standards and quality of programs. Its mandate is to enhance quality assurance procedures and evaluation techniques so AIOU's quality may be developed. Quality assurance work entails curriculum development, course and staff development together with research and other activities. AIOU's quality Assurance Cell also uses Academic Audits to check the content delivery process by the faculty members to provide quality education in a particular department (Awan & Ali, 2006).

## **E-Learning Framework**

In AIOU, OLIVE is being introduced for distance learners. OLIVE is an online model which is developed to get the support of teaching and research faculty from abroad. Through OLIVE blended and e-learning is also being promoted. To make education more comprehensive and fruitful, multimedia courseware is seen as vital by OLIVE and multimedia CDs have been distributed in 25 cities where students are studying under various OLIVE delivery models. With the use of OLIVE multilingual multimedia content, the content of many courses is now delivered. Three e-learning models are also being used on OLIVE framework for distance learners.

## **Self- Instructional Materials, Assignments and Final Examinations**

Self-instructional materials include the following items: Course books/Reading material, Study guide, Assignment, Tutorial schedule, Radio/TV schedule, General student guide, and Assignments forms. AIOU's correspondence materials consist of a self-learning study package and supplementary study materials (Jumani, Rahman, Iqbal and Chishti, 2011).

In AIOU two methods of evaluation are being used, namely formative (assignments) and summative (final examination) evaluation. The weightage for course assignments and final examinations is 30:70 respectively and the minimum required marks to pass the assignments and final examination are 40 %. The tutors evaluate the student assignments and final examinations which are held at the end of each semester are marked by the faculty members related to the course (AIOU, 2007).

In the global scenario, the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is a recently introduced concept in distance learning. According to this concept, a distance learning program must be designed in a way that all stakeholders get maximum knowledge and benefit from it. Many universities in the USA, Canada, Mexico, Europe and Asia have offered partnership with MOOC providers. Including all other facilities, one of the special features of this program is to provide an interactive user forum that ultimately brings together all stakeholders. There are other initiatives in which distance education institutions assimilate virtual learning platforms into lesson plans and also work together with other universities to replicate this initiative at schools globally.

Distance education online/virtual offerings may have numerous dimensions. It may be material-based or entirely online. Education may be provided by adjunct faculty or through franchised local institutions. There may be separation between instructor and learner, and between learner and learning resources. Interaction between learner and instructor may be conducted through one or more media. The process may employ a multiple set of delivery methods in learning, such as written material, interactive audio and video, computer, and other technologies. Teaching may be 'off' or 'on' campus. Each of these may be used alone or in combination. It may also employ real-time interaction between learner and instructor. The institution may be totally virtual when it undertakes all its operations online. Traditional higher education institutions may operate a dual mode system combining the traditional system and the virtual modes.

As higher education shifts from being primarily a private enterprise to taking on significant public importance, countries world-wide are paying greater attention to the regulation and promotion of quality within their higher education sectors. They have good reasons to do so. According to Blackmur (2007), governments' regulation of higher education quality is often associated with policies aimed at promoting economic development and equity, increasing accountability and transparency, responding to public opinion, preventing market failure, or protecting consumers. Faced with rapid globalization and economic uncertainty, governments and educational leaders also endeavor to ensure that the quality of their higher education systems meets international standards, and does so at minimal cost.

## Findings

This study explored the conceptual issues (e.g. the values, beliefs, and attitudes of major decision-makers within institutions regarding the concept(s) of quality, purpose(s) of higher education, and approaches to quality assurance), as well as contextual issues (e.g. institutional infrastructure, guiding policies, current practices, and the historical, political and socioeconomic environment in which institutions operate).

This in-depth study of distance education institutional perceptions and practices related to accreditation and quality assurance measures helped to create a better understanding of the possible opportunities for and potential challenges to implementing an accreditation system or emergence of any other type of quality assurance system for distance learning programs. This study provided guidelines for stakeholders and policy-makers in distance learning programs to decide whether the accreditation and quality assurance system should be revoked, amended, or implemented.

Additionally, research findings showed that aspects of institutional culture, such as leadership perceptions and actions, may be more important in bringing about change and improvements in quality than establishing or adopting external standards and processes, and that attitudes, beliefs, and actions of key institutional personnel play a central role in determining whether accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms succeed or fail (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005).

It made sense to resolve or at least become aware of these contextual issues prior to developing and implementing a quality assurance system. Mizikaci (2006) advocates model for developing and implementing quality systems in higher education institutions. She recommends, as a first step, that the current state of the institution be described and that stakeholders' needs and expectations be assessed. This exercise entails an exploration of both conceptual issues (e.g. the values, beliefs, and attitudes of major decision-makers within institutions regarding the concept(s) of quality, purpose(s) of higher education, and approaches to quality assurance), as well as contextual issues (e.g. institutional infrastructure, guiding policies, current practices, and the historical, political and socioeconomic environment in which institutions operate).

It is found that the country's distance education institutions are also governed by the same accreditation and quality assurance rules/regulations which exist in other higher education institutions of the formal education system that indicates an enormous dichotomy or policy disconnect. There is a need to undertake research to guide policy makers



and stakeholders to the best appropriate direction forward in this regard. The decision to amend, revoke or to implement accreditation and quality assurance policy needs to be informed by a clear understanding of how accreditation and quality assurance is currently perceived and practiced in distance education institutions, one of Pakistan's major education stakeholders.

This study promoted understanding of some of the key issues relevant to the design and implementation of a viable accreditation and quality assurance system for distance education institutions in Pakistan.

The findings of study reflected that there was no instrument available with NACTE to evaluate the distance education institutions, and the existing evaluation tools are no fit for ODL institutions.

### **Recommendations**

- The study recommended developing a separate tool for quality assurance and accreditation of ODL institutions. It is further recommended that a new tool for quality assurance and accreditation of teacher education programs may be developed by involving all the stakeholders of ODL system. There are some parameters provided by HEC for ODL directorates in terms of ODL facilities and practices.
- Quality Assurance is not a one-time action or set of one-time arrangements but it should entail constant self-assessment and enhancement. The existing QEC may also assume the QA responsibility for the distance learning programs and, in the rapidly evolving open distance education environment, policy must be constantly reviewed and adopted or new policies developed to accommodate changes in ODL practice, such as increased use of information technology and communication technologies (ICT). It is problematic to apply established educational policy to distance education environment without adapting it to be the context.
- It is important that the policy governing distance education and its operation in an educational system be kept consistent and up to date. Policies governing the use of distance and blended modalities should, therefore, be reviewed at the conclusion of each course offered through distance modalities, and adjustments/amendments to the distance courses offering(s) should be planned prior to the next courses offering.
- The decision to amend, revoke or implement an accreditation and quality assurance policy needs to be informed by a clear understanding of how accreditation and quality assurance is currently

perceived and practiced in distance education institutions, one of Pakistan's major education stakeholders in education.

- Prerequisite Facilities for ODL Programs should be made compulsory for any institution starting a program in the ODL system
- Standards for institutions to offer distance learning programs should be developed by the Higher Education Commission. Online/virtual programs should have standards for programs to be offered. Infrastructure and ICT Facilities standards for distance learning should be developed.
- Student support services for distance learning /online/virtual programs should be confirmed. Standards for distance program delivery should be developed and executed. Standards for student assessment/examinations/grading in the ODL system should be developed and implemented. Standards for faculty development in distance learning/online programs should be developed and implemented.
- Criteria for quality assurance and accreditation for distance learning/online programs should be developed according to the above-mentioned parameters and standards, and implemented in all ODL institutions in Pakistan.

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