
UNIT 2 SOCIAL CREDIBILITY AND JUSTICE

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the criteria for assessing the social credibility of an educational system;
- Analyse the quality indicators that determine the social credibility of ODL systems; and
- Discuss social justice as an integral part of social credibility with reference to ODL.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

You may think that it has become a cliché, but the statement that education makes a difference in the lives of people still merits repetition. All of us will acknowledge that education holds the key for development. If education can improve the quality of life, work towards wealth creation and make the world a better place to live in, the questions such as the following need to be addressed:

- What actually prevents us from framing viable policies that guarantee education to all and corresponding plan of action for their effective implementation?
- What prevents us from creating the required human and material resources to address the issue of quality education for all?

- What prevents us from reforming our educational systems in order that equity and quality are assured in education, no matter who and where the learners are?
- What prevents us from reprioritizing and redistributing the required resources to accelerate equity in education?
- If investments in education do assure rich dividends in terms of national development and social transformation, what may be the stumbling blocks in not doing so?
- Whose responsibility is it any way to make quality education available to all who aspire for it?

As you may have noticed, the questions posed above are as much rhetoric as substantive in nature, warranting convincing answers.

Against the backdrop of these illustrative questions (and you may wish to add more to the list above), in this Unit, we shall attempt to give you a snapshot of the present and emerging higher educational scenario vis-à-vis the prevailing quality norms confined generally to determining the social credibility of the face-to-face educational system, which all of us are quite familiar with. We then present the indicators of quality, as they obtain today, in ODL environments to show that the notion of social credibility assumes a new dimension in open and distance learning (ODL). In this Unit, we shall also touch upon the question of social justice as an integral part of the social credibility spectrum and urge you to reflect on the issue in the context of ODL.

2.2 EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CREDIBILITY

The relevance of any educational system ought to be adjudged in terms of the criteria that give the system a significant social function. Thus, it is not presumptuous to say that the basic issue of credibility can be seen as one of either success or failure to meet such criteria. To serve our immediate purpose, let us consider the following four required aims that characterize the functioning of an educational system:

- 1) **To advance learning:** An educational system must make a contribution to the growth of knowledge which in turn leads to the advancement of truth or the unveiling of ignorance. This growth of knowledge becomes a specialized function of an educational system, especially at the higher level of learning, which explains the reason why research is generally coupled with teaching at this level of learning.
- 2) **To give instruction in skills:** The primary function of an educational system is to give instruction in skills that are related to and promote a general division of labour and at the same time respond to changes in such division of labour. (It should be mentioned here that students come to institutions of higher learning mainly because their studies and training are related to future prospects.)
- 3) **To build a cultivated society:** Besides imparting skills that are purely practical, education aims at teaching whatever it does in a manner calculated to develop the powers of the mind. It thus attempts to produce a cultivated society, and it is this particular function of the educational system that places it in a highly eminent light.

- 4) **To transmit the secular view of people:** An educational system is unique insofar as it is the only system that seeks to transmit a common human culture and common standards of citizenship. It indicates the spread of rationality or of a certain view of people and so a vision of human potential that distinguishes it from other social institutions. To emphasize, educational institutions, thus, play a crucial role in the evolution of human culture.

The degree to which the traditional educational set up meets these criteria seldom attracts discussion. In other words, that it meets the criteria adequately is taken for granted – however unfair the assumption could be – unlike in the ODL context. The latter is often called upon to prove its social credibility from time to time, owing to our culturally induced bias towards face-to-face education.

Adding to the element of culturally induced bias are the habitual offenders, i.e., the ODL institutions that pay lip servicing to instructional design, learner services, etc. As the ODL practices of these institutions leave much to be desired, they tend to strengthen the view that the system could, at best, be substandard. A majority of those seeking education at a distance, for whatever reasons, tends to approach it only with this mindset. The ‘what’ of the system, i.e., its inherent potential, gets obfuscated, while the ‘how’ of it, i.e., the way it has been put to practice, determines the world view. What worth is the intent, if it is not translated into action? Lack of political will as represented by government apathy towards ODL encourages the offenders. On the one hand, institutions of higher learning suffer from dwindling government funding which they used to enjoy traditionally, irrespective of whether or not they are any productive. So used to the unflinching financial support from governments of the day without the concomitant responsibility and accountability, on the other hand, institutions are historically maimed to generate funds from such activities as research, consultancy, etc.

Keeping this in view, we will discuss the extent to which ODL addresses the issue of social credibility in the rest of this Unit.

2.2.1 Advancing Knowledge

Can distance education lead to research and add to the growth of knowledge through research? Yes, it can. The kind of research that may entail distance education programmes concerns the designing and selection/innovation of courses. This research can be very fruitful as it will have to concern itself with continually modifying and updating courses and thus provide a basic dynamism to the distance education system.

Consider the following:

You would have noticed, by this time, that by itself distance education is a socio-academic activity – an activity that

- i) has to develop not only new insights into but also new ways of explaining and achieving the educational aims of different courses required by distance learners; these aims mostly pertain to cognitive, psychomotor and/or affective domains. However, it does underscore the fact that the variety of courses offered by an open university or a distance education institution – academic courses, refresher and updating courses, training courses, general awareness courses, etc. – will demand an unusual ‘mixing’ of these aims, and therefore each course will have to be designed and presented differently.

- ii) must be based on investigations and insights into the study habits of individual learners, the processes of learning, teaching and effective academic communication.
- iii) assesses and then exploits the differing strengths and weaknesses of different education media - print, audio and video materials, oral communication, communication by correspondence, telephone, computers, etc. - for purposes of both the cost and the pedagogic effectiveness of the type of courses offered.
- iv) plans two-way feedback extensively for purposes of reducing misunderstanding by students, failure of courses, the difficulties caused by the variations in students' abilities and other difficulties that may be caused by the failure of postal services, the private problems of a distance learner, the unsympathetic attitude of a tutor, etc.
- v) makes use of investigations and insights into the systems and strategies of information processing for purposes of promoting more effective teaching materials and thereby discarding the less effective ones.

The items (i-v) presented above give us a broad outline of the research activities that are basic to distance teaching as a system.

Check Your Progress 1

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

In about 15 lines describe how distance education fulfils the criteria of advancing knowledge. Are you yourself convinced of it?

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2.2.2 Imparting Skills

Society is naturally concerned with the question of imparting 'skills', if it is to give its approval to the system of distance education. This question is significant also because the distance learning system does not rely upon oral instruction, and hence does not depend on the kind of socio-academic interaction which is the mainstay of the formal system.

Though distance education depends mostly on the written word, the role of the spoken word is not wholly discarded. Being a multi-media system of education, the distance mode of teaching/learning imparts instruction through electronic media as well.

A basic learning of skills is thus inherent in distance education.

For our purpose, we shall divide skills broadly into three categories:

- i) Communication skills (listening, reading, writing, and oral skills),
- ii) Intellectual skills (reasoning abilities), and
- iii) Specialised skills (scientific and technological abilities as well as management skills).

Communication skills

In fact, the distance education system makes ample provision for the distance learners to communicate, though mainly through the written word, with the distance tutors or institutions. Having read through the course materials, the students are expected to respond to the assignment questions sent to them. (Usually, the submission of assignments is made compulsory in this system). These days electronic media are being used more and more successfully and conveniently for two way communication.

Intellectual skills

These skills are presupposed in the course design. Sufficient demands are made upon the students who may at the same time be permitted to pace their learning. However, a point of some importance may be made here. Distance education programmes are bound to function in a somewhat different existential situation where the student is more immediately concerned about his/her ability to support himself/herself and is thus likely to make an informed choice of courses. It is this *feasibility* that gives him/her stronger motivation to study. It can be argued that intercultural stimulation would produce a more promising response in him/her than it would in a student who is part of a traditional university.

Specialized skills

Such skills pose problems of a logistic nature. They concern the teaching of science and technology and those areas where an insistence on project work is considered desirable. Certain solutions do suggest themselves such as the use of, practical kits in the case of basic science. There are other solutions too, such as week-end practical or summer schools where laboratory based practical may be possible. We can also think in terms of apprenticeship programmes with the active participation of industries. These problems are by no means intractable. So they call for a good deal of innovation and considerable coordination. At this juncture, let us distinguish between 'higher' and 'lower' levels of education.

The 'lower level' of education will consist of traditional courses with suitable modification in so far as their administration/monitoring is concerned and will provide education in the fundamentals. There is no harm in retaining the traditional-arts, commerce and science streams or in integrating these into a common stream with adequate modification to effect distance teaching! learning, allowing multiple choices, monitoring student progress and awarding degrees on the basis of credits earned. Thus a student might be allowed to opt at a time for two disciplines at an elementary level, and over a minimum period of three years complete at least six disciplines, along with a selected few at somewhat more advanced and specialized levels, to be able to earn his/her first degree.

At the 'higher level', a variety of courses will have to be offered. These may consist of in-service and post-experience courses that will assume a basic knowledge of the discipline/area, seek to further update knowledge/skill levels, and provide the adult learners with an opportunity for continuing their education. These courses may include instructional packages giving the latest information on relevant disciplines such as astronomy, chemistry, sociology, anthropology, economics, etc. Such courses include discussion at a fairly sophisticated level and lead - once again through a credit earning system to a post-graduate degree.

We should not, however, overlook the problems which arise from the general conservative attitude of society. The social problem which deserves our attention is whether a distance student will be employable in the teaching profession or for that matter any other profession, at par with a student from the formal system. Of, course, we have argued that a distance student is in no way inferior to his/her counterpart at a conventional institution. Our discussions in units 1 and 2 give us adequate support on this issue. But has society in general accepted it?

Check Your Progress 2

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

In about 15 lines describe how distance education fulfils the criteria of imparting skills. Are you yourself convinced of it?

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2.2.3 Building a Cultivated Society

Apart from furthering a more professional Understanding of social and economic roles, distance education can help significantly in the evolution of a learning society. The possibility of taking a course and of updating

one's information level at any time in one's life is more than likely to promote a professional attitude towards one's social role. Consider the case of a general medical practitioner who, without having to go on leave, can take a course in order to learn about the latest diagnostic practices and the principles behind the new formulations in drugs. Such a course would foster in him/her a more professional attitude, besides adding to his/her efficiency. And such a task would be accomplished within a limited time, with limited resources and limited commitments. In other words, in spite of several constraints, distance education strategies would certainly help us move one step nearer to a more self-Conscious, professional and learning society.

Hence, it is hardly necessary to justify the idea that distance education leads to a general improvement and transformation of learners and through them, of society as a whole. By initiating them into subject and areas which are valuable in themselves, the system will turn out more cultivated persons whose powers of reasoning are likely to be more sophisticated than they were before. And, since distance education can act without the restraining condition of numbers, the system can reach out to very large groups and bring about desired changes in a very short period of time.

Check Your Progress 3

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Write in about 10 lines how distance education can transform an ordinary society into a cultivated one.

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2.2.4 Instilling a Secular View

More specifically, distance education - and this encompasses its fuller development including the use of audio-visual supplementation and, gradually, the channeling of radio/TV and computer networks -- will promote in the individual those basic abilities that form a necessary part of the adult in a modern, changing society.

What are these basic abilities?

- i) ability to support himself or herself,

- ii) ability to make informed choices about-life, including career, religion, politics, life-style and general attitudes, and
- iii) ability to decide what is and is not morally acceptable.

Corresponding to each of these, one's education must provide one with

- i) sufficient skills to obtain work,
- ii) general education giving a reasonable understanding of the nature of human beings and of the world, and
- iii) education in morality.

It may be possible, at this point, to say that a distance education system, when properly and fully developed, leads to a furthering of those interests that are peculiar to an open society. By providing education to all, the educational process ceases to be a preserve of the elite. And by catering to the needs of school/college dropouts, distance education can almost eliminate the academic isolation of those who have been deprived of education for whatever reason.

Thus, distance education is placed in a position which enables it to take on the responsibility of offering diverse courses throughout an individual's life.

It also ensures the spread of rationality and a common human culture based on values that arise out of learning and professionalism. Distance education, is thus a highly potent tool in a developing society that is anxious to bring about egalitarianism through the educational process.

In contrast with this system of education, the educational structure now prevalent tends to be autocratic and coercive. The manner in which the formal university is structured, and functions in some of the developing societies leaves much to be desired. In these societies, universities were set up quite early in the colonial era and often by the ruling Western societies. These universities tend to ape the Western universities of the past and often turn out products that are more suited to Western societies. What is, however, the most abominable part of these universities is that they are wary of giving to the student any real measure of academic freedom. For instance, there is generally a great deal of restriction on the choice of subjects/ disciplines and these are such formidable barriers that students often take up courses of study only through the pressure the system exerts and not through any degree of voluntary choice. In fact, the students do not even know about the choices possible in the western world. Thus, a student who may wish to change a course midstream finds it impossibility and is compelled to continue with a programme in a halfhearted manner.

It should be mentioned here that those universities which resisted the influence of colonialism were able to define their objectives more clearly and hence avoided this rather lop-sided development.

It is here that distance education as a system is in a position to offer flexibility in course curricula. It can cut through the heavily ritualised manner of functioning of the formal system. Education can become a more vital experience, giving to the learner a chance to alter his/her existential situation and hence perception of society. In effect, distance education can reduce significantly the constraints on development that

originate and arise out of the formal educational system. That this alters the historical experience of a society makes distance education a basis for revolution as well as for evolution.

By altering the existing social stratification through educational restructuring, it is possible to alter significantly the developmental experience of a society. This is particularly relevant in a developing society. In other words, it is only when one perceives education as a future-oriented programme that one is able to link it up with the process of development.

Some inferences:

The following major inferences emerge from this argument:

- i) Education is very heavily conditioned by the constraints and compromises of the past and thus does not easily respond to new demands and to change in society. An educational system can achieve a high degree of autonomy and social insulation under certain conditions and can grow indifferent to the world around it.
- ii) The responsiveness of education to social, economic and political demands depends largely upon the type of society and the kind of development it permits. (From this point of view, one can see the educational system in India reflecting the general conservatism of Indian society. This may not permit any radical change unless the values of leading socio-political groups overcome the constraints of the past and conceive of new options for the future. Thus, a degree obtained through distance education may carry a stigma in Indian society for quite sometime until the overall social framework is amended through political pressure. However, the way it gains currency indicates that distance education has come in a big way in India. This may, be the experience of other developing societies too.
- iii) There is, a special responsibility of the academicians in so far as they have to spell out the vision of a better future of an evolving society in which education is going to be widely available and will be linked to the development and participation of all individuals in the general social growth.

It is in this light that distance education can also be seen as an important declaration of policy. Policy in education does not reflect only a concern with resources and priorities. It is more deeply related to questions of social demands. These demands cannot be separated from the interests of dominant groups with vested interests and their political power and form the network of international relations. Thus, a programme for education cannot be discussed except within the social needs it reflects.

Besides reflecting social needs, educational planning, to be realistic, should take into account not only the choices available but also those constraints which cannot be easily overcome, and the means through which ends have to be realised. Distance education provides just such an alternative. It accepts the challenge of existing constraints on resources, buildings for schools and, colleges, funds, availability of workforce etc., and seeks to mobilize available resources to provide the much needed instructional package. It is in that sense that distance education is an answer to a genuine need and is a significant policy change in education.

Check Your Progress 4

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Write, in not more than 10 lines, how distance education succeeds in instilling a common secular view among human beings.

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At the micro level, education is also related to livelihood. Social credibility of an educational system is also seen from the strength of its degrees/ diplomas fetching employment or promotions. Looked at from a different angle, with liberalization and globalization coupled with the gigantic growth of the information and communication technologies (ICT) resulting in IT-enabled services across sectors, employers also seek for higher education that make people job-fit.

Consider the following questions in this context:

- Shouldn't we have a robust education policy with directions for employability?
- Shouldn't we repackage our learning materials?
- Shouldn't we change our teaching styles?
- Shouldn't we change the assessment/evaluation pattern?
- Shouldn't we change the way we plan our curricula?
- Shouldn't we embark on technology-mediated teaching/learning environment?
- Shouldn't we retool the teachers?
- Shouldn't we make education/learning learner-friendly?
- Shouldn't we have built-in mechanisms for transparency in selection education leaderships?

Note that the list above is not exhaustive and it is not meant to be! However, the list represents the categories of questions that need to be adequately addressed in order to establish the social credibility of an educational system. In other words, quality does matter, which we will discuss in Section 3.3.

2.3 QUALITY AND SOCIAL CREDIBILITY

The cost of education and perhaps lead to a multi-tiered system. Skewed growth seems to remain the world order and continues to be more a rule than an exception, no matter what the sphere of concern is. While, on the one hand, for example, there is astounding growth in technologies, which include information and communications technologies (ICT), biotechnology, space technology, etc., contributing to improving the quality of life, on the other, countries are getting devastated for reasons ranging from HIV/AIDS, food/nutrition insecurity, environmental degradation to engineered political instability cankering human value systems. This, despite the fact that these very impoverished countries are among those in the world endowed with natural resources that many of the developed economies cannot boast of. As a consequence of these rather paradoxical trends, the world view on various sectors understandably keeps on changing. One such sector is higher education.

Institutions of higher learning – be they campus-based (with or without dual-mode operations) or off-campus (e.g., Open Universities) – are to necessarily reinvent themselves in the wake various factors including the current General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) dispensation promoting globalization of education., the Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) regime that is widely seen as a potential instrument to commodify knowledge; the emergence of New Learner that seeks to earn while learning in technology-enhanced environments; the ever-shrinking of government funding for higher education; the increasing privatization of education that seems to place, among others, the onus of research more on privately funded institutions/industries than on public universities, etc. The inclusion of education as one of the trades in services seems to have a direct link to the current trends in higher education, which include the emergence of corporate-model for-profit educational outfits, the growth of seamless online educational provisions, emerging knowledge-driven markets, the upsurge in transnational mobility of experts and professionals and the dwindling government budget for higher education. In other words, the inclusion of education in WTO/GATS seems to be a response to as well as a contributing factor for the current trends in learning provisions, demography, market, etc.

You must note that the process of reinventing assumes various aspects including robust learning experiences; flat governance that encourages participatory decision-making and ownership; flexible learning environments, etc., which when implemented would sufficiently fuel the institutions to ably compete or/and collaborate with overseas providers of higher education for learners and to generate funds for sustained development. Clearly, governments and higher education institutions have to think beyond affirmative actions/reservations for various categories of people in institutions of higher learning so as to embark on a robust *global* policy.

In addition, indicators are such that the responsibility of the government are being arrogated by private players who provide education on their terms, some of which may prove to be, to be fair, more discerning than offerings made through government sectors. However, some may argue that leaving such a (Welfare) State subject as education to the realm of private concerns potentially divides the already imbalanced societies. They further add that the noble purpose of opening up education for which the arrogation assumedly took place thus remains unfulfilled, while

the very act of arrogation further deepens the divide. Some others may refute this claim citing excellence and exemplar performances registered by private institutions. Ensuring access to education is going to be a formidable responsibility for public education institutions in a scenario where the demand for higher education is steadily growing, often well beyond the capacity of the country to provide it.

Similarly, the debate on the implications of WTO/GATS (World Trade Organization/General Agreements on Trade in Services) on higher education is ongoing. Some are of the opinion that the potential of digital as well as social divide is more now than ever before in the context of GATS, while some others look at the possibility for digital dividend and social inclusion that could be achieved through the instrument of GATS. In other words, on the one hand, there is a view that highlights the benefits educational trade can bring in terms of increased access to international new knowledge and economic gain, while on the other, the focus is on the threat this dispensation poses to the role of government, the state of education as public good and the nature of quality of education. In sum, GATS enthusiasts maintain that consumers/students can have greater access, as providers are ready, under the trade, to offer higher education services across borders. Non-supporters, however, believe that access may remain as it is, and if anything, may still be limited because trade will commercialize education and consequently escalate

Among the number of unanswered questions that still remain, the social development goal of education and the governmental role of education assume significance. Relevance, quality and accreditation are at the heart of this debate. For example, the importance of frameworks for licensing, accreditation, qualification recognition and quality assurance are important for all countries whether they are importing and exporting education services. Developing countries have expressed concern about their capacity to have such frameworks in place in the light of the push towards trade liberalization and increased cross border delivery of education.

For the purpose of this Unit, let us be very clear that we are not making any value judgments on these socio-academic claims and/or counter-claims. You could assess the situation on your own on the basis of your exposure and arrive at an informed conclusion. The sole purpose of our bringing it up here, however, is to inform you of the differing views on these factors and relate them to the issue of social credibility as it pertains to ODL and related indicators.

2.3.1 Campus Education

The traditionally perceived elements of quality in the context of campus-based education could be typically categorized as under:

- **Physical plant:** Is the plant purpose-built and/or aesthetically appealing? Does it have facilities such as library, labs, etc., for research? Are there enough teaching complexes/lecture theatres? Do the lecture theatres have multimedia facilities? Is the information and communications network efficient and effective? Are there recreational facilities/sports complexes/eateries? Does the physical plant satisfy safety standards and security specifications? Does the plant meet the needs of the differently-abled? Is the plant eco-friendly?, etc.

- **Institutional reputation:** How traditional or modern is the institution? Does it have an enviable tradition/history? What is the stature of its past and present staff in the society/academia? Is the staff-mix international in nature? Do the staff members represent an intellectual force to reckon with locally and internationally? Do their peers, students and others, recognize the faculty members as scholars or/and effective teachers? What is the social environment within the institution? Does the institution assume any responsibility to maintain and upgrade the quality of life of students and staff members? What is the level of institutional commitment to make available the required resources to accomplish the goals set?
- **Student entry and exit criteria:** What are the student-admission criteria/entry requirements in use? How rigorous is the assessment/evaluation process? What are the pass-rates? How employable are the students?
- **Learning environment:** Are the existing programs/courses relevant and appropriate to the local contexts? Do they prepare the students for global contexts as well? Are the aims/objectives of the programs/courses clear to all the stakeholders? What is the nature of student-teacher ratio and interaction? Do the staff members enjoy academic autonomy? How are the contents/methods of programs/courses and assessment of student performance decided? Are the students involved in curriculum framing, and in the assessment of teachers, at any stage? What is the extent of technology used for teaching/learning? Are the faculty/staff members and students technology-oriented?, etc.
- **Campus discipline:** How often has the institution to grapple with industry actions or disturbances of classes? Are there confrontations between students and staff members or among them? How many times have interventions of law-enforcers been sought? How fair are the proctored examinations, and have they been conducted without difficulties?

Obviously, the categories listed above are illustrative of the common elements that contribute towards interpreting quality and framing quality-auditing policies/procedures with regard to place-bound education.

While some elements under each category listed above represent the quality accrediting agencies will look for, some others satisfy the quality criteria set by the institutions themselves to the extent that they are in synchronization with their established value structures. Seldom, if any, however, do institutional policies on quality address/accommodate the concerns of students. In other words, the parameters accrediting agencies, governments, etc., tend to employ to assess quality need not necessarily be the same as those the practitioners or learners hold, and vice versa. Not only must, therefore, institutions put in place proper mechanisms to look into this anomaly in the prevailing approach to quality, but also put an end to applying the quality criteria evolved for campus education to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and this assumes importance in the GATS context.

2.3.2 Traditional ODL

Myopic is how one would tend to describe the so-called vision of those who, over the decades, have been taking upon themselves more

often than not by political design the responsibility of shaping up our educational system. The fall-out of which is a subversive process of institutionalizing mediocrity, be it in the appointments student exit policies, etc. What we have now, as a result, is a badly mauled academia that is exposed to be unabashedly scavenged on by many, including the powers that be, in the absence of a robust mechanism to keep them at bay. Despite the cries of foul play by a section of the educational stakeholders such as students, parents and employees, it is ironically business as usual as far as the academic and governance structures of higher education are concerned.

This clearly warrants, among others, socially-relevant curricula and educational systems that cater to the lifelong learning needs of those who aspire for it. Until education is freed from the tyranny of distance in terms of space, place, time, finance, gender, religion, age, academic qualifications, community, caste, communication, study pacing or learning pace, time, duration, etc., can an educational Renaissance of sorts that is required be possible. Put differently, freedom from traditional learning barriers is imperative to achieve inclusive education, i.e., greater access to and equity in higher education. It is in this context that we consider ODL a socially credible system of education.

By traditional ODL is meant the educational environment which is predominantly print-based. While categories such as physical plant, learning contexts, institutional reputation, etc., can be seen as contributing to evolving the quality criteria for traditional ODL, as is the case with campus education, quality indicators do differ. Listed below, for example, are some of the concerns that represent the quality indicators of traditional ODL, most of which remain inessentials in the context of campus education:

- **Learning materials:** How to judge the difficulty level of the learning materials? Is the content dense? Are the materials designed in such a way as to facilitate self-learning? What are the criteria to judge the self-learnability of the materials? Who judges it and how? Are there developmental or self-assessment questions embedded in the materials? Do they contribute to learning? Do learners get feedback on these questions, how and how soon? Is the material learner-active? Is the presentation lucid? Are the materials subjected to peer-review? How effective is the layout (in case of print materials) or format (in case of digital materials) in terms of facilitating learning? Do the materials have illustrations, different colour, simulations, visuals, etc., to make the learning process enjoyable?
- **Materials despatch:** After registration, when do learners receive the materials? Where do they collect the materials? Are the learners informed of the material-dispatch schedule? What is the mode of dispatch – ordinary mail, speed post, registered post, courier, by hand or any other? Where, and when, can one buy the learning materials for personal use?
- **Continuous assessment (e.g., assignments):** What is the purpose of assignments? Are the assignment questions clear and unambiguous? Are the instructions to learners clear? What should be the type/level/format of questions? Does it contain any marking scheme? Who marks the assignment responses? Is there any scope for monitoring assignment evaluation? When do learners get the feedback from the markers/tutors? Is there any rationale for the turn-around time?

- **Academic counselling:** Are the learners/tutors aware of what is expected of them in an academic counselling session? How are these sessions made available – at a distance or face-to-face? How far is the sites/classrooms, where these sessions take place, from the learners' homes/workplaces? What may be the opportunity costs for attending these sessions? Is attendance in these sessions mandatory or optional, and what is the rationale – content requirement or any other?
- **Resources:** How do distance learners access the library books/journals, etc.? Do learners have access to electronic media, etc., if they form part of the programs?

The crux is that the key quality indicators one uses to assess campus education cannot *ipso facto* be used to assess traditional ODL, primarily because the teaching/learning processes involved in both the modes are markedly different from each other. Policy makers/administrators, and others concerned, must recognize this difference, and accordingly frame policies on the quality of traditional ODL.

To extent this argument further, the indicators one uses to assess the quality of traditional ODL will prove to be inadequate to assess that of online learning, though the categories may remain the same.

2.3.3 Online Learning

The five key indicators of quality that characterize online learning are:

- **Learning design:** Contexts, including needs, goals and environments of learners, the subject matter, intended learning outcomes, instructional technologies, etc., must determine the online learning activities. Components such as clear statement of intended learning outcomes, appropriate selection and application of media, learning activities responsive to the learning needs of individual learners, learner autonomy in terms of time, place and pace, team approach to content creation and continuous evaluation for effectiveness, etc., thus, constitute this indicator.
- **Learner support:** An effective learner support services system must be in place to enable the learners to optimally use the available resources. A learner support structure that helps learners in accessing a wide range of required information, various resources including library and other technical facilities, learning assets to suit their learning styles, etc., thus form this indicator.
- **Institutional commitment:** Online learning policy must be an integral part of an institution's overall policy framework. This indicator accordingly comprises the extent of administrative and financial commitment institutions make towards online learning, including the maintenance of programmes, research, staff development/promotion and the equitable treatment of learning done on-campus and at a distance.
- **Learning outcomes:** Online learning programmes must organize learning activities around demonstrable learning outcomes, assist learners to achieve these outcomes, and assess learner progress by reference to these outcomes. The focus of this indicator is thus on the key functions of learning outcomes in the overall design.

- **Technology:** A technology infrastructure plan defining the technical and related requirements needed to support the learning activities must be in place. Addressing to matters such as security to ensure the integrity and validity of information shared, the level of interactivity among all elements of a learning environment, the availability, accessibility and equity of technology being used/contemplated, the code of conduct in the use of technology, etc., thus form this indicator.

These categories are deceptively identical to the ones listed in the context of campus education and those implied in the context of traditional ODL. Significantly, however, the concerns expressed in terms of indicators in the context of online learning are close to traditional ODL but are markedly different from those of the campus education. It is evident that the underlying quality concerns of both the online and traditional ODL contexts are analogous insofar as they deal with the basics of instructional design and student learning. Obviously, that which distinguishes them is the indicator pertaining to technology, i.e., the learning environment.

The foregoing discussion unequivocally points to the following facts:

- Key quality indicators do differ, depending on whether the educational system is place-bound learning, print-based ODL or online/distributed learning, in spite of the fact that the end-goal is to foster and facilitate effective learning. It is imperative for institutions to recognize this variance and accordingly accommodate appropriate quality indicators, if their quest for quality maintenance and improvement is to be accomplished.
- An application of key quality indicators evolved to assure/audit the quality of ODL environments to campus education will help improve the quality of the latter, as the focus of the former is inherently more on learning/learner than on teaching/teacher. But the reversal, which is the current practice, will do more harm than good.
- Key quality indicators generally accommodate the concerns of institutions/accrediting agencies and, more often than not, skirt around those of learners.

To frame a robust policy of quality assurance and audit, no matter what the learning system is, the mindsets/attitudes of policy makers/administrators must change in such a way as to recognize that:

- Learner concerns are the core of the policy. In any learning context, some learners do well and get through the system successfully and some others will not. In other words, learners can be successful despite a bad system, and similarly they can be unsuccessful despite an excellent one. The crux is that success or otherwise largely depends on the amount and the nature of efforts learners make for learning, and the teachers can only be 'guides on the side'. (And, this indeed is the underlying philosophy of distance education). Precisely for this reason, pass-rates of learners, for example, can be just one, but a weak, parameter/indicator to measure the quality, success or reputation of an institution. What institutions must be striving for, therefore, is to provide learning experiences that make learners feel that they do spend quality time at the institution during their academic journey, and will cherish it in future. This should be the driving force behind any policy on quality.

- One size does not, and will not, fit all. Besides learner concerns, the uniqueness of the learning systems must determine quality indicators. Drawing quality criteria from a system of education that is familiar and proven in its unique context to frame policies for a system that is not only innovative in terms of learning environments but also is still evolving is seemingly less cumbersome and, therefore, may sound legitimate, but will prove to be woefully inadequate to serve the purpose intended. Policy makers/administrators must accept this reality, however established the current practice may be. There is no harm though to adapt existing quality indicators pertaining to such categories as institutional commitment (including finances), technology, student support services (including training), instructional design, development and delivery, learning content, intellectual property policy, faculty and staff support services, equity, evaluation, etc., to suit a particular context.

In essence, the quality of products and services builds and sustains the social credibility of ODL. Let us touch upon these now. But, first, we shall complete Check Your Progress 4.

Check Your Progress 5

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

List the factors predominant in assessing the quality of (i) campus education, (ii) traditional ODL, and (iii) online learning.

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2.3.4 Courseware

A major chunk of the course materials of any distance education programme is normally covered by print materials notwithstanding the rapid developments in the telecommunications, computer technology and audiovisual media. Obviously, the distance teaching directorates involve themselves in the production of a large quantity of print materials for various courses. However identical the course content/syllabus may be, each one of these directorate/institutes prepares its own materials in order to maintain its identity and standards.

It should not however, be understood from this that the academic and distance teaching directorates are the sole agencies engaged in preparing

course materials. By implication, these directorates more often than not, might as well depend on outside sources - course writers from outside the directorate structure - for materials. It should be mentioned here that inadequate academic infrastructure is the chief factor which forces the directorates to depend on course materials prepared outside, the directorate system.

Those directorates which have to find course writers outside the system normally pay small and varying amounts depending on the status of the person engaged for preparing the course materials. Eminent persons, who have sound footing in their own field of study, are generally reluctant to undertake this task, either because of the fact that they hardly have any time to spare for such work, or because of the disincentive in the form of trivial remuneration. (Added to this, perhaps, is the fact that a majority of the senior academics feel diffident about *writing* course materials). Consequent upon these facts some distance teaching directorates are forced to depend on mediocre course writers. The courses thus prepared very often fail to bring to light the effectiveness of the print medium.

It would not be difficult to pay decent remuneration to the course writers, if the distance teaching directorates were given adequate financial support, or in some cases, allowed to use the income generated by the directorates for the development of courses and other support services.

Besides print materials, the distance teaching directorates make use of media support - radio, television, video cassettes, etc. In fact, radio talks have been widely used. With the co-operation of local radio stations, the directorates broadcast the lectures of eminent personalities. As far as possible the directorates choose a convenient time for the students to listen to these lectures and benefit from them. But there are limitations.

To serve our immediate purpose, we have identified three major drawbacks

They are:

- i) The specified time for radio talks may not be convenient to a heterogeneous Population.
- ii) However mature/adult a person, 'animation' has a stronger impact on him/her. Radio talks being restricted to an auditory channel may not capture and sustain the attention of the students.
- iii) Being a heterogeneous group the degree of concentration reached by the students may not be identical- a student who has a lower level of concentration cannot play back the talk and thus does not assimilate it at his/her own pace.

Notwithstanding these limitations, we can safely say that, wherever available, distance students benefit from radio broadcasts. What we need, perhaps, is a means to present these broadcasts effectively. We discuss the related issues in detail in ES 318, the course on "Communication Technology in Distance Education".

2.3.5 Learner Services

Compelled by the socio-academic issues of parity, open and distance learning (ODL) *struggled* to remain imitative of campus education. It is time, however, ODL reinvented itself by eschewing the tendency to borrow dysfunctional norms, be they in terms of learning experiences,

quality concerns, etc., from the conventional education systems and by placing learner development first. Accordingly, learner support services must transcend teacher-learner interaction variously called 'counselling', 'academic counselling', 'face-to-face counselling', 'personal contact programs', 'tutoring', 'synchronous learning', 'mentoring', etc., and incorporate elements of activities ranging from the announcement for admission to certification and post-certification, and all the activities in between (Sewart 1978; Murgatroyd 1980; Smith and Small 1982; Daniel and Marquis, 1983; Sewart 1989; Hiola and Moss, 1990; Sewart, 1993, Koul and Asha, 2006; Robinson 2007, Lockwood 2007 and so on).

Past experience shows that within a few years of their existence, ODL institutions invariably manage to standardize and mass produce learning materials. Where ODL woefully fails is to build robust support services system, and no ODL institution seems to be an exception. The relative intangibility of support services is projected as the major factor for its current state of affairs that obviously leave much to be desired. Paradoxically, however, the success of ODL depends largely on the quality of support services. This, despite the fact that quality assurance/auditing processes are yet to come to terms with this reality.

Against the backdrop of differing quality categories mentioned above, let us consider the following factors as typically contributing to the quality of learner services and social credibility:

- **Admission notification:** Clarity, reach, coverage, cost, communication gap between the unit that announces and that which has the responsibility to respond to queries, etc.
- **Post-notification scenario:** Queries through phone, mail, by post, in person, etc., the extent of timely response, clarity in the response, authenticity of the response, transaction time, availability of trained workforce, opportunity cost of students, cost incurred by the university, etc.
- **Application submission stage:** Clarity of content, lack of understanding on the part of students, gaps in the information sought (in the application form), incomplete filled in applications, discrepancy in fee payment, level of support extended by Learning Centres, information clutter in the Prospectus, etc.
- **Screening process at the ODL institution:** Receipt of forms by post (from students/Learning Centres), lack of acknowledgement procedures, wrong delivery addresses (leading to despatch delay), removal and collection process of bank drafts and their entry at the finance unit, routing of application forms to the admission unit, scrutiny for eligibility criteria and data entry, seeking missing details from students, marking of provisional admissions, routing of requests for credit transfer/exemptions to the units concerned, generating student identity (ID) cards, possible errors in spelling, medium of choice, ID number, course/programme code, address, etc., routing the list (soft or hard or both) of eligible candidates to learning materials unit, sending the ID cards to Learning Centres/students, time lag in sending the ID list/card, etc.
- **Issuance of student identity (ID) cards:** Malpractices/illegal demands made on students, closure of Centres without informing the university, return of ID cards back to the university, student query through various mediums, creating appropriate response channels,

delay in responses and follow-up queries from students, delay on the part of the post office, courier agency, etc.

- **Issuance of learning materials:** Availability of adequate and adequately trained workforce, adequacy of space for materials storage, lack of ready-availability of learning materials, maintenance of database, demands from students/centres for replacement of books (due to soiled, incomplete, wrong medium or course, etc.), etc.
- **Post-dispatch of learning materials:** Students changing the course/medium, loose organization of queries relating to replacement of materials/reallocation of courses/ID cards, etc., late query from students without the required enclosures (fee, books/ID for replacement), etc.
- **Face-to-face classes:** Inappropriate scheduling at the centre/university, time taken for the schedules to reach the students, centres ignoring the university's stipulation, nature of classes (timings, duration, space, etc), quality of the classes (qualification of resource persons, time for interaction), lack of student attendance, lack of means to get student feedback from students, etc.
- **Two-way communication/continuous assessment channel:** Relevance of assignment questions, time taken for them to reach the students, time given to students for their responses, unclear instructions regarding response submission date and place, lack of acknowledgement channel, lack of means to avoid student copying, space to store the assignment-responses, lack of means to return the responses after tutor-comments/grading or marking, availability of trained workforce, delay in the dispatch of assignments for marking, delay in collecting the assignments after marking, delay in entry of marks in the system, delay in routing the marks to the examination unit, delay in entering the marks in the system at the examination unit, requests for resubmission, marking of resubmitted assignments without proper authority, publishing of results without assignment marks, student queries (angry to anxiety in tone), insufficient response channels, communication gaps between the examination unit and that concerned for responses, etc.
- **Examination schedule:** Time lag in scheduling, delay in the issuance of hall tickets to students, notification of the schedules on the media, clarity of the schedule, etc.
- **Post-examination:** Collection of answer papers and their distribution for marking, collection of marked papers, entry of marks on the system, ranking (after collating the marks obtained for continuous assessment and examination), creation of certificates and mark sheets, arrangement for convocation, post-convocation activities (e.g., arrangement for issuance of duplicate mark sheets/certificates), etc.

In the absence of a robust learner support policy, the current practice of learner support services in many ODL institutions is characterized by a tedious process-cycle that is tenuously coordinated, resulting in avoidable delays.

Descriptors of quality indicators

Some of the generic elements that could be taken as descriptors of quality indicators in this context include the following:

- **Reduced waiting-line or queue:** Whether it is a gas station, a fast-food or supermarket cash counter, a cinema or an airline ticket counter, a bank or post office, a doctor's or lawyer's office, or at a traffic signal, we as customers/clients generally expect that our transactions should be the first without having to wait on a queue. In case, the waiting-line is long, we either wait restlessly cursing the organization or the person in charge of the counter or/and another customer/client at the counter or we simply walk out and look elsewhere for the services. We may lose nothing in the bargain, or the loss is affordable. However, working as they do in an age in which monopoly is looked down upon, alternatives abound and competition is high, most organizations want to retain their customer/clients. To ensure their loyalty, one of the measures they take is reducing customer waiting-line. It is also customary in business processes, to assess wax and wane periods when the queue is relatively more or less, and accordingly re-deploy personnel. On parallel lines, learner-centredness being the underlying orientation of ODL, it is imperative for ODL institutions to pay attention to, and put mechanisms in place for reducing the turnaround time of the institution-learner transactions, be they for registration, admission, delivery of materials, examination results, etc. Intra-institutional waiting-line (i.e., among clients within an organization) usually contributes to the transactional waiting-line between the institution and learners. For example, in the ODL context, the initial delay in the supply of subject content creates a painfully long waiting-line for materials production and their subsequent delivery/consumption.
- **Single-counter operation:** Suppose that we want to withdraw some cash, transfer money from the savings to the chequing account and take a bank draft. What would we prefer to have – three different counters, or just one – to complete these transactions in a bank? Most probably, a single counter. Or, if we were at a fast-food joint, we would rather pick up our choice of meat, fries and drinks and pay for them at one counter, instead of going to three different ones? For the benefits of customers/clients, most banks, joins etc., do have single-window operations. Admittedly, the intention is not to trivialize an educational endeavor by comparing it with a fast-food joint, but the value that a single-counter operation adds to customer/client service cannot be downplayed. If learner support services units in ODL institutions are to serve the single-counter operation, they should obviously be equipped so.
- **Delivery of quality-response:** By quality response is meant a response that satisfies the student. At one point in time or another, we may have come across situations where our queries get a mumbled response leaving us wondering whether or not we got the required response. If we insist for a proper answer, either we get it or we get a lecture on the virtues of being patient or a stern discouraging look or whatever to that effect. What is our state of mind in these situations? On very many occasions, in the absence of proper management of student services, it is not quite unlikely that distance learners grapple with unsatisfactory response from the institution, and this accentuates their feeling of isolation. For example, when distance learners demand to know when they are likely to get course materials, can virtuous institutions give them an absolute date, and actually deliver the materials on the date? Can institutions prepare a master schedule for materials dispatch and make it part of the information brochure in

print or otherwise? At the outset, however, why should learners ask for a dispatch date, unless materials are delayed? Then, the question is why are materials delayed? In other words, for giving a satisfactory response to student queries, the whole organizational machinery must be well-oiled, not its parts alone. The whole is more than the sum of parts, and if this is not acknowledged, the resultant evasive responses to student queries are inevitable.

- **Availability of services required:** Institutions must be clear as to what they would offer to learners in terms of services. Different clients come to a post-office for different purposes. One can, for example, go there to take an international money order in a foreign currency. If this service is not available in a post-office, the client may go to a bank. What has it got to do with ODL institutions? In many ODL institutions in developing countries, face-to-face sessions form part of the instructional system. At some institutions, attendance in these sessions are mandatory and at others, optional. Face-to-face sessions are also used for different purposes, e.g., actual teaching of the kind that takes place in traditional classrooms (though that is not the intention for which these sessions are instituted in ODL), social activity, practicum or lab experiments. Suppose in a situation where the face-to-face component demands compulsory attendance, some learners, for reasons of ill-health, travel or a personal tragedy or some such, are unable to make it, are there alternatives provided for them to catch up with their peers? Making course materials available in different media, including the web, to suit different learning styles can be another example.
- **Client preparation:** When a product or service is introduced in the market, more often than not, awareness programmes are implemented to orient the potential customers/ clients. On some occasions, 'user guides' are produced in glossy papers with attractive designs, etc. However, many of us may have come across situations where we could not make a sense out of these materials. Or, we use only a few facilities that the product or service offers, and we never bother the rest because either we do not need them or we never come to grips with them, in spite of reading the guide that is supposed to help us derive the optimal benefit from the product or service! Similarly, in many ODL institutions, reams of materials are produced with the assumption that these help learners understand the content. But the question is, are they really? Proper learner preparation, in addition to printed or electronic materials is imperative, if learners are to derive the intended benefits from the distance mode of learning. We are aware of learner induction programmes that purport to introduce learners to ODL, but in a majority of cases, these are used as a desideratum or as an inevitable ritual.

In order to streamline the activities more efficiently and effectively, however, ODL institutions could embark on a relatively lower-cost networked environment that is more context-specific than a proprietary lone.

Benchmarks

Benchmarks in the context of support services are a good idea, but are yet to be evolved. The table given below illustrates some of the issues that need to be looked into for building quality standards or benchmarks:

| S. N. | Areas | Quality Indicator | Quality Descriptor |
|-------|--|---|--|
| 1 | Admission/ Registration | Simple procedures are in place Admission/ Registration throughout the year | Programme-wise (to the point) Prospectus in print and on the web) is available Simple (easy to fill-in) application in print and on the web is available Mechanisms are in place to keep the time between application and registration (including the distribution of Smart Learner Card) at the maximum of one working week A system for the acknowledgement of the receipt of application from the learners is in place (irrespective of the medium chosen for application) |
| 2 | Learning Materials Production – Print and Electronic – and Course Delivery | Materials are designed in self-learning format following sound instructional designs/theories | Quality Assurance Team is in place (pilot, continuous assessment rating, course credit rating, number of face-to-face classes required/assignments, etc.) |
| 3 | Learning Materials Distribution | Learning package(s) given (in person) to the learner on the date of getting full-registration | Courses are launched after ensuring materials are available. Distribution Centres across the Districts are in place |
| 4 | Assignments (as a tool for both distance teaching and continuous assessment of learner performance) Project Works (for evaluation and feedback) | Learning package contains assignment questions and last date for submission Indication of the date of reception of feedback from the mentors (i.e., the commented and graded/graded responses) The institution has the database of mentors. | Training is imparted to part-time mentors Mentors are deployed on University payroll Collection Centres across the Districts are in place The turnaround time for feedback on assignment responses is fixed (i.e., enough time between two assignments, if there is more than one assignment) Arrangements are in place to send/give the commented upon and evaluated responses. Staff Mentors are available for quality check Rule book for mentors containing details of feedback to be given, etc., is available. |
| 5 | Face-to-face Classes | Learning package contains the schedule for face-to-face classes The institution has the database of teachers | Classes are not compulsory Training is imparted to part-time subject teachers Trained teachers are available on University payroll Classes are arranged at convenient timings/locations at established tertiary institutions (in the evenings, on weekends, etc.) Rule book for teachers containing rules of engagement is available. |

Basic Issues of Open and Distance Education

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|----|------------------------------------|---|--|
| 6 | Synchronous Sessions | <p>The package contains (depending on the requirement of the Course) the schedule for synchronous sessions</p> <p>ODL institutions have the required infrastructure (technology and personnel)</p> | <p>Training is imparted to full-time ODL teachers</p> <p>No. of sessions specified for each teacher per Course</p> <p>Learning Centres are available across the Districts</p> <p>Recorded sessions are used subsequently as asynchronous materials (to downsize the synchronous sessions or to diversify them)</p> |
| 7 | Asynchronous Sessions | <p>Learning materials, assignments, sessions, etc., are available online</p> <p>ODL institutions have the required infrastructure (technology and personnel)</p> | <p>Mechanisms are in place to incorporate feedbacks from the learners</p> |
| 8 | Learner-Query Response | <p>Learners get/access the information required without any difficulty (in person and at a distance through emails, posts, faxes, telephones, etc.)</p> | <p>24/7 help-desk is available</p> <p>Touch screen facilities are available at convenient locations (at Learning Materials Distributions Centres, Assignment Collection Centres, Post Offices, Banks, ATM shelters, Railway/Bus stations, Airports, etc.)</p> <p>Portal/Web Sites contain as much information as possible</p> <p>Mechanisms are in place for data maintenance</p> <p>A Query Management Cell (QMC) is available at the Headquarters</p> <p>Learner Query booklet in the form of FAQ is available (Queries include common as well as specific, e.g., credit transfer, course exemption, scholarships, etc.)</p> |
| 9 | Institutional Commitment | <p>Evident policy shift from materials production to learner services</p> <p>Sufficient infrastructure and budget (e.g., about 1/3 of the Course fee income) for learner support services</p> <p>Robust digital policy</p> <p>Changes in institutional structure and reporting arrangements</p> | <p>Involvement of academics in the selection of mentors, etc.</p> <p>Involvement of academics in suggesting the number of sessions/classes per Course</p> <p>Involvement of academics in suggesting the areas for discussion during the classes/sessions</p> <p>Involvement of academics in handling synchronous sessions</p> <p>Establishment of a robust Centre for Learner Support Services as a single-window operation for learners with the QA Team (which liaise with Academic Schools, Materials Production Units (print and non-print), Learning Centres, etc., on a continuous basis) Policy books are in place</p> |
| 10 | Examination (theory and practical) | <p>Learning package contains the schedule for examinations (in the evenings and on weekends)</p> | <p>Examination Centres are available</p> <p>Rule book to conduct exams is available</p> |

Seldom do institutional policies on quality, if any, address/accommodate the concerns of learners. Generally, accrediting agencies are “hesitant to look at course quality, a primary point of interest for consumers. There are indeed practical problems – primarily insufficient resources – to implement these finer levels of quality assurance. If we agree that the course needs to be added as a unit of analysis, how do we construct a quality assurance process that is doable?” (Twigg, 2001). In other words, the parameters accrediting agencies, governments, etc., tend to employ to assess quality need not necessarily be the same as those the practitioners or learners hold, and vice versa. Not only must, therefore, institutions put in place proper mechanisms to look into this anomaly in the prevailing approach to quality, but also put an end to applying the quality criteria evolved for campus education to ODL. Exploiting the potential of emerging technologies, ODL institutions must embark on learner support service solutions, besides refocusing and accommodating the consequential institutional restructuring process.

2.4 SOCIAL JUSTICE

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has been, and to a certain extent still is, considered an alternative or a complementary to the face-to-face educational set up. In the 1980s, people who were skeptical of the concept of ODL and were staunch believers in the physical contiguity for learning transaction to take place, vehemently opposed the concept of ODL and considered it a second-rate education, at best. Though many of these skeptics later became converts, having understood the inherent socio-academic strength of ODL, some still do not want to be convinced.

Then there were moderators in the 1990s, who believed that ODL, if implemented properly, would certainly help increase the access to higher education. And, considering the student profile, they accepted that ODL is a complementary system as it provides tangible provisions for retraining and continuous professional education, which are very vital, given knowledge explosion. These beliefs coexisted and perhaps they still do.

However, with the phenomenal growth in the Internet/Web technologies and other ICTs in capturing, storage and retrieval of the teaching-learning processes, people who are technology savvy and those who earlier dismissed technology as a manifestation of neo-colonization saw a convergence of face-to-face education and ODL. The changing demography, globalization, the demand of knowledge workers, etc., are in turn changing the learner profiles in ODL (see Unit 4 of this Block for a discussion on the subject). The learners in ODL no longer are the typical persons who ‘missed the bus’, as the cliché goes. ODL caters to a mixed group of learners comprising those who are fresh from school education, who are gainfully employed, who look for non-credit Programmes, etc. What this means is that the contribution of ODL in accelerating the access to and assuring quality in higher education is getting acknowledged. By extension, the social credibility of ODL is firmly placed.

The significant trends in Open and Distance Learning (ODL), a powerful weapon for mass instruction, can be grouped under the following two symbiotic, mutually-supporting categories:

2.4.1 The Question of Access

Across the ODL spectrum, a primitive interpretation of social justice seems to historically prevail. Considering the fact that ODL was, by and

large, conceived more as a vehicle for accelerating the access to tertiary/higher education than as a system with huge potential to deepen the quality of higher education while simultaneously widening the access, particularly in the context of the developing economies of the world, a broader interpretation of social justice insofar as ODL is concerned did not occur. Thus, ODL has been and unfortunately continues to be associated with access or quantity, and in the process the issue of quality was relegated to the background.

Though indisputably important, access alone is not enough to achieve social justice in terms of equity – quality of learning and quality of life. That is to say, the enthusiasm to improve the access to higher education will prove to be misplaced, if it is shorn of quality and, by extension, human development that singularly determines the degree of social justice achieved. This exactly is the reason why ODL systems, particularly in India, conjure up an unenviable image of mediocrity among the enlightened. More often than not, the major stakeholders such as the government, the academia, the employment market, etc., see them as a manifestation of institutionalized mediocrity.

Besides the abysmally poor performance of some of the institutions that embark on ODL systems with the primary purpose of generating revenue, the other main reason for looking down upon ODL is the ‘culturally induced bias’ that on-campus education is superior because the physical contiguity that exists between the learners and teachers encourages learning. The impact of this deep-rooted myth is such that it is not uncommon to preposterously apply quality parameters that are pertinent to on-campus environments on ODL. Indicators of quality should, by all means, reflect the quintessence of the system under consideration. Based on the familiarity with the classroom education, the customary standards such as the physical plant (campus), number of faculty members, learning environment, resources such as playground, Internet/Wi-Fi connectivity, physical/digital library, audio/visual studio, cafeteria, etc., the status of council members, teacher-learner ratio, annual learner intake and exit rate, effectiveness of parent-teacher association, on-campus discipline, etc., that are used to gauge the quality or otherwise of the conventional education system are unabashedly applied in the context of ODL. Does one size fit all?

This should not be, however, construed that the on-campus parameters of quality could not be used at all in the ODL context. What is actually meant is that the degree of application differs and that on-campus parameters alone are insufficient to ascertain the quality or otherwise of the ODL systems. Conversely, in their enthusiasm to be treated on a par with the classroom education, ODL institutions often fashion their programmes after those available face-to-face. This is quite unfortunate for obvious reasons: the properties of chalk and cheese remain what they are, packaging notwithstanding. However, the academic benefits that could accrue by dovetailing these systems cannot be disputed. With the emerging information and communications technologies (ICT), a sense of fusion or convergence of these systems has already been sporadically achieved, and the resultant robustness of the products and services ably addresses the issue of social justice.

2.4.2 Quest for Social Justice

For the purpose of this Subsection, we shall touch upon the case of India. (You may like to reflect on this with reference to your own situations).

About half a century ago, when ODL was introduced in its earliest avatar as correspondence education in India, the purpose seemed to be to provide continuing education to teachers as well as to increase the access to higher education. With the emergence of open learning in the 1980s, the access angle also gained currency and it was projected in the successive Five Year Plan documents that each Indian State would have an Open University and that the share of distance learners in the GER by 2012, i.e., by the end of the 12th Five Year Plan (2007-2012), should be about 40%, etc. Thus, 'access' was predominant in the ODL discourse in India, and, perhaps, rightly so, as the prevailing situation warranted so. However, with the phenomenal growth of the ICT since the mid-1990s and the whole new perception this brought with it on every aspect of life including education, the quest for quality and, by extension, access for success is beginning to dominate the ODL scene. Mere access to higher education, as it obtains today, turns out to be a politically correct populist measure, but access without paving the way for improving the quality of life is socially and economically unproductive. If the earlier discussion on the use of ODL for revenue generation is of any indication, even the noteworthy access angle becomes subservient to finance.

The government seems to approach ODL rather reluctantly and this could be attributed to the lack of a genuine ODL roadmap to achieve social justice, i.e., improving the access to quality higher education and quality of life.

2.4.3 Reflections

In a vicarious way, ODL addresses itself to the 'bottom of the pyramid' - a concept propounded by the legendary management guru C.K. Prahalad that revolutionized the field of marketing management. Though this concept does connote 'mass', dilution of quality of products, processes and services was neither intended nor contemplated. This cannot, however, be said of ODL. Nonetheless, it is not impossible for open and distance learning institutions (ODLIs) to build and maintain quality of their offerings by periodically overhauling curricula; re-drawing staff development activities; carrying out relevant research studies; making available quality learner support services, etc. For example, they could embark on multifarious learning environments to cater to differing learning styles, bring relevant and current information/knowledge to the doorsteps of learners, address the learning needs of the differently-abled, etc., by harnessing the potential of technologies including information and communications technologies (ICT). With the world community fiercely embracing Free/Open Source Software (FOSS), Open Educational Resources (OERs), etc., ODLIs could extend a helpful arm to deeply bury the clichéd digital divide arguments and bring to life the hitherto dormant phenomenon of digital dividend. The proposition put forward may smack of contradiction, but the fact remains that the problems created by technology could be solved only by technology.

Wriggling out of the stereotypical academic trap, which many of the existing ODL institutions currently find themselves in, they must reflect on their social contributions and make concerted efforts to re-invent themselves, and the resultant new avatar should ably address the issues of social justice beyond access. However, the role of ODLIs in bringing about social justice in education is limited, though sufficiently important. Granting that ODLIs could bring forth positive changes within their environments to meet the demands of social justice, what worth would

they still be, if they continue to receive flak out of socio-political apathy? ODLIs, in isolation, cannot achieve social justice: they need to carry with them the entire social milieu in which they operate.

Able addressing the issues of socio-political apathy, academic credibility, etc., thus, becomes imperative, and this could not be done without intense engagement of the pillars of democracy. This, when occurs, will result in robust ODL policies, achieving inclusive quality higher education and thus social justice.

Course correction steered by out-of-the-box thinking, far from the sickeningly dominant business-as-usual attitude, is imperative, should higher education in general and open and distance learning (ODL) in particular achieve social justice in terms of human development, i.e., improving the quality of life of people. Radical changes in such areas as governance, administration/management, funding patterns, faculty hiring, curriculum framing including instructional design and learner support systems, etc., therefore, are warranted in the context of ODL to make it sufficiently robust in order to be increasingly responsive to the learning needs of the society in which it operates. Are we prepared for, or at the least, inclined towards radical changes? With the emerging geopolitical scenario; ever-increasing digital societies that serendipitously flatten the world; emergence of new economic superpowers in the global South, etc., and their impact on demography, culture and particularly higher education, ODL has to, of necessity, come under the reformist scalpel to flush out some of its burdensome traditions.

Making education accessible is one thing, making quality education accessible is quite another, and it is the latter that will complement the social justice exercise undertaken in the education sector with the advent of the ODL in India about half a century ago. We should therefore interpret social justice, as it pertains to ODL, against a broad canvass of quality human development, of which access is but a part.

Check Your Progress 6

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

State the meaning of social justice in the context of ODL

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2.5 LET US SUM UP

We discussed the academic and social relevance of an educational system and the normal criteria within which it operates. We also identified four major aims that characterize the functions of an educational system. The aims we identified are: to impart skills, to develop the powers of the mind, advance knowledge, and promote a secular view among the people.

We then evolved a more valid perspective of distance education and considered its legitimacy with reference to that perspective. Having given the perspective, we discussed comprehensively whether or not distance education fulfills each of the educational criteria mentioned above. We eventually draw the conclusion that distance education does fulfil the criteria satisfactorily.

2.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

An education system should be able to:

- i) Give instruction in skills,
- ii) develop the powers of the mind and bring about a cultivated society, advance knowledge, and
- iii) transmit a common human culture and thereby instill a secular view among individuals.

The present social situation suggests many more criteria, for example, social and economic relevance of education, education to bring about equity, etc.

Check Your Progress 2

Distance education provides an opportunity for updating. Information and life-long education. It, thus, promotes one's professional attitude towards one's social roles and leads to improved awareness in the learner. This awareness, in turn, leads to a shared improvement and the transformation of the society as a whole.

Distance education encompasses three domains (i.e. cognitive, psychomotor and affective) which subsume skills of learning.

- i) Cognitive domain: Access devices, i.e., glossaries, exercises, etc., which predominate in distance teaching materials help to develop independent reading and the comprehension skills of the students.
- ii) Psycho-motor domain: Distance education takes care of this domain by providing the students access to laboratory facilities - especially for science subjects.
- iii) Affective domain: The demands of this domain are met through personal contact programmes, counselling; tutor-comment, audio/video programmes, computer aided learning and by adopting a personalized approach in the design of course materials.

Check Your Progress 3

By providing educational opportunities to a majority of the population, distance education brings about de-elitisation of the educational process. Thus, its wide 'coverage' ensures the spread of rationality and a common human culture based on values that arise out of learning - this is a positive move towards the creation of a learning society

Check Your Progress 4

Though the factors indicating quality of campus education, traditional ODL and online learning environments overlap, a few factors stand out from the rest in each of these environments as presented in the table below:

| Campus Education | Traditional ODL | Online Learning |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Physical plant (Campus) | Learning materials | Learning design |
| Institutional reputation | Materials despatch | Learner support |
| Student entry/exit | Continuous assessment | Institutional commitment |
| Learning environment | Academic counselling | Learning outcomes |
| Campus discipline | Resources | Technology |

Check Your Progress 5

The expression 'social justice' generally takes the meaning from the context in which it is used. Accordingly, in the context of ODL, we could describe social justice as being able to provide increased access to quality higher education and improve the quality of life.

Check Your Progress 6

About half a century ago, when ODL was introduced in its earliest avatar as correspondence education in India, the purpose seemed to be to provide continuing education to teachers as well as to increase the access to higher education. With the emergence of open learning in the 1980s, the access angle also gained currency and it was projected in the successive Five Year Plan documents that each Indian State would have an Open University and that the share of distance learners in the GER by 2012, i.e., by the end of the 12th Five Year Plan (2007-2012), should be about 40%, etc. Thus, 'access' was predominant in the ODL discourse in India.

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