Quality Enhancement in Assessment Practices in Distance Learning: Context, Concerns and Challenges

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Abstract:

Increasing access to education and consequently rapid expansion of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a viable alternative pause to ensuring quality to develop Stakeholders' confidence. Assessment in Open Schooling education is mainly associated with growth of learning of the learners and improvement of different programme allied with in the ODL system. The success of distance education largely depends on the total quality management and best practices for the quality enhancement of curriculum, delivery mechanism, assessment practices and student support services provided by the institution. Most of the criticism has been directed at the wide spread use of achievement test in open educational institutions. Many of our assessment practices place too much emphasis on assessing content and give too little attention to the skills and application. Critique in this evaluation fails to assess learner's level of meta-cognition, creativity and other higher order skills, which are mostly the pre-requisite of real life situations, work employment, personal and professional growth. In open schooling system Self-Learning Materials (SLM), Personal Contact Programme (PCP) and assessment are supplementary to each other and assessment itself become a valuable learning experience. Learning and evaluation activities needs to be blended into a holistic act/task, which demands learning not to select but to design and create the task. In this changing scenario, quality enhancement in assessment practices need to be practiced in distance education institutions for addressing meaningful learning rather certifying the learners.

Quality enhancement in distance education includes strategic initiatives for the improvement. Quality enhancement plays in important role for highlighting the quality assessment practices in distance learing platform. This paper outlines different aspects and trends of assessment practices in major distance education institutions. Indicators of quality enhancement in distance education programme have been discussed. This paper further discussed the initiatives of NIOS for bringing quality enhancement in assessment practices and discussed different challenges in around the assessment procedure. Finally this paper suggests rethinking the alternative mechanism to be followed in assessment practices in order to enhance the quality in Open Distance Learning (ODL) system.

Introduction:

*If we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must look into its assessment procedures. What student qualities and achievements are actively valued and rewarded by the system? The answer to this question is to be found in what the system requires students to do in order to survive and prosper.''***D. Rowntree (1977)**

Open Schooling Institutions work on the ideology of individual differences and share the conviction that students learn best when they are intrinsically motivated and interested in the topic. This particular ideology shapes most of the Teaching-Leaning experiences and Assessment practices in the school. The focus is on the child and efforts are made to bring out the best and his/her latent talents. The teaching-learning processes are geared towards his/her learning styles and learning speed and assessment processes are inbuilt within the paradigms of teaching-learning experiences. Learners in the open- Schooling system are primarily those who, for one reason or the other, could not either join or continue studies in the formal system. In the Open Schooling System, a learner is required to learn at his/her own pace. He/she is expected to be a self-learner. One can learn at one own speed and at one own convenience. For this, a learner is provided specially designed printed self-instructional material on the course(s) offered by him. Besides print material, support materials like audio/video cassettes and practical manuals are made available to the learner.

PERSPECTIVES ON OPEN SCHOOLING ASSESSMENT

We can look into the assessment of *Open School* Systems from the following perspectives:

a) **Process Assessment:** In this the educational programme is assessed by observing the programme in action. It describes and assesses the various components of the programme like teaching-learning activities, programme materials and activities, students' evaluation procedures etc. The appropriateness and desirability of each of these components is assessed by way of observations, feedback from teachers, students etc. The programme evaluator might observe teachers using the programme and write a descriptive account of how students respond and then provide feedback to the teachers or the administrators. Examining implementation of the educational programme activities is an important form of process evaluation. Finding the gaps between 'what is' and 'what should be' with the intention of providing the necessary interventions.

b) **Outcome Assessment:** It studies the impact which the educational programme has been able to bring about in its learners. It basically tries to see whether the desired learning outcomes have been attained by the learners or not. For example, if in a programme on 'Teaching Skills', the evaluator would be interested in knowing whether the learners are able to demonstrate adequately the teaching skills in their teaching or not. This perspective of evaluation tries to see the 'total gain' by students on account of the teaching-learning interventions. The level of students is seen both at the time of entering the programme (entry-level behavior) and at the end of the programme (terminal behavior). The greater the different in their entry-level and exit-level scores, the better it is as evidence of programme effectiveness. They are generally quantitative in nature.

c) **Impact assessment:** They are a combination of qualitative as well as quantitative analysis. Impact assessment tends to look beyond the immediate results of process and outcome assessment. They look beyond the immediate results of policies, instructions or services to identify longer term benefits or negative impact of an educational programme. They also tend to look at the unintended learning outcomes or hidden learning outcomes both positive as well as negative. They also look into whether the learning or the positive impacts of the programme are sustainable over a longer period of time or not.

MODES OF LEARNING ASSESSMENT IN OPEN SCHOOLING

Assessment in education is mainly associated with the growth of learning of the students. How much learning experience a student has acquired at a particular point of time against the expected learning outcomes? What are the strengths and weaknesses of a learner in the stipulated area of learning? To what extent the results of assessment can be helpful in strengthening the learning? These are some of the usual questions associated with educational assessment. Usually, the assessment in education is widely used in seeking the answer to the first question and that is concerned with 'assessment of learning' which is predominantly useful for teachers in designing the teaching strategies in facilitating the students to learn. But, with shifting of focus from teacher or subject-centered education to the learner and learning-centered education with the pursuance of constructivist approaches, the multifarious utility of assessment has come to fore in recent educational literatures and practices. Besides continuing with assessment of learning, the practices of using assessment for the growth of learning and converting assessment processes as learning processes are

being increasingly used in the learning centered classrooms. The concepts of 'assessment of learning', 'assessment for learning', and 'assessment as learning' are put schematically in the box below:

Learning Assessment

Assessment OF Learning	Assessment designed primarily to make judgments about student achievement of knowledge and/or skills at a given point of time.
Assessment FOR Learning	Assessment designed primarily to promote student learning and guide instruction.
Assessment AS Learning	Assessment designed primarily to provide students with the opportunity to reflect on their learning.

Source: Cooper (2007) p.11.

COMPONENTS OF OPEN SCHOOLING ASSESSMENT

The following are the main components of assessment of an Open School Programme (*adapted from OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education, Australia, 2011*):

i) **Learner Assessment:** Open Schools by their very nature relies on focusing on the strengths of each individual student. Open schools share the conviction that children and adolescents learn most effectively when they are interested in and motivated for a topic or a project (Sliwka, Anne, 2008). For this reason, evaluation in Open schools should focus on varied methods of evaluation; trying to look into all the personality dimensions of a person. The assessment system has to be comprehensive in nature with focus on criterion-referenced evaluation rather than norm-referenced (explained in detail in unit-1). Also there is an acute need to see Teaching, Learning and Assessment as a part of the same paradigm, rather than seeing them as water-tight compartments.

ii) **Teacher Assessment:** High quality teaching is essential to improving student outcomes and reducing gaps in student achievement. Regular Teacher Performance Appraisal System provides teachers with meaningful appraisals that encourage professional learning and growth. The process for teacher appraisal should be designed to foster teacher development and identify opportunities for additional support where required. By helping teachers achieve their full potential, any educational systems and specially the open education systems can go a long way in realizing their vision and following their philosophies.

iii) **Programme Assessment:** It involves evaluation of academic and support programmes with the intent of helping improve the programme and in particular, improve the students' performance. The results from an assessment process should provide information that can be used to determine whether or not intended outcomes are being achieved and how the programmes can be improved. An assessment process should also be designed to inform departmental faculty and other decision-makers about relevant issues that can impact the program and student learning (OAPA Handbook PROGRAM- Based Review and Assessment). An effective Open School Programme Assessment should have the following features:

- *Systematic*: It has to be a systematic and scientific method of collecting and analyzing information over a period of time.
- *Focus on Vision and Philosophy:* The main focus has to be the mission statement and the overall philosophy of the Open school/ institution.
- *Formative and Summative:* The assessment processes should be ongoing throughout the session as well as at the end of financial/ academic year for overall effectiveness
- *Comprehensive:* The assessments processes need to keep in mind not only the academic excellence but also other institutional as well as administrative factors. It has to be a comprehensive exercise keeping in mind the qualitative as well as quantitative dimensions.
- *Pragmatic:* Practical considerations also need to be given due importance. The main objective is to improvise the overall school environment. An assessment

process which is extremely time consuming or overtly expensive may defeat the very purpose.

- *Suited to internal needs and requirements*: An assessment programme standardized by an outside agency may not serve the purpose. It is better that an assessment programme developed in-house by internal members of faculty and administrative heads be adopted to bring about overall efficiency.

-adapted from California State University, Chico, Assessment Plan *(1998)*

iv) **Curriculum Assessment:** Curriculum is best thought of as that set of planned activities which are designed to implement a particular aim – set of such aims – in terms of the content of what is to be taught and the knowledge, skills and attitudes which are to be deliberately fostered" together with statements of criteria for selection of content, and choices in methods, materials and evaluation.

Therefore, we can say that curriculum pertains to all the academic and non-academic aspects and interaction of students with instructional content, resources, media, materials, people and processes for the attainment of educational objectives. In contrast to what is construed by people, curriculum is far more comprehensive than syllabus, which is a list of contents to be studied in an academic tenure. Curriculum development process starts with determining the aims and objectives of an Open School programme keeping in mind the vision and philosophy of the school. After the objectives are finalized, other important components of curriculum like the Content, Teaching-Learning Experiences and Assessment procedures are finalized.

ISSUES OF ASSESSMENT IN OPEN SCHOOLING CONTEXT:

In the broader point of view assessment refers to how much scope for learning and the role of teacher is vital for creating conducive learning environment. Distance education programme, the main constraint is physically interaction with teacher. The role of teacher is no doubt integrated inside the Self Learning Materials (SLMs) to assess the learners. But in many cases, the contextual based assessment is quite difficulty in Open Schooling system due to the physical barriers between teacher and students. Therefore, from learning point of view the assessment is a challenging task in Open Schooling system. The assessment in Open Schooling system mainly to

provide feedback to learners starting from assignment to term-end examination, self-assessment through in text questions/items and terminal exercise in the SLMs, and to reach summative evaluation for the purpose of successful completion of the course. The assessment in Open schooling system is not to earn grade but also impact learners' improvement of learning and positive attitude for further learning. Assessment in the ODL system is a multitask activity unlike in the face-to-face system. Unique practices are managed to assess students' performance such as: self assessment (students assess themselves by evaluating their performance when they read SLM), peer assessment (mutual assessment can be practiced), academic tutors to assess assignment (formative evaluation), external examiner for project and practical assessment (part of summative evaluation) in term-end examination.

Open Schools/Institutions	Assessment Practices
National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), India	A three-tier system of evaluation: self-assessment Exercises, continuous evaluation through assignments (Tutor-Marked Assignment), and term-end examinations. Assignments and term-end examination constitute 20% and 80% respectively of the total weighing.
The Open University (OU-UK), Milton Keynes, United Kingdom www.open.ac.uk	It conducts both formative and summative evaluation with a greater weighing to summative assessment and lesser weighing to formative assessment. Assignment in each course, term-end examination, projects, dissertation, seminar, group discussion, observation records, practical assignments; field work, contact sessions, hands on activities are the common components of students assessment.
Bangladesh Open University (BOU), Gazipur, Bangladesh www.bou.edu.bd	There are two types of evaluation at BOU such as continuous evaluation through tutor marked/practical assignments and the projects, and semester-end evaluation through semester–end examination.
Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), Islamabad, Pakisthan www.aiou.edu.pk	Assessment of students in distance education system in AIOU is done in two ways: continuous assessment and term-final examination. In continuous assessment students are required to do two assignments for each half-credit course and four assignments for each full credit course. The marks obtained in the assignments contribute to the final course result. Term-final examination is another component of overall assessment system of a course. Term-final examination helps the students to review their studies and see the course as a whole. At the end of each

	semester the University arranges a final three-hour written examination in each course.
The Open University of China (OUC), Beijing, China http://en.crtvu.edu.cn	Every learner has his/her own individual learning space and enjoys, personalised support services. Learning progress can be evaluated constantly, and formative and summative evaluation are used together to ensure the learning process and quality of learning. The OUC operates a credit bank with the functions of credit accreditation, transfer, deposit and withdrawal. The bank helps learners establish lifelong learning portfolios and accredit or receive certificates for various learning achievements. The bank carries out accreditation and transfer, of credits between degree and non-degree continuing education, and bridges and connects different types of learning achievements.

Source: *Retrieved on 20/09/2014 from the concerned web-sites*

The main issues of students' assessment in Open Schooling context is credibility and reliability of assessment procedure. There are three types of assessment qualities, which are essential for effective assessment. They are validity, reliability and fairness (Makamane, 2011). For an assessment system to be valid, care should be taken to verify whether the purpose of assessment has been achieved or not. Reliability entails the extent to which assessment is free from errors of measurement. An error free assessment system is treated as a reliable system. Fairness in assessment speaks about the objectivity of assessment and making assessment free of subjective judgment (UNESCO, 2006).

Let us discuss some of the challenges of assessment in Open Schooling context which are debatable and indicating the concern of quality.

   a) **Array of Infrastructure and Personnel**

   In many examination centres lack of laboratory and technological supports are the major issues for conducting examination. The personnel involved such practical activities were least motivated towards the system due to less low remunerations. In many cases the mal-practices, cheating happened during term-end-examination of Open Schooling system. The root reasons are bad infrastructure as well as terrible personnel were involved in examination process.

   b) **Conducting Formative Assessment in Open Schooling:**

 Tutor Marked Assignment (TMA) is one of the ideal tools of formative assessment in Open Schooling system. TMA not only provides the scope of inquiry based learning but also give the

scope of writing skill as well as learning by doing. It has been observed, tutors are assess the assignment with grades and marks without any remarks. In this case, the purpose of formative evaluation remains unfulfilled, if we fail to link assessment with students learning development. It has also been observed that without going through the details of the assignment, tutors award a grade. Quite frequently, tutors assign the same grade to all/most students just to satisfy them. It has also been observed that the copies of assignments are evaluated not by the real appointed tutors but by a person who is not specialised in that field or is unauthorised to do that. All the above cases left room for the system to be blamed. A careful monitoring is needed to check such type of evaluation lacunas in ODL systems (Shidong, 2011).

c) Lack of Linking with Learning

Assessment of learning plays an important part in the measuring of the quality in education (Makamane, 2011). Students' performance assessment cannot be separated from learning. As we know, ODL institutions follow diversified approaches to assessing performance of the students. The components of assessment in ODL systems should never be separated from students' learning experiences. For example, strategies of student's self-evaluation, peer evaluation, instructors/tutors evaluation, and external evaluation may well be linked with the learning strategies of the students. The detailed assessment process in the ODL system should be informed to the students well in advance. As we know, most distance students initially come from the conventional system, having experienced certain types of face-to-face activities. They are used to the practice of learning style in the face-to-face system. But in the ODL system, assessment is conducted differently according to the learning strategies of ODL systems. Keeping these things in mind, a careful detailed know, ODL institutions follow diversified approaches to assessing performance of the students. Keeping such views, a proper induction programme should orient to learners about the habit of Self-regulatory learing, self-evaluation and check-up their own progress.

d) ICT as Assessment tools in Open Schooling (On-Demand Examination):

The beauty of Open Schooling system is its flexibility. Flexibility in terms of admission, choosing subjects and examination and it is possible due to the role of ICT. When learners feel prepared to sit examination at any time, the On-demand examinations of Open Schooling fulfil such demand of learners. But the question raised how far the question paper is Valid i.e. the

degree of truthfulness to serve the purpose of assessment. The validity of question paper in On-demand examinations of Open Schooling system is one of the major issues.

       e)   Fail to integration of Comprehensive Evaluation

The aim of education is mainly concerned about all round development of learners, means change of behaviour in cognitive, affective and psychomotor domain. The assessment practices in Open Schooling system mainly associated with formative and summative in nature. In the continuous evaluation process the cognitive domain i.e. achievement in the curricular aspects the learners under Open Schooling system were assessed. There is little scope to assess affective and psychomotor domain in Open Schooling assessment procedure. Therefore, in Open Schooling system fail to integrate the comprehensive evaluation and which is one of main constraint of learning.

Rethinking Alternative Assessment Practices

Assessment is an integral part of any system of education. It is closely linked with learning experience of students (Black *et al.* 2003). Assessment in the ODL system is a complex process. It is a challenge to assess and manage quality in a widely spread system of education. To sustain quality, in ever expanding quantity can be possible if the system functions in order. ODL systems should ensure that students earn marks/grades according to their competency. The existing system in ODL cannot be called a failure; rather there is the need for renovation in the existing practices. Assessment mechanisms in ODL require a more cautious and vigilant approach to discharge their duties. To ensure quality assessment in Open Schooling system, we need to renovate the present practices of assessment procedure and to think over the alternative assessment procedures that could be helping to learn and fulfill the alternative aims of education. Let us discuss some of the important points to renovate in assessment practices in Open Schooling system:

- The weightage of formative assessment i.e. the marks obtained in Tutor Marked Assignment (TMA) should be reflected on the certificate separately for making more solemn among the learners.
- Justified bifurcation in assessment is needed in Open Schooling system, i.e. weightage to formative and summative assessment to final certification process.

- In the assessment of assignment should be two way traffic between the tutor and learner means the assignment should not only contains mark secured by the learner. It should contain mark as well as feedback and feedback should be open discussion.

- A careful mechanism should be developed to validate the question paper designed for On-Demand-Examination (ODE) otherwise the purpose of examination in Open Schooling system will be worthless.

- No distance education institution should neglect regularity of the students in various assessment activities. There should be the provision of a grade and credit to students' attendance rate in the personal contact programme and practical sessions contributing to final certification.

- For students from overseas countries, online assessment facilities should be practiced. There should be a special assessment cell in each Open institution for this purpose.

- Suitable question banks of each course and programme for the term-end examination may also be developed to reduce examination tension of the students. A limited percentage of questions for term-end examination could be drawn randomly from question banks.

- Academic counselors and tutors should be trained not only to tackle the academic matters but also to link in-house and external examination with the learning experiences of the learners.

- For making more transparency in Open Schooling examination system , each officials duties and responsibilities should be categorized and single window system should be monitor each one's duties.

- The mechanism of centre fixation and spot evaluation in Open Schooling system should be in a transparency manner to avoid malpractices in Open Schooling system.

Conclusion:

Student assessment in ODL is a crucial aspect of quality assurance because it drives student learning. It is one of the most important measures to show the achievement of learning outcomes. The result of assessment is also the basis in awarding qualifications. Hence, methods of student assessment have to be clear, consistent, effective, valid, reliable and in line with current practices

and must clearly support the achievement of learning outcomes. A valid system of assessment, which can ensure fulfillment of the course objectives, needs to be practiced. Information communication technology based assessment tools, like the portfolio and e-portfolio should be used in a large scale for establishing a student friendly and innovative practice of assessment in ODL system. To accomplish reliability of the total system of assessment, it should be managed with lesser error and objectivity in scoring. To develop confidence in the distance learners, the Open Schooling assessment system should be transparent as fair as possible. In order make quality school education in distance mode, the assessment should reflect learning rather measuring merely the marks obtained. Therefore, it is the time to rethink and redesign the assessment practices in Open Schooling System.

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