

## Enhancing Quality in Distance Education

**Dr. Vinod S. Ingawale**

Professor

Bharati Vidyapeeth University's Institute  
of Management and Entrepreneurship  
Development, More Vidyalaya Campus,  
Erandawane, Pune-411038.

**Prof. Hrishikesh M. Bhagat**

Assistant Professor

Bharati Vidyapeeth University's Institute  
of Management and Entrepreneurship  
Development, More Vidyalaya Campus,  
Erandawane, Pune-411038.

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### *Abstract*

*Distance Education is the mode of learning, where source of information and the students are separated by time and distance or both. The students mostly interact with teachers through online or through contact sessions. This type of education is the need of the day as major knowledge transformation is done through contact sessions, online sources; video conferencing and other methods also the students need not to leave their current assignments or job. Through the new techniques the students get more exposure to the current world and they enjoy the learning process. This paper throws a light on the four pillars of Distance Education and ways to enhance qualities in Distance Education.*

**Key Words:** *Distance Education, Four Pillars, Quality Improvement, Online Education*

### **Introduction**

Distance education is a mode of delivering education to the students, who may be guided through contact sessions or by the use of information technology. Many times students enrolled in distance education are not compulsorily had to be physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom. Distance education provides the access to learning where the source of information and the students (learners) are separated by time and distance or both. The recent developments in distance education include massive open online courses and open access via the web or other network technologies. Massive Open Online courses include large-scale interactive participation and open access via the web or other network technologies. Distributed Learning, e-learning, online learning are the other terms which are used synonymously with distance education. Distance education is the broadest term and has largest collection of research articles. The learner (student), through distance education enjoys a high degree of autonomy in deciding what, how and when to learn. The regular distance education activities includes admission to various programmes through online or physically submission of admission forms, conduction of contact sessions online or by traditional method, submission of

Assignments online or physically submitting them to the study centre, Distribution of study material physically to various centers, Examination online or by traditional method.

Faculty appointed for various subjects plays an important role in sharing their knowledge to students. They may conduct online sessions (through video conferencing) or by traditional classroom teaching method. Coordinator appointed for distance education activities plays vital role in coordinating various activities to the faculty members and students. To function the distance education activities smoothly, the distance education study centre should have adequate infrastructure facilities. Infrastructure facilities include classrooms, Library and self learning material storage, computer labs etc.

### **Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this paper is to know the concept of Distance Education. Through this paper, an attempt has been made to know the ways for enhancing quality in distance education. The main purpose of this paper is to suggest Four Pillars Model of Distance Education.

### **Methodology**

The present paper is an outcome of an in-

depth study of secondary data sources such as Books, Journals and Internet.

### Literature Review

An article written by Merisotis and Phipps, What's the difference, in the year 1999 gives a summary of the current state of research on distance education up to 1999. No Significant Difference Phenomenon, an article written by Russell in the year 1999 is a compilation of more than 355 sources. This suggest that the learning outcomes of students in distance education courses are similar to those involved in traditional classrooms. Merisotis and Phipps reviewed research and policy papers from 1990 to 1999. Merisotis and Phipps have classified these having three broad measures of the effectiveness of distance education.

- a) Student outcomes
- b) Student attitudes
- c) Student satisfaction

Experimental studies concluded that, distance education courses are as good as, almost equivalent with regular classroom-based instruction. Students from distance education receives similar grades or test scores. These students have similar attitudes towards the course.

Merisotis and Phipps have identified four quality issues with respect to research in distance education.

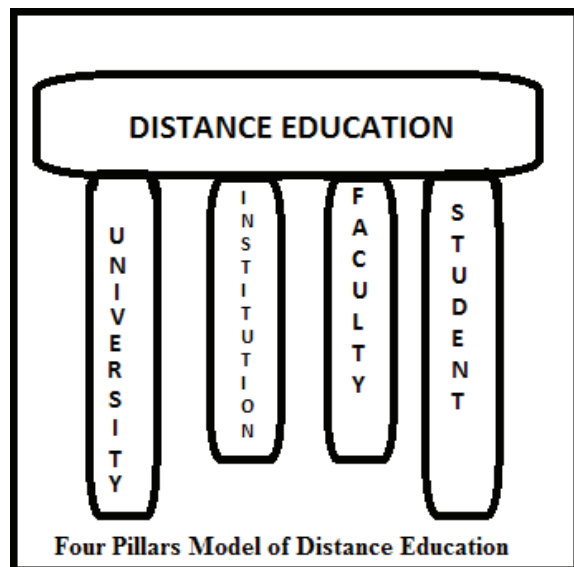
- a) Failure to control for entrance out variables.
- b) Lack of random selection of students.
- c) Poor or no reliability and validity for the instruments.
- d) Failure to control for attitudes and beliefs of students.

They observed that art of teaching is most important. Inman and Kerwin in 1999 focused on the changing role of the instructor in distance education. As per his view, the student - teacher interactions are conducted without the visual cues available through direct eye contact. In 2001, Sullivan have observed that the students join distance education courses for their convenience and flexibility, individualized instruction and measure of anonymity.

Kubala (2000), Sullivan (2001) and Weems (2002) found that students join distance education courses as they want flexibility in scheduling and convenience of place.

### Four Pillars of Distance Education

Four pillars of Distance Education includes University, Institution (Study Centre), Faculty and Students. The Director Distance Education and Coordinators of various study centers plays an important role for smooth functioning of Distance Education activities.



- a) **University** All major policy decisions are taken place at the University. These includes design of course structure and curriculum, in relation with new trends in industry, decision related to introduce new programmes under different faculties, development of rules and regulations related various programmes, study centers related decisions etc. University provides funds to carry out various activities at study centres. These funds are utilized for development of good infrastructure facilities for students like library. Committees working in Universities designs bride courses, gives decisions related to conduct of conferences, seminars on distance education, design strategies related to faculty exchange programmes, faculty reward system, gives special grants to the faculty who are dedicated and also pioneers. University authorities also assure cost-competitiveness. They also provide full support to study centres in all aspects.

- b) Institution (Study Centre):** All decisions taken by University authorities are practically implemented at all study centres. Conduction of classes of various subjects, providing different activities for students, counseling, all academic activities are performed at study centre. These activities include increase the alumni network; invite alumni for guest lectures, viva, placement activity etc. Facility at the study centre includes library equipped with e-book, CD, DVD, wi-fi internet, reading room etc.
- c) Faculty:** Faculty members are appointed for various subjects and these may help in preparation of study material. Faculty members may use case study method for regular teaching in contact sessions, solve online difficulties of students, use video conferencing method and use e-learning method, helps students from counseling to convocation. To utilize the services from faculty members effectively, they should be properly motivated.
- d) Student:** Student is always the central part of any University. Coordinator of specific study centre should ensure the following details which helps students in better coordination with the study centre
- i. Online submission of examination forms.
  - ii. Online submission of assignments.
  - iii. Project guidance time to time.
  - iv. Online payment gateway.
  - v. Online submission of convocation forms.
  - vi. Online transfer and migration certificate.

The website of the University/study centre should be properly developed/updated regularly & should contain following details:

- i. Syllabus
- ii. Examination time-table
- iii. Previous years question papers
- iv. Notices
- v. Project submission guidelines
- vi. Assignment submission guidelines
- vii. Query solution
- viii. Online self learning material.

Students of distance education are the important asset of the University and study centres. As majority of the students are working in organizations, the guidance to

these students should be given by applying new technology with the use of information technology. The goal of any organization / institution should be to reach up to maximum students.

### **Ways to Enhance Qualities in Distance Education**

Following points should be considered for enhancing quality in distance education –

1. As the faculty in distance education plays an important role, there should be professional development of the faculty engaged in distance education. In distance education the role of faculty is different as compared to the regular class room teaching. The distance education students are comfortable with less direct interaction; therefore the faculty in distance education needs professional development to help them to change their role in teaching. As majority of the students are working in organizations they prefer online mode of teaching and communication.
2. There should be frequent formative course assessment. This will help the faculty to adapt to students needs.
3. Coordinator should ensure that there is collaborative work, debate, dialogue and conversational learning.
4. There should be weekly quizzes.
5. One of the ways to improve the quality in distance education to provide online feedback.
6. Faculty should strictly follow a syllabus.
7. There should be a course forum for questions on course and concerns.
8. Faculty should assign students to write research papers using digital library and internet research.
9. Coordinator and faculty should provide global course plan before course starts.
10. Avoid synchrony interaction including chat room.

### **The following points will help students to get more knowledge and exposure to outside world**

- a) Encourage students to research projects online. For this purpose virtual library essential.
- b) Arranging dialogue with online guest experts.

**To get maximum support from students of distance education, faculty should remember the following points**

- a) Assignments should be returned within a week.
- b) Faculty should ensure that various distance education courses have self-directs learning and self initiative.
- c) Faculty should give more emphasis on explaining purpose and importance of activities in the learning process.

The library of study centre should have web cams with high speed internet support for video conferencing.

Distance education institutions should have a virtual campus with links to accreditations, orientation, degree plans etc.

High dropouts in distance education can be minimized through better student recruitment; University may think of evaluation of educational effectiveness of course and adapt it as needed.

**Conclusion**

Distance education is different from regular classroom teaching wherein students interact with the faculty members through contact sessions or by means of online communication. Therefore there is need to understand various new approaches to the education such as use of information technology in distance education. Through

proper management and administration of various activities, distance education institution may ensure smooth functioning of programmes and in effective manner.

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