

GLOBAL TRADE IN EDUCATIONAL SERVICES: IMPLICATIONS FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL)

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Abstract

It was incongruous, until recently, to refer to international student mobility as international trade in educational services. Indeed, considered crucial and innocuous for socio-cultural development, such traditional forms of trade in educational services as international student/teacher mobility across borders may remain benign. Similarly, signing of memoranda of understanding or letters of agreement with overseas institutions for research and for purposes of resource sharing – expertise and hardware – is not uncommon. Trade in educational services assumes a new dimension with the inclusion in GATS of foreign investments in the educational sector and borderless education through e-learning provisions. As much as there are commercial motives, there are the ubiquitous cultural and political rationales behind policies to globalise education.

Against this backdrop, the paper analyses the implications of GATS for ODL by examining various aspects such as the relative value of removing knowledge from the realm of public domain and considering it as a commodity, the impending Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) regime that is potential to make information dearer to the already disadvantaged societies, the fostering of collaboration or competition among institutions, however skewed it may be, the reframing of existing national quality control/assurance mechanisms and the evolving of international quality audit systems as they pertain to higher education in general and ODL (including e-learning) in particular.

Context

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 insecurity, malnutrition, 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.

Technologies to harness these resources and synergize them into capital – hard or/and human – are available, but unfortunately not at the countries that need them. Countries possessing the technologies, however, are so much obsessed with power that a sense of neo-colonization of the resources and people who own them willy-nilly prevails. And, the stories of poverty, malnourished children who wear holes for eyes, forlorn women trafficked to feed the flesh-starved, etc., make media/business sense to some, while people across the continents devour them day in and day out with an insatiable hunger for melodramatics. The power of story-telling is such, thanks to the advancements in ICT available to the rich countries, that the attention of people gets limited to the stories *per se* and not the roots and the routes to reverse the scenes of inhumanity to those of prosperity. This may be but quite logical because the stories are told sensationally by someone about someone else both of whom are unconnected whatsoever with our lives. The impact the stories makes, if ever, is short-lived when the world all around is witnessing disaster, natural or human-made, one after the other.

International agencies created with a view to establishing an atmosphere of level playing among countries of the world, big or small, land-locked or water-locked, developed or developing, seem to

have lost their focus in the course of time and now function more as a minion to the developed countries than as a savior for the countries that need them. Outliving the purposes for which they have been created, these agencies are slow to accommodate such of the changes as are of benefit to the developing world, following the dictates of the global politics. Nonetheless, the silver lining, however delicate, the non-governmental interest groups that are active in various fields bring, in the otherwise myopic situation, cannot be ignored. The slow but perceptible public and private alliance that is emerging – be it in the developing or developed economies – towards the formidable task of improving the quality of life can also make a huge difference in the way resources are mobilized distributed and used. There is, however, no room for complacency. The alliance has to be strengthened and accelerated if the 6.5 billion-strong world in which we live is to be made a better place.

What this means is that, at one level, there seems to be increasing despondency owing to lopsided growth perpetrated by global politicking and, at another, there is hope born out of growing realization for private and public partnerships for improvement of livelihood and quality of life. Put differently, to mitigate the power of adverse policies that wish to perpetrate the system of dependent countries, the tool that can be meaningfully used and with tangible result is *education*.

Millennium Development Goals (MDG)

That education can make a difference is not something novel, and this precisely is the problem. In other words, we are aware that education holds the key for development, and countries that are now affixed with the qualifier ‘developed’ bear testimony to the phenomenon that education has been and is contributing to national development. That is to say, if education can improve the quality of life, work towards wealth creation and make the world a better place to live, what prevents us from implementing policies that guarantee education to all *and* corresponding plan of action for implementation? What prevents us from creating the required human and material resources to address the issue of education for all? What prevents us from redistributing the resources to take education to all? What prevents us from reforming our educational systems in order that equity and quality are assured in education, little matter who and where the learners are? If investments in education do assure rich dividends in terms of national development and social transformation, what may be the stumbling blocks? Whose responsibility is it any way to make education available to all who aspire for it? These are not merely rhetoric questions but questions that beg convincing answers.

That said, there is also no dearth of international and national commissions and committees to voice the need for education. What is, nonetheless, lacking is the collective efforts to put the resolutions of these bodies into actions, and therefore many such pointers for growth remain dormant, while the world continues to be lopsided.

One of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) orchestrated by the United Nations (UN) and committed by world leaders speaks of universal basic education to all at the turn of the 21st century, but the recent report of the progress made on the commitment diplomatically speaks volumes about the long distance one has yet to travel before the commitment is fulfilled. It is of interest to note that this goal is addressed at the developing world such as Nigeria, Brazil, India, etc., where the millions are still deprived of education. It may be noted that it is the advanced countries that seem to show interest in achieving basic education to all in the developing countries.

On the face of it, this gesture is commendable because they, flaunting their growth as a result of making available education to all, try to impress on the developing economies to put systems in place to ensure education to all their citizenry and thereby ensure growth. These very countries perhaps know for certain that implementing the policy is a Herculean task in most of these so-called developing countries, given the existing pathetic state of affairs in these countries owing to centuries of deceit they have been subjected to. Instead of making toasts for world progress through education, what should have happened is the minimum commitment from the relatively richer countries to create sustainable support mechanisms, which did not happen. But then, why should they?

Of the many ways of looking at this question, two may be of paramount importance in the emerging context. One way of addressing this question is that the developed economies do have a stake, given the market economy. In other words, insofar as their products and services are concerned they have to reach a wider market, lest they will have a dwindled economy. Markets get widened, when the buying power of the population increases, and this increase is dependent on the national socio-economic development which in turn is generally the result of quality education. It is for this reason, untold, that developed economies are interested in upgrading the educational status of the developing ones. Making a parody of the intentions of world organizations and rich countries and attributing self-serving ulterior motives to their intentions may sound irresponsible and quite mean. One cannot, of course, paint their intentions with a broad brush and trivialize them. However, in the same vein, one cannot also ignore the point that is being driven home. In short, the developed countries do benefit from the growth of developing countries as long as the growth is monitored in a way that the exclusive clubs, representing the developed world, do not get additional memberships.

There is also a completely different way of looking at the question. Why should others be interested in capacity building exercises, if the countries which must show interest themselves ignore the issue? When the countries that should have seized the opportunity to redraw their priorities and strive to put a smile on the face of its citizenry themselves are indifferent to the cause, owing to vested political interests, expecting others to support them to upgrade their human resources and therefore all other resources is far-fetched, to say the least. In other words, if the interim report of the progress made on MDGs points to the less-than-satisfactory state of affairs, evidently, a whole host of factors are at play. Of the many, one is the weak political will. This combined with the huge amounts required to right the wrong that has been in practice for over decades and even centuries proves to be a powerful cocktail that dulls the spirit, even assuming there is one, of providing education to all.

What this means is that while the underdeveloped and developing world must put their acts together by, among others, refocusing their priorities, the developed nations must extend possible support to facilitate the required changes to take place. This should be taken up as a matter of urgency because even where there is political will, however cash-strapped the will may be, the task of educating the mass is becoming the prerogative of private enterprises, run on corporate model. There is no harm in this model as long as the purpose remains education-specific. However, not many private operators nurture the goal of social transformation. At the same time, we cannot also throw the baby with the bathtub! Careful handling of the situation is very important because in some instances the academic/training offerings the private operators make are more socially-relevant than that by government agencies as the former does contribute towards livelihood improvement and wealth creation. This indeed is a tight-rope walk for elected governments to manage the growth of private interests in educational matters without losing their social mandates to them.

Already, indicators are such that the responsibility of the government are being arrogated by private players who provide education on their terms, some of which prove to be, as mentioned, more discerning than offerings made through government sectors. However, leaving such a State subject as education to the realm of private concerns potentially divides the already imbalanced societies. The purpose for which the arrogation took place thus remains unfulfilled, while the very act of arrogation further deepens the divide. It therefore does more harm than good.

The potential of digital and social divide is more now than ever before in the context of General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

WTO/GATS

The current debate on the implications of GATS on higher education is divided. On the one hand, there is a view that highlights the benefits that 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 GATS poses to the role of government, the state of education as public good and the nature of quality of education.

The inclusion of education as one of the trades in services has 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 GATS seems to be a response to as well as a contributing factor for the current trends in learning provisions, demography, market, etc.

An Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) study in 2002 estimated that the value of trade in education services was about US\$ 30 billion in 1999. This is a conservative estimate in that it was based on students studying abroad and did not include other types of cross border education. Today, the market may be worth more than US\$ 3 trillion. WTO aims to capitalize on the market potential and promote international trade in education services within the stipulated rules and procedures to assumedly eliminate trade barricades.

The GATS defines the following four modes or ways of supply in which a service, and in the present context education service organized into five categories of primary, secondary, higher, adult and other (e.g., language testing, student recruitment, etc.), can be traded:

1. **Cross border supply:** This means a service crosses the border and does not require the physical movement of the consumer. This includes distance learning, e-learning, virtual campus, etc.
2. **Consumption abroad:** This means the movement of consumers to the country of the supplier. This is a popular mode of supply since time immemorial in that students move to other countries for studies.
3. **Commercial presence:** This means the presence of a service provider in another country in order to render service. This includes setting up local branches or satellite campuses, franchises in another country.
4. **Presence of natural persons:** This means persons travelling to another country on a temporary basis to provide service. This is a common phenomenon in that professionals work abroad.

On the face of it, GATS is benign and innocuous as it promises to provide international education at local contexts. But, does it have another face? And, that is the trillion dollar question. It is this question that compels us to examine the obligations that govern GATS.

When a country under GATS allows foreign competition in a sector, equal opportunities in that sector should be given to service providers from all WTO members. This applies to the mutual exclusion treatment as well. For instance, when Country A allows a foreign education provider to establish a branch campus, it cannot deny the same opportunity/treatment to other WTO members. Or, if Country A chooses to exclude Country B from providing a specific service, then all WTO members are excluded from providing such a specific service. This puts the countries in Catch 22 position: if a country allows foreign access to its educational services, it cannot be a chooser as to who will be allowed, and the scenario is no different when the country does not allow foreign access. In addition, once a foreign supplier has been allowed to supply a service in one's country there should be no discrimination in treatment between the foreign and domestic providers. While putting the 'public good' concept of education at risk, this questions the sovereignty of a country.

Supporters of the GATS emphasize that education is, to a large extent, a government function and that the agreement does not seek to displace the public education system and the right of government to regulate and meet domestic policy objectives. Nonetheless, critics express concern that the whole question of the protection of public services is very uncertain and potentially at risk because the phrase 'governmental authority' could not be conclusively defined. Clearly, which higher education and higher education providers or services are exempt from GATS is ambiguous.

As a result, different rationales and approaches do exist as regards the GATS is concerned. A consumer-oriented rationale can be the need to provide a wider range of opportunities to consumers or the need to protect consumers by assuring appropriate levels of access to and quality of education services. An economic rationale can be a way to increase trade revenues for exporting countries or a means to attract additional investment for education for importing countries. A socio-cultural rationale may be the threat of foreign dominance or exploitation of a national system and culture.

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 light of the push towards trade liberalization and increased cross border delivery of education. Although the agreement focuses on temporary movement of the labour force, it may lead to and facilitate permanent migration as well. The implications from increased mobility of teachers and researchers are particularly relevant to developing countries. It will be a major challenge to improve education systems if well-qualified professionals and graduates are being attracted to positions in other countries.

The GATS induced-trends could be the following:

- The use of information and communications technologies (ICT) for domestic and cross-border delivery of programs.
- The growing number of private for-profit entities providing higher education opportunities domestically and internationally.
- The increasing costs and tuition fees faced by students of public (and private) institutions.
- The need for public institution to seek alternate sources of funding which sometimes means engaging in for-profit activities or seeking private sector sources of financial support.
- The ability (or inability) of government to fund the increasing demand for higher and adult education.

Ensuring access to education is going to be a formidable responsibility for public (government) 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. 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 the cost of education and perhaps lead to a multi-tiered system. This also raises the fundamental question regarding the capacity and role of government with respect to funding and providing open or limited access to higher education. In sum, governments by themselves cannot scale the heights because of politicking and insufficient funds, but arrogating to the private agencies with the task of educating the nation is not a sensible act as this is potential to jeopardize the societal systems.

What then may be the alternative? One alternative, of the many, may be strict quality control/assurance/audit systems.

Quality Audit

Statements on the quality of education have typically been taken for granted and seldom does it become a tenuous part of institutional policies. Moreover, the paradigm shift in education from teacher (or teaching) to learner (or learning) as manifested in open and distance learning (ODL), the WTO/GATS specifications which require transnational quality criteria and the emerging Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) regime that potentially makes education dearer in the process of knowledge commodification all have implications for quality and thus render the existing policies inadequate.

Quality in 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 aged 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, reflecting the quality elements generally expected of campus educational systems, are not intended to be exhaustive. But, they are certainly 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. 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 and this assumes importance in the GATS context.

Quality in Traditional ODL

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 dispatch:** 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?
- **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?

Concerns of the kind listed above, irrespective of whether they are coalesced under the category 'learning context' or any other, therefore, must find a place in the framing of the policy on quality of traditional ODL. 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.

Quality in Online Learning

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

- i) **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.
- ii) **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.
- iii) **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.
- iv) **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.
- v) **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 (Adapted from ACE, 1996).

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 framework of quality indicators the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) advances also highlights this overlap as well as the distinction, as given below:

- i) **Institutional commitment:** Is a technology (IT) policy in place? Does it cover electronic security measures (i.e., password protection, encryption, back-up systems, etc.) to ensure the integrity and validity of information? Is the delivery system in terms of technology foolproof? Is the technology being used in the course reliable? Is the technology being used (e.g., web sites, course management software) learner-friendly? Is there a robust support system to maintain the infrastructure? Is a policy on intellectual property (IP) in place?

- ii) **Courseware production/delivery:** Are there guidelines for course development, design, and delivery? Are these guidelines valid and reliable, and followed? Does learner access and/or learning outcomes, and not technology availability, determine the technology to be/being used for course delivery? Is the learning content/design reviewed periodically to ensure their compliance to programme standards? Does the course design take into consideration learning styles of students? Does it facilitate students to engage in analysis, synthesis and evaluation as part of their course and programme requirements? Is the content current and relevant to satisfy learner needs in terms of their educational and professional goals?
- iii) **Course structure:** Do learners have course information, outlining course objectives, concepts/ideas and learning outcomes, in clearly written, straightforward statements? Do learners have sufficient access to learning resources (e.g., virtual and physical libraries, databases)? Are course expectations, including the time for assignment submission, etc., clear to the learners? Is the course structured in such a way as to match the course experience with learner and course expectations?
- iv) **Teaching/learning transaction:** Do learners get pre-enrollment advice to assess their access to the minimal technology required and their motivation and commitment to learn at a distance? Are the learners encouraged for independent learning to set the self-pace, as well as collaborative learning for decision-making, problem solving, etc? Is the interaction among learners and between them and instructors through various media encouraged? Are the learners and tutors clear about the purpose of assignments and learning activities? Is the feedback on assignment responses constructive and given in time? Do learners get sufficient help just when they require it?
- v) **Student support services:** Do learners get information about programmes, including admission requirements, tuition and fees, books and supplies, technical and proctoring requirements, student support services, etc., in time? Are learners provided with hands-on training and information to aid them in securing material through electronic databases, inter-library loans, government archives, news services and other sources? Do learners have continuous access to technical assistance, including detailed instructions regarding the electronic media used, practice sessions with, and convenient access to, learner/technical support staff? Are learners' questions answered accurately and quickly? Is a structured system in place to address learner complaints?
- vi) **Faculty support services:** Is technical assistance in course development available to faculty to develop/deliver courses online? Is the mechanism in place to assist faculty members in the transition from classroom teaching/traditional distance teaching to online instruction? Is the mechanism in place to assess the faculty members during this process of transition? Are faculty members provided with sufficient resources to deal with issues arising from student use of electronically accessed data?
- vii) **Programme evaluation:** Is an assessment system in place for formative and/or summative evaluation to assess the educational effectiveness of the courses? Is the evaluation system robust enough to accommodate the inputs from all the stakeholders? (Adapted from IHEP, 2000).

One category that is conspicuously absent from the IHEP list of indicators, rendering it incomplete is that which pertains to technology. However, one significant contribution that this list of quality indicators makes is in terms of the category pertaining to the level of support institutions give to the faculty members for the implementation of online learning. This category gains importance given the fact that the amount of training or retraining faculty members must receive on a continuous basis for effective implementation is generally ignored, resulting in faculty apprehensions and resentment. Any system of learning, however sound its conceptual framework and meaningful its overall aims may be, is bound to meet with failure if the staff members are not prepared for the job, and a support system is put in place. Establishing a sound faculty support services system to create the content and deliver it online must, therefore, be one of the priorities of any institution embarking on, or embracing, online learning, and this must form a part of the list of quality indicators. In addition, the quality framework

must include learner concerns. For example, such aspects as equity, bandwidth, etc., are a worthy contribution to the debate on the quality auditing of online learning.

Framing Quality Auditing Policy

The foregoing discussion unequivocally points to the following facts:

- i) 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.
- ii) 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.
- iii) 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:

- i) 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.
- ii) 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.

Conclusion

Given the difference in the delivery modes and learner profiles, the guidelines developed for assuring and auditing the quality of campus education, when applied to off-campus contexts, will prove to be wanting and detrimental to distance learners. Embarrassingly, however, this remains an established practice particularly in dual/mixed mode institutions, and it must no longer be encouraged. Despite the fact that advancements in information and communications technology (ICT) have been bridging

the gap between campus and ODL contexts, it must be recognized that the concerns, emanating from the teaching/learning processes involved in these contexts, remain different, and that must be reflected in the policy on the quality of ODL, and therefore the indicators/benchmarks that guide quality auditing. The other challenge for institutions is to find ways to accommodate the concerns of all the stakeholders in their policy statements on quality, breaking away from the established practice of deriving policies on quality from the traditionally held institutional norms and the requirements of accrediting agencies. A formidable task indeed it is. But, when undertaken, the exercise will prove to be worthwhile, as it enables institutions to articulate and implement robust quality management systems. There is no choice but to carry this out if ODL systems have to survive in the GATS atmosphere.

The whole discussion must, therefore, be seen against the fundamental issue of the capacity of the developing countries to participate effectively in the global trading system and to be equal members in the WTO. Strong sentiments exist about the potential for trade rules to make poor countries poorer, instead of narrowing the gap between developed and developing countries. The perceived injustice regarding the expectation that poor nations are expected to remove trade barriers while rich nations retain barriers on certain goods, contributes to the strong reactions of some developing countries about GATS in general. In sum, the liberalized trade on higher education is ambivalent in that for some it is an opportunity and for some others it is a threat. As much as GATS is a liberating force in the sense it facilitates education to whoever aspires for it, it is a restricting force as a majority who aspire for education will be left out.

Only when do countries establish sound systems of quality auditing, would they be able to survive in the emerging WTO/GATS context.

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