Quality assurance in distance education: The challenges to be addressed

ANTONY STELLA and A. GNANAM
Bangalore, India

Abstract. Integration of technology in all forms of education has narrowed down the gap between the on- and off-campus students and has resulted in the use of the more broad-based term 'distributed learning'. Consequently, distance learning is seen as a subset of distributed learning, focusing on students who may be separated in time and space from their peers and the instructor. The new forms and meanings it is acquiring, its convergence with traditional learning and its global impact pose several challenges. It has caused a serious concern to the governments and the quality assurance agencies all over the world about the safety of the national systems, legitimacy of the providers, protecting the public from fake providers, quality of the offerings etc. the common element being 'concern for quality'. Many quality assurance agencies have responded to this need and there is considerable dialogue about ensuring quality in distance education. Some think that quality assurance practices for distance education are essentially the same as those used for traditional education. Others argue that distance education tests conventional assumptions and hence the present mechanisms of quality assurance are not adequate to ensure the quality of distance education. This paper highlights the aspects of distance education that deviate so markedly from what has been practiced for hundreds of years and argues that quality assurance of distance education has to be approached differently.

New forms of education

Traditional campus based education is no longer the only mainstream delivery mode. Due to technological developments the last two decades has seen a significant increase in different forms of education and new education providers that have a global impact. They include a wide range of provisions that overlap, notably

- Distance Education programs that are delivered through satellites, computers, correspondence or other technological means across national boundaries
- Twinning arrangements – in which a degree is gained through study in more than one country as a result of agreements between institutions in different countries to offer joint programs

- Study abroad semester or credit earning arrangements similar to the twinning programs
- Branch or satellite campuses set up by an institution in another country to provide its educational programs to foreign students
- Sale of proprietary materials such as books, courseware or testing, together with associated services
- Franchised operations – using a third party to give degree – for example a computer company delivering a university computer science degree
- Partnerships for overseas offerings where institution A in one country enters into a collaborative arrangement with an institution B in another country to provide one or more of its programs to students in B's country
- Free-standing programs operating outside the country of the provider with or without a combination of the above mentioned arrangements
- Corporate Universities
- Virtual Universities

Among the various new forms listed above, Virtual University is of recent origin gaining momentum due to the development of communication via e-mail and Internet and is still acquiring its meanings. One meaning is an operation in which experts are commissioned to prepare educational materials that are then made available via the Internet. Teaching personnel assist students to work with these materials. The curriculum planners, the instructional designers, the students and the teaching personnel may be anywhere in the world with Internet access, and the home campus may be no more than a couple of offices and a computer from and through which to run the operation. Virtual University is just one of the different forms of educational provisions made possible by technological developments. The above-mentioned forms are not exhaustive but they give a flavour of some variants.

Convergence of the new forms of education and redefining distance education

Technology has been integrated into almost all forms of education making the distinctions between various forms of education less clear. They seem to converge towards a more learner responsive and flexible system. With on-line delivery systems and approaches being employed for both distant and on-campus students, distance education and on-campus instruction are converging. Today, on-campus students can take a part of the program or courses through on-line or e-learning, either in the campus or away from the campus and this combination has narrowed down the gap between the on- and off-campus students. This convergence has resulted in the use of the more broad-based term 'distributed learning'.

Very soon the term 'distributed learning' may replace the usage of distance education because distance is too restrictive a concept. Distributed learning can occur either on or off campus, providing students with greater flexibility and eliminating time as a barrier to learning. Regardless of whether students are on campus or on-line, by integration of technology into education, learning becomes distributed. In fact, the "anytime, anyplace" nature of distributed learning has its greatest impact on campus instruction in countries where on-line courses are in vogue. Some universities advertise that their on-line courses would cost less and encourage the campus students to earn part of their credits through on-line courses. The certificates given by the George Washington University and many other universities in USA do not differentiate between the on-campus and off-campus students. Australian Universities of repute have been awarding indistinguishable degrees to on-campus and off-campus students for decades (Jones 2000). In UK, Open University Degrees are recognized as representing a rigorous, thorough British education.

Consequently, distance learning needs to be redefined. It may be seen as a subset of distributed learning, focusing on students who may be separated in time and space from their peers and the instructor. It is a system and a process that connects learners with distributed learning resources. It takes a wide variety of forms and use of electronic media is not necessarily required. However, it is the technological development that has enabled distance education emerge as part of mainstream education globally.

With the developments in world-wide-web (www), the impact of distance learning is not confined to the country of origin anymore. Developments in any country affect the higher education scenario globally. Here are a few specific developments that extend their influence globally.

Recent developments in distance education

In US, large public universities such as University of Maryland University College (UMUC) are especially active in distance learning, providing distance learning opportunities through online courses. In 1999–2000, UMUC had more than 40,000 online students (Eaton 2001). Other Universities are rapidly expanding the online courses and enrolments. The proportion of US universities with distance education courses has grown from 34% in 1997–1998 to about 50% in 1999–2000 (Salmi 2000) with significant activity in online courses that are offered globally. According to a market survey conducted in 2000, ninety-four percent of all colleges and universities were either engaged (63%) or planning to be (31%) engaged in distance and distributed learning (Twigg 2001). Thirty-three states in the US have a statewide virtual university (CHEA Update No. 2, 1999) and 85% of the

community colleges are expected to offer distance education courses by 2002 (Salmi 2000). The International Data Corporation (IDC) released a report in January 1999 titled *Online Distance Learning in Higher Education, 1998–2000*. The report estimates that 2.2 million college students will be enrolled in online courses in US institutions by 2002 (CHEA Update No. 2, 1999).

It is difficult to draw a line between program offerings and other educational services. Kentucky Commonwealth Virtual University (KCVU) of USA does not offer courses, but emphasizes the delivery of broad student support services through the Internet. Some universities join together and float programs online by contributing courses to the partnership that would make up various combinations for the programs. Partnership is not necessarily among educational institutions. Regents College in Albany, New York and Peterson's (a company producing educational products and services including publications, software, and online activities) have formed a partnership to develop a support system for those interested in pursuing a degree through distance learning (CHEA Update No. 3, 2000).

There are traditional universities that have established successful partnerships with corporate universities. It is estimated that there are about 1,600 institutions in the world functioning today as corporate universities, up from 400 ten years ago. Two significant examples of successful corporate universities are those of Motorola and IBM. Experts are predicting that, by the year 2010, there will be more corporate universities than traditional campus-based universities in the world, and an increasing proportion of them will be serving smaller companies rather than corporate giants (Salmi 2000).

In Australia, nearly 14% of university students study at a distance (Jones 2000). The Australian Government has planned to spend more than $100 million over the next five years on a program aimed at bringing education and skills training to developing countries via the Internet. This program will link up with an $800 million World Bank plan to use the Internet to help developing countries avoid becoming victims of the "digital divide" as the developed world goes online (Chronicle 8/8/01). In Canada, 57% of Canadian Universities offer on-line courses – with 3000 courses offered in all (Hirsch 2001).

In the UK, the international division of The Open University (OU) undertakes activities worldwide which include setting up partnership arrangements with overseas academic institutions, selling copies of the best-selling Good Study Guides and other Open University course material and licensing Open University TV program to broadcasters all over the world. The OU represents 21% of all part-time higher education students in the UK. Courses are available throughout Europe and, by means of partnership agreements with other institutions, in many other parts of the world. Over 25,000 learners

are studying OU courses outside the UK. United Kingdom Telecommunications Academy (UKTA) and the National Training Organization for the UK Telecommunications Industry are the other initiatives that provide global access to the combined training capabilities of the leading communications companies and selected universities in the United Kingdom. It has been estimated that the UK institutions of higher education have more than 400 collaborative arrangements in India itself to offer their programs.

A $13.3 billion 'eLearning Action Plan' has been adopted in March 2001 by the European Commission (the Executive Body of the European Union) to promote the development of online education by European Universities (Chronicle 27/4/01). Earlier this year, German Federal Minister of Education and Research announced the joint program between the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the DAAD to support the export of German universities' study programs. After the first round of competition, funding for up to three years have been allocated for 22 projects for exporting courses of study.

According to a survey conducted in 2000, one in four of Dutch universities provide electronic learning environments, but all but 10% have plans to do so. In Japan, 34% of 4-year institutions use the Internet for on-line learning and 23% more plan to, and 123 institutions have installed a communications satellite system for organizing lectures, seminars and academic meetings (Hirsch 2001).

In India, there are ten open universities and around sixty-two distance education directorates in traditional universities. Some of them have gone global with overseas study centers. The Virtual University launched by the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS) is a notable development in the use of technology. Here too convergence of traditional and distance education programs is taking place. In the Pondicherry University, which is one of the pioneering institutions to try new innovations like five-year integrated master's programs and Choice-based Credit System, the students have the option to accrue credits through other delivery systems. The Indira Gandhi National Open University, the Community College of the Pondicherry University and the Distance Education Directorate of the Pondicherry University have been approved for such credit earning. While such instances are rare examples to be prided of in developing countries, they have already become an integral part of academic planning in the developed countries (Stella 2002).

In other countries only a minority do, but growth is rapid. The Mexican Virtual University of Monterrey uses teleconferencing and Internet to reach 50,000 students spread allover Latin America. In Thailand and Turkey, the national open universities enroll respectively 41 and 38 percent of the total student population in the home country (Salmi 2000). As the countries

improve their communication capabilities and Internet facilities, their attempt for global impact is increasing. The growth of distance learning, the new forms and meanings it is acquiring, its convergence with traditional learning and its global impact create problems for quality assessors. The survey conducted in 1998 by the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC), a national agency of the US that undertakes accreditation of distance education institutions world over, revealed that the following are widely believed within DETC membership: "regulatory interests will increase, as hundreds of new 'providers' create more activity and 'problems' for quality assessors" (DETC 1998).

The recent developments in promoting education as a trade in service is also adding pressure to the quality concerns. Commercial interests within higher education have received powerful support in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) led negotiations over the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). GATS aims to liberalise trade in services by providing member countries with legally enforceable rights to such trade. Under the GATS, governments are asked to make commitments to two principles: market access (government should not discriminate between incumbents and new entrants to a market); and national treatment (governments should not discriminate between domestic and foreign service providers). By 1998, twenty-one countries had made some commitment to GATS and more and more countries agree to reduce obstacles to international trade in education (Marginson 2002). As this trend continues, higher education would be subject to all the commercial pressures of the market. With the bewildering array of new learning options available in the market, the consumers will expect the quality assurance agencies to provide more information about the quality of those educational services to make intelligent choices. This raises issues of quality assurance controls by the exporting and importing countries and whether quality assurance should discriminate between in-country providers and the transnational providers. In fact, it has caused a serious concern to the governments and the quality assurance agencies all over the world about the safety of the national systems, legitimacy of the new providers, protecting the public from fake providers, quality of the offerings etc. the common element being 'concern for quality'.

Quality concern

There is considerable dialogue throughout academia about what constitutes quality in distance education and how to ensure it. There was a time when courses through distance education were criticized on the counts of poor quality, not being on par with the regular courses, lower standards of students

who enroll, and being detrimental to the planning of higher education in the country. The supporters of distance education used to argue about improving access, the wide choice of learning opportunities, the possibility of competitive pricing, the advantages of not leaving home to take courses and the healthy competition that could be promoted to offer quality courses. The adequacy of student support services and the missing element of interaction with teachers and other students were also issues of concern. Of course, supporters of distance education brush away these reservations by reminding others of the situations in the traditional classrooms where hundreds of students move between large lecture halls of unintellectual atmosphere without any interaction with teachers. They contend that distance education is just like any other form of traditional education; it can be done well or badly. Proponents argue that distance education is as good as traditional education if conducted properly.

With technological developments and adequate awareness about ensuring quality there is a growing consensus that distance education can be made very effective. But it is easier said than done. Exploiting the potential of the distance education mode to offer a quality program is a complex issue in itself – much more than merely installing gadgets to arrive at simple and straightforward solutions. If that is so, how to assess how good it is, against what standards?

Several different organizations have developed principles, guidelines, or benchmarks to ensure quality of distance education. The Institute for Higher Education Policy of USA has come out with 24 benchmarks that cover seven aspects considered essential to ensuring excellence in internet-based distance learning – Institutional Support, Course Development, Teaching/Learning, Course Structure, Student Support, Faculty Support and Evaluation and Assessment (IHEP 2000). With the increasing interest of the federal and state governments to ensure the quality of the distance education modes, the regional accreditation agencies in dialogue with the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) are revising their standards to include the distance education and electronic course offerings into their assessment procedures. The regional accreditation commissions have agreed on certain standards against which the evaluation of electronically offered programs will be done. They cover five major areas, each of which addresses a particular area of institutional activity relevant to distance education. They are: Institutional Context and Commitment, Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty Support, Student Support, and Evaluation and Assessment (C-RAC 2000).

In the UK, new guidelines for distance learning in higher education have been published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The guidelines are arranged under six headings: (1) System design, (2) Program design, approval

and review, (3) The management of program delivery, (4) Student development and support, (5) Student communication and representation, (6) Student assessment. Each one deals with an aspect where quality assurance is likely to require attention in a particular way when study is by distance learning (QAA 2002).

While these are good initiatives to differentiate 'good' from the 'substandard', there are many issues that are still debated. To make informed decisions we need a research base that goes beyond proving the obvious. But what does research say? The American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association commissioned The Institute for Higher Education Policy to conduct a review of the current research related to distance education. The purpose was to analyze "what the research tells us and does not tell us". The review revealed that too many of the vital issues of concern have gone unanswered and the gaps make the validity and reliability of the research findings questionable (Phipps 1999).

Research in distance education should add new dimensions to the existing knowledge and fill the existing gaps. Here are the areas where the existing body of research does not give a conclusive valid direction: What are the significant administrative issues affecting quality in distance education? What is the notion of access and how do we define quality of access in distance education? What is the existing quality of access in distance education? What are the best ways to improve the access and quality of access? How is good learning experience defined and with reference to whom or what? Will the cost of implementing the new technology itself be detrimental to access? Can technology replace human contact without significant lose of quality? How do the quality assurance agencies view the distinction between traditional programs and the distance education programs? These questions indicate that even after many decades of pilot projects, deliberations and field experience in distance education, assuring the quality of distance education is an uncharted area for many quality assurance agencies.

Tensions that may arise

The purpose of this section is to explore a few issues on quality assurance of distance education. The focus is not to discuss the problems of quality assurance in general. For example, quantification of quality is a bone of contention everywhere and the debate will continue in the context of distance education also. This paper does not touch upon those issues. Only the aspects that are distinctly related to distance education and the very basics that are yet to be clarified in the context of distance education are discussed here.

(a) Is it as simple as it appears?

Some think that distance education is a long established form of higher education and that quality assurance practices for distance education are essentially the same as those used for traditional education. Others think that the present mechanisms of quality assurance are not adequate to ensure the quality of distance education. In their argument there are too many gaps and yet-to-be-made-clear stand of quality assurance bodies. Whether offered by the conventional universities or by other providers, distance education introduces new conditions and structures to the higher education environment. The faculty role is different, the course management becomes different and the library and learning resources may require more electronic access. Coursework can now provide material in highly interactive audio, video, and textual formats at pace set by the student. These attributes are very exciting, but drastically different from the traditional classroom-based education. The range of new variables that mark the distinct features of distance education pose potential challenges for the validity of the traditional method of quality assurance to distance education. How differently do we have to examine these processes that deviate so markedly from what has been practiced for hundreds of years?

Although there is a growing consensus towards the point of view that the basic methodology of quality assurance would be the same for both traditional and distance education, there is disagreement on the extent of modifications needed. Distance education tests conventional assumptions, raising fresh questions as to the essential nature and content of an educational experience and the resources required. For example, the requirement of the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) in India on student-staff ratio and a few other aspects even for distance education programs was a burning issue two years back. The distance education units that had thousands of teacher trainees could not comply with those requirements and many of them discontinued their teacher education programs.

The example of what is happening in the US is contrary to the Indian experience. In March 1999, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCACS) accredited Jones International University, the first institution to be accredited by a regional accrediting body that offers its courses and services on a global scale entirely over the Internet. The Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) that has a well structured policy and practice for distance education accreditation has also accredited the Jones International University along with the U.S. Open University and the Western Governors University (WGU). In the case of the Jones International University, accredited by both NCACS and DETC, of the 56 faculty members employed by the university, two are full-time, and the other part-time

members generally hold academic posts at other universities. Content experts help develop the subject matter and structure for the courses, and teaching faculty execute the courses from locations around the world. Accreditation of Jones was criticized too. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) sent a letter describing its concerns about the accreditation of Jones to the executive director of NCACS. The protest was based upon what AAUAP saw as a lack of quality particularly given the high number of adjuncts the university is using. In addition, AAUP cited the short duration of the university's courses, the lack of learning resources – such as libraries and research laboratories – and the small proportion of students who seek degrees from the institution. But accreditors have stated that Jones met the requirements in other ways (CHEA Update No. 2, 1999, Chronicle 10/3/99).

The implication is that distance education may present extraordinary and distinct challenges to the traditional methods of quality assurance in some aspects. The big question at the implementation is "Do we need a drastically different approach?"

(b) Criteria and focus

Any assessment and subsequent accreditation should be made with reference to a set of criteria. Even if we agree that the criteria to assess the quality of educational offerings are basically the same for both traditional and distance education offerings, the subtle difference in the context needs to be spelt out. In distance learning, learners take increased responsibility for control and direction of the learning process. If we look at the international developments, there is growing consensus that existing standards and criteria that often focus on learning input fail to acknowledge the many forms that effective learning can take and therefore, the focus needs to be on learning outcomes.

CHEA and Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service (CHEMS) have designed and tested an alternative approach that places significant emphasis on student outcomes and delivery via distance education. The competency standards are organized in three main areas of institutional performance: Student outcomes and attainment; Responsiveness to students and Organizational alignment and support. The focus of *Student Outcomes and Attainment* is to see how the institution's graduates meet clear standards of achievement demonstrable through explicit assessments of performance. Student outcomes and attainment is a critical aspect of institutional performance and embraces (a) how standards of achievement are established and their rigor (b) how student achievement is assessed and therefore certified and (c) how well students actually perform against established standards. The other two areas also lean towards facilitating effective student outcome.

The Guiding Principles for Distance Learning in a Learning Society suggests the following major dimensions that focus more on learning support and outcome: Learning Design, Learner Support, Organizational Commitment, Learning Outcomes and Technology (ACE 1996).

Even if the quality assurance agency believes in using the same criteria applicable for traditional institutions, as in the case of India, due consideration of the unique characteristics of distance education is essential. In such instances, it is the implementation of the process that will reveal more fine-tuning to be done. For example, contextualising aspects like the "adequacy of infrastructure", "quality of learning resources" and "effective management of support services" need clear guidelines for those involved in the assessment process.

Another issue may relate to some of the basic terms like 'good educational experience', which depends on the definition of the target group. Distance education requires motivated and self-disciplined students. The good educational experience also depends on optimum utilization of available technologies and techniques and their judicious combination to effect maximum learning. It cannot be justifiably done through study material alone. The definition of good educational experience should respect these two factors – differences in the characteristics of the target learners and the potential of technologies and techniques. These issues lead to the question of what would be the frame of reference.

(c) Frame of reference

There is a point of view that distance education can be as good or as bad as traditional programs. In many countries, the stigma attached to distance education, as second grade cannot be denied. Will quality assessment undo this stigma and identify the quality institutions that can provide distance education programs of comparable quality? While assessing quality, is it expected that the distance education program will be assessed with the same rigor that has been applied for traditional institutions? In UK, USA and Australia this has been well established. The guidelines for distance education of QAA of UK start from the principle that the quality of distance learning needs to be assured in the same way as any other form of higher education. Assessed with this underlying principle, the Open University of UK is ranked amongst the top UK universities for the quality of its teaching, and of the 17 subjects assessed up to the end of 1999, the majority have been judged 'excellent'. In USA, the Distance Learning Policy of the Commission on Higher Education of Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools endorses the same view. It states "it is the intention of the Commission on Higher Education to ensure that distance learning programs are subject to

the same level and scope of scrutiny employed in more traditional settings or for conventional campus-based programs" (MSACS 1997). Since the responsibility to provide evidence for quality assessment rests with the distance education institutions, it is essential that the stand of the council is made clear to the distance education community.

While insisting on quality and its assessment in a way as rigorous as the traditional setting, the distinctive features of distance education cannot be overlooked. Distance education should make a respectable place for itself. The question is on 'recognizing the unique features of distance education' without compromising the rigor of the process. That makes the need for benchmarking crucial.

(d) Benchmarks and indicators

The crux of the problem related to quality assurance of distance education lies in identifying suitable benchmarks which will make the assessment clear to both the quality assurance agency and the distance education institutions. Further, to use the benchmarks to make value judgements, Indicators become necessary. For example, without specific indicators the benchmark statement "Instructional materials are reviewed periodically to ensure they meet program standards" does not tell us whether a particular level of functioning is best or just adequate. To take another example, student support system is mentioned in one of the criteria listed above. The corresponding benchmark statement may state as follows: "The institution has well run student support services." This benchmark statement does not spell out clearly what characterizes effective student support and what indicates different levels of effectiveness. Either quantitatively or qualitatively, for each aspect of assessment, it is essential to spell out what characterizes the different levels of performance. Otherwise, the differences between 'we also do it' and 'we do it well' may become ambiguous and affect the objectivity of assessment.

The indicators of quality and good practices for the traditional institutions are generally well understood and accepted. For example, in India, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council – the national quality assurance agency – promotes good practices that are generally accepted by academia. In the Indian context, computer facility with easy access to even non-computer science students is seen as a mark of "quality learning resources" in a traditional institution. The open access system in the library with on-line library facilities is considered a good practice under the management of learning resources. A traditional quality institution is expected to have a functioning counseling center and a placement office. Student seminars and projects are aspects to be encouraged under avenues of learning. When it comes to distance education the picture is not as clear. This is an area

where we need to take stock of what is possible under best conditions, what is happening in most of the distance education units right now and what could be the benchmarked performance for different levels of judgement.

(e) Re-defining the site-visit

With due consideration to the distinctive aspects of distance education, the same combination of self study and peer review is followed by most of the quality assurance agencies. In this broad framework, the "site visit" is the one that undergoes a lot of changes. The basic question for the site visit raised by June Lester in 1991 still holds good – "How do you translate a process that was designed to evaluate a bricks and mortar environment into one that works for distributed sites that include one person's living room and another's kitchen?" June Lester identified five basic purposes of the site visit – to evaluate the institution or program in the context of the learning environment, to conduct the interviews, to evaluate physical resources, to observe instructional delivery and to examine records. Some of these purposes could be achieved with simple adaptations. Examination of records and documents could be achieved centrally at the administration site for most of the data. However, the other purposes need to be translated carefully.

In the traditional setting, the site visit enables the peers to get a feel of the institutional ambiance. What is the concept of institution for distance education? We tend to think of the institution as composed of a complex of physical buildings, faculty, staff and students. This definition of the institution obviously doesn't work for distance education where the learning environment becomes physically distributed. The key elements of the new environment are the supportive and responsive intellectual access to the counselors and information resources. Peers have to cope with this "distributed site".

Another reason for the site visit is that it is the efficient way to interact with a cross section of the constituents of the institution – management, faculty, students, alumni, and parents that constitute a major means of data gathering by the peers. How can this be achieved in distance learning? One of the obvious answers could be through electronic mail, computer conferencing, two-way video and audio, and the telephone. A member of the assessment team can watch an e-mail conferencing going on without the need to move from his/her office or home and make an assessment about the effectiveness of the interaction. Is it sufficient? Is it viable? How well co-ordinated the distance education providers are to face the assessment this way? How well trained are the peers to assess the institutions in this "new way"? It is worth noting the methods adopted by the NCACS and the DETC. To assess the Jones International University, the NCACS team went into the virtual mode. DETC still conducts a wide-ranging survey through contacting hundreds of

agencies, along with on-line interactions. In addition, the commission surveys students whose names are randomly selected by mail to get their opinions as well (DETC 2001). In countries where the new forms of learning have a critical mass and strong presence, the new way of conducting the site visit may not pose a problem. But in developing countries where the new forms are just emerging, redefining the site visit also emerges as an issue.

The third activity of the site visit is observation of the quality, availability and utility of resources. Observing the instructional delivery, in some instances, can be accomplished without the peer ever leaving home by putting himself or herself in the role of a distant learner. The quality of the instructional materials can be assessed independently by subject experts without a site visit and their evaluation may be provided to the assessment team. Evaluation of facilities like library could be easily checked but access to resources in different sites and the responsibility of the provider are issues to be debated. To what extent can the institution be held responsible for the necessary access to resources? How do we define the adequacy of resources? This may be a non issue in developed countries but it is a major concern in a developing country. For example, in India, there are distance education providers who have arrangements with local institutions to use the computer and lab facilities – especially the hardware – for the distance learners. When this exceeds the optimum utilization of resources, putting both the campus and the distance education learners at disadvantage, it results in the criticism that the distance education providers have become parasites of the local campuses. However, this may be a problem peculiar to the context of developing countries.

(f) Defining the boundary

As the providers of distance education integrate more and on-line courses, the need for a physical site is decreasing. The borderless and boundaryless distributed learning has already become a reality. However, there are distance education providers who operate through study centers/sites/campuses spread over in different geographical locations including overseas arrangements. Assuring the effective functioning of the overseas offerings also needs careful reflection on the policy as well as the methodology. The experiences of UK and USA reveal that quality assurance in overseas educational provisions is a challenging task. The QAA expects that all higher education institutions will be able to show that they are adhering to the principles of the 'code of practice' developed by QAA to ensure the quality of the overseas offerings. Failure to demonstrate that best practice is being followed will be highlighted in the institutional reports published by the QAA. This initiative is designed to help provide enhanced confidence in the work of British universities and colleges operating outside the UK. Recently, QAA had to make a special

enquiry about the collaborative arrangement of one of the UK institutions of higher education with an institution at Israel based on the complaints it received. One may wonder how many cases of deviating from the 'code of practice' get noticed anyway. The redeeming feature is the importance given to such quality audits. In US too the regional accreditation agencies require the institutions to submit their off-campus initiatives for assessment.

The question is: Should the quality assurance agency adopt the policy of assessing all activities conducted in the name of the institution in home country as well as abroad under its sponsorship or should it be restricted to the offerings in the home country? Depending on this stand, the distance education units would start taking their responsibilities in the 'crossing the borders' more seriously. If the overseas offerings would be taken into consideration it would further influence the issues on criteria, focus, frame of reference, benchmarks and indicators, site-visit etc since the stakeholders of the outcome of assessment become the international audience. For example, will the peers visit the overseas sites? Will they visit all the sites or only a few? What would be the implications for the resource requirement for such a visit? Will the criteria and benchmarks be raised to the international standards?

The answer to these questions may lie in the mutual trust and cooperation that could be promoted among the quality assurance agencies in handling these issues. For example, the Audit Manual of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) notes as follows: "AUQA will also establish links with foreign quality agencies to obtain their assistance in relation to Australian operations overseas" (www.auqa.edu.au/qualityaudit/auditmanual/chapter02/index.shtml). In other countries too, the national quality assurance agencies have realized that the national regulatory frameworks are not adequate to oversee the distance education provisions when they cross the national borders. The problem is not just how to assess the quality of distance learning, but how to coordinate assessment exercises by various national quality assurance agencies across national borders (Marginson 2002). Mutual recognition of each other's assessment outcomes and mutual cooperation are seen as possible solutions.

(g) Final outcome

The final outcome is another aspect that needs further reflection. It depends on the national context and the objective for which quality assurance is initiated. The primary focus of assessment and the direct beneficiary also needs to be well articulated and accordingly the reporting strategy has to be fine-tuned. If distance education units are the prime beneficiaries the reporting elements may focus more on quality enhancement strategies to build on strengths and overcome weaknesses. If the distance education learner is also in the target

group, according to the differential nature of the distance education learners useful elements have to be incorporated into the report. If there would be government sanctions, the implications need to be discussed with the distance education institutions. Striking the right balance is not an easy task. What part of the report is for public, what is for follow-up, what part is for the institutions to act upon etc, need to be firmed up.

(h) Who will assess?

The next major problem is going to be the "pool of experts" who would assist in assessing distance education. There are many members in the higher education community who still look at distance education not as a desirable mainstream education but as a problem to be solved. The task of removing the traditional thinking from their mind is going to be a tremendous task. The concept that 'distance education should closely resemble conventional on-campus education, and is deficient in so far as it is dissimilar to the conventional' has to be removed from the minds of every one associated with the task. At the same time it should not lead to dilution of standards. This calls for a well-informed group of experts, comfortable with the functioning of distance education in the country and abroad to be involved in the assessment process.

Successful distance education initiatives have proved how quality can be sustained in distance education mode. Dissemination of this information to those who would be involved in the assessment is important because many experts in higher education may not be familiar with what could be achieved in successful distance education initiatives. While most of the assessment team membership will be from the distance education background, there would also be those with a different background. Once the pool of experts is identified, a dissemination strategy should be attempted to bring all of them to the same comfort level they may have with traditional higher education. Not all experts can be trained or invited for an orientation program. This needs a multi-prong approach, especially for those who are too senior to fit into a training program or too busy to attend an orientation or a round table discussion.

In summary, as the developments indicate, the emergence of the new forms of education has changed the nature of distance learning and consequently the quality assessment mechanisms. The new forms of education that deviate markedly from what has been practiced in traditional setting for a long time poses challenges to the conventional ways of quality assurance. In particular, the distance education provisions that cross national borders cause concern to the quality assurance agencies the world over. The implication is that along with "how to assess" the new forms of distance education, the quality

assurance agencies have to reflect on "how to coordinate the quality assurance activities" at the international level. It is doubtful that the philosophy, principles and standards routinely applied to evaluate or accredit traditional units can be used with out significant adjustments to assess the quality and effectiveness of distance education. The solution lies in pooling the knowledge and resources together to identify better ways of assessing distance education, without loosing sight of its distinct characteristics.

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Address for correspondence: Dr. Antony Stella, Adviser National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), 2/4 Aragini Bhavana, Dr Rajkumar Road, P.B. 1075, Rajajinagar PO, Bangalore, 560 010, Karnataka, India
Phone: 91-80-3124045/48/49; Fax: 91-80-3124047; E-mail: stella@india-naac.com, stellaa10@rediffmail.com, stellaa10@hotmail.com