

Quality Assurance Toolkit for Open and Distance Learning Institutes: A Glimpse of E-Learners' Perspective

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Abstract

The emergence of new ODL institutions and keenness of conventional universities to offer online degree programs in higher education predict its popularity. However, the challenge of how to ensure the quality of learning in ODL institutions is also emerging. In this regard, Virtual University of Pakistan (VUP) has nearly developed first ever quality assurance (QA) toolkit at national level specifically applicable to VUP and generally to all ODL institutions offering online programs. In this paper, the key features from the e-learners' perspective are identified. Through extensive literature review and in-depth discussions with focus groups, total ten (10) key areas were identified in the toolkit among which the "e-learner" is acknowledged as a pivotal parameter and the most dominant section of the toolkit. Focus group research methodology was used for data collection from randomly shortlisted informants i.e. faculty members and students of VUP. The questionnaire designed for the focus group was reviewed from experts to ensure the language, cultural and contextual validity. Total twelve (12) sub-themes were extracted relevant from learner's perspectives. This paper will contribute to boosting the confidence of the various stakeholders at home or elsewhere, who are skeptical about quality claims of the ODL institutions.

Keywords: quality assurance, open and distance learning, e-learner, toolkit, online learning

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Introduction

Current millennium is labeled as the millennium of information and communication technology (ICT) which enables the free flow of information, ideas and knowledge across the globe. Due to this free flow of information, the market economy is being reshaped and emerged as a knowledge or learning economy which is now acknowledged as a pivotal indicator in differentiating the developed and developing countries. The efficiency and effectiveness of the learning economy of any country are based on the assumption that the country has strong institutional setups and a nationwide innovation system (Lundvall & Johnson, 1994). In those institutional setups and the nationwide innovation system, learning - an interactive and socially embedded process - serves as fuel and is perceived as an essential ingredient for growth, economic success, and innovation (Kessels, 2001) because a skilled and educated labor force is the key driver for the knowledge economy. To extract its share from the potential benefits of the knowledge economy, it is essential to establish quality institutions especially in higher education (HE).

The endeavor for establishing quality institutions cannot be materialized without addressing the issue of quality. The concerns about quality in education are not new rather they have a long trail. The education sector especially HE is not alien to the term “quality assurance” (QA) which is discussed in the literature as shorthand for all forms of monitoring, evaluation or review of quality. The immense acknowledgment for QA is a result of the plea of various stakeholders demanding a complete overhaul of the current quality system as it is not receptive to the emergence of knowledge economy; the intensification of HE through diversification, privatization, and expansion of HEIs, the expressed immigration and mobility of students due to globalization; and the rapid diffusion of technology (Martin & Stella, 2007; Neave, 1994; Kristoffersen & Woodhouse, 2006). This dilemma of the existing system is escalating the concerns of governments, funding agencies, students, and industry about quality (Azam, 2007). Therefore, the issue for QA is continually being elevated in the priority list of many governments for their reform agendas. In response to this, the establishment of a large number of QA agencies (QAAs) at the national level is witnessed around the world (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Woodhouse, 2006). In developing countries like Pakistan, the concerns about QA are also getting acquiescence and Government of Pakistan (GOP) is taking revolutionary initiatives at the national level to address the issue. The specific initiatives regarding QA in HEIs include realigning existing arrangements operating

in HEIs with a robust QA system regulated at the national level and the establishment of the first ICT based virtual university. In addition to these initiatives, the various higher education institutes (HEIs) investing their knowledge bank, experience and capabilities to contribute to the realization of efforts made by GOP.

The purpose of this article is to acknowledge those efforts made by HEIs especially the Virtual University of Pakistan (VUP). VUP is the pioneer ICT based national university. The University has nearly developed the first ever QA toolkit at national level specifically applicable to VUP and generally to all open and distance learning (ODL) institutions and the institutions offering online programs. VUP has identified various key areas in the toolkit and the area related to distance learners, labeled as “e-learner” is acknowledged as a pivotal parameter and the most dominant section of the toolkit. In this article, the key features related to e-learners are presented. The aim is to share the experience of VUP and discuss the key points of this toolkit with national as well as an international audience. This paper will contribute to boosting the confidence of various stakeholders at home or elsewhere, who are skeptical about quality claims of the ODL institutions. Newer avenues of research for the researchers are also available to evaluate the depth and breadth of the various quality parameters from the learners’ perspective.

Virtual University of Pakistan (VUP)

In developing countries like Pakistan, the GOP has launched some revolutionary initiatives as the country’s standing is very low in two particular fields whose supportive role is considered essential for the knowledge economy. In the field of ICT Development Index, Pakistan is ranked 142nd among 166 countries (ITU, 2013), whereas, in literacy, its rank is 189th with a literacy rate of 55% (CIA Factbook, 2012). The launch of VUP at the national level is the most significant step. VUP is the first Federally Chartered public-sector degree awarding university established in 2002. It is the first completely ICT based university serving multiple purposes like providing affordable, uniform and world-class standard education to masses at their doorsteps; bridging the capacity gap especially in HE; offering a reliable source to academicians and professionals for benefitting from the teaching expertise of other renowned and leading qualified professors regardless of their institutional affiliations; providing a unique opportunity to learn from the knowledge treasure of such academicians who are generally not accessible to everyone; attempting to cope with the problem of acute shortage of qualified professors in the

country. The pedagogical model adopted by VUP is based on video lectures well supported by online interaction. In this model, there are three major pillars which include course design and delivery; academic evaluation and assessment; and institutional support mechanism.

Nationwide leading academicians regardless of their institutional affiliation and geographical boundaries design and deliver academic contents in the shape of recorded lectures for all online courses via VUP owned free-to-air satellite television channels (VUTV-1 to 4). The lectures are recorded in the University's own professional studios. Students have multiple options to watch these lectures like through dish receivers or through online streaming and in offline modes. VUP's self-designed and developed customizable Learning Management System (LMS) is a powerful online tool to deliver formal tertiary education, student-teacher interaction and administration of academic activities. A large pool of professional tutors is the backbone of this model that provides mentoring and online support to students. An office of 'Student Support Services (SSS)' is also established to address students' problems and to expedite the process of solution delivery. To strengthen and promote the VUP community, VUP Alumni and Campus Career Portals are operational. The platforms such as VUP Societies, VUP Social Media and VUP Bytes (VUP online magazine) are available to enhance creativity, social interactivity and personality development opportunities in learners. In short, VUP is trying to reduce the perceptual gap that learners may feel between conventional education and distance education (DE).

Literature Review

Quality in Higher Education. Quantification of quality in education is always a bone of contention and the same continues with distance education (DE) (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). What constitutes quality education is not determined universally? However, the various educational institutes have developed standards and criteria to measure the quality of their educational programs. A concrete definition of quality in HE is not widely accepted as scholars view academic enterprises as totally different from product-oriented enterprises (Koslowski III, 2006). Quality, in general, has been defined by many scholars in different business terms starting from excellence in limited supply utilization to total quality management concept and it has also been mapped in education (Nicholson, 2011). Many scholars argue that concept of quality in business is ill-suited in education and for this purpose quality in education has been re-defined by dividing it on a different basis including the stakeholders (Nicholson,

2011) and used different definitions from business to map the concept in education. The debate that business definitions mapped in education are ill-suited or not is beyond the scope of this paper; however, the most important issue in this debate is that quality is now becoming the main concern for academia. Increased global competition, stakeholders' satisfaction, maintenance of standards, accountability, credibility, and prestige are the factors that are pushing HEIs to identify some standards (Mishra, 2007) which are usually called quality standards. The same pressure is mounted on HEIs of Pakistan whatever mode (conventional or ODL) these institutions are operating, and it is encouraging that HEIs are responding to this issue with great zeal.

QA Mechanism in HE of Pakistan. HE in Pakistan is facing a lot of challenges like access, quality, and relevance to national needs. For instance, only 2.9% of students aged between 18 – 23 had access to HE as compared to Korea where the access of the same age group was 68% (HE – MTFD, 2005); not a single university was ranked among the top 500 of the world; and finally, Pakistan's economy is agriculture-based and the basic pillars on which knowledge economy could be built were missing. The intensity of these issues and the crucial shortcomings in the quality of HE have fueled the demands to apply a focused approach for quality assurance and enhancement in the sector. In spite of a vigilant internal governing mechanism in practice in each HEI, a second layer at the national level is launched in 2002 to regulate, monitor and implement QA mechanism in these institutions. The external layer, known as "Higher Education Commission (HEC)" is established with a mandate to develop and implement HE policy, provide QA framework and guidelines, promoting standardization and transparency, and playing a facilitative role to uplift existing institutions. The issues of QA are addressed by HEC through a Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) established in 2005. QAA is linked with every HEI through a focal body called "Quality Enhancement Cell" (QEC) responsible to implement internal QA (IQA) mechanism. These QECs serve as a kingpin for the implementation of the quality framework with uniform pace and standards designed by QAA to achieve the objective of quality learning. These QECs are not only working according to the guidelines provided by QAA but also regulated, guided and monitored by QAA to meet international quality standards of HE. QAA has designed a QA framework and it is involved in the systematic implementation of that framework through QECs to attain improved levels of international compatibility and competitiveness at two levels i.e. at institutional and program levels. The proposed QA Framework is

implemented in three stages: first the development of Criteria/Standards, manual and guidelines for QA; second, surfacing of internal QA (IQA) mechanism within each HEI's premises; and lastly, the establishment of external QA (EQA) mechanism which is done by establishing different accreditation bodies in spite of presence of many other existing accreditation councils.

QA Approaches in Asia. The awareness about QA, enhancement of quality, continuous monitoring and ensuring sustainability of QA is acknowledged as the most essential components of any QA process (Brennan, 1999; Frazer, 1994). Generally, the QA process is executed at various levels but most commonly it is divided into two segments i.e. self-evaluation and external evaluation. Self-evaluation is carried out to achieve the required standards whereas external evaluation is obligatory and is designed to ensure that HEIs are meeting the standards. Self-evaluation mechanism can be designed as per aspirations of domestic influences, but the external evaluation mechanisms are inter- or supra-institutional. The various quality assurance agencies (QAAs) have identified various standards, criteria and performance indicators derived from regional environmental influences. A brief comparison of the QA criteria developed by different countries is provided in Figure 1. Different countries use these criteria either solely or in combination (RIHED, 2012). The diversity of QA criteria and issues inspires and echoes the need of collaboration among different QAAs both within and across national boundaries to get rid of common issues through the exchange of information, good practices, competence and experience and harmonization of national QA systems. For such exchanges, a growth of different quality networks has been observed in the last few years. All QAAs have prioritized various QA standards for both institutional and unit levels performance, monitoring and reviews. Some QAAs such as that of HEC of Pakistan are

Criteria	Countries											
	China	Hong Kong	India	Indonesia	Japan	Korea	Malaysia	Mongolia	Philippines	Singapore	Sri Lanka	Pakistan
Vision, Mission, Goals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assessment/Evaluation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Educational Resources	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Leadership, Governance & Administration		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Financial Resources		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
IT Infrastructure		✓	✓	✓		✓						
Teaching & Learning	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		
Course Development	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Student Support	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Faculty & Staff	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Internal QA System		✓		✓	✓				✓		✓	
Research		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	

Source: Adapted Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, & Belawati, 2011

Figure 1: Key Quality Assurance Criteria in Different Asian Countries

operating under national governments and therefore are also playing the role of regulator and advisor to the government. It means that QAAs of any region is liable to execute multiple functions beyond those performed by specific QAAs of developed countries where HE systems are also at an advanced stage. The implementation of QA system and monitoring of HEIs is the prime responsibility of these QAAs, however, distance education institutions (DEIs) are also included in those additional functions as QA is also getting reception in these institutes.

QA within DEIs Institutions. The need to implement QA mechanism in DEIs was felt during the 1980s and 90s when the pressure was mounted on these institutes to adopt QA systems either to magnify the value of DE provision or to ensure accountability for public funds where DEIs were operating in public sector (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). In spite of the fact Asia has observed expansion in terms of establishment of DEIs and registered distance learners, still the establishment of QAAs for DEIs is either nonexistent or still in an early stage and the mandate of existing QAA developed for conventional HEIs is extended (Hou, 2014; Jung, 2011). In countries like Pakistan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia, national QAAs cover both conventional HEIs and DEIs (public or private) (Jung & Latchem, 2012). Those QAAs apply the same QA process and criteria to HEIs without any discrimination (Jung, 2011). In some countries of the region, the IQA mechanism at the institutional and unit level has surfaced but EQA is still at initial stages (Jung, 2011; Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2004).

QA mechanism is implemented under the guidance of national level QAAs. The national level QAAs often provide QA criteria, guidelines or performance indicators both for self-assessment at institutional as well as at unit level. The national level QAAs provide the same criteria and standards to DEIs and encourage them to implement a QA framework designed for conventional HEIs. On top of enhancing cooperation and collaboration, the other most dominant role of QAA networks is to develop guidelines, principles, policies, toolkits, and manuals to encapsulate essential elements presently considered indispensable to implement QA system of the region's countries and HEIs. Different QAAs has consensus that HEIs themselves are primarily responsible for QA rather than any external body and for that purpose implementation of formalized processes is not enough rather it must promote "quality culture" for continuous enhancement of quality. VUP is trying to exploit the benefits of this opportunity and has developed first ever QA framework and toolkit equally applicable to online and ODL institutes.

VUP and QA Tool Kit Development Aspiration. VUP is offering various academic programs according to learners' aspirations and the industry's demand. Students enrolled in various HEIs are apprehensive about the quality of the education imparted by these institutions. Due to these concerns, quality enhancement and assurance are becoming major challenges, and VUP is aware of the intensity of these challenges. VUP's aim to inculcate QA and quality culture in education delivery is in line with the contemporary challenges a. The University is trying to realize it by exhibiting a commitment to exert strenuous efforts in producing quality graduates.

VUP is operating in the region where the realization of quality in HE and implementation of structured QA mechanism in DE are very recent phenomena. Due to this late realization at the national level, VUP has joined QA journey too late, however, robust internal control and monitoring mechanism are completely operational to evade any quality lapses. In Pakistan, currently, no criteria or framework is designed by HEC for institutional level performance review for DEIs and VUP as online education also is no exception to this limitation. It is also an established fact that in the presence of established conventional universities both in public and private sectors and a university (Allama Iqbal Open University - AIU) operating in distance education (DE), the survival of new institution like VUP become challenging if quality education is not guaranteed. The potential learners are skeptical about quality education in DEIs and this stereotyped thinking or myth is hard to discontinue. If

students perceive such rationale as a barrier and are unable to cross these barriers to joining DEIs, then let such universities like VUP reaches out to the students in their homes and work-places with the assurance that quality of education in DEIs is well protected. Therefore initially, instead of reinventing the wheel and developing new QA framework applicable to DE, VUP decided initially to embrace existing QA quality frame designed by QAA of HEC. However, VUP is committed to developing a sustainable, viable and coordinated mechanism to achieve excellence by raising quality standards of HE and inspire the confidence of both industry and the general public in DEIs and their graduates. In this regard, being the pioneer of online education in Pakistan and following the prior leading trajectory, the University has exerted efforts for developing a QA mechanism in the shape of QA toolkit equally applicable to ODL institutions. A very extensive and in-depth review of various processes of DEIs and VUP were carried out along with feedback from DE experts, faculty and learners were taken and outcome of those efforts I a complete QA tool in total ten (10) areas were identified addressing all aspects of quality. Through this paper, a section of the toolkit is presented which is about learners of DEIs i.e. what are important aspects of QA are critical for them.

Research Methodology

Generally, toolkits are considered decision-making frameworks based on expert models. For this purpose, detailed discussions with different experts, concerned stakeholders and recipients of this toolkit are required. Initially, to develop this toolkit, different stakeholders like experts, the faculty of VUP and learners are identified to make group discussion on the issue of QA. As a comprehensive and standalone section of the toolkit is related to learners, therefore, feedback from learners of DE was pivotal. In addition to learners, the faculty members were also included to get feedback about different processes related to learners. To collect data and feedback, focus group research methodology was adopted. The most common purpose of a focus group discussion is to provide an in-depth exploration of a topic about which little is known. A series of focus groups were conducted for whole QA toolkit with different stakeholders for detailed insight on the issue. As in the current paper, the focus was on e-learners, therefore, the informants or participants of different focus groups include senior faculty members and the students to discuss specifically the issues related to e-learners. Both separate, as well as combines sessions, were conducted. As the “Learner” is a part of complete QA toolkit and

was extracted after analysis of data collected from those series of focus group sessions, therefore it is difficult to report that in how many sessions this particular section is discussed. The participants were selected randomly as details of both faculty members and students are available in the form of the sampling frame. The stratified sampling technique was opted to select representatives of both groups. In the first strata, equal representation given in term of gender as well as seniority i.e. Professor, Associate Professor etc. Likewise, in the second strata (learners), equal representation in terms of gender along with having at least one-year experience of online learning environment was ensured. The collected data were transcribed and then analyzed to extract possible themes. The focus group data were transcribed by multiple notetakers and observers for multiple purposes like to have a permanent written record, to avoid any loss of information and also to validate the accuracy of recorded information. The moderator, also maintained notes and observations about the non-verbal communication, signals, and behavioral responses of the participants which might be not echoed in a transcript. The analysis and interpretation of focus group data require a great deal of judgment and care, just like any other scientific approach, and regardless of whether the analysis relies on quantitative or qualitative procedures. As per literature, different distinctive perspectives are particularly relevant to qualitative analyses of focus group data. In this paper, social constructivism technique is adopted as the technique broadly posits that much of reality and the meaning and categories that frame everyday life are essentially social creations. In these analyses, researchers tend to emphasize how group members collaborate on some issue, how they achieve consensus (or fail to), and how they construct shared meanings about commercial products, communications, or social concerns. Differences in the meanings attached by the various individuals to experiences are considered because all the participants experience different parts of the reality. Based on the analysis, various themes were extracted, and each theme is considered as a quality standard and opinion on that standard from experts will be taken at a later stage.

Results and Discussion

A number of themes and sub-themes have been identified through discussions conducted in the various focus groups sessions. The main themes and sub-themes extracted after data analysis are summarized in Table -1 (the order of these themes is not important) and Figure -1. There are many aspects pointed out by the participants, but themes related to

learners are reported only in the current paper. The basic idea was that the learners have pivotal importance in the whole QA toolkit as all the activities of a university revolve around the learners. The themes identified during the discussion cover all aspects and processes related to learners.

Table 1

Summary of Main and sub-themes for Learner Criteria.

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Facilitating Informed Decision Making	Academic Information Availability Information Quality Information Usability
Vigorous Admission Process	Pre-Admission Campaign Dynamic Front Desk Office Admission Kit Diverse Financial Transaction Modes Applicants' Database Development and Security
E-Learning Environment	Learning Management System (LMS) Lecture Delivery Modes Web-Based E-Contents
Student-Teacher Interaction Apparatus	Diversified Communication Modes Virtual vs Physical Interaction Mix Computer-Mediated Communication
Academic Assessment Measures	Diverse Assessment Tools Assessment Tools' Quality Conformity of Assessment Tools Assessment Reforms
Feedback and Monitoring	Instructors' Feedback to Learners Employers' Feedback about Learners Learners' Feedback to Instructors Feedback Collection Mechanism
Diversity of Resources	Financial Resources Digital Resources Academic Resources
Students Support Services	Administrative and Technical Services

Main Themes		Sub-Themes
		Cognitive Services
		Affective Services
Learners' Opportunities	Development	Personality Development Skills Development Career Development
Expressed Commitment		Expressed Commitment Scope Commitment Standardization Commitment Implementation
Scholarly Participation	Activities &	Research Resources Scholarly Activities Research Culture Development
Information Mechanism	Dissemination	Information Disseminate Mechanism General and Classified Information Information Diversity

Initially, a large number of themes and sub-themes were extracted after the analysis depending on the response of participants. However, in the final analysis, only those themes and sub-themes are included in which, either majority i.e. >50% of the participants agreed in case of unique participants or there is a consensus in case mixed participants (faculty and teacher) were included in the group discussion. Two important aspects were considered to define such criteria. First, is to avoid excessive abstraction level in quality standards or to get involved in operational complexities of various standards.

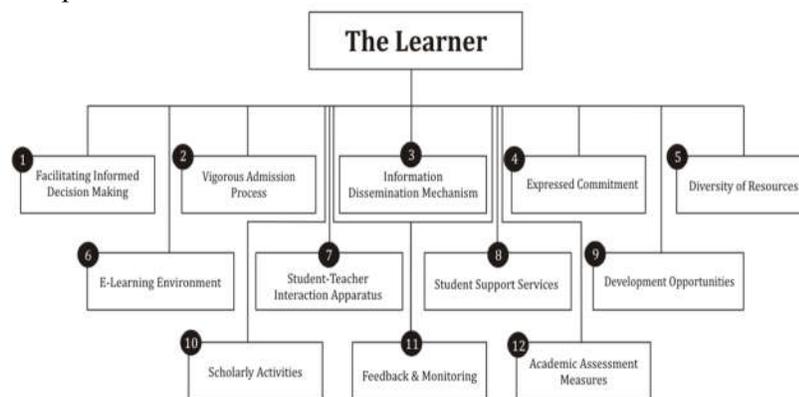


Figure 2: Main Themes Related to E-Learner Criterion

Informed Decision Making. The first area was related to the informed decision making of potential learners. According to the participants, to enable prospective students to make an informed decision for joining a specific distance education program, it is essential that they have necessary academic information provided through multiple sources including admission requirements, program description etc. The participants (67%) emphasized that providing quality information to prospective students is also indispensable to ensure informed decision making. For them, the quality of information is dependent on certain characteristics like its understandability, readability, completeness, accuracy, and consistency. The consensus voice was raised during the discussion that as decisions of prospective students have consequences on their future and career goals, therefore, it is the responsibility of DEIs to provide quality information to current and potential learners.

Expressed Commitment. It was emphasized by both participants (learners and faculty) in combined sessions, that the implementation of QA mechanism is dependent on the level of commitment of the DEIs. According to them, the DEIs have to express their commitment for various aspects in the form of well-written procedures/processes, policies, and rules & regulations for all affairs to facilitate smooth functioning of the DEIs. All the documents need to be standardized to make them clear, well aligned with mission and vision, keep them consistent and evaluate periodically for refinement purposes. The participants emphasized that such documentation, availability, and understanding of policies, processes, procedures, rules & regulations to every concerned individual and monitoring mechanism help in the implementation without any compromise and it strengthens the confidence of stakeholders on the DEIs.

Vigorous Admission Process. The majority of the participants i.e. 77% were of the opinion that no doubt that it is a basic right of potential learners to make informed decisions; however, the question how this right could be given to these learners is an important issue and it was suggested during discussion that it can be addressed through developing vigorous admission process to reach all potential learners across the globe. Diverse suggestions were given during the discussion. The summary of those suggestions is elaborated in the next paragraph.

The vigorous admission process triggers with the launch of a pre-admission campaign collaborated by all outreach centers through active participation. Fitting the media mix (print, electronic and/or online) with the best proportion of every component is essential to launch the

campaign. An important suggestion was given by learners that participation in various admission fairs (local or overseas) to maximize the DEIs' reach to potential learners is a useful tool to strengthen the campaign and to achieve the objective that learners have right to make informed decisions. The development of a comprehensive mechanism to cater to all admission queries is the backbone of such admission campaign. In the mechanism, it must be ensured that it includes the availability of a fully operational hotline comprises of multiple lines where admission officers are available 24-hours to entertain the queries of potential learners along with online query response center for responding e-mails. Front desks must also be a part of that mechanism established at various locations to entertain visitors. Well trained information officers equipped with standard manual and guidelines need to be available to respond in a uniform manner to various queries. The development of an admission kit was also acknowledged as a prerequisite to serving multiple purposes.

In the suggestions, it was also demanded that the DEIs must provide an opportunity to prospective learners for submitting admission requests through multiple modes (online as well as physical at multiple outreach centers). In addition, a number of collection terminals must be developed at various locations. A dedicated data entry team is a backbone of the whole process for processing the admission applications in the DEIs' database after completing application scrutiny procedure developed to verify admission requests. All applications need to be securitized for verification done by a dedicated scrutiny team following an approved and standardized checklist. All the applicants must be kept well informed about the decisions (approval/rejection) timely through multiple sources like the website, SMS alerts, email or telephone. It must be ensured that valid reasons are communicated in case of rejection of the application. Multiple modes (online and physical) must be offered to successful candidates for depositing admission fee.

Development of a database is prerequisite to keep the record of learners' profile. A critical observation from the majority (65%) of the participants was shared which was about anonymity and security of users' data. In this regard, it was emphasized that DEIs must ensure that the classified access with certain SOPs is provided to different users for security reasons. To avoid any security lapses, the periodic backup, frequent up-gradation of the database is must to adopt technological changes. A suggestion from faculty was also provided about the use of the database for future planning and forecasting essential for developing a semester calendar.

E-Learning Environment. According to the participants, the DEIs are responsible to provide all the possible facilities to support learning especially in DE as distance offers various hurdles in the learning process. In this context, LMS was acknowledged as an ideal platform which is a comprehensive and reliable platform to keep continuous administration, documentation, tracking, reporting, and delivery of different courses or training programs. The participants urged that such a platform must be equipped with main features like its user-friendliness, compatibility, ability to fulfill the needs of multiple users and offering the best alternative for the conventional classroom. Through this medium, DEIs must ensure that the course contents are easily assessable in multiple formats (PDF, Word, HTML, PPTs etc.) to all learners in multiple schemes (Course-wise, Lesson-wise, and/or Topic-wise) to facilitate and to maximize their understanding and facilitating the realization of program/course's outcomes. In such e-learning environment, the DEIs must offer a choice to learners (local, overseas, full-time or job holders) to access academic contents in multiple modes like live streaming, TV Broadcast, Cable Network, CD/DVD, etc., to ensure flexibility inherent in DE.

Academic Assessment Measures. During the discussion, the academic assessment was observed as a matter of great concern among the participants. To address this issue, the faculty members have consensus that DEIs must adopt diverse assessment measures like summative as well as a formative assessment as such assessments are necessary to evaluate the academic performance of learners at all levels for all kinds of programs and courses. They argued that quality of assessment measures are needed to be comparable to acknowledge standardized grading having: fairness, transparency, and consistency. It was suggested that the various assessment tools designed to grade assignments, quizzes, research term papers, examination etc. must be aligned with different learning outcomes of the programs and courses. The assessment methods conform to the contemporary standards developed for assessment at national and international level. The assessment methods also conform to the standards defined by accreditation bodies both local and international.

Both faculty members and learners emphasized that the assessment mechanism/tools must consistently be revised or introduce new reforms periodically. A well-defined question bank (QB) used to conduct online exams should be revised periodically to ensure that the questions papers generated through QB are unique by avoiding repetition, have a certain level of quality, and the predefined difficulty level is maintained. Similarly, it was also emphasized that the grading scheme must be

revised/reviewed/upgraded periodically according to the needs/demands of the course outline, contemporary developments in literature, theory, and/or practice. New assessment tools other than assignments, quizzes, examination etc. must be also introduced according to the outcomes of program/course in addition of revision of the grading scheme. In addition to all these measures, it is essential that the DEIs ensure that the examination system is robust enough and fool-proof techniques are adopted to minimize different possible attacks of unfair means usage.

Feedback and Monitoring. The up-gradation and evaluation of existing QA are dependent on the feedback taken consistently from different sources (learners, faculty). The need for feedback is also essential to design and refine processes and systems to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. The participants emphasized that the nature and type of feedback must be very diverse. The faculty members suggested that feedback about learners must be collected from various sources (instructor, employer) to avoid biases (if any). It was recognized that instructors must provide feedback to learners on their graded activities like assignments, projects, and graded discussion boards (GDBs) to make learners aware of their progress/shortcomings. The learners highlighted the importance of fair, consistent and uniform feedback about all course activities and it can be ensured if SOPs are available and circulated to faculty for proper implementation and monitoring. It is also urged that a mechanism must be in place for collecting employers' feedback on learners' performance, skills, and professional development. The learners demanded that frequent feedback from learners about learners' satisfaction, University's resources/services, faculty, and courses etc. must be taken. The feedback must also be taken about learners' support services to determine to what extent these practices are effective.

During the discussion, an opinion was also given that the feedback from multiple sources must be taken through appropriate forums such as Quality Enhancement Cells (QEC), Alumni Network Portal, internship placement center, IT Support etc. Refined procedures are devised for collecting and analyzing feedbacks. The procedures must be defined for feedback forms development and sending mechanism, interdepartmental communication mechanism for data collection, exchange of information, and the generation of useful reports after analysis of data. These mechanisms developed for different purposes need to be operational, updated and improved.

Diversity of Resources. A consensus emerged about the type of resources (financial, digital and academic) DEIs must arrange with appropriate quantity and quality to execute various academic/non-academic activities of enrolled learners. The majority (81%) of learners stressed that the financial resources such as merit-based scholarships, need-based scholarships, research grants, and educational loans must be allocated sufficiently to help learners to fulfill their academic expenses. However, the audience elaborated that for this purpose, a clear eligibility criterion and mechanism for timely distribution of every type of financial assistance must be defined and provided/communicated to learners.

For digital resources, the audience argued that the DEIs ensured the accessibility and augmentation of such resources like digital equipment (USB, desktop computers, laptops), licensed software, access to open courseware etc. The DEIs provide a free/subsidized subscription to access these digital resources to learners as well as for faculty. The subsidized price offers, or free distribution of computer equipment or software are other steps which the DEIs can take.

The arrangement of academic resources like a physical library (internal/external) and access to the digital library to learners and faculty is the prime responsibility of DEIs. The library must be equipped with updated library catalogs (online and physical), computers and internet facilities, video lectures (CDs/DVDs), lecture handouts in booklet format, e-Journals, e-Books, e-Magazines etc. The DEIs also ensured to expand academic resources through collaboration with other local and foreign conventional universities for using the library resources (physical or digital) on a sharing basis. For this purpose, the DEIs must establish an association with libraries of other institutions for resource sharing through documented procedures to access and to monitor the accessibility and services provided to learners. For this purpose, sufficient and qualified support staff for the assistance of learners should be available. Financial resources must be allocated for this purpose.

Student-Teacher Interaction. According to the participants, the diverse modes and ICT media offer opportunities to bridge the distance, to support and enhance student-teacher interaction. Both learners and faculty members emphasized that interaction through multiple facets of written communication like letters, online discussion boards, email correspondence, announcements & notice boards, chat rooms, SMS alerts, social media etc. can support relationship and learning experiences. The interaction through verbal communication like a landline, wireless, softphone etc. also offered an added advantage to both. The advanced

mode of communication i.e. video conference, Skype, Webinar, TeamViewer, etc. offer an opportunity for face to face interaction to provide personal attention to the problems of the learners. In all outreach centers, the arrangements of physical infrastructure for the personal interaction of learner with faculty for learner-teacher interaction are also ensured.

Students Support Services. The role of the DEIs is not limited to provide academic support to learners rather it is essential that the DEIs ensure to provide all kinds of support services (administrative, technical, cognitive and affective) at all levels to all learners to support their learning. In this regard, the participants described how important administrative and technical support services of diverse types are provided by DEIs through different departments for meeting their' needs indispensable for learning. The scope of these services must be extended and offered at all campuses (local, regional and overseas) as well as to home-based learners or to all those learners having physical disabilities.

The learners discussed different cognitive support services they are expecting from DEIs. Those services include: providing academic advice & counseling (online and physical), developing instant response mechanism to address specific academic problems, arranging informational lectures / seminars / workshops other than academic workshops to polish cognitive skills of all learners at all campuses, providing tutorials (physical sessions or recorded videos), arranging study tours for practical exposure and designing study groups to provide answers of unexplained/unsolved problems. The learners having difficulties in learning showing consistently poor performance in academics must also be identified to fix the problems they are facing regarding their learning. Promoting students' societies/associations to satisfy learners' cognitive needs should be a part of support services.

It is also essential for DEIs to promote an environment and provides services to build affective attachment of learners with the DEIs. It can be done through different plans especially developed to promote a sense of university life among learners difficult to develop in DE. The aim of such activities must be to make university lifespan of learners who have geographical, physical, cultural diversity more energetic, enthusiastic, smooth and future-oriented. According to the participants, building a strong alumni network should also be a part of these services designed to build strong connection among learners even after completion of studies.

Learners' Development Opportunities. The majority (69%) of the participants highlighted that it is the obligation of DEIs to provide an essential service to all learners in the form of offering a variety of opportunities for learners' development/growth. These opportunities include personality development, skills development, and career development.

According to participants, the DEIs provides leadership opportunities to learners and they are encouraged to work in groups. Providing a platform for freedom of expression to learners is another opportunity to serve the purpose. Literary art (literature, poetry etc.) or debating and performing arts are different tools which can be offered to learners. Social Interaction Opportunities in the form of Councils/bodies are also important. Through this medium, learners' interact (online or physically) is ensured to promote social diversity and harmony. The tourism opportunities, sports galas/festivals, in-house fitness facilities or discounted memberships of various clubs, cultural events also have a positive impact on learners' personality.

The participants pointed out that DEIs also ensured to incorporate the element of civic sense in their activities in order to build learners' personality and making them responsible citizens. The diverse skills development opportunities are offered to learners which include technical, learning and/or computing etc. For this purpose, the DEIs arrange training workshops and seminars. In addition, different experts from industry or other academic institutions are invited to enhance learners' exposure. Placing learners in the different organization for an internship to sharpen their skills is also very essential activity. The DEIs also provide an opportunity for learners by establishing laboratories (computing, psychology, mass communication) in their outreach centers to experiment and to attend different practice sessions.

The DEIs also arranges career counselors (online as well as physically at campuses) to guide learners. They guide them for program/course selection, higher education and identification of jobs and placement of graduates in different industries.

Scholarly Activities & Participation. According to the participants, the diverse facilities are essential to support the scholarly activities of all faculty members and learners at all level to fulfill their academic needs. The financial resources like monetary grants as well as human resources in the form of research supervisors necessary for research are arranged for learners. Diverse research activities are arranged, and learners are encouraged to participate in those activities. For this purpose, the

arrangement of frequent research seminars / workshops / conferences for both faculty and learners is ensured. In addition to this, the faculty and learners are sent to participate in research seminars/ workshops/ conferences. To promote research culture, the DEIs provide academic and administrative support to learners for their studies; efforts are made to enhance national and international research collaboration; the curriculum is revised and upgraded to ensure that research related contents are available in the curriculum of courses offered by the DEIs. The DEIs also ensure to provide assistance to learners for winning funded research projects.

Information Dissemination Mechanism. A consensus emerged about information dissemination during the discussion. A comprehensive mechanism to maintain and disseminate related information about various academic/non-academic activities of enrolled learners is essential and the DEIs must practice that mechanism to keep all stakeholders updated. The information must be disseminated by the DEIs through reliable and publicly assessable platforms such as university website, LMS, SMS alerts, noticeboard, etc.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Keeping in view the increase in adoption of ODL mode by conventional institutes of Pakistan, QA has become an important area of concern. The domain of QA can be better addressed if ODL institutes follow an appropriate framework for QA which essentially differ from conventional QA system. As a step towards QA, a toolkit has been developed and a snapshot of one of the key section is presented in this paper to increase awareness and highlight the importance of QA to promote effective QA arrangements. Through this paper, an effort was made to cover all aspects important for learners (prospective, active, alumni) of ODL institutes. In this paper, the concerns of the participants were addressed that were observed during discussion about how different processes and their execution support their learning experiences. The majority (80%) of the participants were concerned about how the absence of a teacher in a classroom be substituted through a virtual classroom supported by ICT infrastructure with recorded contents. These concerns were addressed by developing a discrete and an all-inclusive criterion titled “The Learner” with the identification of relevant themes and sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes elaborated in a way that a learner can understand how DEIs will pay attention of his/her learning and university

life from entry to exit. The identified themes and sub-themes will help in eradicating the worrisome of the participants detected during discussion when they came to know that no QA framework is available for ODL institutions from HEC. However, after the discussion and development of learner specific criterion, the paper is offering a list of factors that can contribute to improve the quality of education in DEIs in general and at VUP in particular.

In the toolkit best, quality practices directly related to learners are identified after meticulously scanning, conceptualization and discussion on different aspects. The findings and the observations made during focus group sessions, to some extent, have eliminated the issue of trust deficit on the part of potential students regarding the quality of education in DE. The factors identified in the toolkit are addressing directly the students' dropout which is an outcome of quality concerns, lack of university life, low interaction, limited mentoring, invariable student support services and many other. All these issues are addressed in the QA toolkit and proper mechanism is proposed for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The toolkit will serve to improve quality of various processes related to learners to reduce the perceptual gap widening about quality education in ODL institutions. The proposed framework can be employed for evaluating the quality of all processes related to distant learners.

Moving further, VUP is on the way to develop rubrics and different metrics for implementation and testing purposes to evaluate the quality of different processes. Once developed, the rubrics and evaluation metrics will be put into practice to determine the weak areas for continuous improvement which is at the heart of any QA framework.

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Citation of this Article:

Qadri, M. M. (2018). Quality Assurance Toolkit for Open and Distance Learning Institutes: A glimpse of e-Learners' Perspective. *Pakistan Journal of Distance and Online Learning*, 4(2). 1-24.