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Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) System and Quality Framework for ODL of University of Ruhuna

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Abstract

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) concept focuses on providing opportunities in education that is free from barriers of time, age, place and offering flexible learning opportunities at affordable cost. Quality assurance in ODL is designed with the aim of improving and proving the quality of institutional methods, maintaining accountability, improving the effectiveness and the efficacy of all the activities. These include the learners' satisfaction, developing academic programmes, producing learning materials, services and support to the learners, and the standards of the outcome. University of Ruhuna has contributed to expand access to higher education and to acquire other competencies via providing the opportunities to follow external degrees and extension courses through the ODL system. Due to various disturbing factors, there has been a huge gap in maintaining standards in terms of service delivery, learners' satisfaction, student learning, teaching, gaining public confidence, demonstrating good practices, the credibility of awards, and the employability of graduates in the ODL system of Distance and Continuing Education Unit (DCEU) of the university during the past period. With the establishment of Quality Assurance mechanism through the Centre of Quality Assurance (CQA) of the university and the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) of the DCEU, implementing quality measures, quality enhancement and monitoring mechanism with respect to the academic, examinations and administrative functions are in the process of developing. This paper presents the quality assurance processes that have been already developed and implemented, suggestions for further enhancements, and then the internalized monitoring procedures suggested on achieving the expected standards.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning, Quality Assurance Process, Quality Measures, Quality Enhancement

Introduction

Distance and Continuing Education Unit (DCEU) of the University of Ruhuna that was initially established as External Education Unit in 1997, was formally established in 2012 according to UGC

circular of 932 issued in 2010. DCEU conducts Bachelor of Art (external) Degree program (EDP) and Extension courses (ECs) such as Certificates and Diploma programs, leading to developing skills and acquiring competencies through Open and Distance Learning modes. These programs are conducted with the collaboration of different Faculties of the university, namely BA degree program from Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) and, Diploma and Certificates programs from faculties of H & SS, Management & Finance and Agriculture etc.

Assuring the quality of education provision is a fundamental aspect of gaining and maintaining credibility for programmes, institutions, and national systems of education worldwide². There is a growing demand for accountability and transparency in higher education worldwide. Open and Distance Learning System requires maintaining and proving the quality of learners' educations as ODL systems are different from conventional education processes. Physical separation of learners from teachers (less face to face contact), gaps in learners' support from teachers and institutions, and different *assessment* methods, etc. are the main characteristics in the ODL system. Therefore, the quality assurance (QA) of ODL aims at placing the interests of the learners and the facilitation of learning at the center. This needs to be addressed at all the activities at every level and to constantly strive to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the activities and programmes. The QA process of ODL should lead to the achievement of standards of the programs and goals and objectives of the center that are aligned with the institution's vision and national policy.

As the quality of the ODL is merely judged by in terms of learning material, academic programmes, services provided, and the standard of the qualification holders produced, Quality assurance of ODL systems is essential to be framed on following main categories,

- Institutional policy documents respect to ODL and Quality Assurance
- Admission criteria and selection of students
- Planning and conducting of the academic programs
- Teaching and learning material
- Quality of the staff
- Students learning
- Assessment procedure and the releasing results
- Quality of the qualification provided

- Student services/supports
- Progression rate and retention rate of learners
- Tracer Studies
- Internalization of quality assurance and external reviewing process
- Quality of the processes in the Institute
- Accountability of funds used

Status of the Quality Assurance procedure in DCEU of University of Ruhuna

DCEU has been involved in producing Bachelor of Arts degree graduates and different qualifications holders like Certificates, Advanced Certificates, and Diploma. Due to various disturbing factors, quality assurance procedures pertaining to teaching, learning, examination, and services had not been adequately practiced since many years at DCEU. Considering this situation, DCEU has taken steps to establish an Internal Quality Assurance Cell to the DCEU in 2021 in order to attend in quality enhancement and monitoring procedures in all the processes in DCEU aiming to produce qualification holders with required quality and inefficient manners.

As the initial work, the Quality enhancement procedure for ODL in DCEU of University of Ruhuna is formulated and implemented under four categories given.

1. Quality Assurance process for the academic programmes
2. Learners support
3. Quality enhancement process of the operational procedures academic, examination & administration
4. Quality enhancement of examinations/ assessments of External degrees (EDP) and Extension courses (EC)

Quality Assurance Process for the Academic Programmes

- Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) for Distance and Continuing Education Unit (DCEU) has been established in order to assist the quality enhancement of the ODL system.
- IQAC of DCEU set the guideline for reviewing the process (internal and external) of new academic programmes before implementing.

- All the new courses are forwarded to the Centre for Quality Assurance of the university for the necessary reviewing process.
- SLQF guidelines are to be implemented in all ODL programmes
- The steps that have to be followed when new courses/ programs are planned to be commenced have been established, get approved, and communicated to all the faculties.
- A mechanism has been implemented to monitor the progress of ongoing courses (teaching/learning) weekly and monthly.
- The regular progress is forwarded to the higher Board of studies and Management Committee to get necessary steps for further improvement or to solve any situation affected to the learners
- Staff / Faculties are encouraged to start new programmes (Certificates/ Diploma) which are having market values, can contribute to the socio-economic developments, and acquire competencies and essential skills.

Learner Support System

- MIS has been developed for learners in all the programmes.
- An effective communication system has been established to communicate with learners for academic and examinations matters with different modes.
- A Grievances Committee has been established at DCEU to look into students' grievances and to give quick solutions whenever possible.
- The facility has been developed to apply the students' grievances online.
- LMS access is given to all the learners registered under DCEU.
- Online teaching/ learning methods have been implemented.
- The online application process for courses has been developed.
- All the essential information on courses is uploaded to the Web.
- Steps are taken to provide guidebooks/ handbooks for all the learners.
- Steps to establish students counselling service for ODL students.
- Academic calendars, lecture timetables are uploaded to the Web.
- DCEU staff members are assigned for separate programs in order to attend to the work and students matters efficiently.

Quality enhancement process of the operational procedures pertaining to academic & administration

- DCEU staff has been properly assigned to the main task with respect to EDPs and ECs.
- Official Communication Channels for the activities have been established.

- Proper communication channels for DCEU with the Board of Studies and Faculty Boards have been established.
- Proper procedures were developed for appointing visiting staff for the courses.
- Duties for the Coordinators of EDPs and ECs and the responsibilities of DCEU pertaining to courses/ programmes have been prepared and communicated to the respective parties.
- The process was developed for proper maintenance of the records pertaining to all the activities.
- Steps have been taken to work efficiently and effectively at the Centre.
- Steps have been taken for proper financial management and maintaining the records properly.

Quality enhancement of examinations/ assessments of External degrees (EDP) and Extension courses (EC)

- Proper mechanism was developed to conduct examination work efficiently.
- The process for conducting examinations and releasing results has been expedited.
- Process for appointing examiners, moderators, marking, etc. have been revised to make them more transparent and effective.
- Procedure for handling examination work is properly documented.

With the implementation of the above processes, the DCEU has shown improvement in the processes with many aspects such as support to the learners for communicating their problems with DCEU, conducting examinations at the proper time, expediting the results releasing process, proper conducting of academic programs/ lectures and proper handling of office work and working inefficient manner, etc.

Conclusions

Setting the standards and the mechanism for enhancement of the quality and implementing internalization of quality assurance procedures for the ODL system in DCEU has been successful. Some more procedures need to be established in the future.

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