STUDY OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract

The Education system is an important tool for enhancing knowledge and skills for understanding and better living style. The increasing demand for education as per New Education Policy 2020 invoked the working employees to continue their education. Due to the work and family constraints, they are not able to continue their studies by traditional mode of education. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) education system provides an opportunity for them to improve their knowledge and skills. Only getting education is not sufficient in today's technological era. A need has been raised for developing, implementing and practicing quality standards in ODL education system. Moreover, assuring quality of ODL system through accreditation mechanism has became a recent phenomenon. This is due to the increasing demand for accountability and need to project that the quality of OLD programs, institutions is comparatively equal to traditional education. This paper aims to study the suitability of current accreditation bodies for ODL education system. Initially, the importance of quality and quality assurance in traditional as well as ODL system is discussed in this paper. Further, quality parameters for accreditation of ODL system is redesigned by considering inputs from the stakeholders.
Keywords: Quality Assurance, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Accreditation, NAAC

1.1   INTRODUCTION

Quality has become an integral part of human life. Every customer in the market demands for the quality product and service. Although, there are many products and service sectors available in the market, the customers opt only the quality once. For this reason, providing quality product and service has become crucial for the organizations to satisfy the customer. Even though organizations manufacture and deliver quality products and services that meet the specified requirements, the customers are not sure whether it is of quality or not. In order to ensure the quality, a systematic approach is required to build the confidence among the customers regarding the fulfillment of the quality requirements. Quality assurance is such an activity that ensures the best possible product and service is delivered by the organization. The quality assurance system documents the procedures with the aim of ensuring that the overall process meets the specified objectives [1]. Due to the increased demand and need for higher education, most people are settling in their career first and then learning simultaneously through distance education [2]. Few decades back, there were only few institutions which offered education through distance mode. Today, to meet the demand, the number of distance education institutions and courses has been increasing. At this pace, providing the quality education plays a vital role [3]. Distance education system is in need of developing quality procedures and documentation. The important and critical areas of ODL system are i) designing standards for developing program structure and course curriculum. ii) Establishing standards for preparing course material and digital lectures. iii) Drafting the norms for preparing question papers and assignments iv) framing the guidelines for examinations and certification etc., This paper majorly focuses on the importance of quality assurance in distance education and also the parameters to be considered for assuring the quality.

The objectives of this paper are:

- To know the importance of quality & quality assurance and their significance in education
- To learn about various quality assurance bodies for educational institutions
- To check the suitability of current quality assurance bodies for ODL education
- To redesign quality parameters for accreditation of ODL institutions

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Leena singh et.al., [4] examined the aspects of quality in ODL institutions along with gap areas. Fourteen parameters such as accessibility, reliability, manageability, etc., that assures the quality in ODL system were identified and explained. Further, three aspects were identified as gap areas and innovative measure were suggested to fill the gap. A quality enhancement framework for ODL system was proposed which includes assessing institutions, identifying gap areas, practicing innovative methods and implementing innovative solutions.

Dr. Sufianakhatoon MALIK [5] developed a paper to recommend the strategies for introducing and implementing the quality in ODL at higher education level. Author believed that there is a necessity to introduce quality education programs. It was mentioned that developing research culture, training faculty in adopting innovative methods, providing quality

supporting system to the student etc., are some of aspects which improve the quality of distance education programs. Further, it was concluded that inculcating quality ethics in faculty as well as students and also taking the measures at every point of delivery system of distance education through quality agencies may provide support in assuring quality of ODL system.

Upasna THAPLIYAL [6] conducted a research study to look whether the ODL programs fit the quality criteria as viewed by the students. A total of hundred students pursuing masters of USOL, Punjab University were taken into consideration to analyze the quality dimensions as they pursued. Feedback was collected from the students on the areas like objectives, teaching, course material, curriculum, overall environment etc,. The author further concluded that focus on instructional strategies, student-teacher interaction and adequate support system is required to enhance the overall quality ODL education.

Kihwelo P.F [7] explored the role of quality assurance and its importance in open and distance learning mode. The author clearly mentioned that assuring quality in ODL is highly important for Tanzania. History and development of ODL and also the quality assurance establishment was also explored in the paper. The paper also reveals that only a small proportion of the people who are qualified to primary education are participating in higher education. Further, the author highlights the various challenges faced in ODL viz., lack of ODL policy, lack of framework, improper infrastructure etc.,

Javiera Atenas et.al., [8] highlighted the significance of quality assurance during open educational resources (OER). Authors conducted survey through Google forms and expert opinions/ interviews. The survey is intended to obtain information such as challenges faced in searching and selecting the content, proportion of people using OER repositories etc., Benefits of using OER and problems and difficulties encountered by academics using OER was represented in the paper in the form of bar diagram. Further, authors concluded by suggesting a framework to enhance the development and quality of ROER.

N. Jayalakshmi [9] explained the system of distance education and its importance, challenges and whether or not quality is ensured in distance and open learning. The need for quality assurance in distance education was critically analyzed in the paper. The author hypothesized the history of distance education and mentioned that AAOU, IELA, ICDE and UGC etc. are the controlling agencies for distance education. Author emphasized that proper services and support, sharing of resources through networks of collaboration etc, may be the various aspects of quality improvement programs.

Manoroma Tripathi et.al., [10] proposed a plan of action for distance learning libraries and suggestions were offered for enhancing the services of library. A comparison of present principles and practices followed by the libraries in ODL institutions was made. They emphasized that role of libraries in distance education is to ensure just-in-time delivery principle and just-in-place services to the learner of distance education. The framework and the practices mentioned in the paper may

provoke the educators to usher in reliable and quality services.

Antony Stella et.al., [11] highlighted the challenges need to be addressed in assuring quality in ODL institutions. It was pointed that due to the technological advancements, the class room based teaching is no longer the only means of delivering lecture. Authors emphasized the role of quality assuring bodies in framing and coordinating the quality related activities at the global level.

1.3 QUALITY & QUALITY ASSURANCE

The definition of quality may vary based on the human perspective. Some relate quality with product features, some may relate with products free from defects and some other may relate with the conformance to the standards. Various perspectives were derived since last three decades to get the precise definition of quality. The needs of the customer should be established and transformed to scalable characteristics [12]. The ultimate goal is to make customer happy for the amount he paid. Few definitions of quality are as follows

- It is degree of excellence
- It is degree of customer satisfaction
- It is fitness for the purpose
- It is meeting standards or norms

Quality Assurance is an activity to assure that an organization or an industry will provide the best viable service or product to the customers as per the standards [13]. It focuses on enhancing the processes and operations to deliver the quality products and services to the customers. Quality assurance helps the industries and organizations to meet their customer expectations and demands. High product/service quality creates trust in the organization which makes the organization more competitive. Quality assurance measures the established standards before the product or the service goes into the market. It uses auditors from govt. or a private aided agencies or sometimes in-house employees to evaluate and measure the standards [14].

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF QUALITY & QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EDUCATION

In education system defining the term quality it is little bit difficult but not critical. Quality can be measured in terms of pass out percentage, continuity in improving pass out percentage, number of publications, number patents gained by the institutions etc;. Quality in education may be the satisfaction of students or satisfaction of teachers or satisfaction of all stakeholders. In order to achieve the degree of excellence, quality systems must be implemented and practiced continuously in educational institutions. Quality standards must be designed, implemented and practiced to gain the Quality Excellence Awards in any education system, may be Regular education system, ODL education system or Online education system. The system of quality assurance (QA) in education establishes accountability and clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of top management, administrators, staff and students in ensuring that the highest quality standards have been followed [15]. QA system takes into account the students learning method and effective utilization of resources

for the growth of the institutions. In the industries Quality Assurance department was established in long back may be during 1990's but in educational institutions Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) and later renamed it as "Centre for Internal Quality Assurance (CIQA)" was established during 2012-2020. It was established after continuous efforts of NBA, NAAC, UGC, AICTE and MHRD. Now all the education systems including regular, technical and ODL systems are implementing quality assurance systems established by NAAC and getting its accreditation grading. It is one of the indications for improving the quality of higher education in the country.

1.5 QUALITY ASSURANCE BODIES IN INDIA

Accreditation is a form of quality assurance activity by which operations and services of educational institutions or programs are assessed and evaluated by an accrediting agency (an external body) in order to determine whether the standards are met or not [15]. Accreditation gives an indication that an educational program or an institution meets the specific requirements and standards of quality in education which was established by the accrediting body. There are many accreditation bodies in India for assuring quality of institutions. Some of the important accreditation bodies will be discussed in this paper which is given as below and their main objective is as shown in the Figure 1.1:

i.   NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council)

ii. NBA (National Board of Accreditation)

iii. National Accreditation Board for Education and Training (NABET) and

iv. National Accreditation Board for Certification Bodies (NABCB)

Figure 1.1: Accreditation Bodies in India
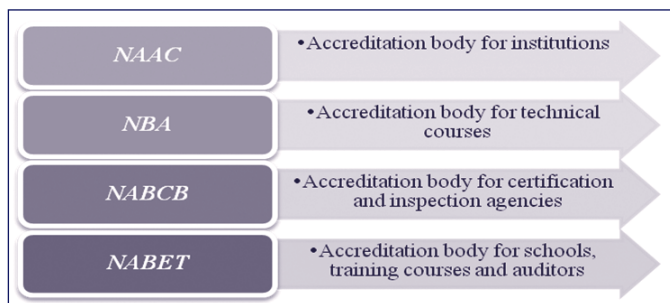
1.5.1 National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC): Computers, Internet, Information and Technology are becoming a part of lifelong learning process. In any field computers are playing a vital role either it may be in industry or service sector or educational sector. Due to advancement of using these ICT technologies, opportunities are created for working employees to improve their skills, upgrade their qualifications and also gain knowledge of upgraded technologies. Industries and institutions are planning to implement the upgraded technologies with assured quality of goods and services. The higher educational institutes, which offer the programs recognized and certified by the professional bodies are gaining the competitive edge. Therefore any

educational institutes must develop benchmarks for measuring educational quality and quality assurance. In this endeavor of quality enhancement process, the establishment of National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) took place. NAAC is an autonomous body established by the University Grants Commission (UGC) of India to assess and accredit institutions of higher education in the country. It is an outcome of the recommendations of the National Policy in Education (1986) that laid special emphasis on upholding the quality of higher education in India. Since then the number of colleges and higher educational institutes and faculty had been given training on quality assessment and accreditation procedures. At present there are many number of higher educational institutes including technical educational institutes have also got the NAAC grades and many more institutes including ODL Universities/Institutes are in the process of practicing quality assurance procedures and for gaining valuable NAAC accreditation. As per the data NAAC Annual Report 2017-18 taken from website: www.naac.gov.in . The number of Institutions assessed and accredited by NAAC for the year 2017-18 is as shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Number of Institutions Accredited by NAAC during 2017-18

Cycle	Universities	Colleges	Total
Cycle I	18	496	514
Cycle II	10	243	253
Cycle III	12	212	224
Cycle IV	00	08	08
Total	40	959	999

Source: NAAC Website: www.naac.gov.in/annual report 2017-18

1.5.2 National Board of Accreditation (NBA): NBA was initiated and established by the AICTE in the year 1994 and became an autonomous body from 7th January 2010. NBA was granted membership status in Washington Accord in the year 2014. The significant milestones of NBA are shown as a timeline chart in the Figure 1.2. The primary objective of NBA is to assure the quality in the technical disciplines such as pharmacy, architecture, management, engineering and technology, hospitality and mass communication through the accreditation mechanism. In the process of accreditation, two main documents are involved, namely pre-qualifier and Self-Assessment Report (SAR). Pre-qualifier is the preliminary step where the institute needs to provide the basic information regarding the organization and the course for which it is applying. In pre-qualifier basic details like the sanctioned and actual intake, student-faculty ratio, no. of PhD's available, no. of professors available and the count of the placements will be evaluated for the past three academic years. Once the institute fulfills the required score in the pre-qualifier, then the NBA body asks the institute to submit the self-assessment report. It consists in deep details on each and every aspect of the course

and the institute. The submitted SAR will be evaluated by the committee personally by visiting the institute. Based on the score secured in the SAR, the course may get accredited. The state wise total number of programmes accredited by NBA during the academic year 2018-19 is shown in the Table 1.2.

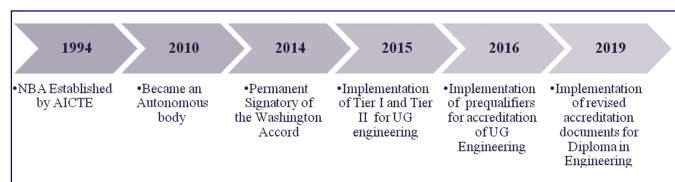**Figure 1.2: Timeline of National Board of Accreditation**

Table 1.2: Number of Engg. Programmes Accredited by NBA during 2018-19

Sl. No.	State	Programmes Accredited	Sl. No	States	Programmes Accredited
1	Andhra Pradesh	134	14	Madhya Pradesh	35
2	Assam	17	15	Maharashtra	206
3	Bihar	3	16	Odisha	23
4	Chandigarh	3	17	Pondicherry	8
5	Chhattisgarh	23	18	Punjab	12
6	Goa	-	19	Rajasthan	12
7	Delhi	7	20	Sikkim	2
8	Gujarat	13	21	Tamil Nadu	322
9	Haryana	11	22	Telangana	89
10	Himachal Pradesh	9	23	Tripura	3
11	Jharkhand	9	24	Uttar Pradesh	20
12	Karnataka	153	25	Uttarakhand	6
13	Kerala	82	26	West Bengal	22

1.5.3   National Accreditation Board for Education and Training (NABET): National Accreditation Board for Education and Training (NABET) is a body which provides accreditation to auditors, training courses and schools that meet the board's criteria and requirements. It also provides a mechanism for their international recognition. NABET is the world's first organization to provide Accreditation of consultant and consultant organizations in various assessment areas and also Hospital accreditation system etc. In order to have a focused strategic planning and direction, the board has formulated into four distinct areas. They are Formal Education Excellence Division, Accreditation Division, Government Projects Division and Skill Training and Services Division.

1.5.4   National Accreditation Board for Certification Bodies (NABCB): National Accreditation Board for Certification Bodies (NABCB) is one of the constituent Board of Quality Council of India. It is responsible for providing national accreditation system for Certification Bodies & Inspection Bodies in the country depending on the assessment of their competence according to the Board's criteria. The board of NABCB is managed by eighteen honorary members including the chairman with sincere representation from

the stakeholders. NABCB board also applies the relevant documents of Asian Pacific Accreditation Cooperation (APAC), International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) and International Accreditation Forum (IAF) in its accreditation schemes.

1.6   QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a vast education system in terms of number of admissions, quantity of learning materials developed and mechanisms that involve dispatch of study materials to the admitted students. The ODL system resembles an industrial production unit, where student admissions, developing & printing SLM's can be treated as inputs and establishing regional study centers, indentifying and allotting counselors, mentoring, establishing examination centers and conducting exams can be considered as processing units. Evaluation and grading, announcing results, conducting convocation etc., can be treated as output ODL system. All these events follow a pattern similar to a product in an industry. To signify the quality of an industry and its products, ISI mark, ISO certification may help in assuring the quality. In the similar fashion, assuring the quality of ODL education system has became a recent challenge due to the demand. On this basis, developing and implementing the quality standards and parameter to measure and assuring the quality of ODL education system is important. According to Manjulika S and V.V.Reddy (1996) delivery of Distance Education in India can be done in many ways such as, through Radios, audio video programmes, Tele conferencing & Radio Counseling, Counseling and Contact sessions, Practical's conduction, Libraries, Assignments, Projects etc;. In these, setting quality standards and maintaining quality standards for each and every function of delivery system is more important for getting accreditation from the recognized council such as NAAC and NBA. Developing quality standards, implementing and practicing them in each and every operation of ODL educational system will lead to gain the competitive edge and learner satisfaction. Maintaining and assuring quality at each and every point of educational supply chain system is very important to gain accreditation from the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and sustain the quality in ODL education system. It will lead to all the stakeholders' satisfaction and to increase institutional reputation.

1.7   NAAC   FOR   ODL   UNIVERSITIES   AND INSTITUTIONS

The need for getting NAAC accreditation in ODL education system was initiated under the dynamic leadership of IGNOU's present Vice Chancellor Professor Nageshwar Rao as Chairperson of the National Task Force for developing the scheme for Assessment and Accreditation of ODL Universities and Institutions (IGNOU Profile 2020) in 2018. Now most of the ODL Universities and Institutes are in the process of getting NAAC accreditation. It is the symbol of improving the quality in ODL education system.

1.7.1 Advantages of NAAC Accreditation of ODL Systems

- Grading of the ODL Universities/Institutions
- Learners can choose to join in good graded ODL Universities
- Parents can analyze the ODL Universities reputation
- Organization may recruit the students on the basis of NAAC grading
- Continuous quality improvement process will take place
- Chances of getting research funds and projects
- NAAC grade to the ODL Universities will become a benchmark for the excellence
- Students from NAAC graded ODL university/institute may given priority for job

1.8 SUITABILITY OF CURRENT ACCREDITATION PROCESS FOR ODL

The accreditation bodies covered so far in this paper are applicable for Regular full-time institutions and courses. However, the degree of quality parameters and their applicability may vary from one another. Now the question arises that, how far these quality parameters suits for providing the accreditation for open and distance learning institutions? Before, we look into the suitability and applicability of the existing bodies and their parameters for ODL institutions, let's look at the differences in Regular education system and Distance education system which was given in the Table 1.3.

Table 1.3: Regular and Distance Education Differences

Sl. No.	Traditional Education	Distance Education
1	Classroom education is a both student as well as Teacher centric	Distance education is a student centric
2	This is systematic and follows strict timings	This may be unsystematic and doesn't follow any timings

3	Attendance is mandatory	Attendance may not be mandatory
4	Students opt this system for career	This system is opted for the benefit of promotions or to upgrade the knowledge or to gain the degree
5	In this system, more focus and stress is on teachers	In this system, more focus and stress on the students
6	There is regular monitoring and counseling system	There is no monitoring in distance education
7	In regular education, faculty are busy with their class works and academics	Faculty in distance education may have less work
8	Teachers and students are encouraged to participate in symposiums and conferences	Very less chance to participate in conferences and symposiums
9	Outcome based education is the main criteria	Outcome based education may not be the main criteria
10	Co-curricular and extracurricular activities are involved	No co-curricular activities are involved

It is noticed from the table no. 3 that the focal points and the delivery mechanism for regular/traditional education and distance education is different. Most of the accrediting bodies have framed different criterions for regular/fulltime institutions which covers all the measures at institute and program level to assure the quality. As discussed in the previous sections, NAAC and NBA are two major accrediting bodies in India which accredits programs and institutions offering UG and PG courses. The ODL institutions are in a need to get accredited by any of the quality assurance body in order to gauge their quality and replicate the same to the people. This section deals with the suitability of NAAC and NBA to ODL institutions. Table 1.4 shows the seven criterions involved in NAAC process and their marks for different levels of institutions. The last column in the table indicates that, whether the existing criterion weightage can be increased or decreased when applied to ODL institution. The approximate weightage for each criterion has been suggested and explained in the preceding paragraphs.

Table 1.4: Criteria Wise Marks for NAAC Accreditation Process

Criteria No	Criteria	Marks			Criterion weightage for ODL institutions
		Constituent Colleges	Autonomous colleges	Universities	
Criteria # 1	Curricular Aspects	100	150	150	Decrease ↓
Criteria # 2	Teaching-Learning and Evaluation	350	300	200	Increase ↑
Criteria # 3	Research, Innovations and Extensions	120	150	250	Decrease ↓
Criteria # 4	Infrastructure and Learning Resources	100	100	100	Increase ↑
Criteria # 5	Student Support and Progression	130	100	100	Increase ↑
Criteria # 6	Governance, Leadership and Management	100	100	100	Decrease ↓
Criteria # 7	Institutional Values and Best Practices	100	100	100	Decrease ↓

Criterion 1 of NAAC covers the curricular aspects of an institute. The practices initiated by the institute to cover a wide range of programmes and courses that are emerging globally are included in curricular aspects. This criterion holds a share of 10% - 15% in the overall marks. Curricular aspects dealing with the distance education can be given a share of 5%, as this is not the major aspect to decide the quality of the program or the institute.

Criterion 2 of NAAC evaluates the overall efforts of an institute in serving and satisfying the students by means of effective teaching-learning strategies. The key factors of criteria 2 are enrolment ratio and profile of students, process of teaching-learning, quality and profiles of teachers, evaluation system, student performance and student survey for satisfaction. The present share of marks for criteria 2 ranges between 20% - 35%. As this criterion describes the quality of teachers and learners through systematic evaluation of student performance and through student survey judgment, this can be given a higher priority when applied to distance education accreditation process. More than 40% weightage can be shared by this criterion.

Criterion 3 of NAAC includes the research and innovations practiced by the institute. Resources and facilities available at the institute to develop and promote research culture are taken as a measure for evaluating criterion 3. However, the culture of research in distance education institutes is still at a basic level and also is not a major quality measuring criteria, this should be given less preference during accreditation. The marks shared by this criterion for accreditation regular institute is in range 12% - 25%. About 5% of marks can be allotted to this criterion when evaluated for distance education institutes.

Criterion 4 of NAAC has two aspects, infrastructure and learning resources. The infrastructure for distance education institutes and centers is not a priority but required. The learning resources like library, e-books, computers, study materials are very crucial for distance education institutes. More focus has to be made on learning resources than the infrastructure. It is advisable to segregate infrastructure and learning resources as two separate criterions. At present, 10% of marks are shared by this criterion which can be increased up to 20% when applied to distance education institutes.

Criterion 5 of NAAC includes student support and progression. This criterion also evaluates the student's participation in co-curricular activities and also considers the alumni profiles. The last two factors i.e., students participation and alumni profiles may not be the quality judging factor for distance education institutes. The key indicators for measuring quality of distance education institute pertaining to this criterion are student support and student progression. Assisting students in learning and enhancing their performance is always a major priority for distance education institute which can be evaluated through this criterion. Around 20% of marks weightage can be given for criterion 5 when implemented for distance education institutions.

Criterion 6 and 7 of NAAC relates to institutional values and best practices including governance, leadership and management. This criterion includes effective leadership, optimal utilization of budget, recruiting and training employees, human resource planning, eco-friendly practices, social responsibility etc. All these can be considered as significant factors in any organization for smooth and effective functioning, but comparatively its role can be treated as minimum in distance education. 20% of weightage is occupied by criterion 6 and 7 in the present NAAC SSR, its weightage can be reduced to 10% while considering for distance education institutions.

Another prominent accreditation body in India is NBA. It accredits the UG and PG technical programs. The criterions involved in NBA evaluation and their marks for Tier-I and Tier-II institutions are shown in the Table 1.5. The last column in the table indicates the suggested weightage in terms of increase or decrease as applied to ODL institutions. Already the applicability of NAAC criterions to the ODL institutions has been discussed in the previous paragraphs. In the same pace, it is necessary to check the suitability of NBA criterions for ODL institutions. There are total seven criterions in NAAC accreditation process whereas in NBA there are ten criterions. Although, the criterions in both the processes seems to be different, their sub-criterions listed in each criterion, which are known as key indicators in NAAC and matrices in NBA, refers the same quality parameter. For this reason, an equivalence chart has been prepared which shows and equates the criterion both in NAAC as well as NBA. This is shown in the figure no. 3. The discussions and suggestions which were made for implementing NAAC criterions for distance education institutions can be considered for NBA criterions too, as criterions in NAAC and NBA implies the same quality parameters.

**Table 1.5: Criteria Wise Marks for NBA Accreditation Process**

Criteria No.	Criteria	Marks		Criterion Weightage for ODL Institutions
		Tier-I	Tier-II	
Criteria # 1	Vision, Mission and Program Educational Objectives	50	60	Decrease ↓
Criteria # 2	Program Curriculum and Teaching – Learning Processes	100	120	Increase ↑
Criteria # 3	Course Outcomes and Program Outcomes	175	120	Decrease ↓
Criteria # 4	Students' Performance	100	150	Increase ↑
Criteria # 5	Faculty Information and Contributions	200	200	Decrease ↓
Criteria # 6	Facilities and Technical Support	80	80	Increase ↑
Criteria # 7	Continuous Improvement	75	50	Increase ↑
Criteria # 8	First Year Academics	50	50	Decrease ↓
Criteria # 9	Student Support Systems	50	50	Increase ↑
Criteria # 10	Governance, Institutional Support and Financial Resources	120	120	Decrease ↓

Figure 1.3: Equivalence of NAAC and NBA Criteria

NAAC CRITERION	• EQUIVALENT CRITERION IN NBA
1. Curricular Aspects	•Criteria 1 •Criteria 2
2. Teaching-Learning and Evaluation	•Criteria 2 •Criteria 3 •Criteria 4 & 8
3. Research, Innovations and Extensions	•Criteria 4 •Criteria 5
4. Infrastructure and Learning Resources	•Criteria 6
5. Student Support and Progression	•Criteria 7 •Criteria 9
6. Governance, Leadership and Management	•Criteria 10
7. Institutional Values and Best Practices	•Criteria 1 •Criteria10

1.9 QUALITY RE-DESIGN THROUGH LEARNER ORIENTED ACCREDITATION

In the previous section the suitability of existing accreditation process for ODL institutions has been checked and suggestions were made. It is noted that, the importance and focus of quality parameters and criterions involved in the current accreditation process need to be changed when applied to ODL institutions. As learners are the major contributors to assess the quality of distance education, very less priority was given in the NAAC and NBA to the learner. In short, NAAC primarily focuses on institute whereas NBA focus on Programme but no accrediting body has major focus on the learner. This is depicted pictorially in the Figure 1.4.

Figure 1.4: Major Focus of Accreditation Bodies
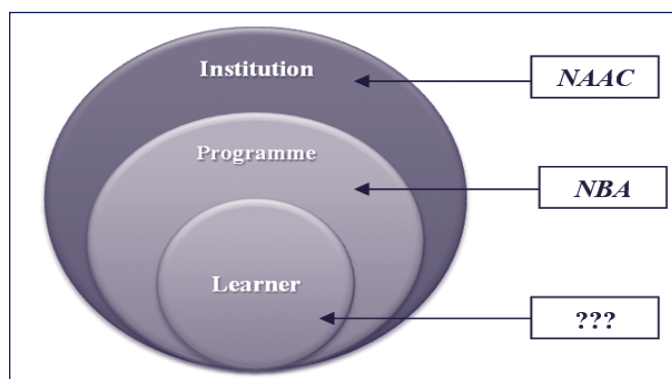
Quality measures are to be developed that primarily focuses on the learner and secondarily on program and the institute. The students (or the learners) in distance education has a wide role as they are self-liable for their learning. Unlike students in traditional education, distance education students has to study by their own in their own timings, solve the assignment problems and prepare the notes for the courses. The work for the learner in distance education is more when compared to traditional education learners. The institutes offering distance education need to reduce the burden and stress on the learner and make their learning easy and comfortable. The criterion for assuring quality of ODL institutions need to be established on the basis of learner. The accrediting bodies should measure the parameters that the institute provides to the learner in making the learner's job easy and comfortable. So, the quality aspects have to be re-designed through learner oriented accreditation for distance education. The criterions pertaining to the learner in distance education are represented in the form of inverted "T" as shown in the Figure 1.5

Curriculum: The ODL institutions should identify the need of the students joining the programmes and based on the need curriculum has to be designed. The curriculum followed in traditional and distance education need to be same, as the outcome of the student is different in both the cases. Based on the suitability of the curriculum to the program and the degree to which student attains the curriculum can be taken as a measure for quality assurance for accreditation.

Learning Materials: Learning materials are one of the major sources for the students to learn the course content as prescribed by the institute. The learning materials may be in many forms viz., hard bound text books, e-books, power point presentation, PDF document etc., All these should be developed to create the interest in the learners by providing relevant examples and applications. Further, these learning materials should have ease of readability. The quality of learning material developed for each course by the staff can be taken as a quality parameter for accreditation.

Teaching-learning Process: Delivery of lectures through various modes to make the students to learn the subject can be considered as major criterion in distance education. In today's digital era, on-line mode of teaching-learning has minimized the gap between a teacher and a learner. This advantage can make the job of distance education easier. Moreover, in traditional education, the three learning taxonomies namely cognitive, affective and psychomotor are involved. But in distance education maximum credits are given to the cognitive domain of learning. So assessing 'what teacher has taught'? & 'what student has learned'? can give a measure of teaching-learning process.

Figure 1.5: Criterions for Learning Oriented Accreditation
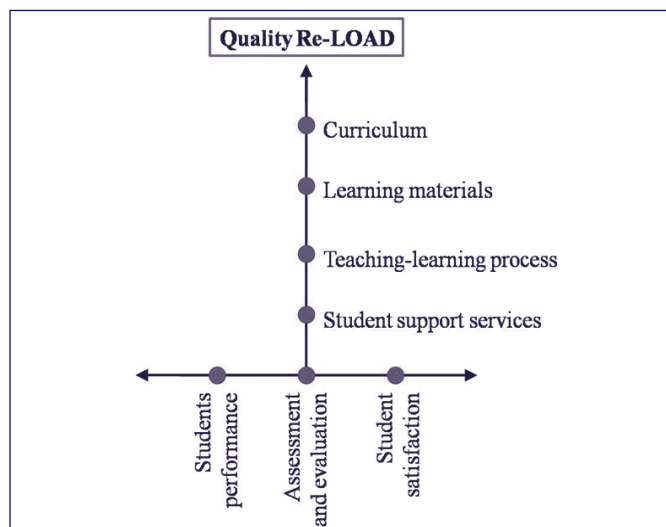
Student Support Service: The activities of distance education other than the actual delivery of course content are defined under students support services. These include the role of administrative as well as academic sections. Table 1.6 shows few factors that are to be considered while assessing student support services during accreditation process.

Table 1.6: Factors and their Requirements for Students Support Service

Sl. No	Factors for student support services	Requirement	Evaluation criterion
1	Local study centers	As most of them being locked, they should be made accessible to the students during holidays and examinations.	Based on the students usage of study centers, marks can be awarded
2	Resources in study centers	Proper resources like computers, internet, etc., should be provided which makes the students more attentive towards learning	Evaluation can be done based on the availability of resources in study centers
3	Administration in study centers	Administrative staff plays a key role in student support services. Required qualified staff should be made available in the study centers to help and guide the students.	Marks should be given depending on the fulfillment of the administrative staff in the study centers.
4	Lectures availability	Well qualified lectures (full-time & part-time) need to be recruited and maintained for each study centre separately.	Awarding of marks can done based on the number of available staff (both full-time and part-time)
5	Tutorial classes	Weekly tutorials need to be arranged to cover the content of all the courses.	Judgment should be done by checking the regularity in engaging the tutorial and also the students attendance
6	Study material delivery	Proper delivery of study material should be ensured.	Assessment can be done based on the response from the students regarding delivery of study material
7	Interaction (direct or online)	Apart from regular classes/tutorials, interaction between student and teacher should be arranged	The count of interactions arranged can be taken as a scale
8	Feedback	Feedback from the students should be collected for every quarterly/half yearly to know the loopholes of the system (if any)	Judgment can be done based on the effectiveness of the feedback system and also the availability of record of responses
9	Response to mails and phone calls	Administrative staff should respond to phone calls and emails positively	Based on the complaints from the students in regard with response to mails and calls, assessment can be done
10	Monitoring	As a part of management information system, student monitoring activity has to be carried out regularly	Evaluation can be done based on the effectiveness of monitoring system.

Assessment and Evaluation: Assessment and evaluation of teaching and learning processes are the key factors for any education system. The effective assessment process may include quality question paper and transparency, proper examination system, conduct of exams on time to time basis and declaring results within a stipulate time. On the other hand, the evaluation is performed to increase the competence of students. Both assessment and evaluation are to be treated as prominent quality assuring factors for accreditation process of distance education.

Student Performance: The output of teaching-learning can be observed in the form of student performance. The extent to which teaching and learning methodologies has been effective is reflected in the student performance. However, evaluation system provides the ranks, grades and marks; student performance can be gauged by the marks secured in the examinations. Student performance can be taken as a criterion for learner oriented accreditation.

Student Satisfaction: The students in distance education get satisfied if the first four criterions (curriculum, learning material, teaching-learning process and student support service) get fulfilled. As there is no peculiar method to measure student satisfaction, institutes need to establish procedures and formats to measure satisfaction. Student satisfaction can be taken as a criterion for assuring quality of distance education during the accreditation process.

1.10 CONCLUSION

Providing quality education to the students to gain knowledge and sustain in today's competitive world has became a necessary criteria. Moreover, assuring quality of educational institution in the form of certification or accreditation is the present trend. There are many accrediting bodies in India for assuring quality of regular/fulltime higher education institutions and programmes. But, no policies are established to assure the quality of distance education institutions. The ODL institutions in India are in a need of getting accredited by an agency for assuring quality. Procedures need to be established by accrediting bodies for quality assurance of distance education institutions and programmes. In this paper, the applicability of NAAC and NBA policies for distance education institutions has been evaluated. Few modifications are to be made in the existing policies if applied for distance education institutions. For a perfect accreditation policy for distance education, quality parameters are to be redesigned according to the requirements. As distance education is a learner centric approach, more focus is to be made on the learner and the quality parameters

has to be developed which judges the aspects related to the learner. So, the quality assuring aspects has to be re-designed through learner oriented accreditation. An inverted "T" model has developed in this paper which signifies seven prominent criterions for learner oriented accreditation. Assessment and evaluation of distance education institutions for accreditation can be done based on these seven criterions which signify the overall quality of the institution.

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