UNIT 4 ACCESS, QUALITY AND COST

Structure

4.1 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- establish the interrelationships among the three vectors of the triangle that represent access, cost and quality;
- design systems that impact the behaviour of each of these three vectors that can contribute to expansion, affordability and good quality in the provision;
- design and develop quality assurance systems appropriate to the environment; and
- analyse the readiness of the national environment to launch and sustain distance education initiatives.

4.0 INTRODUCTION

While discussing the case for distance education, and its relevance to Africa, we had mentioned that distance education promises both cost efficiency and cost effectiveness. The reason for this optimism is the potential of distance education methods to reduce the marginal costs; in other words, the additional cost of enrolling and teaching one more student is less than the average cost per student. This is achieved not by cutting costs, nor by compromising any aspect of the quality of services provided to that particular student or students in general. It is also necessary to disabuse the popular perception that distance education is cheaper. In terms of costs, what distance education achieves are economies of scale; that is, the fixed costs get spread over larger numbers and longer periods.

We have also said that in the developing countries, it is the governments that are most concerned with the provision of educational opportunities. It is true that people are concerned generally, but their concern is about access to good quality education at an affordable cost. These are the same concerns for governments too, with the difference that it is for

them to make provision for education that many more people can access, ensure that the quality of what is provided is acceptable, and that the cost of accessing good education is not too high. The interplay of these dimensions is often referred to as the eternal triangle in education.

We now turn to take a more detailed look at the ways in which this triangle operates in the African context.

4.2 THE IRON TRIANGLE: ACCESS, QUALITY AND COSTS

Sir John Daniel, the President and CEO of the Commonwealth of Learning, calls it the Iron Triangle of education, the vectors of which are made up by the issues of access, quality and costs.

Access is a central issue in education. While discussing the relevance of distance education to Africa, we examined the issue of access in some detail. We need not repeat the details again except to note that nearly all governments in Africa are grappling with the problem of expanding access to educational opportunities at all levels for the African people. There is general agreement that distance education methods are the best means, and perhaps the only means, to reach out to large numbers in as short a time as possible. Faced with not much of a choice before them, most governments in Africa are preparing themselves to expand the educational provision through the application of distance education methods and practices. In making their final choice, they are confronted with two other concerns.

The first is about the quality of the provision. Can distance education methods ensure the quality of the education provided? Certain prejudices against distance education continue to persist; questions about legitimacy, and about quality. Concerns about legitimacy arise because it is generally perceived as a cheaper option and about quality because it is less costly. Both these are genuine concerns. But it needs to be emphasised that high cost does not necessarily mean high quality; nor do all those that cost less are of poor quality. In simple terms, quality is defined as fitness for purpose at minimum cost to society. By that definition, education should be of good quality if it serves the purpose for many. What could be that purpose? Getting jobs? Finding work? Earning livelihood? Improving awareness? Becoming a productive member of the society? Making better communities and societies?

According to Sir John Daniel, education has two major purposes: to build human capital, and to build social capital. Human capital means the individual knowledge and skills that make a person more autonomous, more flexible and more productive. It is the personal capital that can be invested in finding fulfilment in people's lives. But human capital by itself is not enough, we also need social capital. Social capital is trust in other people, the networks of contacts and the coming together of people for a common goal that creates communities.

The third dimension is cost. If high costs restrict access, and if quality is fitness for purpose at minimum cost to society, then high cost is bad quality. Open universities have established that their courses and programmes as well as their teaching and learning processes lead to outcomes that are as good as the best of traditional universities. For instance, the UKOU has been rated among the top five universities in

the UK. A few large open universities across the world are providing opportunities for millions of people, and have certainly widened access to large numbers. And this opening up served the purpose of building human capital as well as social capital on a massive scale at a relatively low cost. That is how the open universities and distance education programmes have helped to break the eternal triangle of access, quality and cost. The principle works like this: learning materials of high quality once produced do involve high costs. But when numbers go up (access), the cost side of the triangle shrinks. Alternately, when access is limited, the cost line that links access and quality becomes longer, and continues to shrink the access line. When a fine balance is established between access and cost, the quality advantage also is shared by many. That is what good open universities have achieved; that is what good distance education programmes can emulate.

It follows that successful open learning and distance education programmes do not compromise quality, they inspire credibility and command legitimacy. The test then is: can quality be maintained at an affordable cost, and do distance education programmes ensure learner success? We shall look at these issues as well.

Check Your Progress 1

Notes: *a) Space is given below for your answer.*

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

There is a perception that distance education is cheap and therefore is of poor quality. Is this perception justified? (Answer in about 75 words.)

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4.3 QUALITY IN THE DISTANCE EDUCATION PROVISION

We have talked about distance education as an instrument for widening access to educational provision. But let us remind ourselves that the focus was not just on getting the numbers right, but on providing good quality education. And quality, we agreed, was fitness for purpose. That argument takes us to the question of relevance of programmes, course contents that add value to the learning experience and the virtues of independent learning leading to lifelong education. If all of these are the purposes of good education, we are also talking of processes that transform our education and making it relevant and critical to our societies and nations.

It is this transformational potential of distance education that we need to mobilise to manage the triangle of access, quality and cost. By widening access, we should be able to ensure quality at low cost. That is to say that the programmes offered by the system should be affordable for large numbers. Then it would be possible to ensure economies of scale. At the policy level, therefore, it should be possible to design funding patterns that favour relevant programmes that can attract large numbers as the top priority. But it is not enough to get a large number registered; they should stay with the programme and complete it. Completion ratios significantly impact on costs and cost efficiency. If graduate output costs go up, efficiency of the system goes down.

Funding support should go with regular and well designed systems of performance audit of institutions and accreditation of their programmes against specified criteria. Rigorous implementation of such measures on a continuing basis guarantees against slippages in the quality of programmes and prevent institutions from turning into commercial enterprises.

In 2002, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) launched what came to be known a the Open Courseware movement under which the MIT has decided to put its courses including faculty lectures and notes online for anyone to use. UKOU followed suit by placing some of its course material online. By January 2007, the movement has about 1800 potential courses of 120 universities worldwide that provide the course materials such as the syllabi, video and audio lectures, notes, assignments and homework that anyone can log into. The primary purpose of this movement is to share knowledge, and it is now known to be helping thousands of students worldwide to enhance their knowledge and improve their performance at the institutions where they are registered as formal students (http://education.zdnet.com). In 2006 IGNOU started its knowledge portal called "e-gyankhosh". By 2010 almost the entire course materials of IGNOU have been put on the web as open courseware.

From Open Courseware Movement to WikiEducator, a collaborative course authoring tool on which there are hundreds of projects to create learning material that is open for all to use, it now seems that content for high quality programmes no longer presents any serious problem. Distance education programmes in the future will increasingly draw upon these sources and adopt or adapt their materials by providing a local flavour where necessary. African distance education will thus be better placed than its counterpart in several developing countries that had to struggle in the process of getting their act together in designing, developing and producing learning materials for its programmes. What is more important from Africa's point of view is that its initial investment on course development, and therefore, the total costs, can be contained within manageable limits without compromising quality. As we said earlier, it also provides the opportunity of managing costs and still takes advantage of economies of scale.

Collaborative initiatives among countries and institutions offer very good opportunities for sharing intellectual and physical resources while improving quality and reducing costs. For instance, institutions across countries can establish joint teams for designing and developing materials for courses that are specially relevant to Africa's needs; these materials once developed can be used by institutions in several countries. Similarly, learning centres and ICT kiosks that support learning can be used by more than one institution to support their learners without each

having to establish and maintain its own elaborate and expensive learner support systems.

We have noted earlier in this discussion that a pool of trained personnel is already available in African countries who have been initiated into the distance education system with varying degrees of intensity. It would not be a bad idea to get them all back into new initiatives, if necessary, by retraining or improving their professional competence by advanced training with the use of training materials and CD-ROMs freely available from organisations like the UNESCO and COL.

And last, but not the least, is the development and use of a costing model to continuously assess the actual costs of all ongoing distance education programmes to identify elements of costs that can be controlled or contained. Areas that could prove to be cost-intensive are engagement of full-time personnel where part-time staff is adequate, decentralisation of processes involved in learner support systems and their management, bulk purchase of equipment and stores, and so on.

4.4 ENSURING QUALITY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

This is not the place to dwell at length with the issue of quality assurance in distance education. It will be dealt with in great detail elsewhere in this course.

Having spoken about the quality issue in the specific context of access and cost and its importance in the sustainability of distance education systems in Africa, it will be worthwhile to look at the ways in which successful distance education systems in the African continent have addressed this issue and to draw lessons from their experience for the benefit of other countries in the continent. It is not our intention to engage in a general discussion on quality assurance systems and processes; what we intend to do is just to flag a few relevant points that might help distance education practitioners in Africa to develop similar systems and processes.

South Africa is one country that has addressed this issue seriously and has developed a well defined system for quality assurance. It has established a South African Quality Authority (SAQA) primarily to ensure that the quality of its educational provision is sufficiently high and that it meets the hopes and expectations of all stakeholders. On the issue of quality, South Africa does not make any distinction between face-to-face and distance education as, according to them, all education, irrespective of modes of delivery, must be of the same quality. In order to assess the quality of its provision, the SAQA has developed and notified elaborate criteria for assessing the quality of all aspects from institutional mission and policies to staff recruitment and training and student performance and satisfaction. There is a Higher Education Quality Committee that reviews and refines these criteria from time to time.

Since distance education processes are different, the criteria for quality standard in distance education have been notified separately. These criteria also range from institutional mission and policies to the processes of programme choice, development and delivery, learner support, staff policies, student management, evaluation, collaborative arrangements, and so on. This is not the place to make a critique of the South African

system of quality assurance; the purpose of referring to this system is to draw attention to the fact that quality assurance in distance education is not new to the African continent.

Countries that do not have any elaborate system of quality assurance could emulate the South African model. The starting point for developing a reasonably satisfactory quality assurance mechanism and putting it in place would involve the following steps:

- Build a common understanding on quality in distance education through broad consultation among major stakeholders;
- Develop, document and implement a national Quality Assurance Framework for education, including distance education, with the clear understanding of the relationship of distance education quality assurance mechanism to the overall quality system in education;
- Build partnerships with international and local agencies for capacity building and technical support in quality assurance processes;
- In setting the criteria, ensure a balance between government commitment and ownership by those using them;
- Promote both external and internal criteria for quality assurance that could stimulate innovation and prevent poor practice;
- Develop an institutional quality assurance framework and train staff to participate in its implementation;
- Institute continuous professional development programmes for part-time staff covering all aspects of distance education practice, including management and administration;
- Ensure recognition of qualifications by securing the participation of employers in the public and private sector in the development of programmes and their evaluation;
- Ensure the quality of the media output;
- Avoid investments in expensive technology unless it is needed;
- Ensure that development of all new distance education practices are firmly rooted in research; and
- Guard against acquiring resources that are too advanced and do not match local needs.

Check Your Progress 2

Notes: *a) Space is given below for your answer.*

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

What are the basic components that contribute to the quality of the distance education provision? List 5 important steps that would ensure quality in distance education. (Answer in about 120 words.)

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4.5 SUSTAINABILITY OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

While discussing the problems and challenges in open learning and distance education in Africa, we drew attention to the issue of sustaining distance education initiatives that have been taken in several countries. We have noted at that point that most projects started with donor funding wound up when the funding arrangements stopped. Neither the governments nor the institutions were able to continue those projects and provide the resource support needed to keep them going. This tendency needs to be reversed. What are the possibilities of providing sustained support to distance education? Some of the possible solutions that emerged from the discussions at the Conference of African Education Ministers, to which we have made several references throughout this Block, are presented below:

- Establish clear and enduring national policies that reflect political will and firm commitment to provide funding on a continuing basis for distance education provision in the national systems;
- Develop mechanisms to relate funding to programmes that have substantial demand from potential learners to ensure economies of scale, are of proven quality and have registered significant success;
- Develop awareness among leaders and managers of distance education that quality is the essence of sustainability;
- Design collaborative efforts in ways that will ensure transfer of skills from developmental agencies and other partners to African experts to foster and promote self-sufficiency and to reduce dependence;
- Make accurate assessments of the human resource needs to sustain programmes and recruit and train personnel for running them; and
- Secure the involvement of local communities in the provision of learner support services like learning centres, mentoring, monitoring, project work, etc.

4.6 IS AFRICA READY FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION?

Funding and other resource-related support do not guarantee that distance education initiatives will endure in Africa or anywhere else. There are several other factors that will influence the course that distance education provision may take in any education system in any country or continent.

The most important among these influences is the educational environment. If the environment is not receptive to new ideas and innovations, all efforts at experimenting with distance education may not lead to any positive impact. It is essential, therefore, that the environment is prepared, and got ready for trying new ways of doing things; in other words, as we said earlier, willingness to work with legacy systems is more important than any overenthusiastic reformist zeal to transplant what has succeeded elsewhere. Reforms need to be rooted in the soil where they have to grow, and what exists already in that soil must be ready to accept and internalise innovation-driven reforms.

a) *Public Awareness:* The most essential pre-requisite for environmental preparedness is getting people to accept distance education as a viable and effective option for developing the human and social capital needed for reducing poverty, improving health, enhancing productivity and enriching the quality of life. National governments, with the help of leaders in different walks of life in the societies, in cooperation with reform-minded academics and educators, should engage themselves in broad consultation, and devise strategies to carry the message that open learning and distance education is a powerful instrument for reducing poverty and misery. Among the educated too, awareness needs to be created that the half-life of knowledge is getting shortened too soon, and that they too need opportunities to catch up with the ever-expanding world of knowledge and the ways of its applications, to participate in the productive processes in their societies. Such awareness campaigns should be built around clear definitions of the respective social and educational purposes and roles of contact and distance education. It will be useful to recall that initiatives like NEPAD have urged African countries to use the potential of distance education for teacher development, etc., to meet the Millennium Development Goals. Without preparing the soil, no plant will grow and all the promise and potential of distance education will remain just that, a promise.

b) *Prepare the Human Capital for distance Education:* We have already mentioned it. But it is worthwhile repeating it. Awareness does not, by itself, ensure successful implementation of distance education programmes. It requires a body of experts, professionals, technicians and a much larger body of committed community workers to deliver distance education programmes. While experts, professionals and technicians can design and develop learning materials, they have to reach every learner who might also need some help and support in the form of advice, counselling, and perhaps, some tutoring as well. This is the human capital that can develop, organise and sustain distance education programmes across countries. The nucleus of this capital is available in most places in the continent, it has to be nurtured and developed. We have already discussed the ways in which this can be done. It is no exaggeration to say that, in the end, it is the dedicated human capital that can sustain such major initiatives. And when that enduring power of commitment to a cause is developed, no obstacle will be big enough to stand in the way of progress.

c) *Give the Learners What They Need and Not What You Have:* This is again a restatement of the cardinal principle that markets are created when you have products that people need; and not just because you have something or the other to sell. Supply-driven markets seldom grow; demand-driven markets do. Again, what may have succeeded in one environment may not succeed in another. The criticality of relating programmes of education to the needs of the local communities cannot be overemphasised. On the one hand, we are talking about the potential of distance education for poverty reduction and relieving people from the miseries of their daily life, and on the other, we are trying to seek solutions to these problems with neatly packaged knowledge-loaded learning materials delivered through sophisticated technologies. Obviously, the two do not match. It is frustrating both for the providers and the learner groups. The right approach would be to develop programmes around the needs of communities,

identified with special projects like better farming practices, provision of micro-credit, new construction programmes that use new and better materials, installation and operation of solar power systems, and so on, in which local communities can be fully involved. Such programmes, if they also incorporate problem-solving skills, are most likely to sustain learner interest and acceptance. The movement for distance education, in most places in the continent, has to be built up from the grass roots level, and not from the top to the bottom.

d) *Learner Preparedness:* Preparedness of potential learners to enrol in a distance education programme and pursue it through independent study is another critical issue. As we have noted, about half of Africa's population is young. Many among them have had no formal schooling. It would be useful to prepare them for self-study, motivate them to learn and support them to persist with their efforts. Preparation of beginners' learning kits that include useful tips on developing learning skills, the manner in which they can pursue their education and training programmes through the distance mode and make learning a lifelong endeavour with no disruption in their work and family life, etc., would be a promising start for the uninitiated. Remember also that we are not talking about the few in Africa who had the privilege of some education and want to improve on it. Potential learners though they are, their numbers do not add up for any economies of scale, and, in most African countries, the size of the population is not large enough to sustain distance education only at the higher or advanced levels. A large enough learner community in many countries has to emerge from distance education initiatives targeted on the out-of-school youth.

e) *Technology Readiness:* We have discussed the role of technology in distance education at length in the previous Units and sections. Indeed, there can be no discussion on distance education in today's context without mentioning the role that technologies play. The essence of the processes of teaching and learning is communication that involves words, sound and images. Whether we like it or not, all these three have converged to make up what we now call multimedia communication. Even if we do not know much about how they are produced, or how they work, most of us have experienced its effect on our lives. No other development illustrates the impact of technology on the lives of common people (education or even literacy is not a criterion here) better than the spectacular growth of mobile telephony in the recent past. According to a study conducted recently, the number of mobile phone subscribers in Africa more than doubled, from 25.1 million to 51.8 million during the period from 1998 to 2003, and is still rising. The WDI database for 2009 indicates that cell phone users went up from 8% of the population in 2005 to 23% in 2007. Apparently, the reason for this phenomenal growth is the relatively low cost of handsets, the ease of use of technology and the reasonably low tariff rates. PC penetration , according to the WDI database for 2009 is only 1.8 per 1000 people and the number of Internet users is only 4.4 per 100 people. Compared to mobile phones, computers are much more costly, bandwidth availability is limited, and connectivity problems are more complex. National policies on connectivity and bandwidth as well as tariff are the major concerns in Internet services remaining the privilege of a few. Governments and Internet service providers have to make it happen if people in large numbers have to access this technology. If it becomes available at affordable costs,

people will take to it as they did in the case of with mobile phones. It may still be a distant dream, but is surely an attainable goal.

A notable event in ICT infrastructure development in Africa is a Pan African e-Network Project costing an investment of $1 billion by India that has been launched early in 2009. The project to be implemented in cooperation with the African Union, has been in the works from 2004. The project seeks to connect India with all the 53 countries on the continent with a satellite and fibre optic network to share India's expertise in education and health care (www.panafricanenetwork.com). Surely a big beginning that augurs well for the future of distance education in Africa has been made. The launch of this project could substantially address most of the concerns that we have discussed and may pave the way for continent wide connectivity and interest in making the best use of this unique opportunity. We need to remind ourselves again that availability of technology alone is not a solution. We need to prepare the people to apply these technologies and to use them to their advantage.

Collaboration within the framework of existing organisations like the African Council for Distance Education, Association of African Universities, Commonwealth of Learning and the UNESCO could further help develop a Pan African strategy for the use of ICTs in education and for local and regional development. Equally important is the need for establishing collaborative arrangements among nations, institutions, projects and programmes to enhance the impact of distance education initiatives and to reduce costs. It would be a good idea if multinational corporations that manufacture computing equipment could consider price reductions keeping in view that large volumes of manufacture and sales could offset the notional loss from lower prices and the national governments considering lowering of import duties on such equipment. Africa certainly promises to be a big market for ICT equipment.

Check Your Progress 3

Notes: *a) Space is given below for your answer.*

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

List four important conditions that are necessary to sustain distance education initiatives. Examine the readiness of African countries to initiate distance education programmes and sustain them. (Answer in about 100 words.)

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4.7 LET US SUM UP

We have discussed the critical success factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the distance education provision in Africa. As we have noted, many African countries are small; the size of their population is not

very big. And yet, all of them need to augment their education provision. It means that they will have to find ways to expand opportunities for the education of their nationals in ways that do not compromise quality and are affordable. Distance education planners and managers have to understand the criticality of these three attributes in preparing for the launch of distance education initiatives. Further, they have to make an assessment of the readiness of each environment before taking the plunge, lest they find their initiatives unsustainable.

4.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

There are certain concerns about distance education provision; its legitimacy and effectiveness. Concerns about legitimacy persist because it is a cheaper option, and about quality because it is less costly. It has to be understood that high costs do not always ensure high quality; nor does low cost mean poor quality. What is important is to ensure that the provision meets its purpose. Generally, education and training serve two purposes; building human capital and social capital. Education and training serve a purpose if it enhances the personal capital through improved knowledge and skills that people can invest more productively and for better returns; and social capital is about teams of people coming together to achieve common objectives. If these two purposes are served, and at a relatively low cost, the quality of education is assured. When good quality education reaches larger numbers, the total cost is shared by that many, and the per capita cost is less. The larger the number, the less is the cost and the quality remains high.

Check Your Progress 2

The three pillars on which good distance education provision is based are; course design and development, learner support and good management. It is possible to develop performance criteria for each of these three basic components and assess the actual performance of institutions and programmes against those criteria to determine their quality. Five major steps for the development of an effective quality assurance system are:

- Reaching a common understanding among all stakeholders about what constitutes good quality distance education;
- Develop, document and implement a national quality assurance framework that applies to all education provision, including distance education, with clear relationship established between distance education quality assurance mechanism and the overall quality system;
- Establish and promote external and internal criteria for quality assurance that strengthen innovation and prevent poor practice;
- Ensure recognition of qualifications by securing participation of employers in the development of programmes and their evaluation;
- Ensure the quality of the media output while avoiding expensive technology and ensure all distance education practices are rooted in research.

Check Your Progress 3

Four important conditions that can sustain distance education initiatives are:

- Establishment of clear and enduring policies that reflect political will and government commitment to provide funding on a continuing basis;
- Choice of programmes and courses that can attract adequate number of learners to secure economies of scale;
- Recruit and train adequate number of people to create a body of professional staff to run programmes;
- Secure collaboration among countries and regions as well as with international agencies for transfer of skills and competence and also the involvement of local communities for provision of learner support.
- The readiness of African countries for distance education depends on acceptance of distance education by people as a means to reduce poverty, improve health, enhance productivity and enrich the quality of life. It also involves the preparation of human capital for distance education in the form of a body of professionals, ensuring the relevance of the programmes and courses by developing them around the needs of communities, and finally preparing potential learners for self-study through development of learning skills. Technology applications in distance education are important too, but it has to be ensured that the technologies used are easily accessible and affordable.