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## Quality E-Learning: Myth and Reality – A Study

**Siddharth Kumar Pokhriyal**  
Academic Associate  
School of Education  
Uttarakhand Open University  
**Haldwani (Uttarakhand)**

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The history of Distance Education (DE) begins around 170 years ago and consequently in the process, the ever expanding developments of technology associated with the industrial revolution made it possible for the first time in history to teach at a distance. Distance education recognized that teaching and learning are separate acts that can safely and effectively be carried on by means of Information Communication Technology (ICT) even though teacher and learner are separated in space and time. The development of Open Universities and modernization of other DE institutions under dual mode systems throughout the world in the 1970s and 80s brought rapid improvements in the quality and the quantity. The developments during 1985 – 2000 are of vital interest to educators and the useful developments in telecommunications of the Electronic Revolution made it possible for mankind for the first time in history to teach face-to-face at a distance in virtual classrooms. By the end of 2011, there may be found at least 30,00,0000 students mainly adults studied at a distance worldwide and the acceptance of distance university degrees was generally conceded.

This paper highlights the importance

of e-learning with a special focus on quality assurance aspects of e-learning that deviate markedly from that of the traditional education. In the process, this paper considers the role of Quality Assurance (QA) in e-learning while; reflecting on the conditions necessary for successful e-learning. It reviews some of the current international work on quality assurance in this area and goes on to consider the ways in which the quality of a process or activity can be assessed—focusing on the use of benchmarking and specification of standards. It also gives some specific suggestions as to how to implement the quality assurance system for e-learning.

Integration of technology in all forms of education has narrowed down the gap between the on- and off-campus students and has resulted in the use of the more broad-based term ‘distributed learning’. E-learning is seen as a subset of distributed learning, focusing on students who may be separated in time and space from their peers and the instructor.

E-learning occurs in a wide range of teaching activities where technology of one form or another is involved. Technology necessarily underpins the administrative functions of most universities and higher education institutions and, for many, the lines between the administration, and the conduct, of teaching can be blurred. E-learning takes many forms, and common issues in e-learning delivery and approaches include:

- Flexible learning : technology supports for learning any time, anywhere;
- Blended learning : varying mixes of technology with conventional learning usually in conventional settings; and
- Online learning : where technology provides the means for the implementation and delivery of learning programmes totally distinct

from face-to-face teaching (for example, Fresen, 2005).

The myriad of research clearly shows that there is a large range of activities and outcomes upon which the successful application of elearning processes depends. In the overall sense, these include such aspects as:

- the scope and nature of the learning materials;
- appropriate selection of the learning design;
- the levels of learner engagement;
- extent of community development within virtual settings;
- scope and level of flexibility of learning;
- enhanced learning;
- reusability of the resources;
- the accessibility of the resources; and
- the level of uptake of e-learning among staff (for example, Khan, 1997; Kearsley, 2005).

Five levels of eLearning have been identified (Nichols, 2001):

1. Information Repository – this is a Blackboard site that only contains electronic documents such as course outlines, handouts, and PowerPoint slides. This is entry-level functionality for a UCOL Blackboard site.
2. One-Way Communication – at this level Blackboard is used to post notices to students using either e-mail or Web pages within a Blackboard site. It is also possible for staff to check which students are actually using the site and how often.
3. Online Exercises – multiple choice, true/false, fill in the blank, multiple answer, matching questions, and short-answer questions can all be created and executed using Blackboard tools. It is also possible to add class-wide surveys, which can be used for evaluations.

4. Two-Way Communications – using tools such as bulletin boards and groups, Blackboard makes it possible for students to communicate with their instructor and one another as a class or in groups. Files and textual information can be conveniently and, if desired, privately shared.

With his far-reaching insight, Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) had aptly perceived the future of communication in the wake of emerging information production and dissemination revolution though he did not live to see the proliferation of personal computer and the subsequent developments. Besides introducing the idea of ‘Global Village’, he propounded that technology, and for that matter any man-made system brings into force four types of impacts, namely, enhancement of features; obsolescence of some limitations and practices; revival of unwelcome effects; and retrieval of cherished dreams. And importantly, all these four impacts happen simultaneously. They are now known as McLuhan’s four laws of media His model is presented below focusing the issue with special reference to the distance learner and the distance teacher.

**Four Laws of Media incorporating Teacher and Learner**

<i>Learner</i>	<i>Teacher</i>
I. Intensifies exchange of information and views across the globe	I. Enhances the variety of responses and cross cultural discussion among participants
II. Renders obsolete physical travel to the classroom	II. Renders obsolete the restrictive practice of campus-based teaching alone
III. Retrieves archival information that is currently not	III. Retrieves the possibility of spotting and

attempted due to efforts involved	mentoring a talent located at anywhere on the globe
IV. Flips into cautious interactions as being monitored continuously	IV. Flips into self-imposed restrictive mode as being questioned constantly

There are number of e-Learning courses being offered at various universities, institutes of DE etc. The question remains “How good is a course or how effective is the learning?” e-Learning environments consists of Learning Management Systems (LMS), Content Management Systems (CMS), Content authoring tools and the Content itself. A Learner is the customer who needs to be kept happy in any learning environment. This requires a high quality content and user friendly, easily usable e-Learning tools (LMS, CMS etc.). The performance of the system in terms of imparting effective learning, availability of the system, durability of the content, interoperability of the systems across the platforms becomes important. To make sure that the vendors stick to some values, standards are here for e-Learning content development and e-Learning tools.

In an era of increased accountability, it is important for stakeholders in educational organizations to be able to demonstrate that their approaches to e-learning are sound and effective. They need to be able to demonstrate that they should carry out e-learning in a way that is efficient and productive, and they must be able to demonstrate quality in the curriculum, the delivery and their teaching and learning approaches.

The effectiveness of a student’s e-learning experience depends not only on learning design and learning resources, but also on the manner in which it is delivered and supported. Learning supports describe the measures and means by which learners

interact with systems, peers, mentors and teachers in the learning process. Previously, many thought that well-designed e-learning settings would facilitate independent learning with little or no need for interaction with others, in the same vein as distance education modes had traditionally operated. Experience and research has shown that this is not the case. Students in e-learning settings can derive many benefits from well supported learning strategies. They frequently strive for the company of their co-learners and often they seek the support and involvement of a tutor to facilitate and guide their learning experiences. A number of writers argue quite strongly that effective learning settings must involve such forms of learner support as mentoring, modeling, coaching and scaffolding (for example, Dennen, 2002). Providing these supports in e-learning, settings can be achieved through a variety of means and at many different levels, and has been the focus of considerable research in recent years (for example, Salmon, 2002).

With fast emerging delivery systems and broader access, a major need in e-learning today is quality assurance. The growth of e-learning, the new forms and meanings it is acquiring, its convergence with traditional learning and its global impact pose several challenges and also create problems for quality assessors. As the developments indicate, the emergence of e-learning has changed the nature of education and consequently the quality assessment mechanisms. E-learning poses challenges to the conventional ways of quality assurance. In particular, the e-learning provisions that cross national borders cause concern to the quality assurance agencies the world over. The implication is that along with “how to assess” the new forms of e-learning, the quality assurance agencies have to reflect on “how to coordinate the quality assurance activities” at the international level. It is doubtful that the philosophy, principles and

standards routinely applied to evaluate or accredit traditional units can be used without significant adjustments to assess the quality and effectiveness of e-learning.

Keeping the importance of QA for e-Learning, it is important to develop framework for formal quality assurance of e-learning content. As a first step to this quality metrics have to be developed that can be used for quantifying the various quality parameters of a e-Learning tool and the content. The development of quality metrics and the framework can become the base for developing the QA tools, which can collect data on various aspects, analyze and arrive at quality measures using well-understood models and then grade the e-Learning environments.

**Therefore a QA tool for e-Learning need to have the following features:**

- To be platform-independent (to run on both Windows and Unix/Linux environments)
- Obtains the quality metrics by analysing the tool for various features, automatically to the extent possible.
- Performance analysis by integrating the tool with open source performance analyzer (such as JMeter) GUI for inputting subjective evaluation parameters.
- Integration with conformance testing tool (such as SCORM compliance tool) for standards compliance metrics

Quality is made up of many elements. For eLearning products, the following is suggested long back which still stands as a quality criteria (based on Garvin, 1988):

- Performance – the finished product should operate in an effective way, as determined by the end-user.
- Features – the ‘bells and whistles’ incorporated into the finished product should be appropriate, and not detract from the overall objectives of the project.

- Reliability – the finished product should not be subject to malfunction.
- Conformance – the finished product should comply with industry standards, using standard technologies (though those technologies can be pushed to their utmost) and reflect established education theory.

The discussion as above attempts to discuss and describe some of the main factors associated with quality performance in the provision of e-learning services in higher education and has provided examples of current practice that exemplify these. The discussion has highlighted in its own limited way 6difficulties associated with quality assuring e-learning given the depth and breadth of the activity, but has demonstrated that there are guiding principles that can be used and there are examples of institutions seeking to explore benchmarking and standards as quality assurance processes for e-learning activities. Some of these are :

- a) A University can be linked to a series of other Universities in the same region, State or country.
- b) Courses can be received and studied by students at a centre near their home or work place.
- c) Students participate in a class room as wide as foot print and have classmates worldwide.

#### **Empirical Observation**

Having discussed the conceptual and descriptive aspects, an attempt though ‘highly limited’ has been made to discuss with the learners of a particular e-learning programme to narrate their experiences with the system.

The DTE (D.Ed.) Programme (as chosen) is meant for inservice teachers working in various Primary and Secondary schools. Since they are all employed, they came forward to utilize the opportunity provided by the ODL institution. The course is in high demand as only a limited number

of seats are available and admission is given on the basis of marks obtained in an entrance examination specially conducted for this purpose. The course is administered at the Headquarters and three Study Centers which provide both Contact-Cum-Counseling (CCC) classes and arrange teaching practice. The major interests of the students to opt for this programme include: to obtain degree; eligibility for promotion; obtain employment; gain job security; update knowledge; improve salary/increments; for professional development; personal enrichment; study and work facility. To fulfill the study objectives, they intend to utilize every opportunity and seek guidance and support at every level by tapping every source. Since the course is offered using exclusively the 'e-learning' technologies, they considered it as an additional advantage/service and favored it because they are all full time employees. Since, the course is for two years and they do not have face to face Contact-Cum-Counseling (CCC) and teaching practical sessions, they would have to maintain 'on-line' relations with the institution and to that extent learner had some advantages and also certain disadvantages. However, fulfilling the learning objective away from office has been considered as one of the 'strongest' reasons by which a large majority of the students preferred the online courses.

Majority of respondents had felt that 'scheme' should offer a package of services that should be comprehensive enough to cover the entire gamut of support they needed. Coupled with the facilities already available online, they think that it should serve as a 'full-fledged information support system' to be guided constantly by the 'net'. They said that 'individualised redressal of grievances' and 'a continuous and active flow of information' is possible through e-learning.

#### **Cost Component**

Majority of the students however

seem to have 'vigilant and cautious' as far as the matters relating to the 'cost component' is concerned. A vast majority of the respondents said that it should not involve any additional cost on their part and impose any additional financial burden to meet the expenditure towards this purpose. More respondents who had no Internet accessibility at home and office, pleaded that necessary equipment must be provided at the study centres with full and free accessibility of the net service. They should also be provided a minimum knowledge of technology - both hardware and software in a specially conducted induction programme.

#### **Some Apprehensions**

In the overall analysis, though a couple of apprehensions were also raised especially about the quality assurance mechanism, its methods and application along with the need for increased access to technology, increased speed in connectivity, greater bandwidth, its relevance and applicability to all courses, availability of required hardware and software at the study centers, data up gradation and improvements, promptness of service and quality of maintenance of the system, there is widespread agreement on the need for such a service, which will be useful to all part-time or full-time learners.

#### **Implications and Conclusions**

On-line delivery of courses and need support services making use of new information and communication technologies has a lot of potential for providing quality and prompt on-line service to the learners. The response from the learners towards the need for such a system called 'e-learning' is overwhelming and they were willing to accept the use of Internet and web technologies for strengthening the institutional support system. Since Internet facility is available everywhere in the open market with costs decreasing, it appears that provision for on line-learning in any University and especially the University

under reference is feasible and manageable the willingness and commitment on the part of the institution to strengthen the online support services and its level of efficiency in managing it would give greater results for the benefit of both the institution as well as the learners. But the issues relating to the quality concern and the cost component and preparedness of the ODL institutions to provide the needed on-line services, provision for necessary budgetary allocations, creation of additional inputs such as expertise to man the service and provision for machines at the required places etc., still, remain matters of serious concern for the institution to offer. The whole programme seem to be still dependent upon various other factors such as the design, facilities and maintenance of the website of the institution, the bandwidth, greater penetration of information and communication technologies, greater access and increased speed in connectivity, openness to cultural variables affecting the machine-human interactivity etc., still remain as crucial issues. In spite of all these, the positive results of the feedback from the students provide a valuable data on how these programme could be introduced and implemented with facilities available outside and in the open market, costs decreased and access increased, coupled with appropriate and need-based changes in the whole programme, introduction of online courses with full quality support will be of great use to the learners and provide a strong base for a complete on-line education in the near future.

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## VOTERS RIGHT TO REJECT THE CANDIDATE: A NEED OF THE NOTA TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

Dr. More Atul Lalasaheb  
Asst. Prof.

B.Sc. (Hons.), LL. M. (NET-Law), Ph.D.  
(Law)

### 1. Introduction

The judgment given by Supreme Court on 27<sup>th</sup> Sep. 2013 in People's Union for Civil Liberties case relating to the right to reject has created a stir in Indian democratic system. But the researcher viewed that the interpretation and meaning emerged out from this decision regarding long pending demand of the people in India for the right to reject has not been properly and correctly appreciated. Most of the academicians and people appear to think either that the right to reject has been granted under this verdict of the Supreme Court or it is as [useless as Aadhaar card](#). The researcher would like to give caution that such understanding about this decision of the Supreme Court will be premature. So, the researcher in this paper would like to touch important aspects *viz.* what was the background of case, the verdict given by the judiciary, what are the outcomes of this decision, what is its International status of right to reject and ultimately what emerges out of this verdict.

### 2. Background of the case

This order/decision came after a writ petition filed by the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) in 2004, under Article 32 of the Constitution, questioned the

constitutional validity of the Conduct of Election Rules 41 (2 and 3) and 49, as these violate the secrecy of a vote. It also requested the court to direct the EC to introduce the NOTA option on EVMs (and ballot papers). It is pertinent to note that the EC itself had demanded the provision of this option through an amendment of the Conduct of Election Rules as early as in the year 2001. But it is sad to say that the Union Government has not taken any action in this behalf therefore the PUCL chose to go to the Supreme Court. In this case the Supreme Court asserted that just as people have the right to express their preference for a candidate, they also have a right to register a negative opinion. This can be exercised through an extra button on the EVM which says "None Of The Above" or NOTA. The apex court has directed the Election Commission to introduce this button through this decision.

### 3. Corollary of the decision in PUCL

It is pertinent to note that the question is raised against this decision is that what will be the effect of this kind of innovation by the Supreme Court? Will it mean that all the candidates in a constituency stand rejected or defeated if the number of NOTA votes exceeds the number garnered by the highest vote-getter? It is the fact that answer to these questions is not clearly given in this case by the Apex Court. E.g. even if there are 99 NOTA votes out of a total of 100, and candidate X gets just one vote, X is the winner, having obtained the only valid vote. The rest will be treated as invalid or "no votes". So, the basic question arises here is that, if it does not affect the result, what is its advantage? Therefore, there are allegations made against this decision of the Supreme Court that Supreme Court acted emotionally rather than intellectually.

Then question raised why was the EC demanding it? The EC's reason for demanding the option was not to institute the right to reject rather it is *firstly* to ensure the