# QUALITY ASSURANCE: LEARNING IN A CYBER-LANDSCAPE

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**Abstract**

*E-learning is the use of technology to learn anywhere and at any time. It can include training, the delivery of in-time information and guidance from experts. The popularity of online training has grown significantly since the early 1990s. Since its popularity and importance has grown, a question of quality raises here, how do QA agencies monitor the existing E-learning provision and develop the future provision in a reliable and efficient manner? In answer to this, The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) have laid the foundation for web-based learning provisions and regulations. With the appropriate interpretation, quality assurance agencies could use the ESG as a backbone document and create an additional material that would aide quality assurance agencies in monitoring the progress and development of E-learning. If e-learning is moving in the right direction, it can produce great results by increasing trainer's costs, bringing about standardization, and improving performance and productivity.*

***Keywords:*** *Popularity, quality assurance, monitor.*

Learning as defined in Oxford Dictionary is "the acquisition of knowledge or skills through study or experience" Learning is associated with an activity undertaken in or is associated with an educational context. In simple terms, it is a continuous process, from birth till death. If one could stop time and inexpensively bring together all the interested people in an organization to learn and find the appropriate resources to teach them, he would need a traditional classroom. In the real world, people have jobs to do and budgets are limited. His learning program will need the power of technology to overcome the limitations of time, distance and resources. People learn in many different ways and at different times. To support these different learning needs, the recent and modern method of learning comes in a new capsule termed E-LEARNING.

The widespread use of Information Technology (IT) and, in particular, the mass popularization of the Internet/World Wide Web (www) have meant that opportunities have been identified for developing learning activity into a more advanced online environment, Furnell. This method of learning by using technology will: improve the quality of learning, facilitate access to education and training and reduce the costs. Intranets and extranets offer a very capable platform for delivering a comprehensive learning and performance support environment, providing individuals with access to interactive self-paced multimedia instruction, assessment of knowledge and skills, performance support materials such as references, job aids, etc. and online communication with instructors, experts and colleagues. E-learning is Internet-enabled learning. Components will include content delivery in multiple formats, management of the learning experience, and a networked community of learners, content developers and experts. In today's fast-paced culture, organizations that implement e-learning provide their workforce with the ability to turn change into an advantage. E-learning delivers accountability, accessibility and opportunity. It allows people and organizations to

keep up with changes in the global economy that now occur on Internet time. E-learning is the great equalizer in the new century. By eliminating barriers of time, distance, and socio-economic status, individuals can now take charge of their own lifelong learning.

Countries and organizations have learnt to adapt to the demands of the Internet economy to stay ahead in an increasingly competitive world marketplace. E-learning can also be personalized i.e. an effective and successful e-learning system caters to its users and tailors its offerings to their learning style, job requirements, career goals, current knowledge, and personal preferences. An e-learning environment generally includes:

- self paced training delivered over the web
- many virtual events (which could take place in virtual classroom, virtual lecture hall, or expert-led discussion)
- mentoring (which might entail coaching, help desk, office hours, periodic check-in, e-mail exchanges)
- simulation (because people learn by doing)
- collaboration (either joint problem-solving or discussion among study groups via discussion groups and chat rooms)
- live workshops (for some topics are best taught in the real world by a real instructor or expert)
- assessment (both for initial placement and for opting out of topics the learner has already mastered),
- competency road map (a custom learning plan based on the job, career, and personal goals)
- authoring tools (to develop and update content)
- e-store (to pay for learning or post costs against budgets)
- learning management system (which registers, tracks, and delivers content to learners; reports on learner progress, assessment results, and skill gaps for instructors; enroll learners, provides security, and manages user access for administrators)

In a scenario, when e-learning has gained popularity and when its importance has grown, a question of quality raises, how do Quality Assurance agencies monitor the existing E-learning provision and develop the future provision in a reliable and efficient manner? This curiosity has risen to the need for the analysis of this question and has paved the way for an answer.

Analyzing on the advantages has also lead to analyzing the disadvantages. In support of this, Alexander and McKenzie have reported that e-learning would fail for the following reasons: In that it is overly ambitious in terms of desired outcomes for the budget and time available, it utilizes particular information technologies for their own sake, without sufficient regard for appropriate learning design, there is no change in the assessment of learning to suit the changed learning outcomes, it commenced software development without adequate planning, it failed to prepare students for participation in learning experiences such as working in groups and failed to obtain copyright clearance. The US Institute has proposed a series of benchmarks for ensuring e-learning quality and evaluating program effectiveness for higher

education and policy. These include a documented technology plan, with password protection, encryption, back-up systems and reliable delivery; established standards for course development, design and delivery; good facilitation of interaction and feedback; and the application of specific standards for evaluation .Cisco Systems [3]. The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) have also laid the foundation for web-based learning provisions and regulations. With the appropriate interpretation, quality assurance agencies could use the ESG as a backbone document and create an additional material that would aide quality assurance agencies in monitoring the progress and development of E-learning.

In India, The University Grants Commission has established the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in 1994 as an autonomous body to assess and accredit universities and colleges. NAAC is triggering a "quality culture" among the various constituents of higher education in India, as well as enhancing the awareness of Quality Assurance (QA) with all stakeholders (UGC 2007).

As for the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions, the Distance Education Council (DEC), empowered under Statute 28 of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) Act, has primary responsibility in promoting, coordinating, and maintaining quality standards in the ODL system. In 2011, DEC had one national Open University (IGNOU), 13 state open universities (SOUs) and more than two hundred distance education institutes (DEIs) under its purview. DEC faces significant challenges, as most State Open Universities do not wish to abide by its decisions, their argument being that DEC is not really an independent body (DEC is currently housed in IGNOU and the Vice Chancellor of IGNOU is its *ex-officio* Chairman). Nevertheless, DEC fulfills its mandate to "provide academic guidelines to promote excellence, encourage use of innovative technologies and approaches, enable convergence of all systems and sharing of resources through collaborative networking for access to sustainable education, skill up gradation and training to all," and has also, over the years, initiated several quality assurance parameters (cited from http://www.dec.ac.in/vision.htm). DEC also accredits SOUs and correspondence course institutes across India. In 2007, DEC conducted an academic review of IGNOU's Master's degree program in English. The committee comprised a minimum of 30 percent of external members. The audit report was not made public, as it was the first time that DEC had evaluated an IGNOU program. Since 2005, DEC has initiated reforms and parameters for offering online and offline courses for ODL institutions.

The large number of online education possibility has made it clear that the scope of online education in India is actually much wider but it is found that this area is largely unexplored, so there is ample scope for improvement in all areas. India being a highly populated country and having large number of student base is also one of the major advantages. Another important factor in India is that is that the repudiated universities and institutions are clustered in the big cities mainly in metros. Hence, it's the compulsion for the small town students to depart from their home town and come to these metros and bear the costs of lodging and boarding apart from the cost of education. E-learning can thus play a major role in helping students to bridge

over this gap. It can facilitate these small town students to get education at their native place. Apart from proper course works, some E-learning portals (largely private) in India are also providing various learning opportunities to the tech-savvy students, like conducting mock tests for various competitive examinations like engineering, medical and management, bank exams, GRE, TOEFL e.g. the EI Design, Paradiso Solutions - Distance Learning having to do with Virtual Classroom, e – Campus, e – Assessments, e – Portfolio, The Center for eLearning and Training (C-eLT), has, for more than a decade, supported e-learning delivery by providing expert tutoring services in Mathematics, Statistics, English, the Sciences, and Accounting/Finance. With a huge number of experts with wide domain knowledge and a record of more than a decade's varied experience, C-eLT does scalable e-learning and Online Tutoring, they provide Subject Matter Experts to support the online course development for universities and publishers. They also provide Online and Offline tutoring using various technology platforms, Content Development services, Online Course Management Services, Teaching and Student Support Sevices and Consultancy Services.

Inglis (2008) has identified certain methods of validation that have been used in relation to development of different frameworks, and has identified four main types of quality processes that are used in developing a quality framework for e-learning education - Quality Assessment, Bench marking, Quality and Quality improvement. Also, since 'Quality' is a relative term it is not feasible to have a single global measure that will suit all conditions. Much effort has been placed in arriving at this single global measure and none has been conclusive (Inglis, 2005).

Ehlers has envisioned the next generation of e-learning as a next version of web surfaces with more media content. He terms this generation as 'E-learning 2.0', as it heavily uses the features of web 2.0 Institutions and organizations that offer the e-learning contents have always felt the need to have a well set framework to measure the quality of e-learning. This leads to identify measures on which these frameworks would be based. Various attempts have been made to identify and standardize quality measures by many organizations, research institutions and individuals to ensure quality and assurance in e-learning (Cho & Lee, 2004; Chua & Lam, 504 A. K. Agariya & D. Singh (2012) 2007; Doherty, 2008; McLoughlin & Visser, 2003). In another study e-learning needs assessment model containing eight components is proposed to assess an e-learning organization's readiness (Chapnick, 2000). The study (Segrave, Holt, & Farmer, 2005) outlined components summarizing organization's sustainability. In another study conducted by the Economist Intelligent Unit in the year 2003, to assess the e-learning readiness of a country, nearly 150 qualitative and quantitative criteria were identified. The identified criteria were further classified into four categories, i.e. Capability, Content, Connectivity and Culture referred as 4Cs (Chen, 2009). Authors have also suggested few measures to improve the capacities for effective online teaching and learning, and hence improving overall quality of e-learning content. They have argued that a systematic and strategic based approach for overall academic professional development (APD) is a need of hour. A similar study was conducted by the authors (Jung, 2010) where the author analysed dimensions of e-learning quality, from the learner's perspective. Seven dimensions were

identified in evaluating the e-learning quality: Interaction, Staff Support, Institutional Quality Assurance Mechanism, Institutional Credibility, Learner Support, Information and Publicity and Learning Tasks. Similar kind of studies was undertaken by other eminent authors (Dolog, Henze, Nejdl, & Sintek, 2004; Dondi, Moretti, & Nascimbeni, 2006; Finch, 2006; Frydenberg, 2002; Little & Duffy, 2011; Agariya & Singh, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Silius et al., 2010; Nakabayashi, Morimoto, & Hada, 2010; Ge, Lubin, & Zhang, 2010) but there is paucity of research done in Indian context.

Inglis, 2008 has pointed out that generalizability of the studies is the main issue because of the major limitation of geographical areas in which the studies were performed. E-learning in India is gaining importance but at a slower pace. Indian market has emerged as an attractive destination for e-learning service provider due to the fact that more than half of the Indian population is below the age of 25 years and the number of internet users are growing rapidly, which clearly indicates the need to develop a quality measurement scale for enhancement and value addition in e-learning. In the case of Indian scenario, e-learning is yet to evolve in its fullest manner. Although a few educational institutions and some websites do provide e-learning facility still most of these are in a distance learning mode and also provide material in paper form, which is preferred more by the learners as well as institutions themselves e.g. IGNOU. Another example in case of e-learning is NIIT Imperia, which has collaborated with some of the major management institution of India like IIM's, IMT-Ghaziabad, IIFT-New Delhi, MDI Gurgaon etc. to provide various certification courses in management for corporate employees in conventional classroom education coupled with advanced e-learning techniques.

The advantages of introducing internationally acknowledged measures of quality assurance of e-learning in developing countries are to:

- Help assuring high quality education in general
- Increase the number of high quality educated people
- Decrease the number of talented people immigrated to developed countries
- Decrease the number of students studying in developed countries
- Get more access to information, locally and globally
- Gain more local political influence
- Adapt to the new world system under globalization
- Develop social, sociological and political aspects

Although India is well equipped with the infrastructure required for e-learning, still it has a long way to go in terms of creating a platform to profile all universities in India. Although some scientists (Cooke and Veach [4] ) are in favour of e-learning and others are against it, no safe conclusion about its effectiveness can be drawn from their sayings and ideas, because these evaluations are usually informal and conducted by users rather than independent sources. Large-scale evaluations have tended to focus on issues such as usability, learner preferences, and equipment quality rather than learner outcome. Council of the Chief State School Officers. Thus, the primary question -whether traditional classroom-training is more effective than e-learning- continues to exist almost unanswered. It is quite difficult to predict the evolution of

new technologies that can be used in teaching and learning. They are changing so fast that even specialists find it difficult to make a general composition of what can be expected in the next 20 years.

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