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THE CONCEPT OF QUALITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE MANAGEMENT IN ETHIOPIA: IN LIGHT OF QUALITY IMPROVEMENT, TOWARDS USE IN DISTANCE AND CONVENTIONAL HIGHER EDUCAION

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ABSTRACT

Across the globe it is an accepted fact that competitiveness is the nature of a knowledge market economy. In responding to this reality, quality education and training programmes have been at the centre of the national education agenda of many countries. Quality and productivity are stressed everywhere in the world and a focus on quality improvement is only achieved through better systems of cooperation's and partnerships with quality enhancement organizations and research institutions, universities, government and private organisations at large (UNESCO, 2013). Quality assurance has become a global issue crossing the cultural contexts of many higher education systems. However, questions still remain whether this notion underpins deeper quality improvement in instructional practice and student learning outcomes. In Africa, where there are rapidly growing and diversified higher education systems, the need to assure quality through external examiners, audits, subject reviews or benchmarking is evident, but it is not clear if quality and standards of education are improved as a con- sequence.

To ensure the quality of products and services in different sectors, including higher education, different countries started establishing various agencies. Amongst these, for example, is the American Society for Quality (ASQ) which is known to be passionate about quality and serves as its voice (American Society for Quality, 2007); it has been the world's leading authority on quality for more than half a century and has many individual and organisational members. This professional association mainly promotes learning, quality improvement and knowledge exchange to improve business results and it supports the creation of better workplaces and communities, worldwide. As a voice for the quality movement, ASQ offers technologies, management concepts, tools and training to quality professionals. Furthermore, it advises and encourages all its partner bodies to make good progress towards quality cultures for the improvement of people's quality of life. Facing challenges, concerning quality and are forced to establish quality assurance systems or units in their institutions to ensure that acceptable standards and quality of education are maintained. However, according to Jung (2013), discussion of quality assurance in distance education and e-learning is a fairly recent phenomenon. When the first open universities were established, the University of South Africa in 1946 and the Open University in UK in 1969, there was no discussion of quality assurance as it is understood today. Establishing a quality assurance system in education has become important to contribute significantly to economic growth and development and education, whether the conventional form or distance education mode, must be of a high quality and meet the skills demands and needs of the country Jung, (2013:13).

Keywords: Ethiopia; higher education; quality assurance; Conventional and Distance education Quality improvement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Quality has become a central theme in higher education and the main reason that quality in higher distance education is important is so that graduates equipped with skills relevant for the country's further development are produced (Don, 2007). The notion of quality pre-supposes a fundamental purpose of higher education of "transforming the life experiences of students" (Harvey & Knight, 1996as cited by Aluko, 2007:167). Quality is usually connected to the concepts of efficiency and effectiveness and although the concept of quality does not have a universally accepted definition, many scholars consider quality in education in terms of what the system is all about and what the system offers the learners.

Higher education, including open and distance learning, is important for social and economic transformation and it is inseparable from the notion of quality. Most public debate on the quality of education includes concerns about students' levels of achievement and the relevance of learning to the world of work as well as to the social, cultural and political worlds of the students. The debate frequently al
so includes concerns about the conditions of learning, such as supply of teachers and facilities (Grisay and Mahlck, 1991). Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) recommend that in the field of higher education, quality should be considered to be a notoriously vague, slippery concept. This simply suggests that it is not possible to find a universally accepted and comprehensive definition of quality in higher education. Therefore, defining the term quality in the contemporary higher education is challenging.

Vroeijentijn, (2006) points out that the concept, quality, has been subjected to various ambiguous interpretations. Quality as fitness for purpose- sees quality in terms of fulfilling a customer's requirements, need or desires. In education, fitness for purpose is usually based on the ability of an institution to fulfil its mission or programme of study to fulfil its aims. Meaning conformity with an institution's mission as well as capacity to fulfil customers' requirements is the principal perspective that is upheld by scholars with eyes of stakeholders. This way of thinking is obviously of paramount importance to external stakeholders (Harvey, 2006). Quality as transformation refers to the classic notion that sees quality in terms of change in the learners from one state to another.

According to Gandhe, quality in distance education is "defined as fitness for purpose in combination with exceptional high standards, perfection and consistency, value for money and transformation capabilities" (2007:11). In education quality is determined by three crucial elements, namely: input, process and outcomes. Input includes the key-players: the learners and the academic and administrative staff members who have the necessary skills and facilities for teaching and learning; process consists of the various teaching and learning activities; and the outcomes are the graduates and their acquired skills and training. In further understanding of the input, process and outcomes framework related to quality needs to be further elaborated in Ethiopian context.

In Ethiopia, as elsewhere, quality in education faces definitional problems. It becomes more problematic when quality is conceptualized in terms of a particular aspect of education because as Dare (2005) observes, 'all the elements associated with educational quality are interrelated. A

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serious defect in one element is likely to have implications for quality in others (Dare, 2005:17). Moreover, questions regarding quality may be posed about any important aspect of the educational system: infrastructure, school buildings, administration, leadership, management, teacher training, educational materials, teaching, and student achievement. Nevertheless, the quality indicators of this study namely: coherence, efficiency and impact are focused mainly on the important aspect of distance education system, but are also directly or indirectly interrelated to these aspects of quality indicators described by Dare, (2005).

According to Stell, and Gnanam (2004) some researchers argue that the quality of distance education should be judged by the same criteria and standard as face-to-face traditional education; others maintain that the assumptions and mechanisms applied in traditional institutions are not applicable as distance education is so different. However, different views have developed as to whether or not the same quality assurance (QA) practices can be applied to campus-based and distance education programmes.

Jung and Latchem (2007) feel that using the same quality assurance criteria for both contact and distance education programmes can be problematic, especially with regard to new developments in distance education where teaching takes place across borders; distance education institutions use different ways of managing quality assurance in their context and, according to Jung and Latchem (2007:241), there are three ways in which quality assurance is managed and operates under open and distance learning. These include the use of the central systems, collective systems and dispersed delegated systems. Jung and Latchem (2007:241) points out that within the centralised systems, quality assurance (QA) is accomplished by designated offices in accordance with national or institutional policies, procedures and criteria. The collective system assigns responsibilities to various boards, councils and committees - at different levels.

2. METHODOLOGY

The literature so far suggests that quality is both a quantitative and a qualitative issue. Its indicators should therefore convey notions of quantity and quality (Dare (2005). Van den Berghe, (1997) defines quality indicators of education as performance indicators that refer to a quality characteristic or objective, thus referring to the broad context of performance evaluation in which the learners operate. It may also be understood in terms of a figure that describes quality characteristic or the achievement of quality objectives. According to Dare, (2005) the nature and quality of inputs significantly determine the outcome of educational provision. These inputs include teachers and the non-teaching staff. But teachers are the principal factor in educational provision and thus affect quality of education in a significant way. Attributes of concern include number of teachers available, pupils-teacher ratios, and the personal characteristics of the individual teachers.

Under this domain, the instructional contents and materials such as the materials that support teaching and learning, the institution, space building, as well as the equipment including the class room and other structures, needs to be considered as input factors. An important input that functions together with the other inputs is finance, which is categorized as capital and recurrent expenditures. The constructions of classroom buildings stand as an example of one of the major capital expenditure of education. While the salaries, of teachers particularly represents the most

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important aspect of recurrent education expenditure Dare, (2005). The process component of the equality range relates to many aspects, such as pupil-teacher interaction in class management and control and daily time-on-task with the class. It furthermore, concerns the regularity and punctuality of the teacher in the school for instructional activities. It also includes the intensity of operation which has to do with length of the school day in terms of how many days teachers are effectively available for school work in a semester bases etc.

Dare, (2005) further describes the output of educational service which constitutes the immediate evidence of quality as the achievement of students in examinations. For many including stakeholders including parents the performance of students in national level or standardized examinations is enough of an indication of what quality education has been provided. When, for instance, people talk of fallen standards in education, they are basing their assertion principally on particular poor examination results. Quality of the education service, however, is also indexed by such non-measurable outcomes as improved health habits and effective participation in social and political activities. In light of the above, one can conclude, that the basic categories of the framework input, process and outcome in higher education as quality indicators have similar purpose and components to serve together in conjunction with these quality assessment indicators used in this study as described above. However, the input, process and outcomes framework has a dynamic application of planning and controlling of the conventional or distance education systems.

Due to the flexibility and broadness of this framework it can be applied also to other areas of life, such as, those operating to industries and production areas. This study as in utilized an input-process-outcome-context framework as an additional basis for defining quality and to categorize different measures of quality in postgraduate distance education complemented with the three quality indicators of the study. The quality indicators and the input, process and outcome framework, all together depicted the eventual results of education as a productive system, in which inputs are translated into outcomes. In other words, it is possible to conclude that, the outcomes of the desired quality human resources development needs of each country depends on the necessary inputs that each higher education *system, including distance education organizations could put in place, to bring the desired* quality change in educational outcomes.

In conclusion, the framework, for input, process and outcomes UNESCO, (2005) as used in the last global monitoring that was identified in the literature as illustrating quality in distance education is given below **in Figure 2.1**.

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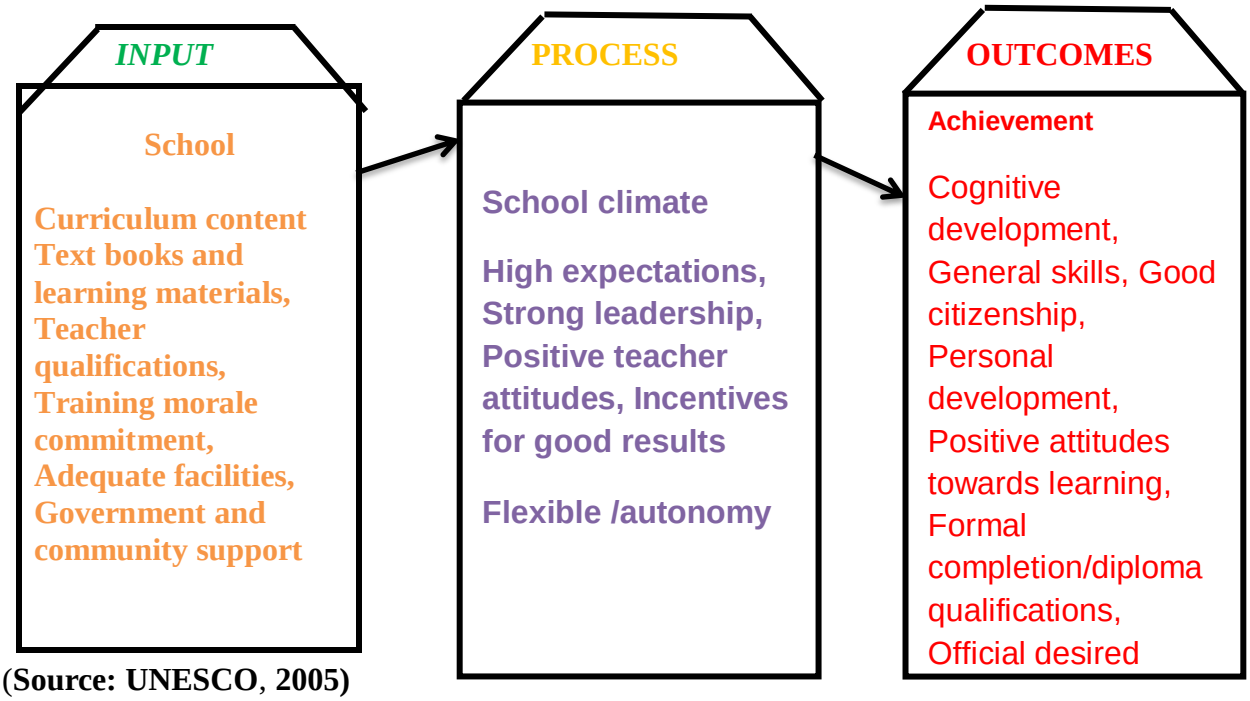
Figure 2.1: An Input-Process-Outcomes Framework for Assessing Quality in Education



(Source: UNESCO, 2005)

As the illustration above shows, the outcomes of the education system for both conventional and distance education are based on the input provided by each institution and on an efficient and effective teaching and learning process. In order to achieve effective teaching and learning outcomes one has to seriously consider the input aspect. Nevertheless, all these activities that take place in human beings, who are very complex and highly individualistic, are sometimes difficult to measure in terms of quality. Therefore, the quality of education at any level needs to follow the interaction described above and fulfil the requirements for quality. The Dakar framework for action declares that ‘’access to quality education is the right of every child” (UNESCO, 2005:27) and it affirms that quality is at the heart of education. These processes have a systematic link and complement each other in this study in the three quality indicators described above, namely: coherence, efficiency and impact. All of these find expression in the quality assessment process conducted in a cross-border distance education institution, such as IGNOU.

Sirkanthan, and Darlmple (2004) argue that “quality has to do with a natural expression of capability; it is concerned with doing what we do well, and doing better what we are supposed to do” (Sirkanthan and Darlmple, (2004:267). In the case of distance higher education institutions, the best place to identify quality or best practice is in the teaching. In this thesis the researcher uses the quality indicators proposed by Gandhe (2007) and Harvey and Green (1993), coherence, efficiency and impact, to assess the whole quality process of IGNOU’s teaching and learning in postgraduate distance education programmes.

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3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Taking its cue from this TQM programme, for example, the North-Eastern State University in the United States of America developed and implemented a total quality management strategic plan for its distance learning programme and course development as complete quality-measuring instruments (Thompson, 2002:13). However, there are different means which can be employed for sustaining the quality of distance education; the relevant literature about distance education identifies the need for continuous staff training in distance education provision as being vital for quality improvement in distance education. Mills (2006:141-147) points out that at the Open University in the United Kingdom, distance education tutors are the main concern of the university in terms of quality assurance in a distance education system. Therefore, it is strongly suggested in the distance education literature that staff support, including training - helps to significantly sustain, maintain and advance the quality of distance education.

The other important area of quality enhancement in distance education is the focus on student support services. Accordingly, learner support is a central pillar in the provision of successful distance education programmes; it is, indeed, the lifeblood of distance education. Mills (2006:142) emphasises that the fundamental feature of successful provision distance education is providing support for distance learners.

The two dimensions of learner support are identified in the literature: academic and administrative support. "Academic support, sometimes known as tutorial support, is provided to students in the cognitive intellectual and knowledge issues specific to certain courses, while non-academic support (administrative) support deals with helping students in the affective or organizational aspects of their studies" (Thompson, 2002:7-8). The other determinant factors that enhance quality distance education equally are the quality of course material production and its distribution.

The literature related to distance and higher education further underlines the importance of the role of student assessment in the transformation of teaching and learning at universities. According to Srikanthan and Dalrymple, "the major purpose of learner assessment, includes providing feedback which enables a judgement to be made about a student and focusing and enhancing student learning, while learning is taking place; as well as providing information to enable evaluation and planning for improvement of educational programmes" (2004:275).They explain that the major purpose of assessment includes providing information for a judgement to be made about students' achievements; this would focus on improving student learning and providing the necessary information for judging individual performance for further improvement while learning and teaching programmes are taking place. Its purpose also includes providing clear information which enables understanding individual performance to judge and plan for the improvement of educational programmes. Assessment should aim to reinforce knowledge of the skilled workforces' needs for the country's further social and economic development.

The quality of distance education varies enormously from place to place and, therefore, opens and distance education has faced an on-going struggle to establish its credibility and legitimacy - even when its quality is good. Its success in achieving quality education has varied in different countries and institutions (Sukati, 2011:5). There are exemplary institutions that are doing well in distance education, such as the UK's Open University. There are countries where higher education is doing

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well in terms of teaching and learning, but there are many distance education institutions, including unaccredited online distance education providers, that are only there for profit-making and who are operating below required standards and take students' money, even though they only provide poorly copied notes; they do not offer assignments; they provide no support services for the learners and only communicate with them when informing them of their examination times; and they issue duplicated certificate at different levels.

3.1. CONCEPT OF QUALITY, AND ITS VALID USE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Across the globe it is an accepted fact that competitiveness is the nature of a knowledge market economy. In responding to this reality, quality education and training programmes have been at the centre of the national education agenda of many countries. Quality and productivity are stressed everywhere in the world and a focus on quality improvement is only achieved through better systems of cooperation's and partnerships with quality enhancement organizations and research institutions, universities, government and private organisations at large (UNESCO, 2013).

To ensure the quality of products and services in different sectors, including higher education, different countries started establishing various agencies. Amongst these, for example, is the American Society for Quality (ASQ) which is known to be passionate about quality and serves as its voice (American Society for Quality, 2007); it has been the world's leading authority on quality for more than half a century and has many individual and organisational members. This professional association mainly promotes learning, quality improvement and knowledge exchange to improve business results and it supports the creation of better workplaces and communities, worldwide. As a voice for the quality movement, ASQ offers technologies, management concepts, tools and training to quality professionals. Furthermore, it advises and encourages all its partner bodies to make good progress towards quality cultures for the improvement of people's quality of life.

Higher education, including open and distance learning, is important for social and economic transformation and it is inseparable from the notion of quality. Most public debate on the quality of education includes concerns about students' levels of achievement and the relevance of learning to the world of work as well as to the social, cultural and political worlds of the students. The debate frequently also includes concerns about the conditions of learning, such as supply of teachers and facilities (Grisay and Mahlck, 1991).

Quality has become a central theme in higher education and the main reason that quality in higher distance education is important is so that graduates equipped with skills relevant for the country's further development are produced (Don, 2007). The notion of quality pre-supposes a fundamental purpose of higher education of "transforming the life experiences of students" (Harvey & Knight, 1996as cited by Aluko, 2007:167). Quality is usually connected to the concepts of efficiency and effectiveness and although the concept of quality does not have a universally accepted definition, many scholars consider quality in education in terms of what the system is all about and what the system offers the learners.

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Due to the flexibility and broadness of this framework it can be applied also to other areas of life, such as, those operating to industries and production areas. This study as in utilized an input-process-outcome-context framework as an additional basis for defining quality and to categorize different measures of quality in postgraduate distance education complemented with the three quality indicators of the study. The quality indicators and the input, process and outcome framework, all together depicted the eventual results of education as a productive system, in which inputs are translated into outcomes. In other words, it is possible to conclude that, the outcomes of the desired quality human resources developments.

3.2. QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ITS MANAGEMENT

According to Sirkanthan and Darlmpe (2004), many higher institutions in contact face-to-face and distance education facing challenges concerning quality and are forced to establish quality assurance systems or units in their institutions to ensure that acceptable standards and quality of education are maintained. However, according to Jung (2013), discussion of quality assurance in

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distance education and e-learning is a fairly recent phenomenon. When the first open universities were established, the University of South Africa in 1946 and the Open University in UK in 1969, there was no discussion of quality assurance as it is understood today. Establishing a quality assurance system in education has become important to contribute significantly to economic growth and development and education, whether the conventional form or distance education mode, must be of a high quality and meet the skills demands and needs of the country Jung, (2013:13).

According to Stell, and Gnanam (2004) some researchers argue that the quality of distance education should be judged by the same criteria and standard as face-to-face traditional education; others maintain that the assumptions and mechanisms applied in traditional institutions are not applicable as distance education is so different. However, different views have developed as to whether or not the same quality assurance (QA) practices can be applied to campus-based and distance education programmes.

Jung and Latchem (2007) feel that using the same quality assurance criteria for both contact and distance education programmes can be problematic, especially with regard to new developments in distance education where teaching takes place across borders; distance education institutions use different ways of managing quality assurance in their context and, according to Jung and Latchem (2007:241), there are three ways in which quality assurance is managed and operates under open and distance learning. These include the use of the central systems, collective systems and dispersed delegated systems. Jung and Latchem (2007:241) points out that within the centralised systems, quality assurance (QA) is accomplished by designated offices in accordance with national or institutional policies, procedures and criteria. The collective system assigns responsibilities to various boards, councils and committees - at different levels.

In dispersed or delegated systems each administrative office and academic division is held accountable for quality which means that achieving the desired quality standard and improvement in education is the responsibility of all stakeholders and that their full attention and involvement is crucial in the whole system of education. These stakeholders include students, parents, institutional leaders, government, employing private companies, teachers and others who are involved in technological innovation to facilitate teaching and learning. Among other things, the rationale behind Asian countries' establishment of quality assurance systems for distance education is mainly to improve the quality of distance education by ensuring accountability in the provision of this sector. This should also be true in all other countries involved in distance education to enable them to maintain a quality standard. According to Perraton (2000:199), in order to assess the effectiveness of distance education, the framework needs to include the quality criteria specific to distance education. Benchmarks identified in the literature for evaluating the quality of internet-based distance education programmes also serve to assess or evaluate

However, these criteria or benchmarks need to be considered with great care and should be embraced by every institution which participates in distance education programmes. The quality enhancement and assurance policy of any distance education providing higher institution must consider, among other things, the important element of learner output in relation to quality. In

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other words, the institutions need to consider the performance of students or the achievement of the learners.

4. CONCLUSION

Vroeijentijn, (2006) points out that the concept, quality, has been subjected to various ambiguous interpretations. Quality as fitness for purpose- sees quality in terms of fulfilling a customer's requirements, need or desires. In education, fitness for purpose is usually based on the ability of an institution to fulfil its mission or programme of study to fulfil its aims. Meaning conformity with an institution's mission as well as capacity to fulfil customers' requirements is the principal perspective that is upheld by scholars with eyes of stakeholders. This way of thinking is obviously of paramount importance to external stakeholders (Harvey, 2006). Quality as transformation refers to the classic notion that sees quality in terms of change in the learners from one state to another.

According to Gandhe, quality in distance education is "defined as fitness for purpose in combination with exceptional high standards, perfection and consistency, value for money and transformation capabilities" (2007:11). In education quality is determined by three crucial elements, namely: input, process and outcomes. Input includes the key-players: the learners and the academic and administrative staff members who have the necessary skills and facilities for teaching and learning; process consists of the various teaching and learning activities; and the outcomes are the graduates and their acquired skills and training. In further understanding of the input, process and outcomes framework related to quality needs to be further elaborated in Ethiopian context.

From the above discussion and illustration it can be seen that there is a new paradigm shift from the old one where distance education emphasised that the learner is at the centre of all teaching and learning activities. Unlike the old paradigm, the new paradigm encourages flexible learning in terms of individual learners' interests and it promotes quality rather than quantity. In principle, the new paradigm shift in accreditation and quality assurance is meant to bring about the desired quality higher education by ensuring the quality aspects. However, these depend on the practical applications and the commitment of each distance education provider.

The use of new technology in distance education, especially of computers and connectivity, has improved what Moore (1993) defines as 'transactional distance'; this is in relation to instructional dialogue, structure and learner autonomy which is pedagogical, not geographical, and necessitates special organisations and teaching places. The use of technology, like internet connectivity, can narrow the gap which means that through the integration of technology in distance education, especially the ICTs, the debate concerning inherent problems in distance education, like face-to-face interaction; can be solved by the use of technology between teacher and learner and also in learner-to-learner interaction. According to Perraton (2000:199), in order to assess the effectiveness of distance education, the framework needs to include the quality criteria specific to distance education. Benchmarks identified in the literature for evaluating the quality of internet-based distance education programmes also serve to assess or evaluate the quality of various distance education programmes, including IGNOU's postgraduate programmes. Some of the identified criteria or benchmarks include institutional support, course development, the

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teaching/learning process, course structure, student support, faculty support and evaluation and assessment.

However, these criteria or benchmarks need to be considered with great care and should be embraced by every institution which participates in distance education programmes. The quality enhancement and assurance policy of any distance education providing higher institution must consider, among other things, the important element of learner output in relation to quality. In other words, the institutions need to consider the performance of students or the achievement of the learners.

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