Open and Distance Learning System in India: Challenges and Remedies

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Abstract

The open and distance learning system is a crucial vehicle in the sustained development of a knowledge society. Its potential for flexible education delivery, scope for self and lifelong learning and cost effectiveness make it instrumental in meeting the needs of individual and communities at this junction – in the rapid transition being made from the industrial to the information age. It has been described as “a process to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both.” However, as India prepares to face the knowledge challenges of the 21st century, higher education presents a dismal picture. The Indian higher education system has emerged as one of the largest in the world with 15 million students enrolled in more than 33000 institutions, in which more than 4 million students are enrolled in the ODLs and account for about 22% of the total enrollment in higher education through one national open university and 14 State open universities and more than 200 distance education centers functioning in India under conventional Universities and private/autonomous institutions. So, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the important role of the ODLs in fulfilling the needs of the Indian society for higher education and also highlights some challenges with certain effective remedies.

Keywords- Open and distance learning system, Challenges, Remedies

INTRODUCTION

Since the immemorial education plays an important role in molding human behavior. In common practice education is termed as any act or experience which has a constructive effect on the human mind and improves the physical as well as mental ability of a person. In the technical terms education is a process of transmitting knowledge, skill from one to another generation. Education is a lifelong process. It is the sum total of our experience and it is unlike our conventional system is not limited to the four walls and covered only those people who are in direct contact of the institution. But the distance or the open learning covers those who are unreached. In the simple term distance learning, is a field that focuses on the pedagogy, technology and instructional system designs that aims to deliver education to those students who are not physically “on site” like in a traditional classroom or campus. It is a flexible form of learning process where a student can study
from home, work, on the move or wherever else is convenient.

As stated, education has been recognized as a major contributing factor to improve the human mind in the social, cultural and intellectual aspects of human being. In India where more than 100 million crores people are living and termed as an emerging super power of international field but still its education level does not met the international requirements. It is worth mentioning here that India has a rich history in the field of higher education since the most ancient time, indeed it is the Nalanda University that is the oldest university system of education in the world. However, the flow of western education is traced back to the British Raj. The establishment of the University Grant Commission has also boosted the development of higher education in India. Now, the educational system falls under the control of the Union as well as the state governments. It needs mention here with having more than 600 universities and over 19000 colleges; India’s higher education system is the third largest in the world, after China and the United States. In addition to this there are more than 1200 polytechnic institutes but still the current ratio of enrolment in the educational institution is below 9% which is less than average of lower middle income countries in the world.

The history of distance and open learning back to the innovate idea formulated by the Delhi University to provide some courses in the year 1962. After that Punjabi University too also took initiative in this field. However, in an organized mood the open learning got its impetus with the opening of National Open University in 1982. Again with the Establishment of Indira Gandhi national Open University in 1985 make a registered remarkable progress in this field. Now IGNOU becomes one of largest Open University of the world

Open Learning has an important role to play by exploring new frontiers and developments in Open and Distance Education. The prominent users of this mode are worldwide in general and Asian region in particular. The growth of the ODE system in India and throughout the world has been phenomenal, particularly during the last two decades.

Rapid changes have taken place in the practice of ODE, mainly driven by changes in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The revolution in ICT coupled with the social demand for education for all and the need for lifelong and continuing education have resulted in the new vistas of open learning for knowledge society.

The main objective of this Paper is therefore to look into the important role of distance and open learning system in India
and also highlights some of the Challenges with its remedies.
Distance learning is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology, and Instructional system designs that aim to deliver education to those students who are not Physically "on site" like in a traditional classroom or campus, in spite of it has certain advantages like

- Overcoming the physical distance of remote learners those are unwilling to physically attend a campus.
- Overcoming the shortage of teachers.
- Overcoming the stringent entrance requirements.
- Fulfilling the needs of fulltime or part-time workers both waged and volunteers for higher education.
- Overcoming the shortage of higher education institutions.
- Widens cultural barriers i.e., provides opportunities for women to learn, meets the needs of the population affected by violence, war or displacement.
- Learners do not have to leave their homes to study.
- Open access
- No formal requirements.
- Instruction that takes place somewhere other than on a central campus, such as a classroom remote from campus.
- Instruction is not limited to traditional methods but includes audio, video, or computer conferences or home study.

**Challenges of open and distance learning system in India**

Although India is the third largest country in the world in terms of higher education, after China and the United States, India still has a current ratio of enrolment in the educational institution below 9% which is less than the average of lower-middle-income countries in the world. In this context distance and open learning open up the door of higher education due to its flexible and innovative as well as low cost characteristics, but inspite of providing a number of avenues and opportunities to learners it is suffering from certain weaknesses, which is as under

- Most correspondence institutes offer courses in arts and humanities only, enrolment in professional courses is concentrated in B.Ed/M.Ed only.
- Correspondence courses were often an extension of courses offered in the conventional mode and retain the same rigidity with regard to admission and examinations.
- Virtually all CCIs were using print medium exclusively and are not multimedia based.
- Lack of coordination between CCIs has led to considerable duplication of efforts and wastage of scarce resources.
Correspondence Institutes are originally weak and neglected, and their internal efficiency is low.

Student Support Services are virtually non-existent. Opportunities for face-to-face contact between teacher and students are few and feedback on student assignments is minimal.

Based on stand-alone, self-study material.

Often print-based with communication through postal services or telephone.

Limited face to face contact with the institution, their tutor, and fellow learners.

Isolation in that distance learning participants may not have little or no opportunity for lack of resources and equipment in that learner may not have access to specialist libraries or practical equipment needed for studies.

Lack of motivation.

Tutor overload

Very slow to remote region.

No systematic follow up on complaints.

Too many assignments.

Students fail to receive assignments feedback before writing examinations.

Lack of research.

Timely updated of course material.

No formative evaluation.

Limited contact between learner and tutor.

Limited use of electronic media.

Poor library cum study centers.

Poor study materials.

Lack of library services.

Printed text, the dominant medium of instruction.

Lack of competent and trained staff for counseling facilities

Low use of media support to students.

Lack of immediate feedback for the students.

Remedial measures required to overcome the challenges of open and distance learning system in India.

Transformation

Transformation of correspondence instructional material to multimedia self-instructional appropriate to distance education mode.

Total Quality Management (TQM)

Total Quality Management (TQM) was developed by business houses and industries to establish standards and techniques that ensure quality of products or services through continuous improvement rather than through final inspection. Government and academic leaders also recognize that improving the quality of distance education on a continuous basis is crucial to make the students capable of meeting the challenges that lie ahead.

Providing learner support
• Personal support such as advice or counseling;
• Academic support such as tutoring, grading, and examining; and
• Face-to-face or mediated support.

Autonomy to open and distance learning institutes
Providing to open and distance learning institutes in administration, academic and financial matters.

Introduction of credit transfer system
Developing credit transfer system to allow students mobility and wider choice of courses.

Library cum study centers
Providing library cum study centers to distance learners will be helpful in order to overcome the difficulties faced by distance learners just like there is a provision of postal library services in Punjab and Utkal distance education universities, under this scheme, the students from remote areas were allowed to borrow two books for a period of one month. In some institutes this was done on the basis of security deposit taken from the students. The students were supposed to become the members of the library and could avail this facility. In some institutes this facility was available even without any security deposit. Some of the distance education institutes had also introduced this facility of book bank at the headquarters for the distant learners (Patna). The students were provided with certain number of books by these book banks for the academic session.

Regular feedback Mechanism
Feedback Mechanism is prerequisite for sustainable development of a system, and it is all the more essential in distance education system keeping in view the spatial barriers between teacher and the taught and the system and the user. Good feedback is the one which is immediate, regular and explanatory rather than judgmental and concise. The success of a distance education programme depends on prompt delivery of study material and fast turnaround assignments. So, a good and regular feedback mechanism is a prerequisite for overcoming the weaknesses of the distance education.

Transformation of CCIs to DE Mode
Most of the distance education learning institutes is still known as centers for correspondence institutes, so there is a need to transform these institutes from CCIs to DE mode by encouraging and adaption of multimedia approach in delivery of the programmes to distance learners.

Monitoring learner achievement
Assessment in open and distance learning may have any of three main purposes:
• Formative assessment: to give learners feedback on their progress so that they know how well they are doing and can, if necessary, change the way they are tackling the Course;
• Summative assessment: to provide the basis for marks that may contribute to the Learner’s eventual certification; and
• As part of the overall evaluation process: to help the open and distance learning Institution to monitor the effectiveness of its courses.

Formative Evaluation
• Diagnosing learning needs: early on in a course, assessment can help learners decide which
• Parts of the course they need most, and may form the basis of a learning contract.
• checking progress: self-assessment questions during or at the end of study units enable learners to check how they are getting on and provide immediate reinforcement of learning Increasing motivation: reinforcement helps to keep learners going;
• Providing feedback: tutor comments on tutor-marked assignments ensure the learner knows what to do next.
• Encouraging a deep approach to learning: particular types of assessment such as questions that call for reflection, analysis, or application; projects; and practical assignments can help learners to improve their approach to learning;
• Facilitating contact between learner and tutor: tutor-marked assignments are often the main point of contact between a learner and his or her tutor, and are therefore an invaluable way of reducing learner isolation

• Increasing learner control: giving learners the means to assess their own progress can increase their control over their own learning.

Collaboration in open and distance learning
Open and distance learning programmes are far from the only ones affected by these pressures. Nonetheless, they are among the foremost seekers and implementors of collaboration arrangements, because of the nature of their work. For example
• Learning materials development represents a major cost to distance programmes. Producers of such materials can share costs through co-development arrangements, or recoup costs by sales and leases of materials. Low-resource programmes can save on staffing and other recurrent costs by purchasing materials rather than developing their own.
• Learners are seeking flexibility, especially in terms of being able to apply credits taken in one programme to the completion of requirements for another. Credit transfer arrangements place great demands on institutional collaborative arrangements
• The technologies used in delivery of distance programmes are forcing collaboration, partly because delivery agencies need to share the costs, and partly because of the nature of the technologies themselves, which increasingly make distinctions between ‘distance’ and
‘conventional’ programmes irrelevant and meaningless Examples: Collaborative arrangements in open and distance learning are many and varied. Here are examples of only a few.

- A number of international organisations have been created to foster course-sharing and other kinds of collaboration among their members, including The Commonwealth of Learning, CIFFAD (Consortium d’institutions francophones de formation distance) and the Consorcio-red de education a distancia.

- Colisa is a consortium of distance teaching universities and organizations in South Africa, including Vista University, the University of South Africa, Technicon SA, the South African Institute of Distance Education, and the SACHED Trust, that have joined together to share course materials and programmes. Some postgraduate degrees in open and distance learning have been the results of collaboration, for example between Deakin University and the University of South Australia, and between the University of London Institute of Education, the International Extension College, Dakin University and the Open Learning Agency.

The Contact North network in northern Ontario, Canada, makes delivery facilities available for a number of institutions, to offer secondary and tertiary-level programmes to widely scattered populations.

Application of technology oriented tools for distance learning system

- **Blogs:** Resource personal can write blogs which are a free form of expression and less laborious to handle. Blogs serve as the same purpose of Black Board/Notice Board in conventional system but online.

- **Micro Blogs:** Micro Blogging is a recent trend in online education. Authors/Resource Personnel will write short blogs here and then on their online wall where the subscribed people can come and read those blogs and even can make comments on them. Sites like TWITTER are increasingly getting famous for its ease of updating and subscription.

- **Social Networking:** With the evolution of High speed data networks and Broad band Internet on the Indian social, social networking is increasingly getting popular even in rural areas of India. It is believed that almost 60% of the younger generations have their presence in one or many social networking sites. Face book is increasingly becoming a phenomenon with youths. Authors and resource personnel can use this same medium to communicate, get feedback and even to do one-to-one counseling in cases when it is required.

- **Webinars:** Webinars are nothing but seminars conducted online using all possible multimedia technologies. This is like a Two-way video conferencing only but users are
formed as groups restricted with certain activities assigned to each group using something like passwords etc., this concept is increasingly getting popular in education sector very rapidly.

- **Online mailers:** This is one of the ages famous and age old concepts, it’s getting increasingly popular after the evolvement of Web 2.0 tools. In this a resource personnel can send daily/timely mailers as and when it is required. It is getting popular because of its low cost/High-yield nature.

- **Chat:** With the emergence of Web 2.0, Chat is getting increasingly popular in learning domain too. Different kinds of Chat methods are available like Text Chat (where in 1 or many users communicate through text typing on a common shared wall with each other), Voice (where in 1 or many users communicate through voice with each other) and Video Chat (where in 1 or many users communicate through voice with each other face to face). The same medium can be used effectively to interact with the learners and to give them needed assistance/Guidance.

- **Video Conferencing:** With the evolution of Broad Band and 3G networks, Video Conferencing is now a reality in India. This facility can be used to its best in order to deliver lessons, to interact with students etc. The basic advantage of this tool is that same resource personnel can teach in multiple locations at the same time. Due to its high nature of saving money, time, travel etc., this is increasingly getting popular in learning medium.

- **Online Presentations:** Though this is one of the famous and age old concept, it’s getting increasingly popular day by day with the Telecom revolution worldwide. A resource personnel will make an online presentation or store the presentation in some web location where in the users can watch it according to their own pace. With the evolution of Telecom and 3G networks in India, people can watch these presentations even on their mobile device like Mobile phones or Tablets etc.

- **Video Lessons through YouTube and Likes:** This is relatively a new phenomenon as far as India is concerned which is slowly picking up momentum from the past 1 or 2 years. In this method the resource personnel will records his/her lesson and upload it into online video streaming sites like YouTube etc. where in the users can watch them where and when required at their own pace. This concept is increasingly getting popular for the ease and liveliness amongst youths so many institutions are offering these services on experimental basis.

**Conclusion**

The distance education system has registered a remarkable growth after 1962 when ever first school of correspondence courses of the
country was established in Delhi University. It is now being recognized as a potential medium of reaching with latest information and knowledge to the society in general and the needy target groups in particular. However, with the increase in enrolment and quantum of work in these institutions, a great difficulty is being faced in providing effective support services to the distance learners. Inadequate trained staff and faculty, paucity of funds and ‘annex’ status of these institution, are a few constraints which are faced by them in their day-to-day functioning. In order to develop the distance education system parallel to the conventional counterparts and enable it to shoulder the major responsibility of democratizing education in the country, concentrated efforts are required to be taken on the part of the government as well as the conventional universities, of which they are a part.

The distance education institutes also have to concentrate on the quality of support services being provided to the distance learners since it is the major component that distinguishes distance education from correspondence courses. Quality self-learning material should be made available to the learners well in time. If this milestone is achieved by the institution, it has won half the battle. Collaboration and networking with the Open University system in the country can help this institution a great deal in this direction. It will, on the one hand, enhance the accessibility of these institutions to quality learning material and eliminate the chances of duplication/ multiplication of efforts made by them individually on the other. It will further help in establishing and developing an acceptable standard of distance education in the country. At the same time alternative channels of service delivery should be explored which would enable utilization of latest information technology for enhanced learning.

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