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Changing Context and Expanding Equal Educational Opportunities in ODL System

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Abstract

In our nation, access to an equal and higher education has long been regarded as focused need to enable the latent pool to have quality education unreached so far and to contribute to the nation development. In this context for the last four decades, ODL system has not only flourished in quantity but also in expanding the educational opportunities to benefit a greater number of students which has been of paramount importance for the educators and the nation.

With visible social, linguistic and economic diversity in our nation,the challenge to expand the dream of an equal and quality education has been greater.My paper will examine how potential opportunities are met by Open Distance Learning Universities, especially Vardhaman Mahaveer Open University, Kota(Rajasthan) to achieve the elusive goal of reaching the unreached and seriously respond to our social responsibilities of quality yet approachable knowledge to students of all sections of society.

The paper will also touch upon the notion that there is a need of knowledge society within universities and Open Distance Learning approach acknowledges and celebrates this paradigm shift that brings to their students global perspective to face the challenges of the 21st Century.

Research Paper

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Introduction

"In the twenty first century, a new society is emerging where knowledge is the primary production resources instead of capital and labour."

This is how Dr. A.P.J.Abdul Kalam emphasised the primary importance of education in making our nation, a truly developed nation. In India educational system has expanded exponentially over the past five

decades, but its current achievements are grossly inadequate for the nation to realise it potential greatness. An importance role of education is to faster in each child the attributes and values of a responsible, capable, active and healthy member of the family and society. The 86ᵗʰ Constitutional Amendment Act of 2002 makes elementary education of fundamental right of every child. The Constitutional Amendment itself clinches the argument for ensuring that all girls and boys receive eight years of good quality education. However, it has been viewed that as the child grows, the opportunity cost of sending the child to secondary school is beyond the parents' budget, even socio-economic factors create barriers to move further. We are now more aware than ever of the nature, extent, pattern and complexity of the challenges of education for all. So the questions which arise are: Are there any alternatives to the existing conventional pattern of educational? What can Open and Distance learning (ODL) contribute to the above challenges? And how and in what ways, might this system practically develop and change the educational scenarios within?

As we all know "Distance Education" is an educational process in which for the majority of the time the learning occurs when the teacher and learner are removed in space and/or time from each other. While "Open Learning" refers to "an organisational activity based on the use of teaching materials, in which the constraints on study are minimized either in terms of access, or of time and place, pace, methods of study or any combination of these (Perraton 2000:13) In the country India where the unreached are a majority, conventional educational systems are often not only unaffordable and irrelevant but also alienating to many of those they are intending to serve. The concept of open and distance learning has come to serve here as a central reference point for exploring a range of options with the potential to reach beyond the specific confines of conventional learning. (World Bank 1996, Commonwealth Secretariat 1999, Hoppers 2000)

It has been noted that cast members of aspiring youth do not have access to education start right from the primary level and become more acute at the secondary level and even more so at the higher levels of education. The Open University system augments opportunities for higher education, ensures access, is cost-effective and promotes as a flexible and innovative system of education. They show new light and hope as time and again they have proved their worth and achievements in objectives.

Preparing Students as Global Citizens

In an interdependent global society the distinction between home and abroad has largely vanished. We live not only in a global economy and society, but it is also very complex, interconnected and interdependent world. Out challenges therefore are the prepare and equip our students as global citizens. They should be able to transcend from one society to another effortlessly, be capable of communicating in multiple languages and be able to work in institutions and organisations that are international, diverse and multicultural. They should understand diverse perspectives born out of differing cultural and geographic experience. And as global citizens, imbibed with the Gandhian belief that they serve a cause that is larger than the self, they will think global and act local. Today's information and communication technologies offer an unparalleled opportunity for reaching out to the hitherto unreached group. The gap should be bridged up and inequality of distribution of education and existing knowledge should be reduce or minimise and media should be exploited for this purpose. India, as a part of global community cannot shirk away from its responsibilities and its universities play a major role in making education accessible to all youths irrespective of financial, social and psychological conditions. The postmodern conditions in the world have ushered a new era of **"Knowledge based society**" leaving behind old age concepts of agricultural society, urban or rural society or even technological society. Vardhaman Mahaveer Open University, Kota, Rajasthan is also a major part of this growing community of knowledge givers in their State. The vision of VMOU, Kota is to become"Knowledge Institute" the first step towards becoming knowledge institute is to go fully computerization and digitalization of work. The University was instituted in 1987 with only 9 academic courses. They became 39 in 2006 and rose to 75 in 2007. In 2008 more courses were introduced and the number increased in 82 and in 2009 the number touched 105 with introduction of Sanskrit, Rajasthani language, Distance Education as an optional subject in B.A..Faced with the challenges of globalization, VMOU, Kota also introduced many vocational courses to provide the students with the tools of life learning and to broaden their education through academic exposure and working experiences in diverse and multi-cultural settings.

Reinventing the University in the New Global Society

Knowledge, as the primary production resources is very crucial in higher education for generalisation, absorption and diffusion. According to the 2001 census, 65 percent of Indians are literate. This is a significant achievement compared to 18 percent in 1947. But there is an ardent need to reinvent our existing educational system. The formal and traditional system of education has been playing an elitist role through ages. It has been perpetuating the disparities and imbalances growth in the society. It has been realised that this system cannot make universalization of education a success due to its inadequacy. With a view to opening new frontiers of knowledge and democratising the teaching-learning process Open and Distance Education is an effective alternative. It has its message both for lifelong education as well as for universalisation of education. It can be seen as a potential means of equalisation of educational opportunities, a useful means for promoting diversified as well as vocational education with globalised concept. In India and at International level ODL has been strongly supported in provision of life-long education and in a process of human growth towards fulfillment of global citizen. Global education through ODL is no longer an add-on but a power of forming a global society. It is therefore vital that what is offered is supplemented by opportunities and experience.

Vardhaman Mahaveer Open Univerisity has been modestly but consistently contributing to the demands of higher and vocational education in Rajasthan for last two decades. The university has signed a memorandum of understanding with Rajasthan Mission on Livelihood (R.Mol.) an organisation headed by Chief Minister of Rajasthan for providing certification to their entrants and collaborating with them diverse short-term vocational training programmes on the strength of our state-wide institutional network.

For the first time in the country, the Government nationwide project of providing employment **"NERAGA"** has also been introduce by the university as an academic programme. This programme provides theoretical as well as practical knowledge. The learning goes beyond the confines of the campus; the enrolled students will have the opportunity of experiencing the first hand through studying, working and interacting with experts. The university due to state areas limitation or with limited manpower

resources has not stopped in expanding its areas of activities. It plans to launch new certificate programmes in issues like Legal Awareness among Women, Osteopathy, Soft Skills and programmes even for Aganwadi workers and defence personals.

Knowledge Building from a Global Perspective

The Higher education sector is one of the fastest growing sector and in tandem with such rapidly escalating demand for quality, access and equity, the number of universities in India is still less to respond to socio-economic need of the society and address the issue of creating global in global perspective. It is therefore neceeasary that all ODL institutions on the basis of their objectives on which they are established, revamp the existing curriculum catering to global subject content, behavioural outcomes and other comprehensive learning experiences which effectively fulfill the knowledge building technological requirements of the country.

The VMOU, Kota is consolidating its role towards knowledge creation and dissemination. It is providing knowledge with opportunities for self-perfection through self-transformatory incitation such as Awareness of Gandhian Methods, Nonviolence and Conflict Resolution. As required in Technology of education, the university has interpreted the entire process of the setting goal, the continuous renewal of curriculum, the trying out and use of new methods and material in workshops, the evaluation of the system as a whole and the resetting of goals in view of the changing global circumstances. The university is all set to intensify the computerisation of all the six regional centres and eventually linking all the study centres with it. The access to the learners has increased four times through Interactive Radio Counseling that is undertaken in collaboration with IGNOU. Future education of global citizens through ODL will thus be able to play its role more effectively by making the individual creative, innovative and efficient of course, success of education cannot be achieved merely by substituting mechanical methods for human beings or text books, but by developing new patterns using both human and technological know-how in order to teach more people better and more rapidly. On the whole, knowledge building in ODL through educational technology

from a global perspective can immensely contribute to the qualitative as well as quantitative improvement by imparting education.

Excellence and Access in Higher Education

In the recent years, the phenomenon of globalization has brought about tremendous changes the world over. It is signified by greatly increased access to markets, cultural practices and products, increased movement of people, money and information across national and cultural boundaries.

The sphere of education has also been influenced by the twin phenomena of globalisation and liberalisation. This is essentially because the skills of a nation's people have progressively become an important factor in attracting global capital to the national markets. In fact, gloabalisation has impacted the higher education scenario at the level of policy as well as at the institutional level. Higher education institutions are expected to do more with less due to drastic budget reductions. There is growing pressure for generating resources through measures such as fee increase, cuts in research grants for universities, emphasis on consultancies and research outputs. An increased commoditization of the intellectual as intellectual property has occurred particularly with regard to connecting the intellectual work of universities with community, business, government interests and priorities. (Porter and Vidovich, 2000).

Education and training programmes using new forms of information and communication technologies, open and distance learning have emerged as a new altenative. Faced with increasing global competition, governments in developing countries, including India, are relying heavily on these forms to meet the training needs suited for a globalised country.

The last couple of decades have witnessed the emergence of India as an attractive market for trade and global capital investment. Thus, we find that the issues of creating a high skill society and capacity building of our national economic policy formulations. These concerns also find expression in various

regional foray for economic and educational cooperation that India shares with other countries, the most notable being the Commonwealth, and SAARC.

In such a scenario, sharing of global intellectual resources, of course, at a suitable price seems to be an attractive option to our policy planners' and decision makers at different levels. Indeed, it is seen as a major advantage as the loss of precious financial and intellectual resources in 'reinventing the wheel' is avoided, making education a cost-effective venture. It is argued that such measures lead to increased access to higher education and thereby promote equity.

Each individual ODL institution has its own particular set of justifications. However, some objectives are common to all ODL institutions. These traditionally have included the following:

Efficiency: ODL institutions have high fixed but low variable costs. Consequently there are economies of scale and scope in supplying higher education through ODL institutions. Thus, if ODL institutions are of a sufficient scale and organised in ways that capitalise on economies of scope, they be cost-efficient.

Access: The ODL system of learning is seen to be accessible to marginal groups. 'Open' suggests access to those who lack formal qualifications. 'Distance' implies access to those individuals/group who are isolated from centres where conventional higher education institutions are located.

Quality: Regardless of these additional advantages, the aim of all ODL institutions is to impart education that is on par with conventional insititutions of higher learning.

These three characteristics form the basis on which outcomes should be measured. Each can be identified with one of 'the three E measure' (Jackson and Palmer, 1998). Efficiency can be gauged against cost-efficiency; access can be gauged against ease of entry, and quality can be gauged against effectiveness. Together they ensure equity of provision.

Distance education as an alternative is an expensive endeavor; however, considering the potential of large number of students in the developing countries, the cost can be spread over large number of students. Distance education has the capability to expand access, enabling universities to teach far more students than they would otherwise to able to do, to teach students at a distance from campus, and to overcome problems such as physical disability and work or other commitments. It has continued to develop into a phenomenon as 'the big bang theory', in which distance and communication technology (Hawkridge, 1995).

Problems and Challenges

We have seen that has been very difficult to operationalise the notion of ODL. This is only partly because of the continued subservience of ODL to the problematic of modern technologies in education. There remains the unresolved and largely problematical marriage between open learning and distance learning, and the conceptual and operational unclarity which permeated the discourse throughout the decade. The ODL movement has not succeeded in pushing through an image of a consolidated perspective or philosophy which could respond to the policy initiatives being advocated at the national or international level.

In my view, an ODL vision in this century would need to go beyond the trappings of high technology, if it is to realize the value and relevance of open learning principles for meeting the learning needs of those truly 'unreached' groups. Although, policy makers may criticise it, the onus remains on the advocates of ODL to develop coherent strategies and ensure their integration into policies. From a long-term perspective, greater cooperation amongst developing countries having same concerns and problems should collectively join hands to improve access to educational opportunities for their people who could then lead to identification, creation and sharing of relevant educational resources. It is measures such as this that would

take us on the path of development by increasing access, promoting equity and acquiring the competencies that lead us more equitably towards development and also give us an edge in the global market.

Quality and accessibility are a major challenge for open and distance learning. The open and distance learning institutions and developing world also have to confront with changing external pressures. Competition among open and distance learning providers means positive challenges for this educational sector to improve its accountability and quality, and this will benefit students and other users. It is a challenge for open and distance-learning providers to welcome this opportunity positively and to respond accordingly to the changing demands of the clients and the society.

To achieve its institutional missions and goals of increasing student participation and widening accessibility should be targeted on maintaining existing students and implementing proactive recruitment of potential students. Quality and accessibility are to be achieved through effective internal management involving effective utilisation of human resource system, facilities, finance, and the development of positive corporate culture.

In term of instructional process and learning services, priorities should be given to the development of multimedia learning packages, the application of information and communication technology in teaching and learning as well as management, and the development of networked regional offices. Development of course materials involves the use of a course-team approach, utilising existing resources internally and externally, and incorporating the application of the newest and applicable information and communication technology. ODLs' are challenged to incorporate the newest ICT elements, such as Internet, computer, and networking, etc. in its courses in order to facilitate student learning. Equipped with adequate infrastructure and facilities, regional centres should be the frontline offices to provide services needed by the students and other clients. These centres also need to develop mutual partnership and cooperation with local institutions, universities, public and private organizations in order to function well.

Conclusion

In the end we can righty conclude that formal education, non-formal education and open and distance education systems should collaborate to provide greater diversity and choice to learners, offering a variety of curriculum patterns and organisational styles in management of basic education. They should legitimately seek to offer the most appropriate programmes that address the needs and circumstances of these target groups. Mechanisms will have to be put in place to expand educational opportunities in such a way that they promote equity without compromising quality. Distance education is flexible and, therefore, demands constant change and orientation. Our effort should be directed towards educational expansion in favour of the disadvantaged, unreached and women; offering IT-enabled and OT-enhanced education and training; sustainability and convergence; active student learning, institutional networking and resource sharing, and community-based learning; widening the scope of accreditation and quality assurance; internationalization of education; empowerment of human beings at large through skill development and capacity building for learning to learn and lifelong. That is, we have to move towards seamless education, and open and flexible learning can be a committed and the most effective vehicle.

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