Higher Education in a Changing World:
An Appraisal of the Indian ODL System

Swaraj Basu
Distance Education Council (DEC),
Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)
Railway Road, Karnal-132001
New Delhi, India
basuswaraj@gmail.com

Abstract

In a country of India's magnitude and diversity, the conventional system alone cannot meet the needs and demands of higher education. To meet these demands, the open and distance learning (ODL) system was introduced as an alternative system by providing flexible educational opportunities to large segments of the Indian population. This paper outlines the changing landscape of higher education in general, giving specific reference to India. Against that backdrop, the author reviews the accomplishments of the Indian ODL system in meeting the challenges confronting higher education. Finally, some of the major issues afflicting the ODL system are critically examined.

Abstrak

Di dalam negara India yang mempunyai kepelbagaian, sistem konvensional sahaja tidak boleh memenuhi keperluan dan permintaan pendidikan tinggi. Untuk memenuhi permintaan ini, sistem pendidikan jarak jauh dan terbuka diperkenalkan sebagai satu sistem alternatif yang menyediakan peluang pendidikan yang fleksibel kepada segmen populasi India yang luas. Artikel ini menerangkan perubahan landskap pendidikan tinggi dengan India sebagai rujukan yang spesifik. Berasaskan latar belakang ini, pengarang mengulas kejayaan sistem pendidikan jarak jauh dan terbuka India dalam memenuhi cabaran yang dihadapi dalam pendidikan tinggi. Akhir sekali beberapa isu penting yang mempengaruhi sistem pendidikan jarak jauh dan terbuka dikaji secara kritikal.

Introduction

Higher education merits a special place because of its particular importance in the knowledge society. In the present information age, the importance of knowledge and skills has compelled expansion of the higher education system to meet the demand for lifelong learning, which has indeed become a necessity rather than an enrichment option (that it was in the past). Our society is witnessing change at a pace which is difficult to comprehend. Technological advances have made the world smaller, more accessible and transnational borders and boundaries are merging. These rapid changes have also created opportunities for new jobs that did not exist a decade ago. Moreover, the nature of work is continually changing and the workforce has to upgrade/"up skill" itself to compete in a new competitive global environment.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) is likely to further power innovations to meet the ever-increasing demand for higher education, training and skills development and promotion of lifelong learning on a hitherto unknown scale. Higher education has been moving from the elite to the masses, resulting in universal access (Altbach & Davis, 1999). The context in which higher education is presently functioning is a dynamic environment that is changing dramatically. Some of the major issues influencing higher education are:

- Importance of knowledge and skills – demand of a learning society – more people want to learn different things (changing clientele) and new career patterns exist.
- Globalisation and transnational education, new pedagogy and curricula.
- Emergence of new forms of instruction and ways of communication.
- Changing demographics with more older adults participating due to demand for lifelong learning.
- Need to restructure higher education so that it is more accessible.
- Financing of higher education–reduced funding, financial stringencies.

In this paper, we examine these issues with particular reference to Indian higher education.

Globalisation, a major development of the twenty-first century, has increased the importance of higher education more than ever before. Indeed, higher education is on the globalisation agenda as the trade of goods and services. Under the General Agreement on Trades and Services (GATS), higher education has been further liberalised and internationalised; ultimately, its success would depend upon flexibility, access, quality of services, curriculum design and above all, value for money. Global public spending on education has increased and more and more transnational corporations have started targeting higher education for profit making. Institutions of higher education can no longer isolate themselves from the winds of change; instead, they need to respond to the new challenges and cater to the diversified needs of learners who are interested in learning what is directly related to their needs at work and in their communities. In other words, education providers have to develop partnership with the industry, community and corporate sector to make education relevant to specific needs and to accommodate learners of different backgrounds.

Changes are also taking place in the production and application of knowledge. A number of discipline-based studies support this argument (Becher, 1989; Henkel, 2000). Ever since education has become more responsive to the "world of work", the emphasis is more on its value or relevance in given circumstances. Barnett et al. (2001) referred to this phenomenon as the "principle of preformativity", which is the relationship of higher education and the labour market. It highlights doing rather than knowing and performance rather than understanding.

Education is an organic entity and it evolves dynamically in response to the changing needs of society. We have known revolutionary changes in the ways and means of imparting instruction. The first, of course, was the shift from oral to written (print) communication and this formed the core of correspondence education. The use of radio and TV broadcast added value to instruction because it became possible to present the best teachers to the learners for interaction. Pre-recorded audio and video programmes introduced the concept of learning through audio-visual aids at one's own pace, place and time. Self-learning materials introduced the concept of self-directed learning with the teacher built into the text. Applications of satellite and telecommunications provided for synchronous communication between the teacher and learner groups at multiple locations.

The internet and the world wide web have now given us the option of providing instruction anywhere on the globe and at any time, synchronously as well as asynchronously. Traditionally, education has been teacher-centric, where the skills of the master determine the quality of the learner. However, the use of interactive radio, television, teleconferencing, online education etc. has facilitated greater openness. This contains more relaxed pedagogical frames as it has taken instruction out of the four walls of a classroom with the emphasis being more on learning than teaching. The time and place for formal learning as well as the institution is now becoming less relevant. Instruction can be absorbed at home or at the workplace and no longer depends on special or dialogical constructions produced through classroom lectures.

With the reduction in resources for universities, institutions of higher education have been advised to generate resources in order to meet growing expenditures. A more business-like approach to management and budgeting is perceptibly visible. Funding is now based on parameters such as institutional performance and quality of outputs. The state is no longer the principal employer of educated youths in the country, the majority of the employment opportunities being in the private sector. Since the 1990s, educational institutions have been faced with the need to develop more flexible, cost-effective and faster ways of meeting the needs of growing numbers. Thus a wave to develop modular programmes based on credit accumulation so as to meet the requirements of the private sector emerged. To cater to specific requirements, even corporate houses are investing funds and independently or jointly offering tailor-made courses. As of now, private investment in education is on the increase. Of the 355 universities in the country, 110 are deemed-to-be universities and most of them belong to private providers.

Some state governments have passed private university bills and this helped in setting up private universities in the states of Uttarpradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Tripura, etc. It is now an established fact that the private sector controls 84% of engineering colleges, 40.9% of colleges offering medical education and 90% of those offering management education (Kapur & Mehta, 2004). In India, private investment in education is increasing. Privatisation of higher education is a worldwide phenomenon. In Latin America and some parts of Asia, the fastest-growing institutions are in the private sector. In Central and Eastern Europe, private initiative is also of

considerable importance. Public universities are in some places being "privatised" in the sense that they are increasingly responsible for raising their own funds by relating more directly to societal needs. Students are increasingly being seen as "customers" (Altbach & Davis, 1999).

We have to recognise that higher education has profoundly changed in the past three decades. Institutions of higher education have faced pressures from increasing numbers of learners due to demographic changes and reconsideration of the socio-economic role of higher education. In spite of vast expansion, access to higher education continues to be a major issue everywhere. There is much debate on the pattern of funding. The prevalent view is that the "users" need to pay for the cost of service as policy makers increasingly view higher education as "economic goods" to an individual rather than as "public goods" where benefits accrue to society. Also, what is worsening the scenario is the non-availability of qualified faculty members, infrastructures like libraries and laboratories, etc.

Open and distance learning (ODL) promises to be the panacea for the myriad issues confronting higher education today. It holds promise and potential to provide quality education in a A3 (anyone, any time and anywhere) paradigm at affordable costs. That is why it has emerged as a natural vehicle for many to get access to the world of knowledge and contribute to national development. In this background, we now review the status of higher education in India, in general, and the role of the ODL system, in particular.

The ODL System in India

The first universities in India were established in 1857 in Kolkata, Chennai and Mumbai and education at a distance began at the University of Delhi in 1962. Fifteen decades of conventional universities and four and a half decades of ODL have seen a phenomenal expansion and growth of both systems, not only in terms of the numbers of institutions but also in terms of the numbers of programmes and courses offered and student enrolment. Today, India has one the largest higher education systems in the world.

Many universities have recognised the strategic significance of ODL and are imparting education through dual modes. Presently, there are 355 conventional universities and of these, 127 are dual mode universities (DMUs) offering both classroom based education and distance education. Besides these, there are 15 single mode open universities (OUs) exclusively

offering programmes through the distance mode. Thus, nearly one out of three universities is offering ODL programmes (Table 1). IGNOU, a national university with jurisdiction over the entire country, offers programmes in all states and union territories through its network of over 1,500 study centres, 58 regional centres and six sub-regional centres (IGNOU, 2007). Besides the National Open University, there are 14 state open universities.

Besides government owned and government recognised universities, there are a large number of professional bodies (such as the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI); the Institute of Company Secretaries of India (ICSI) and the All India Management Association (AIMA), many private institutions (including those owned by corporate houses like NIIT's Net Varsity and Zee Education's Zed Virtual University) and foreign universities which are also offering programmes through the distance mode or by partnering with local institutions through twinning arrangements. The statistics published by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Distance Education Council (DEC) do not include the enrolment of learners pursuing their study through ODL at such institutions. Thus the actual enrolment in higher education through ODL is more than 25% of the total enrolment in higher education.

Table 1   Status of Higher Education in India

Year	Total No. of Universities	Universities Offering DE	% of Universities Offering DE	Students Enrolled in the Conventional System (in Millions)	Students Enrolled in the ODL System (in Millions)
1975–76	139	32	23.0	3.1	0.97
1982–83	187	41	21.9	4.8	0.68
1992–93	320	115	35.9	9.95	1.93
2005–06	355	141	39.7	11.028	3.6

Compiled from: Kulandai Swamy (2002); UGC (2005), (2007); DEC (2004), (2007)

In India, the establishment of the first state Open University (OU) at Hyderabad in 1982 marked the beginning of the open learning era. A great impetus was provided to these efforts in 1985 when the Indira Gandhi National Open University was set up by an Act of Parliament. Creation of a national OU with the mandate to provide education to the unreached and to promote and regulate quality in distance education resulted in rapid growth of

the ODL system. An exhaustive description of developments in the ODL system in India is given by Garg et al. (2006).

It is important to note that although distance learning has existed in India since the 1960s in the form of correspondence courses and has been offered by many conventional universities, it was only with the establishment of OUs that a learner-centred approach was adopted and a systematic effort was made to provide self-learning materials in print supported by audio/video programmes, use of electronic media, establishment of a network of regional centres and study centres, etc.

In other words, a definite attempt was made to widen the reach of an innovative system of education, which was flexible and open in terms of methods and pace of learning, combination of courses, eligibility for enrolment, etc. There would be fewer restrictions on entry and exit. Moreover, the modular approach was adopted with a view of promoting learning in a variety of new areas untapped by the conventional universities, thereby encouraging new fields of knowledge in accordance with the changing times.

Growth of ODL Institutions

What began in 1962 as an experiment in the form of correspondence courses offered by the University of Delhi has matured into a full-grown system. That is proving to be an excellent alternative system for higher education in the country to supplement the conventional university system and to ease the pressure on it. ODL has experienced dramatic growth during the four and a half decades of its existence. From 22 distance education (DE) institutions in 1975, the number of institutions reached 141 in 2006. The popularity of DE continues to be high in the southern and northern regions, which together accounted for 63.5% of the total number of institutions in the country in 2003–2004 (Srivastava & Ramegowda, 2006). Out of 141 DE institutions, 53 are located in southern India, 43 in the north, 25 in the east and 20 in the west (http://www.dec.ac.in).

Table 2   Growth of Open and Distance Learning Institutions in India: 1962–2006

Year	Dual Mode Universities (DMUs)	Single Mode Universities (Open Universities)	Total of Distance Education Institutions
1962	1	-	1
1975	22	-	22
1982	34	1	35
1985	38	2	40
1990	46	5	51
2000	70	9	79
2005	106	13	119
2006	127	14	141

Compiled from: Manjulika and Reddy (1996); DEC (2004), (2007)

Growth of Student Enrolments

The data presented in Table 3 reveal that enrolment in the ODL system has been steadily increasing over the years. The share of the ODL system in the total enrolment in higher education improved from 0.15% in 1962 to 2.6% in 1975–1976 to 9.3% in 1987–1988 to around 25% in 2005–2006. The growth of institutions and enrolment demonstrates the growing importance of the ODL system in India.

The majority of the distance learners are enrolled at the undergraduate level in general programmes at OUs (41.84%) as well as DMUs (39.72%) which is in conformity with the trends in the conventional system with 88% of students being undergraduates. This is reflective of the Indian mindset that a university degree is a stepping stone for a "white collar" status and earning respectability in the society. At the DMUs, more learners are enrolled in postgraduate programmes for similar reasons. Moreover currently, not many OUs offer postgraduate programmes. Since OUs are offering a variety of need-based diploma and certificate programmes, there is a noticeable shift in overall enrolment in skill/ competency oriented programmes related to the workplace. 42.85% learners are enrolled in these programmes at OUS, which is more than the learners enrolled in the undergraduate general education programmes.

The enrolment pattern in the ODL system is different from that of the conventional system. It is undoubtedly an alternative system but it is not competing with the conventional system. Its target audience, especially that at the OUs, is different. The mandate of the OUs is to reach the "unreached" who have missed the opportunity of pursuing their studies – mainly women, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, working people, people living in rural and remote areas and in educationally backward areas, etc. The DMUs are mainly taking care of the over-flow from the conventional system. Since the conventional system has limitations pertaining to its student intake, ODL is complementing it very well. The profile of the learners enrolled at the OUs reveals that the majority of them fall within the 25–45 age group and are generally working adults (Srivastava, 2006; Biswas, 2001; Taplin, 2000; Kumar, 1999). More than 50% of the learners are enrolled in undergraduate programmes, one-third are pursuing postgraduate programmes and one-fifth diploma and certificate programmes that may be relevant to their jobs and/or for skill development/career advancement, as the case may be.

Table 3   Growth of Student Enrolment and Annual Admissions at Open Universities in India

	Year of Establishment	1987–1988	1991–1992	1999–2000	2005–2006
IGNOU	1985	1684	62345	163394	429542
BRAOU	1982	19486	33587	93477	97083
VMOU	1987	14272	7824	5735	15817
NOU	1987	--	119	703	8448
YCMOU	1989	--	13052	64204	129472
MPBOU	1991	--	--	98700	177602
BAOU	1994	--	--	4070	29786
KSOU	1996	--	--	19752	36377
NSOU	1997	--	--	891	24164
UPRTOU	1998	--	--	--	10331
TNOU	2002	--	--	--	17222
PSSOU	2005	--	--	--	--
UOU	2005	--	--	--	--
KKHSOU	2006	--	--	--	--
Global OU	2007	--	--	--	--

Table 3 (*continued*)

Total of new enrolments at OUs	35442	116927	450926	975844
Total of enrolments in DE in India	50569	664572	1580275	1833465*
Enrolments in OUs as % to equal enrolments in DE in India	9.3%	12.6%	28.5%	25% (approx)

*Data available from 75 institutions out of 141 institutions.
Compiled from: DEC (2007), (2004); Manjulika and Reddy (1996).

Table 4   Stages in the Enrolment in the ODL System (2005−2006)

	Research	PG Prof.	PG Gen.	UG Prof.	UG Gen.	Dip.	Cert.	Others
OUs	0.12	2.35	8.65	4.19	41.84	4.72	20.22	17.91
DMUs	1.72	9.96	33.89	8.14	39.72	4.77	0.41	1.39

Source: DEC (2007) Information Data base on DE in India, New Delhi, IGNOU, DEC

Increase in Academic Programmes

Initially, undergraduate programmes in arts and humanities were introduced by correspondence course institutes in conventional universities in the 1960s. In the 1970s, the rapid expansion of distance education (DE) programmes took place with the introduction of postgraduate programmes, including diploma and certificate programmes in new disciplines like science, education, law, journalism, library sciences, etc. (Manjulika & Reddy, 1996). The advent of OUs brought about a qualitative change in the ODL system with the introduction of more need based programmes, keeping in view the demands of the new information age. OUs have developed a wide variety of programmes for the development of life/work skills: professional, vocational and continuing education programmes.

The range of programmes on offer has increased significantly. Management, computer education and teacher education programmes are more in demand. Programmes in the areas of mass communication and journalism, foreign trade insurance, the environment, hospital

management, human rights, Intellectual Property rights, paramedical surgeries and more recently, entrepreneurship development programmes, have added a new dimension and enriched the programme profile of the Indian ODL system (Venkaiah et al., 2006). The data in Table 5 show that in the Ninth Plan period, there were about 400 programmes in the OUs but towards the end of the Tenth Plan period, this number had increased to about 700.

Expansion of Outreach Programmes

With the objective of taking education to the doorsteps of the unreached, most ODL institutions have set up study centres providing support services to their learners at the local level; these services included guidance and counselling, practicals, hands-on experience, library facilities, feedback on performance, term-end examinations, etc. OUs have also set up regional centres for the systematic organisation of support to their learners through a vast network of study centres. In 2005–2006, 115 regional centres and 6203 study centres were established by OUs throughout the country. On the other hand, a few DMUs have also set up their own study centres – there were 2,737 study centres of DMUs in 2005–2006 (DEC, 2007).

With the increase in enrolment and number of programmes, special professional and skills development as well as the nature and type of support services to be provided have increased and diversified. As a result, ODL institutions are increasingly adopting ICT to meet this demand. In general, institutions are digitising their records. Many have developed databases to offer web-based solutions and have launched dynamic websites to provide specific requirements of their programmes and in response to queries from learners.

Table 5 Expansion of the ODL System

	At the End of IX Plan			Achievement during X Plan (up to March 2006)		
	IGNOU	**SOUs**	**CCIs**	**IGNOU**	**SOUs**	**CCIs**
Total No. of Programmes	74	325	–	125	552 (2005)	1616 (2005)
Total No. of Courses	854	–	–	1142	4054 (2005)	–
Total Enrolment	8.04	8.09	7.70	14.33	17.69 (2005)	8.5 (2005)
No. of Regional Centres	48	58	NA	58	57 (2005)	–
No. of Study Centres	1081	2986	NA	1409	4794 (2005)	2737 (2005)
Overseas Centres	30	–	NA	37	–	–

Compiled from: DEC (2004), (2007)

Use of Media and Technology

Although print is still the predominant medium of instruction, ODL institutions primarily depend on the use of multiple media for instruction delivery and to support learners throughout their learning endeavour. Electronic media are being used, through audio and video programmes which are also broadcast over radio/TV; there are also live interactions between the teacher and the taught through teleconferencing, interactive radio, email, web bases, chat sessions, computer conferencing, etc. Organisation and conduct of face-to-face sessions form an important component of the delivery system. Experience shows that the number of face-to-face sessions is rather limited for theory courses and the basic assumption that learners will come prepared in counselling sessions has not proved practical.

To give more weightage to the component of interactivity in the learning process, many OUs have introduced ICTs like interactive radio and television, satellite based teleconferencing, internet based learning resources and multimedia through CD-ROMs. The details are given in Table 6.

The establishment of dedicated educational TV and FM Radio channels should be considered a major positive step in the development of the infrastructure for providing better learner support services. IGNOU alone has set up national networks of 26 FM radio stations and about 200 Satellite Interactive Terminals (SITs) mediated through EDUSAT (a dedicated educational satellite). State OUs, professional institutions and conventional universities have also taken similar initiatives which will definitely revolutionise the methods of teaching and learning. Following the new innovations emerging in the field of educational technology, the ODL system is bound to influence the way people acquire and utilise knowledge (IGNOU, 2007).

Challenges

ODL provides education to learners according to their needs and convenience without compromising on quality. Depending on the availability of technology and various other infrastructures, different models have been suggested to reach the learners. Keeping in mind the various formulations and developments that have taken place in the ODL system, our focus here is on approaches adopted by various institutions. An understanding of the ongoing efforts in different parts of the country is therefore essential to take measures for furthering accountability and credibility of the system. It is now widely known that universities are keen to extend access and to increase student enrolments. But are they equally concerned about quality and flexibility? This question is important because a growing number of universities are offering DE learning programmes without a road map or putting mechanisms into place to ensure the quality of learning materials and desired support facilities for learners. In India, the practice of private examinations where students are registered with the universities is widespread. Students follow the curriculum which is taught to regular students and are allowed to appear in final examinations.

Table 6   Use of Media by Open Universities

	IGNOU	BRAOU	VMOU	NOU	YCMOU	MPBOU	BAOU	KSOU	NSOU	UPRTOU	TNOU
Face-to-face Sessions	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Broadcast	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	---
Telecast	√	√	---	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	---
Computer Aided Packages	---	---	---	√	√	√	√	---	√	√	---
Print	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Field Training	√	---	---	√	√	√	√	√	---	---	---
Seminars	√	---	---	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	---
Workbooks/ Projects	√	---	---	√	√	√	√	---	---	---	---
Assignments	√	---	---	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Audio Tapes	√	---	√	√	√	√	---	√	---	√	√
Video Tapes	√	---	---	---	√	---	---	---	---	---	√
Home Kits	√	---	---	√	√	---	---	---	---	---	---
Interactive Radio	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Tele Conferencing	√	√	---	---	√	---	√	√	---	---	---
Internet/E-mail	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Online Courseware	√	---	---	---	√	---	---	---	---	---	---
CD-ROMs	√	---	---	---	√	---	√	---	---	---	---
ICT Centres Video	√	---	---	---	---	√	---	---	---	---	---

Compiled from DEC (2007)

Correspondence courses can be construed as an improvement over private studies because such students are provided some printed materials and occasional personal contact programmes for short durations. In the majority of the universities offering private or correspondence courses, the curriculum and evaluation systems for both the formal and non-formal systems are similarly based on the logic of parity of degrees. As a result of such practices, the non-formal system has begun to lose parity of esteem and is regarded the last resort for those who are unable to enrol in the formal system. This has created an unfavourable mindset for students coming out from the non-formal system and as a result, students are not given due credit. Students face difficulties in understanding the curriculum without any help from the university; however, when they study hard and emerge successfully from the university, they do not get fair treatment in getting employment. In the whole process, students always remain at the receiving end.

The success of ODL primarily depends on three factors: course development, which includes content planning, choice of the pedagogical or epistemological approach and selection of media; course delivery which includes the physical infrastructure and the learner support system and evaluation mechanism to assist learners and sustain their motivation. In view of this, it is essential to have a close look at the existing ODL system in the country. A survey of various distance learning programmes offered by open and dual mode conventional universities shows that the print materials are the basic source of learning. In some cases, print materials are supplemented by multimedia. As of now, only a few OUs have the facilities to develop audio-visual materials. And as far as print materials are concerned, the real problem lies in developing them in a self-learning format. Besides, the existing materials need to be periodically revised and updated based on programme evaluation.

A regular/full-time faculty is another major issue for ODL institutions, in general, and the directorates of DE at DMUs, in particular. These directorates are run mostly with skeleton staff. In the majority of the cases, counselling is done once annually at a centralised location without looking into the needs and requirements of the learners. As the ODL system draws upon the expertise and experience of the faculty engaged in face-to-face teaching to prepare learning materials as well as support DE learners,

many institutions face the problem of getting experts to develop course materials and provide services to learners.

Yet another problem is the multiplicity/duplication of programmes offered by national OUs, state OUs (SOUs) and DMUs. Initiatives ought to be taken at the national as well as state level to avoid reinventing the wheel. At the state level, the SOUs and DMUs offering distance learning programmes should come together through coordinating bodies like the State Higher Education Council to develop uniform curricula and guidelines for the development of learning materials/sharing of resources. This would help ensure quality and uniform standards in DE. At the national level, the initiative of the DEC to develop a national pool of best materials needs to be pursued with vigour. However, the DEC should make these programmes available to all. This would not only bring about uniformity in the standards of various distance learning programmes but also ensure their quality.

Innovations in ITC for the benefit of distance learners have to be studied urgently. Most ODL institutions in our country are still in the process of developing required facilities to provide access to learners to technology-enabled learning. Internet-based synchronous technologies, web-conferencing, online learning, use of radio and television, etc., are just some examples of the rapid technological changes that may be utilised for the benefit of learners. ODL in India is still predominantly print based although the basic philosophy of distance learning and the varying needs of distance learners demand facilities for the appropriate combination of media and technologies. Although access to internet is limited, we must encourage all to put in place online services, such as for online registration, fee payment, course materials, declaration of results and such other information. Similarly, the distance education planners need to integrate mobile learning as a substantial and sustainable component of distance learning. An action plan needs to be developed for the application of ICT-based learning.

As such technology is essential to support pedagogy, its selection must be conducted with due care to keep the focus on learning. It would be pertinent here to give reference to the vision of our Former President on the use of space technology to take quality education to students living in remote areas in our country. In his presentation on the "Application of

Space Technology in Education". Kalam (2004) stressed a three-pronged approach for the viability and success of DE through a tele-education system. He suggested that "an integrated networked system comprising EDUSAT, Broadband and Wireless networks should provide a highway for reaching quality education to all parts of the country". Connectivity should be followed by the development of a tele-education system which "should not only enable the lectures delivered from the studio at the university to reach any remote corner but also enable a good teacher in the remote area to provide multicast information to other participants of the programme". In this direction, the third important parameter is quality content generation through the sharing of resources and transmission of quality materials to students in remote areas. "All this would lead to synergising the strengths of different universities in promoting quality education to our students in a cost effective manner" (Kalam, 2004). It is beyond any doubt that the need of the hour is to carry forward the knowledge base to remote locations using various collaborative tools.

The design and development of a learner support system play a crucial role in the successful completion of DE programmes. This system primarily includes facilities for interaction between learners with counsellors and access to multimedia tools and reference books to enhance learning ability at places convenient to the learners. In technical and professional programmes, adequate facilities for practical training must be provided. At present, most OUs in India have set up their study centres but this facility is yet to be developed by the DMUs for their learners. Learner support is probably the most neglected component of the ODL system in India. Although there is great overlapping in programmes and courses being offered, no step has yet been initiated to pool and share the existing support service networks set up by various DE institutions. The entire learner support system is largely dependent on part-time counsellors drawn from the conventional educational system. Orienting a large number of counsellors by apprising them of the requirements of distance learners and motivating them to the ODL system is very essential for the success of the system. IGNOU itself engages about 40,000 counsellors for its 130 programmes. However, unless these counsellors are properly trained in various facets of distance learning and are given periodic orientation, the basic needs of distance learners would not be addressed properly. Keeping in mind the constraints of resources, there is urgent need for the development of a collaborative learner support system.

Another important aspect is the issue of access to higher education, particularly to those sections of the population that have been denied equal opportunity. A study of the profiles of distance learners shows that out of the total of registered learners in the ODL system in 2003–2004, about 49% were women, about 32% belonged to marginalised groups and about 16% were from rural areas. However, in some SOUs, the learners from rural areas were about 50% (Srivastava & Ramegowda, 2006). Although the representation of women and marginalised groups is satisfactory, more effort is required to attract rural populations. Designing and developing curricula keeping in mind local needs and prospects of employability should significantly improve enrolment from these rural populations.

Experience shows that the success rates and acceptance of distance learners by job providers are key issues confronting practitioners of DE. It is clear that compared to conventional students, the success rate of ODL learners is significantly less. The reasons are many.

The ODL system is flexible and learners, who are mostly preoccupied with other activities, take more time to complete programmes. However, given the increasing enrolments of learners and varied programmes offered through ODL, one is tempted to conclude (and probably logically so), that a large cross-section of the society is deriving the benefits of distance learning.

Even so, distance learning is not the first choice of learners. It is predominantly conceived as a means of learning for those rejected by the conventional system. This perception is a creation of our own notion of correspondence education and lack of understanding of the basic philosophy of ODL. This in a way creates misconceptions about the value of the degrees earned through ODL. Rethinking by education providers on the nature and scope of ODL as an effective mode to disseminate knowledge is very much required. Then only would we be in a position to bring change in the societal perception and attitude towards ODL.

There are strong reservations regarding the quality of education being provided by ODL institutions in view of lack of credit transfers between OUs and conventional universities. There are constraints pertaining to mobility of learners among ODL institutions themselves. Each institution has its own method of assessing prior learning and exercises its own

discretion. There is a strong need for the establishments of a proper accreditation system and a prior learning assessment and recognition mechanism.

Conclusion

To keep pace with the rapid changes in education and the shift from teacher and institution-based learning to student-centred learning, ODL is the best available option offered. Undoubtedly, ODL is a modern tool and holds great promise. With the advent of new technologies and the demand for technology-enhanced learning, there is an urgent need for the development of a focused academic agenda which deploys appropriate technology to support the pedagogy. The challenge is to anticipate emerging educational purposes and experiences. Innovation and adaptability to change are the major attributes of ODL. However, its success largely depends on how best the institutions address the needs of learners and the concerns for quality.

References

Altbach, P.G. & Davis, T.M. (1999). Global Challenge and National Response. In Philip, G. Altbach and Patti McGill Peterson (Eds), *Higher Education in the 21st Century Global Challenge and National Response.* Institute of International Education and Boston College Centre for International Higher Education: Annapolis Junction.

Barnett, R., Gareth & Coate, K. (2000). *Conceptualizing Curriculum Change, Teaching in Higher Education, 6*(4), pp. 435–449.

Becher, T. (1989). *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Biswas, P.K. (2001). Learning strategies and academic performance: A study of the successful distance learners of PGDDE programme of IGNOU, *Indian Journal of Open Learning, 10*(2), pp. 211−220.

Distance Education Council (DEC) (2004); (2007). *Information Database on Distance Higher Education in India.* New Delhi: Distance Education Council.

Garg, S., Venkaiah, V., Puranik, C. & Panda, S. (Eds.) (2006). *Four Decades of Distance Education in India: Reflections on Policy and Practices.* New Delhi: Viva Books Pvt. Ltd.

Henkel, M. (2000). Academic identities and policy change. *Higher Education.* London: Jessica-Kingsley.

IGNOU (2007). IGNOU Vice Chancellor's Report, New Delhi: IGNOU.

Kalam, A.P.J. (2004). Vikram Sarabhai Memorial Lecture, delivered on 12.8.04. Accessed from: www.icssr.org

Kapur, D. & Mehta, P.B. (2004). Indian Higher Education Reform: From Half-Baked Socialism to Half-Baked Capitalism. *CID Working Paper No.108,* Centre for International Development, Harvard University.

Kumar, A. (1999). Learner characteristics and success in Indian Distance Education. *Open Learning, 14*(37), pp. 52−58.

Manjulika, S. & Reddy, V. (1996). *Distance Education in India: A Model for Developing Countries.* New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd.

Srivastava, M. & Ramegowda, N.S. (2006). Profile of Distance Learners. In Suresh Garg, V. Venkaiah, Chambi Puranik and Santosh Panda (Eds.). *Four Decades of Distance Education in India: Reflections on Policy and Practices*. New Delhi: Viva Books Pvt. Ltd.

Srivastava, M. (2006). IGNOU graduates: How did they benefit? *Indian Journal of Open Learning, 15*(3), pp. 257−270.

Taplin, M. (2000). Problems experienced by female distance education students at IGNOU: Why do some consider dropping out while others decide to stay? *Indian Journal of Open Learning, 9*(2).

UGC (1977); (1984); (1994); (2005); (2007). *UGC Annual Reports 1975−1976; 1982−1983; 1992−1993, 2005−2006.* New Delhi: University Grants Commission.

Venkaiah, V., Puranik, C. & Rausaria, R.R. (2006). Changing nature of academic programmes at a distance: The Indian perspective. In Suresh Garg, V. Venkaiah, Chambi Puranik and Santosh Panda (Eds). *Four Decades of Distance Education in India: Reflections on Policy and Practices*. New Delhi: Viva Books Pvt. Ltd.