Revamping the Distance Education in India: Some Necessary Interventions

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Abstract

Tomorrow's education must form a co-coordinated totality in which all sectors of society are structurally integrated. It will be universalized and continual. From the point of view of individual people, it will be total and creative and consequently individualised and self directed. It will be the bulwark and the driving force in culture, as well as in promoting professional activity. This movement is irresistible and irreversible. It is the cultural revolution of our times.

Keywords: distance education, universal, individual, creative, cultural revolution

Abstrak

Pendidikan untuk masa depan perlu diselaraskan secara menyeluruh, iaitu dalam mana semua struktur sektor masyarakat diintegrasikan. Corak pendidikan akan bersifat berterusan dan meliputi sejagat manusia. Dari sudut pandangan seseorang individu, ia akan bercorak total dan kreatif dan seterusnya dipandu mengikut keperluan individu. Ia akan menjadi benteng dan pendorong dalam budaya serta dalam mempromosikan aktiviti profesional. Pergerakan ini tetap berlaku dan perubahan yang dijangka didatangkan sangat menarik. Nyata sekali hal ini akan menjadi kebudayaan revolusi masa kini.

Kata kunci: pendidikan jarak jauh, universal, individu, kreatif, revolusi budaya

Introduction

The Cultural Revolution as envisaged in the observation is possible only when universalisation of education is done on a war-footing. Regular scheme of education alone could not be the 'fits-all' panacea for achieving this universalisation. The role of distance education in supplementing this unique effort is indispensable. Globalisation of education has brought in new imperatives and opportunities for distance education programs. Rapid economic development has fuelled a demand for human resources with skills and capabilities to compete in volatile global markets.

While number of educational institutions has increased to meet this demand, the gap between market requirements and supply is widening. Distance education programs are expected to contribute to meeting these demands alongside, regular programs by offering job-oriented courses.

Distance education programs were established with an explicit principle of extending universal access to higher education with an emphasis on equity and autonomy. These programs have become hugely successful in terms of students enrollment and popularity. In Tamil Nadu alone more than seventeen universities offered distance education programs with over a 12 lakh students enrolled in 2007. Government policies are now being framed to harness the potential of distance education programs to serve the needs of the market as well as the aspirations of the students—both from rural and urban regions.

Distance Education: The Prime Mover of 'Inclusive' Education

Trend analysis of the higher education system in India indicates few critical developments. Higher education system in India is finding meaningful expression by using alternate channels of learning provisions.

Distance Education System of this country has also witnessed the birth of other sub-systems such as Open Learning Systems including Open Universities. The sanctity of the Distance Education System lies in the type of clientele system it fathers. It is expected that distance education and open learning systems should cater to the millions who do not have access to the formal education system, as well as in providing flexible,

need-based programme. The proposed study would be a contribution to our understanding of the effectiveness of distance education programs.

Further, it is argued that courses offered by emerging deemed universities and self-financing private institutions are increasingly being tailored to meet the domestic multi-national job markets at the expense of regional market demands through western-centric course content. Expectations are that distance education programs would be able to design development and delivery appropriate programs to meet the regional demand through localisations. These markets would include local business, small-scale industries, micro-enterprises, government employment; IT enabled services as well as fast growing sectors like pharmaceuticals and bio-technology.

Distance education programs are flexible and open, providing students from poor socio-economic background an opportunity to pursue higher education degrees while continuing to work. They also provide many employed youth an opportunity to pursue their special interest in learning. Scholars studying distance education programs have argued that distance education is an industrialised form of teaching and learning, with a strong potential for promoting student autonomy.

Distance Education: A Compromise on Quality?

However public perception of distance education programs sees these programs as less attractive, pursued by students unable to secure a regular college enrollment. Consequently, degree obtained through distance education programs is undervalued in both public perception and job markets. Such negative characterisation has implications for students pursing these programs.

It is argued that students pursuing studies through distance education are underperformers, lacking intrinsic motivation and are driven predominantly by a need to obtain a degree certificate. As such, little research that has been carried out on distance education programs has emphasised the need for equivalence with regular stream and hence has focused exclusively on curriculum and course development. As such they

have relied on academic performance to draw conclusions about quality of outcome.

The research has also examined the 'drop-out' phenomenon and student's autonomy in greater detail than on what are student's understandings and perceptions, thus providing us only a partial view of student's perceptions.

Studies focusing on students have shown that empathy approaches are conducive to student motivation and success, that problem learning can be brought about in distance education that methods have been developed to facilitate learning and that modern technology can efficiently serve distance education.

Distance Education and Technological Relevance

The developing conditions in today's world have far reaching effects in this current generation without borders. Each and every country around the world is in the process of adjusting and developing in order to keep up with the changing world in which communication is acknowledged to be at the heart of every system and every institution in society. Technology is a determining factor in ways of thinking and the course of current events, influencing the activities of human society. People now have the opportunity to use technology to choose their own educational course. For this reason, educational system of yesterday is obsolete for the people of tomorrow.

Governments around the world have increasingly used distance education, both pre-service and in-service, to overcome conventional, campus based programme constraints in funding, access and student places.

Most institutions of higher education acknowledge that distance education has a role in higher education in the area of either communication or learning. Therefore, educators need to adjust current teaching methods so as to correspond to learners' need as much as possible. These adjustments need to emphasise open learning and flexible learning both of which require traditional education to increasingly adjust to the format of distance education.

It is generally acknowledged around the globe that distance education is a good course to follow. From a report regarding distance education in different countries, it has been found that distance education has met with quite a bit of success for many years now as technology has evolved and developed from communication by standard mail service to a wide variety of communication mediums, and has now entered the age of networking and multimedia. These technological developments in themselves have changed the situation entirely, as the state of the world has changed; a whole new meaning has been given to the term "Distance Education".

Redefining Distance Education

Distance Education is a style of education in which teachers and students who are in different locations at the same time, or at different times, conduct classroom activities by means of two-way interactive telecommunication, including video, voice, and data. Besides this, it should be noted that the objective of this educational format is based on the belief that, through two way interactive communication, the same effective learning will be obtained as compared with traditional education methods.

As technology changes, the constituent elements of teaching and learning methods must also correspondingly be adjusted to fit with these changes. It must be understood that the success or failure which results from distance education will depend upon the quality of people's knowledge of technology more so than the quality of the communication media itself.

Designing Distance Education: Shedding of the 'Traditional' Jinx

The expansion of style of education from the confines of traditional, or conventional, education to distance education originates in the development of educational technology. In order to meet the needs of learners, society, and a country which is advancing towards Western standards it is necessary to step out of traditional mode of face-to-face education and develop distance education, for when we think of distance education, the image which usually comes to mind is one of classroom activities being done by teachers and students who are separated due to factors of time and distance. The System model is therefore a tool that can

be used to move distance education away from conventional education and to separate good distance education from bad distance education. Furthermore, distance education should not be regarded as merely a passing educational fashion, but rather a duty of all those who have a hand in helping learners to acquire knowledge and gain acceptance.

Therefore, it is urgently necessary to examine each and every basic element of distance education so as to establish, carry out and assess a new system of education that will deliver effective results in both the areas of teaching and learning.

It might be said that distance education must necessarily use a new design and develop a system of distance teaching. It is especially important that institutions of higher education establish a program of distance education, educators generally face the following questions: Does technology which has already been employed in distance education deliver the same results as traditional teaching methods? How much does it cost? Is it beneficial to learners?

Instructional design is critical to distance education and planning for effective teaching is needed for learning to occur.

Even though a design for distance education has already been assembled, it is not very different from already established academic plans. In this regard, most educators generally fail that makes a break from the conventions of traditional education.

It follows that there are many reasons for which distance education must have a different organisational framework than that of traditional education. One reason is that the technology used in distance education is generally not a part of the foundational teaching media with which most instructors are well acquainted. And since many administrators are not very familiar with this technology either, it is necessary to plan, develop, package, and distribute such a system for facilitating distance education. Yet if this is so, the additional workload for teachers and administrators will be more than they can reasonably handle. Therefore, in the final analysis, the establishment of such a system will be left to educational policy at the national and international level, owing to the fact that most

institutions of higher education are owned by the state. The implementation of such a policy will naturally involve society at large and politics will be unavoidable.

Variables of a Veritable Distance Education Design

Research that has been done on distance education has found that there are many variables that affect the successful establishment of distance education.

Media Variables
It is believed that the success of traditional teaching or distance educational teaching is the same. Choosing instructional media is important. Even though the success of modes of teaching is the same, why are the media variables important?

Many instructors use technologies to deliver distance education which have synchronous and asynchronous distance contexts. Moreover, they have to consider the factors involved systematically in order to deliver the contents effectively and efficiently. However, in the future the delivery systems may not be important, but the techniques and methods which make learning flexible are more important.

Instructional Variables
Instructional variables are needed to study carefully because the activities of distance education are live and interactive, and the learners and the instructors are far away.

Strategies for teaching are the factors which affect the instructional achievements, especially student focused instructional strategies. Promoting interaction, giving feedback, facilitating discussions, creating learner-centered activities, and ensuring flexibility are important to the instructional design and delivery.

For distance education, instructional designs are needed to get critical assessment and planning for efficient teaching according to the learners' needs.

Instruction and feedback are the main factors of learner's effective distance learning experiences; the instructors have to perceive and try to follow the interaction strategies.

Interaction models are needed in distance education. There are 4 models: learner-content learner-learner, learner-teacher, and learner and learner's environment.

If divided by interaction model, distance education interactions can be divided into individual interaction, and social interaction.

So, at present distance education usually means social interactions which may be synchronous or asynchronous.

Instructors have a duty to create interactions during distance education, and the designing of interactions and effective instructions also are important factors.

Learner Characteristics
Learner variables, such as learner characteristics, learner elements, and learning styles are very important in order to bring the information to plan in the determination of the curriculum and instructional program designed to help learners access the information and also to affect the distance education condition. Obtaining the information about distance educational learners' needs great efforts because of the long distance between learners and instructors. Enrollment motivation is another factor which should be considered because the learners who choose to study in distance education programs have individual reasons about being suitable in their own lifestyles. Providing learner support, for instance, duration of feedback and ability to use information sources or teaching aids is another factor of the instruction.

Instructor Elements
Another important factor of distance education is instructor elements. Instructors may have many roles in considering contents-not only, as a provider of information but also as a facilitator, a collaborator, a guide, and a motivator and considering the strength and the weakness of the technologies. Therefore, the instructors need to prepare and adapt

themselves to plan their further instructions. Furthermore, instructor specifications and techniques are important to affect the success of distance education, that is-having self-confidence experience, ability in using modern teaching aids, using media creatively and having continuously high interactions with learners.

Cost Variables
One of the main variables is cost variables in order to effectively manage the delivery system and instructional supports.

Content Variables
Nowadays there is a lot of widely scattered information, so arranging content efficiently is another considerable factor. Qualified contents affect the success of distance education. As a result, there should be an arrangement of data base for learners.

From the factors of distance education mentioned, there are still many small systems relating and affecting the failure or success of distance education in institutions. And it is accepted that effective distance education does not come from only having modern high technologies but also providing related factors sufficiently including cooperation of all divisions-policy, planning and project strategies. Especially, government sectors have to open opportunities for developing educational systems and studying the internal and external factors, developing curriculum, developing technologies, working models and continuous learning including networks of local distance education.

Distance Education: The Unexplored Agenda

E-Education: Learning at Your Desktop
Though the success of distance education predominantly rests on the various variables discussed above, it would be more worthwhile if it responds to the changing needs of a technological society. The information and communication technology has revolutionized the way we live today. Information is power and this power brings convenience above all. Simplification and accessibility remain the dictums in all the major interfaces- government to government, government to private, government to citizen, private to citizen and so on.

There is ample scope for effectively using ICT in distance education. In fact distance education would go places with the magical touch of the ICT. The very concept of distance education will be effectively nullified as the distance factor will be totally irrelevant if the IC technology is mindfully applied to all the distance education elements like pcp (Personal Contact Programmes) classes, learning materials, examinations, hall ticket issuance, student – teacher interaction etc.

More recently studies have underscored the significance of new information and communication technology integration and its consequences–by speeding up student-tutor interaction when electronic mail is used, by offering possibilities for spontaneous discussions on the Internet, which can also be used to supplement and explain teaching provided by print, facilitating search for information and sources of information on the web etc. (Rekkadal, 1993). Fuelled by developments in the Internet Technologies, and more recently Web 2.0, the concept of 'open learning' is also central to debates on the future of distance learning programs.

Only the distance education has all the ingredients of efficiently metamorphosing into a full fledged e-education by perfectly capitalising on the inputs provided by the ICT. The distance education remains the best mode deserving the ICT up gradation as accessibility remains a major challenge here. It scores over the traditional education even in serving best the special needs of the inaccessible. The IC technology perfectly fits here in distance education driving out the inaccessibility factor.

Therefore riding on an efficient design where IC technology plays wonders in reaching the unreachable through internet based communication, the distance education would really work wonders in the educational history of our country thereby making e-education a happening reality in the lives of the common man particularly the disadvantaged.

Caring for the Careless: Distance Education and Disabled
Since distance Education has now been established as a successful means to provide quality higher education to the marginalised and disadvantaged groups' people with disabilities can benefit much from the provisions of

distance education. It can integrate disabled people who account for nearly 10% of the total population, into the mainstream society, and empower them with the necessary confidence and dignity to live like any other individual. However, the full potential of distance education for people with disabilities has yet to be exploited by distance education institutions, as all of them flourish in the "economies of scale" by providing mass education, without much customisation that is expected of a service sector like education. With the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education, especially in the ICT mediated distance education, providing customised services to disabled learners is no more a dream. Providing accessible learning materials and services are not only good for the disabled but others too appreciate it. However, most of the time attitude, willingness and lack of information on available options become barriers to develop and provide accessible learning materials and services.

For persons with a disability, education is the key to social and economic empowerment. In order to gainfully accommodate people with disabilities in the income generation and economic activities, their access to higher education must be improved. Distance education has emerged as a powerful way to offer educational opportunities to people with disabilities. Distance education offer flexibilities in location, scheduling and course delivery formats that may be first access of disabled people to higher education.

The heterogeneity of distance learners, and people with disabilities do not allow for any absolute statement, but the standard features of distance education, such as flexible study time, choice of study location and autonomy in deciding the workload, can and should facilitate customization of education for the disabled. However, in spite of the possibilities to serve disabled individuals better, distance education institutions very rarely go out to provide specialised services to their disabled learners.

Distance education remains the only resort to the people with disabilities as their disabilities can effectively be coped with various learning and assistive technologies enhanced by ICT. It's high time that the policy makers make necessary policies to accommodate the so called disabled

into the mainstream society by enabling them academically. Only education can repair the loss the nature has rendered them. Only distance education could father their phenomenal rising to glory with the all powerful IC technology.

Distance Open Learning (DOL) can play a crucial role in meeting the needs of the disabled people in India in the following ways by:

1. Increasing the accessibility to the existing courses/programmes which the disabled people want to do.
2. Designing new courses – academic and vocational – suitable to the special needs and abilities of the disabled.
3. Offering training programmes which would equip the disabled to take up appropriate jobs.
4. Offering awareness programmes for the parents, the general public and the policy makers.
5. Enhancing the quality of the existing training programmes for the personnel working with the disabled.
6. Expanding the scope of the present training programmes to cover greater number of trainees.
7. Designing and offering new training/staff development programmes for the pre-service and in-service staff and the NGOs working in the disability sector.

Conclusion

Thus in an effort to supplement the universalisation of education particularly at the graduation level and beyond, the distance mode of education has emerged as an undisputed leader on par with the regular mode. But in view of certain drawbacks it has been acquiring since its emergence, owing to several complacencies the distance mode has been smacking of some dangerous tendencies of lagging much behind in terms of technology and value addition which are supposed to be the main drivers of a well-nourished distance education design. The article has shed enough light on the crucial issues of technological relevance, effective designing of distance education format, synergising Information and Communication Technology with the educational technology and caring

for the disabled, all of which rightly rejuvenate the existing system as whole.

In short, the distance education has emerged more as a heaven sent opportunity not only to the economically disadvantaged but also for the physically disadvantaged. The present day distance education will soon become the major model for higher education when it is perfectly in unison with the e-education format. The distant dream of creating a civilised society with an informed citizenry will then be a reality with the hitherto untouched illiterate sections becoming highly literate at the Midas touch of the distance mode of education.

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