INNOVATION IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING SYSTEM:
The IGNOU Experience

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ABSTRACT

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) occupies a prominent position in the academic world by way of shouldering the responsibility of providing quality education to the growing numbers of learners. Its journey of achieving its objectives is marked with the problems of efficiency, equity, quality and benchmarking of the ODL system. The IGNOU had established the experience that there are several impediments to innovation, most of which are of bureaucratic nature. In this paper we present our experience of nurturing innovations with an aim to sensitize the ODL functionaries towards creativity and innovation.

Keywords: Innovation, bureaucratic impediment, open and distance learning system.

The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system in India is about three decades old. There is one National Open University, namely the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and 13 State Open Universities approved by the Distance Education Council. The ODL system has shown a tremendous growth during the past few decades due to its unique feature of being a user-friendly system. In this system, the students are free to learn at their own pace and convenience while being placed far away from the institution. This uniqueness and the ease of gaining knowledge have a pivotal role to play in facilitating today's emerging knowledge society. In India, today almost half of the students enrolled in higher education are receiving education through the distance mode, i.e., through the open universities or through the Directorates of Distance Education of traditional universities. However, the problems of efficiency, equity, quality and benchmarking of the ODL system still persist.

In the wake of the UN Millennium Development Goals, which emphasize on education for sustainable development, there is a need and demand for innovative methodologies and programmes in the ODL system that would meet the quality requirements of the large and diverse communities of the country, for their overall development. There is a need for innovations that would increase the efficiency and quality of the ODL system.

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The Government of India (GoI) has set the target of the national Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) to be increased to 30 % by 2020 (Department of Higher Education, 2011, p.7), which means bringing in about additional 26 million learners in the ambit of higher education (p. 9).

To achieve this colossal target, there is an estimated need for 800 more Universities and 35,000 more colleges in the next ten years (The Times of India, 2010). Evidently, with the current infrastructure of 480 Universities and 22,000 colleges, the country is not equipped to cater to the huge number of learners.

The Working Group of the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resources Development, GoI for the 12th Five Year Plan (2012-2017) clearly emphasised the important role of IGNOU and Distance Education saying "IGNOU's share in higher education enrolment amounts to about 15% of the total student population in the universities in India" (Department of Higher Education, 2011, p. 20) and "Distance Education system is emerging as an important means to cater to the increasing demand for higher education" (p. 25 -26).

In the above scenario, the role of IGNOU becomes highly crucial in taking a lead role as regards providing quality education to the growing numbers of learners. There is a pressing need for IGNOU to equip itself for making innovations in its various educational services to provide quality and access to the unreached. IGNOU functions through its sub-systems, such as the Vice Chancellor's office, Schools of Studies, Centres, Administration Division, Finance and Accounts Division, and Learner Support Services Division among others. The mindset of the functionaries in these sub-systems plays an important role in the acceptance and diffusion of innovations in the system (Das & Ghosh, 2012).

Recognising the need for innovations in the ODL system, IGNOU had established the National Centre for Innovations in Distance Education (NCIDE) to promote, develop and pilot innovations in all aspects of the ODL system. While working on the subject of innovations at NCIDE, we have experienced that there are several impediments to innovation, such as acceptance of the innovative ideas by the functionaries concerned, which reflects their attitude towards innovation. This mindset needs to be changed if any improvement in the ODL system is to be brought about.
In this paper we have highlighted some of our experiences with an aim to sensitize the ODL functionaries towards innovations. There is a need for them to understand the psyche of the innovators to be in a position to better appreciate their approach and attitude towards work.

THE ATTITUDE IS LACKING

Let us look into a real life experience of one of the authors (CKG) which has reflection about the lack of proper attitude. The episode will help in setting the tone of the paper.

Night Sky is a Fantastic Laboratory
Teachers in school have a tendency of complaining about lack of infrastructure. They feel that in particular, laboratory infrastructure is quite poor across the schools in the country. Thus the teachers are unable to show live demonstration in the classrooms. In this connection, let us question – Have we ever given a thought on the issue that night sky is a fantastic laboratory?

One does not need the Attendant to come and open the locks. It is of course required that the sky be clear. It is this laboratory which was used to a great extent by stalwarts like Aryabhatta, Aristarchus of Samos, Galileo, Tyco Brahe, Johannes Kepler and others.

Having said so, let us narrate an experience of CKG who was denied the opportunity of making suitable observation of the night sky. The incident took place in April 1986 when he was teaching at the Department of Physics of a well-known college in Kolkata, India. It was the time when the Haley's Comet was getting viewed from earth. Such a situation happens with a periodicity of about 76 years, and so it is quite a rare cosmic phenomenon. In 1986 the tail of the comet was away from the sun and thus it did not become a cosmic spectacle. A telescope was required for its viewing.

The author was quite keen to make the observation. He also inspired his students to do so. There is a place called Diamond Harbour about 100 km southeast of Kolkata. It was the vantage point for observation during the late evening time for a stretch of about five to six days. He had to look for a good telescope for being taken to Diamond Harbour for the observation. The college being quite old and traditional had a large 8-inch telescope. It was kept unutilized for years together and so the author felt that the observation of Haley's Comet would be the right occasion for utilising this telescope.

He with the help of a Laboratory Assistant took the telescope out of the store, got the accumulated fungus cleaned and brought it into proper shape so much so that distant objects like torn posters on building walls having aerial distance of more than 10 km could be seen clearly. But the telescope had to be taken outside the premises of the college to Diamond Harbour. So the permission of the Principal had to be sought. On approaching the Principal, he said that he was not the competent authority. Since it is a costly device, the permission of the College Council, which is the Governing Body, has to be sought. There was hardly any time left for holding a meeting of the Governing Body by following the due procedure. It was also pointed out that the issue is not so significant that it merits a meeting of the Governing Body with a single point agenda. Thus the telescope could not be taken for viewing Haley's Comet. The students missed a chance of a life time. The story does not end there. A few days later one of the teachers of the college had to go for Extra-ordinary Leave (EOL). The permission for EOL also is not the jurisdiction solely of the Principal. It has to be referred to the Governing Body. The case was urgent and permission for EOL was obtained from the members of the Governing Body by way of circulation of the relevant documents. One wonders that what could be done in the case of permission for EOL, why the same could not be done for getting the desired permission in respect of taking the telescope to Diamond Harbour!

In another incident, personal computers (PCs) sent to the rural schools of Madhya Pradesh, India were not unpacked from the packages as the Headmasters feared that if after opening the devices malfunction, then it would lead to curtailment of their pension.

The above episodes, though not directly related to the ODL system, show the lack of the desired attitude. The Principal of the college in Kolkata and the Headmasters in the state of Madhya Pradesh suffered from xenophobia and some kind of unknown fear.

It is also seen that the clerical staff on whom a lot depends, seldom escapes the infection spread by their superiors.

Needless to say, they lack the proper attitude that can nurture innovations. There is a huge gap in the level of understanding among the bureaucrats and the innovators. Bureaucrats are generally adaptors in contrast to the innovators. They have a different mindset compared to the innovators. They dislike risks and want to play safe. For the bureaucrats, therefore, it is important to understand the mindset of innovators, who can bring about quality and efficiency in the system. We attempt here to provide some idea about the psychological and behaviourial characteristics of innovators and adaptors.

INNOVATORS

Several experts have worked on the psychological profile of the innovators and have provided useful insights on how they innovate; what thought processes and methods they employ while innovating.

H. Barnett (1953) emphasized that innovations initially and primarily take place on a mental plane where divergent ideas converge. Popular belief holds that innovations are largely the product of supraindividual inventors who have great intellects, insight, and an eagerness to take risks. These independent innovators are also the entrepreneurs whose gall, brilliance and drive for profit make the market economy function (Environmental and Natural Resources Policy and Training Project, 1995).

Dr. Michael Kirton worked extensively for more than three decades on the psychological aspects of creative and innovative individuals. According to him, all people are creative and the creativity of one individual differs from another in style and approach. He proposed that the creative ability of the people could fall in a continuum between high and low.

While one person could have the ability to *do things better*, the other could have the ability to *do things differently*. Kirton labeled the people who could do things better as *adaptors*, and those who could do things differently as *innovators*. He theorized that these two categories of people form the extreme ends of a continuum on which any individual could be located.

He stated, "The contention . . . is that everyone can be located on a continuum ranging from an ability to 'do things better' to an ability to 'do things differently,' and the ends of this continuum are labeled adaptive and innovative, respectively" (Stum, 2009). He called his theory the Adaptor –Innovator (A-I) theory.

Kirton defined creativity as the capacity of an individual for initiating change and based on his A-I theory, he proposed parameters to measure how and in what ways a person is creative, known as the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory (KAI). The KAI helps people find their creating styles and how they use them to initiate a change that is both new and relevant to their context.

He also provided the behavioural descriptions of both adaptors and innovators (Kirton, 1984) which is summarised in Table 1.

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Table: 1

Behaviour descriptions of adaptors and innovators

Adaptor	Innovator
Does things better Reliable, efficient, methodical, disciplined, conforming, safe, dependable	Does things differently Undisciplined, unpredictable, abrasive, creating dissonance, ingenious, unsound, impractical, catalyst to settled groups, irreverent of their consensual views
Resolve problems rather than finding them	Discover problems, manipulate problems and discover solutions that have low consensus
Impervious to boredom	Work in routine for usually only short bursts
Tends to high self-doubt when system is challenged, reacts to criticism by closer outward conformity; Vulnerable to social pressure and authority; compliant	Appears to have low self-doubt when generating ideas, not needing consensus to maintain certitude in face of opposition; less certain when placed in core of system
When collaborating with innovators: supplies stability, order and continuity to the partnership	When collaborating with adaptors: supplies the task orientations, the break with the past and accepted theory
Provides a safe base for the innovator's riskier operations	Provides the dynamics to bring about periodic radical change, without which institutions tend to ossify

Understanding the behaviour and the motivation of the innovator (s) is of prime importance for the successful steering of an organisation towards innovativeness. However, there is a lack of understanding between the innovators and the bureaucrats in this vital area. The following section explores the impediments the innovators face due to the apathetic attitude of the bureaucrats.

Apathy Towards Learning Through Electronic Medium

One of the authors (CKG) had been a member of the Executive Council (EC) and Planning Board (PB) of two State Open Universities. Both the universities are in existence for more than a decade. At both the places during deliberations at the meetings of the Executive Council and Planning Board the efficacy of learning through electronic media was explained.

It was also mentioned that educational video must from an integral part of the teaching-learning transactions of any open university. In order to bring home the point, some educational video programmes prepared by IGNOU and in particular one physics programme made by CKG along with the eminent scientist, Prof. J.V. Narlikar was shown.

It was appreciated by one and all. CKG got lot of pats on his back. Some sort of wishes (no commitments) were expressed that the said open university would take up such endeavour of preparing video programming, but nothing has happened so far.

An introspection into the matter reveals an apathy towards electronic media as the cause behind such inaction (Roy & Ghosh, 2011). Thus more than a decade old open universities remain restricted to printed mode as far as teaching-learning transactions are concerned and do not provide the scope to their students to get the benefit of learning through the visual medium.

Innovation in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) System

Innovations in the ODL system in India have indeed been found across diverse areas. However, no attempts had been made to identify, classify and adapt these innovations. The National Centre for Innovations in Distance Education (NCIDE) at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) took up the task and classified the diverse areas of innovation of the ODL system into the following categories (Das & Dikshit, 2010):

- ➢ Innovative Programme
- ➢ Innovative application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in delivery mechanism
- ➢ Innovations in admission procedures and learner support
- ➢ Innovations in evaluation methodologies and practices
- ➢ Innovations supporting convergence of systems
- ➢ Quality management and benchmarking

Let us now discuss them in detail.

Innovative Programme

A programme forms the core of the ODL system. It refers to either a Certificate, Diploma or Degree programme that consists of a few courses (the number of which differs from programme to programme). Examples of programmes include Master of Business Administration, Bachelor's Degree, Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education Programme, etc. It has been discussed earlier that the main component of a Programme comprises instructional design. It is the special design of the instructions to the learners (study material) of the ODL system.

The instruction is learner-centric instead of being teacher-centric and has features that the learner easily understands. It is designed in such a way so as to cater to learners with a wide range of qualifications and learning abilities. The programmes considered innovative are expected to contain new content which includes contemporary issues and the range is indeed wide-from Shoe Stitching to Heart Stitching, from Pottery Design to Performing Arts. Some examples are Certificate Course in English Language & Personality Development (Uttarakhand Open University), Postgraduate Diploma or Masters Degree in Museum Studies at University of Leicester, Life Coping Skills and Communication Skills (Tamil Nadu Open University), Online Horticulture Degree (Oregon State University), Natural Resources and the Environment Certificate (Colorado State University), PG Diploma in Water, Wastewater & Health (Chhattisgarh University), and Certificate in Sustainable Community Development (Simon Fraser University).

The Impediments in Offering Innovating Programmes Are As Under

These innovative programmes generally do not have any parallel in the conventional system. So there is no room to fall back upon for getting guidelines about curriculum design, evaluation methodology, organising practical sessions for skill-based programmes, etc.

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However, there are institutions/organizations that have specialized in these areas, for example Apollo Hospital for Clinical Cardiology, *Khadi Gramodyog Vikas Samiti* for handmade paper products, etc. It is not in the scheme of things of an open university to recruit faculty with complete expertise in an offbeat area and offer the programme. Thus, it emerges that there should be adequate provision for collaboration with institutions/organizations, which have expertise in such areas. As a matter of fact, such provisions are not non-existent. But the statutory obligations involved are many, which are quite time consuming, full of bureaucratic hassles and at times quite intimidating from the point of view of consequences to be faced by a faculty if each of them is not fulfilled.For example, say one has chosen an organization X for some programme. While vetting the MoU required to be signed, the Legal Cell will raise the question – Has the possibility of collaboration with other similar organization been explored? However, there are no specific University guidelines that direct the process of collaboration. At present a MoU is signed based on the fulfilment of basic mutual objectives.

Next comes the question about the 'Share of Fee' between the university and the collaborating institution. Again there is no specific formula. In a way it is a reflection on flexibility and a healthy practice but it entails performing some calculations on the basis of unknown parameters like number of students to be admitted, number of study centres per region to be activated, cost of consumable items in case of a laboratory based programme, etc. Thus it becomes essential that the matter gets referred to Finance & Accounts. There such calculations, which are generally done by way of combined application of mind of the faculty members and the officials of the Student Support Services Division, are vetted by the clerical staff at the behest of their superiors. With due respect to them, they lack adequate knowledge about the innovative dimensions of the programmes which generally do not have any precedence, nor do they try to apply their mind to understand the intricacies. But still they provide comments and these get authenticated by their superiors. Such a working procedure has become a part of the pattern of operations and needless to mention, it impedes the process of launch of the programme.

A programme, prior to its launch, has to go through several stages which involve the School Board, that is the highest academic body in the School of Studies that houses the programme, the Planning and Development Division, the Academic Council and finally the Board of Management.

Such a flowchart has been worked out to ensure checks and balances which are essential in a university system but it is seen more often than not that most of the learned members of these bodies remain silent during the discussions. They do not contribute effectively, but these deliberations form an essential part of the procedural framework and hence unavoidable. Can we not think of a single body customized to the requirement of the programme?

Innovative Application Of ICT In Delivery Mechanism
The impact of ICT in education can be felt strongly by observing the uses of ICT tools, such as multiple media, in teaching. These ICT tools support the predominant print media being used by the ODL system. The ICT tools are expected to help teachers in finding solutions to learning problems by providing them with new instruments for the analysis and continuous monitoring of students' learning processes.

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The category 'Application of ICT in delivery mechanism' includes the innovative use of ICT tools in delivery mechanism and learning methodologies. It also includes innovative ICT–enabled online student registration, online programme delivery, online evaluation of assignments and project reports, online examination, online availability of results, and making available the self learning materials and other resources in a digital repository, etc. Any creative intervention that uses ICT in print material production and its distribution to learners is also considered an innovation in this category.

In order to ensure that the fruits of such innovation reach the students, it is essential that they should have at least a PC with access to internet. The urban student is computer savvy and most of them would be having the desired access. The problem lies with the semi-urban and the rural students. We have to remember that the slogan of the ODL system is to '*Reach the Unreached'*. So we have to worry more for such disadvantaged learners. Now, "If the Mountain does not come to the Muhammad, then Muhammad has to go to the Mountain." Keeping such an ideology in mind, it was felt time and again that let the study centres of IGNOU be equipped with ICT based devices, and let that first be done for the remote area study centres. A student may not be having the facility with him, but he and his peers can definitely take access to such systems at the study centres.

Now comes the bureaucratic intervention. An IGNOU study centre is not a permanent establishment of IGNOU. They are temporary or at best semi-permanent. Some of them are in private institutions. Can the public fund be utilized to create facilities at such an institution? Again the host institution asks how can they pay for additional charges of electricity, telephone, etc? Who will purchase the software? The University becomes wary of the fact that perhaps due to the inability on the part of the host institutions of the study centres to meet the cost of original software, they may go for pirated versions. In such case the responsibility, indirectly falls on IGNOU! As a matter of fact, the University has been struggling to find suitable answers to such questions for more than a decade.

Innovations in Admission Procedures And Learner Support

The admission procedure to the ODL system involves walk-in admission or through entrance tests. As of today the admission forms and prospectus is available online for several ODL institutions. The detailed information about the eligibility criteria depending upon the course selected by the learner is also available online. However, there is much scope of innovation in the area of admissions that would ease the workload of the staff involved and increase efficiency. Similarly, the learner support system is overloaded and is slow owing to several factors.

An innovative application of technology in admission procedures and practices that is useful and effective; and also has the characteristic of user-friendliness and cost effectiveness is considered as an innovation. If technology has been used creatively and applied for monitoring the learners' needs and for receiving the feedback from the learners and for dissipating any other learner related dynamic information, it is considered as an innovation.

A very big issue regarding the admission process is the timely availability of the Student Handbook and Prospectus. Printing takes place only at the city of headquarters.

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The process of these books (these are no longer booklets) getting printed and subsequently dispatched to sixty-odd Regional Centres by trucks and thereafter the Regional Centres sending the desired shares to the Study Centres, on an average 50 under each Regional Centre, is quite an uphill task. Actions like augmentation of the infrastructure, manpower, etc., have been tried but the desired results have not been achieved.

At IGNOU, the admission procedures have been computerized at the Regional Centres and the Headquarters. The admission data is received from the Regional Centres online. Till 2010, FoxPro was used, which did not allow online transfer of data. Recently, the Student Registration Division has adapted Oracle, which allows the transfer of data online from the RCs to the Headquarters and vice versa. The Student Evaluation Division, which is responsible for declaring the results is still in the process of adapting Oracle.

The IGNOU supports the learners if they need to change their names (mostly women learners who change their surname after marriage) Regional Centre, Study Centre or Examination Centre, the Medium of Instruction and courses. To change the name, the learner has to write an application to the Registrar, Student Registration Division, with a copy to the Regional Director along with the Notification of change of name published in the newspaper. The change of a Course/Programme/Medium is permissible within one month of receiving the study material. For changes of Course/Programme/Medium there are prescribed fees. The payment has to be made through demand draft and submitted along with a prescribed form for change of Course/Programme/Medium to the Registrar, Students Evaluation Division at the IGNOU headquarters. The study material has to be returned to the Registrar, Material Production and Distribution Division at IGNOU. To change the address or correction of the address, a prescribed form is to be filled in and sent to the Regional Director. It may take six weeks to take effect. To change a study centre the learner has to write an application to the Regional Director, with a copy to the Registrar, Students' Evaluation Division. The allotment of a new study centre is subject to the availability of seats. Change of Study Centre is not permissible in programmes where practical components are involved.

To transfer the Regional Centre, a learner has to write an application to the Regional Centre from which s/he seeks a transfer, sending a copy of the same to the Regional Centre where s/he would like to be transferred and another copy to the Registrar, Students Evaluation Division. In addition, the learner has to write to the Coordinator of the Study Centre from where s/he is seeking transfer regarding the number of assignments submitted. The Regional Director of the RC from where the learner is seeking transfer will send all the records of the learner to the Regional Director of the RC where the learner wants the transfer.

In this age of dominance of information and communication technologies, one expects that such services be web enabled. But in the 27 years of existence of the University this has not happened mostly due to very trivial reasons.

Other such areas of support services where serious thoughts about web-enablement need to be given are handling of assignments and projects (wherever applicable). We shall be talking about assignments while discussing evaluation methodologies. Let us now discuss about an initiative taken regarding project report submission.

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An innovative ICT-based "Web based environment for evaluation of Project Reports (A software tool for evaluation of ES-320)" was developed by STRIDE, IGNOU for the MADE programme (Mythili & Mishra, 2009). It has the following features:

> ➢ online student registration/authentication;
> ➢ online evaluator authentication;
> ➢ automatic allotment of project report to evaluators;
> ➢ automatic updating of student record and feedback.

The features like automatic allotment of project report to evaluators and automatic update of student record and feedback is an innovative mechanism developed by the team. This system can be used as an online availability of submitted and evaluated reports in a digital repository. Simultaneously the system can also be used for any other project report submission at IGNOU, which will save a lot of physical space and administrative effort. Thus, an online library of project reports can be made available. This will also help to reduce plagiarism and duplication of work.

The University has introduced project component in several programmes. The idea is to provide real life experience to the learners, something similar to a miniature for of what is deemed to be achieved by a trainee doctor during his/her internship period. So it is a very crucial competent and the overall management of the issue of handling of projects, particularly in programmes like MBA, MCA, BCA involve a lot of effort, time and manpower. So it was prudent that the above platform be used for such other programmes also. It required scaling up of the innovative intervention. But it has not yet happened, primarily due to a peculiar kind of lethargy prevalent in the bureaucratic set up and the tendency to maintain the status quo despite knowing that the change is capable of bringing in more efficiency.

Innovations in Evaluation Methodologies and Practices

Monitoring and evaluation are critical elements in managing the ODL system. They provide an evidential base and establish linkages between course structure, instructional delivery and expectations from the students. Evaluation is the most crucial component of the ODL system. The overall aim of evaluation is to ensure that the programme/course results in the expected outcomes from learners. The learner in ODL system is generally evaluated by providing self assessment questions in the course book itself, questions at the end of each unit, multiple choice questions, projects, assignments, and through term end examination. Any innovative method or practice that contributes to the efficiency of the evaluation system is considered an innovation under this category.

Evaluation at IGNOU is a three-fold package which consists of self assessment questions (which has NIL weightage), continuous evaluation through assignments (30% weightage) and term-end examination (70% weightage). Term-end examination is held in June and December at about thousand centres in the country and about fifty centres abroad. This examination is handled in a conventional manner where the students are made to use paper and pen. Thoughts have been given towards organising online examination, but that seems to be a far cry.

For objective type tests, like the entrance tests for MBA, B.Ed., etc., Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) sheets are used.

This has to some extent eased out the process of holding the examination and subsequent declaration of result. But such process cannot be introduced for subjective tests and it appears that there is not much scope for innovation. However, there is scope for innovation in respect of the continuous evaluation through assignments. It is very much necessary that the assignments are evaluated timely and the scores are fed in the system managed by the Student Evaluation Division. This does not happen due to multiple reasons, the most crucial among them being the delivery mechanism which is a long chain – the students getting the assignment questions, themselves submitting the responses to their respective Study Centres, the centres getting them evaluated and sending the scores to the Regional Centres and the Regional Centres sending the data of scores to the Student Evaluation Division where it gets processed.

NCIDE took up the issue and worked out a strategy to avoid human intervention as far as practicable, it suggested that let the assignment questions be uploaded on the website and let the students submit their responses also through the Internet. Let there be a pool of evaluators who can access the responses topic wise, region wise, who after making the assessments would send the scores directly to the Student Evaluation Division and the comments to the students through e-mail.

The scheme did not work out as many of our students and even teachers do not have access to PC and Internet. But from a study it could be ascertained that almost 60 to 70% students can avail themselves of this facility. So it was proposed that let these students take benefit of the system, and the rest go by the existing process which will help in reducing the burden to a substantial extent. But now the objection was about the integrity of the students. Some of them may not write the responses themselves. The responses will be prepared by others on their behalf and fed into the system. Such a doubt is not ruled out even in case of the existing paper and pen -method. But there is a kind of pseudo – satisfaction that the student is writing in his or her own hand. Thus on one hand we could not make the lengthy, uncomfortable existing system foolproof and on the other hand the circumstances did not allow to bring about a change which could have ensured some relief at least in respect of cutting down on the turn-around time.

Innovations Supporting Convergence of Systems

Convergence of systems is envisioned to ease the flow of students from ODL system to conventional system and vice versa. Today in India, although there is an enabling mechanism for the transfer of students from the conventional to the ODL system, the reverse is not true. As a result the student of the ODL system faces difficulties. The rules of admission need to be reworked in detail to enable the transfer of students from one system to another with ease.

The crux of the issue lies with the 'Credit System', which is in operation for the ODL system. One credit is equivalent to 30 hours of study time from the point of view of an average learner, which consists of all learning activities like reading and deciphering the contents of and working out the exercises given in the self-instructional printed material, listening to/viewing the relevant audio/video programmes, attending counseling sessions at the study centre and also telecounselling wherever applicable and preparing responses to the assignment questions. Credits are earned by way of qualifying at the examinations.The University has the provision of transferring the credits earned by a learner at IGNOU or say at other institution.

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External Credit Transfer allows a student of another university to get enrolled in IGNOU for completing any equivalent degree/diploma programme on the basis of credits obtained by him/her in that university. Such students are allowed exemption in examinations if they have been found to complete the courses and acquired the credits.

The Credit Transfer scheme is applicable to those students who have not completed their degree from any other recognized university. The BCA/MCA and B.Com programme have the provision of External Credit Transfer. Internal credit transfers are allowed to the already enrolled students of IGNOU. For example, if a student has done a one-year Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education (PGDDE), s/he can complete a two-year Masters in Distance Education (MADE) in one year. His/her credits from the PGDDE will be transferred to MADE and s/he has to study the remaining credits to complete the programme.

The creation of intelligent solutions to address credit transfers, exemptions, transfers, recognition of prior learning etc., have been considered as innovations under this category.

Innovations in Respect of Coordination Between Subsystems

In the conventional system, the teacher is the master of the situation. All he needs is a classroom in a reasonably good institutions, a chalk, a duster and a blackboard. But in the ODL system, the teacher is not independent. He may be a course writer who has applied the methodology of distance education to prepare the self-instructional material.It goes through several stages like course editor, language editor, format editor, printer, artist and so on.

If a particular topic has to be explained with the help of a diagram, in the classroom situation, the teacher handles it himself whereas here he has to depend on the artist, his understanding of the concept to be brought home through the diagram and so on. Again on the whole, the University needs further intervention which is basically a co-ordination between the different divisions like the Student Support Service Division, which controls the regional and the study centres the Student Registration Division, which controls the process of admission, the Student Evaluation Division, which is the nodal unit for examination related matters.

It has been the experience that the above task of co-ordination is not very simple, again primarily because of too much of human intervention. The most crucial feature is the communication channel between the distance teachers at the University headquarters and the academic counsellors at the study centres who basically from the interface between the students and the University. These academic counsellors are supposed to get oriented by the teachers from the headquarters, but many a times such programmes do not materialize. Programmes are organized, but counsellors cannot join perhaps for not getting leave from their host institutions or even if they join they do not get the required facilities at the study centres to carry out the sessions in the manner they are asked to.

Counselling of the learners is indeed a very crucial service and efforts are to be taken to make it effective. The best possible solution seems to be the creation of an electronic platform, which can enable interactivity between a learner and his peers and also with his teachers.

To cater to this issue, an effort was made through *Vedyadhara*- Technology Enhanced Open Learning System created by IGNOU (Kumar & Farooqi, 2010). The salient features of the electronic platform are as follows:

> ➢ **A powerful open e-learning framework supported by disciplined social networking that empowers the learner with the freedom of learning at the convenience of time and space and yet be connected with the teacher/ instructor and the peers alike.**
> ➢ **The ICT intervention in the programme delivery provides a quality assured learning support to the learners that alleviates their fear of isolation and paves way for moving from the passive ODL system to active learner and learning centric education.**
> ➢ **The student's learning experience and engagements are enriched through community wiki, discussion forums, Learning Management System and other forms of open source supported interactions.**

This platform is being used to deliver highly skill based capacity building programmes, one of which is Post Graduate Diploma in Analytical chemistry (PGDAC). The ICT based material of the PGDAC consists of linkages with open resources, additional and supplementary material in addition to the approved course material. It has "Enriched Unit" as a novel feature under the additional materials. It consists of the annotated approved course unit; the annotations providing the contextual linkages to relevant animations, simulations, video lectures, quizzes and presentations, etc. In spite of high appreciation from the learners, counsellors and the other stakeholders, this innovative intervention is losing its lustre due to factors such as lack of coordination and facilitation of the faculty through technical support. The NCIDE has also developed an innovative ICT-based platform called the Virtual Training Lounge. The Virtual Training Lounge is a web-based platform that enables trainers to provide training and capacity building of the ODL functionaries online. This system is designed to provide not only synchronous training, but also to sustain the learning experience of the trainees online. The ease of access to the Virtual Training Lounge anytime from anywhere makes it an ideal platform for training and its sustainability. Some of its key features are:

> ➢ **Access anytime, anywhere through a web based platform.**
> ➢ **Asynchronous and synchronous collaborative tools, such as discussion board, chat, wikis, blogs etc.**
> ➢ **Flexible content uploading.**
> ➢ **WYSIWYG editor for interactive content generation**

The Virtual Training Lounge is yet to be implemented on a large scale due to non-availability of technical support.

Quality Management And Benchmarking

Quality management plays a key role in developing and maintaining quality in distance education institutes. It deals with the quality of the learning experience and the support services.

It helps to ensure the completion rates of studies and diminishes dropout figures and results in satisfied students who may in the future be willing to start new studies. It also ensures that the students are easily accepted in the traditional universities.

Benchmarking is one form of monitoring and measurement used in quality management. Benchmarking is being highly used in educational organizations to evaluate various aspects of the teaching-learning processes in relation to the best practices or innovations. It provides new methods, ideas and tools to improve the effectiveness of the organization. The ODL system in India needs to improve its quality management and benchmarking mechanisms to develop and establish innovative practices in the system for increasing its efficiency. Any practice that has markedly improved the quality of the system is considered an innovation under this category.

To give an example, the quality of a programme is of paramount importance in the ODL system. It has been mentioned earlier that such programmes generally do not have parallel in the conventional system and so a teacher may like to pre-test the material by providing it to some prospective students with a view to obtain their suggestion, because all said and done, the students are the best judge. Now, in order to introduce some kind of professionalism the teacher decides to pay the students a token amount for their services. Such a step will trigger many questions, such as:

How do you know that they are prospective students? What has been the basis of their selection? How have you arrived at the figure for the token amount? It is a national university, but you have chosen students only from the city of the headquarters, why so? Uncomfortable questions like, "Were the students known to you?" are also asked.

A deep introspection into the matter will reveal that in the instant case useful suggestions can only be obtained from the known persons. Fruitful suggestions may emerge from persons unknown but the general tendency is to work with known persons on whom you can depend. It is a common practice among successful authors of good text in science to get the manuscript read by their students, to cross-check the solutions to the problems assigned in the text. You can do such things when you are the author of a text by yourself, but if you are in the role of an author, in the form of what is called a 'course writer', in open university parlance, there will be many hassles if you intend to take such an otherwise extremely normal step to ensure the quality of the learning material.

CONCLUSION

The spirit of innovation must get inculcated among one and all. A small but significant step has been taken by the National Centre for Innovations in Distance Education, IGNOU. It releases posters entitled 'DID YOU KNOW?', which contain information with illustrations of incidents that keep happening in real life but generally go unnoticed. For example – *"Did you know that by the time you complete reading this sentence, Usain Bolt, who won the Olympic Gold Medals for Men's 100m race, 200m and 4x100m relay race at the Beijing Olympics, 2008 and London Olympics, 2012, would have reached the finishing line of 100m."* The 'DID YOU KNOW' series have also been made into audio and video snippets of 90 seconds' duration and are being aired through *Gyan Vani* and *Gyan Darshan*. We have got feedback from those who view the posters or listen/watch the audio/video that it enhances their thinking faculty which is a step towards being creative and innovative.

However, at every step we need the support and understanding of the bureaucracy, such as the Finance & Accounts (F&A) and the Administration Division.

The bureaucracy has a tendency to tread the beaten track and look for precedence. They need to realize that a suggested innovative measure cannot have precedence. So there is ought to be ways and means to make the attitude of bureaucracy more friendly towards innovations. It may be easier said than done. We therefore suggest that the officials of the F&A and the Administration Division of the University should be sensitized about innovations in the ODL System through periodic training programmes.

Earlier the universities of our country used to be known as temples of learning. They got identified by the teaching and research work of the erudite teachers. The universities would be pulsating with academic activities making the entire ambience an environment of learning. It would be relevant in this regard to mention about young physicists from all over the world studying under Sommerfeld in Munich in then Undivided Germany. They used to discuss about their work among themselves, particularly when they met at the University Cafe.

They will not even spare the marble-topped tables at the cafe to write several mathematical equations, many of which figure in umpteen number of text-books today. The waiters at the cafe were not allowed to wipe the contents scribbled on the tables without the permission of the scholars (Jungk, 1956). It is unfortunate that areas other than academics figure in the discussions among the staff members of the universities today when they meet at the canteens or corridors. Innovative approach towards academia, for which there is lot of scope in the ODL System, can perhaps provide a way of redemption.

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