ENCOURAGING HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL): Some Aspects

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ABSTRACT

Higher Education system of a country enhances the human resources potential and gives the country the right niche in global scenario. Due to wide scattered and over whelming population and an increasing demand, it is not possible for country like India to provide higher education to all who really need through formal mode. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is one of the best alternatives to satisfy the growing demand for education of a variety of learners. The present writing deals with the role of ODL in the promotion of higher education in India.

Keywords: ODL, higher education, access, equity, IGNOU

INTRODUCTION

Higher education occupies a significant position in education system of a nation. It stands at the apex of the entire educational system, and influences all other levels. In India, a significant increase in the number of colleges and universities has been found during the last five decades and Indian higher education occupies the second largest system of higher education in the world after America (Tiwari, 2010). It comprises 506 universities, 33 institutions of national importance, 5 institutions established under State Legislature Act and 31, 324 colleges (Annual Report, 2010-11). In spite of being one of the largest systems of higher education, it has failed to guarantee the students' accessibility to higher education as per the need. In the recent past, the demand for higher education has increased enormously throughout the country because of massive awareness. But the system of higher education fails to accommodate this ever increasing demand.

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In spite of an impressive quantitative expansion, India lags behind developed nations and also some of the developing nations in regard to access to higher education. The enrolment ratio in higher education in developed countries like Canada is about 100%, USA (80%), France (50%) and UK (30%) (Tiwari, 2010).Even the enrolment rate in developing countries like Egypt is 20%, Thailand 20%, Mexico 16%, Brazil 11% and Turkey 10%, India lags far behind all of them. It is estimated that only 7 per cent (146.25 lakhs) of the age group receive higher education. The picture is quite dismal as the available educational opportunities at the higher education stage are not accessible to many students especially belonging to groups who are disadvantaged because of various geographical, social, cultural, economic, and linguistic or gender limitations. Viewing the increasing demand of higher education and a lot of limitations to face, Indian higher education needs a serious make over. ODL (Open and Distance Learning) provides a viable alternative mode with the objective to take education to the door steps of the learner, enhancing social equity, and creating flexibility for lifelong learning (Koul, 2000).

ODL-THE CONCEPT DEFINED

As the concept is used all through the world, it got different terms like distance education, correspondence education, home study, independent study, external study, off-campus study, open learning, open education etc., but their use and meaning denote more or less the same. These terms have come into vogue because of the historical circumstances in various countries; they have their peculiar characteristics most of which are similar to distance education (Sharma, 2007). But the most important terms used are distance education and open learning which jointly call Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Distance education refers to the mode of education where the interacting learner and teacher are separated by space and time, while open learning focuses on removal of many restrictions and rigidities in opening the doors of education for the needy learners(Koul,2000). Though in some countries distance learning and open learning are used for different functions, but the modern system of education uses these two terms jointly to refer to the same and unified concept ODL. The basic principle in both the cases remains the same. The main philosophy that governs the system is learners' flexibility and democratization of education. Open and Distance learning emphasizes giving learners' choices about:

> ➤ medium or media, whether print, on-line, television, or video;
> ➤ place of study, whether at home, in the workplace, or on campus;
> ➤ pace of study, whether closely paced or unstructured;
> ➤ support mechanisms, whether tutors on demand, audio conferences, or computer assisted learning.

To democratize education, it:

> ➤ Provides opportunity of learning to those, who do not have direct access to face to face teaching, working persons, house wives etc.
> ➤ Provides opportunity to working professionals to update their knowledge,
> ➤ enabling them to switchover to new disciplines and professions and enhancing their qualifications for career advancement.

"Open learning is a state of mind rather than a method with particular characteristics".

In a distance learning system,

"the learner and the teacher are not face to face. In order for two-way communication to take place between them, a medium such as print, radio, or the telephone has to be used".

Later, Rumble (1997) defined open and distance learning system comprising at least of three sub-systems:

> - the regulatory sub-system: such as human resources, purchase, finance, equipment and building;
> - the material sub-system: such as production and distribution of learning material;
> - the students support system: such as to enroll students, collection of fees, allocation of study and exam centre.

The above classifications on the concept of open learning and distance learning shall facilitate to study the cost analysis of distance education system.

Maxwell (1995), for instance, makes the following distinction:

"Open learning is defined as a student-centered approach to education that removes all barriers to access while providing a high degree of learner autonomy. Distance education refers to a mode of delivering a course of study in which the majority of communication between teachers and students occurs non contiguously, and the two-way communication between teacher and student necessary for the educational process is technologically mediated. Distance education may or may not be based on open-learning ideals." (Maxwell 1995, 43)
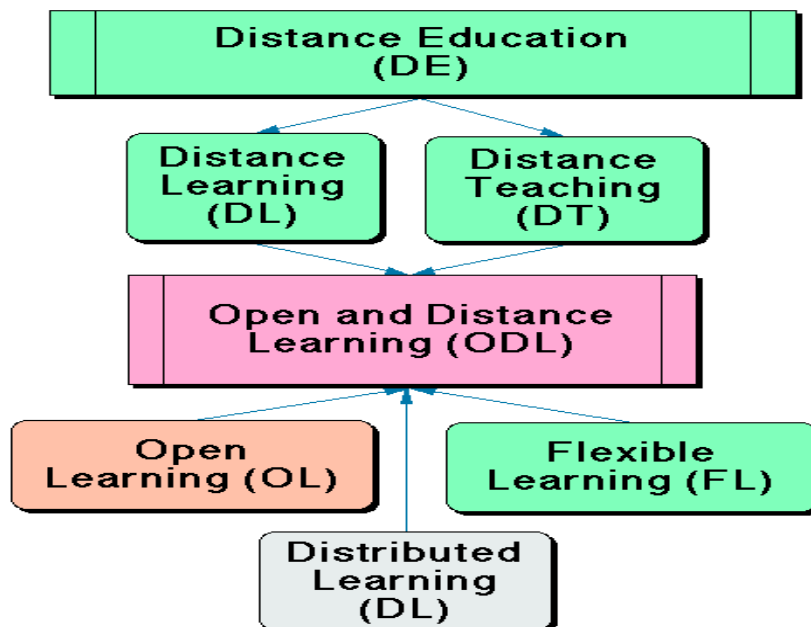
CHARACTERISTICS OF ODL

The main characteristics of ODL are open access, flexibility, self pacing, learner centeredness, self learning and having a target group. Let us discuss all these characteristics under following four heads:

Open Access
The term *open access* implies a lack of:

> - formal entry requirements;
> - prerequisite credentials;
> - an entrance examination;
> - an age bar; and
> - cast restriction.

Flexible Learning
The term *flexible learning* emphasizes the creation of environments for learning having the following characteristics:

> - convergence of open and distance learning methods, media, and classroom strategies; learner-centered philosophy;
> - recognition of diversity in learning styles and learners' needs;
> - diversified curriculum;
> - unlimited enrolment;
> - recognition of the importance of equity in curriculum and pedagogy;
> - use of a variety of learning resources and media;
> - fostering of lifelong learning habits and skills in learners and staff; and
> - flexible examination system.

Time and Place Continuum
Open and distance learning programmes fall somewhere along two continua: the continuum of time and the continuum of place. Most open and distance learning providers use a combination of the four scenarios.

Same Place And Same Time
Classroom teaching, face-to-face tutorials and seminars, workshops, and residential schools. *Example*: Open Learning Institute, Charles Sturt University in Australia, for an example of an institution that relies on residential schools to provide interaction between learners and tutors is being challenged.

Same Place But Different Time
Learning Resource Centers, that learners visit at their leisure. *Example*: Open Access College in Australia for an example of an institution that has a number of resource centers.

Different Place But Same Time
Audio conferences and video conferences; television with one-way video, two-way audio; radio with listener–response capability; and telephone tutorials. *Example*: Indira Gandhi National Open University for an example of an institution that is using audio conferencing and television with one-way video and two-way audio.

Different Place and Different Time

Home study, computer conferencing, tutorial support by e-mail, and fax communication. *Example*: Wide variety of ways to make learning materials available for this kind of independent study.

Target Group

Distance education has a target group of its own and it meets such needs and challenges which are not catered to by the formal classroom system (Koul, 2000). The target group includes women and girls, scheduled casts and scheduled tribes, people of rural and remote areas, functionally non-literates, disabled children, long term unemployed, out of work youth, refugees, immigrants and non-nationals and working persons.

ODL IN ENCOURAGING HIGHER EDUCATION

Open and Distance Learning offers a number of advantages to both learners and providers. Problems such as distance and time, which are barriers to conventional learning, are overcome in Open and Distance Learning with the use of ICT, self learning materials and a good student support mechanism. However, the following are the main contributions of ODL for higher education.

Overcoming Physical Distance

Open and distance learning can overcome problems of physical distance for:

> ➢ learners in remote locations who are unable or unwilling to physically attend a campus; and
> ➢ learners and teachers who are geographically separated; for example, teachers in urban settings instruct learners in rural settings.

Example: Indira Gandhi National Open University is an institution that serves a widely scattered and remote population. The use of technologies like e-learning, mobile learning, telephonic conversation, radio and television broadcasting etc. helps to overcome the problem of physical barrier.

Solving the Problem of Time and Schedule

Open and Distance learning can solve time or scheduling for:

> ➢ client groups unwilling or unable to assemble together frequently;
> ➢ learners engaged in full-time or part-time work, both waged and volunteer;
> ➢ learners who have family and community commitments.

Expanding Access

ODL expands its sway through establishing new campuses, broadcasting its programmes via radio and television, establishing more local study centers, increasing the numbers of partnership institutions and using modern technology for its programmes. IGNOU for example, has established 101 special study centers to cater to the demands of North-East region, tribal and other backward regions of India. Open and distance learning also provides access where:

> ➢ campus-based institutions are less in number; and
> ➢ there are stringent entrance requirements.

Example: **The Open University of Sri Lanka for example is an institution that expands access to university education in a country where the number of places available at conventional universities is very limited.**

Promotion of Equity
Open and Distance learning can deal differences in cultural, religious, and political considerations and consequently:

- ➢ **widens women's opportunities to learn;**
- ➢ **helps the rural , tribal and minority groups and disabled to learn;**
- ➢ **meets the needs of populations affected by violence, war, or displacement;**
- ➢ **makes learning possible even when group assemblies are proscribed.**

Leveraging the Enrolment
The ODL system boosts student enrolment every year. It has the need based and flexible curriculum, technology supported and cost effective quality education, easy delivery system, flexible admission and examination system and a suitable learner support system. We find an increase in enrolment percentage in higher education through ODL in every decade since 1967. The data are given below:

Year	Students enrolled in ODL	Percentage
1967-68	8,577	0.61
1980-81	1,66,428	6.00
1990-91	0.56 million	11.20
1999-2000	1.58 million	20.40
2002-03	2.00 million	22.00
2009-10	3.78 million	25.88

A Learner Centric Approach to Education
- ➢ **Students can learn at any time (before, during or after normal school hours, at the desktop in the workplace, "just in time learning" for a particular task)**
- ➢ **Students can learn at any place (in the traditional classroom, in a dorm room, at home, at a convenient learning center, at work, on the road)**
- ➢ **Students can learn at their own pace, giving extra time to new material and speeding through material already known, with pauses for tutorial help or supplemental courses.**
- ➢ **Students can learn more efficiently when concepts are presented with multiple media so students can select those which best assist their own understanding and retention.**
- ➢ **Students can learn only what they need to know, reinforcing both retention and motivation learning and then applying individual modules of a course.**
- ➢ **The course content and course quality are constant; organizations can document training coverage and student learning over a wide geographical or temporal area.**
- ➢ **The need for costly, permanent teaching facilities is reduced; learning can take place at home, in dorms and workplaces, or in temporary facilities.**

Making Best Use of the Limited Number of Teachers Available
The number of faculties employed in Indian higher education is only 6.99 for   146.25 lakh students which are quite insufficient for providing quality education (Annual Report, 2010-11).

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Hence there is a great need of recruiting huge number of faculties in our conventional mode of higher education which is a difficult task due to meager fund allocation to education in general and higher education in particular. But this problem can be solved easily by ODL system as it requires fewer teachers on the regular pay-rolls and uses part time teachers and teachers of conventional mode for transaction of teaching learning. It requires fewer teachers as the learning materials are made so as to promote self study. Moreover, use of ICT in ODL compensates the need of regular teacher to minimum. Open and distance learning can make the best use of the few teachers available when:

> ➢ there is a lack of trained teaching personnel relative to demand;
> ➢ teachers are geographically concentrated; and
> ➢ teachers with certain expertise are in short supply. Example: NSOU, IGNOU etc.

Providing Need Based Programs and Courses

The ODL system always tries to launch need based programs and courses catering to the demands of different learners. For example, IGNOU offers different programs in the areas of rural development, journalism, intellectual property rights, hospitality management, IT management, clinical cardiology, information technology, and computer literacy and HIV/AIDS awareness. Even different distance education institutions buy or lease courses from other open and distance learning providers if they realize the need of that course for the target learners. *Example*: The University of Lincolnshire and Humberside for an example of *course franchising*.

Producing, Reproducing, Storing, and Disseminating Materials

Almost all the ODL institutions have their own production house, storage and method of dissemination. This saves their time and promotes easy access for students. They have their own course materials like print, audio, video, or computer software; they disseminate through post, courier, transport companies, telecommunications, broadcasts, satellites; and in many cases they have specialized equipment and personnel required for storage, handling, packaging and dispatch.

Examination

ODL follows the credit system whereby each course and program has a specified number of credits. Each credit involves 30 hours of learner study time. The learners can keep accumulating credits as per their convenience. They have also adopted the modular approach, which helps the learners in moving gradually, through small modules towards higher levels of learning. Besides that, they also promote formative evaluation and quality controlling mechanism in evaluation. They involve professional associations and external agencies to maintain quality in their evaluation.

Promoting Research Work

Many Open and Distance Education institution have higher courses like M.Phil. and Ph.D, where researches in various subject areas is carried out. They have provided enough flexibility to learners in conducting their research works.

Cost Effectiveness

ODL is cost effective from the side of learners and providers. Learners get education with a much less cost than that of formal education system. The institutions utilize both human and material resources to the best, and thus prove themselves to be cost effective.

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IGNOU AS A ROLE MODEL

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) established in 1985 by an Act of Parliament (50 of 1985) has undergone rapid expansion and emerged as an International Institution in the field of Open Distance Learning. The IGNOU's student strength has grown manifold to three million cumulative student enrolments today. The university is providing a cost-effective education to its students and functions through a network comprising the headquarters, regional centers at States/UTs, study centers and partner institutions within the country and in 40 countries overseas. It is now widely accepted as a system leader in the field of ODL the world over. The university is currently offering 430 Certificate, Diploma and Degree program through 21 Schools of Studies, 12 Divisions, 14 Centers, and a network of 61 Regional centers, 3,000 study centers, and 67 partner institutions spread across 40 countries with the help of about 424 teachers and academics and 1,219 administrative staff. The additional help also sought from about 6,000 experts from conventional universities and other organizations, and about 39,000 part-time academic counselors.

The university follows the latest evaluation pattern provides a multi-media learning system comprising print, audio, video, radio counseling, internet- based learning and face-to-face interactive and through ICTs, counseling and practical. The university has a state – of- the - art Electronic Media Production Centre (EMPC).

The IGNOU caters to learners from various social sectors mainly in the rural and tribal areas, disability groups, jails and rehabilitation centers, government and non-governmental organizations, parents and home-makers, the employers and the employed. The university has adopted a policy of special focus on rural areas, SCs/STs, inmates, women, blind, minorities, physically handicapped, socially and economically disadvantaged groups, the North-East Regions, Tribal Regions and other most backward districts of the country. For these purposes it has set up 101 special study centers.

CONCLUSION

Open and Distance Learning system is an emerging field in higher education, particularly in India. It is definitely going to play a bigger role in the times to come. But it has its own barriers. However, if these are sorted out, then, certainly this system will emerge as one of the effective modes of propagating higher education in India.

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