A Comparative Study on Current Trends in Distance Education in Canada and India

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Background

The emergence of DE in Canada is generally considered to coincide with the rise of the mail service. It arose in Canada to provide access to education across the vast expanses of the country. In Canada, Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, was the first to offer correspondence courses in 1889. The Canadian North West Mounted police was used for delivery of courses in areas without mail service. (Sauve, 1990). In 1907 DE off campus courses were introduced by the University of Alberta. Soon after several institutions opted for DE to serve populations living away from major centers of learning such as : Francis Xavier University (1935) and, University of British Columbia (1950). Such sporadic growth of distance education continued in Canada with the adoption of DE by Memorial University in 1967 and University of Waterloo in 1968 (CADE et.al., 1999).

A major landmark in the history of DE in Canada was the establishment of Athabasca University (AU) in 1972. AU was Canada's first Open University and also the first autonomous DE institution to be set up in Canada.. The 1970s and 1980s saw a real spurt in the growth of DE institutions in Canada. In 1972 another open university(OU), namely Tele-universite in Quebec and Open Learning Institute(1978) later known as Open Learning Agency, introduced distance education programmes. The momentum caught on and there were many more players in the field by the 1990s. Today post secondary education in Canada is provided by degree granting institutions, called universities and by non-degree granting institutions which are referred to as colleges, CEGEPs or institutes of technology. Universities offer bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees, whereas colleges typically offer career oriented technical training and general education leading to diplomas or certificates. Presently there are about 90 university level institutions in Canada and more than 200 colleges. About 70 of these grant degrees in all of their own programmes. A small number grant degrees in only one or two fields – usually theology and others do not grant degrees at all, but are associated with universities that do (CMEC, 2002). Canadian universities are generally publicly supported. For demographic reasons, more than half of the universities are located in the two most heavily populated provinces – Ontario and Quebec and also Nova Scotia for historical reasons.

Virtually all provinces have developed various communication media which universities are using to offer students an opportunity to study part time through DE. In 1999-98 there were 826361 learners were enrolled in Universities, 580376 full time and 245985 part time. 494955 were enrolled in colleges, 403516 full time and 91439 part time. (See Table-1 CICIC, 2002).

Table-1 Enrolment by levels in the Canadian Educational System

Year	Schools, Elementary & Secondary	Colleges			Universities		
		Part time	Full time	Total	Part time	Full time	Total
1990-91	5141003	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
1994-95	5362799	90810	379961	470771	283257	575713	858970
1998-99	5369716	91439	403516	494955	245985	580376	826361

Source:Statistics Canada,
(http://www.statcan.ca/english/pgdb/people/education/educ03a.htm accessed on, 19
September 2002.)

According to the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), in 1994, 54 % of Canadian Universities and 68 % of Community colleges were using distance education to some degree and of the universities that did not adopt DE, 94 % planned to do so within the next five years (Hughes, 2000). In 1994, much of the DE offered by universities was off campus face to face delivery or print based correspondence delivery (Morris and Potter, 1996).

Since the 1990s, many universities and colleges have begun to explore the use of networked learning strategies such as computer conferencing and web-based resourcing as part of regular courses which can be taken by on or off campus based students. There has been a rapid growth in Internet based courses. Several consortia arrangements have emerged which include TeleEducation NB, Contact South, Atlantic Notemakers Consortium, Contact North etc. (Report of Simon Fraser University and Tele Education NB, 1998). Infact Canada is emerging as a world leader in promoting e-learning and supporting distributed learning environments.

According to the above cited Report prepared by Simon Faser University and TeleEducatin NB, (1998) there were 1265 courses being offered online as on Aug., 5 1998, of which the share of the OUs was around 50 %. At the global level, Canada accounted for 19 % of the courses being offered online, with USA dominating the scene with 76 %, Australia 3 % and other countries barely 2 %. Thus DE in Canada, like in other countries, has evolved through broadly three phases:

1889 – 1960s - Correspondence education phase
1970s – 1980s - Open and Distance Education phase
1990s – onwards - Online education phase.

In India too DE has passed through the same three stages, only the timings were different.
In 1947, India inherited a system with great educational disparities. Education was categorically denied to women and to the lower castes. Social handicaps like sati, child marriage, ban on widow remarriage, and purdah prevented women from being educated. The practice of untouchability and discrimination based on caste prevented the spread of education among the lower castes. A history of isolation in the remote areas led to educational backwardness among the scheduled tribes. To add to that, the downward filtration policy of the colonial period due to limited economic development, a feudal agricultural society, and a hierarchical culture which lacked an egalitarian philosophy – prevented the spread of education. Further the main objectives that guided the educational developments in the colonial period were to train personnel for administration, to develop a small class of educated persons, and to teach the Indians the English language and through it to introduce them to the literature, science and philosophy of the West – in Macaulay's words, "a class of persons Indian in blood and color and English in taste, in opinions and in intellect". Against this background, the national government, since the time of independence, has undertaken the development and expansion of education as the key to development and as a vehicle for the transmission of the new value system : new ways of life, thought and work.

Tremendous expansion, has taken place since independence during the last 55 years. The details are given in Table-2.

Table-2 Growth of the Indian Educational System

Year	Primary			Upper Primary			Secondary & Senior Secondary			Higher Education		
	Schools	Students	Teachers	Schools	Students	Teachers	Schools	Students	Teachers	Institutions	Students	Teachers
1950-51	210	19.2	538	13.6	3.1	86	7.4	1.5	127	28	548	0.17
1990-91	561	97.4	1616	151.5	34.0	1076	79.8	19.1	1334	176	7346	4.43
1997-98	611	108.7	1872	185.5	39.5	1212	107.1	27.2	1521	229	9274	7.10
2000-01	x	X	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	262	11831	9.31

Source : Ministry of Education, Government of India(http:www.education.nic.in/html.web/edusta.htm)
NB :The number of students is in millions and other figures in thousands.

Since the formal system was unable to meet the demand for higher education in India, the Planning Commission in its third five year plan (1961-66) recommended the introduction of Correspondence Education at the University level. Hence, distance education was adopted as an alternative mode at the University stage in 1962.

The period 1962 to early 1980s was the correspondence education phase. The 1970s saw a spurt in the growth of correspondence education. The first OU was established in 1982. The 1980s and 1990s is referred to the OU phase when several open universities, including the national open university, namely Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) which was established in 1985. Presently there are 10 Open Universities in India. The latter part of the 1990s saw the beginning of the virtual education phase when online courses were introduced by educational institutions.

Today in India there are four types of institutions offering programmes through distance mode: National Open University, State Open Universities, Directorates of DE functioning under conventional universities i.e.Dual Mode Universities(DMUs) and private professional institutes. However, only the National Open University namely, IGNOU uses third generation tools and has made a modest beginning with Internet based education, by offering few online courses, thereby claiming to have graduated into the fourth generation, i.e., the flexible learning model. The Directorates attached to conventional universities are still at the first generation level i.e., correspondence model. However, some of the private contenders too are functioning in the fourth generation, but majority are at the first generation only.

Table-3 shows the increase in enrollments at DE institutions for the period 1975-2001. It is heartening to note that the share of distance mode has increased from 2.6 % in 1975-76 to 20 % in 2001. Thus every fifth student at tertiary level is enrolled with the DE system. The Tenth Plan document envisages 30 % − 40 % annual growth for the DE system against 5 % - 10 % growth of the formal system.

Table-3 Growth of Distance Education in India

Year	Universities	Students (millions)	% of DE in total HE system (Total enrolment in HE) in millions
1975-76	18	0.06	2.3 (2.49)
1981-82	22	0.19	5.7 (3.34)
1990-91	40	0.56	10.1 (5.55)
1999-2000	74	1.58	17.0 (9.31)
2000 – 2001	74	2.00	20.0 (10 approx)

Source : Kulandai Swamy (2002):18

Current Scenario

Canada's investment in education is among the highest in the world. It had the highest expenditure on education as a proportion to GDP (7 %) among the G-7 countries and the second highest per student expenditure in 1968. also, 88 % of the relevant age group in enrolling in higher education which is probably the highest in the world (World Bank, 2001). According Canadian Education Statistics (2000) post-secondary education participation and enrolment rates have leveled off in the 1990s. The reasons for this could be the following:- cost of attending universities, availability of other educational programmes, number of job opportunities due to improved labour market conditions. In spite of all the above mentioned reasons, Canadian educational levels are already high by international standards and have been improving over the years. The percentage of 25 – 29 year olds with less than high school fell from 20 % to 13 % between 1990-98; while the percentage of university graduates increased from 17 % to 26 % during the same period. In 1998 approximately 1.4 million adults aged 25 – 54 years enrolled in formal educational programmes as compared to 576000 students in the 17 – 24 years age group.The demand for higher education among adults has been on the rise due to the information age in which we are living. Thus institutions of higher education are making efforts to include flexibility in the learning package in order to cater to the increasing population of non-traditional learners and also to confront the competition from new, non-traditional educational providers. Thus besides the 3 single mode universities there are several dual mode universities and community colleges offering more than 750 courses and 70 college courses (CADE, et .al, 1999).

Though the Indian achievement with regard to higher education has been substantial in quantitative terms, these have not been enough to provide access for all. Barely 7 % of the relevant age group is enrolling in higher education. (World bank, 2001). This indicates the need for further expansion of the higher education system as the average percentage in developed countries is 45 % and the world average is 16 %.

The population growth rate of 2 percent is alarming in itself. 40 % of the people of India are living below the poverty line. The literacy level (of population 7 years and above) has increased from 16 % in 1952 to 62 % in 1999 (GOI, 2002). The population of India has crossed 1 billion, and hence 38 % of its illiterates account for nearly 50 % of the illiterates in the world. Presently, there are 10 Open Universities (OUs) and over 90 Dual mode universities and a few privately owned professional institutions offering courses through distance mode. Some of the Indian OUs have reached the mega university status, enrolling more than 100,000 students annually. There are several major issues confronting the growth and development of DE system in India and Canada which are being dealt with below .

Major Issues

Lopsided growth

The growth and development of DE has not been uniform throughout India. The Southern Region accounted for 47.1%, Northern Region 35.4%, Central and Western Regions 16.4% and Eastern Region 2.9% of the total students enrolled in DE in 1999-2000. The overall student enrolment has gone up in the Central and Western Regions during 1990s due to the growth of two SOUs namely YCMOU and MPBOU Open Universities (Kulandai –Swamy, Garg and Panda (Eds.) 2002: 29). Further analysis reveals that the number of DMUs and a few Open universities have a few hundreds/ thousands distance learners. On the contrary a few institutions have attracted huge numbers beyond their manageable capacity.The details are given in Table-4.

Table-4 Classification of DE institutions of India by size of student enrollment(1999-2000)

Category	Less than 5000 students	5001-25,000 students	25001-50000 students	50001-100000 students	1000001 above	Total
• Open Universities	03	02	01	01	03	10
• Distance Education institutes (under DMUs)	37	14	06	01	04	62

Source: DEC 2001 and Kulandai Swamy, (Garg and Santosh Panda (Eds), 2002

Table-5 Participation of deprived groups. Percentage of women, rural and SC/ST students: 2000

Sl.No.	Open/ Conventional Universities (CU)	Women	Rural	SC/ST
1	* IGNOU	27	21	07
2	* YCMOU	28	31	20
3	* BRAOU	27	45	27
4	+ Kurukshetra University	26.44	-	-
5	+ University of Madras	42.98	39.88	-
6	+ University of Calicut	43.94	-	-
7	+ Pondicherry University	26.44	34.91	-
8	+ Allahabad University	17.84	-	-
9	+ University of Mumbai	49.90	-	-
10	+ H.P. University Shimla	38.67	35.60	-
11	+ M.D. University, Rohtak	40.48	-	-
12	+ University of Burdwan, Burdwan	47.95	60.28	-
13	+ Punjab University, Chandigarh	31.74	25.57	-
14	+ University of Delhi, Delhi	46.04	-	5.63

Source: Kulandai Swamy, V.C. (Suresh Garg and Santosh Panda (Eds)), (2002).:42

Note: * Open Universities
+ Conventional Universities

Canada does not have a federal education system, therefore government policies, which affect DE, emanate from the provincial governments. Hence the conduct of DE differs somewhat from one part of Canada to another. Each province or territory has its own statutes and forms. There is little similarity in DE across provinces. In some, notably Alberta and British Columbia, there is considerable activity. In others including the most heavily populated provinces : Ontario and Quebec, activity is relatively modest, on the other hand others the Atlantic provinces and northern territories, there is virtually no involvement in DE. (CMEC,2002). However most of these initiatives have emanated from the western provinces and Quebec where vast geographical areas and sparse populations have required innovative approaches to higher

education and all the 3 OUs are located in these very provinces..

Access

The major purpose of DE is to provide education to those who for one reason or the other, could not take advantage of facilities provided by the formal system. The 1960s and 1970s saw extensive expansion of the correspondence education system in India through conventional universities and 1980s and 1990s through Open Universities. By 2001, the DE enrolments in India, stood at 20% of the total enrolments in higher education. This number seems to be reasonably high but it does not necessarily indicate the extent to which the system has been able to reach the disadvantaged groups, wider sections and remote areas of the country. Table 5 presents the percentage of women, rural and SC/ST students enrolled (some of the disadvantaged groups) in major OUs of the country and a few selected DMUs. For a relatively new mode of education the percentage of women students is quite high when compared to the conventional system where there were nearly 30% women students enrolled in higher education. However enrolment in DE reflects the urban bias of the university system as a whole. The Indian OUs have to make definite efforts to attract and sustain more rural students including scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

Canada is a vast country with much of its population concentrated in cities along the Southern border. However, considerable numbers of people live in the northern areas, making the provision of services including education, difficult in those areas. Thus there are still regions in the country where there is low literacy. Added to this, most of the populations living in these areas are aboriginals or the First Nations and Metis. There is little attention being paid to the kinds of education that might be appropriate to the aboriginal peoples. The educational outcomes of the aboriginal Canadians have improved but remained much below those of non-aboriginals. In 1996 only 6 % of them were university graduates (Canadian Statistical Council, 2000). The working poor constitute yet another group who need access to education and training. These include older workers who have been struck in low wage jobs without opportunities for advancement and constitute 20 % of the workers (CMEC,2002).Enrolment of women in higher education has been on the rise and so has been the number of female graduates.At Athabasca University women account for more than 50% of the total learners(Athabasca University,2002). Although the Canadian Government provides subsidy and loans / grants for post secondary education aimed at specific population like aboriginal groups, women and the differently- abled, yet DE institutions need to develop courses and offer support services to cater to the needs of the neglected sections of society.

Table-6 Indian Open Universities in brief, 2000 − 2001.

State	University	Students Enrolled	Prog.	Courses	Under Graduate	Post Graduate	SC	RC	Academic	Total Staff	Academic Counselors
Madhya Pradesh	MPBOU	56,123	29	145	BA,BSc,B.Com, BSc (N) BBA	MCA,MBA	670	9	52	92	3140
Andhra Pradesh	BRAOU	93,570	21	307	BA,B.Com,BSc, BLIS, BPR	MA,MSc, MBA, MLS,Ph.d, MPhil	130	13	98	473	4010
Rajasthan	KOU	8,141	21	195	BLIS,BA,B.Com BEd	MA,MEd	36	6	36	362	1000
Maharashtra	YCMOU	1,04,551	54	204	BEd,BLS, B.Com,BA	MA,MCom, MSc,MBA, PhD,MPHIL	1399	8	49	242	4280
Karnataka	KSOU	27,231	23	213	BA,B.Com,BEd	MBA,MEd, MA,M.Com, PhD	218	23	80	280	2616
West Bengal	NSOU	434	3	112	BA,B.Com,BSc	NIL	36	NIL	10	36	252
Uttar Pradesh	UPRTOU	3,307	18	253	BA,B.Com,BTS, BLS	NIL	18	NIL	18	38	NA
Delhi	IGNOU	2,91,360	62	673	BA,B.Com,BSc, BCA, BEd,BIT,BLS, BSc(N),BTCM BTCRE	MADE,MBA, MBA(BF), MCA, MLS,MTM, MA(E),PhD	626	44	301	1811	20364
Gujarat	BAOU	5556	09	88	BA,BCOM		70	02	20	60	642
Bihar	NOU	641	09	59	-	MA,Med	04	-	02	25	48

Source: DEC(2002)

Learner Support

Support services are probably the weakest component of DE system in India. Over 50% of the DMUs do not have any student support service network. There are a large number of Universities and Colleges and hundreds of professional and non-professional institutions with vast infrastructures who have invested huge outlays over a period of time which could be utilized by DE institutions on holidays and weekends. Among OUs IGNOU has more than 650 Study Centres, 45 Regional Centres across the country. Similarly, many of the OUs and some DMUs too have established Study Centres and Regional Centres or other forms of support Centres/information centers. In addition, these OUs and DMUs have their own full-time academic staff as well as academic counsellors / faculty from other institutions (engaged on part-time basis). There are 36000 academic counsellors and 3100 full-time (academic staff & others) who are working at Open universities alone (Refer Table 6). Even though there is so much of over lapping in the courses being offering, no steps have been initiated for pooling and sharing existing support service networks.

In Canada the trend is towards e-learning. Hence supporting the distance learner via email on the webis gaining popularity.. There the issue is diametrically opposite that of India. In India DE institutions have to grapple with the major problem of supporting large numbers. Hence the concept of Regional Center and Study Center is more suitable for Indian conditions. In Canada, on the other hand the issue is not so much of large numbers but of scattered student populations. Fortunately, Canada has a widespread ICT network to serve these scattered populations.. Being one of the most advanced countries of the world, the percentage of

Canadians having access to ICT is also very high. Hence all DE institutions are making use of it. There has been an upsurge in the introduction of online courses too. This trend has prompted a number of new providers to directly compete with public education providers like OUs and DMUs etc. Private providers are entirely driven by profit motive. There is a need for a coherent federal policy on DE to tackle this problem systematically.

Credit Transfer

There is a widespread suspicion, not entirely justified, of the quality of education provided by the DE institutions. There is also a tendency to think that any method other than the conventional method of education is inferior. However, this tendency is gradually disappearing. In view of disparities in offering curricula and lack of credit transfer between these OUs, DMUs, students enrolled in various institutions are constrained in terms of mobility among DE institutions and migration from / to the latter. One major thrust is to institute a common credit allocation system for the programmes and courses offered by DE institutions and conventional universities.

Canada has already taken steps towards recognition of informal learning and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). But in actual fact it is merely recognition of prior schooling than informal learning. Moreover each institution has its own way of assessing prior learning. There is a great deal of local discretion. Other issues related to PLAR are namely : what kind of prior experiences are substitutes for formal learning and what kinds of informal learning influences desirable outcomes : (whether it is literacy, political participation or employment), which needs to be decided upon. (CMEC,2002). Only the province of British Columbia has systemized PLAR. In a few provinces Credit Transfer guides are made public ally available. All the3 Canadian Open Universities have facilitated transfer of course credits and formalized articulation of programmes to bridge the college / technical institute and universities gap (Shale, 2002). Education being a provincial concern, each province evolves its own educational policy. What is lacking is a national accreditation system.

In India too, education is a provincial concern yet there are national bodies like, the University Grants Commission (for conventional universities) and IGNOU's Distance Education Council (for distance education institutions and open universities) who can institute a common credit allocation system across institutions of higher education in the country. Memoranda of Understanding have been signed between institutions in order to implement credit transfer and recognition of awards. In India too a lot more needs to be done with regard to setting up of a proper accreditation system and establishing PLAR.

Quality Assurance

Accompanying the rapid growth in the distance education system there has also been an increasing interest in the quality of education by this new mode. Funding for DE has been increasing year after year. Whether these funds, are being utilized in a more productive manner in DE than in conventional education, is one of the major issues that has brought in enhanced scrutiny from the general public and the government in developing countries like India. Equal concern has been raised with respect to the relevance of programmes and achievement of programme objectives by the distance learners. There is a need for research and empirical evidence to establish credibility and respectability of the DE system in this context.

The Distance Education Council (DEC) has been specially established at IGNOU, which is not only an open university but also an apex body for DE in India. One of the major roles of DEC is to promote, coordinate and determine standards in the system. DEC has worked out some modalities with regard to quality control and assurance in collaboration with the National Accreditation and Assessment Council established by the University Grants Commission. It is yet to be implemented.

In Canada on the other hand, each province has its own laws, policies, and procedures for quality assurance. Most institutions have their own self-assessment methods for internal reviews. Such reviews entitle /determine public funding. However without any national system of accreditation and recognition makes it unclear how quality is assured at the institutional and programme levels? There is however accreditation of specific programmes by regulatory bodies across all post secondary institutions of Canada. Also a number of national organizations like the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada and the Association of Community Colleges, etc indirectly promote quality in higher education (CMEC,2002).

Partnerships

Millions of Indian rupees have been invested in developing DMUs , OUs and other independent bodies/councils and professional institutions. For example, IGNOU has its own Electronic Media Production Center (EMPC) that can produce independently a large number of audio, video programmes (not only for IGNOU but also for other institutions). The University has satellite uplink and down link facilities; dedicated television channel and FM Radio Channel located in its EMPC. Of course, dedicated television channel is being used by number of educational institutions and teleconference facility by educational and government and non-governmental organizations. Similarly, there are quite a few institutions that were established by the UGC, various Ministries, International Organizations, etc for various purposes in the education sector and other than education sector. Now, the time has come in order to utilize the available infrastructure in a more organized manner in the education sector, through partnerships and collaborations.

Against this background the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, gave IGNOU the dual role of functioning as a national OU but also as the apex body the coordinating agency of all DE institutions in the country. (IGNOU Act 1985). In May, 1991 the UGC formulated the Statute for the Establishment of the Distance Education Council (DEC). The DEC established as a statutory body of IGNOU, became operational in 1993.Ever since thenDEC has provided assistance for establishment of new State Open Universities; funding for downlink facility, for Wide Area Network (WAN) and Local Area Network (LAN). Support in training and development of communication channel networks; identification of common pool of courses and programmes for sharing by distance education institutions; technical assistance to SOUs for adoption of Credit System and Common Grading Pattern for student evaluation; provision of financial support to SOUs and DMUs for infrastructure development (mainly for equipment);provision of grants for human resource development to SOUs; provision of research grants to SOU and DMU staff; establishment of quality assurance mechanisms in collaboration with NAAC; and formulation of norms and guidelines for offering programmes of study through distance mode in collaboration with the national regulatory bodies in particular areas.

There is a high level rhetoric in Canada around partnerships. Provincial efforts seem substantial in this regard. For example, Quebec, New Brunswick and Saskatchewan have created industry councils to promote and implement closer collaboration between industry and higher education. British Columbia has institutionalized cooperation among educational institutions. However inspite of provincial autonomy, universities throughout Canada work together in collaboration to facilitate "laddering" from college diplomas to university degrees and also from one institution to another. Collaborations exist also for purposes of course development, course delivery, technological development and research. For example, Athabasca University (AU) often leases its courses to other institutions. In such cases students of those particular institutions take the courses from AU and transfer the credits back to the home institution. In turn the home institution secures copyright clearances from AU and also pays AU user fee based on enrollments. Similar arrangements are made with regard to course delivery and services. Universities are entering into partnerships with the private sector with the objective of improving services. To avoid wasteful duplication, institutions at different locations are collaborating in research projects .For example the Circumpolar Universities Association is one such collaboration (Hughes,2000).

Conclusion

In both Canada and India DE opportunities at the university level have increased enormously. Many trends are putting new pressures on the conventional education system, forcing many institutions to review and amend their existing policies and procedures. As pointed out in the Report on Technology Mediated Learning: Current Initiatives and Implications (1998), "a more insidious threat than alligator of an OU, is the "piranha" attack from small topic or domain specific niche players. These organizations will be more nimble and able to take small bites out of the education market and possibly leave little for traditional suppliers." Most of the trends identified are due to the following reasons : the changing workplace which calls for constant upgrading of skills; the changing nature of work – more serial careers, contracting etc., the changing workforce itself and not to forget the information age itself. All these form rapid trends stem developments in communication and information technologies. As Shale (2002) put it, "capitalizing on the interactive capabilities of the "new" learning technologies, some DE providers are beginning to behave more like conventional institutions and vice versa. Reflecting a growing convergence between conventional and distance learning modes, leading to the "hybridization" of higher education".

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