Transnational *University in the Sky* for Professional and Technical Education: A Private Initiative

Binod C. Agrawal, TALEEM Research Foundation, India

CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE

Two decades ago Professor Walter Perry told the story of starting an open university in the United Kingdom (Perry 1976). Since then Asia has seen the creation and expansion of several open universities. India alone has half a dozen open universities and is in the process of setting up a few more.

While discussing the structure of the open university, Perry (1976, pp. 47–48) observed "From the outset we foresaw that we would be operating not only an academic establishment, but in a very real sense a sort of commercial establishment. The latter would require a form of government quite different from that which was common in conventional universities".

The mushrooming growth of open and distance learning institutions in the Asia-Pacific region certainly testifies to this observation that open learning institutions have become commercial establishments. There is no doubt that the proliferation of open and distance learning has lead to the commercialisation of education more so in South Asia due to the very high level of unmet needs and the limited capacity of conventional universities to educate the general public.

The arrival of the computer and its quick acceptance in business and industry has further accelerated the process of "commercialisation of education". The end result — the streets of South Asian cities, especially those in India, are plastered with attractive posters of "computer training institutions", "communication technology aided professional and technical academies", and corporate commercials of "multinational learning centres".

South Asian countries are deluded with advertisements luring young and old; men and women alike to acquire new skills, knowledge, and diplomas to take them to the front of the job queue in a liberalised economy and global market. In a country like India where millions of graduates line up to find a meagre job that offers just enough to keep body and soul together, these new educational institutions claim to provide virtually unlimited opportunity for high salaried jobs. Without assessment, it is difficult to reject these claims. At the same time, few, if not all young men and women have found jobs after completing these new diplomas and degrees, especially in business and industry.

Computer and business management education in India today provides the best illustration of this point. While there is no "public" cost as government is not involved in supporting these privately owned academies, centres, and institutes, the "private" cost is extremely high. A comparison might illustrate the proportion of the private cost involved in these institutions. While the annual fee for a master's degree in computer science at an Indian university would be less than a couple of thousand Indian rupees in a year, the same would run anywhere from Rupee 50,000 to 100,000, depending on the reputation of the private institute offering a diploma accredited by some unknown foreign institute or university The same high fees hold true for management education.

Another aspect of Indian education is a tacit acceptance that money can buy degrees, for example, through capitation fees to get admission to institutions of higher learning. A result of economic liberalisation, this approach has been legitimised as a new method of providing education by allowing private institutions to charge exorbitant fees from those who would not get admission on their scholastic merit. It has led to legal and illegal means of gratification by a group of individuals who have now turned education into commerce. A very large amount of money is being drained from individual hands to an ever-growing "educational industry". It is difficult to predict the shape and size of this "new industry".

At the core of the proliferation and expansion of education in India is the basic belief among people that degrees and diplomas provide a means for economic prosperity, upward mobility, and social prestige. Colonial rulers advocated this view through Western liberal education in the last century and leaders, educators, and social reformers in South Asia and in independent India continued this emphasis. To create a secular society of equal opportunities regardless of social and religious antecedents, education was considered both essential and a precondition. Education has been seen as an equalising factor for providing opportunities for better living.

Such a belief has been amply supported in the recent history of India, reaffirming the commitment of the government of India to follow the path of positive discrimination. A backlash of such educational policies has lead to social unrest and the appearance of private educational institutions all over the country. This brief contextual perspective precedes a discussion of setting up a private university for distance and open learning.

CONVICTION

Education holds the key for future development of a nation. Education is a means to employment, upward mobility, and economic prosperity. Education is one of the means of development. Traditional educational systems in Asia are not able to cope with the demands and aspirations of the people. At the same time, conventional education patterned after European pedagogy is unable to respond to the needs of the market and industrial economy. While there is a great deal of demand for trained professionals to accept the challenges of the twenty-first century, there is a dearth of such trained personnel on the subcontinent of Asia.

Another concern has been the rising all-round unemployment in each successive year after India's independence. The Indian army is smaller than the size of educated unemployed youth in India today. And this number is ever increasing. The paradox is that in spite of all round unemployment, employers are unable to find "suitably trained personnel", whether government or private company, industrial or business houses. These educated unemployed youth are so uprooted from their moorings after going to college that they are unable to return to their traditional family occupations, trade, or even agriculture, where more than three-quarters of India's population lives. This contrasting image shows the imbalance between supply and demand in India. But this is true for many of the emerging economies in Asia, especially in South Asia. Educational planners and educators have been greatly concerned about reducing the gap of growing disparity, but with little success.

TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE

In the recent past, there has been a great deal of talk about distance education and open learning. In the context of Asia, it has led to a remarkable expansion of educational opportunities to meet the challenges of technical and professional education (*Towards A Commonwealth of Learning, 1987*).

In 1985, a great deal of thinking was done by the policy makers and planners in India in which the role of education was seen as an enabling factor for the democratisation of society and national development. The focus of the argument was on "equity, quality and relevance in planning the development of the education system" (*Challenge of Education: A Policy Perspective, 1985*, p. 6). This led to the formulation of the *National Policy on Education 1986*, which was further modified in 1992 as *Programme of Action 1992*. The *National Policy on Education 1986*, emphasised the use of information technology for improving and supplementing the quality of education.

Three factors that led to a remarkable acceptance of information technology for expanding educational access through distance and open learning are: satellite communication and multimedia (*technological*); a growing demand of education backed by political will (*socio-political*); and the belief that it is cost-effective and flexible (*pedagogical*).

It is no accident that while a new education policy was being formulated in India, the Indian Parliament enacted the bill to set up Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in 1985 as an apex institution for distance education and open learning. Within a few years, the open school system was also ushered into the country. While setting up these institutions, it was argued that the national endeavour must be to provide the best possible education to the poorest of the poor and women and children living in remote parts of the country. In other words, open learning would be distance neutral and equally accessible to everyone.

Three other considerations were at the forefront of distance education and open learning: first, the conviction that education is a lifelong learning process; second, it would provide opportunities and a stimulating environment to all segments of society; and third, it will be an enabling force

in the pursuit of new economic opportunities. These considerations gave a further thrust to enhance investments in distance education and open learning. This meant breaking away from the conventional, rigid close-ended system of entry, course work, and examination.

Further, emerging needs of information related to national development, health, family welfare, and employment required a great deal of augmentation through multimedia to assist the ongoing government and non-government endeavours. Also grey areas needed to be identified to emancipate and empower people through communication — that too in an interactive mode in which the individual's participation is considered essential. Keeping these development factors in view, Asian countries, especially India and China among others, have given impetus to distance education and open learning.

RATIONALE FOR PRIVATE INITIATIVES

So far, the state was thought to be responsible for educating its citizens. In many South Asian countries, education at all levels has been a constitutional responsibility and large amounts of resources are set aside for this purpose. In countries like India, allocation of the educational budget is next to only the defence budget. Despite these efforts, literacy levels remained low; women have been least literate. Higher education, that too of uneven quality, continues to be for the fortunate few. At the same time, the demand for higher education is at an all time high.

Looking to the future of South Asia and its educational needs, it has become imperative to supplement, support, and extend a helping hand from various sectors of the society to mobilise resources of the individual, industry, and public and private sector to enlarge the institutional base to increase access of to educational opportunity at a reasonable cost to improve both the quantity and the quality of education.

Out of primarily social concern and commitment Mr. Subhash Chandra, chair of India's largest private satellite television, Zee, decided to focus some of its resources and creative energies on vocational education for the general public. The first step taken was to establish Zee Education in 1995. Further, to increase educational opportunities for professional and technical education through open and distance learning in Asia with special reference to India, Chandra conceived the idea of establishing *University in the Sky* in 1995. To achieve this goal TALEEM (Transnational Alternate Learning for Emancipation and Empowerment through Multimedia) Research Foundation was registered as a literary, scientific, and charitable society at Ahmadabad in May 1996.

The TALEEM Research Foundation is committed to utilising information technology to increase scope and access and to enhance and enlarge opportunities for equalising existing rural and urban disparities, and economic disparities. Among other things, TALEEM Research Foundation has proposed to set up a *University in the Sky*

A *University in the Sky* accessible to all can take the classroom and laboratory to the doorsteps of the people. It can be the means for human resource development and income generation through education and training. It would also help address the issue of economic inequity. The multimedia based *University in the Sky* would enable upgrading knowledge and skills based on the demands and needs of the situation. Its focus would be on collaboration to identify educational and development needs and to promote horizontal two-way channels of communication.

The proposed university would be involved in follow-up activities to enable people to establish links with other institutions and organisations for further exposure; reinforcement and refresher training; apprenticeship; employment opportunities; development-action; and interventions. Thus the approach is not that of top-down education but need-based, action-oriented education linked to supply and demand and social and economic reality, in the cultural context of Asia and today's free market economy. In this proposal there is a shift from Western liberal education for the sake of education, to education for economic and social liberalisation and as an enabling force for survival with dignity.

CHOICE OF OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Given the increasing cost of education and to have a uniform quality education in an over-populated country like India, there is no alternative but to adopt open and distance learning as the best option. In countries like Australia and Canada, the introduction of distance and open learning was required to serve a few learners living in vast and distant places. In South Asia there are too many learners to be reached to meet the supply of education.

Not only has the stigma of open and distance learning as a poor cousin of conventional education system faded away but open learning is recognised as a valid alternate mode of education in an ever increasing urban industrial complexity. Also, open learning will help meet the ever burgeoning demand of education in the highly populated countries of Asia .

THE FIRST STEP: VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

The main aim of education as perceived by parents and students alike is to find employment after acquiring a diploma, degree, or certificate. In independent India and many countries of South Asia this view is most dominant where education is seen as an enabling means for employment. It is also one of the reasons the unemployment rate remains very high, as educated youth cannot see other means of livelihood besides other salaried employment. This problem was realised much earlier and therefore an effort was made to move out of a classical liberal arts, humanities, and science education, in favour of vocational education.

Vocational education meant designing curriculum in such a way that a student after completing the course could be recruited to a professional or trade job. However, the programme remained within the defined framework of the old educational system. The first serious effort of vocational education in India was initiated in 1968 when 50% of students at the secondary level of education were expected to join the vocational stream. Mullick (1987, p. 21) reported that "the actual figure is too insignificant to deserve mention. In fact it is less than 2 percent." The situation has not changed much in last 28 years. In higher and technical education, a somewhat similar observation was made. "As regards higher education, it is stated that the quality and employability of college graduates is affected because arts and humanities are offered as programmes of study unrelated to requirements of real life and science courses are designed essentially to explain concepts without, supportive arrangements in the form of laboratory apparatus, kits, etc. Regarding technical education, this system is now facing serious problems of obsolescence of machinery and equipment and the lack of wherewithal for research and training in respect of new technologies."

In the recent past, as a result of economic liberalisation and rapid industrialisation, an acute need has arisen for vocational education to meet the growing need of trained human power. It must be mentioned in passing that major industrial houses in the country have had methods of solving this problem, by creating in-service training programmes for their new recruits. This method only increased the cost burden of having trained personnel in the industry and further delayed the productive utility of these individuals.

Realisation of the shortcomings of the educational system was most acutely felt in the areas of management and computer education. It has led to the commercialisation of computer and management education in India on an unprecedented scale. Every means and mode of educational delivery system has been pressed into service to mop up enormous profits from individuals, leading to an unknown quantity of private cost of education. It has become difficult to separate the spurious from the genuine educational institutions involved in selling computer and management education.

Vocational education in India and other South Asian countries must be examined in light of demands from industry for specially trained personnel rather than university graduates. While initiating and directing a new professional postgraduate programme, I personally experienced how vocational education has become important to meet the future needs of Asian countries that aspire to become new economic forces in the contemporary market economy world order.

Traditionally, management graduates with a Master's of Business Administration were recruited in advertising industry for client servicing and account and media planning. Some years ago, one of the leaders of the advertising industry came out with a proposal for vocational communication education for the advertising industry in India. As a Director of the Institute, I assisted the faculty to work out an outline of a course that was designed to be very similar to a MBA programme on one side and to a Master's programme of Communication and Media on the other side. In reality, it was neither of the two but a new course with elements taken from several disciplines integrated and orchestrated with a specific focus. The programme was designed to train a person who could get into the advertising industry directly from day one and save almost a year of in-service training earlier required for fresh MBAs. A Master's programme in the Indian university is typically of two years' duration. This programme was also designed for the same duration on the patterns of premier Indian management institutions.

The question raised by several academics and faculty working on this course outline was about who would recognise such an unconventional course both for

employment and higher education. The response of the advertising industry leaders was an interesting one. "So long as such trained person get a high salaried job and are directly recruited by us why should one worry about the recognition by an academic body?" They were right. The 50 odd students who graduated from the first enrolment in 1996 were offered more than one job at a fairly high salary comparable to the best in the industry. The moral of the story is that more vocational higher education is a necessity and it is up to the educational planners to recognise the needs of industry and design new degree or diploma courses and programmes accordingly.

There are several areas in which vocational education is not only desirable but essential to channel financial resources for providing new kinds of education to the coming generation to catch up with the requirements of the 21st century. It is one of the prime philosophical and pragmatic reasons for taking this new initiative.

PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Keeping the employability criterion in the selection of any new programme, it has become obvious that industry's major needs are professional and technical human power. Within this broad frame of professional and technical education, a number of "human power needs of the industry assessment studies" are proposed to be carried out to design new professional and technical degree or diploma programmes. Industry partnership will be sought while designing these new courses.

Some of the suggested courses — apart from management and computer education — may include hotel management, hospitality, tourism, training for pre-primary and primary teachers, a regular one-year Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) programme, nursing, pharmacy, and training for auto industry personnel, to mention a few. The basic philosophy while selecting a new course would be employability.

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

The organisational structure of the *University in the Sky* has been thought within the Government of India proposed bill — *The Private Universities(Establishment and Regulations) Bill 1995*, having its headquarters at Ahmadabad (Gujarat) India. In addition, alternative arrangements will also be considered. Efforts are being made to affiliate *University in the Sky* with the Commonwealth of Learning. The *University in the Sky (Establishment and Regulations) Statutes* have been formulated, keeping in mind the proposed bill of the government of India. It must be mentioned that while preparing the statutes, the *Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) Act 1985* was closely followed and necessary modifications were incorporated to suit the present needs. It must be mentioned in passing that the *1995 Bill* and *IGNOU Act 1985* are quite identical. Therefore to conform to the *1995 Bill* on pragmatic reasons the *IGNOU Act 1985* was utilised extensively at the time the statute was formed.

MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

Given the reality and demand of the industry, to start with, many courses will be offered in English. However, depending upon needs, other South Asian languages will be considered as the language of instruction.

TEACHING AND LEARNING MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT

"Inter-disciplinary team approach" would characterise the method to be followed in designing course and study material. Multimedia based courseware will be developed by a team of experts ranging from educational technologists, content experts, and media production personnel to communication researchers. They will form the interdisciplinary team of course developers. Experience already gained in an interdisciplinary approach by other Asian open universities will be utilised. *University in the Sky* will further build and refine the approach, keeping in mind the technological innovations in communication and existing cultural sensitivity of the learners. More than a decade of firsthand experience of the Indira Gandhi Open University (IGNOU) in India will be handy while planning and preparing new course material.

Existing national and international course material and course content will be reviewed to avoid duplication and to reduce fresh costs of development and production. Educational technology will be researched at various phases of production to improve the quality of the course material with a cross-cultural perspective so as to make it usable in several countries in South Asia.

DELIVERY APPROACH

A decentralised approach to education in distance and open learning demands a very strong infrastructure of

delivery system. Zee Education (ZED), a wing of Zee Network Television, in the last two years has developed a strong local level network of "study centres" in over 200 locations in India. Known as ZED Points, these study centres are receiving ends in the link of the total delivery chain. Each ZED Point will form a "classroom" of the *University in the Sky* and will act as the focal point for interaction, assistance, resource sharing, and follow-up action. ZED Points are easily accessible to students because of their central locations in towns and cities.

Each ZED Point will have a classroom with a seating capacity of 25. It will be equipped with television, videotape recorder, computer, telephone, and Internet connection. The ZED Points will be a multimedia facility and will be assisted by local resource persons. As each ZED Point is organised as a joint venture, the entire responsibility of its operation and maintenance will be that of a local entrepreneur.

COURSE PRODUCTION

The audio/video course material production and multiplication will be done centrally at infrastructure facilities to be created. Print production will be done the same way. Effort will be made to connect each ZED Point with a mobile satellite telephone service in the future.

FACULTY AND STAFF

Recruitment of core faculty for the *University in the Sky* has already started. It is expected that by the end of December 1996 a competent team of academic faculty will be fully functional to initiate a number of programmes and courses. The assistance of national and international institutions is being sought. The office of the *University in the Sky* has functioned in Ahmadabad since November 1995.

REFERENCES

Commonwealth Secretariat. 1987. *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning. A Proposal to Create the University of the Commonwealth for Co-operation in Distance Education.* London.

Mullick, S. P. 1987. "Distance Education in India". In *Distance Education*, vol. II, pp. 15–94. Manila: Asian Development Bank.

Perry, Walter. 1976. *Open University: A Personal Account by the First Vice Chancellor, Milton Keynes (UK):* The Open University Press.

Indian Ministry of Human Resource Development. 1985. *Challenges of Education: A Policy Perspective.* New Delhi : Government of India.

Indian Ministry of Human Resource Development. 1986. *National Policy on Education 1986.* New Delhi: Government of India.

Indian Ministry of Human Resource Development. 1992. *Programme of Action 1992.* New Delhi: Government of India.

Indira Gandhi National Open University Act, 1985 No. 50 of 1985 and the Statutes of the University. New Delhi : Indira Gandhi National Open University.