

Best Practices in Open and Distance Learning Systems in India: An Assessment

M.M. ANSARI

Distance Education Council, IGNOU, New Delhi, India.

Abstract: *The success of Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions has contributed to increased credibility and acceptance of distance learning systems as an effective mode of teaching and learning. This genre of education has made significant contributions to human resource development. At least 40 per cent of incremental students' population at post-secondary level, of the total of about 0.5 million students per year, prefer to study through distance mode. They opt for different types and levels of degree/diploma programmes that are offered by the ODL institutions. The factors, which contribute to the growth and sustainability of distance education system, are identified in this paper with a view to designing appropriate strategies to effectively face the challenge of promoting human resource development through ODL systems. In view of this, an attempt has been made to describe the best practices in open and distance education, especially with regard to (a) policy initiatives; (b) design and development of courses; (c) methods and strategies of instruction, (d) media for learning; (e) student support services and (f) management and financing of institutions. Some of the major challenges that are confronted in quality assurance of programmes are discussed in this write up.*

Introduction

In response to the growing social demand for education and training for professional development, opportunities for open and distance learning Open Distance Learning (ODL) have been augmented, which contribute in a significant way to the efforts made for human capital formation through conventional systems. A number of mono-mode Open Universities (10) and the Centres of distance education in dual mode universities (65) have been established. And, these institutions offer a wide range of courses and cater for one-fourth of students in higher education. This share is rising over time.

The flexible and innovative characteristic features of the ODL systems allow for meeting the educational requirements of heterogeneous groups of learners at low costs. ODL institutions are therefore offering all types and levels of courses for self-motivated students through independent study programmes. Students work on their own with supplied course materials in print (audios and videos in some cases), postal communication, some forms of counselling, teleconferencing and learner support from tutors and mentors via telephone or e-mail. Since student population is large, over 20 lakhs, and widely dispersed, each institution has developed its own form of distance education in accordance with local resources, target groups and philosophy and mission of the organisations. The teaching and learning strategies are designed to effectively promote education and training, especially through adoption of multi-media approaches.

As there is no one best choice of media for learning, there is no one best way of teaching with technology. Flexibility and innovation in teaching and learning are therefore hallmarks of ODL institutions, which encourage teachers to develop learning materials and design teaching strategies utilizing the variety of options offered by the technology. The teaching-learning process is evolved to suit both the requirements of heterogeneous groups of learners as well as the teachers who make an appropriate choice of media for effective learning. It involves a high degree of interactivity between teacher and student howsoever they may be separated in time and space.

Systems of Distance Education

Major Policy Initiatives

The ODL systems have evolved overtime. A number of healthy practices emanating from the Government's policy initiatives to promote ODL, especially the use of educational technology as well as innovations made by the institutions have contributed to the growth process of ODL systems.

ODL for all : Distance education was initially launched for adults, mainly post-secondary students. This initiative was taken by the School of Correspondence Courses and Continuing Education, University of Delhi, in 1962.

Dual to mono-mode : The programmes were initially launched by conventional universities, which continue to play an important role even today, as they enroll about 60 percent of students who study through distance mode. There are over 65 Correspondence Course Institutes (CCIs) established by university level institutions. The establishment of mono-mode open universities by the Centre (one) and as many as nine major States is a significant development in the promotion of distance education. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has emerged as a trendsetter in providing a wide range of programmes in India and abroad. ODL institutions are increasingly involved in providing community-based and development-oriented education and extension services.

In a significant paradigm shift since 1989, the programmes at the elementary and middle school levels are being offered through this mode. The National Open School at the all India level and nine Open Schools at the States' levels cater for elementary and secondary levels students. There is thus a marked improvement in access and equity in provision of educational services as well as quality of learning materials at school level through distance mode.

Correspondence to multi-media approach : While print materials have been the main stay of imparting education under distance mode, the variety of educational technologies are increasingly relied upon for effective teaching and learning as well as for widening the reach of education. The institutions are at different stages in making use of technology for instruction. There are discernible shifts and improvement in programme delivery and learner support services. Adoption of multi-media approaches have not only transformed the culture of teaching and learning under the distance mode but also brought about its convergence with the conventional face-to-face teaching-learning system.

Private initiatives : A large number of private institutions have, of late, begun to offer courses of short-term duration. Such courses are targeted to meet the requirements of those students who seek to qualify admission tests to pursue higher education programmes in technical and vocational disciplines or seek employment in business and industrial sectors. Such institutions have greatly benefited from the network of facilities and courses developed by ODL institutions. And, at the same time, they have contributed to the growth of knowledge.

Localisation to globalisation : In the wake of globalization of education, which is a recent phenomenon, many foreign universities have begun to offer programmes in India through both conventional and distance mode, particularly on-line courses utilizing Internet facilities. As the number of Internet users is rising fast, such institutions offer ample opportunities for learning to a large number of students. By the same token, it must also be noted that they also pose a challenge of competition to all the service providers especially those that are lagging behind in using technologies for effective teaching and learning. In the process, quality of education is expected to improve.

Establishment of DEC : A significant policy initiative has been taken to guide and oversee the activities of institutions. The Distance Education Council (DEC) was established in 1992 as an apex body for promotion, coordination and maintenance of standards of distance education. The Council has adopted a multi-pronged strategy for development of ODL systems, the impact of which is reflected in strengthening of infrastructure of institutions as well as expansion and diversification of activities of ODL institutions.

The above policy initiatives have been influenced by the growing aspirations of knowledge seekers, the availability and use of educational technologies for instructions and the national response to promote ODL for creating knowledge society.

Systematic Design and Development of Courses

In designing learning materials, one must consider not only the goals, needs, and characteristics of teachers and students but also content requirements and technical constraints. Provisions must be made for continually updating courses, which should be based on feedback from instructors, content specialists and learners.

Till IGNOU launched its programmes in 1987, there was hardly any attempt in India to prepare study materials in self-instructional format. Division of Distance Education (DDE) earlier, Staff Training Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE) since 1993, have played the crucial role in this exercise.

As the successful distance education system involves interactivity between teacher and learners, almost all the OUs and a majority of CCIs have laid emphasis on improving interactivity. This is being done, mainly through newly created or conversion of study material into self-instructional formats, use of interactive technologies and increased counselling services. The impact of such practices is reflected in both increased enrolments in various programmes across the institutions as well as improvement in outcome as measured by educational attainments.

Realising this, the DEC has developed a comprehensive set of guidelines for design and development of programmes. Accordingly, instructional design laid emphasis on such good practices as development of self-instructional materials (SIMs), modular approach, assignment and evaluation system. The ODL institutions have thus designed their courses and/or in the process of revision/updating, for which the Council is providing financial support.

The approaches adopted by OUs/CCIs to cater for educational needs of students widely vary and depend on their institutional capacity to offer quality programmes as well as the assessment of needs of the clientele groups. Some of the notable good practices in design and development of courses are as under:

Preparation of knowledge workers : Open universities, namely, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and Yashwantrao Chawan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) offer employment oriented vocational courses, which have wider access and cater to deprived groups, such as, rural and women students. A number of short and medium term courses have been developed by OUs/CCIs that cater for needs of the deprived groups in remote areas. Such efforts have improved access and equity in provision of educational services for different categories of working population, as the programmes are offered in regional languages. A few dual mode institutions, namely University of Hyderabad and Birla Institute Technology and Science offer high quality programmes in technical and professional disciplines, which are very popular among students who seek employment in the knowledge intensive sectors.

Contrary to such good practices, a large number of programmes offered by most ODL institutions are in the areas of general higher education and the study materials are sub-standard. The students' learning attainments are abysmally low. The graduates of such institutions, especially those who opt for courses in humanities and social sciences, contribute to swelling number of 'unemployable' graduates. The OUs/CCIs should, therefore, pay attention to reduce the mis-match between education and the requirements of the world of work. Initiatives taken by a few institutions, as mentioned above, could be emulated to improve responsiveness of the ODL institutions to manpower needs of the society.

Extra-curricular activities for personality development : To attract and retain students in various programmes, some institutions, like Kakatiya University, provide facilities for extra-curricular activities, namely sports and culture and yoga, which are integral part of education and are considered critical for personality development. Such healthy practices are expected to be adopted by other institutions as well, since drop-out is a major problem faced by them.

Sharing of quality materials : To assure quality of programmes, reduce duplication of efforts and costs of services, ODL institutions in India share study materials developed IGNOU. A number of OUs and CCIs have adopted IGNOU's materials, mainly in the professional and technical disciplines. A concerted effort is being made to develop a 'common pool of resources' under the auspices of DEC for sharing across the institutions and to enable them to offer high quality courses in regional languages for wider access among students.

Focus on special target group : Specialised courses are planned and developed for specific target groups. For instance, Madhya Pradesh (Bhoj) Open University (MPBOU) offers 'special education' for teachers of learners with disabilities. IGNOU offers 'teacher education programme' specially designed and developed for teachers in the Northeast region. Likewise, target oriented vocational and technical courses are planned and offered for improvement in knowledge and skills formation of working population. Extension services are largely of such nature. The scale of such activities is however, low, since a very small number of institutions are participating in continuing education programmes.

Appropriate teaching-learning strategies : In designing new courses and developing instruments for assessment and examinations, resourcefulness of teachers is called upon to evolve innovative and creative approaches for effective teaching and learning and their evaluation. Appropriate teaching-learning strategies are accordingly adopted by the teachers and counsellors who impart education to heterogeneous groups of learners, using a variety of educational technologies.

Methods and Strategies

The methods of teaching and learning under distance mode require that the teachers should be thoroughly familiar with the instructional design and delivery process. And for this, teachers need training in instructional message design, strategies for delivering instruction, diverse methods of presentation, selecting various mixes of student-teacher activities and interactions, and assessing the level of learning by students. Likewise, all other functionaries, who facilitate the teaching-learning process, benefit from training programmes, which are organised by the Staff Training Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE) of IGNOU. Of late, DEC funding makes it obligatory that SOUs and CCIs have to use their funds for research and development.

Training and staff development are critical for promotion of ODL. Almost all the major OUs/CCIs therefore organise training programmes for faculty and other supporting staff. And, such occasions are also utilized for sharing best practices in development of courses and effective delivery of services. All the 9 State Open Universities and over 40 CCIs are annually supported financially by DEC to organise the training programmes that assist in evolving methods and strategies for enrichment of distance education programmes. Financial support for research and development activities is also provided to all the institutions for faculty development and improvement in the process of teaching and learning.

Effective teaching and learning require extensive preparations not only in terms of developing study materials for independent learning but also for adopting face-to-face teaching strategies, mainly in the forms of periodic contact programmes. Efforts are made to suitably blend the teaching-learning methods as employed in the distance and conventional systems, which ensure a close interaction between teachers, students and other facilitators, who function as a team. The practices of ODL institutions in stimulating interaction between teachers and students vary and depend on the choice of media that is dominantly used for instructions.

The Karnataka State Open University (KSOU), for instance, has adopted a novel approach to provide on-campus personal contact programmes. The University provides hostel facilities to distant students who stay in campus for specific period, during which teachers enable students to establish contact with them, as well as interact among themselves. The KSOU has thus developed appropriate methods of feedback. Such strategies assist in adapting to different student learning styles, using case studies and examples that are relevant to the target audience and personalising instruction.

Media for teaching and learning

The technological innovations that have been adopted by distance educators take into consideration such factors as user-friendliness, the climate for learning and the ability of technology to enhance and enrich teaching. ODL institutions have adopted a multi-media approach and make use of a wide range of media suited to the needs of students and the desired learning outcomes. Some of these may be mentioned below:

Use of inter-active technologies. The most dominant mode of delivery in distance education has however been the print materials while the other forms of communication media, such as; radio, television, audio and video play a supportive role, especially among the institutions that are equipped with adequate facilities and trained staff.

The major Open Universities like IGNOU, BRAOU and YCMOU use the network of radio/television facilities for broadcast/telecast programmes. The Gyan Vani and Gyan Darshan programmes that are offered under the auspices of IGNOU have significant potential to revolutionise distance learning, especially through improving two-way communication systems.

Preparation and use of self-instructional material : As most programmes are offered in regional languages for the reason of wider accessibility among the target groups, the print materials in self-instructional formats are ideally suited to diverse groups of learners. ODL institutions, with DEC's technical and financial support have undertaken the task of transformation and updating of courses. In most institutions, study materials are simultaneously made available in audio/video cassettes to facilitate teaching and learning. The STRIDE of IGNOU conducts workshops for transformation of materials in self-instructional format. Many OUs/CCIs have benefited from such initiatives. All the Schools of IGNOU assist them in their respective fields of activities in improving quality of materials and teaching techniques.

On-line education : A few ODL institutions have developed infrastructure, while some others are in the process of creating requisite facilities for on-line and web-based learning. IGNOU, as a trendsetter, has already shown the way. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are thus playing a critical role in reaching large number of students and reducing costs of education, which ensure cost-effectiveness of programmes. A majority of institutions are yet to harness the potentiality of ICTs for improving access and effectiveness of their programmes. Such institutions are facing stiff competition from those that are using Internet for providing educational services.

Study materials on Web : The institutional capacities to access new technologies and to use them widely differ across the ODL institutions. The high cost of investing in its use

and the equally high rate of obsolescence, the lack of experience in its use and the resulting need for expensive training determine the policy choices on technological solutions to educational problems. In exercise of abundant precaution for technology management, most institutions rely on 'low-tech' and more effective solutions to education and training problems. The feasibility of making effective use of appropriate technologies is constantly studied for adoption by ODL institutions. The progress in this regard is commendable.

For instance, the National Law School of India University, Bangalore, has put the entire study materials of the courses offered through distance mode on the university's Website. YCMOU and IGNOU's experiences of offering on-line courses in information technologies augurs well for intensive and extensive use of ICTs for learning, and DEC is not only committed to support their initiatives but also taking a pro-active role to entice and encourage the institutes for utilizing ICTs. The outcomes of such initiatives are encouraging. For instance, the interactive multimedia of BRAOU for Science programmes is widely welcomed. MPBOU's Kiosks in rural areas for computer teaching are very popular. Many institutions are contemplating such measures as above to effectively extend their services for the benefit of people.

Student support services

Interaction between students and teachers is critical for effective learning. Student support services are therefore suitably designed to overcome the negative effects of isolation and lack of regular contact between the distance learner and teacher. And, in doing so, different forms and channels of interaction are created.

Counselling services : At the institutional level, pre-entry counselling is provided to the students at the university campus and at various study centers. The students admitted to various courses are also provided a detailed counselling schedule, which contain such information as the venue for their counselling and the names of the counsellors. The academic counsellors are provided training to orient them in subject specialization as well as the methods of teaching-learning process in ODL systems.

The counsellors and staff of local study centers provide relevant information relating to admission requirements, fees, courses on offer, student support services, examination and evaluation system, etc.

Assignments and students feedback : A large number of students are involved in distance teaching, which poses insurmountable difficulties in providing feedback to students through tutor comments on assignments. Yet, many ODL institutions are in the process of making assignments compulsory in select programmes so as to ensure necessary feedback to students.

Contact programmes : Face-to-face counselling sessions are organised, especially on holidays. The advanced technologies are also utilized for teleconferencing, interactive radio counselling, etc. Some Open Universities provide toll free numbers for rural students and other disadvantaged groups. As these activities are at the lower scale, the institutions are making deliberate efforts to improve various forms of interactivity and support to students, particularly through the use of electronic media.

Library services are provided at most study centers. The quality of such services, however, depends on the facilities available with the host institutions. While most libraries established at the study centers do not issue books to students, the Kakatiya University, for instance, lends books to students to facilitate learning at their convenience. Jiwaji University provides mobile practical facilities for programmes in rural technologies and in management.

Management and Finance

The system and structure of higher education institutions widely differ in India. ODL institutions, especially the CCIs of conventional universities follow different practices in so far as organisational structure and funding of programmes are concerned. A few healthy practices may be mentioned.

Functional autonomy : The CCIs, which enjoy functional autonomy, are able to effectively deliver educational services and realize their objectives. A majority of CCIs are however not that privileged. Most CCIs were initially created as a constituent department of the university for offer of courses under distance mode. As the programmes are generally developed by the faculty of the parent university especially in the areas of on-going programmes, such CCIs are operationalised by the Managers/ Coordinators appointed by the University. The effective functioning of such institutions is severely affected, due to administrative delays in dealing with special characteristics of ODL. Unlike the departments, moreover, the CCIs do not have their own Board of Studies. The CCIs cannot therefore take their own decision. A significant number of conventional universities have therefore taken steps to convert such units into an independent Center/Directorate, which is a healthy sign of creating a responsive management structure. They are provided functional autonomy for efficient delivery of programmes. Some of the major CCIs are run and managed professionally for development and delivery of courses, and many more are expected to acquire autonomous status in the foreseeable future.

Staff training and development : The academic and supporting staff in ODL institutions are, by and large, drawn from the conventional system. Such staff lack in requisite training to manage the development of course materials, to design and deliver student support services. As these activities are distinct from those of conventional universities, ODL institutions with DEC support have undertaken training and research activities for providing orientation programmes to the staff on regular basis. Concerted efforts are being made to develop expertise for efficient management of the institutions. DEC and STRIDE of IGNOU are supporting initiatives for staff training and faculty development.

Need-based learning packages : The institutional models of the Open Universities are designed to effectively respond to the growth and development of ODL, particularly to meet the educational requirements of the regions, for which they have the mandate. They follow flexible and innovative approaches that allow them to launch need-based programmes. The activities pertaining to planning and execution of new courses are effectively carried out, which have however not been possible in the conventional system due to institutional constraints.

For instance, IGNOU has established study centres in prisons. And, for the empowerment of rural people it has undertaken a major project on Panchayati Raj Institutions, which focuses on the development of rural community through relevant educational interventions. Likewise, M.P. Bhoj (Open) University is offering special education programme for teacher training for education of the disabled persons. The launch of such programmes in collaboration with national apex institutions/Government department is made possible due to institutional flexibility and innovations to reach the un-reached.

Networking and sharing of resources : ODL institutions are geared to collaborate and share resources, which facilitate quality assurance without unduly raising the costs of development and distribution of programmes. A number of quality programmes designed and developed by IGNOU are shared across the institutions, for instance, under the auspices of DEC the establishment of a national resource center has been envisaged. It is proposed to establish an Inter-University Consortium for development and translation of study materials in Hindi for the use of a large body students' community. In a recently held meeting of Vice-Chancellors/Directors of CCIs in Andhra Pradesh, it was recommended that a consortium should be formed by A.P. State Council of Higher Education to work out the modalities for sharing of resources between ODL institutions in the State. The implementation of such measures, as above, augurs well for quality assurance and efficient use of resources.

Financial viability of ODL institutions : The costs and finance aspects of ODL system indicate a healthy sign for meeting the huge social demand for education at the least costs. Unlike conventional education, ODL institutions are financially viable as the evidence shows that:

- i) The costs of education are much lower, about one-fourth of the conventional system;
- ii) Most institutions are generating enough revenues, which may be ploughed back for re-investment for improvement of quality and for development of new courses; and
- iii) The cost recovery is very high, over 40 per cent for OUs and more than 80 per cent for major CCIs. The corresponding ratios for the conventional university departments are less than 10 per cent.

Finally, the financial health of ODL institutions thus reflects a low level of financial dependence on Government support due to efficient management of the system, effective revenue generation and economies of scale in ODL activities. They are therefore capable of contributing to human resource development through distance education. In cooperation and consultation with institutions, DEC is making a deliberate effort to develop database on distance education activities and promote R&D activities with a view to obtaining desired feedback for taking informed decisions. The priority areas for research have been identified and funding support is provided to the individuals and institutions for undertaking research projects, which aim at improving planning and management of the system, quality of programmes and its delivery mechanisms.

Concluding Remarks

The record of performance of ODL system, as reflected from the growing size of enrolment, a large number of programmes on offer and improved access to deprived groups, is attributable to healthy practices that have stimulated growth of ODL in India. The system has endeavoured to respond to the growing and diverse educational needs of heterogeneous groups of learners. The best practices pertaining to the design and development of courses, adoption of appropriate teaching-learning strategies, development of institutional structures for effective management and, more importantly, financial sustainability of the system have strengthened the ODL System. Of the total incremental demand for higher education, about 5 lakhs, nearly 40 per cent is currently absorbed by ODL system. And, the share is steadily rising which indicate the credibility of the system. The use of communication technology have not only contributed to distance learning but also facilitated the dissemination of good practices across the institutions.

The creation of extensive infrastructure and use of information technologies offer opportunities to enhance the level of participation of students in higher education and other programmes of continuing education. The share of educated manpower is one of the lowest for India, about 5 per cent for graduates and above. As this compares unfavourably with other countries, it is an impediment to productivity growth, especially in the context of the competitive and knowledge intensive global economy. A major challenge for the ODL systems would be to effectively extend the reach of educational programmes among the traditionally deprived groups and others who seek to improve their knowledge and skills. As the increase in level of participation of educated and trained manpower in the total labour force is critical for improving economic productivity, ODL institutions should effectively respond to societal needs. It would therefore be necessary for them to articulate education and training needs of working population as well as to create infrastructure for providing matching level of services, through adoption of appropriate distance teaching-learning strategies. The extent to which interactivity between teacher and students is improved, through two-way communication for effective teaching and learning, would determine the contributions of the ODL systems in human capital formation; which, in turn, would pave the way for universalisation of higher education and for making the economy globally competitive.

[**Dr M.M. Ansari** is Director of Distance Education Council, IGNOU, Maidan Garhi, New Delhi] .

My grateful thanks to Ms. Rosamma for help and support in preparation of this paper.