

# Scope of Open Learning and Distance Education in J&K State

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**Introduction :** The open learning/distance education today has been accepted as a well recognized mode of education and relevant training to meet out the emerging demands of our society. Because of the openness and flexibility of the open learning system, more than 105 countries have already established their own open education institutions. Presently, number of such institutions have crossed 850 which offer well over 16,000 courses to over 15 million learners all over the world. In India, the open learning has been received well and we have Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) at the national level and 10 State Open Universities at the state level. We also have 64 Institutes/Directorates of Distance Education. Distance Education Council (DEC) established under Statute 28 of IGNOU is expected to function as an apex body for the promotion and maintenance of standards and co-ordination of open and distance education in India.

The inherent flexibility of the system particularly its potential to reach large number of learners simultaneously with quality programmes enables it to cater to the needs of varied clientele. The areas hereto untouched by the conventional education system are now gradually being taken care of by the open learning system. Yashwantrao Chawan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU), Nashik, conducts programmes in home-gardening, fruit production, vegetable production, floriculture, land-scape and gardening for the farmers, farm labourers and rural youth. At National Open School, vocational education is being offered along with the formal academic courses. The area addressed under vocational education at the school level by National Open School include engineering and technology, agriculture, business and commerce, home science, health and paramedical and computers. IGNOU has been making pioneering efforts in offering as many as 51 programmes covering a very wide range of subjects such as computers, nursing, management, rural development, panchayati raj, disaster management, participatory forest management, women's empowerment, mass communication, library science, child development, nutrition, tourism etc.

The State of Jammu and Kashmir being hilly has wider scope for open and distance education. Keeping in view low literacy rate on one hand and the challenge of reaching lakhs of unreached people spread throughout J&K State, adoption of open learning through distance mode seems to be inevitable choice on the other. The multi-media learning package through distance mode will not only help to overcome illiteracy but will also help to generate employment avenues for a State like J&K.

**Areas of Intervention :** There are various educational initiatives, which have been taken from time to time. Some of them are producing good results and some are not. There may be some areas, which have remained unexplored. An ideal situation calls for an educational need analysis, which is not a possible within the given time frame and prevailing situation. The other option was to have an in-depth discussion with selected cross section, study relevant literature and analyse the situation in order to arrive at certain conclusions. This was resorted to and the analysis reveals that the areas of intervention for open learning mode in the State can be broadly classified into following :

(1) School Education, (2) Technical and Vocational Education, (3) Adult and Continuing Education, and (4) Higher Education.

**School Education :** The educational profile of J&K State does not provide a very encouraging picture. The literacy rate in the state is around 36% and at the same time the gap between literacy among males & females is quite wide. For example, the backward district like Kargil, the literacy among male is 38% as against 12% in case of female. The dropout rate is also reported to be very high. According to one report, only 36% of the age group 6-12 are found in the school and the rest are engaged mostly in child labour market as domestic servants and handicraft workers, farm boys, cattle boys, automobile workers etc. Keeping the above scenario in view, School Education through distance mode of learning assumes a great significance. It has a potential to considerably reduce drop out rates. Thus, there seems to be a strong case for establishing a State Open School in active collaboration with the State Board of Secondary Education. The National Open School can play an important role by providing all necessary technical and professional guidance in such an endeavour. But the initiative has to come from the State Government.

**Technical and Vocational Education :** The State of Jammu and Kashmir has potentials to promote distance and open learning in this regard, the policy planners for technical and vocational educational programmes have to bear in mind special human resources requirements of the State. The State also calls for establishing linkages with private and public sector undertakings and industries to make distance education respond to the market economy of the State. The State of Jammu and Kashmir has three main factors, which contribute significantly to the State economy and have great potential for employment generation in the following domains : a) Tourism ; b) Horticulture ; and c) Handicrafts.

**a) Tourism :** The tourism sector plays a very important role in boosting the economy of the State. In fact tourism is one of the major sectors, which has great potential in strengthening the economic position of the State. In this sector, large number of manpower gets engaged which includes houseboat owners, tourist guides, tourist escorts, hotel managers, transporters etc. A number of educational programmes through distance mode

can be developed to cater to the educational and management needs of this sector. These may include Certificate, Diploma, Advanced Diploma, Bachelors Degree Courses. The Certificate Programme in Tourism Studies can be very effective for those persons directly involved in tourism industry such as houseboat owners, tourist guides, tourist escorts etc. The Diploma and Advanced Diploma Courses in Tourism can be very effective for in-service persons of tourism department and those providing informal and subsidiary services in tourism as well as hotel industry. Similarly, Bachelors Degree Programme in Tourism has a great potential for fresh graduates who would like to opt for tourism as their career and wants to start their own tourism related business. Such programmes are currently being offered by the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi. These courses can be adopted to suit the specific needs of the State by the Distance Education Institutions in the conventional University system, till such time State has its own open university.

**b) Horticulture :** The Horticulture is the most important sector contributing to the State economy. A large number of people in the State of J&K are directly or indirectly associated with horticulture particularly the fruit industry. At the same time, there are very limited avenues and opportunities available in the State for diversifying horticulture activities. This diversification may include processing, packaging, promotion, marketing of fruit products etc. All these areas can be effectively addressed through distance mode of education. Further, new areas, which have great economic potential, can also be explored. These may include Commercial Vegetable Production and Fruit Nursery Production. In fact, IGNOU is readily engaged in developing a multi-media package in Commercial Vegetable Production and Fruit Nursery Production. To begin with Agricultural University of J&K State can join hands with IGNOU to develop distance education packages to be introduced in the State. Distance Training for Agricultural Research Management is another areas which may qualify for attention.

**c) Handicrafts :** Handicrafts is also one of the most important sector of J&K State economy. It involves a large number of people all over the State. The areas, which can be addressed through distance mode may include, application of new technology in handicrafts, diversifying handicrafts, marketing and human resource development. Courses and programmes can be developed separately for in-service personnel working in the Department of Handicrafts Development and Handicrafts Corporation and other related departments. Similarly, courses can be developed for those who are actively engaged in handicrafts production such as carpet weaving, paper machine, wood carving and other cottage industry product. All these programmes can be developed keeping in view felt needs and linguistic requirements of the clientele group. Since, the clientele group involved is expected to have different learning styles and preferences, distance education mode

seems to be most suited mode of education and training in this area of intervention. University of Kashmir and University of Jammu can join hands with IGNOU to develop relevant distance education packages.

### **Adult & Continuing Education**

Adult and Continuing Education is another areas that did not receive adequate attention as a component of higher education in J&K State. Education was considered as a one-time opportunity and once lost, the question of regaining it did not arrive. The emergence of the concept of continuing and adult education is the outcome of the realisation that there is a need for continuation of education beyond initial education, especially in the professional and vocational spheres. As far as J&K State is concerned, Continuing Education through distance mode is an important emerging area. It assumes special significance for J&K State because of its far-flung areas and its flexibility to address diverse learning styles and preferences.

Firstly, a large number of female population in J&K State in general and Kashmir Province in particular, constitute a vast reservoir of human resource which can be turned from a liability into an asset, through effective distance education interventions. These interventions can be more useful through long winter months when such a large segment of population almost remains indoors. Some of areas of intervention may include Nutrition and Child Education, Early Childcare, Food & Nutrition. Some vocational courses based on felt needs can also be developed and introduced. Secondly, education and training of local self-government functionaries assumes special significance. IGNOU, for the last couple of years is actively engaged in developing a multi-media package for the elected members of the Panchayats. Since, the specific requirements of the State in terms of J&K Constitution and a separate Act are there, it only needs development of special modules in these two areas. The remaining package can be introduced along with these two modules. Similarly, distance education can effectively address other human resource development needs of the State either in management or any other development field.

### **Higher Education**

The higher education through conventional system remained mostly confined to specific defined areas of intervention. The increasing demand for higher education on the one hand, and the limited output capacity of the conventional system on the other, did not allow much scope for innovation. Further, the rigidity and lack of flexibility in introducing new courses did not allow any innovative initiative to be taken up with the popularisation of distance education, the scenario has changed. Distance Education has addressed a number of emergency areas with great speed, which were hitherto not

addressed by the conventional system so far. The author feel that higher education through conventional system and through distance mode have to compliment to each other. Only then we can achieve best results. This type of complementarity educational interventions is all the more necessary for a State like J&K, which due to resource crunch cannot afford any mis-adventure.

The conventional system of higher education may concentrate its efforts in such areas which need vigorous face to face classroom/interaction/laboratory hand on practice, learning other emerging areas to distance mode of education. Based on the experience of last one and half decade of distance education in India, it seems that in future, higher education system may have to operate through dual mode rather than single mode. Every University may have to have two campuses - one conventional system campus and another virtual campus operated through modern communication technology. The State of J&K provides an excellent ground to experiment dual mode operationalisation of higher education.

### **Conclusion**

The State of J&K being educationally one of the backward States in the country, provides a great potential for exploring the possibility of the use of open and distance learning mode. This has become all the more necessary because of the restoration of the normalcy in the Educational Institutions after a long period of disruption. Since, open learning mode has now been accepted as a useful and effective mode of intervention, it can play an important role in democratisation of higher and professional education in the State of J&K. A number of possible areas of intervention have been suggested which if followed up sincerely offer a great potential for a positive change in both higher and professional education of the State.

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