

Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University and its Academic Programmes

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Today India is perhaps the only country that has more than one single mode open university. Interestingly, in many cases, not even academic professionals know about them. With this presentation we are introducing an informative series on such universities. Subsequently, we shall present a similar series on our dual mode distance education institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) came into existence in July 1989 through Act XX (1989) of the Maharashtra State Legislature. The YCMOU is the fifth open university in the country, and the fourth one at the State Level. The University was named after Yashwantrao Chavan, one of Maharashtra's unquestionably great sons and leaders, who enthusiastically supported the cause of education when he was Chief Minister of the State in the early 60s.

The YCMOU is located in the city of Nashik (sometimes spelt Nasik), about 200 kilometers to the north-east of Bombay.

2. PURPOSE AND AIMS OF THE YCMOU

The Act of the Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University addresses itself unequivocally to the role the University is expected to play. The Act states the following aims and objectives:

1. To make higher vocational and technical education available to large sections of the population.
2. To give special attention to the needs of the disadvantaged groups, in particular, people in the rural areas and the women.
3. To relate all courses to the development needs of individuals, institutions and the State.
4. To provide an innovative, flexible and open system of education by using distance teaching methodology and by applying modern communications technologies to education.
5. To provide continuing adult and extension education. Special attention is to be given to retraining adults in new skills to enable them to adjust to a changing technologies-environment.

6. To provide post-graduate studies and research opportunities in all fields of knowledge, especially in educational technology, distance education and development communications.

3. SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE YCMOU

The YCMOU Act clearly specifies the direction the University is expected to take. While implementing its programmes, the YCMOU is expected to give attention to the following :

1. The University is expected to make its courses available both in English and in Marathi, the local language.
2. The University's major thrust is expected to be on applied, technical and vocational courses.
3. The University is expected to operate in a cost-efficient manner and make efforts to become self-sufficient in its operational costs within the first five years, i.e., by 1994.

4. ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES OF THE UNIVERSITY

4.1 Preparatory programme

The Preparatory Programme is offered to those who have not passed 12th or equivalent examinations¹ but wish to have direct entry to the Degree Programme. Originally, it consisted of courses in English, Mathematics, Social Sciences, and Commerce and Accountancy. A student was expected to study 3 courses, of which English and Mathematics were compulsory.

The Preparatory Programme was launched for the first time in October 1989 at 15 Study Centres and had an enrolment of 1,223 students. The second offer of the

Preparatory Course was made in July 1990, for which 6,602 students were enrolled at 31 Centres.

At the moment, a revised preparatory programme is being developed, with greater emphasis on the study and learning skills than on the content. The revised programme will be offered in mid-1992.

4.2 B.A./B.Com. degree programme

The YCMOU has the major responsibility of meeting the common man's aspirations to obtain higher educational qualifications. Since degrees open doors to further opportunities, the YCMOU has been making efforts to enable people living in remote or rural areas to study for a higher degree. In doing so, it is not unmindful of the fact that in many developing countries the degree disease is rampant. To make degree level programmes relevant to current social realities and improve their vocational potential, the YCMOU has introduced a novel applied degree both in the Humanities and in Commerce.

The YCMOU's degree level programmes in the Humanities and in Commerce offer the following choices :

- B.A. (Applied) : For those who wish to choose the applied component as the major field of studies (48 credits out of a total of 96 credits).
- B.Com. (Applied) : The same as above.
- B.A. (General) : For those who wish to study a broad-based programme of studies.
- B.Com. (General) : For those who wish to study a broad-based programme of courses in Commerce and Management.

Every YCMOU Programme is characterised by the number of credit points the student must complete. The degree programme consists of 96 credit points distributed over a number of courses. When a student successfully completes a course, he or she obtains those credits.

The YCMOU hopes that the innovative modular structure of the programme and the provision for applied courses will revitalise degree programmes in the Humanities and Commerce and enhance their economic potential.

4.3. Programmes in agriculture

The YCMOU's main thrust is expected to be on applied and technical courses and it is expected to usher in a new era of needs-oriented vocational education in the State of Maharashtra. The YCMOU's courses in agriculture attempt to encapsulate the successful farming practices and make them available to the average farmer and farm labourer.

Initially, the YCMOU has planned courses in the representative crops: grapes, mangoes, cotton, groundnut, onion, pulses, saffola oil-seed, sugarcane, *ber* (jube plum), and pomegranate. Farmers study with the help of specially written print materials, audio-visual aids, two-way communication between individual farmers and agriculture experts, and contact sessions. For contact sessions, the University uses the concept of *parivaars* : a sort of an extended family where people get together to exchange ideas and benefit from each other's experience. The YCMOU has taken the first step to eventually develop an expert system through which difficulties of the individual farmers will be solved with the help of answers provided by the practices adopted by the successful farmers.

The School of Agriculture is actively engaged in the development of a number of certificate level courses in horticulture and the training of gardeners also.

4.4 Programmes in science and technology

Over the years, Indian economic and human resource planning has accorded high priority to science and technology education. However, the creation of educational and training facilities in various areas of science and technology has fallen short of the massive demand. Also the distribution of these facilities has been uneven, with the urban areas monopolizing the best of these facilities. The University has, therefore, decided to offer programmes at various levels in the field of electronics and computer science. Currently, the Diploma Programme in Applied Electronics is under preparation.

This programme keeps in view the increasing demand for trained electronics engineers, technicians and technical supervisors. Course work consists of 16 credits (480-560 study hours) worth of theory, 16 credits worth of practical work and 8 credits worth of project work. Study materials have been developed by well-known experts in the field. The instructional package consists of self-study texts, video demonstration tapes, a special manual and an innovative home experiment kit. Students will be able to obtain the kit against a deposit and perform more than 50 experiments at home. Institutions with adequate technical facilities are being identified as study centres. At the study centres, students will obtain individual guidance and perform complex practical tasks under the guidance of counsellors. The Diploma in Applied Electronics will be launched in 1992.

4.5 Programmes in education

Recent decades have seen a rapid development of primary and secondary school education in the State of Maharashtra. The National Policy on Education² envisages the continuous training and orientation of teachers as a crucial quality component. This means that even teachers who have had some pre-employment training must continuously upgrade their knowledge and skills. The number of such teachers is very large, with an esti-

mated backlog of 40,000 teachers in Maharashtra alone. The YCMOU has established an In-service Teacher Training Programme in cooperation with the Department of Education, Government of Maharashtra. This programme combines the distance education methodology with innovative face-to-face contact activity.

The University has also launched a programme for a Bachelor's Degree in Education (B.Ed.). The curriculum was approved at a national level meeting and initially 1000 students have been admitted on a pilot project basis.

4.6 Master's and research programmes

The University will soon launch its Master's level and research programmes. These are :

4.6.1 MA/MPhil/PhD: These programmes will be available in various subjects, with emphasis on the communication of the content. The titles will be MA/MPhil/PhD in Physics/Science/Social Science/Language/Geography/History/Communication/Education, etc. The target learners for such degrees are persons working in colleges, universities and special research institutions.

4.6.2 M.Ed.: This programme will be available to teachers with a B.Ed. qualification or to those without a B.Ed. For the second group, study of certain core courses in education is necessary. The target group for this degree comprises school teachers and teachers of Education-as-a-discipline.

4.6.3 M.Phil/PhD in Educational Communication: The target group for this degree comprises school teachers, junior-college teachers, and college teachers. Practising teachers with at least 10 years of experience and a B.Ed. degree will be allowed to join the M.Phil. programme on the basis of their bachelor's degree.

4.6.4 M.Phil/Ph.D. in Distance Education: The target group for this degree comprises persons already working in or likely to work in the distance education organisations.

The YCMOU organised a National Level Workshop in January 1990, which recommended that the following four courses should form the course work for the M.Phil. level programmes :

- Research Methods
- Communication Models in Education
- Instructional Systems Design
- Assessment and Evaluation

The dissertation/thesis will be handled through the following stages :

- Topic Submission
- Research Design Submission
- Outline/Synopsis of the nearly-ready dissertation/thesis

- Defence of the final dissertation/thesis

Research guidance will be provided by guides strategically located in various parts of the State.

A Research Council, consisting of 20 approved research guides, will examine the first three stages of dissertations/theses.

Every year, a two-day Research Seminar will be organised to support this programme.

4.7 Programmes under preparation

- Diploma in Digital electronics
- Diploma in Computer Technology and Certificate Courses in Computer Applications, and Office Automation.
- Continuing Education Certificate level courses in Repairs & Maintenance of Radio and Taperecorder, Masonry, Black-and-White Television Repairs, Plumbing, Lathe Operations, Two-wheeler Mechanism.
- Certificate level courses in Commerce, Management, Journalism and English language.

5. HOW THE YCMOU CHOOSES ITS PROGRAMMES

The YCMOU aims at establishing educational programmes based on the economic and development needs of the people of Maharashtra. The YCMOU uses the following criteria for accepting a programme :

- i) Will the programme help the students to find employment and better their living standard ?
- ii) Does the programme represent the needs of the larger sections of the people in the State ?
- iii) Is the programme consistent with the YCMOU aims and objects?

6. HOW THE YCMOU ATTEMPTS TO ASSURE QUALITY

A university must reflect the aspirations of the community which supports it. To ensure that the University's programmes achieve the intended quality and that all sections of the society, including acknowledged experts, participate in the decision making process, the YCMOU uses the following mechanisms:

6.1 Participation of experts and practitioners

The Academic Council and the Planning Board are the statutory bodies established by the YCMOU Act. Members of the Planning Board are eminent people from a variety of fields, including social services, industry, education and the professions. Every proposal for an educational programme is examined by these bodies for viability and relevance. At present, the Planning

Board performs the function of the Academic Council as well.

6.2 State-level advisory committees

Once the University decides to develop a programme or a course, it appoints a State Level Advisory Committee for that programme or course. Members are chosen from all over the State and are eminent personalities in their own fields. The State Level Advisory Committee works out details of the courses and recommends names of persons responsible for the preparation of learning materials.

The State Level Advisory Committee ensures that the best possible expertise is available at the planning stage so that students can have the benefit of a programme devised by acknowledged experts in the field. It is necessary to emphasize here that members represent not only the academic aspects of a course, but also its practical side. Many members are successful practitioners in their fields. For instance, in the case of agriculture courses, there are people from the agricultural universities as well as successful innovative farmers.

6.3 Writers' committees

Specially created print materials are the backbone of the YCMOU's instructional package. Every course is accompanied by textbooks developed by well-known experts. Usually, a group of experts gets together and works out details of a particular book. Then individual chapters are written and critically examined. Care is taken to ensure that the latest ideas are presented in simple language.

The YCMOU believes that its specially created textbooks have the potential to improve the overall quality of education in the State.

6.4 Special seminars

Apart from the regular mechanisms like the Planning Board, the Academic Council, State Level Advisory Committees, and Writers' Committees, the YCMOU ensures broader social participation in its programmes by organising seminars. The seminars have the participation of eminent practitioners from a variety of fields like social service, education, commerce and industry, public administration, agriculture and science and technology. Through these seminars, the YCMOU aims to establish a direct link with and understanding of the people's aspirations.

The first activity was organised in November 1990, and was called the *Lokasamvad Satra*, i.e., a seminar to have dialogue with the people.

7. THE YCMOU INSTRUCTIONAL PACKAGE

In line with the thinking in many parts of the world, the YCMOU attempts to provide as complete an educa-

tional experience as possible to its students with the help of what is often described as an instructional package, which is in actual fact a multimedia package consisting of print and non-print materials, limited contact sessions, and where necessary special kits and practical experience.

8. STUDENT EVALUATION

Although the precise nature of student evaluation depends upon the specific nature of a course, the following components are common to all: self-check questions, counsellor-marked assignments, class tests and end-of-the semester or end-of-the course examinations.

9. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The YCMOU has completed about two and a half years of its existence. In its operations, the following problems have been encountered:

9.1 Work delays

It was found that there were delays in providing study materials to the students. This was mainly because the University has a limited academic staff component and cooperation of the outside academics is crucial. It has also indicated the desirable staff profile for the YCMOU academic staff, who should possess not only subject expertise but also interactional skills. Efforts to speed up production have resulted in the use of electronic publishing. It seems now that the lead time is about 10 months for a course.

9.2 Staff role

The academic staff sometimes believe that working at the YCMOU results in what is often described as **deskilling**, i.e., they feel that they are not able to continue their development in their own subject specialisations.

9.3 Comparison with staff from conventional institutions:

In the Indian colleges and universities, academic staff spend not more than about 4 hours at their places of work. At the YCMOU, however, all staff are expected to work a full 8 hour day. This is sometimes resented by the YCMOU academic staff.

9.4 Difficulty level of YCMOU courses

In some cases, students have complained that the YCMOU courses are more voluminous and more difficult than the conventional courses.

9.5 Compulsory subjects

The University has made the study of English and

Mathematics compulsory at the Preparatory Course level and that of English at the Foundation Course level. Some students believe that this is not relevant to students of a distance teaching university.

9.6 Industrialised form of working

Since the YCMOU communicates with its students through the learning artifacts, the production of artifacts is a crucial activity. Unlike the conventional institutions, where staff work fairly independently in their departments, at the YCMOU considerable interaction becomes necessary between academics, course writers, instructional designers, artists, copy editors, and so on. This is sometimes not appreciated by the staff.

9.7 Work style mix

The YCMOU has introduced mechanisation and computerisation in certain areas of its work. For instance, electronic publishing is attempted. However, the actual pattern is still a mix of manuscripts being generated and editing being done manually on these manuscripts and finally wordprocessing or pagemaking being performed. A smoother work flow where first wordprocessed printouts are generated and editing functions are done on the computer will enable the University to make the most of the expensive investments in computers and software. The same applies to student registration and examination records.

10. REMEDIAL MEASURES

10.1 A more comprehensive staff selection process

In order to gauge the fitness of individuals for the

tasks relevant to the working of the YCMOU, it is now planned to make the interview merely one component of a total selection process, rather than the only one. Candidates will be shortlisted and given a typical distance teaching task for about three months. Their performance on this task will be an important input to the selection. It is hoped that this would lead to the selection of persons more suited to the work of the YCMOU.

10.2 Rationalisation of the workflow

The University is now planning a streamlined flow of book production work, starting from development of a short outline to the development of a full length draft. A sample unit will be developed together by the subject specialist and the instructional designer and scrutinised by the Course Writing Team and an External Assessor for use by the team subsequently.

10.3 Life-cycle of courses

In order to rationalise the work load, the University has now decided that every course will have a life of at least five years, before any major revision is undertaken.

The YCMOU is entering a critical period. The University is aware that it has raised people's expectations of what it can do. It has also placed upon itself the responsibility to become self-sufficient in terms of the operational costs. It has come to realize that the major challenge is the development of courses with a genuine social demand and to this end, the future emphasis will be on using research as the basis of academic planning.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The final school leaving examination.
2. *National Policy on Education, 1986*, Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of Education, New Delhi.