

Growth of Open and Flexible Learning in India: Emerging Challenges and Prospects

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Honourable President Professor Ram G Takwale and other officials of IDEA, Esteemed and successful Vice Chancellor of KSOU Professor Ramegowda, Distinguished Delegates, Guests and friends.

I consider it an honour and privilege to address you on this important occasion of the Annual Conference being organised by IDEA and KSOU.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the education system in our country is passing through a period of significant transformation and expansion. Education is a human right – and we feel very enlightened and satisfied to observe the fast growing rate of literacy in our country. This is bound to accelerate further by the revolutionary decision of the Indian Parliament to declare education as a right for every child in the age group of 6-14 years and shall bring additional responsibilities on the education system and thereby educators. We need to respond appropriately with necessary wherewithal and start organising ourselves right now as the task is truly monumental.

It is well understood by all that to empower our people and improve the quality of their life, education is a prerequisite for the success of our noble and cherished mission. Educated India empowered with skills and knowledge in different sectors will propel us as world leaders in the International scenario. History is witness to our past glory and we will be able to revive it by emerging as leading '*Knowledge Society*'. It is also encouraging to observe that our society today has some serious concerns to achieve the above goal in a dynamic time frame. But how do we do that especially in the background of huge numbers, heterogeneous groups and well distributed and scattered settlements is a challenge to be met. There are also sparsely located areas with very poor infrastructure support in terms of even basic transportation and communication. Then there are also serious financial constraints. This brings us to the eternal question of optimising dissemination of knowledge and skills ensuring quality and that too at low costs.

Inadequate response and inappropriate solutions to this question restricted education in our country and elsewhere to Gurugrhas, Ashrams, Vihars, Madarsas or similar such systems for centuries. But growing demands for education gradually led us to

the present conventional systems of education in the form of classroom focused transactions. However, these involved heavy infrastructure investments and without ensuring unlimited access. Increased pressures for higher education after our independence due to the realisation that education is a prerequisite for social and political empowerment and our inability to add new institutions created a serious crisis in our system of education. We were forced to increase the intake without appropriate additional support in terms of faculty, laboratories, libraries etc. Even Institutions like IITs are currently in the process of doubling their intake and are handicapped by being not able to recruit appropriate faculty. I am aware of some departments in IITs where the staff strength has reduced by 30-40 percent of what it used to be earlier. The situation in the conventional university system is even worse and many of these institutions are passing through unprecedented financial crisis and in many cases it has become difficult to ensure quality of education. Never before in the history of education in our country, have we encountered such a deep crisis and it is important for all of us as individuals and collectively as institutions and a nation to address these problems and unprecedented situations.

The emergence of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) System in the country a few decades ago has been a welcome development. It faced initial scepticism from convention peers, probably more because of their ignorance about its capacity and potential. Fortunately for all of us, the wheel has turned in the right direction; and now the ODL system has established its credibility, competence, and capability to bring in a very successful transformation. The policy makers are now convinced that the open and distance learning system is poised for an important role in the emerging educational scenario in our country. What is more satisfying is the fact that it has been a source for inspiring such systems in other countries in our region and developing countries elsewhere. We are now able to provide quality education to large and heterogeneous target groups of learners at sustainable costs. There is a paradigm shift from classroom-centred education to student-centred; education relevant to their contexts. We have to now engage ourselves to address the requirement and expectations of customised education rather than prescription of a tailor made programme for all. There is also greater involvement in new and important areas of education, so relevant for improving the quality of life of our people. In essence, the Open and Distance Learning System is heading towards placing education and educational institutions in the centre stage of all major developmental activities as envisaged in the Education Policy of 1986. In the coming years, we will have to reposition ourselves from 'learn what we offer' to 'we offer what you need'.

The system is new, pragmatic and dynamic. From providing course material through correspondence course institutions, we have moved to intelligent flexible models, which provides high quality self-instructional course material with multimedia and ICT inputs to support and strengthen the learning process. The ODL system has accepted, assimilated and absorbed the developments of fast growing and emerging area of Information and Communication Technology and has ensured cost-effective, flexible education, with global access. This is amazing and greatly satisfying as for the first time we are in the process of appropriately providing answer to the question raised by me a little while before about quality education at low cost with increased access. Friends, let us remind ourselves that we in ODL system are in the process of

creating history in the annals of education in the country; we have to play a major and crucial role in this great movement and we have to be quite conscious about ensuring quality of education that we provide to large target groups of learners. We have great collective responsibilities ahead. There are, of course, some of the best ODL systems in our country but we should not lose sight of some of the weakest links like non-campus, non-collegiate students which still continue to exist in our conventional systems; these need to be transformed and catered to by the ODL system.

In the beginning of this address, I drew your attention to two major contemporary developments in education viz. increase in literacy and education as a right in our country. In this background, it is essential for us to start estimating, assessing and preparing for the enormous future demands for education which will emerge from the foregoing important developments within the next few years. Fortunately, the credibility and quality of distance education programmes and enhanced access to educational opportunities at low costs being provided by IGNOU, SOUs and other important institutions and organisations to our youth, in-service personnel and neoliterates/non-literates in the unorganised sector have contributed to a very clear understanding and realization in the country that the ODL system is no more an option but a compulsion for democratising education at such a large scale. Today IGNOU alone is providing education to nearly 10 percent of the total number of students in the country in higher education and the ODL system covers nearly 20 percent of them. In view of the credibility, and acceptance of this rather new system, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India has projected a phenomenal growth for the ODL system. The expectation is that nearly 40 percent of the total number of students in higher education will be able to receive quality education, including requirements for skill up-gradation and lifelong learning, through the ODL system by the end of the Tenth Five-Year Plan. We are aware of the tremendous responsibilities and the crucial role that the National Open University has to play in meeting the challenges that emerge from such a gigantic time-bound task. In order to achieve our cherished goal, we have already started working aggressively in collaboration and cooperation with institutions both in the conventional system and the ODL system. We have been interacting with policy makers, national organisations like the University Grants Commission, NCERT, Department of Space, NIOS, Distance Education Council, Vice-Chancellors and other educationists across the country for promotion and expansion of quality assured ODL system. This has shown results and within the first year of the Plan period an Open University in Tamil Nadu has come into existence, another has been announced for Orissa and new SOUs for the States of Assam, Haryana and Kerala are in advanced stages of conceptualisation. Several established institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology have started distance education programmes and several national organisations like Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR) have responded very positively to proposals for use of distance education for extension programmes in collaboration with IGNOU.

Through extensive discussions and deliberations within the system and outside, we have formulated the Vision and Mission Statements for IGNOU and DEC. These outline our commitments and directions of development for the entire ODL system in the country. We have thus set for ourselves enormous tasks with far reaching

implications for our system of education, which can only be achieved through sustained collaborative efforts of the conventional, formal, non-formal and all other systems of education. Sharing of resources and dynamic use of emerging technologies will enable us to meet the challenges of access and equity without compromising with quality; we have to provide the best education to those who need it the most. We are forging ahead in this direction and seven FM radio stations located in different parts of the country have already become functional and another 13 should become functional within the next few months. We are in the process of setting up 40 FM radio stations under the radio cooperative *Gyanvani*. With 80 per cent coverage of landmass, radio is the most convenient, conventional but effective tool to reach the geographically removed people. Three television channels under *Gyandarshan*, devoted exclusively to education, are now available and being run by us from our studio in IGNOU campus as a collaborative initiative of IGNOU, MHRD and several leading institutions like IITs, NCERT and UGC, among others in the field of education in the country. I have already mentioned about the massive future expansion in the demand for education and I am very pleased to inform you that as a follow up to a meeting convened under the Chairmanship of Prof. Murli Manohar Joshi, Hon'ble Minister for Human Resource Development, Science and Technology and Department of Ocean Development, ISRO has very recently decided to launch a dedicated satellite to provide extensive ICT support to meet the future requirements for education alone. **This is a path-breaking and visionary decision for which I would like to compliment the MHRD and ISRO.** This will be another major area for our collective intervention in coordinating, sharing and developing necessary software to support learners at all levels. With the availability of these capabilities, I see an important role for us all to contribute meaningfully and support continuous up-gradation of knowledge and skills in different sectors through lifelong learning to meet the challenges arising from tough competition and dynamic developments. I would like to place before you a visionary statement made by Padma Vibhusan Dr. K.Kasturirangan Chairman Indian Space Research Organisation and Secretary Department of Space, Govt. of India about the importance of the ODL system and its future during his visit to IGNOU on February 22, 2003.

"At the core, both ISRO and IGNOU share a common vision, which is to realize 'Educated India'. It is this vision that gave birth to our national space programme; it is the one which inspired our young men and women to achieve unparalleled feats of excellence in space and again it is the same vision that presents the challenge of the highest order for current generation. In facing this challenge, symbiotic linkage between organizations such as ISRO and IGNOU is an inevitable necessity.

IGNOU is a trailblazer in India's quest for establishing a knowledge-based society in the 21st century. It is more than an institution; it is a movement, for the cause of education and knowledge. Whether in reaching out to the vast multitudes of people, who are unable to access formal educational systems or in the integration of the best of knowledge and skills through national and global networking using the most advanced techniques, IGNOU's future role will be that of frontiers."

Such policy decisions and new interventions have emerged from the confidence and credibility developed by the ODL system. We have to make special efforts to aspire for greater and still greater levels of excellence and acceptance of our systems. We have to work together, share each other's strengths and work jointly to improve the quality of weaker systems. We should also realize that we are under serious scrutiny and are being watched; there is still a small cross-section of our society, even peers, who continue to doubt our ability and capability. It is my considered opinion that the products of ODL system are in no way inferior to those of the conventional in skills and competencies. For this reasons, there is an extremely visible and positive response from policy makers and others in our country.

A large number of institutions from Asia and Africa are joining hands with the ODL system in our country. Several successful partnerships and arrangements with Governments and Institutions abroad have emerged from offering of academic programmes and sharing of resources. In the year 2002, IGNOU alone has licensed 68 courses to the newly established Nigerian Open University, Abuja and 63 courses to the Institute of Open Learning, Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya. IGNOU, YCMOU, BRAOU are entering into arrangements with agencies like the International Crops Research Institute of Semi Arial Tropic (ICRISAT) to promote agricultural education and development of skills. We have to continue our efforts to take quality education to less developed and developing countries, which lack infrastructure or appropriate expertise. In this way, we shall contribute to global understanding for peace. I would also like to mention that we have to be extremely careful and cautious in exporting our education. Good quality will ensure greater acceptability, resulting in escalating demand leading to our wider presence. A number of delegations led by Ministers from several other countries have visited IGNOU during the last few months and they have shown keen interest in sharing our expertise and academic resources. Just to strengthen your commitment and confidence in distance education system in the country, I may mention that the Director General of UNESCO during his visit to IGNOU in August 2001 described your national open university as an 'organization rather than an institution with which UNESCO should share plans rather than projects'. It is again gratifying to note that two out of five Assistant Director Generals of UNESCO viz. Sir John Daniel and Prof. A.W. Khan, my esteemed predecessor in IGNOU, were Vice Chancellors of Open Universities. Complementing the success of ODL system in our country, Sir John Daniel (2003) declared that

“The Indira Gandhi National Open University is leading this revolution in higher education, which is why I am so proud to be here. This revolution means that in higher education, big is now beautiful. I was delighted to see that in the PowerPoint slide presentation about the University, the first slide says ‘IGNOU – the World’s Largest University’. That is a wonderful achievement. Along with India’s State Open Universities you have opened up access to higher education to hundreds of thousands of people. Even more importantly, you have not only made higher education available to more people, you have brought learning to people who could not previously aspire to it because of where they live or who they are.”

.....Your success does not end there. You have also raised the quality of higher education, not just at IGNOU and in the open universities, but across all of higher education. Because of the scale and diversity of your academic and professional programmes, you are India's largest producer of quality academic material and **as a spin-off effect** this material now improves the quality of teaching and learning in all universities (the emphasis added by the author).

Along with wider access and higher quality, IGNOU has brought down the cost of quality higher education. The Government of India, more than any other government in the world, has recognised this by putting the expansion of distance education at the heart of its policy.

Operating a university of this massive size is a major academic, managerial and administrative challenge. I congratulate the Board of Management, the Vice-Chancellor and the staff for the modern and effective way in which they run IGNOU, not the least challenge being the increased annual enrolment targets that you have to meet. However, as I said earlier, big is beautiful and bigger is even more beautiful. That is why IGNOU is leading the 21st century revolution in higher education."

In response to a decision taken at the meeting of Heads of State of SAARC Countries, IGNOU-External Affairs Ministry, Govt. of India and SAARC Secretariat in Nepal organised a two-day conference of Vice-Chancellors of Open Universities and Heads of Distance Education Institutions of SAARC countries. The conference led to the setting up of the SAARC Consortium of Open and Distance Learning (SACODIL) at IGNOU with Vice-Chancellor, IGNOU as its first Chairman for a period of 3 years. This is a singular recognition of our collective strength in the region and we have to make greater efforts to attain world leadership in open-distance teaching learning. Intellectual Property Rights relate to contractual rights and are closely related to economic development. As such, it provides scope for promoting creativity and innovations. In view of its growing relevance in the emerging scenario, we should set up a National Centre for IPR education through distance mode. I would like to invite all SOUs to collaborate in this task.

We have also to start paying greater attention and focus on expanding our system to meet the requirements of our people living in remote and less developed areas, like the states of the North-East and other similar regions. There has been an appreciable increase in the enrolment of students in these regions but much needs to be accomplished. We realize, that the ODL system has some major responsibilities for initiating education interventions for social transformation and general well being of the community. We can say with some humility that IGNOU has played a very major and crucial role in providing the largest number of IT trained personnel. Our experience shows that Computer Literacy *interalia* plays an important role in empowering our people, specially those living in remote and less developed areas. Thus we may like to mention our recent initiatives in offering Computer Literacy Programme for the NE states and Sikkim in collaboration with the State Governments, Ministry of Communication and Information, Govt. of India under a project sanctioned by the PMO to use the communication network covering all

blocks in the region for education. We are also aware of some other successful interventions made by ODL system in several other states.

We may also like to mention that about 60 per cent employment in our country is in the Agriculture sector, which is being handled mainly by small farmers with poor skills. The experts in this sector assess that the food production can increase by 200 per cent if we are able to train the agriculture workers. We have to bring this unorganised yet crucial sector into greater focus in coming years. If the famous and most successful green revolution was supported by the AIR, we can foresee yet another successful revolution by combining teleconferencing, radio counselling, and television broadcast system now available for extensive use by the ODL system in the country. From self-sufficiency in food, we can achieve quantum jump to become major food provider in the region and generate financial resources for the cause of national development. Moreover, we shall be producing job-creators rather than job seekers.

In spite of a very huge higher education system, 70 percent of our people have no access to higher education institutions at a reasonable distance. This has resulted from an inappropriate response to demand of higher education and backlog accumulated over the years; while annual requirement was about 10 per cent, only half of it could be met. We cannot afford to multiply the number of institutions due to lack of resources, though only 7.5 percent of those eligible to get higher education are being catered to. As an alternative strategy, we need rapid convergence of existing systems. Due to high speed, efficiency, reliability, capacity, capability and reproducibility, ICT can play an important role in addressing the last mile problem. In this background, the initiative of setting up an Inter-University Consortium (IUC) at IGNOU for enabling academics and researchers from different ODL systems in the country to converge and work towards innovative ICT interventions is but the first step in this direction. Further developments in this direction will be crucial for meeting the targets of the Tenth Five Year Plan and I look forward to the support of all engaged in transacting open education.

Due to dynamic and broad-based growth of the system, highly innovative, professional and technology enabled approaches and practices have emerged in the ODL system. As a result, a very high priority must be accorded to systemic research in our system where scope must be made to involve conventional teacher. To encourage it further, we need to constantly revisit, review, redefine and reengineer its form, quality and utility. For a fast growing system like ours, there is a constant need to upgrade the knowledge and skills of the University faculty. We have to aggressively and regularly conduct review and training workshops in new and emerging areas faculty and orientation programmes for the new faculty/counsellors/coordinators, who are our peers from the conventional system.

To infuse interactivity in distance learning, teleconferencing can be regularly used to motivate the learners through various contact programmes. Besides this, the 7 FM radio stations set up under *Gyanvani*, interactive Radio Counselling (IRC) every week for an hour from 186 Radio Stations of *Akashvani* and with a toll-free telephone facility available from 80 cities could also be used. For open universities with massive target group of learners, it is essential to handle most of the operations

through ICT. We have to maintain very functional and responsive websites. These sites have to provide greater facilities to suit the convenience of students. Extensive networking of learning and managing points has to be ensured.

In the area of Teachers Training both for primary and secondary level teachers, high quality material are now available. These are being used extensively not only for IGNOU's delivery system but also by several other institutions in the country and quite a bit of interest has been shown by other countries. We are handling major projects for Teacher Training through the ODL system. One such project caters to the training needs of primary education functionaries working at village clusters, block, district and state levels. This provides academic and resource support to 18 States in the country. Towards capacity building of teachers, workshops on the development of audio and video programmes could be organized. In the states of Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, half a million, 135 thousand and 11 million children respectively can now access radio broadcasts. We have to work aggressively to match the requirement of education for the tribal and other educationally backward regions in the country. In the NE region and Sikkim, 200 downlinks for extending the teleconferencing facility in the region are now available. Ten thousand teachers are being trained on request by the Govt. of Sikkim alone. There is an enormous demand for this programme by most of the states and the modest assessment of the Teachers Training requirement at this level shows a requirement of more than 300 thousand teachers. SOUs and other Distance Education institutions have to collectively make more significant contribution to train untrained employed teachers.

IGNOU established by an Act of Parliament is an apex body for coordinated development of distance education system in the country. This role is performed through the Distance Education Council (DEC). The DEC has geared itself to the task of providing facilities and infrastructure support to all existing SOUs and CCIs, to be able to meet the challenge of growing numbers in the system, from 20 percent to 40 percent in the Tenth Plan, without compromising on quality. The major steps initiated in the past one year for development of the system as a whole include creation of links with various Universities to establish Distance Education Institutions (DEIs)/Centres. This has yielded rich dividends; 35 universities have expressed their willingness to start DEIs. We have to continue this trend; the number of dual mode institutions has crossed the one hundred mark now and we have to increase it further. Financial support to distance education institutions for improving the quality of education, development of infrastructure, institutional reforms, staff development and training, student support services, computerization and networking of institutions is extended regularly. The Council has adopted a proactive approach and initiated measures for development of distance education and overall strengthening of institutions. High powered National Committees have been constituted to recommend policies and programmes for promoting IT enabled education throughout the country and for assessment and accreditation of DE Institutions.

The strength of the Open Learning Universities in general is the quality study material developed by pooling the expertise of many professionals and academics from various educational institutions and industries in the country. IGNOU has played a very proactive role in facilitating use of IGNOU's study material for

adoption/adaptation by the State Open Universities and Correspondence Course Institutions. The utility of the materials and programmes can be increased manifold by translating them into the regional languages, and adopting/adapting these for wider applications.

It is against this backdrop that establishment of a National Centre for Research and Innovations in Distance Education, with focus on the systemic research and development of national resource materials, has been envisaged. The objectives would be to provide intellectual, financial and technological support for application-based research so as to plan for system standardization. Some of the important areas of activities in the centre would be: standardization of systems; identification of innovative practices and development of guideline documents; mechanism and modalities for convergence of different systems for seamless on-line education; development of programmes which could be adapted by other institutions as per their requirements; development of programmes/courses and study materials for differently abled persons; development of workforce training package programmes and Total Quality Management of various facets of the system. There is a need to share these facilities and contribute for collective growth. Given the fine intellect across the length and breadth of the country, I invite all to make it a leading centre.

It gives me special pleasure to mention some leading role played by the ODL system in our country in the area of education for the differently-abled people whose number is about the 10% of the total population in the country. This is very well recognized and appreciated all over. Through a National Centre for Differently Abled Persons, let us cater to hitherto unattended sector for national good. The same also holds for the unorganised sector, which employs our major work force.

To conclude, Ladies and Gentlemen, let me say that for its achievements and recognition, ODL system has received significant support from the government, various national and international bodies and agencies connected with the development of higher education and several international bodies. I also wish to place on record due appreciation of my colleagues in ODL system for it is due to their efforts and cooperation that we have been able to progress to meet national aspirations.