

COMMUNICATION

Learners' Profile in IGNOU: The Issue of Equity and Strategies for Reaching the Disadvantaged

S. KISHORE

Regional Centre, IGNOU, Chennai, India.

Abstract: *The foremost task of any distance learning institution (DLI) is to democratise higher education, which includes the elements of equity and access for outreach. This is also enshrined in the broad framework of the objectives of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), a distance education leader in the country. Despite enrolling high volume of learners, an open university can have impact only if it is able to reach the disadvantaged sections of the society. An analysis of the learners profile in IGNOU shows that the participation rate of disadvantaged sections viz., women, rural, SC/ST etc. needs to be enhanced to a desired level. Notwithstanding the fact that the generation of internal resources is adequate, the equity-self-reliance mix needs to be matched more with the expectations. This article underpins the need for further sharpening the policies of IGNOU and suggests strategies for making distance education barrier-free, accessible and open to the disadvantaged.*

Introduction

Distance education (DE) in recent times has emerged as an alternative channel in the higher education arena all over the world including in developing countries like India. The popularity of DE is mainly attributed to its ability to accommodate a large number of aspirants, flexibility, cost-effectiveness besides the capacity to democratise higher education. For a country like ours, DE is a potential agent to take care of the demand-supply equation in higher education as the formal system of higher education (with its about 240 universities and above 9000 colleges) is in a position to meet only 7% of the learners in the age group of 18-23, which is very low compared to those of developed countries. It is also a discerning fact that those countries having large participating rate in higher education are also able to attain higher socio-economic development. In our country too, it is possible to enhance the participation rate through distance learning mode since DE has the in-built capacity to expand, sustain and cope with the increasing demand for higher education.

Moreover, in our country, the scope for expansion of formal higher educational system is limited primarily due to the heavy financial burden it places on the state (Ansari, 1994).

In view of this, DE has got a prominent role to play in meeting the ever increasing demand towards the higher education and thereby contributing to the manpower development and economic growth.

No doubt, the *National Policy of Education, 1986* (NPE, 1986) also realised this fact and emphasised the need to strengthen the DE system holistically in the country for the twin purposes (i) of serving varied target groups and clientele and (ii) to bring down the existing pressure on the formal system of higher education. In these contexts, the ultimate aim is to widen the access towards higher education through the innovative and flexible strategies of DE for the sake of sustainable growth.

Issue of Equity and Access

Education in general strengthens the capability to meet the wants of an individual and those of the family by increasing their productivity, thereby the ability to achieve a higher standard of living (World Bank, 1991). Higher or tertiary education inter alia is an essential tool for developing productive human capital and acts as a catalyst for social transformation (Schultz, 1961). Moreover, the phenomenon of globalisation, liberalisation, knowledge explosion and advances in information technology have brought unforeseen developments in human endeavor. In this backdrop, the economic progress and wealth alone are not considered as vital assets of a nation; instead, in the age of knowledge and information, creation, mastering and application of knowledge decide the prosperity of the people and fabric of the society (Drucker, 1993). It is only through learning revolution, a 'knowledge society' or 'learning society' can be established. Therefore, a situation has arisen whereby the basic education for all and higher education for a few are equally important for a society to sustain its growth and progress (Kulandai Swamy, 1995). Therefore, through education for all, training, retraining, continuing and lifelong education, a learning society can be created.

One of the major reasons for establishing distance learning systems is to provide more opportunities to large sections of the society and reach disadvantaged groups who otherwise are not having access to higher education due to a variety of barriers (Spencer, 1995).

Today, in our country, this task is looked after by 60 odd distance learning institutions (DLIs) including 9 open universities. These DLIs enrol about 14-16% of the learners in higher education. In the process, unlike the conventional system, DLIs are able to generate sufficient internal resources. By this they are able to sustain themselves and are in a position to reap economies of scale. In spite of their self-reliance, the success of the DLIs in qualitative terms lies in their ability to extend educational opportunities to all irrespective of the age, gender, social, economical, cultural and academic status. Consequently the role of the DLIs is to act as agent for social change so as to realise the principle of expanded education (Srisa-an, 1997) for the sake of equity-self-reliance mix. Perceptibly, achieving equity through DE is a new challenge for the DLIs and hence it becomes important to strike a balance between the following two major activities:

- Enrolling high volume of learners to reap economies of scale thereby the self-supporting character.

- Providing equity (equality of opportunities) to increase access and support communities for wider participation.

If this new dimension of 'equity initiative' for the sake of social justice is to be embraced by the DLIs, they must adopt proactive approaches to draw sufficient enrolment from the various disadvantaged sections of the society so that both the factors viz. self-reliance and equity are able to go together.

IGNOU: National Provider of DE

Establishment of IGNOU in 1985 has provided necessary momentum and thrust for promoting DE in the country. IGNOU, a distance learning institution having national jurisdiction, adopts multimedia strategies for imparting higher education and has made considerable efforts to blend both quantity and quality in the delivery of its programmes. Unlike other distance/correspondence learning institutions in the country, it has more than the usual responsibility of functioning as a university and its major objectives are:

- democratisation of higher education through a diversity of means for the benefit of the large sections of the society including the disadvantaged.
- provision of continuing and lifelong education and
- an apex body for promoting, co-ordinating and determining standards of distance education in the country.

In tune with these three major objectives, it is envisaged that a wide range of target groups will be served especially those living in remote and rural areas.

IGNOU has made rapid progress in the first decade of its operation both in terms of enrolment and the number of programmes offered. At present a network of 21 Regional centres and about 400 study Centres throughout the length and breadth of the country looks after the delivery of the programmes besides providing academic support to the learners. IGNOU has also emerged as one of the mega universities in the world with the cumulative strength of learners on the rolls being more than 500 thousand (Daniel, 1997). Due to the steady increase in enrolment, the internal generation of resources through the student fee has been increasing. Income generation through the fee receipt constituted only about 40% of the Government grants in 1991-92 whereas the fee receipt surpassed the Govt. grants during the year 1996-97. The steady raise in the fee income indicates the extent to which the university has been able to market its courses and programmes and this is basically due to progressively a good enrolment. The steady raise in the internal resources vis-a-vis the Government grants (which do not show any marked raise) is an indicator for the self-sustaining character of the university. Moreover, the financial resources of IGNOU are found to be optimally utilised (Kishore, 1998).

In spite of the very favourable financial trend, it is equally important that the University serves the needy or disadvantaged sections of the society in tune with the objectives for which the university has been established. It is a well known that the percentage of disadvantaged sections or population in India is very high due to the social, economic, cultural disparities prevalent in our society. The following categories are classified as the disadvantaged:

- those living in remote and rural areas
- women especially with rural background
- scheduled caste/scheduled tribes
- physically handicapped population
- unemployed people.

The open universities are said to be successful only if they are able to serve the social purpose of empowering the disadvantaged groups and communities which allow them to integrate in the main stream of the society.

Objectives of the Study

The main purpose was to study the learner enrolment profile in IGNOU, i.e. year-wise enrolment pattern and its growth, gender ratio, SC/ST enrolment, urban-rural ratio, gender mix in enrolment. By examining the profiles of learners, the study was intended in assessing the extent of the outreach of IGNOU programmes and the equity-self-reliance mix. For this purpose Annual Reports and Annual Accounts of IGNOU have been utilised.

Findings

Growth in Enrolment: Trends Towards Self-reliance

IGNOU has been able to register a phenomenal growth in terms of enrolment during the period from 1986-87 to 1996-97. The year-wise enrolment data are presented in Table 1. The enrolment has gone up from 4502 in 1986-87 to 1,63,307 in the year 1996-97 registering a 360 fold growth in 11 year period at an annual growth rate of 32.5%.

Table 1: Growth of enrolment in IGNOU

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total Enrolment Programme</i>	<i>Enrolment in Management Programme</i>	<i>Percentage Admitted in Management</i>
1986-87	4502	NA	—
1987-88	16097	5156	32.0
1988-89	34506	6520	18.9
1989-90	42189	8430	20.0
1990-91	43170	11895	27.5
1991-92	62375	12403	19.9
1992-93	75666	26095	35.5
1993-94	78693	32444	41.2
1994-95	91398	42301	46.3
1995-96	130228	62571	48.0
1996-97	163307	58667	35.9

The steady growth rate in enrolment no doubt, has favoured both cost recovery and economies of scale. Perceptibly a phenomenal growth in enrolment is attributed to the demand for most popular programme in IGNOU viz., Management Programme which comprises various Diplomas in Management, and the Master of Business Administration (MBA). This is clear from the percentage of learners enrolled in Management Programme (MP) in IGNOU which is presented Table 1. The enrolment in MP throughout the years of study has been always in the range of 20% of the total and has even gone upto 48% in the year 1995-1996 (i.e., almost half of the total enrolment). The MP of IGNOU is mainly targeted towards in-service personnel aimed at building their professional and managerial competence. As a result, naturally, the target group served in this case cannot altogether said to be from educationally, socially, economically weaker sections of the society. The MP in general guarantees better social and economic climate leading to value addition in the productivity processes of the nation, and strategies need to be adopted for its contribution in increasing the participating rate among the disadvantaged sections of the society.

Gender Ratio in Enrolment

The female participation or enrolment in the programmes of IGNOU for the period from 1986-87 to 1996-97 are displayed in Table 2 which reveals that the female participation in IGNOU programmes is consistently less than 25 per cent except for the year 1992-93 (where it has been 26.3%). This indicates that female enrolment can be

Table 2 : Female enrolment in IGNOU

<i>Year</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>%</i>
1986-87	4213	93.5	289	6.5
1987-88	14122	88.0	1927	12.0
1988-89	26541	76.9	7965	23.1
1989-90	31232	77.3	9153	22.7
1990-91	34547	80.3	8424	19.7
1991-92	49496	79.3	12879	20.7
1992-93	55776	73.7	19890	26.3
1993-94	61021	77.5	17672	22.5
1994-95	71064	77.5	20334	22.5
1995-96	101676	78.0	28676	22.0
1996-97	126041	77.2	37266	22.8

considered to be only marginal in IGNOU when compared to the female enrolment of 31.6 percent in the formal system of higher education as worked out by the University Grants Commission while the corresponding figure in DLIs in India was 41.2% (Kulandai Swamy, 1991). The female enrolment is moreover, conditioned by the kind of programmes offered and prerequisites for admission that go with them. In IGNOU, the MP recorded the lowest female participation (i.e., 5-8% only as compared to other programmes) because the condition stipulates that the applicants should be in employment in managerial cadre and if not, they should possess Master's or Professional degree. As MP continues to be a very popular programme in IGNOU (Table 1),

and that too among male rather than female learners, the reach of IGNOU programmes seems to be only marginal in the case of female learners. Hence, efforts need to be initiated in the direction to enrol at least one-third of the total from female learners.

SC/ST Enrolment in IGNOU

Table 3 depicts the category wise enrolment in terms of general, SC and ST learners in IGNOU for a period of 11 years (1986-87 to 1996-97). It can be seen from the Table 4 that the percentage of SC/ST learners constitutes a very meager share in relation to the general category learners. This is an area which needs to be concentrated in the evolving enrolment policy of the university, especially at the regional centres.

Table 3: Enrolment by category-wise: General, SC and ST in IGNOU

<i>Year</i>	<i>General</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>SC</i>	<i>(%)</i>	<i>ST</i>	<i>(%)</i>
1986-87	4456	98.9	24	0.6	22	0.5
1987-88	14609	90.7	1213	7.5	277	1.8
1988-89	29863	86.5	2918	8.4	1017	5.1
1989-90	37729	89.4	3170	7.5	1277	3.1
1990-91	38898	90.1	2917	6.7	1156	3.2
1991-92	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
1992-93	69403	91.7	3952	5.2	2311	3.1
1993-94	73138	92.9	3714	4.7	1841	2.4
1994-95	85665	93.7	3798	4.2	1935	2.1
1995-96	123251	94.6	5057	3.9	2046	1.5
1996-97	151859	93.0	7054	4.3	2759	2.7

NA: Data not available.

Urban-Rural Distribution

Table 4 gives the urban-rural ratio in the enrolment of learners in IGNOU programmes for the period 1988-1989 to 1996-1997. The data show that the enrolment is dominated by urban learners vis-a-vis rural learners. The percentage increased during 1990-91 to 1993-94, showed a decline subsequently. This is also an area which needs further attention at the regional centres.

Table 4 : Urban-rural distribution in IGNOU

<i>Year</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>(%)</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>(%)</i>
1988-89	28774	83.4	5732	16.6
1989-90	36325	86.1	5864	13.9
1990-91	32668	76.9	9819	23.1
1991-92	48668	78.0	13707	22.0
1992-93	59874	79.1	15792	20.9
1993-94	60634	77.0	18059	23.0
1994-95	74203	81.2	17195	18.8
1995-96	118923	91.6	10845	8.4
1996-97	136405	83.9	26205	16.1

Gender Mix in Enrolment

Information about female enrolment programme-wise is an indicator to know about the policy of equal participation, and assess gender balance in individual programmes offered by IGNOU. Enrolment of female learners for the period 1990-91 to 1995-96 for some of the selected programmes which have been on offer since the early stages of the establishment of IGNOU are depicted in Table 5.

Table 5 : Female participation in selected programmes of IGNOU

Pro- gramme	1990-91		1991-92		1992-93		1993-94		1994-95		1995-96	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
BPP	9057 (809.6)	2180 (19.4)	6031 (78.7)	4113 (21.3)	9050 (76.2)	2822 (23.8)	7351 (75.2)	2421 (24.8)	6682 (75.2)	2199 (24.8)	5670 (76.0)	1791 (24.0)
BDP	10714 (77.7)	3075 (22.3)	10991 (72.8)	3075 (27.2)	16417 (69.7)	7150 (30.3)	18625 (74.2)	6484 (25.8)	18566 (69.2)	8269 (30.8)	20140 (70.0)	8631 (30.0)
MP	11240 (94.9)	605 (5.1)	11567 (93.2)	836 (6.8)	24073 (92.3)	2022 (7.7)	29972 (92.4)	2472 (7.6)	38749 (91.6)	3552 (8.4)	57565 (92.0)	5006 (8.0)
BLS	1345 (71.8)	527 (28.2)	837 (57.2)	624 (42.7)	814 (55.3)	659 (44.7)	723 (57.3)	547 (42.7)	704 (56.5)	502 (43.5)	692 (54.1)	587 (45.9)
DRD	NL	NL	2355 (78.6)	645 (21.4)	1738 (73.8)	632 (26.7)	1166 (67.3)	567 (32.7)	1063 (69.7)	462 (30.3)	1191 (63.0)	586 (33.0)
CFN	1147 (39.3)	1772 (60.7)	1363 (24.1)	4292 (75.9)	1086 (18.2)	4871 (81.8)	425 (12.6)	2951 (87.4)	499 (17.4)	2366 (82.6)	535 (22.0)	1897 (78.0)
DNHE	NL	NL	NL	NL	328 (30.3)	753 (69.7)	585 (47.2)	642 (52.3)	496 (49.7)	502 (50.3)	463 (47.4)	514 (52.6)
CIG	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL	255 (31.8)	546 (68.2)	234 (29.9)	548 (70.1)	178 (28.1)	455 (71.9)

Figures in the parentheses are percentages to the total

NL: Not launched

It is seen that the enrolment is dominated by male learners in programmes like BPP, BDP, MP and DRD, and a mixed trend is noticed in the BLS programme. Female enrolment outnumber male only in programmes like CFN, DNHE and CIG. Since CFN, DNHE and CIG programmes happen to be women's education programmes, understandably these three programmes have been able to draw more female learners than male learners. Disparity in male-female enrolment is highest in MP (female enrolment ranges from 5.1 to 8% : Table 5) which incidentally also happens to be the most popular programme in IGNOU (Table 2). The gender mix in various programmes is uneven and there is an imbalance existing in the male-female ratio in most of the programmes under consideration.

Broad Interventions for Overcoming Barriers

In view of the fact that programmes of IGNOU are not having desired outreach, there should be a greater thrust aimed at providing increased access to the needy and the disadvantaged sections of the society. For this, basic planning is in reorienting the policies

not only in enrolling high volume of learners but also in substituting an elite paradigm approach to egalitarian one in the broad framework of its activities. Primarily the focus must be in removing the various kinds of barriers and facilitate social learning to occur within the communities (Spencer, 1995). Apriori, the following strategies may help the open universities and other distance teaching institutions in achieving egalitarianism and outreach.

- Courses and programmes tailored to meet the needs of the disadvantaged need to be introduced, especially in local languages (wherever possible) so as to enrol more learners from the disadvantaged sections like women, SC/ST etc.
- More study centres exclusively meant for women and socially disadvantaged sections can be planned after mapping the sites for establishment of centres. In selection of such centres, the areas with high population density of women, high percentage of SC/ST, tribal population should be given preference.
- Centres meant for women, socially and physically disadvantaged must be in close proximity so as to reduce the travel time for such learners to bare minimum. Such centres must be preferably in community based settings, and moreover introduction of high touch low-tech technology should pave the way for effective as well as collaborative learning.
- Study centres exclusively meant for women to have only women counsellors/ functionaries to overcome gender prejudices and keep the learners motivation high. Also, such centres should possibly have boarding and lodging facilities if the learners happen to stay for field or practical work.
- There may be partial or full fee concession to women, SC/ST and tribal learners to draw sufficient enrolment from such groups. Offering fellowship for these disadvantaged groups under government schemes and getting sponsorship from industry and banking sectors can be explored.
- Measures can also be initiated to design more vocational, skill-oriented and need-based programmes which are relevant to the rural/remote areas. For this, collaboration can be established with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and voluntary organisations for envisaging their support in design, development and delivery of the programmes linked to the local needs. This tilt has to be consciously decided by the faculty involved in designing and developing programmes, except that committed collaborators need to be identified and involved.
- Introduction of many short-term programmes especially of six months to one year duration with modular structures and multiple entry points leading to certificate or diploma (for capacity building and awareness generation) may attract large women learners. More emphasis on formative evaluation and practical training (hands-on experience) would help in preparing skill-oriented human resources.

- We may think in terms of supplying home kits and packages in case of skill and practical-based courses to motivate as well as to maintain high retention rates among women, socially disadvantaged and rural learners.
- Industries located in small towns and villages and willing to act as collaborator can be approached to collaborate and disseminate information about distance education programmes in a particular area as well as for developing and introducing skill and work-based courses, aimed at increasing the employability of learners.
- Community centres at district, municipal and panchayat levels may be equipped with distance learning study materials and audio-video cassettes to facilitate flexible study by the existing disadvantaged learners as well as to act as 'tasters' for the prospective learners from rural, remote and socially disadvantaged sections.
- In backward, remote and geographically disadvantaged areas, higher secondary schools or colleges may be identified for setting up library corner or information bureau for further generating awareness about distance education courses and programmes.
- Special corners or cells for both disseminating upto date information about courses and programmes and providing special counselling for learning support, personality development and sensitising to the methodologies of distance education may be set up at regional study centres, and such other collaborating agencies at the grassroots level. Mobile study centres may also help in this direction.
- Introduction of technology for the teaching-learning processes and periodical evaluation of their impact upon the disadvantaged would help in assessing the role and acceptability of technologies for wider outreach.

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[**Dr. S. Kishore** is Assistant Regional Director. *Correspondence:* Regional Centre, IGNOU, CIT Campus, Taramani, Chennai 600 113, India. Fax : 91-44-2301818; E-mail: ignourcc@md3.vsnl.net.in]