Best Practices in Open and Distance Learning in the Emerging Scenario: A Report

Best practices in Open and Distance Learning in the Emerging Scenario, was the focal theme of the Open University Vice Chancellor's Conference held at Kolkata on February 1-2, 2003. The Conference hosted by Netaji Subhash Open University, discussed the issues related to Best Practices with regard to credit transfer and learner mobility, quality assurance, assessment and accreditation of ODL systems and strategies for promoting research in the ODL system. In addition, a Round Table on Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) and Human Rights was also held. The Conference was inaugurated by Prof. Satya Sadhan Chakraborty, Hon'ble Minister for Higher Education, Govt. of West Bengal. Prof. H.P. Dikshit, Vice Chancellor, Indira Gandhi National Open University presided over the inaugural session.

The speakers in the inaugural session dwelt on the role, relevance, importance and future of open and distance learning system. The speakers argued that distance education is the only recourse left to us in view of the increasing demand for higher education, availability of limited resources for higher education, emerging demand for life long continuing education and skill upgradation of in service workforce, challenges posed by globalisation including those of GATT and WTO agreements and rising aspirations of people for better quality of life.

Prof. Surabhi Banerjee, VC, NSOU emphasized that the newness, creativity and innovativeness, availability of knowledge repository with existing OU and conventional universities were the resources, which her university would like to harness.

Prof. Satya Sadhan Chakraborty, Hon'ble Education Minister of West Bengal, in his inaugural address, observed that the doubts expressed in the earlier years about the viability and quality of open distance learning are no longer valid. The question today is not of the relevance of Open Distance Education (ODE) but of how to make use of the system in the emerging area of cutting edge competition and challenging fields. The Hon'ble Minister also stressed that we must adopt changes pervading all over. He emphasized that in spite of limited resources, the state cannot and should not wash its hands off from higher education and leave it completely at the mercy of private sector and market forces.

Hon'ble Minister for Minorities Md. Salim in his address pointed towards the tremendous backlog in higher education, diversity and widespread poverty in India. He argued that in the era of globalisation, education should be IT-driven, creativity infused and performance oriented. He exhorted planners to set their priorities right and respond to the emerging demands.

Prof. A.K. Banerjee, Vice-Chancellor, Calcutta University drew attention to the financial crisis faced by the higher education sector in the country. According to him, opening up the education sector to international trade shall be the major

external factor in creating problems of sustenance and expansion of higher education. He felt that ODE was perhaps a way to deal with both these challenges. He stressed the need of cooperation and collaboration between the conventional and open distance learning systems. He suggested that creating an interface between the two and recognising each other's importance by offering joint degree programmes is the need of the hour.

Prof. H.P. Dikshit, Vice-Chancellor, IGNOU and Chairman, DEC, in his keynote and presidential address elaborated on the progress made by the ODL system in quantitative terms. According to him, every fifth student in higher education is now being catered to by the ODL system and for the Tenth Five Year Plan period, it has been projected that every third student in higher education will be in this system. This can become possible through joint efforts of practitioners in ODL system and cooperation of conventional peers. We are yet to reach 70% of our population and with the recent changes in constitutional provisions for EFA, and education as right for children upto the age of 14 years, the pressure is bound to increase manifold. We need to equip ourselves for these challenges with necessary wherewithals, if we wish to escape criticism of coming generations. Highlighting the need for sharing resources, he pointed out that newness and dynamism of ICT are yet to be harnessed fully. Prof. Diskshit stressed on convergence of all systems to further the resolve to *reach the unreached* and address the *last mile problem*. According to him, academic institutions would be required to prepare themselves with appropriate software for Educational Satellite *EduSat*, which may be available from 2004-05. Also, the accreditation of prior learning would demand newer approaches to course design and development. He invited all present to join hands to be able to face the lurking fears of competition, identity and improving grey areas like student support services. This would require funds to be ploughed back into the system. He pointed out that the ODL system has the capacity and capability to absorb emerging technologies and is particularly suited to extend access and equity to higher education. He clarified that the ODL system is not technology based but technology enabled. Therefore, it is not correct to think that the teacher is irrelevant or unnecessary in the ODL system. On the contrary, in this system learners get opportunities to be guided by the best of the teachers available countrywide. Prof. Dikshit also dwelt upon the new and emerging challenges and observed that new challenges required new responses, which might be quite different from those we have been used to so far.

The first session of the Conference on the theme *Credit Transfer and Learner Mobility* was chaired by Prof. V.S. Prasad, Vice-Chancellor, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad and co-chaired by Dr. K.D. Vasava. Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Babsaheb Ambedkar Open University, Ahmedabad. Shri Y.N. Chaturvedi, Former Secretary, Information and Broadcasting and Department of Health, Government of India, Prof. Ananda Dev Mukhopadhyaya, Vice-Chancellor, Vidyasagar University and Dr. B.P. Sabale, Vice-Chancellor, Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nashik were the main speakers.

The speakers in this session were of the opinion that the system of credit transfer was both necessary and desirable, particularly in view of the fact that the ODL system is learner-centric. There is a need to relax rigidities, offer what is relevant and shed

what is not. To effectively contribute and fulfil its mandate the university system, in general, and ODL system, in particular, must guard against 'resistance to change'; there is a need for OUs to devise a system which provides for credit transfer and its sub-system credit exemption. In the existing scenario, the target groups catered to by the system may have to shift from one system to another or from one programme to another within the system for various reasons. In such a situation there would be a need for accreditation of their prior learning. This concept has special significance in the ODL system in view of its flexibility and modularity and works on the cardinal principle of lifelong learning. Credit transfer is essentially an acknowledgement of learning through other institutions and therefore we must recognise each other.

The speakers also highlighted a number of problems likely to arise in implementing the system of credit transfer. These include questions of uniformity and equivalence, differences in standards, closed mindsets among academia, total number of credits that can be transferred, difference between exemption and transfer, procedures to be followed, among others. Useful suggestions were made to address some of these issues. These included establishment of a consortium of Indian Universities and involvement of statutory bodies like DEC, UGC, NCTE in evolving processes. The speakers argued that there is a need to give a uniform meaning to the term credit in terms of hours of student workload, extent of commonality of course contents and consistency of nomenclature. It was also suggested that credit transfer has to be procedurally simple. Arbitrary boundaries of disciplines also need be crossed and students be provided flexibility to widen their horizons. Society should be sensitised towards acceptance of new ideas and need for change.

The panelists and participants recommended that *the Chairman, DEC should constitute a committee to study various issues, evolve a mechanism for credit transfer, and define a road map for implementation of horizontal and vertical transfer of credits within open universities to begin with.* The issue could be taken up later with UGC and other agencies.

The Round Table on IPR and Human Rights was presided by Prof. Madhav Menon, Vice-Chancellor, NJU, Kolkata. Initiating the discussion, the Chairman clarified that Human Rights are enshrined in the Indian Constitution to empower people and HR education amounts to creating good citizenry. On the other hand, IPR relates to contractual rights and is intimately connected with economic development. It is a recent phenomenon and provides scope for creativity and innovations, two features which would control physical wealth in the knowledge society. Since not much has been written and offered on IPR, it would be important to consider issues like (i) the level of course offerings, (ii) target population and (iii) careful identification of course designers and developers. Members pointed out that this should be done as a cooperative venture. IGNOU may take the lead and provide for local consultations/changes in the curriculum development. It was also suggested that there is a need to sensitise all; from college going students to researchers, scientists and professionals.

The second business session was on *Quality Assurance, Assessment and Accreditation of ODL system.* The session was chaired by Prof. H.P. Dikshit,

Chairman, DEC and Vice-Chancellor, IGNOU and co-chaired by Dr. N.S. Ramegowda, Vice Chancellor, Karnataka State Open University, Mysore. The main speakers in the session were Prof. Suranjan Das, Prof. R.K. Singh and Prof. Ashok Thakur.

The issues addressed in the session included the need and importance of quality assurance and assessment, enhancing the credibility of ODL system as well as formulation of methods and procedures for all the above issues, quality assurance, assessment and accreditation, mode of monitoring, identification of priority areas for quality assurance, etc.

The speakers highlighted the following issues:

- In spite of the fact that ODL system is now well reorganised and established, there are still doubts about the quality of education imparted by it in the minds of employers and society, in general. An important reason for scepticism is that some universities establish ODL centres only to generate money. Another reason is the continuing closed mindset of many managers of higher education, particularly in conventional universities.
- There is a need for setting standards, maintaining and assuring them and setting mechanisms for their monitoring.
- Relationship with conventional system, mechanism for assessment and accreditation of ODL system and minimising overlap of accrediting agencies must be established. From the presentations and subsequent discussion, the following suggestions emerged:

  - The first task of practitioners and managers of ODL system should be to undertake an awareness enhancing exercise and establish networks with their peers in the conventional system.
  - Activate DEC as an agency for setting standards and ensuring their implementation at a pace compatible with the dynamism of ODL systems. In addition, agencies similar to DEC could be established at the state level to coordinate this task through DEC.
  - The open universities should undertake internal and external peer reviews because of the peculiarities and specialisations they require and have developed. The internal assessment and accreditation can be undertaken periodically through Planning Boards, which may be created, if not existing already.
  - There is a need and possibility of cooperation and collaboration between open universities, in particular, and ODL system, in general for development and delivery of programmes. This can be done by producing quality study material jointly, generating a combined pool of existing and new courses/ programmes with liberal access/sharing, organising combined counselling sessions, and providing additional inputs through teleconferencing.
  - Media facilities available with the ODL system, particularly the upcoming FM radio channels should be used extensively for providing

adequate information to a large number of students not getting quality education in the conventional system either due to non-implementation of minimum days of study or non-availability of infrastructure. Students enrolled as non-collegiate or external candidates should be provided access to self-instructional print material and FM radio sessions. These will improve the quality of education even for students of conventional system and thereby improve their standards.

The third and fourth sessions were on *Best Practices in ODL system and Strategies for Promoting Research in ODL System.* Dr. B.P. Sabale, VC, YCMOU, Nashik chaired the third session and Prof. G.S.L. Devra VC, VMOU, Kota chaired the fourth session. Prof. Surabhi Banerjee and Prof. R.K. Singh were co-chairs of the two sessions. The main issues and suggestions that emerged in these sessions were:

- Collaboration with or engagement of private enterprise can be used for preparation of materials, particularly for professional programmes. This practice has proved economically viable and professionally of very high standard.
- Best practices emerge from well articulated Institutional vision and mission. Drawing long term as well as annual plans and monitoring/ evaluating them is crucial.
- Strengthening of student support services needs to be considered on a priority basis. It was considered important to provide for flexible admission policy (on demand), decentralised admission, collection of fee in instalments, providing study material at the time of admission itself, particularly for short term courses. Examinations on schedule, preferably twice, declaration of results, centralised evaluation, opening of special study centres for specific groups in specific areas, dissemination of information about the system were the other key desirables stressed upon.
- Co-existence of off-campus, on-campus, electronic campus, learning from others, creation of necessary ICT infrastructure and training of human beings for bridging the digital divide, realisation of limitation of market forces, and networking in possible areas were identified as the imperatives to be acted upon.

The following issues and suggestions emerged from the discussion on strategies for promoting research in the ODL system:

- Research in distance education is extremely important, both for evolution of best practices and management of ODL system; it needs to be encouraged and the existing processes have to be reviewed, revisited and redefined.
- While research is important, it should be of high quality and backed by rigorous research methodology with due emphasis on in-depth analysis. Comparative research can be more relevant: cross-cultural and cross-national research shall help dissemination of knowledge.
- Research outcomes should be widely disseminated and inbuilt institutional mechanisms must be put in place for integration and implementation of research findings for systemic improvement.

- Distance education should be recognised as a discipline for grant of research degrees like Ph.D.
- Motivation for applied research particularly through indigenous tools, undertaking tracer studies, preferably though collaborative arrangement may be beneficial.
- Quality of research has to be improved.
- Research through database on learner motivation, success rate, aptitude analysis etc. should be initiated. There is tremendous scope for such endeavours and there is an urgent need to join hands to scale greater heights.

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