

COMMUNICATION

Research Operations in Open Universities

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Our Viewpoints

Through this paper, we have looked into some of the operational issues of research in higher education, like quality of research in open education, researchers of open education, research support for open education, different approaches to research processes, and research dissemination. In order to find out the solution to such issues, we have conducted interviews with a few experts.

While conducting this study, we accepted a special position stating that the research problems of open education will be at variance from that of face-to-face education. The nature of research-site of distance education is different from that of face-to-face system. Possibly, the methodology of research in open education will differ in its management and procedures.

We agreed with one of the documents of IGNOU saying:

“In organizing research work, the approach of an open university has to be different from that of a campus university. Generally, admission to post-graduate and research programs offered by the conventional universities has been highly selective. Much of the research work taken up in the conventional universities is highly specialized; they are designed to create knowledge and to explore new ways of using such knowledge. By contrast, an open education university is an instrument to enlarge opportunities and providing access to cost effective education, combining quality teaching with communication technology that will empower an increasing diversity of people to lead fuller lives. In this context, research programs in Open Universities have to make creative contribution to the processes of life-long education in a learning society”¹

We are placing three other observations and comments for our own scrutiny. First observation is by Koul (1993) who says that research paradigms for open distance education are facing the challenge of role models. Distance education institutions look up to conventional universities as standards for acceptable norms, credibility and role models.

The second comment is by Passi (1999) who pleads for creating self-reliance of our perspectives. He says that research in open distance education has to lay down its “first principles”. The sociological and epistemological assumptions of research in open education have to be outlined in the context of open education paradigm. Research principles suiting educational environment will have to be outlined. We assume that sociologically, there is a good coordination amongst the learners, teachers, and functionaries of distance education. The epistemological principles for distributed learning and self-education are guided by the holistic environments of learning, living, and working.

The third point is an observation. It states that we ought to “watch and see”. But we feel that such a viewpoint may mislead us towards indifference. The environment around is competitive. Some of the campus universities have expressed their doubts about the research capability, research quality, and even the availability of funds in open systems. While looking into the substance of these three points, we decided to explore the position by knowing the views of experts.

Expert Opinions

In order to understand the operations of research, we interviewed three experts for a few chosen issues. We posed these issues to the experts in the form of dilemmas, questions, and problems. The experts belonged to distance higher education and also the conventional higher education. The responses were recorded and content analyzed. The following are their opinions and discussion on the issues related to distance education research.

Research: Integral Function of the System

We posed a dilemma about the position of research in the system of distance education. We presented the dilemma by saying — “Many of us believe that research can improve the quality of open education and enhance the self-esteem of teacher-researchers. There may be some truth in this assertion. But some others do hold a contrary view. They say that research is a luxury for open distance education. We work effectively with the help of common sense. Why do we waste time on research while resources are scarce? What is your opinion? Do you think that distance education has reached a stage where hard decisions about introducing research for self improvement have to be taken?”

The experts asserted that research activity should become an integral function of all system of education. No system gets improved without research and so is true for the open education system. Systemic research can improve all the components like input, process and output. Research helps to overcome psychological barriers between the learners and the institutions. Research provides opportunities of creating interaction around learning operations.

Research can be used for enhancing the quality of learning material, expanding the subject boundaries, improving program-delivery, and stimulating other learning processes such as counselling, assessment, evaluation, and accreditation. Research can guide many other dimensions related to the growth of institutions, and personal

development of the learners. Research provides continuous answers for improvement. Research improves the quality of support services provided to learners. Experts also asserted that there could be a separate division for managing research activities. This division can co-ordinate the research work of different personnel in the system.

Research Areas

Secondly, we sought the opinions of experts regarding research and stages of developmental activities. They asserted that we should undertake formative research, process research, and product-summative research. For example, we should undertake plenty of formative research for introducing new student services; and for improving the quality of our materials. During the preparation stage of material production, we should undertake research upon the subject contents, site situation, and the strength in producing new knowledge. We should coordinate processes and outcomes of research completed through universities, laboratories, industrial units, work sites and other places.

Who should do Research?

We posed the problem as how do we prepare our researchers. We explained to the experts that researchers have to handle complexity of areas, operate with multiplicity of techniques, and follow systematic procedures. Therefore, some of us argue that research is an exclusive responsibility of selective academia. We also presented an opposing view that the ever first researcher was a common man. He did not belong to the university academics. They say that activists, students and support staff working in the institution too can help in the research process.

The agreement of the experts was that the selection of best-suited teams to undertake research could vary with circumstance. The nature of research teams depends upon the area of research, nature of the problem, the context, research methodologies, availability of infrastructure facilities, time allocations, budget allocations, and so on. It also depends upon the interest and attitude of the researchers. Selection of best-suited teams is contextual.

The experts agreed that one could have student-researchers as members of the research pool. The student-researchers could play active roles for conducting studies including that of stand-alone studies. Undergraduate and postgraduate students can undertake such studies in the form of micro projects, and action research. Unlike face-to-face system, open education system should create flexibility regarding educational qualifications, age limits, time limits, selection of guides and research-sites.

Teacher-researchers can be another category of researcher. These researchers can undertake middle level studies. Teacher-researchers can guide projects chosen by their students. At the institution level, teachers can undertake long term macro studies. One of our experts expressed the fear that such research activities may interfere with the on-going pace of the teaching programs through distance education. Other members of our responding group denied the same. They reacted that the researcher-teachers will judiciously distribute their time for various activities without hindering their on-going activities of teaching. Further, they expected that the researchers are persons who are highly motivated for doing research work.

The experts also envisaged that our support-staff working in open education system could facilitate research processes provided they are given some training. Nature of their training programs with respect to objectives, duration, contents, and so on could be modular in approach. We have to find out interested persons. We should pursue our administrative staff for undertaking research tasks while working in open education.

The experts thus opined that different types of researchers could undertake multiple functions of research. Research can be undertaken by the institutions, teachers, students, and even support staff.

Motivating Researchers

We asked question about motivating researchers for undertaking more and more of research work. The expert-responders were clear in their mind that incentives in the form of money should be avoided. Incentives in the form of social recognition and certificates are acceptable. Better if researchers are motivated to realize that research can improve their self-esteem. Research itself is a reward. They did not like the word incentive. They preferred to call it facilitating mechanisms for undertaking research. The experts wanted to persuade the funding bodies, collaborative agencies, and the governments for enhancing and simplifying the funding process.

Experts viewed that there should be clarity in the minds of planners regarding research budgets. Requested research-grants can be allocated to individual teachers on the basis of the substantive proposals. Automatic funding on annual basis may also be provided for chosen programs of research. More and more research work is needed for exploring the operation of incentives. Necessary human and infrastructure facilities should be provided for conducting research. Library facilities with up-to-date literature and Internet facilities should be made available.

Regarding the support system, the experts suggested to undertake multiple studies on different aspects of the system. Multiple approaches like research projects scheme, research fellowship, research associateship, and research collaboration with various agencies are essential to promote research. We can facilitate research processes by providing financial support, enhancing infrastructure support as well as by creating academic support.

Faculty Initiatives

We also looked into the views of experts about faculty initiatives for networking with other organizations. They said that the faculty can conduct their research projects with the help of outside agencies. The respective 'schools of studies' should decide their own strategies for creating infrastructure. Schools of studies should also contact with other collaborative agencies for getting support. Faculty members can generate resources and create research facilities for themselves and also for others. This requires hard work, sincerity as well as motivation. The university should also provide necessary financial and material help to the respective schools of studies.

With the advancement of information technology, we can access virtual research facilities through Internet for undertaking research. This can ensure the quality of data, depth of responses, research protocols, and improving the time frame.

Research Laboratories

We asked questions about the availability of research laboratories. The experts asserted that research is a systematic activity where experiments are conducted under controlled conditions. Creation of such research-sites requires lot of efforts, money, infrastructure, library, laboratory, and so on. Unlike face-to-face institution, the learners of distance education are distributed throughout. We are concerned whether the research sites (laboratories) should be located in the open university campus or to be distributed over the country. During our discussion, it was agreed that open universities should collaborate with other national, state, local agencies like, regional research laboratories, universities, research institutions and avail laboratory facilities. Regional directors and faculty from study centers should help in identifying such research sites, and researchers.

Research Approaches

We continued our explorations regarding the research approach followed by the researchers. The experts viewed that there are more than one ways to conduct a study. We can enhance the "disciplinary research", "area research", and "systemic research" for the development of open higher education. Both positivism and post-positivism approaches have their own relevance. One can use both scientific and naturalistic approach during the research process. The type of approach to be followed largely depends upon the purpose and nature of the problem selected.

Regarding the interdisciplinary approach to research, the experts viewed that inter-institutional mobility and interactions of researchers are necessary to share the uniqueness of specialized perspectives. One can receive feedback from each other. Communication technologies are undergoing radical changes for mass-data collection and their analysis. Individual researchers can interact with researchers of other disciplines at any time and at any place. Research in open education should create awareness amongst researchers, administrators, and policy makers about the opportunities, and potentials of open distance systems of research. Successful convergence of the ideas from related disciplines can really enhance the quality of education.

They also viewed that since open education is a multi-disciplinary subject, it is the duty of the research personnel to create deliberate integration amongst related disciplines, systemic researchers and subject pedagogues. Research is carried out by the individual or by a group of individuals. Proper policy is required to undertake inter-disciplinary research, formulate inter-departmental research policy, and improve inter-institutional cooperation.

Dissemination of Research Findings

Dissemination of the research findings is a matter of concern amongst researchers and administrators. Sharing and disseminating the findings of research to a wider section of the population is a major challenge. Most of the findings are lying in the files. What do we do?

Regarding the sharing and dissemination of the research findings, the responders suggested the use of modern information technology and indigenous methodologies of

communication. Communication technologies should be utilized for wider dissemination. Internet facilities should be made widely available to the researchers. More and more journals for publication of research summaries of distance education in subject specific areas should be created.

We should avoid copying and piracy in research. Mere punishment in the form of rejection of the theses/ project report and dissertation may not give fruitful result in reducing copying. Research should also be undertaken about how to manage dissemination of the findings.

Conclusion

Open education research has unique problems, which are quite different from that of research problems of face-to-face education. Distance education differs from face-to-face education in terms of the nature of its research groups.

Research policy should emerge from new perspectives. Policy is required to attract the attention of large numbers of researchers and scholars. Problems should be selected according to their utility value for open distance education system.

Distance education institutions will create their own standards for deciding the quality of its operational procedures. A set of indicators to check the quality of research could be prepared which, of course, ought to be local and contextual. Credibility and role models can not be copied from other systems of education.

Note

1. *Research strategies in the open university system: a policy statement, IGNOU, New Delhi.*

References

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