Globalisation of Distance Education : A Reference to India

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Introduction

The framework of university education is expanding rapidly with partnerships and alliances which are coming up in a big way both as an important features as well as consequences of the new developments in different areas at the global level. Edwards (1994), comments that with globalisation there comes a pressure for local autonomy and identity, and the affirmation of local, regional, ethnic identity and integration of the globe reconfigures rather than supplant the diversity. The new providers emerging on the tertiary education scenario are potentially threatening the existing providers and forcing them to reconsider their roles, functions, structures and approach to teaching and learning in the new situation. A reconfiguration of both the discourse and practice of pedagogy in relation to contemporary trends in globalisation, has become need of the hour. The existing tertiary education system needs to urgently respond to these changes in the world around us. It has to take this challenge of change seriously. These institutions while registering their presence globally will have to respond to globally rooted challenges as well as to regional social needs since, the phenomenon of globalisation has shifted benchmarks away from just institutional or national environment to global one. A positive change is foreseen during the recent years. Bates (1997) observes that even in traditional universities, we are witnessing, for quite some time a convergence in full-time and part-time and distance and face to face education.

Globalisation

In general, globalisation is used to describe the emergence of global economy through development of ICT. Therefore, its proponents believe that the economic and political pressure of globalisation will highlight the role of higher education and thus will lead to change in university culture (Sadlack, 1998) with the same perception, Slaughter (1998) finds this change taking the shift from elitist to mass higher education institutions.

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Globalisation may best be understood as the growing interdependence of the people on each other transcending national boundaries through shrinking space and time. Tarafdar and Alam (2000) reports that the groblalisation is the characteristic feature of technology amelioration that makes the world more and more profits for its provider. It is evident that globalisation works more for the profit than for welfare of the people at large. While it results in spread of westernization across the globe, this trend produces a pressure on the local institutions and culture for preservation of autonomy and identity. Therefore, as Edwards and Usher (1997) observes, globalisation does not automatically result in universalisation of particular trends and perspectives but leads precisely to their problematisation. Globalisation can also be seen as the intensification of world wide social relationships which bridge the gap among distant localities. It is a complex sense of link among a number of local situational realities which are otherwise aloof from one another. Perraton (2000) characterized globalisation an arrangement as 'old-fashioned trade in advanced goods from rich countries to poor ones'. Although globalisation is resulting in greater integration in some areas of the economy, politics and culture, it is also resulting in greater fragmentation and stratification, in which some states, societies and communities are being increasingly enmeshed in the global order while others are becoming increasingly marginalized (Held et al, 1999).

Globalisation of Distance Education

The process of globalisation challenges us to rethink not only as to how much collaborative education is needed but also awaken us the ultimate purpose with consequent threats and opportunities. The universities, therefore, need to consider a participative approach of collaborations and consortia. If the university even now does not form strategic alliances and partnerships, it will be difficult for them to sail smooth in the global water. A rational approach of competing with some and collaboraing with others can be adopted to combat the situation. Here comes the role of distance education system which is well equipped to respond to the increasing global competition in higher education. Field (1995) observes that as borders open up to traffic of almost every kind across the globe, so distance education flows increasingly across national borders since, it appears to be uniquely suited to the emerging world order. However, according to COL (1994), the institution of higher education becoming involved with distance teaching need to be very clear about their objectives in doing so and about the means to be adopted in pursuit of their objectives.

For Edwards (1994), globalisation of education by using telecommunication technologies will empower the learner and force the providers of education to concern

themselves with students needs rather than with the transmission of a pre-established canon of knowledge. The change in attitude of the clientele and their perception will also necessitate the institutions to reach them with quality education differently. Similarly, Mason (1998) views that there is a sliding scale of provision from traditional distance education to international distance education, to online courses, to virtual universities and finally edging to globalisation. A global distance education institution offers different courses directly to its students by using distance education technologies across a number of countries. Therefore, every institution operating internationally may be a global distance education institution. A programme can be described as global when we find students from more than two countries, where there is an expressed aim to attract international participants, where course content is devised with transactional participation in mind and where there is a global student body supported by appropriate structures, both institutional and technological. Moore (1966) asserts that for a course to be truly international, it requires involve all participants viz., including staff and students, in a re-examination of their educational philosophies, their views of subject being taught and their cultural perceptions of the course content. As a part of globalisation of distance education, it should be ensured that local institutions are able to add value to partnerships. Developing Countries and Globalisation of Universities are facing an urgent qualitive challenge as a matter of fact higher education has become an international system with the adoption of global standard prescribed by American research universities (Dhanrajan, 1999). However, there is an apprehension in globalisation for developing countries. Prasad (1997) puts it that the globalisation process may open up alternative possibilities to 'globalise and grow' or 'globalise and perish'. Though, many developing countries with insufficient educational infrastructure and resources can have easy access of educational resources from other developed countries to supplement and complement their efforts, it is, however, experienced that under the umbrella of globalisation, a one-way-stream of courses and programmes flows from developed countries to developing ones. The impact of globalisation on the developing countries which are mostly at the receiving end, is to be seen with situational perspective. The collaborative arrangement in an unhealthy situation may not bring any educational benefit for the client learners in developing countries.

The process of globalisation may restrict the activities of many Indian universities. Evans (1995) has described that globalisation presents a dilemma before the developing countries, they access the world, but the world invades them. The developed countries

take it as an opportunity to through their obsolete knowledge and technology upon developing countries. The developed countries are technologically advanced and they transfer a particular technology to the developing countries and in the meantime while the later adapts to the use of that technology, the developed ones go one step further in their innovations and therefore, this technological gap gets widened. In the present context, more and more efforts are needed by the developing nations to adopt strategic framework to take part in the globalisation process.

In general, universities will have to re-engineer their structure and functioning before they wage the global mission. In this regard, Prasad (1997) has a serious apprehension that unchecked globalisation would result in unequal competition with the 'small fish being swallowed by big fish'. He highlights the idea of 'acting globally and thinking locally'. Some of the existing institutions are trying to change their teaching strategies in order to position themselves to deliver their courses more effectively on the global canvas. In the wake of global competition, they are adopting information and communication technologies in order to teach globally. The new delivery mechanisms for most international educational programmes are electronic and rely heavily on the digitization and computerization of knowledge. Such institutions not only have to accept partnerships of foreign institutions but also have to try to extend their outreach beyond the national boundaries in collaboration with them.

The institutions located in the developing countries may get a secondary role in the wake of globalisation loosing their grip over local initiatives and self-identity. Moreover, constraining factors like outdated telecommunication facilities, lack of technological know how, bureaucratic hindrances, high cost of technological gadgets and non-availability of necessary infrastructure play adverse role in this direction.

Impact of Globalisation

In this era of information technology, every alternate institution wants to register its presence in the cyber space by launching one or the other programme through the Web. In many cases, it has been raported that the same matter is pasted on the server without bothering much about the institutional commitments, infrastructure, instructional design, interactivity and usability related issues. It leads to deterioration of academic and support services. Noble (2000) believes that the commercial element in distance education is even stronger now and many of the online programmes on offer are being delivered by poorly paid and over-worked low status instructors for commercial rather than education ends.

Mason (1998) identified some of the arguments favoring globalisation of distance education :

– Benefits to students participating in a course with colleagues drawn from across the world,

– The provision of access to quality education wherever a student lives,

– The scarce top quality expertise can be made available to students anywhere in the world,

– Provision of access to curricula that embrances a broader spectrum of knowledge than any one institution might accomplish,

– Search for new revenue in global market place, and;

– Empowerment of learners who can now choose courses from a range of institutions previously closed to them.

Mason in his report on globalisation has escaped the adversities of collaboration especially for the developing countries. However, the general view expressed against globalisation of education are concerned about the danger of increased learner isolation as students learn from screen and not through interaction with their peers and teachers, the reduction of education to a packaged consumer goods, and globalisation of content with consequential loss of cultural diversity and richness putting local autonomy and value system at stake. Crossing national boundaries certainly adds to the logistical and organizational problems of distance education institutions because they find it difficult to sustain the broader vision of a regional commitment and local identification. Not only this, support services also become a matter of great concern for them.

One approach to the development of a global educational pursuit is based on franchising arrangements. In a franchise arrangement, the course content remains the same but the material is adopted by translating it in the local language incorporating local case studies and by customizing the length or degree of difficulty of material which would demonstrate the quality of globalisation (Trait, 1996). This allows the local institutions to replace a proportion of the course material with locally produced material which is more reflective of local culture. Localization emphasises the cultural sensitivity in the study material. Hence, it is more necessary to incorporate local tinge in such programmes. While this type of arrangement can be seen as an educational advantage to a developing country, it may weaken national initiatives to develop local institutional

provisions which could be better suited to local needs. Evans (1995) gives this situation the name of 'post-colonial dependency on another developed nation'. He further argues that though global education has a potential in offering diversity of choice, but this takes place at the cost of local initiatives which nurture local culture and beliefs as the basis. However, it is alleged that the franchised courses do not take care of the local values. They are merely the learning materials packaged into a predetermined course for use under agreement by another independent provider, which lay down constraints on the adaptation and use of the materials.

Hedge (1999) views collaborations as an opportunity for the educational institutions to capitalize on existing strengths while positioning themselves to take benefit of impending changes and developments in the educational environment. However, collaboration made with private business organizations may put the image of the institution at stake due to disparity in the institutional motives of both the organisations. A commercial organisation would like to see all activities with a profit viewpoint while the social organisation may have a mandate to serve the society at large. Therefore, it is all the likelihood that quality of service may succumb to profit making. However, the private institutions are more sensitive to partnership arrangements as their profit motive forces them to make adjustments for parochial interests and their management is much more focused on outcomes rather than peripheral.

Cultural Implications of Global Education System

The process of globalisation paves the way for cultural invasion. In a state of cultural invasion, often existing cultures have been replaced by the values of the dominant ideologies and many indigenous dialects and languages come under the threat of becoming extinct. Dixon (1991) alleges that it is the death of the indigenous languages which is delved in globalisation of education. Evans (1995) observes that there is a little likelihood of a myriad of small, local, traditional cultures being nurtured within globalisation. However, Collins (1991) repudiates the adverse effect of trans-culturation since other forms of communication between cultures have been in existence for sometime. Survival of cultures in such a situation is the evidence of cultural resistance and adaptation.

In majority of cases, the courses offered by cross-border educational institutions may be global on the surface but not in spirit and, therefore, may not commensurate with the local value systems. As the distance and open education permeates the cultural trans-borders, it becomes an agent of cultural diffusion and change. It has the ability to access large number of individuals and to transcend traditional barriers to communication. But,

simply providing education to variety of individuals who are separated by space, time, prior learning skills and new training requirements, will need an infrastructure which is state-of-the-art, global, user-friendly and affordable.

Social arguments against internationalization are related to the dysfunction of community system. The cultural arguments against global education are equally compelling and make a reference back to old concerns of imperialist attitude, loss of regional culture & values and invasion of western value system.

As Moore (1996) points out, seeking guidance outside our own individualistic culture is an essential step required to develop a global distance education model that honours cultural differences. Keeping this in view, the distance educators have to perform their catalytic role in changing culture and establishing terms of an emerging global way taking their responsibility as an agent of social change very seriously. The distance education will thus support the emergence of a global culture that embodies the best of world order. For that the institutions are required to adopt good practices for their success in higher education market.

Global Accreditation of Academic Programmes

In the recent times, the distance education institutions have been playing a pioneering role and have been amongst the leaders in developing and implementing schemes of instructional partnerships and collaborations. But globalisation raises some crucial issues in the light of which the distance educationists have to review and modify their practices to fit to the new frame. This condition may vary from location to location across the borders.

In order to allow full mobility to the students and give them maximum benefit of specialized programmes run by different institutions globally, the international agencies like COL, UNESCO etc, can help to a great extent in internationalization of education and forming a mechanism to globally recognize the programmes of different institutions and evolving a viable mechanism of credit transfer for the benefit of international student body.

In a global environment, a learner may select a part of curriculum from one institution and a part from another. This will be feasible only if a global credit transfer / course exemption policy is adopted by mutually recognizing the course content on other institutions across the national frontiers. This is a challenge and the partners of distance education can play a prominent role in this respect. The requirements of these institutions have to

be standardized universally. Dhanrajan (1996) has pointed out that COL has already made some efforts in this direction by building Commonwealth Credit Bank for transfer of programmes and credits etc.

Issues of Globalisation of Distance Education

The process of internationalization of distance education raises the following crucial issues among others which need to be resolved before an institution steps in the global fray :

- Improving quality of teaching — learning and making it available to a culturally, educationally, geographically and linguistically diverse student body.

- Becoming sensitive to local issues while being globally competitive and preventing commercialization and westernization in the name of globalisation.

- Need to understand the range of requirements of old and new clients to concretize the same with academic understanding for development of a curriculum which recognizes globalisation and universal interdependence.

- Preventing commodification of education to protect the dwindling status of educational institutions to that of business houses.

- Increasing and maintaining acceptability and desirability of cross-border education.

- Helping the teachers in updating their knowledge to adopt new role by adding new competencies to their existing scientific and pedagogical backgrounds.

- In global framework, service management is a gray area which hampers the smooth functioning of the system and requires utmost serious attention. The institutions in developing countries like India are not able to improve the deteriorating student support services in their own land.

- Establishing, maintaining and monitoring the student support services network since the development of ICT is not uniform across the world and providing quality services alike in all parts of the world will be very difficult.

IGNOU Offerings as Part of Globalisation

Any institution willing to offer its programmes and courses across the national frontiers in collaboration with the institutions imparting education in that local setting, has to pass through a rigorous process under bureaucracy. For offering its courses abroad, IGNOU had to make lot of efforts and convince the government to extend its jurisdiction.

Bureaucrats for their own sake have reservations on any new development. The procedure and viewpoint of University Grants Commission on recognition of different programmes and courses being run by foreign institutions and new programmes being launched by the Indian Universities also discourages advancement in the international collaboration.

The presently, IGNOU is running many of its programmes in especially the developing countries like Abu Dhabi, AI-Ain, Doha, Dubai, Fujairah, Sharjah, Sultanate of Oman, Seychelles, Mauritius, Maldives, Ethiopia, Liberia, Madagascar, Myanmar, Vietnam, Singapore, Nepal and Sri Lanka in collaboration with various local educational institutions. The response in this case in quite encouraging. The self-instructional material has been specially printed for these countries so as to conform to international standards. In case of certain programmes, the case studies pertaining to the local setting from the respective countries have also been made part of the course content, which provides the programmes a local tinge by maintaining local value system. The University has also collaborated with Edexcel Foundation (a UK registered charity), London for launching Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT) and Advanced Diploma in Information Technology (ADIT) programmes under a new project called 'Virtual Campus Initiative'. These programmes are delivered online and make use of information and communication technology extensively.

Further the IGNOU has also collaborated with Commonwealth of Learning and Open Universities in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and BBC World Service for launching Commonwealth Executive Master of Public Administration and Master of Business Administration Programmes. The BBC World Service will broadcast a series of programmes sequel to this collaboration. These programmes are offered initially in the South Asian region and later on the same will be launched though the Commonwealth.

Conclusion

During the information age globalisation of education has been facilitated. The process of globalisation is responsive to space time compression where distance can be covered far quicker than earlier. In today's world the globalisation of distance education is imperative. It cannot be resisted for long, rather the developing countries may have to equip themselves to rise considerably to a competitive level. As the price of technological equipment falls, access to ITC will increase and will make process of globalising education easier and faster. The local institution can make value addition to this process. However, while being open to world, the local institutions should not loose their grip and firmness at the domestic level.

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