

Student Support Services in Correspondence/Distance Education in India : A Historical Perspective

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The history of Distance Education in India is not very old. It is a post-independence phenomenon. Immediately after independence, the Government realized that the traditional full time education had turned out to be restrictive and accessible to not many. The erstwhile education system had not been able to fulfill the constitutional obligation of the government to democratize and make education accessible to the masses. The Education Commission (1964-66) pointed out that *"it becomes evident that the present system of education.....will need radical changes if it is to meet the purpose of modern democratic and socialist society changes in objectives.....Besides, the knowledge explosion and the consequent demand for acquiring new skills and knowledge is placing pressure on the educational system to accommodate more and more..."* The non-formal, correspondence/distance education or open learning was, therefore, thought of as a viable alternative (Anand, 1999). The Kothari Committee constituted in 1961 by the Department of Education paved the way for institution of correspondence courses in India. Later, on the basis of the recommendations of the committee, the University of Delhi was invited by UGC to consider taking up the institution of correspondence courses on pilot basis. Accordingly, country's first School of Correspondence Courses and Continuing Education was established in University of Delhi in 1962 (Singh, 1992). Encouraged by the reception on the part of the people and the success of this pilot project, the Education Commission (1964-66) under the chairmanship of Dr D.S.Kothari recommended for the expansion of correspondence courses.

The necessary guidelines for establishment of school of correspondence courses were framed by UGC and circulated to all the universities. The Punjabi University, Patiala (1968) was the second Indian University to set up a full-fledged directorate of correspondence courses. In fact, it was the first university which was allowed by UGC to run its courses in regional language (Punjabi) along with English. After this, many other universities also started their directorates of correspondence courses. While the total number of university level institutions has reached to 248 (including deemed universities) (University Handbook, 2000), the total number

* IGNOU, Maidan Ghari, New Delhi - 110068, India.

of CCIs (including deemed universities) which are running correspondence courses in different disciplines has reached over 65 (Yadav & Panda, 1999). Operational jurisdiction of these institutes vary from institute to institute, some of them have national jurisdiction while some others are restricted to a particular state or a certain part of the state (AIU, 1986). The CCIs, were, thus, established largely to meet the rapidly growing demand of higher education in the years immediately following independence.

The historical growth of distance education reveals that the process of launching undergraduate courses through correspondence courses was in vogue during 1962-72 phase as an alternative mode of education. During 1972-82, the expansion of CCIs as well as scope of courses was witnessed in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. However, the pace of expansion in undergraduate courses was quite higher. In 1980s, the distance education spread further and along with the opening of more correspondence institutes, few open universities came up. The true revolution in distance education in India was heralded with the establishment of the first open university in the country namely Andhra Pradesh Open University, Hyderabad (1982) which was later renamed as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University. It was the institute totally devoted to the cause of development of distance education. This was followed by establishment of other open universities in the country including a National Open University in 1985. The establishment of Kota Open University, Rajasthan (1987); Nalanda Open University, Bihar (1987); YCM Open University, Maharashtra (1989); MP Bhoj (Open) University, Madhya Pradesh (1991); Dr B.A. Open University, Gujarat (1994); Karnataka State Open University, Karnataka (1996); Netaji Subhash Open University, West Bengal (1997) and Rajarshi Tandon Open University, Uttar Pradesh (1999) further added to strength of distance education and open university system. Consequent upon the establishment of these universities, the distance education acquired a more respectable status in the minds of the conventional people. Thus, open universities and CCIs cover 18-20% of all the students in higher education (Powar et al, 2000).

The open universities are established with a view to introducing and developing concept of open and distance education in which quality education could be ensured through optimum use of technology. They are expected to be innovative, flexible in terms of offerings, methods & media of instruction, completion time of the courses and cost effective non-formal channel of education (Takwale, 1996). Combined with the correspondence/distance education institutes, they are to play a momentous role in the domain of higher education in the country. Today, both forms of distance

education are well established in their own way and are responsible for the education of people at large. Although the conventional system has been expanded extensively but total capacity to provide education is about 6% of the youth population in India. The infrastructure in this system can not be further expanded for want of various reasons including adequate funds (Kem, 1998).

Table 1- Growth of Education System During Past Few Years

	Growth of Universities			Growth in Student Enrolment	
	1950	1970	2000	Year	Student Enrolment
Central Universities	3	5	165*	1972	2.17 million
State Universities	24	79		1981	2.95 million
Deemed Universities	--	9	42#	1991	4.61 million
Inst of National	--	9	11#	1994	5.05 million
Importance					
Open Universities	--		10#	1995	6.10 million
Growth in Colleges (including professional colleges)	578	3277	8600#	1996 1997	6.42 million 6.75 million

Source :Tilak R Kem (1998). Potential of Distance Education in India in Information Technology, Reengineering of Distance Education, Aravali Books International, New Delhi;

*Data pertains to year 1996-97-(UGC Annual Report - 1996-97)

#Universities Handbook (2000), AIU, New Delhi

The distance education in India can be viewed in two streams (Sharma, 1995; Manjulika, 1995) - correspondence courses /distance education and open university system. The correspondence course institutes (CCIs), which are annexed to conventional universities, can be considered as first generation institutes. However, the open university system is the improved single mode version of CCIs and can be considered as the second generation of distance education system in India. Thus, the Correspondence Course Mode is the oldest and amenable model of mass distance education. An overview of total enrolment in the education system during the years is given in Table 2. A synchronous development of correspondence course/distance education institutes along with open universities can be seen in India during the past few years. The present paper concentrates on the student support services being offered by the correspondence/distance education system in India.

Table 2 Enrolment in Higher Education and Distance Education Institutions in India (1975-76 to 1994-95)

Year	Universities/Colleges (% age)	Distance Education Institutions (% age)	Total enrolment (number)
1975-76	97.42	2.58	2,490,319
1977-78	95.56	4.44	2,684,135
1979-80	95.10	4.90	2,785,278
1981-82	93.84	6.16	3,145,757
1982-83	94.07	5.93	3,330,648
1985-86	90.96	9.04	3,925,987
1987-88	90.45	9.55	4,217,137
1988-89	89.68	10.32	4,402,165
1989-90	88.84	11.16	4,780,319
1991-92	87.18	12.82	5,289,170
1994-95	86.86	13.14	6,113,929

Source :Yadav and Panda (1999). Open and Distance Higher Education: Policy and Development, in Open and Distance Education: Policies, Practices and Quality Concerns, Aravali Books Int, New Delhi.

Characteristics of Correspondence Course Institutions

A formidable climate was developed for correspondence education in seventies and early eighties and a number of universities established CCIs during this period. The courses were restricted to subjects that did not require laboratory work or practical component to be completed (Raza, 1991). The correspondence course directorates were directly attached to the conventional universities. The courses & syllabi and other rules & regulations of the parent universities were followed by these directorates without any modification or alteration. The following were the salient features of the directorates of correspondence courses in India :

- i) *They were traditional appendages of the conventional universities and used to adopt the same course and syllabi as adopted by the parent university.*
- ii) *They were having no say in decision making pertaining to management of directorates, whatsoever.*
- iii) *There was no financial or administrative autonomy to these directorates. In fact, they were considered as an extension of the university departments.*

iv) *The courses & syllabi adopted by the parent university were adopted by them and were followed in letter and spirit. The same exam schedule was applicable to them. (Singh, 1992).*

A rapid development in establishment of correspondence course institutes and diversification of courses has been seen during 1980s. Besides, the traditional courses like B.A, B. Com, B.Sc, B. Ed and M. Ed, which were being offered by the correspondence institutions, a number of non-conventional programmes were also introduced during this period. Some of the universities have even gone to the extent of introducing science courses at postgraduate level like M. Sc in Chemistry, Physics, Zoology and Mathematics. Professional courses have also been introduced by some of the universities along with these courses like MBA, Computer Application, Engineering etc. (Agrawal, 1991). Some of the universities have introduced courses in agriculture for the welfare of the rural people as well (AIU, 1986). The students enrolled in these institutions comprise not only the in-service personnel but also those who could not get entry to conventional system due to paucity of seats or are working in remote areas.

Student Support Services in CCIs

At the initial stage of development of CCIs, there were two schools of thoughts (Singh, 1995a); one believed that the CCIs need not provide any support services to the students, since the students would learn at their own while being away from the institution. However, the second school was of the opinion that different types of support services are essential for the students in order to break the sense of isolation and keeping in view the range of variety in the profiles and comprehensive levels of the distance students. Dr. Borje Helmsberg of Fern University, Germany emphasised the need of two-way communication between the distant learner and the teacher and among the learners themselves. The second school of thought gained momentum in India and little attention was given towards offering support services to the distance learners (Singh, 1995b).

The student support services eventually aim at compensating for the absence of live support from teacher for the benefit of the isolated individual learners and making the necessary basic facilities available to them directly or indirectly. These services play the role of relay station (Sharma, 1995). The support services refer to any service other than the actual course material which an institution provides to its learners to realize the instructional objective of the course (Gupta & Gupta, 1999). Apart from helping the students in learning and comprehending the course material supplied to them, the queries also should be answered as and when required and

information needed by the students should be supplied to them (Agrawal, 1991). However, the student support services sub-system is probably the most difficult sub-system to manage (Powar et al, 2000).

The salient objectives of the student support services in a distance education institute can be summarized as under :

- i) *To help learners fruitfully utilize the learning package by augmenting it with academic support services;*
- ii) *To help them make their choice and decisions by providing administrative and information support;*
- iii) *To reduce their sense of isolation caused by distance and consequent lack of regular personal contact;*
- iv) *To provide learners with access to resources and opportunities for personalized, interaction whether mediated or face-to-face (Mehta, 1996).*

On the whole, the student support services has ever been a neglected area as far as correspondence course institutes are concerned (Sahoo, 1993b; Singh, 1992; Manjulika, 1995). A UGC project with Vijaya Mulay as Principal Investigator, investigated the working of the correspondence course institutes. She made a detailed study and submitted an exhaustive report in this respect in 1986. The student support services, thus, tend to have a low status on the whole (Gupta and Gupta, 1999). The quality of correspondence education has been low in terms of course sessions, student support and student learning (Powar et al, 2000). Sharma (1995) found that the main drawback of the system is weak student support services. As a result, the distance learners are dissatisfied, frustrated, confused and they are dropping out from the system.

Library-Cum-Study Centre

The library facilities are considered as an important part of the student support package in education system and distance education is no exception. The correspondence course institutes are supposed to provide to their students the reference material so that they can enrich their knowledge about the course(s). As per the guidelines provided by UGC, the CCIs were supposed to establish well equipped Library-cum-Study Centres for providing support services to its students. However, it could not get fruitful results. Some of the CCIs were having study centres at the headquarters exclusively and the students who were in nearby places around the headquarter just could use the library facilities. However, the students in remote areas were left with no other alternative but to resort to the provided study material. Whereas some institutes were having more than one Library-cum-Study Centre scattered around in their jurisdiction. The range of Study Centres varied from institute to

institute (highest in Delhi University). The School of Correspondence Courses, Delhi established its first library in 1974, however the school has not been able to set up library-cum-study centres at a desired level (Dutt, 1988). The study by Bakhshish Singh (1992) reveals that less than half of the institutes were having Study Centres. For instance out of 29 Study Centres only 8 have library in School of Distance Education, Andhra University (Laxmi, 1999).

In some of the CCIs (Panjab, Utkal), there was a provision of postal library services. Under this scheme, the students from remote areas were allowed to borrow two books for a period of one month. In some institutes this was done on the basis of security deposit taken from the student. The students were supposed to become the members of the Library and could avail this facility. In some other institutes this facility was available even without any security deposit. Some of the CCIs had also introduced the facility of book bank at the headquarters for the distant learners (Patna). The students were provided with certain number of books by these book-banks for the academic session. The postal library service was introduced by Punjab University, under which one way postal charges for sending the books to the distance learners were borne by the university (Bhatnagar and Saihjpal, 1996).

Some universities started journal of distance education (Kakatiya, Osmania, Panjab, Jammu) in order to create interest of the people at large in distance education system (Bhatnagar & Shaihjpal, 1996). Most of Directorates tried to continue. The publication of Journal but only few. Could maintain regularly. Those who maintained regularly are SOLSE, Kakatiya and DDE, Jammu University.

Method (s), / Mode(s) of Instruction

The printed text has ever been the dominant medium of instruction delivery in correspondence programmes. The courses & syllabi of the programmes being offered by the CCIs are the same as that of regular stream with the classroom lectures being replaced by written words which have a permanent existence. The CCIs used to prepare the lecture scripts for their students based on the course and syllabus adopted from the parent university. However, the notes were not of good quality, as no care was taken in their preparation in the context of self-learning attributes (Singh, 1992). Since the lesson writing requires proper understanding of the techniques of imparting instruction to learners in absentia that is why it is different from writing a book or a lecture (Singh, 1995a). At the same time, there has been no uniformity among the materials of different distance education institutes (Limbadri, 1999). These notes were dispatched to the students in more than one instalments depending upon the payment structure of the programme. Some of the CCIs used to send full material by post in one lot. It has been found that a large segment of student population (81-

91%) depend solely on use of printed notes for completing their studies (Khan, 1982; Sahoo, 1993a, Tyagi, 1990).

Studies have shown that the CCIs kept on receiving the complaints from students about non-receipt of study material on time as some of the students would receive the same a few days before the commencement of examinations (Singh, 1995b). Thus, irregular dispatch of lessons created problems for students (Sahoo, 1993a). The students were faced by different sorts of problems in CCIs. The weakest points in the CCIs were the lack of quality study material and poor student support services. The revolution of awareness in preparation of self-instructional material took place after the establishment of open universities in India particularly Indira Gandhi National Open University. Moreover, there were no proper infrastructural facilities for providing student support services to the learners. As many as 10 correspondence institutes have introduced the open university system along with the formal correspondence courses (Banerjee, 1995). In this system, the students are required to possess no prior formal qualification. But, they are made to appear in a preparatory/entrance examination on attaining a certain age before permitting them to enter to the mainstream of a particular course.

Single Sitting System

In the mean-time, some universities like Madurai Kamraj, Annamalai, Osmania, KUK etc started single sitting system for imparting their first degree to the students. The students were required to have a gap of certain years after passing out of their last examination. They could appear in the courses of all the three years in one go. Later on in 1994, the UGC appointed Takwale Committee to examine the issue of one-sitting B. A. degree being offered by such universities. The committee submitted its final report in September, 1996 mentioning that the practice of awarding first degree (one sitting) by private appearance by some of the universities is not in consonance with the regulations issued by the UGC on minimum standard of institution for grant of first degree through formal as well as non-formal/distance mode. Hence, the committee recommended that this practice should be topped keeping in view the quality of education imparted through such single-sitting practices. And thus, universities were not allowed to enroll candidates for one-sitting B.A degree courses from the academic year 1996-97 onwards (UGC, 1996).

Counselling Facility

General queries and demand of information pertaining to various programmes being run by it is a common phenomenon for an educational institution. And fulfillment of this demand can very well be expected from the CCIs too. The study of Bakhshish Singh (1992) revealed that though different institutes included the component of pre-admission counselling in their scheme, but the student support services of the CCIs

were managed very poorly and the state of facilities provided at their study centres was not encouraging. There was no provision of counselling facility at the Study Centres except in a few institutes. These centres lacked in competent and trained staff who could quench the informational thirst of the prospective and aspirant learners. The informational/promotional material was rarely available in these centres (Singh, 1992).

Personal Contact Programme

Tutorial support is of crucial importance to the learners since it serves as a great morale booster for them (Singh, 1988). The personal contact programme gives the learner a chance to have direct rapport and interaction with his counsellor as well as peer groups and help him in overcoming the sense of isolation (Singh, 1995b). Thus, Personal Contact Programme forms an important part of student support services in the correspondence education system. It is traced as an integral part of all the courses run by these institutes. All the CCIs had a provision of personal contact programmes of varying durations. The place of the contact programme was decided on the basis of the concentration of students in a particular area. However, such centres for PCP would vary in case of UG and PG programmes. Some of the institutes used to organize PCP at their headquarters only. The attendance on such programmes was not made compulsory. However, it gave lot of help to the students for preparing for final university exams. The attendance of students in the programmes varied from course to course.

A study of the available data shows that there was no uniformity in frequency, duration and organisation of the PCPs. The programmes were organized by the faculty of CCIs with the help of teachers from other institutions. Some CCIs even used to organize workshops and seminars by calling eminent scholars from different parts of the country for the benefit of the distant students. Some of the institutes have a provision in the application form itself to enable the student to give choice of the centre where he would like to attend the personal contact programme. However, some institutions prefer to inform the learners later with a general letter giving details of the centre and the students are free to attend the programme at the centre of their choice. However, the studies by some of the eminent scholars like Biswal and Sahoo among others have shown that the attendance at these contact programmes was not very encouraging due to variety of reasons and constraints at different levels. Efforts have been made from time to time by the scholars to evaluate the learning support system. It has been found that the teacher lacked one or more of the skills expected of an instructor of heterogeneous adult learners. Study Centres are very few and ill equipped. Some students feel that a well-equipped library is a must to enable them to do reference work when they find lesson units insufficient. They want the text books to be supplied on loan.

Student Evaluation

The educational effectiveness and the quality of distance education that uses mass production methods can be maintained only through in-built evaluation systems (Mani, 1988). Evaluation is a continuous process contributing to the process of learning by enabling the learner to appreciate the strong and weak points of his own learning, through the process of learning itself. It also contributes to the instructional process by enabling the teacher to understand the strengths and weaknesses of his own institution through an appreciation of student responses to the same (Mani, 1988). Not every teacher/tutor handles answer-scripts with the attention and devotion expected of him (Koul, 1988).

The evaluation of students was carried out in two ways. In order to internally assess the progress of the student and ascertain two-way didactic communication, assignments were made a part of the programme in correspondence courses. The questions/assignments provided at the end of the course material were supposed to be answered by the learners and submitted to the institute. Most of these questions were of essay type and required an in-depth study of all the relevant material on the part of the student. The tutors were supposed to evaluate these assignment responses, give necessary remarks/ comments and return them by post to the student for their guidance. It helped students to assess their work and get necessary directions from the tutor in the form of tutor remarks on the assignments. In some of the institutes e.g. HP University, it was prerequisite to submit all the required assignments before being eligible to sit in the term end examinations (Sahoo, 1993a). In some other institutes the submission of assignments was an option on the part of the learner. Singh, (1995a) reported that due to various reasons the students rarely used to get the evaluated assignment responses back, and if somehow they could, the same were without any fruitful tutor comments.

In order to finally assess the worth of student for the purpose of certification, the term end examinations were conducted at the end of the session. The study by Koul reveals that, except one or two institutes which were following semester system of examination, annual system of examination was followed by majority of institutes. The students of CCIs were supposed to sit in the examinations conducted for the regular students and were awarded the same degree by the University. The scheme of examination used to be the same for these students. However, the students were at liberty to choose any examination centre in the jurisdiction activated by the University for the purpose. School of Correspondence Courses, Andhra was authorized to conduct examinations for distance learners separately. All the tasks pertaining to conduct of examinations were undertaken by the Directorate and the degrees were awarded by the Andhra University (Abraham, 1996).

Electronic Media

Unfortunately, correspondence institutes in our country hardly provide any properly organized media support to their students though some institutes do arrange radio talks. The correspondence institutes have not been able to utilize the electronic media at large for instructional purposes. It has been limited to radio talks and some of the institutes were telecasting their lessons through regional radio stations periodically. Some of the CCIs used audio programmes to supplement their study material (SNDT, Delhi, CIEFL). However, electronic media was never used at the satisfactory level by these institutes (Singh, 1992). The CCIs like Delhi, Punjab, Punjabi and Madurai were making limited use of radio. Radio talks for the benefit of distance learners were also aired sometime by some of the CCIs. However, of late, some universities have established electronic media research/ production centres with the help of UGC (Bhatnagar & Saijpal, 1996). Educational audio and video programmes were produced here for the help of learners to supplement the printed text.

Feedback Mechanism

Feedback mechanism is prerequisite for sustainable development of a system, and it is all the more essential in distance education system keeping in view the spatial barriers between the teacher and the taught and the system and the user. Good feedback is the one which is immediate, regular and explanatory rather than judgemental and concise. The success of a distance education programme depends on prompt delivery of study material and fast turn around of the assignments. But distance learning system lacks the immediate feedback from the students (Mani, 1982). The assignment responses from the students acted as the main source of feedback in regard to the content and quality of course material, method of delivery of programme etc. for the institute. On the other hand the assignment responses which were supposed to be sent back to the students duly evaluated containing tutors comments acted as an exclusive source of feedback for the students. It used to give, and for that matter even today, gives an assessment of the pace of progress done by the student. It also acts as a source of guidance and direction for future activities by and for the student. It helps him in attaining the course objectives and preparing for the final examinations.

The personal contact programmes organized by the correspondence institutes also acted as another important source of feedback from the students in regard to different services being provided to the students. During these contact programmes the students could place their problems pertaining to different aspects of their study e.g. non-receipt of material and other information, non-receipt of contact programme schedule on time, non-receipt of evaluated assignment responses and other related

matters, before the faculty available at that point of time. Though, studies have shows that this feedback from the students did not play a prominent role in rectification of system errors once for all.

Transformation of CCIs to DE Mode

In order to assess the progress made by the CCIs in the country, a CABE Committee (DOE, 1994) was appointed which gave its observations on the functioning of correspondence course institutes as under :

- i) *Most correspondence institutes offer courses in arts and humanities only; enrolment in professional courses is concentrated in B. Ed/ M. Ed only.*
- ii) *Correspondence courses were often an extension of courses offered in the conventional mode and retain the same rigidity with regard to admission and examinations.*
- iii) *Virtually all CCIs were using print medium exclusively and are not multimedia based.*
- iv) *Lack of coordination between CCIs has led to considerable duplication of efforts and wastage of scarce resources.*
- v) *Correspondence Institutes are originally weak and neglected, and their internal efficiency is low.*
- vi) *Student Support Services are virtually non-existent. Opportunities for face-to-face contact between teacher and students are few and feedback on student assignments is minimal.*

The committee further reported that under these circumstances, the correspondence education was looked down upon as a poor substitute for the formal education.

Taking into consideration the deficiencies in the erstwhile correspondence education system, the UGC realized the need to change the functioning of the CCIs to the distance education mode and encourage them to adopt multi-media approach in delivery of the programmes to distance learners. On the recommendation of Working Group on Distance Education (1993) a UGC document, to this effect, was prepared by IGNOU, Distance Education Council and Staff Training & Research Institute of Disance Education collectively. This document was discussed by a High Level Committee of Vice-Chancellors of 18 universities having CCIs, who tried to develop specific guidelines for transformation of correspondence course institutes to the distance education mode. Later on, a joint committee of UGC and Distance Education Council decided on the *modus operandi* of such transformation and formulated a policy which was linked with the release of grant on the part of the government (DEC, 1995). The

task of monitoring of this transformation was assigned to Distance Education Council (Takwale, 1995) The guidelines aimed at the following among others :

- i) *Providing greater autonomy to CCIs in administration, academic and financial matters.*
- ii) *Spending surplus funds generated by CCIs to its own quality improvement.*
- iii) *Transforming correspondence instructional material to multi-media self-instructional material appropriate to distance education mode.*
- iv) *Developing credit transfer system to allow students mobility and wider choice of courses.*

Impact of Transformation on SSS

Based on the guidelines and viewing the need of the non-formal education system, many of the CCIs changed their nomenclature from correspondence courses to distance education (SVU Annual Report, 1994-95; ICDL Database and AIU, 1997). Consequent upon this, slight modifications and improvements were made by some institutes in their mode of delivery of programmes and student support services. However, the quality of study material supplied to the students is the same as was earlier. The nomenclature of the material has not even been changed to 'Self-Instructional Material' and various terms like 'lecture scripts', 'reading notes', 'lecture notes', 'print material' are still being used by these institutes (AIU, 1997).

Many institutes have made efforts for expansion of their Study Centre network and have been able to increase the number of Study Centres to some extent in their jurisdiction. There is an increasing trend in the establishment of library facility in these institutes. Many universities have instituted annual magazine covering different activities of the directorates of correspondence/distance education. The distance learners are encouraged to contribute their bit to this magazine. The Alagappa, HP, Bharathiar, Bharathidasan and Madurai Kamraj universities among others have introduced the scheme of *on the spot admissions* at their specified centres. Barkatulla conducts its contact classes during Dussehra/Diwali vacations, whereas Calicut, M G, MD among others have started conducting contact classes during Sundays and other holidays at their Study Centres. In Hyderabad, 20% weightage each to assignments and contact programme is given and 75% attendance is compulsory in PCP. At the same time, a certain percentage of attendance in PCP is made compulsory by some of the universities (MD, Kashmir) (AIU, 1998).

The extensive use of electronic media in course delivery is thought of and audio/video programmes are prepared by some of the institutes to supplement their learning

material. Organisation of counselling classes at weekends took place of occasional personal contact programmes in many institutes. Efforts were also made to further strengthen the library services and expansion of network of study centres across their respective jurisdiction. In some more institutes, open university system along with the distance learning system was also introduced for those who did not possess any formal qualification (AIU, 1998). These students were admitted to a particular course on the basis of entrance test conducted by such institutions. The scheme of open university system (with no formal qualification) is on the increase with many universities. The single sitting system of examination introduced by many of the universities has since been discontinued on the recommendations of the Committee constituted by UGC under the chairmanship of Prof. Ram Takwale (UGC, 1996). The trend of launching different professional and academic programmes in regional language is also on the increase.

Conclusion

The distance education system has registered a remarkable growth after 1962 when ever first school of correspondence courses of the country was established in Delhi University. It is now being recognised as a potential medium of reaching with latest information and knowledge to the society in general and the needy target groups in particular. However, with the increase in enrolment and quantum of work in these institutions, a great difficulty is being faced in providing effective support services to the distance learners. Inadequate trained staff and faculty, paucity of funds and 'annex' status of these institutions, are a few constraints which are faced by them in their day-to-day functioning. In order to develop the distance education system parallel to the conventional counterparts and enable it to shoulder the major responsibility of democratising education in the country, concerted efforts are required to be taken on the part of the Government as well as the conventional universities, of which they are a part.

The distance education institutions also have to concentrate on the quality of support services being provided to the distance learners since it is the major component that distinguishes distance education from correspondence courses. Quality self-learning material should be made available to the learners well in time. If this milestone is achieved by the institution, it has won half the battle. Collaboration and networking with the open university system in the country can help these institutions a great deal in this direction. It will, on the one hand, enhance the accessibility of these institutions to quality learning material and eliminate the chances of duplication/multiplication of efforts made by them individually on the other. It will further help in establishing and developing an acceptable standard of distance education in the country. At the same time alternative channels of service delivery should be explored which would enable optimum utilisation of latest information technology for enhanced learning.

It is worthwhile emphasizing here that in this new era of information and technology revolution, the conventional education is out and distance education is in. Hence, national resources should be diverted to the distance education institutions so as to enable them to rise to the occasion and fulfill the increasing demand of quality higher education in the society.

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