

The Role and Contribution of STRIDE in the Development of Human Resources for Distance/Open Learning

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Developing countries practising distance/open education face a number of problems at the very basic level which the developed countries do not. Scarcity of human resources to establish and manage distance/open education systems in those countries which are even otherwise not endowed with adequate material resources, technology or infrastructural facilities is one such problem. To develop appropriate staff development programmes with a view to developing human resource for the distance/open learning system still remains a challenge before institutions which have been running academic programmes for more than three decades in India with staff who never had an opportunity to equip themselves professionally to develop and present the courses in the ways they should. Obviously, lack of professionalism does affect adversely the academic quality of the courses and the quality of services to the student. Quality of teaching learning ultimately depends on the quality of the teaching staff and the learners. STRIDE's role and contribution in this regard merit the attention of distance educators the world over.

The Rationale

Distance Education in India in the form of correspondence education dates back to 1962 when the School of Correspondence and Continuing Education of the University of Delhi came into existence. Between 1962 and 1985 when the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was established, a number of conventional universities had set up their correspondence education institutes/directorates. About 40 such institutes had been offering their correspondence education programme in the mid eighties. In 1982 the first open university in the country was established in the Southern State of Andhra Pradesh—the Andhra Pradesh Open University (APOU), now renamed as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU). At present, besides the National Open University, there are 7 State Open Universities and 54 Departments/Directorates of Distance Education located in conventional universities offering various programmes/courses through distance mode in India.

During the quarter century of correspondence education preceding the birth of the National Open University, there were hardly any attempts to professionalize the practice of this mode of education, although elsewhere in the world, particularly in the advanced countries there was tremendous progress in promoting distance/open

education in various forms. The educational achievements of the former USSR through distance mode, the success story of the Open University, UK and the spread and credibility of distance education in North America, Australia and Western Europe was talked about in the Indian academic fora meant for bringing in the much needed reforms in the national education system. The Working Group (Government of India, 1974) which recommended strongly the setting up of the National Open University made a detailed study of, among other things, the need for human resources to achieve the visualised goals of distance/open education in the country. But it took another ten years to give concrete shape to the ideas of National Open University as well as professional staff development for distance education.

Although distance/open education based on multimedia and communication technology had made tremendous progress and contributed significantly to the research in various aspects of distance learning, till the mid eighties, there were not many full fledged staff development programmes even in the advanced countries (for a discussion on this, see P.R. Ramanujam 1995: 141-173). In the Open University, UK the academic staff who developed some of the excellent and pioneering self-instructional materials had to learn their skills on the job (Walter Perry, 1976). By the mid eighties and early nineties the need for comprehensive staff development programmes was widely recognized in the developed countries as well. Australia, and later the British Open University made efforts to offer staff development programmes for the internal and the external academics and professionals practising distance/open education.

Analysing the staff development needs in distance education universities, Ross Paul identifies a wide range of needs of distance teachers as well as the learners which can be met only through well designed staff development programmes. He also argues that if 'academics are left alone to figure everything out, they are in almost exactly the same position as isolated rural students' (Ross Paul, 1987:152). Highlighting the distinct characteristics of distance learners and their varying needs, David Sewart (1987) advocates *staff development* which is broader than *training* and which is institution based to 'highlight the different stress placed by distance education on specific elements of teaching'. Sewart further argues that staff development is concerned not only with teaching good practices, it is concerned with creating a "harmony between the individual and the institution which allows the commitment of staff to be maintained within the aims of the institution" (David Sewart, 1987: 170-71). Koul (1981) analysing the roles and functions of distance teachers which are different from those of a classroom teacher challenges the assumptions that a good classroom teacher can *ipso facto*, also be a good distance teacher without any specialised training and puts up a strong case for staff development programmes for distance teachers. Parer has extensively talked about the various needs and areas of staff development in distance education and has carried out a number studies which focus on the different ways of inducting staff development (Michael Parer, 1990; 1991; 1995).

Staff development becomes a necessity primarily for two reasons: (i) the teaching staff accustomed to face-to-face classroom teaching have to reorient themselves to the new environment of distance teaching; and (ii) the different needs of distance learners with varied backgrounds and socio-academic characteristics cannot be met without appropriate staff development programmes. From the teacher's point of view, absence of students on the campuses of distance education institutions would be the central point of difference that makes them feel alienated. Additionally, the extreme division of labour involved in the operations of distance teaching, the stringent demands made on the time of the teachers, the necessity to work to strict schedules, the compulsion to work with teams etc., may have negative impact on the teaching staff, if they are not adequately oriented to appreciate the needs of the system. The most important issues which need to be resolved are the teacher's attitudes toward and understanding of teaching, research, course development and its delivery in distance teaching institutions.

Traditionally, teaching and research are the exclusive domains of teachers where they have absolute control on what they want to teach and research within the overall curriculum and syllabus framed for the institutions or the individual programmes/courses. Teachers have also the freedom to choose their methodology of teaching and the areas of research. Although the academic freedom and facilities get determined by the overall objectives of the institutions and society at large, the day-to-day routine related to teaching and research are apparently decided by the individual teachers who believe that they are the masters of their own activities. Conventions and traditions of standards are already set, and the informal evaluation of teachers by students and the peers is very much a reality. Research areas are usually discipline related and the research activities feed into the teaching process almost on a daily basis. Timings and work load are followed by conventions and adjustments within the institutions, leaving enough time for reading, writing and other creative activities of teachers. Another crucial factor affecting the attitudes and teaching process of the teacher is the student population of the same age group with more or less the same expectations. The physical presence of the students and the immediate interaction expected to take place in the classroom become perhaps the most satisfying aspects at the affective domain of the teachers.

In distance teaching-learning situation, all the major aspects of classroom teaching-learning undergo lots of changes. Though distance teaching-learning remains as teaching-learning at the very basic levels, it gets substantially altered in terms of design, development, operations and implementation. There are no students on campus; institutional arrangements, rather than individual preferences decide the character and quality of teaching; traditions and conventions are broken frequently, in order to effect educational communication; and teachers and students are linked through study materials, communication facilities and occasional face-to-face meetings. Division of labour and increasing team work subsume the individual

identity of teachers, though they can retain their identities through research to a large extent. Teachers have to respond to the institutional needs when they take up research activities.

The role of a distance teacher, thus becomes different from that of a classroom teacher in many other respects too. The traditional role of a teacher as an 'authority' of knowledge and also a giver is changing fast into a facilitator of learning even in the face-to-face educational set up. This role of a facilitator and an academic *manager* is increasingly accepted in the distance teaching institutions of the West at least. The change in the setting of teaching-learning where teachers and students are physically separated most of the time, and the changes in the methodologies of teaching-learning take time to get the social acceptance. Where there is no previous experience, let alone expertise in devising ways and means of imparting distance education in a professional manner, change of role of a teacher meets with resistance at first from the teachers themselves. And if this resistance is not overcome through professional staff development programmes, the institutional goals inevitably get undermined and eventually the teachers themselves will become ineffective in managing their academic activities. In such a situation, administrative and bureaucratic control over the entire range of distance teaching-learning activities becomes inevitable.

The Background

When IGNOU was established in September 1985 by an act of the Indian Parliament, the status of distance/open learning in the country was in a poor shape. In fact, the terms 'distance education' and 'open learning' were little known even in the academic circles. The correspondence education institutes and directorates functioning in the conventional universities seemed to be happy with the then existing practice of writing lecture notes or lessons and sending them to the students. There was not much experience or expertise available in the country to give a professional touch to distance learning course materials or the student support services. The absence of professionalism in distance education programmes in India was pointed out by Reddy (1986) and Vijay Mulay (1986). The Working Group (1974) which recommended the establishment of a National Open University stressed, among other things the need for human resources to develop self-instructional materials for distance education and evolve appropriate strategies to improve the quality of student support services in the system of distance education. Keeping in view the state of affairs prevalent in the distance education scenario and the recommendations made by various experts and committees with regard to development of human resources for the system, IGNOU set up a separate unit to respond to those needs right at the very beginning of the activities of the University. The Division of Distance Education was established by IGNOU in 1986 as a central unit to develop staff development programmes to meet the professional requirements of

the staff of IGNOU and eventually to meet the human resources requirements of the distance/open learning system in the country. It was also expected that the staff development programmes developed by the Division of Distance Education would have international relevance too, especially in the countries which have similar or comparable socio-academic needs and traditions as obtaining in India. These were the two main objectives of staff development programmes to be developed by the Division of Distance Education.

The Division had many other functions, besides developing the staff development programmes such as: orienting and training the staff of IGNOU to develop and deliver their various academic, technical, professional and vocational programmes; assisting the academic and administrative staff in evolving the different mechanisms to maintain and monitor the programmes; organise locally the relevant specialised training programmes of long and short durations; and undertake systemic and system related research. When the Diploma Programme in Distance Education was designed, developed and launched by IGNOU, the aims and objectives of the programme were clearly stated as follows:

One of the major functions of the Division of Distance Education, among many others, is to develop human resources so as to make available the requisite manpower to function in different capacities in the academic, administrative and technical fields of distance education and thereby shape, sustain and effectively run the different distance education institutions/departments and programmes in the country.

It is with a view to developing the much-needed human resources for these existing distance education centres and the many which are to come up soon that the Division of Distance Education of this University has designed a Diploma Programme in Distance Education (IGNOU, 1988).

Creation of STRIDE

It took another six years to realise the second objective of the staff development programmes developed by IGNOU. The expectation that IGNOU would play an international role in the area of staff development became an achievable goal when the Division of Distance Education was upgraded as the Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE) in July 1993. This upgradation of the Division as an Institute has an interesting history. In 1989, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) organised a Regional Seminar in Islamabad, Pakistan. The ADB came up with a proposal to assist an Institute of Distance Education which would take care of the training and research needs of distance education institutions in the Asian region. The Indian representative who attended the Seminar succeeded in persuading ADB to give that responsibility to India. And later the Ministry of Human Resources Development, Government of India proposed that IGNOU could prepare a proposal and a detailed plan to create the proposed institute of training and research. The Division of Distance Education prepared the required proposal and the plan which were considered by the Planning Board and the Board of Manage-

ment of IGNOU and also the Government of India. Simultaneously, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Vancouver, Canada reviewed the Diploma Programme in Distance Education and the training activities of the Division and subsequently conferred the status of **Centre of Excellence in Training for Distance Education** on IGNOU. COL actively supported the proposal to set up the proposed Institute of training and research in the area of distance education and offered to fund 50 thousand Canadian dollars per year for a period of three years so as to help the Institute to equip itself to carry out its training and research activities. Thus, with the efforts of ADB, COL, IGNOU and the Govt. of India the Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE) came into existence. In the Vice-Chancellor's Report to the Fifth Convocation of IGNOU, 16 April, 1994 it has been stated:

An institution called **Staff Training and Research Institute in Distance Education (STRIDE)** headed by an academic in the rank of a Pro-Vice-Chancellor has been established. It has been done by upgrading the Division of Distance Education with the support of COL. The STRIDE will not only develop training facilities for distance education manpower in India, but also for those from other developing countries. A beginning has already been made with Maldives and Mauritius.

Contributions of STRIDE

Keeping in view the social, political, economic, educational and demographic concerns of the country, IGNOU started its programmes to develop the necessary human resources to meet the requirements of system building with regard to distance education. Simultaneously the University launched academic programmes in the traditional disciplines in order to establish its academic status in the given academic environment and traditions of the country. STRIDE has been actively involved in both these broad areas of education and training.

Staff development programmes

Staff development programmes of STRIDE can be divided broadly into two categories: Academic and Training. Academic programmes are: *PostGraduate Diploma in Distance Education* and *Master of Arts in Distance Education*, focusing on the various aspects of distance education. Each of the programmes can be completed in a minimum period of one year or a maximum period of four years.

In order to meet the requirements of the University as well as the country STRIDE devised a two-pronged strategy. While developing the full fledged professional staff development programmes such as the *Diploma in Distance Education*, and the *Masters in Distance Education*, it also organised a variety of in-house training programmes for the regular IGNOU staff and the part time staff who participate in

IGNOU activities in various ways as part time course writers, counsellors-tutors and coordinators at IGNOU study centres.

Course design, development and delivery of the Diploma, Post Graduate Diploma and the Masters Programme in Distance Education were the first three important activities which enabled the staff of STRIDE to get 'on the job' training. In October 1986 there were only 3 Lecturers and a Professor working in STRIDE. Another lecturer joined in November the same year. All the STRIDE staff participated in a 10 day Workshop organised in New Delhi jointly by UNESCO and IGNOU in October 1986. 12 other participants from other institutions of distance education in the country had also participated in the workshop. This workshop was the real beginning for the younger staff of STRIDE to get involved in staff development. (The Professor was already a known distance educator and trainer in his own right). The experience gained through this workshop helped a lot in the preparation of the course materials for the staff development programmes at IGNOU. When some additional staff joined STRIDE in 1987, they too had the indirect benefit of the training by working closely with the older staff and the direct benefit of guidance and supervision from the Professor, who was also the Director of then Division of Distance Education.

More than 80 per cent of the course materials for the three staff development programmes were developed in-house. This exercise was the most significant step in developing human resources within the University. For the IGNOU staff, intensive orientation-cum-training workshops have been conducted by STRIDE since 1987. After the training given in these workshops, the staff are expected to go ahead with the preparation of the course materials in the various academic disciplines. The training programmes for IGNOU Academic Staff last for one week to three weeks. Every academic joining IGNOU undergoes this training mostly at the initial stages.

Besides the full time academic staff of IGNOU, the part time academic staff too are given some sort of training, although the content and duration of these programmes are perceived to be wanting. Attempts are being made to give a more thorough and professional touch to these programmes meant for part time staff such as the IGNOU Academic Counsellors and the Coordinators of Study Centres and the external staff such as the course writers who are mostly working in the conventional universities and colleges. The other category of teaching staff who receive training through STRIDE workshops are those who are working at the State Open Universities and the Directorates/Departments of Distance Education located in the conventional universities. Additionally, the non-teaching staff of IGNOU and other institutions of Distance Education are also given orientation programmes of short duration. Thus, four distinct categories of participants have been participating in the training programmes conducted by STRIDE:

- (i) Regular/full-time academic staff of IGNOU
- (ii) Part time academic staff involved in the activities of IGNOU

- (iii) Academic staff working at distance education institutions other than IGNOU
- (iv) Non-teaching staff working at IGNOU and other institutions.

The needs and requirements of the above categorises of staff vary and, therefore, the content, duration and strategies of training are also differently designed. IGNOU academic staff have the obligation to use the training in their course development and course delivery activities. The non-IGNOU academic staff may or may not put their training experience into practice immediately after their training because of the priorities and preoccupations of their respective institutions. Depending on the priorities and feasibility of organising staff training programmes for the academic staff of IGNOU and other institutions, eight types of training programmes have so far been designed and conducted by STRIDE. They are:

- (i) *Workshops on self-instructional materials (SIMs) in print and non-print media:* These workshops run for 10-15 working days. All the IGNOU academic staff participate in this type of training at least once, soon after they join IGNOU. Those who have received this training are expected to take care of the discipline based requirements when they design and develop self instructional materials. The academic staff from other institutions take part in these workshops with the intention of reshaping their instructional materials which are generally in the form of conventional lessons or lecture notes. While it is obligatory for the IGNOU staff to follow the process and the format discussed and agreed upon during the training period, the other institutions have the option to use the experience gained in whatever way they want to, depending on their immediate needs and infrastructural facilities. In the initial years, the resource persons for these workshops were from STRIDE and abroad, particularly from the UK. Now the STRIDE staff and local experts available in India act as resource persons.
- (ii) *Orientation Programmes for course writers, subject experts and academic counsellors:* These are programmes of short duration, ranging from 1 to 3 days. The basic concepts of distance/open education, the principles of writing self-instructional materials, and the need for and ways of giving academic support to distance learners usually constitute the content of these orientation programmes. Since the clientele are from the outside institutions, they need more exposure to the basic philosophy and principles of distance education so as to develop the appropriate attitudes towards the tasks assigned to them. STRIDE staff have acted as resource persons at these programmes.
- (iii) *Advanced level workshops on Programme Evaluation:* Evaluation of distance education programmes is as important as their design, develop-

ment and delivery. It is also the much neglected area in Indian educational institutions in general. Social accountability and the institutional mission make programme evaluation a necessary and inseparable part of distance education practice. For these reasons, STRIDE conducted workshops and also carried out 11 evaluation surveys on the quality of courses and other activities. The workshops provide the methodological basis for the future programme evaluation activities which could be taken up by the individual staff or the Schools of Studies. In these exercises the STRIDE staff and a consultant from the Open University, the UK were involved as resource persons.

- (iv) *Advanced level programmes on training trainers*: Training is an ongoing activity and, therefore, the trainers themselves need to be trained periodically, if they have to function as effective trainers. For this purpose, STRIDE conducted two programmes in which the IGNOU staff and the distance educators from other institutions of India took part. The training of IGNOU trainers was assisted by the ODA, British Council and the other programme was assisted by UNESCO. The outcome of these two workshops were the two comprehensive reports on the training needs, strategies of training, content, etc. which provide the basis for future plans for training of trainers. STRIDE staff, five other staff members from the Schools of Studies and twelve participants from other institutions of distance education participated in these two workshops under the guidance and supervision of two resource persons—one from STRIDE and the other from the UK.
- (v) *Development of test items bank (or Question Banking)*: An open university becomes really open when it is in a position to allow the maximum possible flexibility, not only in admitting students but also in allowing them to take their exams—the two features which could be treated as the ultimate measures of flexibility and efficiency of an open university. But to achieve these feats, the institutions must do a lot of hard work, before making any commitments in this regard. Question banking is one such requirement. STRIDE organised a workshop on question banking to meet the requirements of the PG Diploma in Distance Education. Programmes of this kind are in need of developing question banks, especially when they are offered to foreign students under the Rajiv Gandhi Fellowship Scheme. STRIDE staff and some members of the Masters in Distance Education Alumni have done some preliminary work in this regard. Follow up programmes in this area would help IGNOU and other institutions in overcoming the present delays and hurdles in preparing question papers for a variety of courses and for thousands of students who would like to take their examinations at different times. STRIDE's

experience in conducting examinations simultaneously for 100 students from 18 Commonwealth countries will be a useful reference point for all such activities in future at IGNOU, especially when the University is actively considering the internationalisation or globalisation of its various other programmes.

- (vi) *Using the expertise of the graduates of DDE, PGDDE and MADE:* When STRIDE started offering its staff development programmes, there were hardly any degree or diploma holders in Distance Education. Since 1987 about 1000 persons with different disciplines as their academic specialisations and with different professional backgrounds have successfully completed either DDE (Diploma in Distance Education) or PGDDE (Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education) and about 150 persons who had already obtained either of the Diplomas have completed their M.A. in Distance Education. STRIDE has further oriented some of them to take up specific assignments such as academic-counselors, course writers or resource persons in training, depending on the feasibility of involving them. Considering the paucity of human resources in distance education in India, the availability of these 1150 odd alumni of DDE, PGDDE and MADE would be a useful resource base, provided the institutions in need of human resources in this field have the will and capacity to use their expertise appropriately. When these alumni are gainfully engaged, the possible multiplier effect could meet the human resources requirements in the country in a relatively short time. The question is, whether the institutions are ready for that.
- (vii) *Institutional needs based Workshops:* STRIDE's training programmes have created an awareness of the need for staff development among the staff of distance/correspondence education institutes located in the conventional universities in India. The institutes have specific training needs such as the need to train the course writers and/or transform the existing lessons into self-instructional materials. For this purpose they ask for training programmes of short duration in specific areas, rather than the comprehensive ones of longer duration. STRIDE has been responding to the institutional based needs too. The two workshops of 3 days duration for the Course writers of the School of Correspondence Education, Andhra University and the one at the Karnataka Open University, Mysore have become the starting point of this type. The demand for this type of training is likely to increase, since the quality issue as regards learning materials is taken up seriously by many of the institutions. An appropriate training package for this purpose is being formalised.

Training Programmes for the Non-teaching Staff of Distance Education Institutions

Staff development becomes important for the non-teaching staff as well. Those who work in distance teaching institutions have to perform different tasks and play multiple roles. Though for want of appropriate designations the non-teaching staff of distance teaching institutions retain the designations of their counterparts in conventional universities, they have to do many types of work which do not exist in the campus based institutions. To orient themselves to the new work environment, the non-teaching staff need training. Also in the specialised areas like computer operations, keeping of students' records, admissions, dispatch of course materials, organising meetings, conducting examinations, maintaining accounts, etc. the non-teaching staff need to understand the importance of their work and its implications for the overall functioning of the institution or system. STRIDE's training programmes in this area become important in building a new academic culture.

The Number of Personnel Trained

On the whole, STRIDE has conducted 25 training workshops on self-instructional materials (SIMs) and has trained about 500 academics working in IGNOU and other distance education institutions in the country. The duration of these workshops ranged from 2 weeks to 3 weeks. About 52 orientation-cum-training programmes of 1-2 days duration have been conducted for 856 non-teaching staff at different levels. 500 orientation programmes have been conducted for course writers in different disciplines, members on the expert committees, Academic Counsellors and IGNOU Study Centre Coordinators. The number of persons who have benefited from these programmes, when all the categories put together exceeds 10000!

Besides the above categories, about 1000 persons have successfully completed the Diploma Programmes in Distance Education, and about 150 have completed their M.A. in Distance Education. Thus, the human resource base for developing distance education system in the country has already been created by STRIDE. The question now is; How best can these human resources be used by the different institutions? Further, what kind of advanced or specialised training programmes are necessary to fill the gaps that are bound to exist in the pioneering efforts? These questions need to be answered by the practising institutions of distance education.

Consultancy in Educational Technology

Although STRIDE has trained almost all the academics at IGNOU in preparing self-instructional materials in print and non-print media, the actual development of study materials demands practise, expertise and rigour. The expertise in educational technology is provided by STRIDE to the various Schools of Studies of IGNOU.

The units written by the internal and the external faculty are sent to STRIDE for analysis, formatting and comments on the presentation.

When STRIDE developed its own professional programmes such as the DDE, PGDDE and MADE, there were no previous programmes of their kind in the country, or abroad. In fact, Australia and Britain started developing similar programmes almost at same time or a little later. Therefore, the experience gained through the development of the Distance Education Programmes was not only indigenous but also unique, since this experience has been turned into expertise which was instantly used by the Schools of Studies of IGNOU. STRIDE has analysed, formatted and edited about 2000 units in various disciplines from the Schools of Studies of IGNOU. Whether the expert comments offered by STRIDE faculty on the instructional design of the course units were given their due by the faculty of the Schools of Studies is a mute question, since there is no legislation of quality assurance at IGNOU, though informally efforts in that direction are being made. Besides extending its consultancy services to other institutions such as State Open Universities and Correspondence/Distance Education Institutes in India, STRIDE has given consultancy services to countries such as Mauritius, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Myanmar.

Rajiv Gandhi Fellowship Scheme

The second major step taken in the direction of developing human resources in distance education for developing countries was to offer the Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education (PGDDE) and M.A. in Distance Education (MADE) developed by STRIDE to 100 students from 18 Commonwealth countries under the Rajiv Gandhi Fellowship Scheme, sponsored by the Commonwealth of Learning. In fact, at the Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting in Cyprus, October 1993, President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, himself a brilliant distance learner during his revolutionary political activities, announced that COL would offer 100 Fellowships designated as Rajiv Gandhi Fellowships for students from countries in African, Asian, Caribbean and Pacific regions to pursue IGNOU programmes through distance mode (*VC's Report to the Fifth Convocation*, IGNOU, 1994). The first batch of Rajiv Gandhi Fellows joined IGNOU in 1995 and they are actively pursuing the PGDDE and MADE Programmes.

Research Activities

The STRIDE has the responsibility to undertake research studies for system development in distance/open learning. To fulfill this task the STRIDE was involved in a project sponsored under ODA (British Council) to study the issues related to the use of English Language as a Medium of Instruction in Distance Education Programmes in the Asian Countries during 1989-90.

In 1993 and 1994 STRIDE also conducted two studies entitled:

- A tracer study on *The utility of BLISc programme as perceived by BLISc graduates of IGNOU.*
- A tracer study on *The utility of MBA programme of IGNOU as perceived by MBA students who have successfully completed the programme.*

Research activities in other areas will be taken up as soon as STRIDE gets the required manpower, equipment and infrastructural facilities.

Indian Journal of Open Learning (IJOL)

Indian Journal of Open Learning (IJOL) has been published twice a year by STRIDE since 1992. It is one of the six refereed international journals in the field. The focus of the journal is on the Indian experience in distance/open learning allowing sufficient space to accommodate international contributions selectively. 10 issues of IJOL have been brought out so far and the response to the journal both from India and abroad has been very encouraging. The experience, knowledge and information generated by IJOL has been commended by distance educators of the developing world, and also by experts in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan and Germany. The journal provides a forum for discussion and debates on various issues concerning the practice of distance/open learning at the local and the global contexts.

Other Activities

STRIDE has been involved in a number of unique activities related to the design, development and implementation of unconventional mass education programmes which have much relevance to India and other developing countries. The Panchayati Raj (Local/Self Governance) Project sponsored by the government of India is given to IGNOU.

The Panchayati Raj Project is a unique experiment in the sense the project has required IGNOU to develop self-instructional materials to train the 3 million elected representatives of local governing bodies in India. The clientele have varied educational qualifications starting from mere literacy to university degrees. The materials developed by IGNOU should be of such a type that could be understood by all the functionaries with varying levels of education and competence. STRIDE has contributed to this project in the designing, editing, formatting and simplification of units written by experts in the subject area so as to come out with the compromise formula to make materials comprehensible to all. STRIDE has also been involved in training the trainers to implement the programme.

Projects from international agencies—Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the United Nations Development Project (UNDP) through the government of India have sought the expertise of STRIDE to implement their programmes in the areas of Training and Development of Instructional Materials

related to technical/vocational education, and public sector reforms respectively. More such requests are expected to come in the near future.

Teleconferencing has become a regular activity at IGNOU now. Actually the scheme was originally conceived, designed and executed by STRIDE in collaboration with the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in October 1993 as an experiment which became successful. The academic and organisational inputs for this were given by STRIDE.

Conclusion

STRIDE has succeeded in creating the base for comprehensive staff development programmes and research in distance/open learning relevant to the Indian situation. STRIDE programmes have also been internationalised through Rajiv Gandhi Fellowship Scheme and the STRIDE consultancy is provided to various Asian and African countries. Given the required staff, equipment, infrastructural facilities and, above all, the necessary autonomy, STRIDE can diversify and expand its activities to meet the varied and specific training needs of distance/open learning institutions in India and other developing countries striving to develop suitable human resources. The future thrust of STRIDE would be on the expansion of its research activities, extension of its training expertise to other institutions within and outside India and diversification of methodologies and strategies of staff development. Research has not so far received much attention because of pressure of other activities on staff time. Efforts are on to relieve the staff from the more or less stabilised activities such as the development of courses, and enable them to turn to systemic research. With the increasing demands of various distance teaching institutions within and outside India, there is a need for STRIDE to design and develop a variety of training modules and also strategies to implement them. Training of trainers, training in using the multimedia for training purposes and updating the knowledge and skills of the core training group would possibly be the immediate concerns. The much needed professionalism in the practise of distance/open learning institutions of the developing world would become a reality when the presently available expertise at STRIDE and elsewhere is creatively applied in specific situations.

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