

Developing H.R.D. Professionals through Distance Education: An Experiment

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This paper describes a diploma programme in HRD being offered through the distance mode by the Academy of Human Resource Development to prepare HRD professionals for the HRD function. Our interest in this presentation is two fold – (i) it touches upon the issue of maintaining standards in distance education, and (ii) points to the liberating influence of open education in fostering 'independent' learning. It is true that distance education system can be highly innovative, but it is equally true that it can be misused. But, in misusing it the fault will be that of the user, not the system. The details in this article seem to convey that distance mode of education can be used effectively to give professional courses without compromising standards. Besides, it can bring in innovations that help 'autonomous' learning.

It may be too early to comment on the economics of the experiment, but the voluntary effort reported herein is commendable – we are interested in the question: "Should it be difficult for 'relevant' education to be self-supporting?" Is there an answer here?

THE HRD FUNCTION

Human Resource Development as a separate and important function has taken roots in Indian organisations in the last 10 years. Most organisations have either established new HRD departments or at least appointed HRD managers. A few of them, recognising the importance of HRD, have redesignated their personnel or training managers as HRD managers and given additional responsibilities to them. Thus, today there are several hundreds of managers who have been assigned HRD responsibilities formally and thousands of others who are required to carry out HRD tasks but have not been assigned formal roles.

The HRD function deals with continuous development of employees' competencies and motivation as well as organisational culture. The HRD function uses instruments like performance planning, performance analysis and reviews, potential appraisals, career planning and career development strategies, feedback and counselling, team-building and other developmental interventions, communications, job rotation, process groups etc., to achieve HRD goals. With the use of these and other instruments an attempt is made to create a learning environment or learning culture in organisations.

HRD managers are required to design mechanisms and instruments to develop employees' competencies and motivation on a continuous basis. The HRD has become a specialised function requiring a high degree of knowledge about HRD instruments, skills in their implementation and appropriate attitude and values to manage the same. The traditional personnel function and the training function are the two functions that have

some relationship with the HRD function but both these functions and those who manage these functions have limitations, consequent upon which successful handling of the HRD function has become a very difficult task. Those who handle the traditional personnel function have not been trained in learning theories and developmental skills. Those who handle training have very rarely undergone any professional preparation. And the professional preparation available for others is limited to training in technologies mainly, while several other mechanisms of development remain ignored.

ACADEMIC PREPARATION FOR HRD FUNCTION

The knowledge base in HRD has grown to a great extent in our country in the last 10 years. For example, at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, when the first course in HRD was offered in the year 1980, there was hardly any textbook available for the course. Today, there are at least two dozen books available which constitute the learning material for several HRD courses. However, none of the existing institutions offers exclusive course packages in HRD. The only two institutions that offer some HRD inputs are XLRI, Jamshedpur and TISS, Bombay. The Advanced Diploma in Human Resource Management offered by IGNOU also comes under the same category. Even these programmes do not aim at preparing "HRD" professionals but aim broadly at human resource development.

Since HRD has emerged as a separate function, with distinct competencies required to handle it, organisations feel an increasing need for competent HRD professionals to handle this function (Rao 1990, Nair and Rao 1990). In the absence of any distinct educational prog-

rammes to prepare HRD professionals, most organisations have resorted to the use of personnel and training managers to manage the function. A few organisations have even resorted to the use of untrained line managers to handle the HRD function which results in demeaning the function itself.

With the emergence of the new professional body called National HRD Network, the professional preparation of staff to handle HRD roles has begun. The National HRD Network, established in 1985, started offering short-term programmes to develop HRD Facilitators. However, the short duration programmes fulfilled only a part of the need by training some senior level managers, but preparation of junior and middle level managers through long-term educational programmes continued to be neglected.

ACADEMY OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Recognising this need, the Academy of Human Resource Development started a Post-Graduate Diploma through distance education in early 1991. The Academy of Human Resource Development is an institute established by the National HRD Network which is a Society registered under Societies Registration Act. It is a professional body devoted to the promotion of the Human Resource Development in the country. The Network and its Academy are not funded by any government or non-governmental agencies. The Network earns its income through its conferences and seminars and makes the surplus income on these conferences available for research and educational activities. The Academy of HRD was started with such surplus funds of the HRD Network. After getting a small initial building fund from the HRD Network, the Academy of HRD was required to raise its own finances through its own programmes and use any surplus from its programmes for research purposes as well as for education and training of those who cannot afford to pay for themselves.

The Academy of HRD started the following activities in pursuance of its mission and objectives:

1. A training programme for HRD facilitators through a two phased training and development programme.
2. A one-year Diploma in HRD through distance education with contact workshops, project work and mentor system; each student in this diploma is required to go through eight courses over a period of 18 months. Initially it was started as a one-year diploma but was extended subsequently to 18 months.
3. Round-tables on themes of contemporary importance where select groups of people are invited for a round-table discussion. Issues are discussed and recommendations made to improve select aspects of HRD in future.
4. Research studies on HRD needs of different sectors and effective implementation of HRD in different sectors.
5. Documentation of HRD experiences generated by

different organisations.

6. Promoting doctoral level research and studies in the field of HRD.

DIPLOMA PROGRAMMÉ

As stated earlier, the Diploma Programme was started in response to a need felt by various HRD managers and senior executives in the corporate sector. Such a need also exists in the developmental services sector and in the unorganised sector. But such a need has not been articulated by the institutions involved in education, research, rural development, health, population control and such other developmental sectors. It was assumed that after the Diploma is started for the corporate sector it should be extended to other sectors as the HRD movement gains momentum.

Those who expressed such a need in the corporate sector stated that a number of personnel and line managers are being increasingly required to perform HRD roles. As said earlier, there are only two educational institutions in the country (XLRI, Jamshedpur and TISS, Bombay) that seem to offer a comprehensive package in developing HRD competencies among the Personnel Management students. Both of them together turn out less than 100 personnel managers every year. A large number of social work students also take up HRD positions but with very inadequate preparation in HRD. It is in this context that a diploma in HRD was thought of as a good mechanism for strengthening the academic preparation of those who are already performing HRD roles without adequate academic preparation.

¹ Some of the general characteristics of this Diploma Programme are as follows :

1. It asks for a minimum entry requirement of graduation and at least two years of experience.
2. The student is required to go through two courses in each term of about four months duration. Thus a total of eight courses are to be worked through by the students in four terms of about 18 months.
3. The student is also required to prepare a project report on a project he/she would undertake in the third and fourth terms.
4. The student has the option to choose courses of relevance to his/her sector in the last term.
5. Each student will have a mentor who will be a senior professional to guide him/her during the Diploma Programme.
6. It includes a good number of books and other material which is mailed to the student by the Academy.
7. It also provides two contact workshops of 2-3 days duration each in which the student has an opportunity to interact with and learn from well-known HRD professionals. Such contact workshops are conducted in those cities where the number of the participants is more than 15.

THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE DIPLOMA

The National HRD Network and its Academy were started by HRD professionals who donate their time for the development of their profession. At the time when the Diploma was started by the Academy, there were no full-time staff to look after any aspect of this programme. The Diploma, however, needed full-time staff, building and other infrastructural facilities. It was hoped that the HRD Network members will provide the necessary support to various candidates. It was also decided to recruit one or two full-time staff for the Diploma. Thus the Diploma had to be started with a zero base with no funding, no staff, no building, and the only resource to depend on was the HRD Network membership and their goodwill. A Diploma Committee was constituted to provide academic guidance and support to the programme. The members of this Committee were drawn from XLRI, ISTD, NIPM, IIMA, IGNOU, HRD Network and similar other professional bodies and institutions. An Academic Council consisting of a larger number of HRD practitioners and academicians was constituted to provide a larger base as mentors and guides to the programme.

It is now over a year since the idea of the Diploma was initiated and planning and implementation started. The Diploma was announced in February 1991 and begun in July 1991.

By now, it has completed two terms, and has provided rich experiences for those who organise it. A number of lessons could be drawn from the Diploma experiences so far. This paper intends to highlight these experiences, particularly those pertaining to the economics of the experiment.

SOME UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DIPLOMA

1. Assignments

For this Diploma Programme, students are required to do a number of assignments. In some of the courses each chapter/article/unit they read is followed by an assignment. The assignment requires them to apply what they have learnt from the reading material to examine the realities that exist in their organisation or in a neighbouring organisation or in a sub unit in their organisation. Thus for example, when a participant reads about performance appraisal, he is required to examine the appraisal system of his own organisation and write a critical review of it in the context of the theory he has learnt. Similarly, after learning about the role of self-appraisal, he is expected to write a self-appraisal about his own performance for the last six months using the characterisation suggested in the reading materials. Similarly, after going through an article on In-basket Exercises, the candidate is required to develop an in-basket exercise for any given role in his organisation. A sample of the assignments that are given to students is presented in Appendix I. These assignments require the participants to provide data about the

existing situation as it is applicable to him, his section/unit or his organisation, or critically examine the existing status of HRD.

These assignments are found to be highly involving and require a good deal of the participants' time. Feedback is provided on each of these assignments in the form of letter grades as well as qualitative statements.

2. Mentoring

Each student is required to have a mentor who will be a senior HRD professional in his own organisation or in another organisation close to him. The candidate is expected to be in touch with the mentor and get guidance from the mentor on a variety of issues. As the assignments require constant guidance, mentors are expected to play an important role. They are mostly drawn from the Academic Council of the Academy and they treat their time investment as their contribution to the development of the profession and young professionals. This contribution is a unique feature of the programme.

3. Contact programme

Wherever there are more than 15 students, contact workshops are being organised. These are of two to three days duration each. In the contact workshop more conceptual and experience based inputs are given to the participants. The contact workshops are full day workshops on all the two or three days, requiring total involvement of participants. Two such contact sessions are expected to be conducted every year. Leading HRD professionals in the country have been teaching in these programmes. The candidates draw a lot of inspiration by interacting with such leading professionals.

4. Examination system

This Diploma minimises the weightage given to examinations for qualifying the students for the award. If all the assignments are of high quality and the student is regular and gets reasonably good letter grades, it may be possible for him/her to pass the Diploma without appearing for the examinations. Those who are not able to do all the assignments will have to appear for the final examination. Those who do not submit the prescribed minimum of assignments, do not qualify to appear for the final examination.

5. Project work

Each student is expected to undertake a project in his own organisation. Under this activity, which starts in the third term, a student is expected to take more of action-oriented projects rather than research projects. Under action-oriented projects the student is expected to initiate and bring about some change in his own organisation with respect to HRD. This project also may take the form of integrating all that is learnt during the Diploma. The project work also is guided by the mentor.

6. Sponsorship

An important characteristic of the Diploma is its admission process. This Diploma is being offered only to the employed persons. Only those candidates who are sponsored by their organisations, are admitted. The sponsoring organisation should be willing to release a part of the time of the candidate for studies and completion of assignments. As most assignments require access to HRD information, and other forms of support by their organisations, organisational sponsorship is considered essential. It is estimated that every candidate requires to spend about six to eight hours a week on reading the material and completing the assignments. Such time investment does require reasonable organisational support. Some other assignments require interviews and discussions with senior executives. A few other assignments require presentation of reports by the candidate to his senior executives and top management.

Besides, as the Diploma is being run without any subsidy from the government, the high fee to be paid by the candidate requires organisational sponsorship. Appendix II gives the estimated expenses in running the Diploma Programme and the consequent fee structure.

EXPERIENCES SO FAR

This Diploma has already completed about eight months of its life. The experiences gained so far are as follows:

1. Most participants report that the Diploma has a good learning value as it makes them think. They also feel that it is different from the diplomas which they know about. Appendix III presents some reactions of students.
2. The assignments have been found to be very useful and have provided data about the HRD practices of various organisations.
3. The contact sessions are very well attended by most of the participants (above 90 per cent of the participants).
4. With the large number of assignments involved, finding the right kind of people to correct the assignments and give feedback to the students has become a major problem. For example, the first term courses involve 30 assignments to be submitted by each candidate. With 100 students there are 3,000 assignments to correct.
5. Sometimes the feedback on assignments is delayed as much as by two months. For an 18 month diploma, two months delay in receiving feedback seems to be pretty long.
6. Those who go through the assignments have found them professionally very enriching as they get to know the HRD practices of various companies/organisations.

SOME INNOVATIONS

1. Assignments

A major innovation in this programme is the nature of assignments. Each assignment is different. A student cannot complete the assignment unless he/she reads the conceptual article. Every student enjoys doing the assignment as it normally relates to the function he/she is currently handling or is expected to handle soon. The variety also keeps the monotony down. The motivation level is also kept high as the candidate could make innovations or bring about changes in his workplace through the assignments.

2. Data bank

The assignments done by the students add to the data bank on HRD practices which is being maintained at the Academy. The Research Fellows at the Academy find the assignment-responses as useful secondary sources of data for compiling profiles and disseminating information. For example, on the basis of the assignments on "Induction Training" a trend paper was written highlighting the induction practices of organisations (Ghosh and Dixit 1992). A few other papers are being prepared for similar purposes. Such a facility is provided to those who assist the students as assignment evaluators or as mentors. The overall result is an immensely enriching experience and a very rich data bank.

3. Networking

The Academy facilitates learning from each other. Thus the names and addresses of all diploma students are mailed to each candidate in the beginning. The intention is to help each candidate know the others in his/her city and network with them for mutual benefit.

Another way in which the networking is effected is through sending well written assignment-responses of some of the students to others as illustrations of good responses. The monthly Diploma News published by the Academy also includes sample assignment-responses for use by all students.

A third form of networking is developed through contact workshops. In one of the contact programmes some of the candidates invited the other students to visit their companies and learn about their HRD practices.

A fourth form of networking is through the complimentary membership offered to all candidates by the National HRD Network. By virtue of this all candidates get the HRD Newsletter and other publications of the National HRD Network.

4. Flexibility

Another important characteristic of the Diploma is its flexibility. For example, when groups of candidates were enrolled from some organisations, they were encouraged to form into teams and submit group assignment-responses. It was felt that group learning is better in certain cases. In case where candidates suggested

changes in assignments so that they could do more useful work, they were encouraged to do so without sacrificing the rigour of the assignment. One company instituted awards for best performing teams in assignment-work.

5. Professional development

Perhaps, the most important characteristic in this distance education programme is the opportunity provided to the candidates to get in touch with Indian realities, Indian HRD practices and Indian HRD practitioners. A result of this is the confidence building and a feeling of professional development taking place among the students in their own work-environment.

LESSONS

The experiences from this Diploma indicate that distance education can be made more enriching and involving through imaginatively designed learning experiences. The principles behind these may not be new, but the applications are not widely used yet in the distance education programmes. Some of the lessons that could be drawn for distance education from these experiences are as follows:

1. Professional development programmes offer good opportunities for distance education to innovate as compared to general education programmes.
2. Design 'learning tasks' in such a way that the learner is actively involved not only while reading the materials but also after the reading is over. Learning by doing should extend beyond the reading material to activities that follow reading.
3. Keep providing a variety of learning activities so that monotony is reduced. Learning activities can be so designed that the learner in a distance education programme gets highly involved and enjoys learning. Such involvement and enjoyment comes if the learner is able to apply what he is learning to the immediate tasks and surroundings.

4. Provide other forms of feedback from the place of application (e.g., presentations to ones own seniors/top management). Organisations where candidates are employed offer ample learning spaces and learning opportunities. Often the learner himself may not be aware of these. Those who organise distance education could identify these and design the learning activities in such a way that the learner may be able to use them.
5. The institution conducting distance education programmes could remain in touch with the sponsoring organisations to create learning support systems for the learner and thus facilitate learning and develop a 'learning culture'.
6. Get active support of the sponsor. Legitimise learning by communicating the value of learning to and through those who are significant in the work environment (e.g., sponsors, seniors, etc.).

Some of these suggestions are implementable only when the size of the group is small and the profession is amenable to such learning activities. However, for larger populations appropriate methodologies could be thought of and implemented.

SUMMARY

This paper describes a diploma programme in HRD being offered through the distance mode by the Academy of HRD to prepare HRD professionals for the HRD function. This diploma, ranging over an 18 months period, has been started recently. Application oriented assignments, mentors, organisational sponsorship and support to candidates, and the accreditation system are some interesting characteristics of this programme. Although expensive, due to the small number of students, lack of subsidy and high involvement of professional experts, this diploma programme has thrown up a few lessons for making distance learning more involving and useful.

REFERENCES

1. Ghosh, N.R. and Dixit, N., "A Survey of Induction Practices in Indian Organisations". A paper presented at the National HRD Symposium on *Transitions in Indian Society: HRD Trends and Innovations*, Bangalore, National HRD Network, February 20-22, 1992.
2. Rao, T.V., 1990 *The HRD Missionary*, Oxford & IBH, New Delhi.
3. Nair, M.R.R. and Rao, T.V., 1990 *Excellence Through HRD*, Tata McGraw Hill, New Delhi.

APPENDIX I

Sample of Assignments Given to Diploma Students in HRD

Course 1 : Introduction to HRD

(There are 21 units and 21 assignments to be completed by the students. Some illustrations are given below):

Sl No	Topic	Assignment or Learning Activity
1.	HRD and Personnel Function	How are the Personnel and HRD functions organised in your organisation (differentiated and integrated) ?
2.	Induction	Write a brief note about all that is done in your organisation when a new employee joins it. How would you like it to be different ? Why ?
3.	Potential Appraisal	Develop a potential appraisal form for your role in the organisation and assess yourself.
4.	Role Analysis	Analyse your present role using the three dimensions suggested for this purpose in the reading materials.
5.	Designing HRD Systems	How will you design an HRD system for your organisation ? What will you do to improve HRD system in your organisation? Why ?

Course 2 : Performance Appraisal and HRD

(There are 11 units and 11 assignments. Some illustrations are given below):

Sl No	Topic	Assignment or Learning Activity
1.	Key Performance Areas	Identify the Key Performance Areas of your role using the framework suggested in the study materials.
2.	Self-Appraisal	Do a self-appraisal of your performance for the last six months using the guidelines suggested in the readings.
3.	Performance Analysis	Identify the facilitating and inhibiting factors in relation to your performance at present.
4.	Appraisal Practices in India	Compare the appraisal practices in your organisation with those of others you have learnt about.
5.	Implementing Performance Appraisals	What is it that you would like to do to make Performance Appraisals more acceptable in your organisation ?

Course 3 : Organisation Development and Culture Building

(There are only three assignments/learning activities for the entire course)

First learning activity requires the candidate to choose a problem or issue that is bothering him/his organisation and develop a proposal for organisational diagnosis.

The second assignment requires the candidate to carry out a diagnosis of any sub-system/department/process using some of the diagnostic tools he has become familiar with during the course.

The third assignment requires him to evaluate any developmental work, conducted by his organisation, using the multiple criteria he has learnt about.

Course 4 : Potential Appraisal and Career Development

(This course has four learning activities)

The first assignment requires the candidate to go through an in-basket exercise on the role of HRD manager and get

it evaluated by his mentor and write about his learning experience from this exercise.

The second activity requires him to prepare an in-basket exercise for any one role in his organisation.

The third activity requires him to critically analyse the job-rotation policies and practices in his organisation and make recommendations to improve them.

The fourth activity requires the candidate to prepare a career path for any one entry level job.

APPENDIX II

Professional Diploma Programme in Human Resource Development

Estimated Costs for 100 Students

Establishment Costs

1. Building rentals (Rs. 8,000/ month x 20 months)	1,60,000.00	
2. Equipment costs (Computer, Typewriter, filing cabinet, tables and chairs, telephone, electricity etc. (Rs. 3,000/month x 20 months)	60,000.00	
3. Furnishings	15,000.00	
4. Advertisement in newspapers etc.	50,000.00	
5. Brochure/Bulletin printing and mailing	15,000.00	
	<hr/>	3,00,000.00

Salaries

1. Executive/Administrator (Rs. 5,000/month x 20 months)	1,00,000.00	
2. Secretary (Rs. 2,000/month x 20 months)	40,000.00	
3. Helper (Rs. 1,000/month x 20 months)	20,000.00	
4. Professional Fellow (Rs. 5,000/month x 15 months)	75,000.00	
	<hr/>	2,35,000.00

Study Materials

1. Books (Rs. 2,000 x 125)	2,50,000.00	
2. Additional material xeroxed etc. (Rs. 400 x 125)	50,000.00	
3. Mailing, etc. (Rs. 50 x 4 mailings x 125)	25,000.00	
4. Material preparation costs (Rs. 5,000 each x 8 courses)	40,000.00	
5. Diploma Newsletter (Rs. 2,500 x 12 issues including mailing)	30,000.00	
6. Miscellaneous (books), etc.	5,000.00	
	<hr/>	4,00,000.00

Contact Workshops

Assuming that six workshops, each not having less than 15 participants, are held at centres with the help of a resource person :

1. Travel (Rs. 5,000 x 6 on average)	30,000.00	
2. Living (Rs. 1,000 x 6 x 3 days)	18,000.00	
3. Honorarium (Rs. 500/day x 6 x 3 days)	9,000.00	
4. Hiring charges for hall, snacks, video films, etc. (Rs. 1,500 x 6)	9,000.00	
	<hr/>	Apx. 70,000.00
Repeat the workshop second time	About	70,000.00

Assignment Feedback and Evaluation

Each student needs at least 5 hours of attention by a professional per course (Rs. 100/hour x 5 hours x 8 courses x 100 students) 4,00,000.00

Examinations, Evaluation and Certification

Meeting of Diploma Committee/ Academic Council, library additions, video-cassettes, books, journals, etc. Master library to be updated. 25,000.00

Total :

 15,00,000.00

1. The estimates are conservative. For example, honorarium paid to faculty, travel expenses, etc., have been kept to the minimum.
2. At present no honorarium is being paid to any faculty as they are donating their time, thus resulting in a saving of nearly Rs. 4,000 per student.
3. The actual fee chargeable from students should be Rs. 15,000/- per candidate. However, the Academy has put the fee at half this amount.
4. With a large number of students enrolled some of these costs may come down though not substantially.

APPENDIX III

Some Early Reactions from Diploma Students

1. **K. Devaraju (Textool, Coimbatore)**

"I have carefully studied the guidelines and information given and as mentioned I have to be a problem identifier and a problem solver. A few tips pointed out in the guidelines are of course principles of knowledge development and competency improvement for an HRD professional. Now I have set my own pace for reading the course material regularly and identify source of help for my understanding. I am full of confidence in becoming a full-fledged HRD professional through this Diploma."

2. **Julius Sathiaselvan (Madura Coats)**

"I am delighted to be part of the first batch of Diploma programme of the Academy. I have carefully gone through the various practical tips you have enlisted. It is interesting to note that the Diploma has been designed in a very innovative manner and assessments format worked out has been quite unique. I am sure this course will help to mould seasoned HRD professional. I thank you very much for giving me this opportunity for creative learning."

3. **Dwarka Prasad (SBI, Lucknow)**

"Diploma News provides a lot of guidance and inspiration. The proceedings of the contact programme have been quite useful. Feedback and a good number of assignments have also been reviewed. I convey my gratitude and regards to the resource persons who have evaluated our assignments."

4. **D.K. Likhi (SAIL, Rourkela)**

"I was so happy to receive the feedback on my assignments, and appreciation of my sincerity, interest and commitment to learn. I shall keep on improving with your continuous feedback. I strongly believe that this kind of positive compliments are required for managers in organisations to perform better. I hope that the knowledge imparted to me and to the members of my role set (through me) will lead to a desired shift with more stress on development of human resources. As desired, I shall keep my top management apprised of my feelings about the PA system."

5. **Srinivas Gondhalekar, Sujaya Banerjee, Rakesh Kumar Sinha (Godrej Soaps)**

"Since we discuss every week, we are able to exchange experiences and information that we heard about other companies. This enables us to embellish our assignments. On the whole, we are happy that we are gaining insights into the process of HRD and we are sure our company will be richer for having sponsored us for this programme."

6. **Ram Singh (TELCO, Jamshedpur)**

"It would be really good if some assignments are circulated. This would give us better idea of the subject matter and also an idea of what is happening in other organisations."

7. **R.L. Shanmugam (LIC, Madras)**

"I utilise Sundays and other holidays for writing assignments and as such I myself feel that some of my assignments are not upto the mark. However, I will try to take your view-points into account and prepare assignments in future. I am very thankful for your free and frank appraisal of my assignments."

8. **Fr. Cedric Prakash, s.j. for Pushpa Iyer (candidate) (St. Xavier's Social Service Society)**

"We are happy with the progress that our participant is making with regard to the Diploma programme. We are also grateful to you for the interest shown in helping her to attain the desired objectives."