

Distance Education and Human Resource Development

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Abstract: *The present study reports the findings of a survey undertaken by the author on a sample of 50 graduates of IGNOU belonging to Andaman & Nicobar Islands regarding the contribution of DE to skill development and in meeting the job requirements. Suggestions have been made to improve DE for further contribution to human resource development in the islands.*

Introduction

New theories, which emerged during the late 1980s and early 1990s in the field of economic growth, emphasized that the motive force behind economic progress is people. These new growth theories which tested the effects of human capital on long term growth rates of countries have important policy implications. These theories suggest that growth could be stimulated by undertaking public investment in improving human capital and research and development. The educated people can use capital more efficiently resulting in improvement in productivity. The rising level of education causes rise in the efficiency of all factors of production.

Human Resource Development: A Conceptual Framework

The economic quality of population remain low when there is little knowledge of what natural resources are available, the alternative productive techniques that are possible, necessary skills, the existing market conditions and opportunities and institutions that might be created to favour economizing effort and economic rationally. An improvement in the quality of human factor is as essential as investment in physical capital. It is the human resources of a nation that determine the character of the economic and social development. In the words of Prof. Harbison, human resources constitute the ultimate basis for wealth of nations. Capital and natural resources are passive factors of production, human beings are active agents who accumulate capital, exploit natural resources, behind social, economic and political organization and carry forward national development. Clearly, a country which is unable to develop skills and knowledge of its people and to utilize them effectively in the national economy will be unable to develop anything else (Harbison, 1973). As pointed by Harbison and Meyers (1964), human resource development is the process of increasing the knowledge, skills and capacities of all people in a society.

In economic terms it could be described as the accumulation of human capital and its effective involvement in the development of an economy. In political terms, human resource development prepares people for adult participation in political process, particularly as citizens in a democracy. Human resource development in the national context is a process by which the people in various groups (age groups, regional groups, socio-economic groups, community groups) are helped to acquire new competencies continuously so as to make them more and more self reliant and simultaneously develop a sense of pride in their country (Shyam Chandra, 1998). In the organizational context it is a process by which the employees of an organization are continuously helped in a planned way to acquire all round capabilities (knowledge, perspectives, attitudes, values and skills) to perform various tasks related to their present and future roles, do develop their general enabling capabilities as individuals and to develop an organizational culture where team work and collaboration contribute to the organizational health (Shyam Chandra, 1998).

Developing nations are facing some problems in developing human resources, which are as follows:

- rapid growth of population, increasing unemployment and widespread under employment;
- shortage of persons with critical skills and knowledge required for effective national development;
- inadequate or underdeveloped organization and institutions for mobilizing human effort; and
- lack of incentives for persons to engage in particular activities relevant for national development (Meir, 1984).

It is clear that effective utilization of physical capita itself depends upon human capital, the absorptive capacity of physical capital has proved to be low because the extension of human capabilities has failed to keep pace with accumulation of physical capital. Knowledge is the most important scarce factor in underdeveloped countries with otherwise favourable social climate (Harvat, 1997). It is worthwhile to point out here that a World Bank study of 192 nations has concluded that only 16 percent of growth is explained by physical capital (machinery, building and physical infrastructure) while 20 percent comes from natural capital. On the other hand, no less than 64 percent can be attributed to human and social capital. An extensive analysis of earlier experience in the Asian industrializing tigers including Japan also came to similar conclusions.

Educational and Human Resource Development

Economists have identified methods for developing human resources. The most obvious is by formal education, beginning with various forms of secondary education and then higher education including colleges, universities and higher technical institutions. Second, human resources are also developed on the job through systematic or informal training programmes in employing institutions; in adult education programme and through membership in various political, social religious and cultural group. A third

process is self-development as individuals seek to acquire greater knowledge, skills or capacities through participation on their invitation by taking formal or correspondence courses by reading or by learning from others through informal contacts.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been preparing indicators since 1990 to measure the quality of life of citizens. In its report published in 1995, the UNDP has demonstrated three indicators, viz. life expectancy representing a long and health life, educational attainment representing knowledge, and real GDP representing decent standard of living. The report identified four components of human development such as productivity, equity, sustainability and empowerment (UNDP, 1995). The Human Development Index (HDI) of UNDP, 1997, is based on four variables: (i) life expectancy at birth, (ii) adult literacy, (iii) the combined gross enrolment ratio, and (iv) percapita gross domestic product. The HDI also contains another measure, i.e. Human Poverty Index (HPI), which has been abuilt on the capability poverty measure (CPM). The HPI is based on three variables, viz. longevity, literacy and decent standard of living.

To measure gender disparity, two measures have been introduced. They are gender related development index (GDI) and gender empowerment measure (GEM). The GDI attempts to capture achievement in the same set of basic capabilities included in the human development index (HDI) — life expectancy, educational attainment and income— but adjust the HDI for gender inequality. The GEM measures gender inequality in key areas of economic and political participation and decision making. It thus differs from the GDI, an indicator of gender inequality in basic capabilities (UNDP, 1997).

A new measure, i.e. Human Deprivation Measure has been introduced which broadens the concept of deprivation. The report "Human Development in South Asia", prepared by the Human Development Centre in Islamabad, also outlines the need to provide South Asia with universal primary education, basic health care and safe drinking water over next 15 years. The study on South Asia estimated the HDM for four of the larger countries in the region— Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sir Lanka. The HDM is the poverty of basic human capabilities, which prevents people from taking advantage of market capabilities. The new measure is based on three variables— deprivation in health, education and income.

The report brings out certain striking observations. The number of South Asians suffering from a combined deprivations in income, education and health is far more than the number experiencing just income deprivation. Secondly, the extent of capability deficiency in education and health appears to be far more widespread than in income. Thirdly, the difference between the incidence of health and education deprivation and that of income is widest in Pakistan. In India and Bangladesh the degree of shortcoming in basic education capabilities seems to be more important.

The Human Development Report 1999 has constructed HDI for 174 countries. Of these, 45 are in the high human development category (0.500-0.799) and 35 in the low human category (less than 0.500). The value of HDI lies between 0 and 1. Canada, Norway and U.S.A. are at top of HDI ranking and some of the African countries like Sierra Leone, Niger and Ethiopia at the bottom. In the medium human development category group, Malaysia ranks 56 in an HDI values of 0.766. This shows that Malaysia has to make

shortfall of nearly 25 percent. India's HDI values is 0.544 and she has to cover a ground of 46 percent, her HDI rank being 132. Pakistan's HDI is lower than India, her rank being 136. In the low human development category, Laos has an HDI values of 0.491, her rank being 140. At the bottom there is Sierra Leone with HDI value of 0.254 and her rank being 174. (*Hindu*, Jan 24, 2000).

Stating the importance and priority to be given to education, renowned economist Prof. Amartya Sen observed: "There is absolutely no question that without education and health care we cannot have participatory economic growth... People have to be educated, be in good health, owning land and have access to local credit to be able to enjoy benefits of liberalization and open economy. Their ability to share the benefit will depend on social opportunity. The country has opened its economy to the world where half of its adult population is illiterate and cannot participate in the globale change". (Sen, 1997).

It is observed that education has been considered as a variable to measure HDI, HPI, HDM, GDI and GDM and in various studies conducted on human development. Investment in human capital has sought new approaches. The formal system is a good investment; also the developing countries need to concentrate on the method of informal education and on the objective of functional education. Efforts in this direction are less time consuming, less costly and more directly related to manpower requirements than the formal system.

Distance Education

In the recent years the adequacy of the formal system, especially of higher education, to cater to the varied educational needs of the society has come to be recognised. A large section of the people does not get chance to enter the field of formal education due to various reasons. Most of those who are on the job may like to pursue education in some form, if only the restrictions of the formal system with respect to time, place and other requirements are not strictly imposed. Some of them may even prefer a course of studies with greater practical bias to their own respective occupations than pursue liberal academic programmes. Obviously, to cater to the needs of such clientele, education has to be more flexible and available to them wherever they are. Over the years, attempts have been made to provide such a system of education in the form of distance education.

Distance Education is that field of educational endeavour in which the learner is quasi-permanently separated from the teacher, there is the use of technical media, two may communication and the teaching of people as individuals and not in groups with provisions of occasional meetings through academic counselling and contact programmes. This mode of education is need based in which participants can choose their place, time and mode of study. Distance education caters to the needs of various groups such as dropouts, employed personnel, farmers, women and other educationally disadvantaged groups.

Distance Education and Human Resource Development

Distance education can cater to the requirement of those who are in employment. Their

knowledge can be updated through continuing education programmes. Moreover, disseminating knowledge in new areas is also possible in a vast country like India through distance mode of education. With technological gadgets and mass media, it also enables to update existing skills and generate new skills.

Presently our economic growth is characterized by high level of technology, which is changing fast. It is necessary to have manpower trained and endowed with different skills. The manpower planning should be related to a broad strategy of human resource development. Manpower needs are to be related to the requirements of economic development, social and political development social and political modernization and to broader national development. Distance mode of education takes into account the manpower requirements of the country and design educational programmes accordingly.

The quality of the labour force in India especially in traditional sectors like agriculture is low. It is necessary to improve efficiency, which can be done by awareness programmes, orientation of persons working in the field, and training of the functionaries. Knowledge of modern methods of production will help in improving production, as also productivity. Distance education programmes through correspondence courses backed with mass media, other satellite and radio programmes, and programmes of the UGC have a positive impact on the human resource development.

The Study

In a developing country like India, development of human resources in various sectors is essential to boost economic development. Education is the key to human resource development. Educational institutions under the formal and conventional system has been the major contributors of human resource development.

Due to the restrictions in the formal system and to achieve the goal of democratization of education, distance mode of education has been widely accepted all over the world across the developing and developed countries. In India, a major landmark in the direction has been the establishment of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). The university has nation-wide jurisdiction and conducts academic programmes to cater to the requirements of different categories of people.

The Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands has also been linked with the network of IGNOU since the commencement of a study centre in 1988 at Port Blair. The programmes conducted here include Bachelor's Degree Programme, Certificate and Diploma Programmes in the field of rural development, nutrition, tourism etc.

The present study examines the extent to which distance education programmes helped the development of human resource in the Islands. More specifically, it was intended to:

- study the extent to which programmes of distance education cater to the requirements of various sections of the population in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands;
- examine how far programmes of distance education provide job enrichment/professional competency; and

- study the constraints and impediments faced by learners in attaining skills through distance mode of education.

Methodology

Survey research method was followed for the conduct of the study. The reference period of the study is from 1993 to 1998, i.e. six years.

Sample

The universe of the study included distance learners from the Islands who successfully completed various distance education programmes of IGNOU during the reference period of 1993-98. 50 distance learners who successfully completed distance programmes from IGNOU had been selected. The sample represented persons working in different occupations and also housewives selected from urban and rural areas of Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Data Collection

Data for the study were collected from two sources: a) records, and b) schedule administered on learners.

Background information for the study was collected from the following offices/ departments:

- i) Port Blair Study Centre of IGNOU, located at JN Govt. College, Port Blair.
- ii) Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Andaman and Nicobar Administration, Port Blair.
- iii) Directorate of Education, Andaman and Nicobar Administration, Port Blair.

For generating primary data field survey was conducted. Perception of the learners relating to distance education human resource development was studied.

Tools

To study the response of the distance learners, a structured schedule was administered on the learners. Another schedule was administered on the academic councillors and other functionaries of the study centre. This empirical study which began in August 1998 took six months to complete.

Findings

The present study which was conducted to examine the extent to which distance education programmes through IGNOU facilitated the development of human resource. The study, which was conducted in the context of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, also examined the impact of distance education on job enrichment of learners and the impediments faced by them in attaining skills through distance mode of education. Analysis of data relating to these items and the related ones led to the following findings.

- i) Distance education programmes implemented in the Islands through IGNOU cater to the requirements of those employed in various sectors. It helped them to acquire higher qualification in their concerned fields and thus to have career prospects. The skills they obtained through distance mode of learning helped them to be more effective in their job leading to professional development. The programmes also gave opportunity to the middle aged persons and housewives to gain more knowledge and new ideas which may not be possible for them to attain through formal mode of education.
- ii) The distance education programmes of IGNOU were accessible to persons belonging to urban and rural areas.
- iii) The curriculum of various distance education programmes was relevant and hence enabled the learners to acquire skills in their concerned fields.
- iv) To be more effective and to promote job enrichment, majority of the distance learners preferred practical-oriented curriculum for such programmes.
- v) Majority of the learners (some of them had the experience of learning through distance mode in other universities earlier) opined that the study materials of IGNOU maintain high standard in terms of quality.
- vi) Though some learners could not attend counselling sessions due to their pre-occupation with employment and family matters, a good number of learners took interest in attending counselling sessions. It is worthwhile to point out that female learners were taking active interest to attend counselling sessions.
- vii) Impact of multimedia on skill development has been studied. It has been observed that study materials, audio lessons, video lessons and academic counselling helped in skill development. However, learners preferred study materials and counselling having more impact on skill development. The learners mainly preferred study materials as having positive impact on skill development because the contents of the study materials are relevant to their jobs and are impressed by the style of presentation.
- viii) Academic counselling also helped the distant learner to develop skill. The counselling gave the distance learners a chance to interact with academic counsellor and other fellow learners which helped them to clear doubts and generate new ideas. Assignment responses, which are compulsory in universities like IGNOU, are relevant in skill development.
- ix) Learners receive adequate guidance regarding various matters related to their study in time from the Study Centre.
- x) The study revealed that the four media had impact on career development of distant learners. Among the four media, study materials and counselling highly facilitate career development whereas assignment responses and audio/video lessons facilitate career development to a certain extent.
- xi) The study examined the difficulties lead by distant learners in attaining skill through distant mode of education. These Islands being remote area, postal delay usually occurs which results in non-receipt of study materials and assignment questions.

- xii) Some learners did not receive assignment questions in time. This resulted in delay in preparing assignments and hence they could not submit it in time to the study centre. Some learners even reported that they could not get a chance to appear for Term End Examination in time due to the delay in submission of assignments.
- xiii) Audio/video lessons are not accessible to many learners. Some learners are not even aware of the existence of these media.
- xiv) Learners are not satisfied with the library facilities available in the study centre. Many learners are not getting chance to refer books and other reference materials.
- xv) Counselling for certain subjects which were conducted in the study centre like that of management programmes has been discontinued due to lack of qualified academic counsellors. Many employed persons in these Islands want to undergo studies in management programmes. In the same way counselling sessions for some programmes such as Post-Graduate Diploma in Higher Education are not available in this study centre. Those who joined for the programmes like this from the Islands have to attend counselling in mainland. The same is the case with contact programme applicable for some other distant education programmes.
- xvi) Some learners expressed that the contents of the programme have to be updated. The learners are getting study materials in which new developments in the subjects are not included. This is especially applicable for programmes like Diploma in Rural Development.

Suggestions

The study makes following suggestions to improve distance education system in order to facilitate human resource development effectively.

- 36 percent learners opined that they did not receive study material in time. Due to this, assignments could not be submitted in time and this disturbs the whole academic schedule. One suggestion to improve the position is that steps can be taken by the University to send study materials and assignment questions earlier to those learners who are living in remote areas like these Islands.
- Another practical suggestion in this regard i.e. to avoid delay in getting study materials is that adequate number of study materials of all programmes conducted in the study centre should be made available with the centre. This helps the learners to start their studies in time.
- 58 percent learners viewed that they are not satisfied with the library facilities available with the study centre. The library has to be activated by rearranging the working schedule so that employed learners can take advantage of library facility. Important and recent publications relating to programmes conducted in the study centre should be made available so that learner can keep abreast of the recent developments.
- 26 percent learners opined that they did not attend counselling sessions. Counselling which is an effective media has to be strengthened. The timing of the counselling sessions may be adjusted with the convenience of learners. Intensive counselling

has to be conducted by identifying areas where learners can conveniently attend these sessions.

- Counselling for management programmes can be activated which will help many learners to undergo various programmes in management. This is an urgent need of some learners of these Islands who want to undergo studies in management programmes through distance mode. This is relevant especially when this academic programme is not available here in any formal education institutions. Moreover, development of managerial skills is a key element in developing human resource in various sectors.
- Another suggestion which can be effective in the acquisition of skills is to make available the latest information technology with the study centre. Some learners opined that even the audio/video lessons are not accessible to them. Arrangements may be made at the study centre to make audio/video lessons available to all learners.
- 24 learners opined that they did not receive assignment responses in time after evaluation. The learners may be instructed to submit assignments well in advance and arrangements may be made to return the assignments after evaluation at least before one month before the beginning of Term End Examination.
- Proper academic exercise may be initiated to update the study materials so that recent developments in the field are included in it.
- Study of the development scenario of these Islands reveals that forestry, fishing, plantation are particularly growth prone sectors in the Island economy. Construction, transport, storage and communication sectors continue to absorb bulk of workers in urban region of the Island territory for both sexes. Taking into account this position, subjects which are locally relevant and need based to be introduced to promote the development of human resource in the above mentioned sectors for the growth of these Islands. This study recommends to introduce academic programmes in the field of fish processing, forestry, marine engineering, marine biology, horticulture and agriculture. Secondly, vocational and job oriented courses in the field of electronics and computer applications can also be started. Thirdly, Post-Graduate Programmes in Management and Commerce are also required especially when these programmes are not available through formal system.
- Another noteworthy suggestion in the context of development of human resource is that possibilities for in 'service training' through distance mode can be explored for persons working in different occupations in these Islands. Employees from these Islands find it difficult to get trained from mainland institutions. The open Universities like IGNOU can take initiative to conduct need-based training programmes in collaboration with concerned organizations.

Concluding Observations

Development of human resource is of utmost importance in a developing country like India. Major part of this task has been facilitated through formal system of education. Distance education can also help in the process of human resource development, which has been revealed through this study.

The distance education programmes conducted by IGNOU in the Islands have been accessible and catered to the requirements of heterogeneous clients consisting of persons employed in various professions, youth and middle aged hailing from urban and rural areas. The programmes have a positive impact on professional development and empowerment of women.

The contents of the programme and the multimedia helped learners to acquire skill and thus to enrich themselves in their concerned fields. The distant learners mainly preferred print media and counselling, which they opined as having positive impact on their career development. The study also identified bottlenecks in the process of skill development and suggested measures.

As a whole distance education programmes conducted in the Islands through IGNOU help in human resource development. However, more programmes through distance mode to generate human resource in the key sectors of development of these Islands have to be introduced which can boost economic development of the Islands.

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