

Open Learning System: A Model for Conceptual Analysis

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A general reflection on the features of the open education system, its inherent strengths and weaknesses and its goals are as much on our agenda as many of the specific discussions on these issues. Reasonable growth can occur only if there is a balance of thought at the conceptual as well as the practical levels.

If democratisation of education is its aim, an open learning system has to safeguard its credibility in terms of quality control regarding course design, materials production, student support services and evaluation. This need is at a premium in the developing countries because the problems are more acute.

Here is a presentation on the subject: this discussion covers these aspects highlighting certain key points such as interdisciplinarity in course design and teaching in an open system, the role and functions of student support network etc.

INTRODUCTION

Open Learning System has combined certain elements of the conventional and the correspondence forms of education and has certain added features. The most obvious component of this system is the written material sent to students by post. Audio-video, practical and classroom interaction at study-centres are the other components. Audio-video facilities and practical training kits may be provided to the students at their home, or at their work place as well. An additional feature of the Open Learning System is its relaxed entry rules for admission corresponding to the applicant's practical experience in the field.

OVERVIEW

Some important aspects of the Open Learning System are as follows:

(A) **Expansion:** This deals with how an open learning institute must grow and develop. The points involved in this basically comprise the following:

- (a) Financial
- (b) Academic, non-academic support for printing, audio-video production, material distribution, etc.; administrative and spare lay-out required for the University building and other facilities.

(B) **Integration:** This can be dealt with at two levels:

- (a) National
- (b) International

At each of these two levels the points to be considered are as follows:

- (i) *Lateral integration* or interface between the user benefited sector like industry in business together with target students and the open learning university.

- (ii) *Horizontal integration:* Within the various components of an Open Learning University itself like academics, non-academics, material distribution etc.

- (iii) *Vertical integration:* Integration with the other educational systems both upward and downward. Upward integration involves interaction with institutes of higher learning as compared to the Open University whereas downward integration involves integration with educational institutes like schools which offer the basic academic qualifications required by the Open Learning University.

Another aspect of vertical integration would be the matter of credit transfer between Universities — open or conventional, and an Open Learning University.

The issue of national and international integration gains importance in view of the fact that Open Learning Institutes have to be topical in their approach — the topicality concerning the developments within the country and in the international interaction — especially with respect to language courses within the county and universally for courses like history, geography, political science, science etc.

The point regarding national and international integration also gains practical significance in view of the national and international links in administrative and academic matters of Open Learning Institutes. This has a bearing on the target market and the scope of expansion of the Open Learning University.

(C) **Quality:** Overall quality of the academic and non-academic activities (like administration, audio-video tapes production etc). should be monitored and maintained at three levels in the Open Learning System:

- (i) *Operational level:* For achieving day-to-day/short-term targets and devising means to achieve the same within a department/section.

- (ii) *Management Level*: A committee constituted by the governing body of the institution should monitor and maintain the overall quality of the University's functioning.
- (iii) *Internal Audit*: An autonomous committee reporting to the governing body of the university should be constituted annually. This committee should consist of a representative cross-section of the University's academic and non-academic staff from all departments and sections of the University and should carry out an exercise in monitoring the quality and suggest measures to improve the functioning of various departments/sections within the framework of the open university as a whole.

For the various courses offered by the university, a committee should be constituted to monitor and improve their quality at two temporal levels as follows:

- (i) *Mid-course Review*: For ongoing monitoring and improvement of a course; and
- (ii) *End-of-course Review*: At the end of a fixed period of time for an over-haul of the course to update it in keeping with the changing times.

For the monitoring of the courses, mid-course review and end-of-course review should consider the feedback from the students about the course.

However, in an open learning system, induction of students on such committees should be considered at the following two levels:

- (i) *Headquarters*: Here a geographically equitable student participation may not be feasible due to the physical distance between the institution's campus and the students' wide geographical distribution within a large country like India. However, in smaller countries this may be feasible.
- (ii) *Regional/study centres*: At this level, student participation (on course quality monitoring committees) may be feasible; and their reports should be submitted to the central quality monitoring committee at the headquarters for co-ordination purposes. This may be more relevant in the case of courses on regional languages in India.

OPEN LEARNING SYSTEM NETWORK

Most of the Open Learning Systems are like a network with regional centres and study centres functioning in tandem under the control of the headquarters. In such a situation, the issue of centralisation versus decentralisation of functions between the headquarters and Regional/Study centres gains significance.

Basically, this centralisation versus decentralisation issue has to be examined with a view to increasing the speed and effectiveness of communication between the target

student group/user group like industries and the open learning system. This effective and efficient communication shall, in turn, have to be a function of the following:

- (i) *academic factors* like efficient and prompt preparation of study material and,
- (ii) *non-academic factors* like timely material production and distribution, easy physical access to the Open Learning System facilities for information dissemination etc.

Let us consider the issues of centralisation versus decentralisation with respect to *academic factors* first. Some aspects of this issue have already been dealt with earlier in the discussion of 'Quality' under the section 'OVER VIEW'.

Fundamentally, the academic scenario in an Open Learning System consists of an inter-mashing of various *subjects* which may be in the form of *independent modules* or *inter-dependent modules*.

For instance, materials for teaching regional languages in India may be developed as independent modules for each regional language both in 'geographical or spatial terms' and in terms of 'intrinsic features' of the subject. The control and development of such subjects could easily be decentralised to the regional centre/s, with interaction between the study centres under the Regional Centre/s being sufficient input for such an exercise. The controlling regional centre/s could then be required to send a summary report regarding that subject to the administration and the regional services division at the headquarters for monitoring and control purposes.

On the other hand, inter-dependent modules of subjects like say 'Computers and Finance' may require close interaction between the Computer School faculty and the Management School faculty since these are subjects which have inter-disciplinary ramifications. Such inter-dependent modules of subjects would be more amenable to centralized development at the headquarter's level with feed-back from regional and study centres being sufficient to maintain and modify the course centrally at the headquarters.

A third class of subjects like Mathematics etc. which may be considered to be 'independent' in terms of 'intrinsic qualities' but with wide 'geographical or spatial' ramifications, may again be more easily developed centrally at the headquarters with feed-back from regional and study centres being considered for its maintenance and modification.

Communication Media: This factor is an important consideration in the development of an Open Learning System Network, and has to be considered at the following two levels.

- (i) within the Open Learning System Network, and
- (ii) interface of the Open Learning System with its target student group and user industries.

At both these levels, the following may be taken as the 'possible' means of communication:

- (i) audio: like telephones
- (ii) audio-video including local-area and wide-area computer networked teleconferencing, currently used in some western countries, and audio-video tapes,
- (iii) written material, and
- (iv) personal contact.

The life-blood of any system is efficient and effective information flow and the greater the degree of perfection to which the communication media are developed, the more shall be the viability of the system.

Although the importance of written and personal contact cannot be undermined, audio and audio-video communication support could help improve the information flow situation 'within the Open Learning System Network'. Moreover, audio and audio-video communication could also help improve the 'interface of the Open Learning System with its target student group and user industries'. A case in point may be that of a student who submits a project report in a certain subject like say Management, but is not able to attend a viva personally due to various factors. By means of effective audio and audio-video communication support, this may be possible at the mutual convenience of the student and the examiner/s. This aspect gains added significance for doctoral level studies which may be introduced by the Open Learning System.

Another issue which arises in respect of communication media, is whether written and audio-video material should be supplementary or complementary in nature. The obvious solution is that in countries with underdeveloped audio-video facilities, these should be supplementary. As audio-video communication attains the requisite degree of sophistication and accessibility, however, these could be made complementary.

Role of regional centres and study centres: Regional and study centres gain significance in an Open Learning System due to the following reasons:

- (i) they take care of local environmental factors like minimising physical distance between students, user industries and Open Learning System and thereby facilitate greater possibilities for communication and contact between the three;
- (ii) promotion of the Open Learning System in all respects and easier dissemination of information about the system to a wider target area;
- (iii) they provide local feedback to the headquarters regarding various activities carried out by an Open Learning System, both administrative and academic;
- (iv) they have a role to play in the evaluation of student responses and queries, taking local

environmental conditions into consideration. For example, in a course like that of Management, students may give local business situations as examples which can be best understood by a local counsellor at the regional/study centre.

Interaction between Regional Centres/Study Centres and the Headquarters: This aspect has been amply dealt with earlier. Suffice it to say that this forms a very important nexus in the whole network of the Open Learning System.

A few other points in this regard which have not been touched upon earlier could be summarised as follows:

- (i) *Issues regarding part/full-time staff at regional and study centres:* During the initial phases of the setting up of the Open Learning System in a large country like India, mainly part-time counsellors and staff at study centres may be employed for the sake of convenience, with a few permanent staff like the Regional Centre Director with one or more Assistant Regional Directors at the Regional Centre level to facilitate control and communication channels.

However, with the evolution of the Open Learning System with the passing of time, additional permanent staff at all levels may be called for to cope with the increased workload.

- (ii) *Temporary/Permanent office location:* Whereas a permanent office location at headquarters cannot be ruled out from the very beginning, a small semi-permanent office location at Regional Centre level say in a rented building, and a temporary space like a local college or school building for a study centre may suffice at the initial stages of the system.

However, once again, the need for permanent office sites for regional and study centres too become obvious as the system evolves towards greater complexity in workload and functioning.

- (iii) *Training of the staff:* Specialised training for all academics and other academics, like communication division personnel, in their respective fields, need not be over-emphasized.

However, both academics and non-academics need a certain basic amount of knowledge of each other's field in order to be able to interact effectively.

Counsellors/tutors, on the other hand, need subject knowledge regarding written, audio-video and administrative aspects of the subjects they are handling.

- (iv) *Monitoring:* Day-to-day, short-term and long-term standards should be chalked out by the headquarters for various regional centres and study centres in consultation with the respective centres.

Scanning of detailed reports on such standards may not be feasible for the headquarters; and a form of exception reporting, where only positive and negative deviations from the standard are highlighted and accounted for by each centre in their report to the headquarters would be in order. This could be patterned somewhat on the basis of "padta system" of financial accounting as used in some Indian companies where such 'exception from standards' reporting is the rule.

- (v) *Exchange of views:* Regional and study centres could act as a medium for exchange of views between the local target students and user industry with the Open Learning System.
- (vi) *On-the-job/academic qualifications for counsellors:* In a country with a low literacy rate and lack of adequately trained manpower, one might not be able to get academically qualified counsellors in some fields like say Computers or Engineering. In such cases, academic qualifications of counsellors may have to be enhanced by on-the-job training experiences, at least till such time as academically qualified people become available in that field.

Such a mode of operation may also facilitate lower operating costs for the Open Learning System since persons with lower academic qualifications should be more easily and inexpensively available as compared to better academically qualified personnel.

However, strict screening must be done either at the Regional or headquarters level in the appointment of counsellors to maintain the over-all quality of an academic programme.

Moreover, the Open Learning System should in the long run aim at establishing minimum academic qualification standards for counsellors in order to ensure quality maintenance of the various academic programmes.

OPPORTUNITIES/THREATS TO THE SYSTEM

Open Learning System affords a convenient means of education for the students. They can study at their place and pace of choice under such a system. Hence for countries like India, this system promises speedier ongoing adult education for the public at large. Even in western countries, this system promises education of adults while in employment and consequent economic gain both for the individual and the country.

Moreover, as the literacy rate rises, the Open Learning System can even be taken down to the school level with parents/guardians/counsellors providing support in training the school going children — progressively from the high school to the primary school level.

Open Learning Systems could eventually even become profit-making institutions as the academic and administrative procedures are smoothed out in their life-cycle. And, with minimal increase in expenditure over the baseline, the same could cater to a wider target audience of students and user industries.

Use of Open Learning Systems in higher forms of education, especially at the University level, has already been proved.

However, as life in most countries becomes urbanised and busier for most individuals, finding counsellors for dissemination of the Open Learning System knowledge-base may become a problem. This may be partly or wholly offset with the use of audio-video means of communication for counselling, whereby even primary school children could be taught through repetitive use of audio-video cassettes for a particular lesson.

ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES OF THE SYSTEM

The main advantage of the Open Learning System is that with a smaller trained manpower base of academics, a wider target student population and user industry audience can be reached than what has been possible by means of conventional or correspondence education, and it can be done in a more effective manner than ever before.

However, the need for group dynamics and synergy provided by conventional education, especially at the school going stage, and to some extent at the early University education level, that is at say bachelor's level, is something which may be hard to replace by any other form of education. Extra-curricular activities, which are a must for the wholesome development of the student, is another commodity in which conventional education establishes its monopoly over other forms of education.

Moreover, the wide network of administrative and academic staff required in an Open Learning System makes its fine-tuning a difficult task. However, this difficulty may be obviated to some extent by improved communication means—both within the system and with the outside world of the Open Learning System.

THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Various issues of the Open Learning System have been discussed above.

However, one observation appropriate at this juncture is that more and more establishments of Open Learning should be encouraged in India as autonomous, private as well as government institutions to create a sense of competition and thereby to enhance the quality of education offered to target students and through them the user industry segment. Nevertheless, the need for a central government recognised body to stipulate minimum eligibility conditions for such institutions needs to be emphasized to check unbridled and unwarranted growth of

sub-standard open learning systems which may ultimately prove to be detrimental to the Open Learning System in India.

THE FUTURE

Ability of the Open Learning System to stretch down to the primary school level has already been highlighted.

Its growth towards higher education even in specialised subjects like medical science cannot be under evaluated.

Medical sciences and engineering subjects could easily be handled by Open Learning Systems with the involvement of the user industry segment.

Let us take medical sciences as a case in point. Students could be mailed written material and experimental kits for home study. Cadavers and bones could be made available at Government approved outlets for anatomical study by the students. Guinea pigs etc. required for physiological,

pharmacological and other experiments could also be made available at government approved outlets and experiments carried out by the student at home; practical copy results can be reviewed by an approved panel of doctor-counsellors or in approved local hospitals with qualified doctors approved by the University to act as Counsellors.

Clinical training could be given through audio-video means complemented by part-time/week-end/vacation training at approved hospitals under the guidance of approved counsellors.

Whether the Open Learning System builds up towards positive growth, a plateau in growth or decays, depends on the inbuilt strength of Open Learning Institutions. However, judicious planning, implementation and monitoring could usher in a golden era, for the Open Learning System the world-over.

This article is based on a talk given by Prof. John Daniel, Vice-Chancellor, UKOU, at IGNOU in 1992.