

DISTANCE EDUCATION : INNOVATIVE AND EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

Open and distance learning today has gained its momentum both in popularity and effectiveness amongst those who have not got the opportunity to join formal mode of education due to various reasons like inadequate time or financial hardship. Despite this, it is felt that the system of open and distance learning can be made more effective and result-oriented particularly in the Indian context. Some new innovative strategies can be developed to be included in this system, which is being analyzed and highlighted through this paper. The role of Information & Communication Technology (ICT) in education is very crucial in today's pedagogy for an improved system of knowledge sharing. The present paper tries to suggest some strategies by which the ICT will be used as a tool for effective teaching-learning. The Government has notified that the qualification earned through open & distance learning mode is at par with that of the formal mode of education. This has complimented in attracting more and more working people towards this system of education through which such people can fulfill their desires of strengthening their academic career while in service.

The recent trends of open & distance learning have also created some negative impressions in the academic fraternity mainly owing to the unfair and illegal means through which degrees are improperly awarded by some institutions offering such programmes. While dealing with such illegal practices, the authorities have even closed down a number of institutions offering courses in the open and distance mode. This paper endeavours to find out the best ways to obtain assured quality education and steps to improve the existing system of open and distance learning for a country like India.

Keywords : Open & distance learning, formal education, innovative strategies, ICT, pedagogy, tool.

1.1 Introduction:

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a system wherein teachers and learners need not necessarily be present for the exchange of knowledge, which is barrier-free and flexible in terms of age, time, place, eligibility criteria for admission, etc. ODL system is usually owned by IGNOU, some state open universities, and some institutions as well as universities with dual mode (*both traditional & ODL*) of education. This system has been more significant for continuing education to those who were not so fortunate to have formal education in their lives, both from advantageous and disadvantageous locations, and to the working personnel who can take help of the system for enhancing their skills. The regulatory powers on ODL are now vested on the Distance Education Bureau, UGC.

The system of ODL in India has been running since 1982, but the popularity has gained its momentum since just a few years ago. As much as the academic world has become more and more large, the world has become more competitive and it has been difficult enough to get admitted in renowned institutions for which the learners have started taking shelter of ODL system. The number of learners through the ODL system has been growing every year, which resulted in an increase in the number of ODL institutions/Universities. This growth of the ODL system has been able to engage a good number of unemployed youths, and at the same time, the mode and the standard of this type of education has come under scrutiny. There are many private institutes/Universities that have started adopting unfair means for earning easy money by giving degrees/diplomas without any rigorous interventions. These types of illegal practices have also made some institutes/universities compelled to closure. There is a growing demand by a section of the society to invalidate the degrees/diplomas earned through ODL system for progression to higher studies and employment because of these unfair practices by a few institutions. However, this demand is very unfortunate and a big slap to those learners who have honestly and sincerely completed their education through the ODL system and earned reasonable degree/diplomas even carrying very good marks. At this point of time, the question of standard or quality of the education through ODL system arises. Here, the significance of some innovative pedagogy comes up that are to be introduced in the system, which will not only be effective but also will ensure the quality of education in the system. This paper tries to forward some suggestive measures by which, innovative and effective pedagogy can be executed and implemented in the ODL system.

Here are some definitions of the ODL system of education that were presented by many academic intellects years ago:

“Distance education implies that the majority of educational communication between (among) teacher and student(s) occurs non-contiguously (at different times and at separate places – separating the instructor-tutor from the learner). It must involve two-way communication between (among) teacher and student(s) for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process. It uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication” (Garrison & Shale, 1987, p. 11).

Some authors have defined DE from the perspective of dominant technologies:

“Telecommunications-based distance education approaches are an extension beyond the limits of correspondence study. The teaching-learning experience for both instructor and student(s) occurs simultaneously – it is contiguous (same time) in time. When an audio and/or video communication link is employed, the opportunity for live teacher-student exchanges in real time is possible, thereby permitting immediate response to student inquiries and comments. Much like a traditional classroom setting, students can seek on-the-spot clarification from the speaker” (Barker et al, 1989, p. 25).

Elsewhere, in a book on ICTs in distance education, the authors say the term distance education refers to:

“... teaching and learning situations in which the instructor and the learner or learners are geographically separated, and therefore, rely on electronic devices and print materials for instructional delivery. Distance education includes distance teaching – the instructor’s role in the process – and distance learning – the student’s role in the process” (Portway & Lane, 1994, p. 195).

SOME OF THE TOP ODL SYSTEMS IN INDIA:

2.1 Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) :

IGNOU is the largest distance education university in the world which came into existence in 1985. It merely started with two programmes of study with 4528 students and today, it has grown up to 228 programmes, 4 million students around the world, 810 faculty members, 574 Academic Staff and 33,212 Academic Counselors. Observing the above figures, one can easily understand the size of the network of this University. This University has been providing education in the ODL mode since its inception and producing a huge number of graduates every year. Apart from having all the traditional facilities of teaching learning tools, IGNOU owns different modern ICT enabled infrastructure for delivering education through ODL mode. It also has an e-Library, comprising of 48000 numbers of e-books and 21 lakh full text academic articles which are freely accessible by the learners or anybody who wants other than learners of IGNOU also, and these can be used for the purpose of learning and research. The University has created an archive of the audio-video catalogue, which is going to be accessible soon. For facilitating the learners, many helpline numbers are made available 24x7 for various academic and administrative purposes. It is mention worthy that this University has kept the provisions for online admissions also to enable learners to get admitted within a few clicks of the mouse which saves both time and money to a large extent. In 2004, IGNOU started **Edusat** bringing a revolution in the ODL system, which is purely devoted to two-way of pedagogy through video conferencing, and facilitates a classroom-atmosphere (virtual classroom). Learners can now easily clear their doubts through face to face virtual interaction with the subject experts or faculties of IGNOU. To encourage the learners, IGNOU has facilitated railway concessions also for its students for face to face interactions. All these have made the university a global leader, and helped in achieving awards of excellence on many occasions. It has today 21 schools and a network of 67 regional centres, 2667 study centres, and 29 overseas centres in 15 countries.

2.2 State Open Universities (SOUs) :

There are 13 state open universities that provide education only in distance mode in this country. We can see also many universities in India which provide dual mode of education, viz. *traditional classroom teaching* and *Open and Distance Learning*. These Universities cater to people who are unable to pursue the regular courses due to various reasons. They also play crucial role in shaping the career growth of the learners who are already employed.

S.No.	Name of the SOU	Address
1.	Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU), Hyderabad, A.P. - (1982)	Prof. G. Ram Reddy Marg Road No.46, Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad - 500033
2.	Vardhman Mahaveer Open University (VMOU), Kota, Rajasthan - (1987)	Rawatbhata Road, Akhelgarh, Kota-324010, Rajasthan
3.	Nalanda Open University (NOU). Patna, Bihar - (1987)	IIIrd Floor, Biscomaun Bhawan, West Gandhi Maidan, Patna - 800001, Bihar
4.	Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU), Nashik, Maharashtra - (1989)	Dnyanagangotri, Near Gangapur Dam, Nashik-422222, Maharashtra

S.No.	Name of the SOU	Address
5.	Madhya Pradesh Bhoj Open University (MPBOU), Bhopal, M.P. - (1991)	I.T.I (Gas Rahat), Building Govindpura, Bhopal – 462 023
6.	Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University (BAOU), Ahmedabad, Gujarat - (1994)	Govt. Bungalow No.9, Dafnala, Shahi Baug, Ahmedabad-380003, Gujarat
7.	Karnataka State Open University (KSOU), Mysore, Karnataka – (1996)	Manasagangotri, Mysore - 570006, Karnataka
8.	Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU), Kolkata, W.B. - (1997)	1, Woodburn Park, Kolkata -700020, West Bengal
9.	U.P. Rajarshi Tandon Open University (UPRTOU), Allahabad, U.P. - (1998)	17, Maharshi Dayanand Marg (Thornhill Road), Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh
10.	Tamil Nadu Open University (TNOU), Chennai, Tamil Nadu - (2002)	Directorate of Technical Education Campus, Guindy, Chennai-600 025
11.	Pt. Sunderlal Sharma Open University (PSSOU), Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh - (2005)	Near Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyay Park, Vayapar Vihar, Bilaspur (Chattisgarh) -495001
12.	Uttarakhand Open University, Haldwani, Distt. Nainital, Uttarakhand	Teenpani Bypass Road, Transport Nagar, Haldwani-263139, Distt. Nainital, Uttarakhand
13.	Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University, Guwahati, Assam (2007)	Housefed Complex, Last Gate, Dispur, Guwahati – 781006, Assam

Out of the above 13 state open universities, two universities, -*Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad* and *Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University, Guwahati* have been taken into consideration deliberately for the purpose of analysis and discussions. The reason for choosing these two universities is that the first one is the oldest and the other is the newest one.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, the first of its kind in the country, established in 1982 with a vision - '*Education at Your Doorstep*'. Today, it has 206 study centres throughout the state of Andhra Pradesh, with a *multi-media teaching-learning approach* which broadly comprises self-learning print study material, supported by audio, video lessons and regular broadcast of lessons through Radio and Television. Apart from having telecast facilities of video lessons through regional Doordarshan, the university also provides interactive teleconferencing during weekends. This university has recently adopted the digital mode of education (online course) whereby the learners can learn through ICT enabled tools and earn degrees through online mode of study.

At present, the Central Library and Study Centre Libraries of the university have a collection of 1, 47,688 books and non-book material in different languages. It subscribes to 20 newspapers (English newspapers 8, Telugu 8, Hindi 1 and Urdu 3) and 128 journals (98 Indian and 30 foreign) for the Central Library.

Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University (KKHSOU) is the newest State Open University of India established in Assam in 2007. Being the first and sole Open University in the entire north-east region, the university enjoys the privileges of having received huge numbers of learners from the region every year. The motto of the university is '*Education Beyond Barriers*' of age, academic background and geographical boundaries. The university has at present 40 academic programmes of study in various disciplines, the course curriculum of which are designed at par with the national curriculum. One unique feature of this university in the curriculum is that, it has a Bachelor Preparatory Programme (BPP) which provides education at the level of higher secondary education (of two years) and also, a BPP course for 06 months duration which is given to the H.S. Passed students prior to admission into B.Com/BCA/BBA programmes. The university also has number of ICT enabled courses of study. KKHSOU has been running Diploma in Elementary Education (D. El. Ed) for in-service school teachers since a couple of years back. Starting with only 79 study centres, the university has reached up to 220 study centres with 24000 enrollments today. To help learners clearing their doubts with their faculty members, the university started phone-in programmes in All India Radio two years back. It also facilitates the mobile phone sms service and e-mail communications to the learners for keeping them updated from time to time.

3.1 Commonwealth of Learning (COL):

The Governments of Commonwealth countries established Commonwealth of Learning (COL) through a Memorandum of Understanding between these countries in 1988 with its headquarters at Vancouver. It is an intergovernmental organization created to encourage the development and sharing of distance education knowledge, resources and technologies. It is helping the developing nations to improve quality of education and training. COL is the only intergovernmental organization which is solely dedicated to promoting and delivering distance education and open learning. COL is funded by the Commonwealth countries voluntarily, and India is third major contributor after England and Canada. India is represented on the Board of Governors and Executive Committee of COL through Secretary, in-Charge of Higher Education. COL has emphasized on activities in the instructional materials, telecommunication technology and training and information service.

3.2 SAKSHAT: A One Stop Education Portal

Keeping in mind the objective of facilitating lifelong free learning for students, teachers and those who are already in employment, or in pursuit of knowledge, the pilot project 'SAKSHAT' was launched in 2006 by the then President of India. The content development task for 'SAKSHAT' was looked after by the Content Advisory Committee (CAC) for the respective subject, which consisted of representatives from many renowned educational institutions, bodies, prominent academicians and NGOs.

“The scheme is to provide connectivity to all institutions of higher learning to world of knowledge in the cyber space, to leverage the potential of ICT, in providing high quality knowledge modules with right e-contents, to address to the personalized needs of learners, in order to take care of their aspirations. These modules are to be delivered through ‘SAKSHAT’. The scheme may also have a provision of certification of competencies of the human resources acquired through formal or non-formal means as also to develop and maintain the database of profile of human resources.”

3.3 Massive Open Online Course:

A **massive open online course** is an online course of study which will have opportunities for unlimited participations and open access via the web. This will also provide a common platform for interactions where the teachers, students and other participants will be able to participate in the community interactions in addition to the traditional form of knowledge sharing. MOOCs being the widely researched recent development in the ODL system were introduced in 2008 and popularly emerged as an innovative mode of learning in 2012.

“Early MOOCs often emphasized open-access features, such as open licensing of content, structure and learning goals, to promote the reuse and remixing of resources. Some later MOOCs use closed licenses for their course materials while maintaining free access for students.”

Recognition of Academic Qualifications and Degrees:

On receipt of numbers of requests seeking clarification regarding the recognition of degrees/ diplomas earned through ODL system for the purpose of employment and admission for further studies, the Distance Learning Division of the Ministry of Human Resource Development has made following clarifications public:

- *“It is up to the concerned academic institution/university to recognize the qualification including certificate diploma, degree, etc. for the purpose of academic pursuit, i.e. continuing education for acquiring another academic qualification, with it. As regards recognition of academic qualifications for the purpose of employment, it is the prerogative of the concerned employer to take a view on the recognition of the degree, diploma, etc.”*
- *“Central Government, as an Employer, had made its position clear in respect of academic qualifications; acquired through distance mode of education, for the purpose of employment under it, vide Gazette Notification No.44 dated March 1, 1995.”*

“The Gazette Notification referred to above is equally applicable to the qualifications acquired from private as well as public institutions/universities.”

SUGGESTIONS:

4.0 Proposed reformations for the ODL system :

It has been frequently observed that a section of the society claims that the quality of study through the ODL system has deteriorated as compared to that of traditional or formal mode of education. Hence, they want that the degrees/diplomas acquired through ODL should not be considered to be eligible for applying for any higher studies or for any employment. Keeping this in mind and to save, the greater interest of the public and the society in the ODL system, some reformative suggestions are being discussed below:

4.1 Entrance examination for admission:

As all are aware that every educational institution uses the mechanism of entrance examination for admission into their programmes and in some cases, the admission is allowed on the basis of the marks obtained in the previous examinations. This helps the concerned institutions in maintaining their standard or quality of education and at the same time, the students also get rid of any kind of probable biasness in the admissions. The same method can be applied in the ODL system also. But here, the main objective of the ODL system may be questioned. Some will say that if this is the case, then what difference between formal and ODL systems of education will be. Then the straightforward answer should be that there should be no compromise in the quality of education, either it is earned through formal mode of education or it may be through an ODL system of education. The main objective of the ODL system should be to provide the opportunity for learning and earning degrees to those interested people who were unable to go through the formal mode of education due to lack of time and money factors as well as various other reasons, but not because of the poor academic performances are being dropouts from the previous courses. Otherwise, the threat for the learners and teachers of the ODL system will definitely arise one day or the other. However, to accommodate those who are dropouts or having very poor academic performances in earlier courses of study, **another third modality or system under the same ODL mechanism should be introduced**, whereby only this particular section of learners (*whose main objective is not to earn degrees for any employment or any other purpose other than just learning and acquiring degrees for fulfilling their desires of being learned*) should be accommodated.

4.2 Course curriculum:

Since, the quality of education in any system (*either formal or ODL*) cannot be compromised in any case, therefore the course curriculum should also not deviate from the mainstream curriculum that are designed for the formal mode of education. In addition, the question papers that are set for the formal learners, the same should be provided to the learners of ODL system. It should be presumed that the learners under ODL are competent enough to entertain the same kind of examination pattern with that of the learners of formal mode. This will not only help in maintaining the standard of education, but also will enhance the self-confidence and satisfaction of the learners. Otherwise, under the ongoing process of ODL pedagogy, the learners of the ODL system are generally considered inferior as compared to the formal mode learners, and always try to question about their competency and credibility of learning and acquisition of knowledge.

4.3 Classes for ODL:

Earlier, the mode of teaching-learning in the ODL system of education was of one-way of transmission. Learners had to read themselves the printed study materials provided to them through postal communication or by counter collection, to understand the written content and then to produce at the time of examination. Of late, the system of delivering classroom teachings (contact programmes) for the learners of ODL systems during the weekends has been practiced by many institutions, which is definitely an affirmative step in making the ODL system of education more effective and learner-centric. This type of pedagogy may be termed as semi-formal education which provides the same opportunity for the learners as enjoyed by the learners of formal mode education. The ODL institutions generally engage the personnel who have qualified NET or completed a PhD for teaching the learners of ODL systems during the weekends as Guest faculties or Academic Consultants. This exercise has been able to ensure quality education under ODL system thus initiating the students into system of interactive teaching-learning. The same method should be adopted by all the ODL institutions so as to strengthen the knowledge level of the learners.

4.4 ICT in ODL system:

It is obvious that the Information & Communication Technology (ICT) can play a pivotal role in bringing innovations in teaching-learning pedagogy, which has already been utilized by many universities/institutions in the country. In many universities in the developing nations, ODL education has been running and providing their courseware content through the media, viz. print, television, radio, new media (computer, internet) etc. and these are especially for the students of higher education.

Through Radio and Television, IGNOU provides customized courses or classes as per the convenience of the learners. The learners are well-engaged during the time of delivery and discussions of the course content through these media. This practice helps learners in acquiring knowledge and better understanding of their course of study likewise in the formal classroom pedagogy. The introduction of new media has revolutionized the system of learning through the ODL system. Any kind of necessary understanding is available on the internet within a single click of the mouse. Even the formal learners are now using this mode of self-learning to complement and supplement their knowledge. The ICT can also be used for the pedagogy in ODL systems of learning through video conferencing or video calls with any faculty of distance education institutions irrespective

of their distance. E-mails and online chatting have been another mode of learning for the students of ODL system, which help in clearing their doubts or in discussion over any course content with the teachers or their fellow colleagues. Also, recorded audio-visual contents of classroom teachings by the faculties will help the learners in facilitating and accelerating their learning endeavours. In many universities in India, the trend of online courses has been recently started. Though it is not so popular amongst the learners at the moment, but it is expected to go a long way as the generation progresses.

4.5 Fee structure:

The fee structure of the ODL system is seen to be quite high which is generally not expected from the institutions funded by the Government. The high fee structure will detract the interest of the common learners to getting admitted into these ODL institutions. Being funded by the Government, it is apparent that the objective of these ODL institutions is to disseminate education amongst the larger common people rather than to earn money. Therefore, the fee structure should be kept reasonably lower for the learners of the ODL system so as to doubly encourage them to learn. Likewise the scholarships or fellowships given in the formal institutions on the basis of merit or by the various other agencies, the students of ODL should also be provided with these kind of financial support, fellowships. There is an inherent need to streamline the ODL system of education in both public and private funded institutions and the government should develop some mechanism to regulate the fee structure, curriculum and the effective delivery mechanism.

5.1 Discussions and conclusion:

The study has been conducted with analysis of available data and through case study of a few ODL institutions. The time has come to formulate and develop cost effective innovative method of teaching-learning in ODL system which can not only ensure quality education but also increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India. These innovative supports can be well utilized with the help of concerned technical experts in the respective domains. The quality of teaching and learning should be geared up in this sector by adopting various innovative methods to make the system very effective. The prevailing discrimination between the learners of formal and ODL system should be erased by bringing in revolutionary change in the existing ODL system of learning. The Government has already initiated various innovative mechanisms for modernization of the ODL systems in India. However, most of the innovations in the area are in the pilot mode, whose success will be determined as the time progresses.

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