

Open Distance Learning : Recent Rumbblings the Way Forward

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Abstract

Open Distance Learning through IGNOU and ICT have been powerful supplements to traditional methods of teaching through colleges and universities to bolster access to higher education. The IGNOU programmes of late are being substantially curtailed causing dismay to discerning observers. The paper analyses the genesis and impact of programmes under ODL & IGNOU in terms of access, enrolment and quality and draws upon experience of other countries. It argues that through better management, more effective use of technology and impact skilled based training to students in remote areas would have employability and IGNOU can be a powerful cost effective knowledge dissemination programme will India's Global Competitive Index dipping substantially, there is a need for evolving a white paper by dispassionate stakeholders about the road forward for this prestigious programme instead of the present kneejerk reaction to throw the Baby with the Bathwater.

KEYWORDS: ODL, IGNOU, ICT, GCI

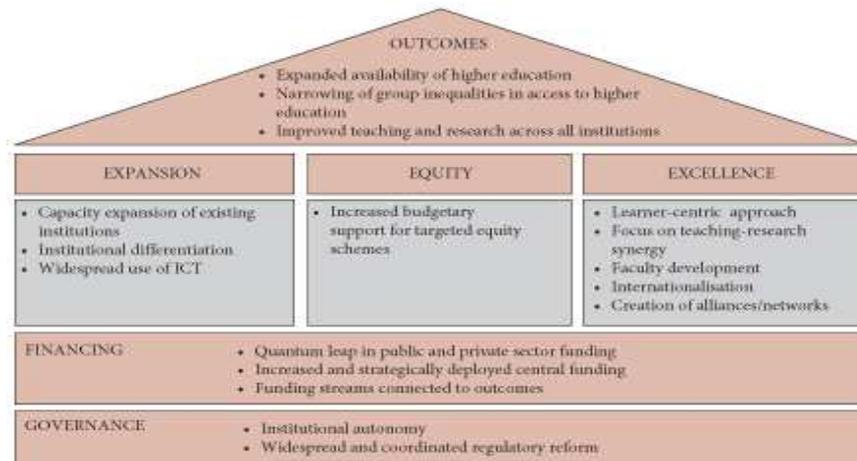
INTRODUCTION

Post Independence, India has made significant stride in access and enrolment in to primary and higher education. It is strongly believed that the economic and social development of a country largely depends on its literacy quotient and quality. Since a large majority of economically backward and marginalized section of the society are deprived of education, the Right to Education Act (2002) has been a watershed in bolstering accessibility to all sections of the society in Primary Education. In higher education segment also a large number of universities and colleges have been opened, ensuring Gross Enrolment Ratio to rise from 10% (2002) to 17% (2014). In order to supplement the conventional system of education, distance education mode has been adopted since the last three decades where the learner receives the study material through postal service, and the subject experts evaluate the assignments of the students leading to open learning. Many universities also started correspondence courses successfully culminating in the establishment of India Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in 1985. This has led to significant growth of enrolment in Open Distance Learning programme during the 11th plan. In this backdrop, the news that IGNOU is closing down a large number of courses/departments has disconcerted Analysts and Think Tanks in equal measure.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- Strategy framework of the 12th Plan & Evolution of IGNOU
- Growth Trends of ODL programmes and Allocation
- Impact of ODL on Access & Quality
- Perspectives on Access & Quality
- The Way Forward

STRATEGY FRAMEWORK OF 12TH PLAN & EVOLUTION OF IGNOU



Source: 12th Five Year Plan 2012-2017, Social Sectors Volume-III, Planning Commission, Govt. of India, Page 91

It would be from the above the 12th Plan consider that the inter linkage between goals of Expansion, Equity and Excellence must be restored further through significant expenditure in public, private sector spending by providing institutional autonomy and better regulatory framework. The Knowledge Commission (2014) also reiterates the concerns for greater interface with quality foreign universities and a more sensitive and independent regulatory framework.

The India Gandhi National Open University, established by an act of parliament in 1985, has continuously striven towards building an inclusive knowledge society. The university began by offering two academic programmes in 1987, i.e. diploma in management and diploma in distance education, with strength of 4528 students. The mandate of the university is to; **make higher education accessible to all segments of the society in all parts at affordable costs; offer programme which is of high quality, innovative and need based.**

Since the university uses latest technology in imparting education, it envisions combining the bi-fold objective of out stretching accessibility to all sections and extending professional development and training to all sections. The university is committed to quality in teaching, research, training and acts as a national resource centre for expertise and infrastructure in ODL system. While making significant mark in higher education, community education and continual professional development, IGNOU continuously structures itself with private and public universities to augment the programmes offered by it. It has taken higher education to the masses.

GROWTH TRENDS OF ODL PROGRAMMES AND ALLOCATION

Table-1: Growth of Enrolment in ODL Programmes in the Eleventh Plan

(Enrolment in Lakh)

Enrolment	2006-2007	2011-2012	Increase	Growth Rate (Percent)
Indira Gandhi National Open University	4.68	6.97	2.29	8.3
State Open Universities (SOU)	7.77	10.80	3.03	6.8
Distance Education Institutions (DEI)	14.96	24.24	9.28	10.1
Total	27.41	42.01	14.60	8.9

Source: Distance Education Council, & 12th Five Year Plan 2012-2017, Social Sectors Volume-III, Planning Commission, Govt. of India, Page-93

It would be seen from the above that there has been a considerable growth in enrolment i.e. from **27.4 lakh students to 42lakh students in 2011-2012.**

The allocation trends show the following picture:

Table-2: Allocation to Open, Distance Education & ICT in Rs. Crore

Type of Programme	2012-13 (Actual)	2013-14		2014-15 Budget Estimate
		Budget Estimate	Revised Estimate	
IGNOU	157	101	73.8	135.5
ICT	191.8	340	106.2	180
Total	348.8	441	180	315.5

Source: India's Budget: 2014-2015

It would be seen from the above that there has been substantial surrenders, particularly in ICT programme during 2013-2014 at the Revised Estimate stage. Also there has been a drop of almost 27% in utilization of funds for IGNOU. It is indeed distressing that compared to 2012-2013 the allocation this year is almost 10% less.

IMPACT OF ODL ON ACCESS & QUALITY

IGNOU has been conferred with awards of excellence by the Common Wealth of Learning, Canada, several times. Addressing the 26th convocation of IGNOU, President of India Shri Pranab Mukherjee declared that IGNOU within a span of 27 years has become a pioneer of open and distance learning in the country, catering to 30laks students in India and 43 other countries through a network of 67 regional centres, around 3380 learner support system and 80 overseas systems. With the launch of EduSat, on 20th September 2004 and establishment of inter university consortium, the university has entered a new era of technology enabled education, the emphasis is on supplementing tradition annual distance education with modern technology capacitated education within the schema of amalgamated learning.

When we look at the growth trends through quality we see, that due to its **high quality of self learning material** it has been awarded the Certificate of Excellence by the Common Wealth of Learning. The technology enabled education are equipped to respond to new challenges and demands of modern world. Moreover the university has put in lots of emphasis on the knowledge and skill development programmes in congruence with the global need. As a consequence, technology enabled education with flexible learning methods has the potential towards excellent global spin off. It's heartening to note that UNESCO has declared IGNOU as the most diverse and inclusive institution in higher education in the world in 2010, due to its consistency in maintaining equity in opportunity to Women, SC, ST, remote access, social and economically weaker section taking the student enrolment to 3 million.

The annual report, 2012-2013 of HRD Ministry refers to the following in respect of Open Distance Learning: Distance Education Council (DEC) was established under Statute 28 of the IGNOU Act, 1985. DEC coordinates maintenance of standards in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system. In pursuance of its objectives, DEC has launched many initiatives for determination of standards in the system and provides financial, academic and technical support to the 13 State Open Universities and over 200 Directorates attached to conventional universities and

Private/Autonomous Institutes, referred as Distance Education Institutions (DEIs). At present, because of the surge in the number of Open & Distance Learning (ODL) institutions and lack of adequate resources-human, technical as well as infrastructural, with the DEC, it is unable to cope up with increasing demand for efficient and effective regulation. The legal authority of DEC, a body created by Statute of IGNOU, to regulate the Open and Distance Learning system is also under challenge in the Court of law on the ground of conflict of interest, ODL programmes in Technical and Professional fields suffer from duality of control. This situation has been exploited to the detriment of learners by those institutions which have entered the ODL system with a commercial motive. In the backdrop of this, the Government had set up a Committee to suggest measures to regulate the standards of education imparted through the Distance Mode with Prof. N R Madhava Menon as Chairman. The Committee has submitted its report to the Government wherein they have suggested, inter alia, the need to create opportunities for higher education including technical and professional education through ODL system but there should be an effective system of quality assurance with programme-specific benchmarks. The Committee has also recommended measures for providing learner support services inter alia, through use of ICT, equivalence of degree, curbing commercialization of Distance Education System, creation of an independent regulatory body by the name Distance Education Council of India (DECI). While the Report of the Committee has been accepted, in principle, creation of an independent regulator is yet to be enacted. On the basis of resolutions of the DEC and the Board of Management of the IGNOU, the approval of Visitor has been obtained to repeal the Statute 28 and to dissolve the DEC under the IGNOU. On dissolution of DEC, the UGC and the AICTE would perform the role of regulators for the ODL system in respect of general higher education and technical education respectively.

In the 12th Plan documents, the Planning commission proposed to carry forward with a view to making this programmes more effective, efficient and sustainable. They include Digital Infrastructure Initiatives, Content Initiatives, Governance Initiatives and Training and Capacity Building Initiatives. However there is no specific mention regarding carrying forward the momentum under the IGNOU programme unlike the 11th plan which has the following achievements to its credit. IGNOU has now a cumulative enrolment of about 15lakh. It has a network of 53 regional centres and 1400 study centres with 25000 counselors. There are 28 FM radio stations and 6 television channels & the university introduced 16 new programmes during 2006-2007; the Distance Education Council, an authority of IGNOU is coordinating the activities of 13 State Open Universities (SOUs) and 119 Institutes of Correspondence Courses in the conventional universities.

The pilot project of 'SAKSHAT'- one stop educational portal – has been launched in October 2006 to facilitate lifelong learning of students, teachers and those of employment or in pursuit of knowledge, free of cost to them. The vision is to scale up the pilot project to cater to the learning needs of more than 50 crore people. The portal contains the virtual class that has four quadrant approaches to learning, which include written course materials, animations, simulations, video lectures, related web links, question answers, confidence building measures, etc. The Eleventh Plan will support IGNOU, existing SOUs and the states setting up new SOUs. Considering the dismal performance of some of the statutory bodies, in-depth and independent evaluation of those statutory bodies will be undertaken urgently.

Consortium for Educational Communication Centre (CEC) will set up a technology enabled system of mass higher education by taking advantage of Vyas

24-hours Educational Channel for one way communication, EDUSAT network for two-way communication and internet for 'any time any where' education. The thrust areas will include strengthening of the existing media centres, setting up of new media centres in those states where no centres exist, strengthening of the concepts of packaging knowledge into video and e-content form in need based subject areas, transformation the CEC and media centre into a vital university system.

PERSPECTIVES ON ACCESS & QUALITY

For designing any educational approach the root concerns are Access & Quality. It's all the more important in Distance Education. One perspective assumes that distance education facilities access whereas the other view assumes that quality standards cannot simulate face to face education. Fortunately both the views are not logical, as business model of distance education develops through advanced communications technology. Though an appropriate balance can be maintained between accessibility and quality, historically it is the access issues which were the driving force of distance education. But with mixed mode institutions that combine conventional and distance learning and with developed communication technology, quality issues in distance education is gaining momentum.

In distance education quality issues are evaluated through the pre-packaged print course material sent to students. Researcher finds it difficult to interpret quality in distance education for its future development, both from a theoretical and practical perspective. An important factor in distance education is pre packaged material which is considered the primary source of information to stimulate reflection and discourse among students. The pre packaged material with defined objective and self instruction tends to guide students towards a prescribed goal. This disjoins the students from critically analyzing the course content or independent construction of knowledge towards a higher cognitive and reflective discourse. Two concepts which revolve around distance education is interaction and independence. Where independence is the underlying factor which concomitantly diminishes interaction but aggrandizes accessibility, independence is seen as free to study as per wish depending on a pre designed learning material, and interaction is limited to the dominance of this pre packaged material (Juler 1990:26).

According to Garrison and Baynton (1987) besides independence, the inclusive balance of control should constitutionalise not only teacher and student relation but also the contextual concerns that are immutably developing. The primary sources of communication are between teacher to student, student to student and from course material to student. The balance of control depends upon two way communications, and the control diminishes with decreasing communication and subsequently the quality of learning is affected. The concerns identified by researches regarding the quality in distance education as based upon two way communication, as a compulsory, imminent factor towards education transaction are achievable goals in distance education given the advanced communications technology.

THE WAY FORWARD

The 12th plan targets to reach GER to 25% by 2016-2017 and the new government promises to make IT a powerhouse of packaged knowledge in video and e-content form in need based subject areas. But the disquieting factor is that while the government is trying to reach out to students through IT, conversely the Open University IGNOU is closing large number of courses and departments. Besides, as brought out at Table-2 that there is a significant under spend in ICT and IGNOU

during 2013-2014. A survey of feedback received from a large number of stakeholders who are associated with IGNOU's programmes reveal the following:

- Need to stop competing with traditional universities and giving traditional degrees. Provide a good base for rural masses at a very low cost, offering short term certificate for skill development programmes or designed special programmes currently not available anywhere.
- Study material very stimulating and correspondences prompt and stakeholders happy during 2002-2006. However when the IGNOU centre was to be restarted with a fresh MOU in 2012 no students list was received.
- Importance of audio visual added learning promoted. While the quality of printed books is invariably good. The complete sets of book were rarely received despite appeals.
- Not allow to join IGNOU programmes and students getting affected by serious mismanagement. Extremely autocratic functioning.
- IGNOU has stopped partner institutes abroad with over 50000 students getting affected.
- Number of African declines over the years who are earlier using IGNOU.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Distance education is a little studied area of education which is growing in importance. As we get more industrialized it is well adapted to the developments of new communication technology and brings to education many of the strength and dangers of the industry. Prof. Keegan in his seminal book "Foundations of Distance Education" brings out the experience of various countries like France, China and USA on their impact on access to higher education while refraining from commenting on its impact on quality. However he concludes by averring that "**it is a needed component of many national systems**".

India's experience of IGNOU programmes clearly demonstrates that it has proliferated very substantially by reaching out to close to 41million students including about one lakh abroad. The stakeholders clearly acknowledge the quality of training material. However what is disconcerting is **endemic mismanagement, need to make it more relevant for students in remote areas by inculcating specific skill based training and harmonizing ICT with IGNOU programmes**. The Economic Survey, 2013-2014 rightly mentions that skill development is vital not only for reaping the benefits of demographic dividend but also for greater inclusive growth. With effective use of ICT, e-study materials can be easily disseminated without having to send complete printed materials to remote corners of the country. Further the IGNOU course should be made a part of accreditation so as to ensure self regulation and quality building.

India's Global Competitive Index (GCI) has slipped from 61 to 71 this year. Higher education and training are considered extremely important parameters that contribute to GCI. China with a rank of 28 has a 7% share of 3.3 million internationally mobile students who benefit through distance education. It is, therefore, a pity that IGNOU is closing its partnership with institutes abroad and not helping out the Indian Diaspora. We should act proactively with half filled class rather than over half empty ones. There is an urgent need to prepare a white paper by associating responsible and experience stakeholders and presented to the new HRD minister so that ideology does not through baby with the bath water.

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