OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION: REFORMS SUGGESTED BY NATIONAL KNOWLEDGE COMMISSION

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ABSTRACT

One of the important objectives of higher education is to achieve expansion, inclusion and excellence. Formal system turns every stone to achieve it but one-fifth of students enrolled in higher education are in the Open and Distance Education (ODE) stream. Open and Distance Education has enormous potential to spread higher education opportunities beyond the brick and mortar world. But there is reason for concern that is quality of higher education provided in large segments of Open and Distance Education. The National Knowledge Commission suggested reforms to bring improvement in quality that includes the creation of Information and Communication Technology, infrastructure for networking ODE institutions, set up a National Education Foundation to develop web-based common open resources, National Educational Testing Service, Credit Bank and the Technical Advisory Group and Advisory Group on Pedagogical Content Management.

Key words: Open and Distance Education, Higher Education, Information and Communication Technology, National Knowledge Commission

Introduction

Higher Education is a very important sector for the growth and development of human resource which can take responsibility for social, economic and scientific development of the country. The University Education Commission (1948-49), under the Chairmanship of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, gave the foundations of the future of Indian Higher Education. The report of the Education Commission (1964-66) under the Chairmanship of Dr. D.S. Kothari symbolized the symbiotic relationship between education and national development. A lot of thought has since been generated towards the emerging concerns of higher education. The vision of higher education in India is to realize the country's human resource potential to its fullest with equity and inclusion. This essentially means the need to provide greater opportunities of access to higher education with equity to all eligible, and in particular, to the vulnerable sections of the society. Expansion of access by supporting existing institutions, establishing new institutions, supporting State Governments and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) / Civil Society to supplement public efforts are needed to aim at removing regional and other imbalances that exist at present. Policies and programmes for strengthening research and innovations have to be initiated and institutions, public or private, will have to be encouraged, to engage in stretching the frontiers of knowledge. Indian higher education system is one of the largest in the world. There were only 20 universities and 500 colleges with 0.1 million students at the time India attained independence. This has increased to 611 universities and university-level institutions and 31,324 colleges as on August 2011.

One of the important objectives of higher education in India is its expansion, inclusion and excellence and formal system of higher education cannot meet the challenge. It has to include non-formal or simply distance education in order to achieve its objective. Distance education is emerging as an alternative to the formal education system. The emphasis on education for all, explosion of population along with the desire for education, limitations of the formal system in providing greater accessibility and

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the rising expectations from education are some of the factors for increasing demand. The new communication technology has brought it within the reach of all. Originally designed to provide alternative educational avenues to the poor and the evoking people for higher education, it has developed as a parallel system in India from the primary to the tertiary levels and covers not only liberal but scientific and professional studies as well. Distance education implies the provision of educational opportunity at the place of learner from a distance by means of multiple media such as self-learning materials, audio-visual gadgets and short term personal contact programmes. Information technology and cybernetics are simultaneously being utilized for upgrading the knowledge and skills. The National Knowledge Commission regarding higher education opines that, "a radical reform of the system of Open and Distance Education (ODE) is imperative to achieve the objectives of expansion, inclusion and excellence in higher education. The significance is obvious. For one, more than one-fifth of the students enrolled in higher education are in the Open and Distance Education stream. For another, ODE has an enormous potential to spread higher education opportunities beyond the brick and mortar world". Open and Distance Education is not simply a mode of educational delivery, but an integrated discipline engaged in the creation of knowledge.

Reforms

National Knowledge Commission recommended the following reforms regarding Open and Distance Education:

1. A National information and communication technology infrastructure must be setup through government support for networking all Open and Distance Education institutions. In this regard, it recommended that the digital broadband Knowledge Network should interconnect the major Open and Distance Education institutions and their study centres in the first phase itself. A national information and communication technology backbone would enhance acess and e-governance in Open and Distance Education, and enable the dissemination of knowledge across all modes, that is, print, audio-visual and internet based multimedia.

2. A National Educational Foundation with a one-time infusion of adequate funds must be established to develop a web-based repository of high quality educational resources. Open Educational Resources must be created online through a collaborative process, pooling in the efforts and expertise of all major institutions of higher education. The Open Educational Resource repository would supply pedagogical software for various programmes run through Open and Distance Education and be available for utilization by all Open and Distance Education institutions. An enabling legal framework that would allow unrestricted access without compromising intellectual authorship must be devised for this purpose.

3. Transition to a course credit system must be carried out to enable the learner to undertake programmes across all Open and Distance Education institutions and disciplines. As a part of this process, an autonomous credit bank must be established for storing and filling credits acquired by every learner. In addition, admission criteria and the system of credits should be as flexible and adaptable as possible. Provisions must be made for multiple entry points and exit points, a flexible time-table and assessment mechanisms for supporting life-long learning.

4. An autonomous National Education Testing Service (NETS) must be established through legislation and invested with functional powers and responsibility for assessing all potential graduates in Open and Distance Education. This unified examination system would test the learner's ability to perform intellectual and practical tasks. All courses, degrees and activities offered through Open and Distance Education should be certified through this system.

5. An autonomous and well-endowed Research Foundation must be established to commission and facilitate multidimensional and multidisciplinary research in Open and Distance Education. In addition, a favorable environment for research must be created by setting up infrastructure like libraries, digital databases and online journals, holding regular workshops and seminars, granting

sabbatical leave for undertaking research, establishing a peer reviewed journal to provide a platform for publication for scholars, and other such measures.

6. Special Education Committees must be set up in all Open and Distance Education institutions to address the needs of learners with disabilities as well as senior citizens. These committees must devise mechanisms to ensure their participation and provide effective mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation of policies and collection of feedback. Admission criteria and time tables must be flexible enough to provide diverse options for meeting programme requirements to differently able learners and senior citizens. Pedagogical tools and components from the open educational resources must be adaptable to alternative formats for special learning needs. This could include, for example, Braille, colour-contrast texts and voice recordings for the visually disabled.

7. A new regulatory mechanism must be established by appointing a Standing Committee on Open and Distance Education under the Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education (IRAHE). The Standing Committee on Open and Distance Education would serve as the nodal agency for the National Educational Foundation on open educational resources, the National Education Testing Service (NETS) and the Credit Bank.

8. For the quality assessment of Open and Distance Education, a rating system to assess the standard of all institutions imparting Open and Distance Education must be evolved and made publicly available. The Standing Committee would stipulate grading norms and independent rating agencies would be licensed by Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education to carry out this function. In addition, it is recommended that every Open and Distance Education institution has an internal quality assurance cell to ensure that statutory quality compliances are regularly met and the establishment of new organizations namely National Educational Testing Service, the Credit Bank, the National Educational Foundation for developing common open resources would receive initial financial support from government.

Conclusion

The National Knowledge Commission suggested important reforms for creating a knowledge society. Establishment of different organizations as suggested by it would bring qualitative development in Open and Distance Education. A research environment is essential to accord Open and Distance Education value as a discipline, as opposed to it being consigned to a mode.

References

National Knowledge Commission

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