

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**SumanKumari*****ABSTRACT**

In this paper I discussed some of the aspects that pertain to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Indian context. The increasing use of technology in distance education has brought about significant socio-economic and cultural changes in India. Learning can be improved through Information Technology. There are two imperative needs in India, so far as the use of Information Technology by the distance education institutions is concerned. Firstly, the technology should be made use of to take the educational programmers to the rural masses. Secondly, sound infrastructure facilities should be developed to provide qualitative teaching to the learner, through the media of information technology. As such, the paper aims to explore fundamental aspects of popularly designated alternative paths to the traditional mode of learning. This paper explores the major terms inherent in open and distance education, its potentials, possible factors that may inhibit successful implementation of the programme, and the use of low and high technological tools for its implementation. The paper also deals with the significance of Modern Technologies in development of open Learning System using Distance Education Concept. While the paper is not intended to impose any particular policy or model, it is hoped that it will assist policy makers, in defining appropriate policies and strategies helping them make the best use of available distance learning technologies corresponding to different cultural contexts and stages of development. This paper is also a contribution to the collective efforts aimed at achieving the EFA goals, adopted at the World Education Forum (Dakar, Senegal, April 2000) by ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes and through harnessing new information and communication technologies to help attain those goals.

Key words: Open and Distance Learning, ICT, Non-formal, Face to Face, Higher Education.

Introduction

Education is considered as foundation stone for development of mankind. This is meant to equalize opportunities for everyone including poor, disadvantaged and women living in every corner of world in general and developing nations in particular. The people living in rural and remote areas must have the opportunity to enjoy the fruit of modern education. Every nation invests in education because it can produce unquantifiable benefits for individuals and the society as a whole. Education is provided through formal and informal modes of communications. In formal settings the conventional (face-to-face instruction) and distance education (offered with separation in terms of physical location of instructors and students) have been used to provide educational opportunities to its citizens. Nipper (1989) divides distance education into three generations. The first generation was the traditional correspondence model in which print is the sole medium for student/teacher communication. Second generation distance education, also known as industrialised multimedia distance education, integrates print and other modern media such as audio/video cassettes, computers and broadcast media into the distance study package. The major objective of first and second generation distance education is the production and distribution of learning materials. In these models little or no student/student and student/teacher interaction occurs. Third generation distance education, also known as interactive, multimedia distance education, places an emphasis on communication

*Assistant Professor (Education), Department of Education, MLSM PG College, Himachal Pradesh.

and learning as a social process typically through the addition of interactive media such as computer mediated communications (CMC), audio graphics or video conferencing. National Knowledge Commission (2006-09) further highlighted that “the open and distance education system is a crucial vehicle in the sustained development of a knowledge society. Its potential for flexible education delivery, scope for self and life-long learning and cost effectiveness make it instrumental in meeting the needs of individual and communities at this juncture - in the rapid transition being made from the industrial to the information age. However, as India prepares to face the knowledge challenges of the 21st century, higher education presents a rather dismal picture. According to the Ministry of Human Resource Development, India, only about 10% of the population in the relevant age-group is enrolled in higher education, and a mere 5% graduate with degrees. With the rapid growth of the service, knowledge and associated sectors in the economy, it is imperative that the populace is equipped to contribute to and benefit from these developments. This requires a radical overhaul of the higher education system, with regard to access, enrolment and most importantly, quality. Failure to address this need and foster more inclusive growth will adversely affect India’s future economic prospects and the welfare of its citizens. We believe that this crisis in higher education gives us the necessary impetus for radical change. Existing ‘brick and mortar’ campuses alone cannot cope with the current and future demand for higher education, given the limited resources for their construction and management. Even so, it is imperative that the state provides and commits to universal access to higher education. Open and distance education (ODE), enabled and delivered through information and communication technology (ICT), holds the promise to address questions of access and provide new, alternative forms of capacity building. ICT enabled linkages - propelled by broadband and satellite networks - are of a new, unprecedented kind, with special implications in a globalised world. They give rise to the ‘A-3’ scenario, where Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere can be connected to others through networks and access devices in a virtual space. This facilitates new forms of organisations and communities, often constituted by the users themselves, and manifested in myriad ways – for example through wiki, blogs, social networks, open resource movements, virtual institutes etc. In working together, these groups and organisations create new resources and ways of empowerment in virtual and real spaces. In a global scenario powered by global markets, higher education institutions must transform to meet the multi-faceted needs of the changing context – professionals who require in-service training and upgrading, unemployed persons who want to attain job specific skills, industries and institutes that wish to collaborate to provide training, etc. At the same time, it is evident that higher education cannot be left at the mercy of ‘market forces’ alone; doing so would compromise access for those without the means to pay at the point of delivery. The biggest challenge faced in higher education, therefore, is the provision of *quality higher education* to the greatest number, at the lowest possible cost to the learner. And this is where ICT enabled open and distance education has significant advantages. Using ICT effectively for higher education can bridge the distance between the learner, instructor and the market by transcending barriers of space and time. Seamless access, flexible schedules, quality content and inclusive delivery mechanisms have enormous potential to increase the scale of access and, in that process, bring down the cost of higher education for the individual learner. Despite the physical absence of a ‘real’ teacher (which often causes ICT enabled education to be perceived as restricted in its social context and pedagogical rigour), ICT based modes foster the engagement of the learner with instructional content as well as work-place applications, to enable one to assess and apply strategies of personal development in meaningful and measurable ways. Most importantly, ICT has the potential to foster greater inclusiveness and overcome spatial isolation by effectively bridging geographical and social divides, especially the rural urban imbalance. While

emphasizing the importance of ICT in distance education, it must be acknowledged that the current crisis in open and distance higher education is primarily due to the lack of clarity and coordination, the gap between avowed values and the actual practice, and inefficient delivery mechanisms. The recommendations made in this report will attempt to address issues of access and quality in a systematic manner while paying attention to organizational and policy issues. In view of the changes and possibilities brought on by new markets and new technology, the most suitable educational model for the 21st century must be devised with care and with a keen eye on the processes of the information age. Under modern conditions, the development of a knowledge society rests mainly upon linking economic growth with cognitive growth. Neither can exist meaningfully without the other. Industry or modern economy is engendered by knowledge and knowledge exists primarily as an industry. However, we need to understand cognitive growth in a larger fundamental and philosophical sense and not just in the instrumental, applied and vocational sense. Complex modern and modernizing societies certainly need a literate population and a large number of managers, engineers and operators. But they also need a pool of experts seriously and collectively engaged in the task of explaining and exploring the society and making it more intelligible to the rest. Knowledge cannot and should not be reduced only to its applied and vocational aspects. Therefore, we hope that our recommendations will pave the way for the establishment of a developmental model of education that will not only provide quality education for all, but also strive towards the economic, social, cultural, environmental and ethical development of the learner and the society”.

Evidently, the last two decades have witnessed considerable growth in education. This unprecedented phenomenon can be attributed to the globalization of open and distance education through the application of ICTs. In this vein, Moore and Tait (2002), remark that open and distance learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of ICT-based technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web. In effect, numerous open universities have emerged to absorb large numbers of new learners, while, on the other hand, increasing numbers of traditional universities have begun to offer their programmes also through distance education (Dimevski and Kokol, 2004). A review of research literature reaches the same conclusion that with electronic tools, people can learn virtually anytime and at any place they choose without obstacles in place, time and social status (Velzeoer, 1996; Greer and Murtaza, 2003; and Keegan, 2004). Thus, the importance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and e-learning in promoting open, distance and flexible education cannot be over-emphasized.

However, the rapid development of ICTs and the shifts from linear to hypermedia learning create new challenges particularly in developing countries. Moore and Tait (2002) point out that ICTs open up new horizons for progress and the exchange of creativity and intercultural dialogue. Nevertheless the growing digital divide is actually leading to greater inequalities in development. This is giving rise to paradoxical situations where those who were in dire need, the disadvantaged groups, the rural communities, or the physically challenged and less privileged do not have access to the tools which would enable them to become full-fledged members of the knowledge society. Considering numerous issues and problems surrounding ICT, Preece (2006) opines that it may not be seen as a final recipe to widening access to education. Similarly Mejiuni and Obilade (2006) maintain that poverty constraints and access affect the use of ICTs. In the light of the foregoing discussion, ICT is yet to be fully integrated into open and distance learning in most of the developing countries. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the issues and challenges facing the application of ICTs to open and distance learning in India.

Computer in Open and Distance Learning

There has been a terminological evolution in this field beginning from 'correspondence education' through 'distance education' to 'open learning'. The openness refers to the dimensions of prior educational qualifications, place of learning, accessibility, choice of subjects, diversity in instructional designs, flexibility in delivery mechanism and in the pace of learning allowed to the learners. In operational terms, the essence of open learning lies in its being imparted and received in a non-institutional setting; making use of multi-media packages of distance education like print material, audio and video cassettes, radio and TV programmes, etc.; and supplementing this packaged programme by contact programmes. In the case of vocational courses requiring skill development, some training-practice facilities in work place are to be made available for hands-on experience. The term 'open learning' has been used to refer to the process of making learning available to learners no matter who they are or where or when they wish to study. The term 'open' has been taken to imply open access for students regardless of their previous qualifications or age. International experience shows that distance education and open learning tend to complement each other.

Concept of Open Learning

Perraton (1997) defined 'open learning' as an "organized educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimized either in terms of access, or of time and place, pace, methods of study or any combination of these". Mackenzie, Postgate and Scupham (1975) defined open learning as, "Such systems are designed to offer opportunities for part-time study, for learning at a distance and for innovations in the curriculum. They are intended to allow access to wider section of adult population, to enable students to compensate for lost opportunities in the past or to acquire new skills and qualifications for the future. Open learning systems aim to redress social or educational inequality and to offer opportunities not provided by conventional colleges or universities".

Open Learning System can be defined as a system of education that does not operate through the traditional conventions which are essentially restrictive in nature - admission restrictions, attendance restrictions, restriction on the candidature for examinations, restrictions on the period of time devoted to a course, restrictions on the number of examination given and taken in a year, restrictions on subject combinations for a particular degree, restriction on the modes of didactic communication and the didactic tasks etc. The larger the number of such restrictions left unobserved, the higher the degree of the 'openness' of the type of education under consideration. Open learning thus refers to non-conventional education, which defies constraints that characterize the traditional school/college/ university education. Also, it can be stressed that using technological advances can easily affect learning. One can say that open learning is thus an extension of (not replacement of) the traditional lecture type, of workshop and laboratory based training and education. Open learning is essentially flexible and is essentially multimedia based. It enables learners to extend and enhance their skills and knowledge working at a time, pace and places to suit them as individuals and/or teams. In a nutshell, we can find open learning as an educational system where:

- the student has a choice and the freedom to learn
- the student is supported by the multimedia based learning materials
- the tutors create an effective learning environment and infrastructure to enhance and facilitate learning.

Thus, Open Learning have sub-systems which identifies the learner, conceptualize and create multimedia learning material, distribute them at the learner's place, provide support in the form of "human element" through a network of contact centres and finally, do a sort of continuous evaluation to provide

feedback to the student for completing his learning. It is essentially unstructured and provides a lot of dialogue so that the learner does not feel isolated. Good open learning programs offer the best use of learning objectives; user friendly style, environment and flexibility (with respect to time, place and pace); tutor marked assignments, and/or self-assessment and finally an education process that is designed and delivered to satisfy the individual needs. Open learning includes those situations where the learning occurs at a 'distance' as well as where learning occurs without this being the factor for the learner and teacher (tele-presence through teleconferencing).

OLS and Non-Formal Education

Open Learning, in common with non-formal education, emphasizes flexibility and learner-centredness. However, if non-formal education does not make use of distance education methods, it cannot be termed open learning.

OLS and Distance Education

OLS makes use of distance education methods. However, all distance education is not necessarily open in the sense that the courses it offers are open to all types of applicants. Thus, professional programmes of continuing education, being limited to accredited members of a particular profession are not categorized as open education.

OLS and Correspondence Education

Correspondence education, though a form of distance education, System cannot be called an open system since it is entirely governed by rules and regulations covering institutional courses, in such matters as curriculum, scheme of studies, admission criteria, and so on. The Open System is distinct from the rigidly formal Institutional system, in respect of curriculum, instructional packages and evaluation methods.

Open Learning System (OLS)

The Open Learning System (OLS) is a learning management system designed specially to support an online constructivist learning environment which works as effectively for both on and off campus students. It allows for:

- Close integration with institutional student records using LDAP technologies, and the upload of student information from txt files. Students can be divided into groups to facilitate group work and discussions.
- Online learning resource files including html documents, uploaded documents and links to other web pages.
- Communication options including regular email, threaded discussions, chat sessions, Frequently Asked Questions and issue trackers.
- Automated submission of assignments as either uploaded files or emailed directly to the course facilitators regular email as well as an online peer review where students can submit their papers and have them reviewed by other students and the course facilitators.
- Student customization in the selection of different themes and icons.
- Selective release dates and easy access control
- Image display and automatic thumbnails

Other third party facilities that can be linked to OLS: Hot Potato for self-testing multiple choice questions, Video conferencing and audio conferencing using Flash technology. The OLS system requires no registration and is very easy to use (Use your normal LAN username and password). These include:

removing the barriers and restrictions placed on students as evident in the conventional education system, opening up learning opportunities to a wider range of people, and enabling them to learn more congenially and productively (Coffey, 1977; Rowntree, 1992). Some illustrations are given as under:

1. Relaxation During Admission

- a. **Age:** In the open learning system a minimum age may be required to take admission to a particular programme, but there is no maximum age limit. For example, Mr. Rakesh who passed 10+2 in June, 2000 can take admission to a bachelor degree programme either in a conventional institute or in an open learning institute in the same year. But if Mr. Rakesh can't take admission in the bachelor degree programme in 2000 and wants to do the same after a gap of one year or more, he can't do it through the conventional system of education. But he can take admission to the bachelor's degree in any open learning institute subsequently as per his choice.
- b. **Qualification:** In the conventional system of education, the enrolment capacity is limited. So, there are restrictions in admissions with regard to the percentage of marks/grades obtained by the learners. For example, in some institutions only those learners who obtain an aggregate of 80% marks are allowed to apply for admission. In the open learning system, there is no such restriction for most of the programmes. Only a few professional programmes (e.g. Computer, Nursing, Engineering, etc.) may have some restrictions due to heavy hands-on work that students need to experience and for which prior knowledge is required.

2. Relaxation with Regard to Place and Time of Study

- a. In an open learning system the learner can select his/her own place of study. For example, Ms. Ram had taken admission in the MTA programme in an open university (IGNOU) in its Chandigarh Regional Centre. Due to some reasons he had to leave Chandigarh midway and settle in Delhi. In this situation what did Mr. Ram do? Did he give up his study? If he was a learner of a conventional university he would have given up his study as the system would not permit him to continue to study from outside of station. But, in an open learning system it is possible. In this case, Mr. Ram transferred his documents from Chandigarh region to Delhi region of the Open University and completed his programme in time. In open learning, the learner can continue his/her education from any place of his/her choice under the jurisdiction of the open university/institute.
- b. Mr. Sharma had taken admission to the Bachelor's Degree Programme of the IGNOU. He could not clear all the courses for the term-end examination of the first year. He took admission to the second year (as the system permits to do so) and completed the left over courses along with the second year courses. In this system, the learners can take either more than one year to complete a 'one year programme'. In other words, the learner can complete a programme at his/her own pace.

3. Relaxation with Regard to Selection of Courses

In the open learning system, the learner gets relaxation in selecting his/her courses. For example, in B.A. and B.Com. programmes of the IGNOU, the learner can select courses from a list of about 100 courses. Some open universities (e.g., IGNOU) allow a B.A. graduate to take admission to even the Masters of Computer Application (MCA) programme. One of the most significant developments in the field of education during the last two decades has been the acceptance, spread and growth of distance education through open learning systems in most parts of the world. The terms 'distance education' and 'open learning' have been used in different contexts with somewhat different meanings. Distance Education has been defined as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from

the learner. Distance Education programmes have often used a combination of educational media, old and new, varying from print to broadcasts to audio and video recordings, and included opportunities for face to face study as well as learning from recorded material. The term 'open learning' has been used to refer to the process of making learning available to learners no matter who they are or where or when they wish to study. The term 'open' has been taken to imply open access for students regardless of their previous qualifications or age. International experience shows that distance education and open learning tend to complement each other.

Computers in Open Learning System

Computer offers major benefits in open learning. These benefits extend to learners, teachers and of course to the institution. These benefits are to the extent that people are compelled to believe that the "institutions they know will no longer exist". To make our point a little stronger, we can list out the possible technologies in open learning where computers play an important role. They are having lot of applications on Local Area Network (LAN)/Wide Area Network (WAN), Electronic Mail (E-mail), Internet, multimedia, CD-ROM, Electronic Conference and Electronic Bulletin Boards (BBS). If you see the international scene, teachers have already started using those applications like text books recorded on CD-ROM interactive media, conferences recorded on CD-ROM interactive media, case-studies and Test banks recorded on CD-ROM interactive media, tutoring through E-mail, BBS and World-Wide-Web (WWW) etc. The list is endless. The use of computer in open learning can be classified into following three categories:

1. *Virtual mode*
 2. *Dual mode*
 3. *Mixed mode*
1. **Virtual Mode:** Those who are using computers for the complete cycle i.e. from registration of students and educational delivery to evaluation and certification. In effect, the student never needs to interact with any entity, human or otherwise, through any other medium.
 2. **Dual Mode:** Those who are using computer to complement one or more operations of their instructional model. In this mode, it is necessary for the learner to complete an instructional cycle through computer-assisted methods.
 3. **Mixed Mode:** Those who are using computer to supplement the operations of their instructional model. In this mode, the learner can choose to learn through any mode. Computer assisted methods are not compulsory.

In India, Net Varsity (www.niitnetvarsity.com) is the first attempt of its kind, which fits into the first category. The Net Varsity offers short courses. It is a virtual institution of seven people operating from New Delhi, with a Web server in the US and networking around 50,000 learners and teachers together in a commercially viable manner. In the second category comes, the Virtual Campus Initiative (VCI) of IGNOU. It is possible to register for several courses ranging from short-term diploma courses to bachelor's degree courses through the web site (www.ignou.org). Lessons can be downloaded and interaction is mainly through email. Another interesting feature of VCI is that the entire study material is given to the students on CD-ROM at the time of registration. The third category comprises of a few institutions that have put the resources on the web. However, there is very little representation from schools. Interest from school administration and teachers is not lacking but there is a great lack of where and how things should be done. Computers in Open Learning provide a student-centric approach. Let's examine it from the point of view of cost. Multimedia is inexpensive. Literally all new PCs are powerful multimedia machines with

CD-ROM, video, sound and networking capabilities. So any learner having access to computer and educational resources would not bear any additional cost. More importantly, students have a choice to pace their study according to their own will, own time and own place. In the case of computer assisted learning, learning is done in a nonlinear mode as compared to traditional linear mode. The learners have direct access and they learn by exploring rather than learn as told. Thus the entire learning process becomes more student-centred. Multimedia is easy to use and interactive. Most programs enable learners to move the cursor on the computer screen to explore new areas of information. This exploration act satisfies the learner's appetite for learning at their own pace and sequence, under their control. The most adorable part of this type of learning is that students can have as many goes at solving a problem or understanding a concept, as many times they require doing so. In the process the concept is reinforced and learning is more powerful. Mistakes can be corrected without getting ashamed. More so, multimedia tools and a variety of media are available during the learning process. The learner becomes more self-critical and participates directly in his own learning process. This kind of approach also facilitates collaborative learning needs and on the other hand permits collaboration between the peer-group. Interactive multimedia supports the concept of "tele presence", meaning that despite the fact that the learner(s) and the tutor(s) are physically apart, they are electronically linked by sharing the same material. Since failures are not exposed in open learning situations, fear is not a part of the learning and evaluation process. Multimedia supports student performance and any learning process are most successful if the learners have the opportunity for success.

Issues and Challenges in Open and Distance Learning

Open and Distance Learning is a way of learning that focus on releasing learners from constraints of time and place while offering flexible learning opportunities. For a lot of married and working adults, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a way of combining work and family responsibilities with educational opportunities. Challenges in ODL are inherent to the characteristics of this mode. Since it espouses values of flexibility and accessibility, it assumes learners to have sense of both autonomy and responsibility for learning. Before I discuss on the problems that start due to the collusion of two elements, I find it worthy to quote Rennie and Mason's conclusion on the impediments in distance and distributed learning in India: Firstly, Internet access is improving rapidly, but is still generally too weak and inconsistent to allow any reliance on net-based learning solutions. Secondly, the academic culture is resistant to the recognition of the value of open-learning degrees, with subsequent difficulties in re-designing course materials for a more educationally flexible, student-centred learning environment. The online distance learners have a problem in balancing the combination of work and education. Most of the Open and Distance education students are older, have jobs and families. The task of balancing all the responsibilities are truly challenging for them. Mathew Simond has listed following challenges in ODL system:

- To acquire online distance study habits is a big challenge to the distance learners. The learners' everyday environment is very distracting. Distractions such as family, friends asking for lunch, dinner etc. and demanding to go shopping at the mall every weekend are among other distractions faced by the learners. To acquiring some time to study is quite a hard task.
- Online distance learners are independent and responsible to their own self. But most of the time no one is around them to monitor their learning progress.
- Online distance learners also face problems in recognizing and mastering strengths and skills. The students will also need to have some basic writing skills and a go online distance command of english language. Unfortunately, not all of the students possess the necessary skills.

- Another challenge is in motivating themselves as well as maintaining and increasing self-esteem. In online distance education, learners are usually isolated from peers and tutors. The motivational factors are absent due to lack of contact and competition with other students.
- Online distance learners also face some problems in relating and interacting with peers. Most of the time, learners will learn most effectively when they have the opportunity to interact with other students.
- There might be audio/video tape material, television-aided learning, overhead projectors, computer referencing and computer-assisted instruction using the internet. Some students might feel uncomfortable with these learning strategies due to lack of skills and knowledge in using those strategies.
- The most online distance learners are not able to use library facilities to access information and references. Most of the library only opens during office hour and the learners would not be able to go to the library during office hour due to demanding works at the office. This will definitely cause problems to students who want to gain access to the reference material. Library database program such as the OPAC will also require the students to have proper training and skills in order to maximize the usage.

The Open and Distance Learning courses are very different from a traditional classroom setting. Due to a number of challenges and obstacles, it often requires a high degree of commitment on the part of the learner. In order to overcome these online distance challenges, learners must first plan and manage themselves effectively in order to balancing work, family and study. They have to manage their time smartly. They need to motivate their own self by setting achievable goals and have a positive attitude. Due to lack of meeting time with peers, they have to make an effort to interact with peers and tutors frequently.

Conclusion

We are at the very beginning of the changes in education. Technology will change again and again; resources and tools will improve constantly. The aim of education is not to be permanently technologically up-to-date, but to meet the needs of the learners in a changing society. The more technology improves, the more it is clear that central issues are human: the learner, individually and collectively, the teacher and the human relationship between the teacher and the learner. The new challenges mainly deal with society: how to make the information society is a knowledge society, how to give access to knowledge to everyone, how to develop a worldwide digital solidarity in order to reduce the “knowledge divide”. Learning for professional development is based on purposes linked to a broader vision of growth in the profession. ODL in an online learning environment has the potential to promote empowered learners who are able to meet the demands of ever-changing knowledge in society. It offers them an opportunity to interact with the instructor and fellow learners as they apply new knowledge in authentic contexts. Such collaborative and transformative learning has the potential to contribute to better learning outcomes, including the development of critical thinking and competencies. It is true that ICT is playing a vital role in open distance learning but at same time there are many issues and challenges that are to be addressed for smooth functioning of various online services that are to be implemented for its learners and other public. In this paper, the required ICT infrastructure and various issues and challenges in usage and setting up of ICT infrastructure in open distance learning are addressed. The institution that is providing education in ODL mode should look at all the addressed issues and challenges and take necessary precautions with a proper action plan along with timeframe.

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