Revamping Distance Learning in India: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

The article reviews the contemporary relevance of Distance Learning and attempts to unravel the challenges that it confronts in the present scenario. Identifying the huge potential that Distance Learning offers, the article considers several practical problems such as commercialization, absence of interpersonal communication, the lukewarm attitude of the authorities, corruption and the inability to use technology in modernizing and popularizing education through the distance mode. Distance Learning has the potential to become the major provider of higher education in India if it succeeds in assuring quality.

Key Words: Distance Learning, Quality, ICT, Women Empowerment

Introduction

Distance Learning is one of the most popular and rapidly growing fields of education today. In an era of lifelong learning, Distance Education becomes a natural choice for millions who desire to upgrade their knowledge from time to time to cope with the drastic and revolutionary changes happening in every field of study. Technological advancements have altered beyond recognition the educational scenario during the past few decades. Strongly linked with developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), it has the potential to generate new patterns of teaching and learning. These types of innovations in mainstream education may even have effects beyond the realm of education itself. In this era of globalization, institutional and inter governmental cooperation is increasing and the concept of 'global class room' has been realized. Mass education is accepted as the motto of the democratic governments. In this context, distance education has a crucial role in the global knowledge-based society. In a country like India Distance Learning attains added significance as the mainstream educational institutions with limited number of seats most often fail to cater to the increasing demand for higher education. In this context, the present paper attempts to examine the major issues and challenges in revamping Distance Learning in India.

Methodology

The paper is a kind of a survey of the condition of Distance Learning in India focusing on the issues and challenges that it confronts in the contemporary situation. For identifying the issues and to suggest remedies, we have used secondary materials on distance learning from various sources cited in the References section. The study is descriptive and not empirical in nature.

Origin and Growth of Distance Education in India

In India, Open and Distance Education has its beginning in the form of correspondence education. The first school of correspondence courses was started by University of Delhi in 1962. The Education Commission (1964-66) also recommended the expansion of correspondence education in India. Consequently UGC formulated guidelines for introducing correspondence courses in Indian Universities. The success of Delhi University's endeavour in distance education motivated other universities also to introduce distance education courses. Some Open Universities such as Andhra Pradesh Open University (Dr. B R Ambedkar Open University), Maharashtra Open University, Karnataka State Open University etc. were established. In 1985 the Government of India decided to set up Indira Gandhi Open University (IGNOU) as an apex

Open University to coordinate and monitor Open Universities and distance education institutions. The establishment of IGNOU was an important mile stone in the history of higher education in India. The National Education Policy of 1986 and the revised National Policy on Education formulated in 1992 emphasized that flexibility and innovativeness of ODL is particularly suitable to the diverse requirements of citizens in our country. At present, distance education accounts for nearly 20% of total enrolment in the Indian higher education system. There are 10 open universities and 90 dual mode institutes offering higher education (Knowledge Commission, 2009). All these institutions are providing access to higher education to large segments of population, particularly to the disadvantaged groups living in remote areas.

Faced with new training demands and new competitive challenges, more and more traditional universities are rapidly transforming themselves from single mode to dual mode universities. They have recognized the importance of distance education in providing students with the best and most up to date educational resources available in addition to the traditional methods of teaching. While overcoming the deficiencies of conventional system such as inadequacy of facilities, lack of access to deprived groups and areas, and high costs of education, distance education has the potential to create knowledge revolution and universalize higher education. By widening the base of human capital formation, distance education accelerates the pace of economic development also.

The report of UNESCO International Commission on Education for the 21st Century suggested that each university should become an open university offering possibilities for distance learning and learning at various points of time. In India, a number of factors including advancements in technology, liberalization, privatization and globalization have amplified the demand for open and distance learning. To have a greater understanding of the potential of distance learning, it is essential to examine the opportunities offered by it more realistically.

Opportunities
The emergence of new forms of distance learning, based on recent developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), has significant pedagogical, economic and organizational implications. Distance learning focuses on freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offers flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. The rationale of open and distance learning, right from the very beginning itself, has been to open opportunity for learners to study regardless of geographic, socio-economic or other constraints. Distance learning programmes allow for increased access to learning and encourage life-long learning. In this educational process, most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print. Technology is the principal means of communication in distance learning while teachers in conventional class rooms use technology as a supplement to their teaching.

Potential
The opportunities associated with distance education have exploded along with increased use of internet. Initially distance education institutions used printed materials, but majority of current programmes use online software and programs to replicate a classroom setting. Advances in Research and Development (R&D) in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) resulted in the emergence of new methods of teaching and learning in the field of distance education. Now, students have access to experts and tremendous volume of online databases. Instead of searching for hours through card catalogs and library stacks, students can utilize online search engines to find countless articles and research databases within seconds. More and more internet users are uploading and sharing audio-visual data on the social networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs, etc. Internet is the largest library with large access to information, knowledge, case studies and resources. ICT tools like e-mail, e-conferencing, e-journals, e-books, e-newsletters, online discussion forums, virtual class rooms etc. have enhanced the scope of distance learning and have proved to be more powerful than

previous technologies. The Universities across the globe are coming up with e-resources with video footage of lectures, talks, discussions, etc. With the evolution of e-mail and internet chat rooms, instructor-student contact has been strengthened. This fosters a better educational experience for the distance learner.

Flexibility

One of the primary advantages of distance education is the flexibility it provides to students. It meets the needs of students who are unable to attend regular courses due to distance or time constraints. As most of the distance learning classes are asynchronous, students need not attend a lecture at a particular time and place. Many online educational programmes allow the learner to work at his own pace and schedule. Since distance learning enables self-paced learning, it is of great advantage to slow learners. But access to technology can be an impediment in countries like India where the rural folk are still not exposed to the Internet technology. Efforts shall be made to provide free internet facility and spread E literacy.

Cost

Most often distance education is considerably cheaper than conventional education. The student can learn from the comfort of his own home and need not pay for accommodation and transportation. Many estimates suggest that, in comparison with traditional courses, special tuition for distance education programmes is typically three to four times lower. However the commercialization is rampant in this field as well challenging the claim for 'openness.' Strong intervention from the part of the Government is essential to rescue distance learning from the hands of the 'business groups.'

Interaction

Lack of interaction between students and teachers has been considered as one of the main disadvantages of distance education. Many distance education institutions have developed online forums or chat rooms for students to share ideas and communicate among themselves and with their teachers. These interactions definitely enable them to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Social Benefits

Distance learning has several social benefits also. While pursuing distance learning, the learner need not leave his surroundings and can maintain his personal, cultural, and social lifestyle. The learner's circle of comfort is maintained with out any additional stress. Distance education offers opportunities for those with family responsibilities (eg. parents with young children at home). Online classes also address physical accessibility issues that some people with restricted mobility (eg. handicapped, injured, elderly) encounter while attending traditional classes. The distance learner can transfer the computer and internet skills that he acquires during the process of distance learning experience to other facets of life also.

Women Empowerment

The need for empowerment arises from the inability of an individual or a group of people to actualize their dreams and reach their greatest potentials due to barriers created by individuals and other groups within the society. As compared with their male counterparts, women lack power. Education is one of the most important means of empowering women. Through open and distance education, benefits of education can be effectively transmitted to women who were previously denied access due to social and cultural considerations. Distance mode of learning is particularly suitable for women.

Major Challenges

Along with the unprecedented expansion of open and distance learning, some critical issues are also emerging in this field. Poor quality of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes is a major source of concern for policy makers, practitioners, and stakeholders engaged in distance education. While large enrolment is considered as the goal of ODL, the question of quality is not given as much attention as it deserves. There is a prevailing misconception that there exists an inverse relation between access and quality. Many consider that increased access leads to quality degeneration. Often, resource mobilization rather than quality improvement is given first priority. In many universities revenue generated from distance education is not used for progress of distance

education institutions, but instead used for improving the conventional education wing of the institutions (Knowledge Commission, 2009). Often, ODL is looked down upon and is treated as second class education. Moreover, ODL institutions offer the same courses offered by the formal system and, therefore, they have the same rigidities with regard to admissions and examinations. Lack of co-ordination among various distance education institutions is another important problem. Often, this results in duplication of effort and wastage of resources.

Loss of student motivation due lack of face-to-face contact with instructors and other learners is another serious problem (Sheeja, 2011). This often results in high dropout rates unless there are regular learner support activities by the ODL institution. The issue of assessment students–i.e. knowing whether the learners have achieved the learning objectives–is a difficult task in distance education as the teachers do not get enough opportunity to interact with the students. There are some problems related to technology also. Developments in ICT offer both opportunities as well as challenges for distance education. Instructors of ODL need to be trained to incorporate technology in the instructional methods. Technicians also have a great role in the instructional process. Equipment & hardware malfunctions can pose a great serious threat to the effectiveness of distance learning. Frequent occurrence of such problems interrupts the entire learning environment. Distance learning requires sufficient infrastructural facilities to ensure that training material reaches the learner. Adequate telecommunication and internet facilities are required for the effective functioning of the distance education system. Even today most of the distance learning institutions use only the print medium & not multi- media for dissemination of knowledge. Leaning is most effective when it is the learner's full time job. While pursuing a career, it is very difficult to learn thoroughly. Hence, it has been argued that distance learning is not as effective as conventional education. Products of distance education have been considered as inferior to those produced in the conventional system of education.

Limited Inter-personal Relations
In the traditional classroom, a skilled teacher can use her/his understanding of the audience in the process of teaching. Participant's reactions can be monitored through observation of body language, verbal response, eye contact, etc. All these can be efficiently utilized to create an effective learning experience. In a distance learning setting, instructors have little or no knowledge or contact with the audience as they prepare and deliver instructional lessons. Online instructors also experience limited interaction with students whether the class is taught synchronously or asynchronously. Most of the faculty members are trained in 'hand to hand' teaching. They are accustomed to direct engagement with the students and the factor which prompted them to pursue an academic career might be the enjoyment of working with students. Personal interaction with students is one of the most gratifying aspects of teaching. An opportunity to see the spark of understanding beginning to glow in the eyes of a student, who has been struggling with a concept, is the greatest reward for many teachers. Hence, lack of direct interpersonal contact with students is an issue for many teachers engaged in distance education. In the process of tele-courses or internet courses there may not be any direct contact or feedback to help the instructors to gauge the clarity of their communication. Student feedback in distance learning is often delayed and indirect. Even instructors in interactive distance learning situations face limited interpersonal contact, and must readjust the manner in which they assess the response and understanding of students.

In a traditional classroom setting, a student's performance can be immediately assessed through questions and informal testing. Within distance learning, students have to wait for feedback until the instructor has reviewed their work and responded to it. Moreover, distance learning does not give students the opportunity to work on oral communication skills. Students in distance learning courses do not get the practice of verbal interaction with professors and other students. Distance learners may feel isolated or miss the social interaction that comes with attending a traditional classroom. However, advances

and use of communication technologies such as bulletin boards, threaded discussions, chats, e-mail and conferencing can be effectively used to reduce the intensity of this problem to some extent. While some centres of distance learning have made committed efforts to tackle the problem of limited inter personal relations with the incorporation of technological advancements, many others have paid scant attention towards this issue.

Quality

The question of quality is very important as far as distance education is concerned. Concerns have been expressed by both proponents and opponents of distance learning regarding quality. In higher education, quality of instruction is measured in many ways. Quality must include access to resources such as library, labs, and faculty. Quality should also include scope for effective development of personality through interaction with teachers and other students. Both of these quality issues are areas in which distance learning has been vulnerable to criticism. Large enrolment was considered as the goal and an achievement of distance education institutions while the question of quality was not given as much attention as it deserved. This kind of attitude actually deteriorated the quality of many distance education institutions. Hence, one of the major challenges for the distance learning institutions is maintaining high standards of the programmes. There is great difficulty in recommending a universally acceptable quality assurance strategy because the issues surrounding distance education, the background of the students, the extent and level of programmes covered etc. vary from one institution to another. Even a single institution includes a complex community of students with varying levels of capability & background.

The institutions need to carry out periodic audits of their programmes through which they can identify their strengths and weaknesses. Audit should cover areas like teaching effectiveness, assessment of courses and lecturers, quality of learning materials, capacity development etc. In order to assure quality there is a need to look into existing student support services being provided at the pre-entry stage, during the course and after the course. Major problems being faced by distance learners while pursuing their studies relate to 'availability of learning material and its quality', 'library facilities', 'assignment evaluation and feedback', 'conduct and quality of personal contact programmes', 'examination related issues' etc. These services which can be classified as academic and non academic, must be discussed from the learners' perspective and some suggestions must be evolved to strengthen these services rendered by the institution.

The availability of adequate and effective training to faculty is also a requirement to improve the quality of distance education. Proper induction courses must be given to newly appointed teachers. Faculty development workshops are essential to introduce faculty to distance education technology and to the changes in pedagogical approach needed to the effective conduct of distance education classes.

Technological Innovations

Technology has the potential to address many challenges in the field of higher education. Distance Learning institutions need to move up technologically by incorporating the latest developments in ICT. Adoption of latest technological developments in the field of distance education changes the way in which instruction is delivered. This requires new skills for both the instructor and the student. Absorption of innovations shifts the educational experience from 'teacher-centered' to 'learner-centered'. Instructors become more facilitators or intermediaries between the students and the resources they need for their own independent study. However, it is very distressing that most of the institutions offering distance learning courses do not provide any special training to faculty members in technological innovations that can be incorporated in distance learning. While introducing any instructional innovation, distance education institutions must ensure that they do not have a negative impact on the quality of instruction. Innovations should enhance quality. Despite many opportunities being offered by technological innovations, there are inevitable accompanying costs also, e.g. the learner must own a computer with internet connection for online learning.

Motivation

Increase in the number of dropouts is a very serious problem experienced by most of the distance education Centres. Many students complain that it is difficult to stay motivated without having to attend a class every day. Since most online programmes are self-paced, it can be easy to lose motivation and dropout rates tend to be higher for distance education. According to an estimate, the dropout rate for distance education programmes is 35 percent as compared to only 20 percent for traditional colleges and universities. It has been argued that independent, motivated and goal-oriented individuals are the best fit for distance education.

Reputation

Programmes offered by some leading distance education institutions are just as well-recognized as courses of traditional colleges. However, some employers are not impressed by degrees obtained through distance education. Learners must always try to choose distance learning centres with good reputation. Students should be careful to avoid institutions that are not accredited or claim to offer degrees with in only a few months.

Job Market Requirements and Orientation to Students

Designing teaching and learning strategies which caters to the needs of all aspirants is a laborious task. Distance education institutions must foresee the varied and exacting demands of the future workplaces. They must try to introduce new job - oriented courses. Switching over to the distance method does not mean that the learners have acquired those skills needed for success in distance learning. Inability to grasp the basic difference between the traditional and novel methods causes confusion in their minds and influences their academic performance. A short term orientation course is required to train the students the skills and attitudes needed for effective distance learning.

Corruption

Just as in other fields of social life the emergence of corruption is an impediment to the effective delivery of education and a great threat to our higher education system. Typical corrupt behavior, to list a few includes absenteeism, acceptance of bribes and utilization of public property for private purposes, excessive political interference, favoritism, lack of professional integrity etc. Dramatic increase in the number of private education providers and commercialization of many aspects of higher education resulted in a variety of corrupt practices. Corruption distorts both the quality and availability of education services. As our nation's competitiveness in the global economy depends on the quality of education provided by our higher education institutions, costs of corruption in academics become enormous. Complete elimination of corrupt practices is essential for the very survival of institutions working under traditional and non traditional streams of education. While there is consensus among the academicians regarding the incidence of corruption in education system, documentation relating to the measures designed to combat corruption is still relatively little.

Findings

Distance mode of education is most suitable for a country like India with a vast area and huge population. But the educational agencies who actively engage in this field often fail to keep up with the declared aims and objectives of distance learning. It is true that Distance Education Institutions are often used for raising financial resources by the Universities especially in the context of financial crunch faced by the Universities. One of the major weaknesses of distance learning in India today is the absence of strict control and proper guidelines to keep away the commercialization of distance education to the extent possible.

Conclusion

Distance Learning, one of the most flexible methods of learning, has the potential to become the most popular mode of education in the near future. It is true that the immense opportunities offered by this mode of study remain dormant even now and the agencies involved in the dissemination of knowledge are often blind to its use in the popularization of higher education in India. On the other hand commercialization and corruption rule this domain making it extremely fragile

and prone to divergent forms of corruption. The need of the hour is the enhancement of quality in distance learning and curbing corruption and commercialization. It is indeed a welcome sign that the government has initiated steps in this direction by appointing Dr. Madhava Menon Committee to suggest measures to regulate the standard of education being imparted through distance mode. However, proper implementation of the guidelines suggested by the Committee and continuous monitoring of the functioning of the distance education institutions become essential to ensure quality and social justice in this field.

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