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## **Importance of ODL as an Alternative Mode of Education: An Exposition**

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### **Abstract**

Open and distance learning is a revolutionary concept in the modern education system. Conventional education system has faced some critical questions in the present context. As a result, people have felt a need for an alternative mode of education. This has led to the emergence of open and distance learning (ODL) system of education. From the present perspective, ODL is the most convenient mode of learning irrespective of factors such as age, educational background, and geographical boundaries.

This paper explores the distinction between conventional education system (CES) and open and distance learning (ODL) system. The

distinction is made between the two prevalent systems from the angle of its importance as far as innovation, quality and employability are concerned. This paper has not attempted to suspend or bracket any of these two systems. It is an exploration of an alternative mode of learning, which can help learners not only in the acquiring quality learning but also in actualizing the potentialities of learners.

### **I**

#### **Introduction**

ODL is a renaissance in the modern education system. It imparts education not only to able or affording learners but has also opened a new or open

education arena that is free for all categories of learners. Thus, it has placed a new challenge before conventional education system. Apart from this, it can play a vital role in spreading education to the unreached transcending the barriers of age and geographical boundary.

Today, the need for an alternative mode of learning is increasingly felt and as a result, plenty of prospective questions have emerged in the field of open learning. However, in keeping the gravity of the questions, some are given importance with the view of searching the causes of choosing the alternative mode of learning.

The cardinal questions in this context are- can education provide bread and butter? Can education preserve the values in society? These two questions are considered important in the present scenario of education. The second question is significant, because it is the crux of education system. It can be considered that a good or educated man may not earn bread and butter if the selected programme / course is not viable or practically provided by any of the systems.

Now, the crucial question is, what type of education do we impart or receive to make our life fit for survival? Of course, both are equally pertinent but the essential point is that only one particular effect of education has become a threat to education itself. To explain the concept of double effect in education, we can take a hypothesis; student 'x' has passed matriculation, H.S. B.A. degree, M.A. degree etc. 'X' has easily passed his/her education days, but now time has come to 'X' that he/she needs to earn money or make his/her life self dependent. If he/she can manage, it can be viewed without any hesitation that education has double effect, but if he/she is unable, the question will be complex or serious. Because, it can be a threat to our society, which is palpable. Therefore, we search such type of education in the present context, which is viable or has double effect or benefit. Now, time has come to explore and examine the alternative possibility of education, which can help learners not only in the acquisition of learning but also in the practical field to become self-dependent by engaging different kinds of self-employed activities.

### II

#### **Emergence of Open and Distance Learning**

According to Perraton, 'Open learning' as an "Organised educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimised either in terms of access or of time and place, methods of study or any combination of these." (Perraton, 1997)

Mackenzie, Postgate and Scupham define open learning thus,

1. 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. (Mackenzie, Postgate, & Scupham, 1975)

The first Open University in the world was established in England in the year 1969. This university in a real sense brought about a revolution to education age giving education a new dimension, launching different programmes based on information technology. In India, the first Open University started in Andhra Pradesh in 1982. It was renamed as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University in 1992. This was established by an Act of State Legislature on August 26, 1982. At present, there are fourteen open universities in India including one National Open University, i.e., Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). In Assam, the Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University was established under the provision of the Act, 2005 enacted by the Govt. of Assam & published in the Assam Gazette (extraordinary) dt 29/9/05. The university started functioning with the joining as its first vice-chancellor with w.e.f. 11<sup>th</sup> December, 2006. The motto of the university is '*Education Beyond Barriers*' of age, academic background and geographical boundaries.

Presently, there are two types of distance learning institutes in India, a) Open universities and b) Institutes or directorates of correspondence course/ Distance Education.

The names of the Open University in India can be presented in a tabular form:

<b>S.No</b>	<b>Name of the Open University</b>	<b>Year of establishment</b>	<b>Place</b>
1.	Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University	1982	Hyderabad, AP
2.	Indira Gandhi National Open University	1985	New Delhi
3.	Kota Open University	1987	Kota, Rajasthan
4.	Nalanda Open University	1987	Patna, Bihar
5.	Yashwantrao Chawan Maharashtra Open University	1989	Nasik, Maharashtra
6.	Madhya Pradesh Bhoj Open University	1992	Bhopal, MP
7.	Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar Open University	1994	Ahmedabad, Gujarat
8.	Tamil Nadu Open University	2002	Chennai, Tamilnadu
9.	Karnataka State Open University	1996	Mysore, Karnataka
10.	Netaji Subhas Open University	1997	Kolkata, west Bengal
11.	Uttar Pradesh Rajarshi Tandon Open University	1999	Allahabad, UP
12.	Pt. Sundarlal Sharma Open University	2005	Bilaspur, Chattisgarh
13.	Uttaranchal State Open University	2006	Haldwani, Uttaranchal

14	Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University	2005	Guwahati, Assam
15	Odisha State Open University	2015	Sambalpur, Odisha

The Open Universities in India had launched several technical and professional programmes /courses that include Computer Science, Management, Medical Science, Engineering, Tourism, Library Science, General and Applied Electronics, Horticulture among others.

The Open Universities use self-learning materials for learners. And some open universities use radio and audio-video programmes as well as regular counseling facilities for the learners at the study centers. Almost all open universities use assignments, and a few have strong student support services. Here, IGNOU has been playing an important role using communication technology in diverse ways. The use of media and technology includes audio-video, radio-television and teleconferencing, radio phone-in interactive counseling,

Gyan Darshan, Gyan Vani, and virtual campus initiative.

The main objective of these Open Universities is to provide educational opportunities to adult learners who do not receive or miss out on the opportunities of higher education.

### **Characteristics of Distance Education**

Four characteristics of Distance and open learning as visualised by Rowntree (Rowntree, 1992) are as mentioned below:

- Depending on one's interest, a learner has the opportunity of finding a programme tailored to his or her needs at a reasonable price.
- The learner receives the opportunity whenever he/she wants it, wherever he/she wants it, and at his/her pace.
- The learner would be able to set his/her own objectives,

choose the content and sequence of programme as well as decide when and how he or she would be assessed.

- The learner would also be able to decide how he/she wants to learn –e.g., with others or on one’s own, from books or from videos, with the emphasis on theory or practice and also who would help him/her in a suitable manner.

Besides these characteristics mentioned above, we can explore more:

- Non-restrictive admissions
- Multipoint entry
- No age and qualification restrictions
- No attendance restriction
- Teaching at a distance in a non-contiguous manner
- No restrictions on subject combinations for a particular degree
- Credit accumulation
- Learner autonomy

The various Models of Distance Education can also be mentioned such as:

- **Correspondence model:** Print is the only medium in this system of education. In some cases typed or xerox materials are also used. In this system, teachers and learners have no face-to-face contact. Here, there is very little scope for interaction between the teacher and the learner.
- **Multi-media model:** Here also print, audio type, video type, computer-based learning and interactive videodisk are used for learners.
- **Tele-learning model:** In this model, audio-video teleconferencing and audio graphic communication are used for learners.
- **The flexible learning model:** In this model, interactive multimedia, internet based access to e-resources and computer mediated communication (CMM) are used as media for learners.

### III

#### **Conventional Education System versus Open and Distance Learning system**

Here, we can see the possibility of becoming more viable and flexible between Conventional Education System (CES) and Open and Distance Learning System. (OES). Besides, we find out the drawbacks of the two from the angle of its importance in the present context. In conventional education system, we often talk of qualitative education rather than quantitative. Conventional education system always gives utmost emphasis on 'quality'. However, the significant point is that we cannot easily assess education in this system. Education is not free for all in this system. While in the open and distance learning system, we see a contrasting picture. None is deprived of education if he or she is qualified up to a minimum standard. However, it is not the case that quality is compromised. ODL system not only places importance on quantity of learners but also equally lays emphasis upon quality of learning. Therefore, the main objective of education, education is for all, is not maintained in the conventional education system.

Now, the present burning problem around the globe is unemployment. Classroom teaching alone cannot be

the sole way to uproot the problem. Although, it is a well-defined thought or saying that education is the panacea of all problems, still we see its dark sides. The palpable question among youth is: what shall we do after successful completion of education? Here, education itself is a barrier of education. Now, we can compare both the systems.

Conventional education system ought to introduce such type of courses so that students after the successful completion of the respective programmes can begin their professional life. Therefore, it is the need of the hour for the education system. Moreover, syllabus should be made 'interdisciplinary' so that students can easily avail optional courses in order to choose their way of life. Otherwise, if the interdisciplinary approach is ignored the on-going education system will be irrelevant or impractical in the long run. Therefore, ODL system has become the chief contender of CES.

The ODL system has introduced many professional courses in order to enable all types of learners to choose their interest. In keeping this positive side of ODL system in the present



context, it can be said that in comparison to CES, learners in ODL system can easily access the courses. Even service holders also can take admission in the programme of ODL either to fulfil the desire towards learning or to upgrade the career. Therefore, it is an exception in case of learning.

In the real sense, it has brought out a revolutionary change in the field of education, embracing all categories of learners irrespective of age, educational background, and geographical boundaries. Thus, this kind of advantage is not available in CES. In this context, we can take example of IGNOU. IGNOU has at present eleven lakh students and eighteen hundred study centers. It gives us an idea that ODL has a dominant role to play not only with regard to spreading education far and wide but in case of discovering multifarious doors of education, showing immense possibilities of engagements in different fields for prospective learners.

- Can we think of quality education in ODL? This question can be analysed from two directions. In terms of the

positive aspect, it can be viewed that ODL has undoubtedly opened new dimension to education system discovering the multidimensional aspects of education and providing the opportunity of learning for all categories of learners, which is not plausible for CES. While in terms of its negative aspect, it is important to ask ourselves whether we are truly acquiring proper education through ODL.

Education is the center of gravity of human life. We want such type of education, which not only provides livelihood but also gives us the essence of education. The essence of education is nothing but the all-round development of human beings, which helps us to run our life smoothly. Now, the important question is, can distance education cover the main objectives of education? The answer can be negative from one standpoint that is, if the entry of learners is not restricted, can it be possible to maintain quality education?

Here, an example can be cited from an experience. Once, I was an invigilator of IGNOU, Guwahati University Centre (Assam), there I saw that some examinee possessing higher ranks in service had used unfair means. Therefore, I had personally questioned them, if they were really enjoying exam as a learner or appearing exam just for its sake. If such situations prevail, then can we think of a quality or value education in ODL? Again, it leads to another serious question: can distance education be the model of society for the welfare of humankind?

Therefore, it can be maintained that professional programme alone cannot satisfy human curiosity although we are unknowingly entering into a consumerist world. Although, great philosophers like Plato and Aristotle advocated different camps with regard to education their main attempt to assess education was only for the well-being of man. It is

indeed true that whatever be the education system, it must be for the betterment of society or human kind. Here, I am not exclusively commenting on this type of education. I am simply mentioning the shortcomings of the two systems. Thus, our aim should be, how can we innovate the systems for the benefit of learners? According to UNESCO (2002) "DE (Distance Education) has the potential to generate new patterns of teaching and learning and there is evidence that it can lead to innovation in mainstream education, and may even have effects beyond the realm of education itself. It is also believed that DE, therefore, plays a particularly decisive role in the creation of the global knowledge based society and will be an important element of future education and training systems that have significant pedagogical, economic and organizational implications."

## IV

**Conclusion**

ODL system can play a vital role bringing out the potentialities of learners in different areas. Just as clay can be easily shaped and moulded into different forms, similarly distance and open learning can shape and also be a torchbearer or guiding spirit for bringing into fore the dormant desires of learning in distant learners. Here, two success stories can be mentioned of the ODL system, which lies in unfolding the windows of knowledge and skills.

A) This is the story of visually impaired girl, Sonali Pal from Jharkhand. When Sonali was dejected owing to discrimination and her disability. Thus, she took admission in IGNOU's Bachelor of Arts programme and successfully completed it. Following her degree, she got selected for the South Asian Regional Leadership Skill Development programme for disabled woman and now she not only supports herself but is also involved in spreading awareness among the disabled woman. Besides,

she also completed Master's degree in Sociology from IGNOU."

B) Another example is that of "two friends Keshvandra Kumar and Ravikant Singh who after passing out of H.S. level joined clerical service in Indian railways to support their family. Both of them were posted in remote areas in West Bengal and while doing their jobs had enrolled themselves in B.A. Programme of IGNOU. The impressive part of their story is that they had cleared civil service exam. Keshvandra Kumar secured 45<sup>th</sup> rank and Ravikant Singh 77<sup>th</sup> rank. (Taken from the 2nd Foundation lecture delivered by Prof. Swarj Basu, Director, DEC, IGNOU, New Delhi, at K.K.Handiqui State Open University, Guwahati, Assam)

Thus, it is evident that people recognise the importance of the alternative or sustainable system of education. Here, the emergence of ODL might be one of the platforms to strengthen and address the issues of the burning problems such as quality education, dropout tendency of learners, gender disparity, and unemployment. Hence, it has immense

scope to flourish as a new platform to discover the potentialities of learners.

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