

## Distance Education: Way to Future

In the age of globalisation, ever-increasing democratisation and pervasive influence of science and technology seem to be reshaping every aspect of our day-to-day life and our education system has not remained immune from it. With increasingly fast-paced life and preoccupations with the routine, one is hardly left enough time to pursue one's various extra-professional activities. Today, if we wish to survive the rat race of a competitive world, it has become more than necessary to keep oneself abreast with the latest in one's field. However, the same hardly becomes possible due to paucity of time because of multiple demands from work and family.

It is at this juncture that open and distance education comes in to play a significant role in filling the gap by the spatio-temporal flexibility it allows. Open and distance learning systems offer the promise of ushering in a knowledge-based society, more so in the developing world. Open and distance learning is of crucial significance in addressing critical educational challenges, especially in the Third World. These challenges pertain to accessibility, quality, cost and the relevance of this method of imparting education.

Today, people in general want to enhance their educational qualification so as to be able to qualify in a highly multi-disciplinary and a competitive work environment. Since their various engagements do not allow them to devote as much time to higher education, distance learning helps to fill this gap, owing to its spatio-temporal flexibility. If distance education is increasingly becoming more and more popular, the reason lies in the flexibility it allows to pursue one's education from anywhere and at one's own pace. And the success of, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), the largest university in the world, bears this out.

The Kothari Commission was far-sighted enough to realise as far back as the 1960s that distance education should not be confined only to university degrees, but customised courses should be suitably developed to make them useful to workers in industries, agriculture and other relevant fields. The growth of open and distance learning systems has been fostered by several factors, which encompass demographic, socio-economic, political and technological considerations. According to one estimate, we have about 300 million illiterates. According

to a 2016 report of the Department of Education, Government of India, the higher education system does not reach more than 10 per cent students in the country, compared to China's 22 per cent and the USA's 28 per cent. In other words, the higher education system in India reaches out to only around 14 million people in the country. We should therefore, target a participation rate of at least 40 per cent if we wish to join the exclusive ranks of developed countries.

Achieving this target through traditional educational system is well-nigh difficult. Open and distance learning systems, on the other hand, have the potential of meeting the exponential growth in demand not just for front-ended education but for lifelong learning too. Rapid expansion of open education systems speaks for its relevance and effectiveness in the resource-scarce milieu of developing countries. Distance education democratises higher education, offers need-based academic programmes, promotes and reaches quality education to people's doorstep. It sets and maintains standards in higher education.

Relaxed entry and exit regulations, flexibility in selection of courses and place of study and examination, the freedom to pursue one's study at different places and its cost effectiveness are the reasons for making the experiment in distance education a success. The annual enrolment in open universities in our country today stands at over 4 million which is almost one third of all the students pursuing higher education in the country. Learners of the future will not only be passive recipients but active processors of information and consumers of varied knowledge products. Today it has become possible for learners to select relevant curriculum and courses from anywhere in the world.

The present trends suggest a vast scope for further capacity enhancement of the distance education system. The system would, thus, require additional infrastructure and support. The latest developments in science and technology could prove handy in further strengthening the open learning systems. The greater use of the new information and communication technologies are supportive of the paradigm shifts in higher education. Creation of infrastructure and development of programmes to meet the exponential growth in demand for higher education would also require huge investments. Private participation and initiative, therefore, become an imperative in open and distance learning systems to sustain this growth.

Today, there are fourteen other open universities functioning throughout the country including the national one represented by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). Distance education system today is attracting huge number of students not only from the younger age group, but also those from the older age groups. The reason for the latter's flow to distance education mode lies in the need for continuing education in today's competitive world. People are always trying to add value to their competence in their bid to advance their careers.

Learners of the future will not only be passive recipients but active processors of information and consumers of varied knowledge products. Today it has become possible for learners to select relevant curriculum and courses from anywhere in the world. Paradigm shifts in education has implications for learners' autonomy. Going by the success of the open and distance learning (ODL) system in general and IGNOU in particular, which already

has made inroads into this segment covering up to 30 per cent of total student enrolled in higher education, it can be said that distance open education is the only alternative for higher education.

The distance education system, moreover, has the capacity to reach the masses at a cost which is significantly lower than what is required in the conventional system. Distance education and open learning have been the key dispersal agents in the movement towards a post-industrial society, which is characterised by globalisation and increased inter-dependence informed by sophisticated means of mass communication. It is believed that the main stay of education in the next century will be distance education. It is only heartening to note that the policy makers are attaching due importance to the same to harness the optimal demographic dividends as made possible owing to availability of a predominantly younger population.

### Salient Points

- If we wish to survive a competitive world, it has become necessary to keep oneself abreast with the latest in one's field.
- If distance education is becoming popular, reason lies in the spatio-temporal flexibility it allows to pursue one's education from anywhere and at one's own pace.
- The higher education system in India reaches out to only around 14 million people in the country.
- Distance learning systems have the potential of meeting the exponential growth in demand.
- Distance education democratises higher education, offers need-based academic programmes, promotes and reaches quality education to people's doorstep.
- Relaxed entry and exit regulations, flexibility in selection of courses and place of study and examination, the freedom to pursue one's study at different places and its cost effectiveness are the reasons for making the experiment in distance education a success.
- Learners of future will not be passive recipients but active processors of information and consumers of varied knowledge products.
- The information and communication technologies are supportive of the paradigm shifts in higher education.
- Private participation and initiative become an imperative in open and distance learning systems to sustain this growth.

### Glossary

**Keep oneself abreast:** keep oneself informed

**Spatio-temporal:** relating to space and time

**Multi-disciplinary:** relating to multiple subjects

**Exponential:** (of an increase) more rapid

**Milieu:** a person's social environment

**Paradigm:** a pattern or model