INTERFACE BETWEEN ODL AND CONVENTIONAL SYSTEM IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

India envisioned itself to be a developed country by 2020 which necessitate creating a knowledge hub. It has already made elementary education a fundamental right by RTE Act 2009. It becomes imperative that it has to pace its secondary and higher education to near universalisation to realize its dream of knowledge driven society (RAMSA). The role of higher education in knowledge creation, preservation, dissemination and extension and advancement of the research and development for sustainable development and human capital formation can no longer be ignored. Unfortunately, the number of universities, colleges and institute of higher education has been pitiable in the face of its huge population despite the impressive growth since independence in 1947.The higher education systems in India today suffer from many shortcomings. The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of India is only 18.8% and it still remains below the world average of 29% (as of 2010). Providing access to the higher education to many deserving people could be done only through providing alternative channels of education for their empowerment. Open distance learning (ODL) offer to fill the void. Here the emphasis is more truly on the learner. The system de-emphasizes teaching, but emphasizes learning and give freedom to learner to set their own pace and thus recognize their autonomy for free communication of knowledge. ODL also offer to learn, unlearn and relearn, upgrade the knowledge and skill survival in the competitive modern world. With the development of technology the real class room learning experiences without compromising on quality could be provided, as a result, the boundaries between distance education an on-campus education are now becoming blurred. The future of distance education will be marked with growing inter relation between different modes of teaching-learning. For imparting education for all there will be both increasing competition and rising co-operation amongst various types of providers of education in the years to come.

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Introduction

India as a nation envisioned itself to be a developed country by 2020. It is now poised to become a knowledge hub and its economy knowledge driven. To affect this, it is imperative to create a knowledge society. Education is the foundation on which one builds the knowledge society. The nation has committed itself to the universalization of elementary education with an explicit aim of providing quality education for all by making education a fundamental right of every child in the age group 6 to 14 years (RTE, 2009). It has also recognized the significance of expansion of secondary education gradually to reach a near universalization level. Besides, recognizing the potential of the higher education for knowledge creation, preservation, dissemination and extension and advancement of the research and development for sustainable development and humane capital formation, a serious intervention is in the cards for increasing gross enrollment ratio (GER) .The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) is only 18.8% and it still remains below the world average of 29% (as of 2010) . This would imply more than the doubling the scale of higher education in the next few years by establishing a good number of world class Universities, new IITs, NITs, etc. This would be able to meet the demands of the workforce with knowledge, skill and competency of a surging economy.

In the massive expansion of higher education, relying exclusively on the conventional system of education will bring no desired result. As such an alternative system of education, open and distance learning (ODL) in sync with face to face conventional education system will become an effective strategy for synergy.

Role of Higher Education

Among various levels of education, higher education has pervasive and influential impact on development of the nation. National development should be in the form of both economic and human resources. Higher education empowers the individual with necessary skills and competence for achieving personal and social goals which in turn contribute to the development of the country. Education has been instrumental in disseminating various accomplishment of human civilization throughout human history in different forms. It has been recognized time and again that education plays a crucial role in producing and transferring knowledge and skills in society. Education in general and higher education in particular contribute the economic growth,

poverty alleviation, development of mental faculties and the growth of general awareness in all human societies. Several scholars and report of several commissions have highlighted the role of education in overall development of nation. Nations having large number of knowledgeable people in diversified fields can preserve sovereignty and achieve strategic depth. Else, dependence especially in critical areas of knowledge leads to arms twisting the nation has experienced such deprivation of knowledge in critical areas.

Growth and Accessibility of High Education

Higher education has been an impressive growth since India's independence in 1947. Over all, the number of universities has increased from 25 in 1950 to 634 in 2011, the number of colleges has increased from 700 to 33023 and enrolment has increased from a tiny base of 0.1 million to a whopping 11.2 million. The extent of capacity expansion is shown in the table 1.

Table 1: Capacity Expansion in Higher Education

	1950-51	1990-91	2003-04	2006-07	2010-11
University Level Institutions	25	117	320	371	564
Colleges	700	7346	16885	18064	330200
Teachers (in thousands)	15	272	457	488	817
Student Enrolled (in millions)	0.1	4.9	9.95	11.2	16.9

Source: 1. Agarwal, P – Indian Higher Education, Sage, 2009

2. National higher education mission report, 2013, MHRD, Govt. of India.

A comparative analysis of population, number of universities and accessibility i.e., the proportion of population in the relevant age group 18-23 years that enters the graduate education of higher education in presented in the Table 2. The data presented in the table shows the large gap that India needs to bridge.

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Table 2: Accessibility of Higher Education in different countries.

Country	Population (million)	Universities	Accessibility
Indian	1130	408	09%
USA	303	711	89%
Australia	21	37	80%
France	64	84	50%
UK	60	126	63%
Singapore	04	05	21%

Source : Data base of HRD, Ministry of Higher Education, Govt. of India, 2007-08.

The problem of accessibility in India typically appear in the form of either large number of students do not get admission or not getting admission in the courses of their choice. Those who could afford and desire to achieve quality education join foreign universities for higher education. As per the estimate, there are about 2 million students from India studying abroad.

There are 564 Universities including 21 central universities, 109 Deemed to be Universities, more than 33000 colleges, 1.69 crore students and 8.17 lakh teachers in India. Although the enrolment of 1.69 crore students appear to be large but only 7 percent of the population in the age group 18-23 enters the world of higher education. A large number of our population in the higher education age group either has no access or does not afford to go for higher education. Therefore, the efforts are necessary to provide the access the higher education to many deserving people as possible by providing alternative channels of education for their empowerment.

Quality assurance in Higher Education

The rapid expansion of higher education in India has been at the cost of its quality. Quality varies widely across Institutions. Despite the general deterioration of quality, some institutions like IITs, the IIMs, a few University departments and some affiliated colleges have maintained higher standards. The deterioration of quality is more glaring in the state university in general, and at the undergraduate level in affiliated colleges in particular. Conventional post-graduate education

is also facing crisis and performs extended 'body sitting' function because of lack of job opportunities for the graduates (Jayaram, 2006). The education Commission (1966) and the NPE (1986) have raised the serious concerns about this continued deterioration in quality. In line with global practices, external quality assurance was conceived as a solution (Stella, 2002).

The NAAC, set up by the UGC in 1994 is responsible for accreditation of institutions of higher education. Only about one–third (172 out of 612) eligible Universities and one fifth (4529 out of 22500) of the eligible colleges have been accredited so far. In terms of grading 90% of the colleges and around 70% of the University are of middling or poor quality. By October 2012, the student teacher ratio in India (24:1) is very low as compared to good institutions in other develop countries (9.5:1 in Sweden, 13.6:1 in USA). In addition, a major factor that leads to poor quality of teaching and learning as well as lack of research capabilities is the lack of qualified faculty in higher education institutions. About 60% of college teacher do not have either M Phil. or Ph.D. Moreover, faculty vacancies of about 40% in the already very less sanctioned positions is also an extremely serious problem.

Besides the general deteriorating low quality education provided by the conventional universities and college, the conventional institutions are functioning almost like ivory towers and show little care for the needs of the students and society.

The following are the commonly leveled charges against the conventional education system.

i)   Educational Courses/programmes offered are not relevant to the existing social needs,

ii)   The highest paid teachers are reaching and increasingly smaller number of selected students,

iii)   The age-old class room teaching method is becoming more and more stale and ineffective as is indicated by the present levels of absenteeism,

iv)   The rigidity regarding the duration of courses, classroom attendance, etc, remains unchallenged, and

v)   The benefits of higher and better education continue to be enjoyed by a privileged few.

The above mentioned items point to a mismatch between the present socio-academic needs and the conventional education system. The conventional education systems –particularly those of higher education has become much insular nature. There are exceptions, but the following problems are common enough to be a cause for concern (NKC, 2007)

i)   Curriculum remained almost unchanged for decades, have not kept pace with the times, let alone with the extending frontiers of knowledge.

ii)   Learning and creativity are at discount in a system of assessment that places a premium on memory rather than understanding.

iii)   The milieu is not conducive to anything beyond the classroom, for it is caught in a 9.30 to 1.30 syndrome.

iv)   The academic calendar is no longer sacrosanct for classes or for examinations, as there are slippages in schedules so much so that, at several places, clams in the time table are not held and results are often declared with a time-lag of 6 to 12 months.

v)   The infrastructure is not only inadequate and substandard but also on the verge of collapse.

vi)   The boundaries between disciplines have become dividing walls that constitute barriers to entry for new disciplines or new courses, while knowledge is developing most rapidly at the intersection of disciplines.

vii)   The importance attached to research has eroded steadily overtime.

viii)   The volumes of research in terms of frequency of publication and the quality of research reflected in the frequency of citation or the place of publication, on balance, is simply not what it used to be.

ix)   As in most public institutions, there is little accountability, because there are no rewards for performance and no penalties for non performance.

x)   Structures of governance put in place fifty years ago are not responsive to changing times and circumstances but the system is readily subverted by vested interests.

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Thus conventional university system has been degraded and deprived of its 'application' value and has grown to be an autonomous and often become a non-relevant system.

ODL a Reformatic Educational Strategy

As a reaction of the deficiencies of the conventional universities and colleges to meet the demand of an industrial society, institutions of polytechnic for vocational oriented courses and management and technology are being established to meet the new demand for professionals mostly in the private sector with an eye of profit motive. In the age of the professional, there is growing demand for relevant knowledge and skills and for a continual updating of such information and skills. There is also demand for post-experience education to which an adult can keep returning to draw fresh sustenance.

One way of meeting these new demands is to separate long-term education from short-term courses which are mainly of the post-experience type. A logical way of looking at this would be to assume a first stage of education which is formal and long term duration and which covers basic fundamental's in various disciplines.

These are —

i)   Need for part-time education with a more 'flexible' arrangement in order to meet the requirements of young persons who 'Learn and Earn" simultaneously,

ii)   Need for specialized courses for those who are in-service,

iii)   Need for intercultural stimulation on the part of the adult, and

iv)   Need for certification without undergoing the formalities of the conventional university system.

The above arguments can highlight the growing realization that dissemination of knowledge cannot be confined to schools and colleges alone. It has to be extended beyond the campus. Then the adults can be able to return to education as and when they feel the need to do so. Thus, education can become a student centered one rather than an institution centered activity.

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In the context of the modern societies a once-for-all education is no longer viable. In tune with the explosion of knowledge, technologies, advancement new skills and changing nature of work and values one has adapt himself/herself to adjust the new situation. In other words, one has to learn, unlearn and relearn for survival. In order to upgrade the knowledge and skill one has recourse to the continuing education.

Compare to conventional system, open and distance learning is cost effective (low costs). It is also a system that can fulfill a plurality of interest and needs. It has more flexible arrangements and can cater a variety of demands. It can provide the traditional courses in a more capsular form and allow for individual variations in programming. it also can provide a variety of post –experience and in service course that are better geared to the requirements of the adults and of society in general.

In conventional education system, a student who may wish to change a course midstream finds it *impossibility* and is compelled to continue with a programme in a half-hearted manner. But in the distance education system it is in a position to offer flexibility in course curricula. Thus it can cut through the heavily ritualized manner of functioning of formal system. By providing education for all, the education process ceases to be a preserve of the elite. And by catering the needs of school/college dropouts, distance education can almost eliminate the academic isolation of those who have been deprived of education for whatever reasons. Distance education is thus a highly potent tool in developing society that is anxious to bring about egalitarianism through educational process. Hence one might conclude by saying that the democratization of the educational process is possibly achieved in some measure by the process of distance education.

The rejection of the academic year of education is the hallmark of distance education. In this system, the learner may learn a programme in more than one year, if he/she wants to, or he/she may pack more than one programme into one year of learning, if able to do so. This rejects the whole idea of a curriculum wedded to a fixed and inflexible time –dimension. The emphasis obviously is neither on the course content, nor on the teachers, but on the design of the course and on its flexibility, i.e., the emphasis is more truly on the learner. Thus the system de-

emphasizes teaching, but emphasizes learning and give freedom to learner to set their own pace and thus recognize their autonomy for free communication of knowledge.

Academic inputs which are being use in the distance teaching institutes to disseminate instruction are-i) students Assignment-responses, ii) course materials (print and electronic media), and iii) personal contact programmes. The major chunk of the course materials notwithstanding the rapid development of ICT, computer technology, audio-visual media will be printed materials. As knowledge is constantly exploding, there is nothing final and sacrosanct about any piece of knowledge, and so the course will have to be constantly updated by screening, additions and alterations made

Open and distance learning in India

India is one of the earliest countries to apply itself to the concept of 'open university' after the United Kingdom established one successfully at Milton-Keyness in 1969. Distance education has its origin in the correspondence education. Unlike the west, where the private provides initially dominated the correspondence education industry, in India it was the conventional university in the public sector that stared correspondence education. It started with the University of Delhi offering bachelor's degree programmes in Arts, science and social sciences in the year 1962. It was during the 1970s that the momentum picked up with nineteen more university introducing their mode of education, and trend continued in 80s.

In 1982, the first Open University which is now called Dr. B.R. Ambedkar open university was established in Andhra Pradesh. Encourage by the success of the establishment of an open University at state level. The Union government established 'Indira Gandhi National Open University' by an act of parliament on September 20, 1985 (1985, IGNOU). The establishment of National Open University has been welcome development because the impediments, which the conventional Universities system posed in the way of promoting distance education, could be surmounted. The IGNOU has been mandated to perform the functions of a distance education university and also to function as a national agency for coordinating the setting standards for various distance education systems in the country. To meet the latter purposes, a distant Education Council (DEC) was established under the aegis of IGNOU in 1992 which was latter

replace by Distance Education Bureau (DEB) under UGC. The University has been recognized as a centre of excellence for training in Distance Education by commonwealth of Learning (COL), Vancouver, Canada in 1993. The staff training and research Institute of distance education (STRIDE), partly funded by COL, is instrumental in getting this recognition and is committed to the development of the human resources for the distance education in India and other developing countries. IGNOU is one of the very few open universities which offer a program of distance education as a discipline. Besides Indian students, a good number of students from 18 commonwealth countries enrolled for MA in distance education. Currently it has 33 regional centers (for civil), 25 regional centers exclusively for Army, Air force, Navy and Para military forces (Assam Rifles and CRPF) and 6 sub centres with1269 study centres offering 60 program. For the purpose of tutoring/counseling the university has employed on part time basis. SRIDE has published a journal, the 'Indian Journal of Open Learning since 1992. The total enrolment of distance learning in the country in 1998 was 1 million of which 50 percent is with IGNOU.

With twenty schools of studies, the university offers a wide range of programmes both short-term and long term leading to certificate, Diploma, Undergraduate, Degree, Post-graduate Degrees and Doctorate degrees which are conventional as well as innovative. Recent addition is opening of 'Community Colleges' under IGNOU aegis. The curriculum comprises life-skills and work skill/vocational skill with internship and hand on training along with theory courses. Other major achievement of, IGNOU are – launching of an IGNOU–ISRD joint channel for organizing a one-way video, two way audio teleconferencing (1993-1994)/ Launching of a series of 24 hours Educational Channels 'Gyan Darshan I, II, III and Kishan Channel, the launch of 'Edusat' video conferencing channels. The IGNOU is the nodal agency for these channels and regular transmission are done from the studios at EMPC (Electronic Media Production Centre). Thus IGNOU has emerged as one of the largest open University in the world.

As on date there are 15 open Universities including IGNOU in the Country. Besides, there are 106 conventional Universities that offer distance education programmes in addition to their on-campus programmes. All these universities are attracting good number of student enrolment encourage the ODL system in the country. As seen in the table-3, from an enrolment of a few thousand in 1967-68, enrolment in distance education grew fast, and reached a 2 million

mark in 2002=03 and constituted 22 percent of the total enrolment in higher education. In 2006-07 there were over 2.8 million students with nearly 1.3 million students registering each year in the distance education programme

Table 2: Student enrolment in Distance and Conventional Mode.

Year	Conventional Mode	Distance Mode	As % of total enrolment
1967-68	1,370,261	8,577	0.62
1980-81	2,752,437	166,428	6.0
1990-91	4,990,000	560,000	11.2
1999-2000	7,730,000	1,580,000	20.4
2002-03	9,200,000	2,000,000	22.0
2010-2012	16,900,000	3,314,454	19.5

Source : Compiled from various reports of UGC and DEC /DEB and MHRD, Govt. of India

As per estimation of National Knowledge Commission (NKC, 2006), almost half the students enrolled in higher education are receiving education through the distance mode, through open universities or through correspondence courses of traditional universities.

As regard the financial viability, often distance education programme generate huge surpluses with fee levels usually higher than fees in similar regular programmes. Most often universities are able to generate all their operating through their fee revenues; some of them even have surpluses. Conventional Universities usually generate huge surpluses through distance education. For some of them, this is the main source of revenue. Some deemed universities also have large distance education programmes and earn huge sums of money. There are also few private providers outside the formal system that offer distance education programme. Overall, there are different types of providers offering a variety of distance education programmes.

The growth of open and distance education in the country has been haphazard and the quality is both unsatisfactory and uneven (NUEPA, 2006). Unlike the UK's open university, which ranks fifth out of 100 British Universities for the quality of its teaching programmes; neither the open universities nor the distance education programmes of the conventional

universities are rated high in India, though some programmes of IGNOU and its self-learning materials are well regarded (Agarwal,P.2009)

Quality assessment through a reliable external agency is a prerequisite for all institutions imparting ODL to ensure quality education as valued by employers, students, industry and other stakeholders. In view of this, it is suggested that a standing committee should be constituted at the national level to stipulate grading norms and independent rating agencies would be licensed by the Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education (IRAHE) as proposed by NKC to carry this function. In addition it is recommended that every ODL institution must have an internal quality assurance cell to ensure that statutory quality compliances are regularly meet (Pawar, 2009).

Conclusion

With new technologies, it is now possible to provide real class room learning experiences without compromising on quality as a result, the boundaries between distance education and on-campus education are now blurred. Blended learning, where the provision of on-campus learning is integrated with online and distance education holds great promise in future. Thus, the future of distance education will be marked with growing inter relation between different modes of teaching-learning. For imparting education for all, there will be both increasing competition and rising co-operation amongst various types of providers of education in the years to come.

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