UNIT 3 SOCIAL CREDIBILITY AND OPERATIONAL ISSUES

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

Our endeavour in this unit is to ascertain the social credibility of the distance mode of teaching/learning and to assess whether or not distance education could be considered an academic discipline. We also look at some of the operational issues at the micro and macro levels.

A careful reading of this unit will enable you to:

- describe the essential ‘functions’ of an educational system,
- discuss the socio-academic relevance of distance education,
- argue for distance education as an effective and purposeful educational strategy
justify the need for ‘re-thinking’ with regard to the ‘academic inputs’, which have been and are in practice in distance teaching institutions, as an imperative, and

- analyse the academic biases coupled with social prejudices which deny distance education the pedagogic prestige it deserves.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we turn to the remaining questions raised in the introduction to this block. Before we take up these questions, let us generalize what we presented with the help of specific cases in units 1 and 2: the changing political scenario all over the world, the increasing responsiveness of governments towards the educational needs and aspirations of the masses and the growing realization that education is one of the major means of ensuring socio-economic well being of an individual and also of a society. have brought in challenges which were not experienced by the educational system so far. These challenges consist of:

i) the emergence of very large numbers of students who seek education of diverse kinds at every level of instruction,

ii) the realization that education and training should serve socio-economic purposes, and that they should be socially relevant,

iii) the realization that the relative sluggishness of the existing educational endeavour has created a time lag of immense proportions, and that a great deal has to be achieved in much less time to remove this lag, and,

iv) the realization that we need innovative systems of education as the conventional approaches to and methods of education are handicapped when it comes to meeting the new demands.

In line with this approach, we now discuss (in this unit) the criteria which have traditionally been used to define educational systems and assess whether the system of distance education fulfils those criteria. In the process we have identified the criteria that contribute to the credibility of an educational system. We have also shown how each one of these criteria has been adequately fulfilled by distance education. Seen from the perspective presented in this unit, it should not be difficult for you to argue for distance education as an academic discipline.

Nevertheless, the impediments that come in the way of distance education system in the developing world are not insignificant and so they cannot conveniently be ignored or overlooked.

The impediments which we intend to talk about pertain to actual, daily routine activities which constitute the distance education operations. Again, for this purpose, we shall draw on our Indian experience. Distance education was introduced in India at the university level in 1962. The mechanism adopted for this purpose was a “unit” established at a conventional university. Subsequently many more universities established such units called directorates/departments/schools/institutes of correspondence or distance
education. Today there are around 60 such directorates functioning in India. As in India, historically these directorates (different countries have given them different names) are the precursors of open universities everywhere in the world and they continue to be so in most cases even today. An analysis of the activities of these directorates should help us understand their operational weaknesses which needed to be overcome to use distance education effectively. The efforts made in this direction ultimately led to the establishing of open universities in India in the eighties and nineties.

We have presented the ‘issues’ as they are, i.e., as seen from the point of view of the existing distance teaching directorates. (Some of these directorates have been in existence for more than three decades). Since we look at these issues from their viewpoint, they are of topical relevance here. It should be pointed out here that we have not resolved the issues. Neither did we intend to do so. In the course of time, however, it is not impossible to find fitting answers to each of them. The possible solutions suggested by the existing distance teaching directorates in order to rectify the ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ issues, have been discussed in some detail.

### 3.2 FUNCTIONS OF AN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The relevance of any educational system ought to be adjudged in terms of the criteria that give the system a significant social function. Thus, it is not presumptuous to say that the basic issue of credibility can be seen as one of either success or failure to meet such criteria. To serve our immediate purpose, we have listed the following four required aims that characterize the functioning of an educational system.

i) To give instruction in skills,
ii) To build a cultivated society,
iii) To advance learning, and
iv) To transmit the secular view of human beings/people.

**What do we mean by each one of these criteria?**

We shall talk about each of the criteria briefly in the same order as given above.

i) The primary function of an educational system is to give instruction in skills that are related to and promote a general division of labour and at the same time respond to changes in such division of labour. (It should be mentioned here that students come to institutions of higher learning, mainly because their studies and training are related to future prospects),

ii) Besides imparting skills that are purely practical, education aims at teaching whatever it does in a manner calculated to develop the powers of the mind. It thus attempts to produce a cultivated society, and it is this particular function of the educational system that places it in a highly eminent light.
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iii) An educational system, furthermore, makes a contribution to the growth of knowledge which in turn, leads to the advancement of truth or the unveiling of ignorance. This growth of knowledge becomes a specialised function of the educational system, especially at the higher level, which explains the reason why research is generally coupled with teaching at this level of learning.

iv) The educational system is unique in so far as it is the only system that seeks to transmit a common human culture and common standards of citizenship. It indicates the spread of rationality or of a certain view of people and so a vision of human potential that distinguishes it from other social institutions. To emphasise, educational institutions, thus, play a crucial role in the evolution of human culture.

These being the criteria which determine the social credibility of an educational system, we now raise a question - does distance education fulfil these requirements and conditions?

In order to take stock of the capabilities of distance education, it is necessary to evolve a valid perspective from which its legitimacy may be considered.

### 3.3 DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEMS: A SOCIO-ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

The idealism of the conventional university is well-known, yet some of its special features need to be discussed in detail. Universities of the conventional type function almost like ivory towers and show little care for the needs of students or of society.

The charges commonly levelled against the conventional educational system, to name a few, are

i) educational programmes/courses offered are not relevant to the existing social needs,

ii) the highest paid teachers are reaching an increasingly smaller number of selected students,

iii) the age-old classroom 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.

#### 3.3.1 Socio-academic needs and conventional educational assumptions: a mismatch

The above mentioned items (i to v) point to a mismatch between the present socio-academic needs and the conventional education system. We should
mention here that much of the insular nature of conventional education systems — particularly those of higher education — has arisen from the fact that research and teaching have been regarded as twin functions that must be yoked together. A university teacher normally earns his/her right to teach on account of the research he/she was, and often still is engaged in. The result has been the development of courses that are more geared to the needs of research scholars than to those of the society at large, for example. Gradually, university education has been deprived of its ‘application’ value and has grown to be an autonomous and often a non-relevant system. This is certainly true of the Indian situation and we believe that it is so in most developing countries.

As a reaction to the above view, there came into being polytechnics and various institutions of management and technology. These institutions prepare students for degrees just as universities do. At the same time, they cater to other levels of training through various diplomas that are more tuned to the needs of society. Unlike conventional universities, these institutions are not intended to be entirely research-oriented and they are more concerned with being genuinely useful to the requirements of students and of the society they live in.

New demands, are thus being made on the educational system, which arise from the nature of industrial society. There is a tacit struggle between the traditional university framework with its emphasis on scholarship, concern with preserving human culture, and advancing knowledge and the new demand for vocation-oriented courses which will help provide training for the general growth of society. In the age of the professional, there is a growing demand for relevant knowledge and skills and for a continual updating of such information and skills. There is also a 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 of long duration and which covers basic ‘fundamentals’ in various disciplines. This is followed by experience which creates definite needs. A variety of needs exists at different levels.

These may be listed as follows:

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 specialised 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.
All these point to the fact that along with the growth of industrial society there has emerged a different kind of motivation towards education. That is to say, the traditional idea of a son generally following the footsteps of his father has become obsolete. Today young men and women generally have definite ideas about what they wish to do or do not wish to do. Often they want to change goals or subjects midway, depending upon their perception of changing needs. This assumes both a strong motivation and a flexibility of approach. Hence a system of education that can cater to such high motivation and offer a package that is flexible enough seems to be among the greatest needs of human society today, as it experiences changes at a much faster rate than it ever has before. (see unit 1, block 3, ES-311, where we say that the changes in educational systems can be attributed to societal changes).

3.3 2. Meeting the socio-economic needs

The argument we presented above highlights the growing realization that dissemination of knowledge cannot be confined to schools and colleges alone. It has to be extended beyond the campus. The adult must be able to return to education as and when he/she feels the need to do so. Education, therefore, is changing from being an institution-centred activity to a student-centred one. In the context of modern societies a once-for-all education is thus no longer viable. Economic, technological and social changes and the changes in the system of values entail a system of continuing education whereby the individual can upgrade himself/herself from time to time. The manifold needs of society, therefore, should reconcile with the educational process in a manner that will increase academic freedom without proving self-destructive.

We shall now look at the weak assumption with which traditional universities function.

Traditional universities function with the assumption that young men and women are motivated mainly by their academic interests, and thus tend to ignore or diminish the role of career prospects. Hence the urgency about the problem. Yet another dimension to this problem of the mismatch between educational assumptions and career prospects arises from the prohibitive costs involved in setting up and running a university. Considering the exorbitant costs involved, it is simply not possible to be able to set up as many universities as are needed to provide education to all. Conversely, this also works to the detriment of the existing university system. For instance, funds may not be available in the required quantity. Furthermore, teaching posts and ‘chairs’ generally remain unfilled for years together and research projects may be held up for want of funds.

Gradually the quality of the teaching staff suffers. Further, classes may not be held regularly, meaningful contact between the teacher and students may not be possible and strong intellectual stimulation may not be effected. The
result will be not only a fall in academic standards but also a deterioration in staff/student ratios. As a result, the first rate researchers are attracted to affluent countries where facilities for advanced research are available relatively easily, or they choose professions other than teaching.

It is with considerations such as these in mind that the distance learning system should be evaluated in the present context. Apart from its comparatively low costs, it is a system that can fulfil a plurality of interests and needs. It is time, then, that the high fertility rate of distance education — something that is reflected in its more flexible arrangements — and its ability to cater to a variety of demands were taken note of.

The open distance learning system can, thus, operate on two levels:

i) It can provide traditional courses in a more capsular form and allow for individual variations in programming.
ii) It can provide a variety of post-experience and in-service courses that are better geared to the requirements of the adults and of society in general.

Check Your Progress 1

List the four major criteria which characterize the functions and social relevance of an educational system. Does the present social situation suggest additional criteria?

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.
   b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

3.4 DISTANCE EDUCATION: AN EFFECTIVE AND PURPOSEFUL EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY

Now we shall look at how efficient this compatible system of education is in fulfilling the criteria that define the functions of an educational system. In keeping with what has been stated in section 3.2 certain key questions arise which should be answered in order to legitimise distance education as an
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effective and purposeful educational strategy. The questions to be answered are

i) Does distance education impart skills?
ii) Can it, by severely minimising the method of oral instruction, a primary instructional medium, turn out a really cultivated society?
iii) Can it help advance knowledge?
iv) Can it promote a rational, secular view of human beings and of human culture without the kind of interaction provided for in the conventional formal system?

Obviously, these questions clearly call for close attention and considerable discussion if distance education is to be accepted as a permanent innovation in the educational system of the contemporary world. We shall take up each one of the questions for a detailed discussion.

3.4.1 Imparting ‘skills’

Society is naturally concerned with the question of imparting ‘skills’, if it is to give its approval to the system of distance education. This question is significant also because the distance learning system does not rely upon oral instruction, and hence does not depend on the kind of socio-academic interaction which is the mainstay of the formal system.

Though distance education depends mostly on the written word, the role of the spoken word is not wholly discarded. Being a multi-media system of education, the distance mode of teaching/learning imparts instruction through electronic media as well.

A basic learning of skills is thus inherent in distance education.

For our purpose, we shall divide skills broadly into three categories:

i) Communication skills (listening, reading, writing, and oral skills),
ii) Intellectual skills (reasoning abilities), and
iii) Specialised skills (scientific and technological abilities as well as management skills).

Communication skills

In fact, the distance education system makes ample provision for the distance learners to communicate, though mainly through the written word, with the distance tutors or institutions. Having read through the course materials, the students are expected to respond to the assignment questions sent to them. (Usually, the submission of assignments is made compulsory in this system). These days electronic media are being used more and more successfully and conveniently for two way communication.

Intellectual skills

These skills are presupposed in the course design. Sufficient demands are made upon the students who may at the same time be permitted to pace their learning. However, a point of some importance may be made here. Distance
education programmes are bound to function in a somewhat different existential situation where the student is more immediately concerned about his/her ability to support himself/herself and is thus likely to make an informed choice of courses. It is this feasibility that gives him/her stronger motivation to study. It can be argued that intercultural stimulation would produce a more promising response in him/her than it would in a student who is part of a traditional university.

Specialised skills

Such skills pose problems of a logistic nature. They concern the teaching of science and technology and those areas where an insistence on project work is considered desirable. Certain solutions do suggest themselves such as the use of, practical kits in the case of basic science. There are other solutions too, such as week-end practicals or summer schools where laboratory based practicals may be possible. We can also think in terms of apprenticeship programmes with the active participation of industries. These problems are by no means intractable. So they call for a good deal of innovation and considerable coordination.

At this juncture, let us distinguish between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ levels of education.

The ‘lower level’ of education will consist of traditional courses with suitable modification in so far as their administration/monitoring is concerned and will provide education in the fundamentals. There is no harm in retaining the traditional arts, commerce and science streams or in integrating these into a common stream with adequate modification to effect distance teaching/learning, allowing multiple choices, monitoring student progress and awarding degrees on the basis of credits earned. Thus a student might be allowed to opt at a time for two disciplines at an elementary level, and over a minimum period of three years complete at least six disciplines, along with a selected few at somewhat more advanced and specialised levels, to be able to earn his/her first degree.

At the ‘higher level’, a variety of courses will have to be offered. These may consist of in-service and post-experience courses that will assume a basic knowledge of the discipline/area, seek to further update knowledge/skill levels, and provide the adult learners with an opportunity for continuing their education. These courses may include instructional packages giving the latest information on relevant disciplines such as astronomy, chemistry, sociology, anthropology, economics, etc. Such courses include discussion at a fairly sophisticated level and lead -- once again through a credit earning system -- to a post-graduate degree.

We should not, however, overlook the problems which arise from the general conservative attitude of society. The social problem which deserves our attention is whether a distance student will be employable in the teaching profession or for that matter any other profession, at par with a student from the formal system. Of, course, we have argued that a distance student is in
no way inferior to his/her counterpart at a conventional institution. Our discussions in units 1 and 2 give us adequate support on this issue. But has society in general accepted it?

Cheek Your Progress 2

In about 15 lines describe how distance education fulfils the criteria of imparting skills. Are you yourself convinced of it?

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.
   b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

3.4.2 Building a cultivated society

Apart from furthering a more professional understanding of social and economic roles, distance education can help significantly in the evolution of a learning society. The possibility of taking a course and of updating one’s information level at any time in one’s life is more than likely to promote a professional attitude towards one’s social role. Consider the case of a general medical practitioner who, without having to go on leave, can take a course in order to learn about the latest diagnostic practices and the principles behind the newer formulations in drugs. Such a course would foster in him/her a more professional attitude, besides adding to his/her efficiency. And such a task would be accomplished within a limited time, with limited resources and limited commitments. In other words, in spite of several constraints, distance education strategies would certainly help us move one step nearer to a more self-conscious, professional and learning society.

Hence, it is hardly necessary to justify the idea that distance education leads to a general improvement and transformation of learners and through them, of society as a whole. By initiating them into subjects and areas which are
valuable in themselves, the system will turn out more cultivated persons whose powers of reasoning are likely to be more sophisticated than they were before. And, since distance education can act without the restraining condition of numbers, the system can reach out to very large groups and bring about desired changes in a very short period of time.

Check Your Progress 3

Write in about 10 lines how distance education can transform an ordinary society into a cultivated one.

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.
    b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

3.4.3 Advancing knowledge

Can distance education lead to research and add to the growth of knowledge through research? Yes, it can. The kind of research that may entail distance education programmes concerns the designing and selection/innovation of courses. This research can be very fruitful as it will have to concern itself with continually modifying and updating courses and thus provide a basic dynamism to the distance education system.

Consider the following:

You would have noticed, by this time, that by itself distance education is a socio-academic activity — an activity that
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i) has to develop not only new insights into but also new ways of explaining and achieving the educational aims of different courses required by distance learners; these aims mostly pertain to cognitive, psychomotor and/or affective domains. However, it does underscore the fact that the variety of courses offered by an open university or a distance education institution -- academic courses, refresher and updating courses, training courses, general awareness courses, etc. — will demand an unusual mixing of these aims, and therefore each course will have to be designed and presented differently.

ii) must be based on investigations and insights into the study habits of individual learners, the processes of learning, teaching and effective academic communication.

iii) assesses and then exploits the differing strengths and weaknesses of different education media — print, audio and video materials, oral communication, communication by correspondence, telephone, computers, etc. — for purposes of both the cost and the pedagogic effectiveness of the type of courses offered.

iv) plans two-way feedback extensively for purposes of reducing misunderstanding by students, failure of courses, the difficulties caused by the variations in students’ abilities and other difficulties that may be caused by the failure of postal services, the private problems of a distance learner, the unsympathetic attitude of a tutor, etc.

v) makes use of investigations and insights into the systems and strategies of information processing for purposes of promoting more effective teaching materials and thereby discarding the less effective ones.

The items (i-v) presented above give us a broad outline of the research activities that are basic to distance teaching as a system.

3.4.4 Instilling the secular view

More specifically, distance education — and this encompasses its fuller development including the use of audio-visual supplementation and, gradually, the channelling of radio/TV and computer networks — will promote in the individual those basic abilities that form a necessary part of the adult in a modern, changing society.

What are these basic abilities?

i) ability to support himself or herself,

ii) ability to make informed choices about life, including career, religion, politics, life-style and general attitudes, and

iii) ability to decide what is and is not morally acceptable.

Corresponding to each of these, one’s education must provide one with

i) sufficient skills to obtain work,

ii) general education giving a reasonable understanding of the nature of human beings and of the world, and

iii) education in morality.
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It may be possible, at this point, to say that a distance education system, when properly and fully developed, leads to a furthering of those interests that are peculiar to an open society. By providing education to all, the educational process ceases to be a preserve of the elite. And by catering to the needs of school/college dropouts, distance education can almost eliminate the academic isolation of those who have been deprived of education for whatever reason.

Thus, distance education is placed in a position which enables it to take on the responsibility of offering diverse courses throughout an individual’s life.

It also ensures the spread of rationality and a common human culture based on values that arise out of learning and professionalism. Distance education is thus a highly potent tool in a developing society that is anxious to bring about egalitarianism through the educational process.

In contrast with this system of education, the educational structure now prevalent tends to be autocratic and coercive. The manner in which the formal university is structured, and functions in some of the developing societies leaves much to be desired. In these societies, universities were set up quite early in the colonial era and often by the ruling Western societies. These universities tend to ape the Western universities of the past and often turn out products that are more suited to Western societies. What is, however, the most abominable part of these universities is that they are wary of giving to the student any real measure of academic freedom. For instance, there is generally a great deal of restriction on the choice of subjects/disciplines and these are such formidable barriers that students often take up courses of study only through the pressure the system exerts and not through any degree of voluntary choice. In fact, the students do not even know about the choices possible in the western world. Thus, a student who may wish to change a course midstream finds it an impossibility and is compelled to continue with a programme in a halfhearted manner.

It should be mentioned here that those universities which resisted the influence of colonialism were able to define their objectives more clearly and hence avoided this rather lop-sided development.

It is here that distance education as a system is in a position to offer flexibility in course curricula. It can cut through the heavily ritualised manner of functioning of the formal system. Education can become a more vital experience, giving to the learner a chance to alter his/her existential situation and hence perception of society. In effect, distance education can reduce significantly the constraints on development that originate and arise out of the formal educational system. That this alters the historical experience of a society makes distance education a basis for revolution as well as for evolution.

By altering the existing social stratification through educational restructuring, it is possible to alter significantly the developmental experience
of a society. This is particularly relevant in a developing society. In other words, it is only when one perceives education as a future-oriented programme that one is able to link it up with the process of development.

**Some inferences:**

The following major inferences emerge from this argument:

i) Education is very heavily conditioned by the constraints and compromises of the past and thus does not easily respond to new demands and to change in society. An educational system can achieve a high degree of autonomy and social insulation under certain conditions and can grow indifferent to the world around it.

ii) The responsiveness of education to social, economic and political demands depends largely upon the type of society and the kind of development it permits. (From this point of view, one can see the educational system in India reflecting the general conservatism of Indian society. This may not permit any radical change unless the values of leading socio-political groups overcome the constraints of the past and conceive of new options for the future. Thus, a degree obtained though distance education may carry a stigma in Indian society for quite sometime until the overall social framework is amended through political pressure. However, the way it gains currency indicates that distance education has come in a big way in India). This may be the experience of other developing societies too.

iii) There is a special responsibility of the academicians in so far as they have to spell out the vision of a better future of an evolving society in which education is going to be widely available and will be linked to the development and participation of all individuals in the general social growth.

It is in this light that distance education can also be seen as an important declaration of policy. Policy in education does not reflect only a concern with resources and priorities. It is more deeply related to questions of social demands. These demands cannot be separated from the interests of dominant groups with vested interests and their political power and form the network of international relations. Thus, a programme for education cannot be discussed except within the social needs it reflects.

Besides reflecting social needs, educational planning, to be realistic, should take into account not only the choices available but also those constraints which cannot be easily overcome, and the means through which ends have to be realised. Distance education provides just such an alternative. It accepts the challenge of existing constraints on resources, buildings for schools and colleges, funds, availability of workforce etc., and seeks to mobilise available resources to provide the much needed instructional package. It is in that sense that distance education is an answer to a genuine need and is a significant policy change in education.
The foregoing discussion shows that distance education has the relevant credentials for being considered a discipline by itself and reinforces the fact that it is a system which is self-reliant and autonomous. However, it has to operate through appropriate mechanisms and the operational issues involved in the practice of distance education are as important as the theoretical propositions justifying it. We shall discuss the micro and the macro issues of distance education operations in sections 3.5 and 3.6 respectively.

3.5 MICRO ISSUES

By ‘micro-issues’ we mean the issues related to the ‘academic inputs’ which are generally being used in the distance teaching institutes to disseminate instruction. The following items constitute such ‘academic inputs’. They are:

i) Students’ Assignment-responses,
ii) Course Materials (print, and electronic), and
iii) Personal Contact Programmes

It should not be, construed however, that these inputs have been uniformly used in all distance teaching institutes. Nevertheless, it should be noted that most of these institutes invariably use print materials. ‘Print’, thus, plays a pivotal role in the distance mode of teaching and learning in India as elsewhere, notwithstanding the technological advances which are making educational transactions more and more intimate.
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Now, we shall take up each one of the inputs in the same order as given above. This discussion of the ‘academic inputs’ brings to light the issues pertaining to them.

3.5.1 Students’ assignment-responses

Assignment-responses are one of the major inputs through which distance teaching institutes normally communicate with the students. That is, tutor comments on the assignments give the students the necessary feedback. Academic communication is thus effected. Usually the submission of assignments is made compulsory in most distance teaching institutes. Some directorates which have experimented with compulsory submission of assignments have been forced to give up this practice, for the following reasons:

i) students’ resistance born of laziness, inexperience or lack of aptitude,

ii) inadequacy of the staff to correct the assignment-responses and send them back to the students.

iii) delay in submission of assignment - responses from the students, and

iv) the failure of the directorates to send reading materials in time so that the students could not submit responses well in time.

It has also been noted that in case the responses sent by the students are not returned within a reasonable period of time, the students lose interest and consequently they stop submitting them thereafter. Secondly, if the teachers correcting the responses do not give concrete suggestions for improvement, the students feel that it is a futile exercise. Therefore, it is necessary that the submission of assignment - responses, which are very useful as means of providing feedback should be streamlined. This implies, among other things, that an adequate quantum of staff be provided for the purpose, and the submission and return of the responses to the students be made more regular. The situation as it prevails in many of the institutes in the developing world today is not encouraging and leaves much to be desired.

3.5.2 Course materials (print and electronic media)

A major chunk of the course materials of any distance education programme is normally covered by print materials notwithstanding the rapid developments in the telecommunications, computer technology and audio-visual media. Obviously, the distance teaching directorates involve themselves in the production of a large quantity of print materials for various courses. However identical the course content/syllabus may be, each one of these directorate/institutes prepares its own materials in order to maintain its identity and standards.

It should not however, be understood from this that the academic and distance teaching directorates are the sole agencies engaged in preparing course materials. By implication , these directorates more often than not, might as well depend on outside sources — course writers from outside the
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directorate structure — for materials. It should be mentioned here that inadequate academic infrastructure is the chief factor which forces the directorates to depend on course materials prepared outside the directorate system.

Those directorates which have to find course writers outside the system normally pay small and varying amounts depending on the status of the person engaged for preparing the course materials. Eminent persons, who have sound footing in their own field of study, are generally reluctant to undertake this task, either because of the fact that they hardly have any time to spare for such work, or because of the disincentive in the form of trivial remuneration. (Added to this, perhaps, is the fact that a majority of the senior academics feel diffident about writing course materials). Consequently, upon these facts some distance teaching directorates are forced to depend on mediocre course writers. The courses thus prepared very often fail to bring light the effectiveness of the print medium.

It would not be difficult to pay decent remuneration to the course writers, if the distance teaching directorates were given adequate financial support, or in some cases, allowed to use the income generated by the directorates for the development of courses and other support services.

Besides print materials, the distance teaching directorates make use of media support — radio, television, video cassettes, etc. In fact, radio talks have been widely used. With the co-operation of local radio stations, the directorates broadcast the lectures of eminent personalities. As far as possible the directorates choose a convenient time for the students to listen to these lectures and benefit from them. But there are limitations.

What are the major drawbacks of radio lectures?

To serve our immediate purpose, we have identified three major drawbacks. They are:

i) The specified time for radio talks may not be convenient to a heterogeneous population.

ii) However mature/adult a person, ‘animation’ has a stronger impact on him/her. Radio talks being restricted to an auditory channel may not capture and sustain the attention of the students.

iii) Being a heterogeneous group the degree of concentration reached by the students may not be identical — a student who has a lower level of concentration cannot play back the talk and thus does not assimilate it at his/her own pace.

Notwithstanding these limitations, we can safely say that, wherever available, distance students benefit from radio broadcasts. What we need, perhaps, is a means to present these broadcasts effectively. We discuss the related issues in detail in ES 318, the course on “Communication Technology in Distance Education”.

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3.5.3 Student support services

In this sub-section, we shall touch upon some prominent support services like contact programmes, study centre and laboratory facilities. (We elaborate on these in the course ES 313 “Support Services” in a larger context).

Contact Programmes

Contact programmes are generally considered to make significant academic inputs in distance teaching all over the world. They are arranged with a view to providing opportunities to the students to have interaction with their tutors and peers. Besides offering academic benefits, the contact programmes establish a useful rapport between the distance teaching directorate and the distance students. Obviously, this helps the students escape from or deal with their feeling of loneliness which may otherwise prove harmful to their studies.

Normally, in contact programmes major issues are taken up and discussed. This assumes, in fact, that the students would have thoroughly gone through the materials sent to them and come to attend the contact programme with specific doubts to be clarified. The duration for such programmes being limited, it is impossible and also impractical to have a sentence by sentence discussion. They have to be more like tutorials than lectures, but it is not unusual for students not to come prepared for such tutorials.

Is the attendance at contact programmes made compulsory?

Except for a few professional programmes like Diploma in Library Science, Bachelor/Master of Education etc., attendance at contact programmes is optional. Some distance teaching directorates do not even conduct these programmes, due to various administrative reasons. The academic effectiveness of such programmes is viewed differently by different directorates — some directorates make them an integral part of their academic endeavour while some others tend to ignore them.

The major reason for this kind of indifference to contact programmes is the simple fact that the directorates suffer either from poor financial support or from an inadequate academic infrastructure. By implication, ‘under-nourished’ directorates should be paid proper attention.

Now let us look at the difficulties which are faced by the directorates in conducting, and by the students in attending the contact programmes.

i) Inadequate financial support: Usually personal contact programmes are organised at places where the distance teaching institutions have reasonable student-concentration. Consequently, these programmes become restricted to a limited number of places. Thus, many students
Social Credibility and Operational Issues

may not be able to profit from such programmes. Given enough financial support, the contact programmes can be arranged at a reasonable number of places.

ii) Difficulty in getting leave: Working students find it difficult to get leave (or day release) from their employers for attending the contact programmes which go on for long periods of time.

iii) Problems of accommodation, board and transport: Often, the distance teaching directorates may not be able to provide these facilities to the students. The transport authorities do not grant travel concessions to the students who come for such programmes.

We should say here that there are many more difficulties we could write about, but these are the major problems which need special mention.

The items we listed above — especially item (i) — reveal that the duration of the personal contact programme is also a matter which needs closer scrutiny.

Duration of personal contact programmes

Distance students generally appreciate the importance of personal contact programmes as a very useful input for improving their understanding of the subject. Consequently, some of them insist on longer durations for these programmes but some prefer a shorter duration. Directorates of distance education prescribe varied durations of personal contact programmes ranging from 2-3 days to 20-30 days in a year. Some believe that a 2-3 day programme is too short to serve any meaningful purpose, but it may be contended that a 2-3 day contact programme can be made effective. It mainly depends on the course content. Depending on what the subject needs, 14 working days extendable up to 20 days in the case of undergraduate programmes and 30 days in the case of a post-graduate programme may be useful for the students. Of course, this presupposes that working students are being granted leave for the purpose. Providing the students with per diem and travel grants will solve the problems of accommodation, boarding and transport. [See items (ii) and (iii) above]. But is that possible for each and every institution?

Laboratory facilities and library-cum-study centres

Distance teaching directorates which offer courses in science and technology confront the problem of providing laboratory facilities to the students.

For this purpose the directorates either set up their own laboratories or seek help from other institutions which have laboratory facilities. The students may avail themselves of these laboratory facilities on holidays and weekends. The strategy of using experimental kits is quite useful, but can't be adopted by all alike. Keeping in mind the significant role the practical experiments play in science and technology, it is necessary for the distance teaching directorates to have laboratory facilities, either of their own or hired from other institutions.
Socio-academic Issues

Distance teaching directorates also require the setting up of library-cum-study centres, which should make library facilities and teacher guidance accessible to the students. Some directorates do set up library-cum-study centres. The main problems faced in this case are:

i) The directorates do not have the resources to appoint teachers who can be made available for the guidance of the students.

ii) Adequate grants for the library-cum-study centres are not available to the directorates, and therefore, reading room facilities and adequate reading material cannot be provided to a large number of students.

Cheek Your Progress 5

Mention the two main factors, which lessen the academic effectiveness of distance education in your country. See how similar or dissimilar they are to those described above.

Notes: Space is given below for your answer.

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The discussion of these micro-issues leads us to the conclusion that the directorates should have enough financial support and a sound academic infrastructure in order that the issues may be adequately resolved. We discuss these issues further in ES 313, the course on "Support Services". Now we shall look into the 'macro-issues'.

3.6 MACRO ISSUES

The educational system in India is passing through a period of transition. On the one hand, the establishment of Indira Gandhi National Open University has fulfilled the long-felt need to have an apex institution to act as a pace-setter with respect to distance education. On the other, educational biases coupled with social prejudices look down upon distance education. This does not, however, lessen the need for an effective educational system like distance education. So some nine State Governments have already established and some others are thinking of establishing open universities to
cater to the needs of a vast clientele. This being the state of affairs, the main contention has been that these newly set up distance teaching institutions ignore the experience of the existing ones. And efforts are being made at the Central level to bring the existing institutions or directorates within the fold of the Open University structure. This stems from the fact that the existing directorates attached to the conventional universities are deprived of the freedom of developing their own syllabi, methods of instruction, etc. In other words, a ‘dual structure’ (i.e., independent Open Universities to impart distance education and distance teaching directorates attached to the existing universities) has come into being. In the long run, such a ‘dual structure’ may not promote the cause of distance education. The Distance Education Council (DEC) of IGNOU and the University Grants Commission (UGC) are making efforts to resolve this issue. The course ES 314 gives you a comprehensive account of these issues.

We shall discuss here two major identifiable impediments in the development of distance teaching directorates which are attached to the conventional universities.

3.6.1 Distance teaching institutes: The present state

Bogged down by their problems, very little time is devoted by conventional universities to promote the distance mode of education. It is not uncommon that academics at conventional universities in India continue discussing whether a particular course can be given through the distance mode of teaching, though experience has shown that every kind of knowledge can be transmitted through the distance mode of education. Obviously, it takes us quite some time before we clearly see the potential of distance education! Consequent upon this, the distance teaching units attached to the conventional universities are considered ‘inferior’ in the academic hierarchy.

They can neither frame their syllabi nor innovate their system of examination. They have no option but to follow the syllabi of the parent universities and adhere to their examination pattern. Added to this is the popular fallacy that certificates, diplomas or degrees obtained after taking distance education courses can have academic and social credibility only if the students concerned have gone through the same course content and followed the same examination pattern which prevail in conventional educational institutions. Although this is a naïve view, there is hardly any effort made to dispel it. Rather, with the present university structure, it is not possible to dispense with it. By implication, the distance teaching directorates do not have an identity of their own. They are treated as mere appendages of the parent universities.

Moreover, the operators of the distance education system have hardly any role to play in the process of decision-making. In other words, the teachers and the non-academic staff of the directorates are hardly associated with the process of decisions-making. The formal bodies of parent universities play a dominant role in taking decisions regarding the problems faced by the distance teaching directorates for devising innovations. This absence of
Socio-academic Issues

autonomy in decision-making is bound to hinder the development of distance education in every respect. As we said earlier this situation may change for the better when the efforts of the Distance Education Council (DEC) bear fruit.

Cheek Your Progress 6

We have said that the existing distance teaching directorates are treated as mere appendages to the parent conventional universities. Is this true of your state/country? Give an example to substantiate your stand.

Notes: a) Space is given below for your answer.
   b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

3.6.2. Financial support to distance teaching directorates

Although as part of the National Education Policy of India, distance education techniques have been accepted as viable and economical alternative techniques for reaching the deprived sections of society, adequate support in the form of human and physical infrastructure has not been provided to them so far.

In general, it has been found that the ratio of cost per student between the on-campus students and the distance students is 3:1. Besides, the average cost per student for the on-campus students is about ten times the average fee.
paid by them. The subsidy per student is quite high obviously. As against this, in distance education the cost per student works out to be less than one third of what it is for the on-campus student and nearly 45% of the cost is being paid by the distance student. The quantum of state support is too meagre for the development of a meaningful distance education system. On top of this, it is not unusual for governments to ask distance education directorates to be self-sufficient or even revenue generating mechanisms, while on-campus education continues to be subsidised. What is the situation in your country/state?

It is necessary that certain norms of expenditure are developed and revised periodically so that this alternative technique of education may develop a proper infrastructure and an effective delivery system.

Distance teaching directorates do not enjoy financial autonomy to run their programmes or bring in innovations necessary for imparting instructions through the distance mode of teaching/learning. This is not to say that there should be no limit on the financial autonomy of distance teaching directorates but that certain norms of making provision for financial assistance should be developed.

The emphasis should shift from a competitive approach to one of collaboration, and optimisation of resources. This requires coordinated planning of distance education at the national level. A detailed discussion on this is presented in ES 314, the course on “Planning and Management of Distance Education”.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

We discussed the academic and social relevance of an educational system and the normal criteria within which it operates. We also identified four major aims that characterize the functions of an educational system. The aims we identified are: to impart skills, to develop the powers of the mind, advance knowledge, and promote a secular view among the people.

We then evolved a more valid perspective of distance education and considered its legitimacy with reference to that perspective. Having given the perspective, we discussed comprehensively whether or not distance education fulfills each of the educational criteria mentioned above. We eventually drew the conclusion that distance education does fulfil the criteria satisfactorily.

Finally, we discussed the major operational issues related to the type of distance education offered by the units/directorates located in the conventional universities, the problems faced by them and the possible solutions.
Check Your Progress: Possible Answers

1. An educational system should be able to:
   
   i) give instruction in skills,
   
   ii) develop the powers of the mind and bring about a cultivated society,
   
   iii) advance knowledge, and
   
   iv) transmit a common human culture and thereby instil a secular view among individuals.

   The present social situation suggests many more criteria, for example, social and economic relevance of education, education to bring about equity, etc.

2. Distance education encompasses three domains (i.e. cognitive, psychomotor and affective) which subsume skills of learning.

   i) **Cognitive domain**: Access devices, i.e., glossaries, exercises, etc., which predominate in distance teaching materials help to develop independent reading and the comprehension skills of the students.

   ii) **Psycho-motor domain**: Distance education takes care of this domain by providing the students access to laboratory facilities especially for science subjects.

   iii) **Affective domain**: The demands of this domain are met through personal contact programmes, counselling, tutor-comment, audio/video programmes, computer aided learning and by adopting a personalised approach in the design of course materials.

3. Distance education provides an opportunity for updating information and life-long education. It, thus, promotes one's professional attitude towards one's social roles and leads to improved awareness in the learner. This awareness, in turn, leads to a shared improvement and the transformation of the society as a whole.

4. By providing educational opportunities to a majority of the population, distance education brings about de-elitisation of the educational process. Thus, its wide 'coverage' ensures the spread of rationality and a common human culture based on values that arise out of learning — this is a positive move towards the creation of a learning society.

6. The existing distance teaching directorates in India are parts of their parent conventional universities. As a result 'academic autonomy' is denied to them. That is, these directorates are forced to follow the syllabi and examination pattern of conventional universities. Thus, the immense potential of distance education as a system remains unexploited.