Emergence of ODL at the Tertiary Level

Introduction

As discussed in the earlier units of this Blocks, today, an important aspect of higher education is the emergence of alternative channels of learning which can address diversified client needs, facilitate continuing professional development, deploy information and communications technology for meeting multi-channel learning styles, and reduce the cost of education and training while maintaining its quality. Global developments, in general, and developments within higher education, in particular, have necessitated the emergence of open and distance learning at the tertiary level, which has further evolved into forms of learning interactive multimedia and web-based learning. This unit discusses the important like changes while critically examining the issues and challenges impacting higher education, including open and distance learning in India.

Learning outcomes

The present unit is intended to give a broad view of the development of distance education in India, against the backdrop of some of the challenges faced by higher education generally. At the end of the unit, you should be able to

- identify and reflect on some of the global changes and their impact on higher education generally;
- analyse the issues and challenges facing higher education in India today;
- discuss the developments in distance education in India and its present status;
- trace and analyse the challenges faced by distance education, and discuss its potential as a system of the future.

Global changes

Changes are taking place globally in all spheres of life, these changes are not only inextricably related to each other but are also influencing each other. For our purpose, we have selected in this section for discussion, some of the important changes in socio-economic and political spheres. These shall provide a base to our discussion on the recent developments in higher education and the emergence of open and distance learning in India.

Global changes

Constant changes in economic, technological and political spheres are taking place which have affected the national policies, regional cooperation and international diplomacy. Economic changes have been the most powerful of all, especially, globalization.

We will discuss these in the following section, beginning with an understanding of what globalization is. Globalization is the product of the emergence of a global economy, expansion
What are the characteristics of globalization?

- In **economic terms**, a transition from fordist to post-fordist forms of workplace organization, a rise in internationalized advertising and consumption patterns; a reduction in barriers to the free flow of goods, workers, and investments across national borders; and, correspondingly, new pressures on the roles of worker and consumer in society;

- In **political terms** a certain loss of nation state sovereignty, or at least the erosion of national autonomy, and, correspondingly, a weakening of the notion of the "citizen" as a unified and unifying concept;

- In **cultural terms** a tension between the ways in which globalization brings forth more standardization and cultural homogeneity while also bringing more fragmentation at the local level.

The fallout of the above has been:

- Economic changes in the form of liberalization, marketisation and global economic reforms like GATT have created **economic imbalances** in the developing economies of many nations. This trend has facilitated privatization, internationalization, and increasing role of multinational agencies in various sectors of society and economy including education. The private sector is looking for opportunities in various aspects of the economy, and the equation between demand and supply is changing with coming up of newer consumers with newer demands for consumption goods and services. With reduction in public investment and increasing privatization of production and distribution of goods and services, new equations are being established for national and regional economic centers and cost centers. The trend has adversely affected the disadvantaged communities of society.

- There have been tremendous (technological) developments in the sectors of communications and information technology. The advent of www/Internet has deeply affected the traditional socio-economic culture, and ways of thinking and living. Technology has permeated every sphere of life, including education and training. Technology is being visualized to increase access to education and reform the quality of instructional and support provisions. In many spheres of life, including lifelong education, convergence of means and media is leading to hitherto unthinkable equations, strategies and processes, and therefore, novel provisions for planning, design and delivery of instruction.

- There have been significant political developments in the past few decades. The notables are the disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union into a few independent nations, the end of apartheid and beginning of democracy in South Africa, reorganization of democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq, etc. These political changes have necessitated rebuilding of societies bringing in demands for equality, equity and access in education. Newly emerging nations and democratization have placed premium on human resource development and education for all.

You may think of many other global changes that are affecting the international, regional, national and local institutions and life styles. Let us examine have these changes are effecting higher education systems world over.
Global changes effecting higher education

We discuss below some of the important changes within higher education that have wider implications for most of the national systems of higher education. The integration of the Indian economy with the world economy as envisaged by the economic reform policies presupposes efficiency and competitiveness in the domestic front as well as in the international arena. The process of globalization is technology driven and knowledge-driven. Globalization involves changes in development paradigms from: social welfare, equity, and nationstate philosophy, to one that which emphasizes economic efficiency, market economy, a weak state and global economy. Following the introduction of these policies, a fiscal squeeze is experienced in social sector investments in India like education. These policies are also found to have caused significant reduction in rates of growth of budget expenditure on education (Tilak, 2001). Ironically, however, the very success of economic reform policies critically depends upon the competence of the human capital. It is important to reflect on these issues to be able to see the developments in higher education and distance education in a proper perspective.

- First, higher education has been under pressure, from both funding agencies and various other stakeholders, to be efficient, responsive, flexible and vibrant. In many countries, there has not been a commensurate increase in expenditure on education with every increase in GNP (gross national product). Within educational expenditure, that for higher and further education is decreasing, and post secondary institutions are being asked to generate resources from other than government sources, and especially from increase in student fees.

- Second, globalization has been very imposing on higher education. Not only new partnerships, alliances and consortia are emerging, but also individual institutions are under pressure to cater to the needs of diversified student groups and thereby broad base and internationalize curriculum and instruction. Globalization also demands that educational resources be pooled to avoid duplication and for purposes of efficiency, with provision for local variations in curricular inputs for meeting local needs of the community.

- Third, technologisation or electronification of higher education has put undue pressure on institutions to create provision for and base curricular designs on new technologies. This has also been argued from the point of view that varied learning styles of diversified groups of learners, and especially the gap between the mainstream and first generation learners, could be taken care of by inputs from a variety of media through provisions for multi-channel learning. The latest development of web-based / online learning has created a new paradigm in instructional design and instructional management, and has created new provisions of costing and the possibility of economy of scale.
Indian Higher Education: Concerns and Developments

- Fourth, with increasing diversity in student population and concomitant curricular provisions, the issues of quality assurance and accreditation are assuming greater significance. While institutional, departmental and individual faculty performance (as also the instructional process) are being evaluated and related to funding provisions, institutions are under increasing pressure to let themselves go through processes of accreditation. International benchmarks are being put up for conforming to such standards, and also institutions are required to satisfy various accrediting bodies / councils for different programmes of study separately.

- Fifth, there is also unexpected pressure on postsecondary institutions to expand provision to accommodate an ever-increasing student population. While physical infrastructure and facilities are very difficult to expand, alternative channels of learning are put in place to make a balance between scale and quality.

- Sixth, community education is emerging as an important dimension of lifelong education, and alternative educational provisions, beyond the "extension" programmes of higher education institutions, are being explored to meet this growing need. Education, training and research are being called for to serve the needs of the local community.

- Seventh, with increasing job mobility, specialization and simultaneously the need for multi-skilling, as also due to the need for constant updation, continuing professional development has assumed greater significance especially in business and industry, and other professional areas.

Self-assessment

2. In the context of recent global changes discuss the implications on the system of higher education?

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Higher education in India: issues and challenges

The above brief discussion on developments in higher education provides a perspective within which we locate developments in higher education in India including the emergence of the ODL. The structure of higher education in India is given in Figure 1, from which you will notice the amount of time one needs to spend on different levels of education in the country. Such an education system had its origin in the gurukula system of the ancient times, and has evolved through the internationally recognized centres of learning at Nalanda and Takshila, and further reforms during the British rule. Starting with 18 universities and 591 colleges at the time of Independence in 1947, these have increased to above 300 and 14,000 respectively. The increase in the number of universities during 2003 is also due to the opening up of above six scores of universities in the newly created State of Chhattisgarh with approval received from the State government. In India, we have the second largest system of higher education with over 9 million students and 3.5 million teachers. While more than 88% of students study in undergraduate programmes, 5% and 3.5% study in Engineering and Technology, and Medicine respectively; and about 1.5% in Agriculture. About 36% of students are women, and the percentage of students from disadvantaged communities has not gone beyond class 12. (This issue has been discussed in the first unit of the Block in greater detail.)
in the Fourth Plan has come down to about 8% in the Ninth Plan. With increasing financial allocation for primary and adult education, the size of the purse for higher education is decreasing; and universities are under tremendous pressure to adopt financial stringency and efficiency. The existing structure of higher education has been able to cater to the educational needs of about 6% of the population in the relevant age group of 17-23 years.

Given the magnitude of the system and its operation, higher education in India is embroiled with host of issues and emerging challenges. A few significant ones are enumerated below for placing the growth and development of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in a perspective.

- First, the pressure on institutions of higher learning is tremendous, and all the Central, State and “deemed to be” universities, and institutions of national importance, have not been able to meet the need for increasing aspiration for education. Increasingly, private initiative for higher education is being called for; though the Private Universities Bill is still lying in the Parliament awaiting clearance. A large number of private institutes have come up and increasing number of such institutions are being accorded the status of “deemed to be” universities by the University Grants Commission. Apart from the private institutions, the Central government is proposing to expand the provisions for distance learning so as to accommodate at least half of the future demand for higher learning through this mode. While the distance learning system caters to about 20% of all higher education students, it is expected to increase the intake to about 40% in the Tenth Plan.

- Second, funding has been a major issue. With decreasing resource allocation for higher education, universities are required to mobilise additional resources from either increasing student fees, and / or tapping other sources like expansion of university-industry linkages and offering distance learning programmes.

- Third, quality and accreditation are other issues as well as challenges. Quality assurance requires human, infrastructure, pedagogic, financial and other resources to be utilized not only to the optimum level but also to conform to agreed upon standards so that the inputs, processes and outputs are under constant scrutiny for improvement in respective areas. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council of the UGC and the National Board of Accreditation of the AICTE are responsible for institutional and programme evaluation, and for providing accredited status to institutions of higher learning. Universities are also required to conform to the standards set by various other Councils like Medical Council of India, Indian Nursing Council, National Council for Teacher Education, as also the Distance Education Council of Indira Gandhi National Open University.

- Fourth, globalisation and global pressure for “reform” (including reengineering, restructuring and transforming) have led universities to rethink about the curriculum, instructional strategy involving more ICT-enabled education, expansion of training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) or “lifelong learning” provisions, international students needs, and quality benchmarking. This involves competition and formation of strategic alliances. While many of the universities are getting into more of strategic planning only a few have adopted holistic planning initiatives which involve system-wide implementation of especially ICT enabled teaching, training, research, extension, management, services and evaluation.

- Fifth, curriculum upgrading, updating and diversification is still a central issue in universities. While most have not even updated and transformed in the pattern suggested by the University Grants Commission through their Curriculum Development Cells, there is also an increasing need to diversify curriculum and course structures to meet emerging specialized need for education and training. Extension has remained an elusive aspect of curriculum and so has quality
research. Though many of the central agencies like the UGC, ICSSR, CSIR, ICMR, ICAR and others have significant funding for discipline research, the quality of doctoral programmes has not increased significantly. It is not surprising, then, that Phillip Altbach, an eminent educationist has remarked that Indian higher education has pockets of excellence in a sea of mediocrity. Further, though many Indian expatriates have brought name and fame in both teaching and research in Western universities, universities at home have not been able to keep pace with emerging research needs and demands especially in the sectors of quality information technology and management.

- Sixth, continuing professional development in various professions, and professional development of college and university teachers are areas of significant concern to educational planners and administrators. Many of the universities do not have programmes tailored made for continuing professional development and training needs of various economic and development sectors. Moreover even the Academic Staff Colleges have been inadequate to cater to the CPD needs of the university and college teachers. Primary and secondary education teacher training, especially training of the untrained teachers, is yet another challenge to the conventional system as such.

- Seventh, higher and further education, while in gainful employment, is still a rare phenomenon. Further, most of the campuses face the problem of student and employee unrest.

Activity 1
At this stage, you may like to reflect on the above issues, and such others that you may think of, and collate your views on how higher education can be geared towards further reforms, and what role distance education can play in dealing with some of the challenges. Space is given below for jotting down your views.

Emergence of distance education
Distance education, in the form of correspondence education, was recommended as a reformative measure by the three delegations sent by the Government of India during 1967-71 to the erstwhile USSR. The recommendations of the delegations were extremely useful to those involved in establishing the complementary mode of correspondence/distance education. However, the initiation of correspondence courses at the University of Delhi in 1962 with 1112 students at the undergraduate level and the subsequent developments in this stream of education was hardly intended, as a policy, to address many of the issues and challenges noted above for Indian higher education. Correspondence education was intended to provide further opportunities to those who had either missed formal education or could not afford it, or even could not have required grades to get admitted to it. The other covert objectives included generation of additional resources to fund the conventional education and research, as also to partially offset campus unrest. You may wonder if such were the objectives of initiating ODL system in other parts of the world! Social access and equity were the other objectives of setting up the Open and Distance Learning systems.
Subsequent to the initiation of correspondence courses in the University of Delhi, many universities, especially in the northern part of the country, started correspondence courses. Though the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-79) had envisaged that about 25% of students in the relevant age-group will study higher education through correspondence, the enrolment in 1976-79 was only 2.58% of total higher education enrolment. The establishment of an open university (which converged distance learning with open access policy) in the State of Andhra Pradesh did not change access quantitatively in higher education, though the system ushered in a new era of openness and flexibility. In 1988-89, the enrolment rose to above 10%, which stands at about 20% today. The establishment of the Indira Gandhi National Open University in 1985 (which offered programmes in 1987) ushered in an era of quality higher education and training at a distance while pursuing the policy of access and equity. Also, ICT was aggressively used on a large scale for the first time in higher education in the country. Though many of the correspondence course institutes had diversified course offer, IGNOU offered largely unconventional programmes at certificate and diploma level, besides programmes for human resource development, continuing professional development in various developmental and extension and community development programmes. However, its reformative Bachelors Degree Programme still stands out at the forefront of its policy of ‘higher education for all’.

In the year 2003, there are 12 open universities and 104 CCIs of dual mode universities which offer programmes at a distance and cater to about 20% of higher education students. Data on 10 open universities for 2002 relating to various aspects are presented in Table 1: those for the newly created open universities in Tamil Nadu and Orissa are not available.

The programmes of the national open university include largely unconventional areas including human rights, women empowerment, maternal and child health, as also human resource development and continuing education programmes at certificate, diploma, undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral levels. For detailed course structure and statistical data, you may like to consult the related document brought out by the Distance Education Council of IGNOU in 2003, and the student handbook on distance education brought out by the Association of Indian Universities. In 2003, there were 86 programmes, 870 courses, and 1.1 million students scattered over 26 countries.

<p>| Table 1 : Status of open universities (2002) |
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IGNOU=Indira Gandhi National Open University; BRAOU=Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University; KOU=Kota Open University; NOU=Nalanda Open University; YCMOU=Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University; MPBOU=MP Bhoj Open University;
It may noted that while many of the colleges in the country are non-viable due to lack of required number of students and resources (and, therefore, are not eligible for developmental grant from the UGC), there are many CCIs and a few OUs which do not have enrolment strength of even 1000. On the other hand, if we like to consider the issues of cost of education and funding of education, on an average, distance education in India is almost one-fifth in terms of unit cost of conventional higher education. To consider the example of IGNOU, while it was subsidized fully at its establishment by the Central government, it now earns above 60% of its recurring expenditure from student fees and other sources. Similarly BRAOU (earlier called APOU) gets only 22% of its expenditure from the State government of Andhra Pradesh; and YCMOU (as per the mandate that after 5 years of its establishment shall generate its recurring expenses on its own) has achieved full self sufficiency for its recurring expenditure today, though it obtains developmental grants from a few sources including the Distance Education Council. On the other hand, the conventional university distance education programmes show considerable variance. For instance, while Madurai Kamraj University generates about 48% income on its own, SNDT Women’s University generates about 95% from student fees. This clearly shows that while UGC has a rudimentary funding policy for universities and colleges, the Central government is yet to have a fair policy for funding for distance education in the country.

There are a few other facts worth taking note of since these are unique to the distance education system in India:

i) First, since IGNOU has been created as a national university by the Indian Parliament, it receives direct funding from the Ministry of Human Resource Development, and does not fall under the purview of UGC for funding, coordination and accreditation.

ii) Second, IGNOU had been given the additional responsibility to fund, promote, coordinate, assure quality and accredit the distance education systems in the country through its Distance Education Council (DEC).

iii) Third, the Government of India has placed the only uplinking facility (other than the government itself) through a satellite transponder at IGNOU for uplinking and broadcasting of educational, training and extension programmes of IGNOU, other distance education institutions, UGC, NCERT and other sectors of education and training through its six television channels. Also, it provides international teleconferencing facility for distance education and training. Similarly, unlike any other institution, it operates FM radio stations (now 7 to be increased to 45) for regional programming and broadcasting.

IGNOU’s Distance Education Council (DEC) has facilitated funding, quality assurance and accreditation of State Open Universities and dual-mode conventional university distance education programmes. Further, many SOUs and CCIs have used IGNOU’s study materials to fulfill the latter’s mandate for networking and collaboration. IGNOU has been a pioneer of multiple-media education in the country; its web-based / online programmes are well received; and the Government of India’s EDUSAT (a full-fledged educational satellite) was to be tried out by IGNOU for making it fully operational.
Challenges before open and distance learning systems

IGNOU has taken a few initiatives which have wider implications for distance education system in particular and higher education in general. A few of these are outlined below, and you may like to discuss and reflect if such initiatives have the potential to further reform higher education in the country.

- The distance education programmes have a strong foundation of curriculum and instructional design, with significant media mix to meet varied learning styles of diversified learners. The modular and credit-based programmes are more flexible, goal oriented, learner-friendly and both market and development oriented.

- IGNOU had initiated and still practices the policy of credit transfer and credit exemption. This, though needs to be extended to accreditation of prior learning, and wider implementation of credit transfer, credit sharing and joint degree programmes.

- Use of ICT, on a large scale has strengthened the case for wider access to education, especially in remote and rural areas. The initiatives in the north-east region of the country, through community informatic centers and also in the whole country through telelearning centers further strengthen the cause. This is an area which needs further orientation to community, reducing the digital divide, and addressing the issue of equity.

- Staff and human resource development on a continuing basis has been major strength of the ODL. It needs further strengthening of continuing professional development, and widening the net to include conventional education, business and industry, and the developmental sectors.

- The initiatives towards collaboration, partnership and networking have the potentially to induce convergence of existing systems and gear it towards a seamless system of education and training at all levels. The conventional dichotomy of conventional and distance education is a passé, and what is needed is a wider and sustained effort towards further convergence, sharing and collaboration.

- Internationalisation of Indian education is a reality. While all universities in the country put together have about 11,000 international students on campus, IGNOU has above one third of this size. However, the issue is not that of number, as much as of the offer of programmes through one window with a wider and flexible basket.
Inspite of significant initiatives by many open universities and conventional distance education programmes, the system faces a few significant challenges which need to be addressed. This also calls for joint initiatives with conventional education, government and non-government sectors, and even selective private initiatives.

- Research (i.e. R&D) is the weakest link in the distance education system. While discipline based research need not be a bitter pill for distance teaching institutions (infact, it should be the contrary), distance teachers need, by necessity, to be engaged in researching discipline distance teaching. While, on the one hand, it shall have wider discipline and inter-disciplinary knowledge base originating from DTIs, it will also reform instructional methods and services to facilitate effective student learning.

- Educational access and equity still remain challenges for distance education. Whether the policies of access and equity have resulted in widening and meeting the challenge? Whether ICT have bridged the digital divide and facilitated student learning? Whether the present instructional design and media mix have contributed to effective student learning? Whether the present provisions are flexible enough to cater for individual self pacing and progress in credit accumulation? These are important questions which need further exploration, reflection and joint action.

- Language has been a major challenge in distance learning. While all the regional languages need to be brought into the center stage, further capacity building and development of study skills for instruction in English and Hindi need to be strengthened.

- Further experimentation is needed on interactive multimedia and online learning. Different models and strategies need to be developed and tried out. It is not enough to merely have provision for networking of media; rather it is all the more significant to empower teachers to effectively teach through and learners to effectively learn from various print and non-print media.

- Common and acceptable benchmarks are required for both conventional and distance education on the basis of common and specialized parameters. This shall facilitate further collaboration, exchange, mutual benefit and convergence.

- So far, there has been expansion of the system at the cost of its consolidation. Can the system further expand in scale and size without consolidation? We now need to look back and consolidate our innovations, pool them together, and converge. This shall provide considered base to proceed further more progressively, intelligently and economically to cater for qualitative and learner-friendly educational provisions.

**Summary**

We discussed in this unit the important political, socio-economic, and technological changes taking place globally, as also the changes impacting higher education systems worldwide. Against this backdrop, we highlighted the significant challenges that higher education in India is facing, and the contexts for emergence of open and distance learning in the country. This complementary system has expanded progressively and brought in wider media networking and internationalization of Indian education. In the process, IGNOU has emerged as a unique institution in the world to act both as a university as also as funding and accrediting body, together with its unique responsibilities to widen access to higher education. However, it faces the challenges of significant R & D initiatives, faculty and learner media capacity building, deployment of new web-based technology, quality and learner-friendly learner support, balancing expansion with consolidation, reforms and sustainable innovations, and convergence towards a seamless system of education. There is an urgent need to address these tasks in order to meet the challenges of tomorrow.
**Suggested readings**


Panda, Santosh (eds.) (2003), *Planning and Management in Distance Education*. London: Kogan Page.