
UNIT 2 PROMOTION AND COORDINATION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE COUNTRY

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

As the 20th century drew to a close, the nature and purpose of the education discourse went through significant changes. Higher education was no longer an elitist pursuit; it was mass education. Most of the developed countries registered enrolment levels of 50% or more of the relevant age group in their higher education institutions. Most of the developing countries were on the threshold of double digit levels while the least developed nations were still struggling to reach any respectable level.

As educational provision expanded, so did the social demand. Questions of access, cost and quality were at the centre of the discourse. The impact of technology on widening access, reducing cost and improving the quality of the educational provision dominated the ongoing debate on policies, strategies and resources that determined the nature and type of the provision.

Open and distance learning had become an integral part of the education landscape. If the latter half of the 20th century promised a prominent place for open universities across the world, views towards greater convergence of the traditional mode and the distance mode of delivery began to emerge as the new century dawned. Strong arguments in favour of dedicated open universities yielded place in favour of dual mode institutions that combined conventional and distance modes of delivery to reach out to larger numbers. The role of technology in making this possible was widely recognised. The focus of the new discourse was on inclusive education ensuring access, equity and justice at an affordable cost and ensuring that the quality of education was of the highest level.

Though national policies and development strategies favoured an integrated approach to education combining all modes of delivery, the planning and management systems of distance education are considerably different from those of conventional education. While technologies are common to both, the organisation of the development and delivery systems had distinctively different approaches and management styles. Depending upon the size, diversity and the scale of operations, specialised structures and organisational mechanisms are conceived and developed in appropriate contexts and circumstances.

The major focus of this Block is the planning and management of distance education in India. As you will have noticed, India has a major National Open University and as many as 14 State Open Universities. There are, in addition, over 200 conventional universities that offer distance education programmes. About 25% of the 14 million students enrolled in higher education in India are pursuing their studies through distance education. It was in anticipation of this massive growth that those who designed the Open University and distance education system and its management in India also thought about a special agency for the promotion and coordination of distance education in the country.

To put the whole issue in perspective, we can do no better than quote the then Indian Education Minister who piloted the IGNOU legislation in Parliament. He said:

“We would like the Open University to grow at this stage on its own, with full freedom, because it would be better to allow this new plant to grow into the sunlight, as it will. I think at this stage we do not link it too closely with established institutions. Let it evolve its own practices, its own traditions, its own values. That may be better for an open system like this because, after all, every institution gets conditioned by its own experiences and we would like this university to be completely free of the conditioning of all other institutions. We should let the open university grow on its own and help in the development of other open universities which will come up as well as the correspondence courses which are being run by certain universities...”

In Unit 1, we briefly touched upon the role of IGNOU as a system leader (1.4.4). The uniqueness of this role lies in the acceptance of the reality that a vast country like India with as many as 28 states and 18 recognised regional languages besides English and Hindi, would not be served adequately by a single national Open University. In that event, it was assumed that the national Open University could also perform the role of a promoter and coordinator by sharing academic and other resources with its counterparts in the states. We have mentioned in some detail the policy perspectives and strategic considerations that prompted the designation of IGNOU as the apex body for the promotion and coordination of

open and distance learning in India. In what follows in this unit, we shall try to look at the ways in which IGNOU went about performing this role and where we stand at present with regard to regulation of open and distance learning.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- analyse and appreciate the contexts and the circumstances in which it would be useful and necessary to create independent agencies to promote and coordinate the growth and development of distance education within the national systems of higher education and its standard setting;
- design and develop appropriate models and structures that can effectively contribute to the growth and development of distance education in the given contexts and circumstances;
- critically examine the IGNOU model that combines the roles of an education provider and an apex body for promotion and coordination of an education system; and
- consider what models would be useful if a separate mechanism needs to be set up at the national level for promoting and coordinating the development of the open university and distance education systems.

2.3 THE EVOLUTION OF DE: A NEW MODEL

You will recall that in Unit 1, we discussed extensively the circumstances in which Open University and distance education systems emerged in India. Considering the federal nature of the country and the large number of States that constituted the Union, the diversity of major linguistic groups and above all, the large numbers of people who spoke different languages within the same state, it was obvious that a single open university operating at the national level cannot meet all the diverse needs of India's population. Establishment of separate state level open universities in all major states was foreseen from the beginning. Indeed, it was one of the States, Andhra Pradesh, that established the first dedicated Open University in India, a good three years before the National University was launched.

The views of the planners and policy makers at that time were firmly in favour of several state open universities because of the multiplicity of languages and the inconceivably large numbers of people to be reached. The Central Advisory Board of Education (a body that advises central and state government on policies) was in favour of a Coordination Council for Open Universities to promote their coordinated development through sharing of academic and physical resources. The CABE had, in fact, conceived of a networked system comprising several state open universities to avoid duplication of efforts, on the one hand, and optimum utilisation of available resources while ensuring a high level in the quality of the programmes, on the other.

Perhaps this vision was a little too idealistic and did not take into account the practical difficulties in translating it into an effective working model. We shall examine the reasons for the hesitant start in giving effect to this model in the following section. Meanwhile, the legislation of IGNOU, was in place. It clearly said that:

“it shall be the duty of the university to take such steps as it may deem fit for the promotion of the open university and distance education system and for the determination of standards of teaching, evaluation and research in such systems, and for the purpose of performing this function, the university shall have such powers, including the power to allocate and disburse grants to colleges or any other university or institution of higher learning.”

In simple terms, it meant that:

- IGNOU is mandated to promote the open university system in India;
- The university has the responsibility to determine and maintain the standards of teaching, research and evaluation in the open university system; and
- In the performance of these functions, the university can provide development funding to other universities and institutions.

It may be noted here that during the past few years, the above functions of IGNOU have been curtailed such that the university takes care of its own operations, and has forfeited the coordination and funding functions mandated to it by its Act passed in the Parliament.

2.3.1 The Conceptual Design

The proposal to establish an open university took concrete shape at a time when there was growing disenchantment with the ways in which the university and higher education system was functioning in India. The system of higher education was already very large, but its spread had been extremely uneven; the facilities available with individual universities varied very widely; the courses offered by most universities had not been revised or renewed to meet the demand of the times, and, therefore, their relevance and utility were being questioned. The University Grants Commission, responsible for development of universities, was not able to do much as funding for higher education was continuously declining. It is against this background that the search for an alternative system for the provision of educational opportunities began and the decision to establish an open university was taken.

The model of a UGC-type organisation was not favoured for the open learning system for several reasons. The most important among them were:

- Organisations like the UGC turn out to be mere funding agencies and, therefore, their approach tends to be bureaucratic. They do not provide any significant academic direction and leadership.
- Overwhelmed with the burden of supporting over 200 universities and 8000 colleges (that was in 1985; in 2018, there are over 600 universities and about 30,000 colleges), the UGC could not be expected to do justice in nurturing a fledgling open university system;
- Unlike the traditional universities which confined themselves to class-room teaching, open universities depend more on learning packages and services that are openly accessible. The open universities are not inhibited by considerations of autonomy in matters like curriculum transaction, course combinations, programme design, etc.;
- The most important development input for an open university is the learning packages. Since there would be more than one open university in India,

it is necessary that these are shared in different forms rather than each university preparing its own packages independently;

- If these considerations were to inform the efforts at promotion and coordination, the most effective instrument for that purpose would be a networked system in which every participant is a partner and a stakeholder; and
- IGNOU, because of its national character and also its significant resource base, could lead the networked system as the promoter and coordinator.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Space is given below for your answer.

ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Why UGC was not favoured to lead the Open University network in the Country? (Answer in about 40 words)

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2.3.2 The Initial Reservations

We just mentioned that the decision to keep the National Open University outside the purview of the University Grants Commission was prompted by two major considerations: one, to let the Open University grow unaffected by the conditioning of the traditional system, and two, to help it evolve its own processes, norms and standards. Since its establishment in 1956, the UGC exercised unfettered freedom on the standard setting functions over all universities in the country (the Agricultural Universities were an exception). To keep the Open University out of its supervisory responsibility would, it was argued, erode the authority of the UGC. As a number of universities in the country were already offering correspondence education programmes with support from the UGC, it would now become imperative for those universities to look for support from new sources. On the whole, the protagonists of the UGC were apprehensive that the move would seriously undermine the authority and effectiveness of the UGC as the custodian of the standard setting responsibility in higher education.

Open University was certainly a new experiment. But it had to be established, developed and run by people who were not conditioned by the traditional system. The impact of the UGC and its ways of standard setting was so deep in their outlook and attitudes that they were not easily persuaded to take up the challenge. They began to express apprehensions about the relationships between IGNOU and other open universities and about the efficacy of one university sitting in judgement over the quality and standards of the academic programmes of another (the player and referee syndrome). The whole concept, it was argued, was contrary to the time-tested principle of university autonomy, and most universities in the country would find it incongruous that they have to be guided, and possibly nurtured, by another university. The senior management of the IGNOU itself began to feel the pressure of this argument, coming as it did from its own peer groups in the traditional system. The only known model for development funding was the UGC model, and over the years, the UGC-University relationships evolved

at best as a patron-client relationship. The perils of one university becoming the patron of other universities were indeed perceptible in the initial stages, making the operationalisation of the whole concept cautious, hesitant and even indecisive.

On the other hand, the concept of a networked system of open universities sharing programmes, courses and delivery systems and resources had its strong supporters too. They were convinced that there was no need for each open university to develop and produce its own course materials; these could be easily shared among them, and the cost would be considerably less if state universities adopted and translated available materials into their own languages and made it possible for larger number of students to enrol and pursue programmes of their choice. Such an approach, it was argued, would make student mobility possible between programmes, institutions and regions. The core philosophy of flexible, modular and open learning systems demanded such an approach. More importantly, the technology infrastructure needed for delivery of programmes required huge investments and it would be unrealistic to expect each university to create its own technology infrastructure when a number of them could draw upon the central facilities created at huge costs. And finally, the view that the Open University system should develop as a partnership among universities that shared common objectives, a common pool of programmes and courses and common delivery systems prevailed.

2.3.3 The Mechanism Takes Shape

All these took protracted discussions among the open universities that were already functioning, the UGC and the Government of India. Towards the end of 1991, a good six years after the IGNOU started its operations, a consensus emerged among all the participating interests on the establishment of a statutory mechanism under the IGNOU Act to perform the functions of promotion and coordination of the open university system in India. This mechanism, it was agreed, would be known as the Distance Education Council (DEC) which would function within the broad framework and the policies laid down by the Board of Management of IGNOU while enjoying a specific measure of autonomy in its operations. A statute was framed for establishing the DEC which became operational in February 1992.

2.4 THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE DISTANCE EDUCATION COUNCIL (DEC)

It may be noted that though in the recent past the DEC has been shifted to UGC, it is worthwhile to examine its earlier existence and functioning at IGNOU to better appreciate the recognition, assessment and accreditation functions for distance education in the country.

At this point, it would be useful to go back to the exact provisions made in the IGNOU Act, 1985 to understand the role and functions of the Distance Education Council and the operational framework within which it had to perform those functions. The provisions in the Act have already been reproduced in Section 2.3 of this Unit, and need not be repeated here. But it required the formulation of a detailed statute under the Act to specify how the mechanism will be constituted, what specific powers it will exercise and what functions it will perform, and how it will support sister universities and distance education institutions. We shall discuss these matters in the following sections of this unit.

2.4.1 The Composition of DEC

The composition of DEC ensures its objectivity and detachment from the role of IGNOU as a university while making provision for the representation of all the concerned interests. The DEC consists of the Vice-Chancellor of IGNOU as its Chairman and the Secretary to the Government of India in charge of higher education and Secretary, UGC as its ex-officio members, two external members of the Board of Management, two Vice-Chancellors of State Open Universities, two Heads of Institutes of Correspondence Education of conventional universities, three nominees of the Visitor (President of India) and a teacher from the distance education system, all of whom are nominated. Some of the nominees hold office for two years while others have a three-year term.

2.4.2 The Functions of DEC

The DEC has been assigned the following powers and functions:

- Promotion of the open university/distance education system, its coordinated development, and the determination of its standards;
- Development of a network of open universities/distance education institutions in India;
- Identification of priority areas in which distance education programmes should be organised, including the specific client groups and the types of programmes, and the provision of support for organising such programmes through the network;
- Promotion of training programmes for distance educators;
- Initiating and organising measures for joint development of programmes and courses as well as research in distance education technology and practices;
- Evolving the pattern and nature of development funding for open universities/distance education institutions;
- Establishing and developing arrangements for coordinating and sharing the instructional material prepared by different open universities/distance education institutions as well as student support systems with a view to avoiding any duplication of efforts;
- Evolving procedures for sharing courses and programmes and also laying down the terms and conditions for such sharing;
- Collection, compilation and dissemination of information about courses and programmes offered by open universities and distance education institutions;
- Periodic review of the performance of open universities/distance education institutions participating in the network;
- Preparation of guidelines or courses and programmes (content, structure and production) as well as for the delivery of various services to students; and
- Provision of funding for the development of open universities/distance education institutions and the establishment of mechanisms for determining the extent and scope of such funding.

You will notice that the functions of DEC are as wide ranging as they are comprehensive for an apex body that is charged with the responsibility of

promoting the coordinated development of an innovative system. A close and critical reading of the functions assigned to DEC will show that the emphasis is pronouncedly on the creation and maintenance of a network of equal partners sharing programmes, resources and capacity, both intellectual and technological. It is this significant difference in the functional domain that made DEC an innovative concept. You will also notice that development funding is a part of its responsibility, but is not the only instrument through which DEC played an effective role in supporting the open university/distance education system.

2.4.3 The Operational Framework

The broad contours of the role for promotion and coordination of the open university system were articulated in detail in the Draft of Eighth Five Year Plan (1990-1995) of the Government of India. These proposals envisaged the establishment of a network of all the open universities (there were five in operation at that time) and other distance education institutions (there were over 60 Correspondence Education Institutes of conventional universities). The vision of the network was articulated in the following terms:

- It will provide a common pool of academic resources involving courses and programmes prepared and produced by member universities;
- This common pool of resources will be available for sharing by all the members; and
- The main objective of the network will be to eliminate duplication in the preparation and production of courses, to ensure a desirable uniformity in the standards of courses, to offer a wide range of choices to students, and to develop a strong delivery system that is supported by all participating institutions.

In operational terms, it was visualised that DEC would evolve systems, norms and procedures in respect of the design, structure and pattern of courses, student registration, assessment and transfer of credits, etc. to facilitate the mobility of students within the network, both institutionally and among programmes. It was also expected that the programmes and courses to be pooled in the network would be selected after a rigorous evaluation of their quality and content. In order to encourage every institution to prepare and produce programmes, DEC was to provide financial support for preparation of courses, production of audio/video programmes, translation of learning packages into regional languages, joint development of courses and also promotion of studies and research in distance education technology.

After almost two decades of its operations, in 2010, this network consisted of, besides IGNOU, 13 State Open Universities (SOUs) and more than 200 Institutes/Directorates of Distance Education/Correspondence Courses of conventional universities as well as public and private institutions. The enormity of the size of this network and the scale of its operations nearly forced DEC to shift its focus of operations from those of a partnership promoter and a facilitator of sharing programmes and resources to what is perceived to be maintenance of quality through the processes of approval and recognition of institutions and programmes as well as their accreditation.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Space is given below for your answer.

ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

What makes DEC an innovative concept? (Answer in about 30 words)

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2.5 THE DEC INITIATIVES

As we have just noted, the efforts of DEC in last two decades focused mainly on two distinct operational areas. The first, of course, was its core concern; establishment and development of the Open University Network. We will call it the development phase that spanned the first decade of its operations. The second decade that began around 2002 witnessed a distinct shift in emphasis; DEC began shaping itself more like a regulator than a facilitator, concerning itself with approval, recognition, accreditation and provision of funding support as a means to establish a regulatory regime. We shall discuss these two phases in the following sections.

2.5.1 The Development Phase (1992-2001)

Soon after its establishment, DEC focused its efforts on the fulfilment of its initial mandate of establishing, developing and maintaining an Open University Network. The specific steps taken by DEC included:

- Development of a database to provide information about open universities and other distance education institutions, the programmes and courses offered by them, and other relevant data about faculty, students, research output, etc.
- Preparation of norms and standards for the design, development and delivery of programmes and courses through the distance education mode. These guidelines deal exclusively with all aspects of planning academic programmes, designing the curriculum, developing the instructional design, strategies for programme development, the methods and styles of preparing self-learning materials, maintenance of programmes, use of electronic media, student support services, assessment (evaluation systems), infrastructure needs, networking and sharing of resources, monitoring and reviewing performance, etc. DEC had evolved norms for development of distance education programmes in management, computer education, library science and teacher education.
- Creation of a Common Pool of Programmes that, to begin with, consisted of the programmes developed and produced by IGNOU and three Open Universities, namely, BRAOU (Andhra Pradesh), KOU (Rajasthan) and YCMOU (Maharashtra). These three State Open Universities were already utilising a number of programmes and courses developed and produced by IGNOU. In many cases, the user universities adapted the materials by incorporating additional units to provide local relevance to their programmes

while retaining the core of IGNOU packages. Some of them used IGNOU packages in translated versions to meet the needs of local students. Presently, most State Open Universities use IGNOU learning packages through adoption, adaptation and translation.

- Framing guidelines for using programmes from the common pool through adoption, adaptation and translation. These guidelines set out the procedures to be followed as well as the duties and responsibilities of the provider as well as the user universities in drawing upon the pool. The core principle underlying the common pool was that both the providers as well as the users accept the significance of sharing academic resources, and acknowledge each other's contribution in making materials available and in ensuring their wider accessibility. The DEC's role in the working of the common pool was essentially one of mediation – providing information and establishing contacts.
- Soon after it was established, DEC prepared a set of guidelines for the provision of development support to state open universities. Development funding to State Open Universities was designed to strengthen their core capacity as distance education institutions. Predictably, the support was to strengthen the technology components – the media centres, computerisation, communication systems, training of personnel and programme development.
- DEC provided funding support to the three State Open Universities that were fully functional to share programmes, acquire materials and adopt, adapt or translate them, create storage and distribution capacities, develop technology infrastructure and modest media production capabilities, establish two-way audio and one-way video conferencing systems, and organise faculty development and staff training programmes. The development funding provided to the State Open Universities during 1993-2002 was about Rs.383.5 million. This included modest support to three other State Open Universities in preparing their project proposals and technical support for establishing their systems and processes.
- There was no major success during this period in getting the Institutes/Directorates of Correspondence/Distance Education within the DEC domain. These institutions were integral parts of the conventional universities drawing their support from the University Grants Commission. The process of getting UGC's endorsement to bring these university institutions within the purview of DEC and settling the issues of resource allocation took some time. In the end, it was possible to get UGC's acceptance in principle to bring these institutions within the funding regime of the DEC and to initiate the development of policies and patterns of support to these institutions during this phase of the DEC initiatives. Nevertheless, during the four years from 1999 to 2002, several universities were provided significant support mainly to transform their learning packages into self-learning material. This support totalled Rs.156.3 million.
- During this phase, DEC also made serious efforts to address the concerns of quality of distance education. With support from International Organisations like the Commonwealth of Learning, DEC deputed distance education practitioners from India to visit countries like Australia, Britain and Canada to study their quality assurance systems and processes and develop proposals to establish such processes in India. The proposals made by them were discussed at a Conference of Open University Vice-Chancellors and Heads of Correspondence Education Institutes. There was consensus on setting up a Quality Assurance Panel under DEC.

- DEC has been supporting research in distance education methods and technologies. The distance education system and its methods are continuously evolving. The changing technological environment and the rapidly developing communication systems are impacting the ways in which people live, work and learn. For instance, the use of cell phone has captured the imagination of those who use them just as much as the phone service providers who are finding newer ways of engaging people's attention. The 3G mobile service with its video streaming capabilities could soon turn out to be an effective mobile learning resource. It would need more detailed studies and research to assess the ways in which these technologies impact people's life and work. Just as importantly, it is worthwhile to study how the new technologies support and strengthen new pedagogical systems. Internet as a learning resource is now widely accepted. Its pedagogical significance lies in the ways in which people access knowledge, select and store information, retrieve it for use, and sift, analyse and integrate those packets of knowledge and information to meet specific objectives and purposes. In order to encourage distance education practitioners and members of faculty of State Open Universities as well as those in the Directorates of Correspondence Education/Distance Education of conventional universities, DEC has been providing substantial research funding. So far, DEC has funded 57 major and 34 minor research projects at a cost of about Rs.8.5 million. The major themes of these projects covered such areas as programme evaluation and impact studies, integrated use of ICT, curriculum development, communicating the subject through distance mode, professional development of distance education professionals, management of distance education, innovative and effective learning strategies, etc.

While the first phase saw hectic preparations for putting in place a series of measures for performing the core functions of DEC, there was not much by way of actual accomplishments as, during this period, the open university system consisted of IGNOU and just three State Open Universities, all of which were fully committed to the ideals and objectives of DEC.

2.5.2 The Regulatory Phase (2002-June 2012)

By the close of the decade of the 1990s, distance education had gained respect, acceptability and indeed great popularity. Not only did more State open Universities get established, more conventional universities also ventured into distance education; many among them found the revenue generating potential of distance education very attractive. They set up study centres all across the country, often transcending their legal territorial jurisdictions. There were instances of study centres being franchised, and franchisees often resorting to unhealthy practices and exploiting innocent students with promises of degrees and qualifications if they enrolled with them.

Yet another major development during this period was the entry of many private players in higher education through what is known as the self-financing colleges of professional and technical education. These colleges virtually constituted the private sector in higher education as they received no financial support from the state governments though for all other practical purposes, they were in the public domain; they required affiliation to a state university, had to fall in line with state policies on admission and appointments, and had to function within the overall regulatory framework of the concerned statutory authorities dealing with the relevant professional/technical fields like engineering, management, medicine, teacher education, and so on. Many among them, especially those engaged in

management education (and their number was very large), found distance education a great revenue generating enterprise. Soon enough, questions began to be raised about their credentials and status as an education provider. Statutory bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC), the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) began to focus their attention on these institutions as well.

As DEC was the promotional and standard-setting agency at the national level for distance education, a decision was taken that DEC should step in effectively to enforce a regulatory regime through the instrumentality of approval, recognition and accreditation. Exercise of these powers, it was assumed, would give DEC greater visibility and respect as against the more academic and relatively low profile functions of developing networks and sharing resources. DEC assumed the power of accreditation by creating a new statute. Quite predictably, DEC's functions turned into mandates and its focus turned on enforcing a regime of requiring institutions, including universities, to secure DEC's approval and recognition for all their distance education institutions and programmes. As development support got tied with approval processes, DEC was able to secure a measure of compliance with its regulatory regime at least as far as the institutions that depended on funding support.

Around this time, DEC also framed a statute requiring all distance education institutions to get themselves and their programmes accredited to ensure quality and standards. With the emergence of private institutions awarding qualifications, especially diplomas in various fields (degrees can be awarded only by Universities established through legislation), it became necessary to set up mechanisms for recognition of those qualifications. The Government announced a decision that institutions awarding diploma level qualifications in various fields should obtain the approval of the statutory body dealing with the relevant subject (UGC, AICTE) and in addition, DEC, if the programmes were offered through the distance mode. DEC drew strength from this decision to reinforce its mandate to turn into a regulator and put in place systems and processes to assume the new role.

2.5.3 DEC as a Regulator

DEC's entry into the regulatory regime raised several questions. There were indeed too many complex issues. Notable among them were:

- DEC was established under the IGNOU Act. It was legally backed by a statute framed under the IGNOU Act, and was accountable to the Board of Management of IGNOU.
- Structurally, DEC functioned as a Division of the University with no real autonomy as all its decisions were subject to ratification by the University's Board of Management, and consequently, it had no jurisdiction over IGNOU.
- Although DEC was conceived as a network promoter and developer, the effectiveness of performing this function depended on IGNOU which failed to foresee the virtue of cementing a partnership that shared available resources. Sharing of resources turned out to be a one-way traffic; IGNOU was the giver and not the taker.
- While DEC insisted that it had the mandate to ensure that all universities should seek and secure its approval for offering distance education

programmes, its writ did not run over IGNOU. This created an anomalous position leading to questions being raised about the objectivity of DEC as a regulator and its authority as a full-fledged statutory agency.

- While some universities/institutions went to courts and the matter got stuck in litigation, there were also attempts to go in for fresh legislation to vest DEC with full statutory authority as a distance education regulator.
- In the meanwhile, DEC got engaged in extensive preparations to fulfil its new role as a regulator. Some of the major initiatives taken by DEC are mentioned in the following paragraphs.

→ **Recognition of Programmes:** The DEC developed a Handbook on Recognition and placed it on its website and issued public notices from time to time urging institutions to get their programmes approved. The process of recognition involved (a) each institution provides detailed information about its programmes to DEC in a prescribed form; (b) DEC verifies the information with reference to its norms on infrastructure, faculty, delivery system, student support system, etc.; and (c) the institution submits a complete set of course materials of the programmes for evaluation by Committees of Experts with reference to currency of content, language and self-learning style. DEC had received about 200 programmes of which 45 from 23 universities were approved. 140 programmes were referred back to the concerned universities for revision and the rest were rejected. The major reasons for rejection were use of textbooks purchased from the market in place of study materials, mismatch between syllabus and course materials, etc. Though over 3000 programmes are on offer by all ODL institutions, the number of programmes submitted for approval was only about 6-7%.

→ **Recognition of Institutions:** While reviewing the process of approval of programmes, the DEC decided in 2008 that programmes proposed to be offered by universities/institutes through distance mode should have the approval of the statutory authorities of the institution concerned and that DEC would give institutional recognition only after evaluating the preparedness of those institutions to offer programmes through distance mode. The criteria for assessing the preparedness included conformity of study materials with the model curricula prescribed by UGC, DEC and other statutory bodies; the self-learning format used; core faculty in position; admission processes and duration of programmes. DEC has, through a Memorandum of Understanding signed with the UGC and AICTE, formed a Joint Committee to examine proposals for recognition of institutions which, according to DEC, are now mandatory. By 2009, DEC has also produced a revised Handbook on Recognition that requires each institution to submit its application in the format proposed in the Handbook, appointment of a Committee consisting of experts as well as nominees of the UGC and AICTE to visit each institution and make recommendations. Some 200 institutions have sought recognition from DEC by 2010.

→ **Assessment and Accreditation of ODL Institutions:** In the early 1990s, both the AICTE and the UGC had established their own accreditation mechanisms. The National Board of Accreditation (NBA) set up by the AICTE in 1990 accredits technical institutions (those offering programmes in engineering, management and allied fields). The

National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) set up by the UGC in 1994 accredits universities and colleges of general education. In both cases, accreditation is voluntary, and by 2010, just about 25% of all existing institutions have sought and secured accreditation (A bill to make accreditation mandatory for all institutions of higher education is currently before Parliament). Neither the NBA nor NAAC is currently considering ODL institutions for accreditation. It was into this vacuum that DEC had entered and started preparatory work to assume this responsibility. Accreditation by DEC would be both of programmes as well as of institutions. The framework of reference for institutional accreditation includes performance indicators and benchmark statements supported by evidence on specific parameters like programme design and development, programme transaction and delivery, student assessment and evaluation, learner support services and progression, infrastructure and learning resources, governance structure and leadership, internal quality assurance processes, and so on. The programme accreditation processes focus on criteria like infrastructure and human resource capabilities, academic programmes and learning resources, learning support services, research and consultancy, governance and innovative practices. While all these preparations are being completed, a new legislation that seeks to make accreditation mandatory for all higher education institutions and for each of their programmes is under way. This DEC initiative, therefore, might have to conform to the provisions of the Act when it comes into force.

DEC's engagement with regulation was certainly not at the cost of its responsibility for development. It continued to provide funding support for the implementation of the initiatives taken during the initial phase. During the period from 2002 to 2009, DEC provided development funding to 13 State Open Universities (most of them started operations around this period) totalling over Rs.1165 million. It also supported the conventional universities to upgrade their correspondence programmes to mainstream distance education offerings with funding support of over Rs.355 million. DEC continued its engagement with the promotion of other early initiatives like professional development of distance education personnel, capacity building, quality assurance, systems research, etc, with renewed vigour.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Space is given below for your answer.

ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

What are the major issues faced by DEC as a regulator vis-a-vis IGNOU?
(Answer in about 50 words)

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2.6 THE IMPACT OF DEC

Having discussed at some length the concept, composition, functions and responsibilities of the Distance Education Council as it has gone about the performance of its role, it is now time to ask what impact it has made on the distance education system in India, and to consider whether the DEC model is worthy of emulation elsewhere. Our purpose here is not to undertake a critical analysis of the working of DEC or to engage in any value judgement on its success or failure; we are more concerned with this mechanism as a sustainable model for the promotion, development and standard setting in the open university and distance education systems.

In the last three or four decades, a large number of developing countries have established open university and distance education systems to augment their educational provision. In most cases, the initiative was taken by the governments; the Ministries/Departments dealing with education assumed the responsibility, not just for making national policies on distance education provision, but also in the execution of those policies. Unlike the case of conventional schools and universities, distance education provision required the involvement of more national level agencies; it needed besides the Education Departments, the active support and involvement of those at the national level dealing with the broadcast media like radio and television, the telecommunication authorities dealing with the internet and connectivity, and not the least the private sector engaged in the telecom industry and distribution channels providing access to broadcast media. As these elements were critical to the implementation of an effective distance education system, the role of national policies in these fields and their coordinated implementation assumes importance. Depending upon the environmental factors like the size of the system, its scale of operations, the diversity of programmes, the number of institutions involved and above all the national system itself (federal or unitary, population size and linguistic diversity), each system evolves its own structures and processes. What is important, however, is to know that there is no one system that suits all needs and situations.

India, as you all know, is a big country with 1.3 billion people, scattered across 28 states and 7 Union territories, speaking 18 recognised national (regional) languages, some of which are the official languages of the states concerned, and as many as several thousand dialects. In this complex mix of languages, religions, tribal identities and cultural diversity, there is no simple or single method to reach out to all the people of India. There are geographical diversities too; unreachable hilly tracts, deep and dense forest areas, small islands, and vast deserts. Responding to these diversities is indeed a challenge that distance education planners in India have to face.

Perhaps, no other country in the world compares with India in all these dimensions at the same time. The Indian experience, therefore, may not be fully relevant to all other developing countries. Yet, there are lessons to be learnt from the Indian experience, not just in developing models and systems in the planning and management of distance education, but in avoiding costly mistakes and expensive experiments.

2.6.1 What did DEC Achieve?

Without any doubt, the most important achievement of DEC was its successful effort in placing distance education firmly in the higher education landscape of India. While IGNOU looms large as the world's largest open university with its

3 million plus students, and DEC operating in its shadow, one might well ask whether DEC did fulfil the responsibility placed on it. The answer is a resounding yes; without DEC, IGNOU could not have become a truly National Open University leading the promotion and development of the open university and distance learning system in the country. With its national character, access to major national resources and its potentially huge intellectual capital, the IGNOU was able in a short time to establish its footprints across the country. But it should not be forgotten that as many as 14 State Open Universities across the country are supplementing IGNOU's efforts in reaching out to regions as well as language and population groups that IGNOU would not have been able to serve. A significant proportion of the distance education enrolment is accounted for by the State Open Universities and Directorates of Distance Education of conventional universities. That DEC was instrumental in mediating the creation of a network and sharing resources, especially course materials, was no mean achievement. The efforts at establishing norms and standards for programmes, setting out quality assurance systems and processes, training for the professional development of distance education practitioners across the country, promotion of awareness about distance education methods and practices through nationwide conferences, seminars and workshops have all contributed significantly to the acceptance of distance education as a credible and effective alternative to conventional education.

If IGNOU were to take these responsibilities on itself, perhaps, it could not have achieved as much. Firstly, it would have diverted its attention from its core responsibility of developing programmes and courses, enrolling students, delivering various services to them including the assessment of their performance and awarding qualifications. Secondly, as a university, it would have been too much to expect IGNOU to bring together all the state open universities as a closely knit network without any conflicts of interest. It would not have been easy for a University to iron out tensions of different kinds arising from perceptions of academic autonomy, quality and standards of learning packages, delivery of services, etc. Thirdly, the presence of a mediator, in the form of DEC that represented all the stakeholders, played its role objectively and effectively, both as a promoter and facilitator. And finally, as the coordinating body for distance education at the national level, it was possible for DEC to articulate a vision for the development of the system across all the States and Union Territories, and formulate the strategies and measures for translating that vision into reality.

2.6.2 DEC: An Assessment

As we noted earlier in this Unit, the establishment of DEC was prompted by the consideration that a new and sensitive instrument like the Open University system should be permitted to grow on its own momentum, without being conditioned by the approach and outlook of the conventional mode of education. It was anticipated that both in terms of the number of institutions and enrolment, the distance education system would occupy a critical position in augmenting the provision of educational opportunities. The experience of correspondence education offered by the conventional universities was none too inspiring, and the continuance of the Open University system under the supervision of UGC would not have offered it enough space for unfettered growth. This is not to suggest that UGC has been indifferent to the growth of the distance education system; burdened as it is with a very large system comprising nearly 600 universities and about 30,000 colleges (in 2018), UGC would not have been able to do full justice in nursing the new system to realise its full potential. It was the expectation that a dedicated agency might perform that role.

Students of distance education engaged in studying the Indian experience need to have a full appreciation of the ways in which, during the past quarter of a century, open university and distance education system took deep roots in India, and the role of the principal agencies involved in that process. We have presented before you a full case study of IGNOU as a university in Unit 1, but that narrative would not have been complete without explaining the part played by DEC as a national coordinating agency for distance education in India. We have presented to you the efforts made by DEC, and, in particular, what it has been able to achieve. From our narrative, however, you will have noticed that the success of such initiatives also depends on the national policy environment, the legislative framework, the stakeholder interests and not the least, the full cooperation of all the components that constitute the national education system.

Having said that, and especially for the benefit of those who might be called upon to establish such national coordination systems in distance education in their own countries, we would make some concluding remarks here about the DEC experience in India:

- The National Policy on Education, 1986 made a strong statement on Open University system. It said: *“The Open University system has been initiated in order to augment opportunities for higher education and as an instrument of democratising education; IGNOU, established in 1985 in fulfilment of these objectives, will be strengthened; this powerful instrument will have to be developed with care and extended with caution”*. This statement, coming as it did after the IGNOU legislation came into force, did fully endorse the need for special attention to establish appropriate instrumentalities to promote the Open University and distance education system in the country.
- The initial success of DEC owed as much to this policy support as to the approach used in giving effect to the roles and responsibilities assigned to it. It carefully went about promoting a partnership, engaging every partner as an equal participant in a joint endeavour in achieving common goals and objectives.
- When the focus shifted from partnership and networking to regulation and control, apparently due to the increase in the number of institutions and the involvement of some of them in gross irregularities and malpractices, some weaknesses in the structure of DEC itself began to surface. Its legal status as a regulator was questioned; its relationship with IGNOU in the context of its regulatory role came up for scrutiny; talks about fresh legislation to clothe it with full legal support tended to weaken its authority and effectiveness; the delay in any new legislative measures further eroded its legal status and moral authority.
- It was not enough to offer policy support; it was equally important to review the initial phase and take appropriate measures to remove weaknesses, if any. After all, when it was initially conceived, the expectation was that the open university and distance education system would evolve its own norms and standard-setting systems. But as the system grew, the complexities also multiplied. There was no review of the policy environment, or proposal for new legislative measures, with any sense of urgency.
- The DEC experience clearly establishes that all new initiatives, taken with good intentions, need to be closely monitored by policy makers to ensure that the environment in which those initiatives are taken is not weakened

and, where necessary, corrective measures are taken to remedy shortcomings, if any.

- The assumption of the regulatory role without adequate preparation in the form of legal backing, and the insistence on the mandatory requirement of accreditation when it was only voluntary in the entire higher education system in the country was, perhaps, a case of DEC moving into an uncharted area too soon and too assertively. The important lesson to be learnt from this experience is that however well-intentioned the distance education planners and managers may be, they need to take all stakeholders into confidence and create the environment that can support and sustain new initiatives. This, besides other imperatives, resulted in shifting of this regulatory function in 2012 from IGNOU to the University Grants Commission.

2.6.3 Some Conclusions

We must make it clear at this stage that all the observations made in the preceding sections are not based on any official review or any particular research study or its findings. These observations, as we said earlier, are no value judgements; nor are they designed to undermine the authority and the statutory responsibility assigned to DEC. Our purpose is no more than to provoke discussion and debate among planners and managers of distance education on different experiences in different situations and to add to the body of knowledge about policies and practices followed by very successful Open University and distance education systems. These observations are based on information available in the public domain, and we have tried to place them in a perspective that would be useful to the learners of large distance education systems across the globe.

Check Your Progress 4

Note: i) Space is given below for your answer.

ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

What major problems DEC faced with shift in its focus from partnership and networking to regulation and control? (Answer in about 40 words)

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2.7 ROLE OF UGC IN REGULATION OF ODL AND ONLINE LEARNING

The Distance Education Council (DEC) had been in existence for more than 22 years performing the duties relating to promotion, coordination and maintenance of standards in the ODL system which includes providing financial assistance to distance education institutions and State Open Universities; devising policies and developing norms and benchmarks; promoting research; providing expertise in ODL pedagogy; providing training and capacity building to ODL functionaries (include faculty, course writers and counselors) of ODL Institutions; and also evaluating Universities and Institutions for recognizing them to offer programmes through distance mode as presented in the above sections of this unit.

However, the regulatory role of DEC was taken away and entrusted from IGNOU to UGC by the MHRD vide which IGNOU was instructed to issue notification for repeal of Statute 28 of IGNOU Act and to take all necessary steps for smooth transition as envisaged in MHRD Order, dated 29th December 2012; and the Notification No. IG/Admn(G)/DEC/2013/3057, dated 01.05.2013 issued by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) notifying the repeal of Statute 28 of IGNOU Act.

UGC took over DEC on '*as is where is basis*' consequent upon repeal of Statute 28 of IGNOU Act and dissolution of DEC of IGNOU. Through the UGC order, among others, it was decided that the entire set up of erstwhile DEC, including infrastructural facilities shall be taken over by UGC with immediate effect, on '*as is where is*' basis. There was however no major change in the functioning of the Open and Distance Education system except the change of guard. All the decisions of the erstwhile DEC were made applicable till such time the UGC brought the new Open and Distance learning Regulations. The UGC (Open and Distance Learning) Regulations, 2017 were notified in the Gazette on 23.06.2017. As per the Regulations, all the Higher Education Institutions intending to offer a programme in Open and Distance Learning mode immediately after the notification of these regulations and for subsequent years, are made to submit on-line application in the format specified by the Commission, and upload the same on the specified portal along with scanned copies of the documents specified therein, at least six months before the commencement of the academic session of the programme intended to be offered by such Higher Educational Institution. The Bureau designated by UGC to deal with the Open and Distance learning institutions is called Distance Education Bureau (DEB). All the Higher Education Institutions granted recognition by UGC are updated on the website of UGC. The final decision to grant recognition to an institution rests with the Commission.

Every order granting or refusing recognition to Higher Educational Institutions for programme(s) in Open and Distance Learning mode are communicated in writing for appropriate action to such Higher Educational Institutions and to the concerned State Government and the Central Government.

Every Higher Educational Institution, in respect of which recognition for programme(s) has not been granted by the Commission, cannot continue the programme(s) in Open and Distance Learning mode. UGC issues Notification from time to time regarding the monitoring of the study centres, territorial jurisdiction and other regulatory directives. The details about the lists of institutions recognized by UGC are available on UGC website www.ugc.ac.in/deb. The various amendments to UGC ODL regulations are also notified and made applicable on ODL institutions.

Later to ODL-UGC Regulations 2017, UGC came out with separate Regulations to offer online programmes by different higher education institutions in 2018, whose details are available on UGC website. We will not be discussing about the same here.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

In the previous Unit you have read about IGNOU in details, yet not complete in terms of its functions and responsibilities. In this Unit we dealt with the remaining part of the earlier Unit i.e. the promotion and coordination role given to IGNOU, very comprehensively and critically. The major issues covered in this

Unit are – evolution of a new model for promotion, the establishment of DEC and initiatives taken by DEC till 2012, and the impact of DEC on the DE system in the Country.

2.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

With funding to higher education is declining UGC could not do much for the development of Universities; and as a funding agency approach becomes bureaucratic. With that approach by UGC, new system like Open University network in the Country, cannot get academic direction and leadership required.

Check Your Progress 2

DEC – an apex agency – part of IGNOU itself is a unique idea, unparalleled anywhere in the world. The functions of DEC are wide ranging and comprehensive consisting of creating and maintenance of a network of equal partners sharing programmes, resources and capacity, both intellectual and technological – which makes DEC an innovative concept.

Check Your Progress 3

DEC faced many problems as a regulator while dealing with IGNOU; few of them were: DEC was accountable to BOM of IGNOU; no real autonomy to DEC as it has to report to BOM; in shrinking of resources also – IGNOU was the giver and not the taker; with these issues many other institutions went to Court and got stuck in litigation over full statutory authority to DEC as a distance education regulator.

Check Your Progress 4

The initial success of DEC in discharging its roles and responsibilities came from the approach – promoting a partnership, engaging every partner as an equal participant in a joint endeavour in achieving common goals. When DEC started acting as a regulator – its legal status was questioned; its relationship with IGNOU in the context of its regulatory role came up for scrutiny, and talks about fresh legislation to provide full legal support to DEC and the delay in this regard further eroded DEC authority.