

RECENT RUMBLINGS IN IGNOU: A PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

IGNOU and ICT have been powerful programs to supplement traditional methods of teaching through colleges and universities to bolster access to higher education. The IGNOU programs of late are being substantially curtailed causing dismay to discerning observers. The paper analyses the genesis and impact of programs under IGNOU and Open & Distance Learning (ODL) in terms of access, enrolment and quality and draws upon experience of other countries. It argues that through better management, more effective use of technology, more responsive regulatory mechanism and skilled based training to students in remote areas, IGNOU can be a powerful cost effective knowledge dissemination program. With India's Global Competitive Index (GCI) dipping substantially, there is a need for bolstering the outreach and quality of programs under IGNOU instead of abdicating them in a knee jerk manner. India needs to improve its skill efficiency and foster it through greater use of ICT.

Keywords: Open Distance Learning, IGNOU, ICT, Global Competitive Index, Planning Commission

Introduction

India has made significant progress in access and enrolment in to primary and higher education. It is axiomatic that the economic and social development of a country largely depends on its literacy quotient and quality. Since a large majority of economically backward and marginalized section of the society is deprived of education, the Right to Education Act (2002) was a watershed moment in our effort towards social inclusion by providing accessibility to all sections of the society in Primary Education free of cost. In higher education segment also a large number of universities and colleges have been opened, ensuring Gross Enrolment Ratio to rise from 10% (2002) to 17% (2014). In order to supplement the conventional system of education, distance education mode has been adopted since the last three decades where the learner receives the study material through postal service, and the subject experts evaluate the assignments of the students leading to open learning. Many universities also started correspondence courses successfully culminating in the establishment of India Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in 1985. This has led to significant growth of enrolment in Open Distance Learning program during the 11th plan. In this backdrop, the news that IGNOU is closing down a large number of courses/departments has disconcerted Analysts and Think Tanks in equal measure.

Objective of the Study

- Strategy framework of the 12th Plan & Evolution of Open Distance Learning
- Growth Trends of ODL programs
- Impact of ODL on Access & Quality
- Access & Quality – A Global Perspective
- Major Policy Recommendations

Strategy Framework of 12TH Plan & Evolution of Open Distance Learning

It would be from Figure-1 the 12th Plan consider that the inter linkage between goals of Expansion, Equity and Excellence must be restored further through significant expenditure in public, private sector spending by providing institutional autonomy and better regulatory framework. The Knowledge Commission (2014) also reiterates the concerns for greater interface with quality foreign universities and a more sensitive and independent regulatory framework.

The India Gandhi National Open University, established by an act of parliament in 1985, has continuously striven towards building an inclusive knowledge society. The university began by offering two academic programs in 1987, i.e. diploma in management and diploma in distance education, with strength of 4528 students. The mandate of the university is to; make higher education accessible to all segments of the society in all parts at affordable costs; offer program which is of high quality, innovative and need based.

Since the university uses latest technology in imparting education, it envisions combining the bi-fold objective of out stretching accessibility to all sections and extending professional development and training to all sections. The university is committed to quality in teaching, research, training and acts as a national resource centre for expertise and infrastructure in ODL system. While making significant mark in higher education, community education and continual professional development, IGNOU continuously structures itself with private and public universities to augment the programs offered by it. It has taken higher education to the masses.

Growth Trends of ODL Programs

Enrolment in open and distance learning programme grow rapidly during the 11th plan period from 27.41 lakh students in 2006-2007 to 42.01 lakh students in 2011-2012 as would be seen from the Table-1. Apart from IGNOU there are 13 state Open University 183 distance education institution approved by the distance education council. Enrolment in DEIS includes 44 private institutions and grow most rapidly during the 11th plan period reflecting the enthusiasm at the grassroot level.

Impact of ODL on Access & Quality

IGNOU has been conferred with awards of excellence by the Common Wealth of Learning, Canada, several times. Addressing the 26th convocation of IGNOU, President of India Shri Pranab Mukherjee declared that IGNOU within a span of 27 years has become a pioneer of open and distance learning in the country, catering to 30lakhs students in India and 43 other countries through a network of 67 regional centres, around 3380 learner support system and 80 overseas systems. With the launch of Edu-Sat, on 20th September 2004 and establishment of inter university consortium, the university has entered a new era of technology enabled education, the emphasis is on supplementing tradition annual distance education with modern technology capacitated education within the schema of amalgamated learning.

When we look at the growth trends through quality we see, that due to its **high quality of self learning material** it has been awarded the Certificate of Excellence by the Common Wealth of Learning. The technology enabled educations are equipped to respond to new challenges and demands of modern world. Moreover the university has put in lots of emphasis on the knowledge and skill development programmes in congruence with the global need. As a consequence, technology enabled education with flexible learning methods has the potential towards excellent global spin off. It's heartening to note that UNESCO has declared IGNOU as the most diverse and inclusive institution in higher education in the world in 2010, due to its consistency in maintaining equity in opportunity to Women, SC, ST, remote access, social and economically weaker section taking the student enrolment to 3 million.

The annual report, 2012-2013 of HRD Ministry refers to the following in respect of Open Distance Learning: Distance Education Council (DEC) was established under Statute 28 of the IGNOU Act, 1985. DEC coordinates maintenance of standards in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system. In pursuance of its objectives, DEC has launched many initiatives for determination of standards in the system and provides financial, academic and technical support to the 13 State Open Universities and over 200 Directorates attached to conventional universities and Private/Autonomous Institutes, referred as Distance Education Institutions (DEIs). At present, because of the surge in the number of Open & Distance Learning (ODL) institutions and lack of adequate resources-human, technical as well as infrastructural, with the DEC, it is unable to cope up with increasing demand for efficient and effective regulation.

The legal authority of DEC, a body created by Statute of IGNOU, to regulate the Open and Distance Learning system is also under challenge in the Court of law on the ground of conflict of interest, ODL programs in Technical and Professional fields suffer from duality of control. This situation has been exploited to the detriment of learners by those institutions which have entered the ODL system with a commercial motive. In the backdrop of this, the Government had set up a Committee to suggest measures to regulate the standards of education imparted through the Distance Mode with Prof. N R Madhava Menon as Chairman. The Committee has submitted its report to the Government wherein they have suggested, inter alia, the need to create opportunities for higher education including technical and professional education through ODL system but there should be an effective system of quality assurance with program-specific benchmarks. The Committee has also recommended measures for providing learner support services inter alia, through use of ICT, equivalence of degree, curbing commercialization of Distance Education System, creation of an independent regulatory body by the name Distance Education Council of India (DECI). While the Report of the Committee has been accepted, in principle, creation of an independent regulator is yet to be enacted. On the basis of resolutions of the DEC and the Board of Management of the IGNOU, the approval of Visitor has been obtained to repeal the Statute 28 and to dissolve the DEC under the IGNOU. On dissolution of DEC, the UGC and the AICTE would perform the role of regulators for the ODL system in respect of general higher education and technical education respectively.

In the 12th Plan documents, the Planning commission proposed to carry forward with a view to making this program more effective, efficient and sustainable. They include Digital Infrastructure Initiatives, Content Initiatives, Governance Initiatives and Training and Capacity Building Initiatives. However there is no specific mention regarding carrying forward the momentum under the IGNOU program unlike the 11th plan which has the following achievements to its credit. IGNOU has now a cumulative enrolment of about 15lakh. It has a network of 53 regional centres and 1400 study centres with 25000 counselors. There are 28 FM radio stations and 6 television channels & the university introduced 16 new programs during 2006-2007; the Distance Education Council, an authority of IGNOU is coordinating the activities of 13 State Open Universities (SOUs) and 119 Institutes of Correspondence Courses in the conventional universities.

The pilot project of 'SAKSHAT'- one stop educational portal – has been launched in October 2006 to facilitate lifelong learning of students, teachers and those of employment or in pursuit of knowledge, free of cost to them. The vision is to scale up the pilot project to cater to the learning needs of more than 50 crore people. The portal contains the virtual class that has four quadrant approaches to learning, which include written course materials, animations, simulations, video lectures, related web links, question answers, confidence building measures, etc. The Eleventh Plan will support IGNOU, existing SOUs and the states setting up new SOUs. Considering the dismal performance of some of the statutory bodies, in-depth and independent evaluation of those statutory bodies will be undertaken urgently.

Consortium for Educational Communication Centre (CEC) will set up a technology enabled system of mass higher education by taking advantage of Vyas 24-hours Educational Channel for one way communication, EDUSAT network for two-way communication and internet for 'any time any where' education. The thrust areas will include strengthening of the existing media centres, setting up of new media centres in those states where no centres exist, strengthening of the concepts of packaging knowledge into video and e-content form in need based subject areas, transformation the CEC and media centre into a vital university system.

Access & Quality – A Global Perspective

For designing any educational approach the root concerns are Access & Quality. It's all the more important in Distance Education. One perspective assumes that distance education facilities access whereas the other view assumes that quality standards cannot simulate face to face education. Fortunately both the views are not logical, as business model of distance education develops through advanced communications technology. Though an appropriate balance can be maintained between accessibility and quality, historically it is the access issues which were the driving force of distance education. But with mixed mode institutions that combine conventional and distance learning and with developed communication technology, quality issues in distance education is gaining momentum.

In distance education quality issues are evaluated through the pre-packaged print course material sent to students. Researcher finds it difficult to interpret quality in distance education for its future development, both from a theoretical and practical perspective.

An important factor in distance education is pre packaged material which is considered the primary source of information to stimulate reflection and discourse among students. The pre packaged material with defined objective and self instruction tends to guide students towards a prescribed goal. This disjoins the students from critically analyzing the course content or independent construction of knowledge towards a higher cognitive and reflective discourse. Two concepts which revolve around distance education is interaction and independence. Where independence is the underlying factor which concomitantly diminishes interaction but aggrandizes accessibility, independence is seen as free to study as per wish depending on a pre designed learning material, and interaction is limited to the dominance of this pre packaged material (Juler 1990:26).

According to Garrison and Baynton (1987) besides independence, the inclusive balance of control should constitutionalise not only teacher and student relation but also the contextual concerns that are immutably developing. The primary sources of communication are between teacher to student, student to student and from course material to student. The balance of control depends upon two way communications, and the control diminishes with decreasing communication and subsequently the quality of learning is affected. The concerns identified by researches regarding the quality in distance education as based upon two way communication, as a compulsory, imminent factor towards education transaction are achievable goals in distance education given the advanced communications technology.

Distance education is growing steadily in importance. As we get more industrialized it is well adapted to the developments of new communication technology and brings to education many of the strength and dangers of the industry. Prof. Keegan in his seminal book "Foundations of Distance Education" brings out the experience of various countries like France, China and USA on their impact on access to higher education while refraining from commenting on its impact on quality. However he concludes by averring that "**it is a needed component of many national systems**".

Major Policy Recommendations

The 12th plan targets to reach GER to 25% by 2016-2017 and the new government promises to make IT a powerhouse of packaged knowledge in video and e-content form in need based subject areas. But the disquieting factor is that while the government is trying to reach out to students through IT, conversely the Open University IGNOU is closing large number of courses and departments. Besides, as brought out at Table-2 that there is a significant under spend in ICT and IGNOU during 2013-2014.

A survey of feedback received from a **large number of stakeholders** who are associated with IGNOU's programs reveal the following **observations and recommendations**:

- a) There is a need to stop competing with traditional universities and giving traditional degrees & provide a good base for rural masses at a very low cost, offering short term certificate for skill development programs or designed special programs currently not available anywhere.
- b) Study material of IGNOU is generally very stimulating and correspondences prompt and stakeholders happy during 2002-2006. However when the IGNOU centre was to be restarted with a fresh MOU in 2012 no students list was received.
- c) Importance of audio visual added learning was promoted initially. While the quality of printed books is invariably good, the complete sets of book were rarely received despite appeals.
- d) Eminent academicians were not allowed to join IGNOU programs. The students also get seriously affected by mismanagement and extremely autocratic functioning.
- e) IGNOU has stopped partnering with many institutes abroad. This is affection the career prospects of over 50000 students.
- f) As regards foreign students it is seen that the number of African students coming to India has substantially declined over the years. This trend needs to be reversed.

Regulatory Mechanism

The Yashpal Committee and Knowledge Commission have strongly recommended for establishment of an autonomous overarching National Commission for Higher Education and Research for prescribing standards of academic quality and defining policies for advancement of knowledge in higher educational institutions.

There is a near unanimity in view that existing regulatory control by UGC, created under Act of 1956 is not lending itself to quality improvement flexibility in charging fees, offering reasonable remuneration to teachers & finalization of curriculum of either public or private universities. UGC's primordial concern is with central and elite universities like DU, JNU etc. This has to be abdicated in favour of a regulatory mechanism which is academically less asphyxiating. Arvind Panagariya (2012) makes a powerful plea against such frustrating control mechanism of UGC and recommends privatization to bring quality improvement.

A survey of the top class universities in the world reveal they have considerable autonomy in terms of fixing curriculum, faculty recruitment and charging of fees from the students. There is also considerable synergy between the industry and the university which foster collaborative work in research and in creation of patents. It is unfortunate that the recommendations of the Knowledge Commission for having an independent regulatory authority IRAHE has not found favour with the present government who seek to merely tweak the existing institutional arrangement of the University Grants Commission.

Funding

The allocation trends show the picture in Table-2. It would be seen that there has been substantial surrenders, particularly in ICT program during 2013-2014 at the Revised Estimate stage. Also there has been a drop of almost 27% in utilization of funds for IGNOU. It is indeed distressing that compared to 2012-2013 the allocation this year is almost 10% less.

Conclusion

The programs being run by IGNOU have certainly contributed significantly in terms of their reach as even the remotest corners of India and the disadvantaged section of population have stood to gain substantially from the quality of teaching material. They have clearly served as a significant supplement to the existing university system which puts a premium only on elite institutions like IITs and IIMs while 50% of the state run universities languish in terms of infrastructure teaching quality and research. It must also be mentioned that in terms of allocation the IGNOU programs account for only 135.5 crores in an overall higher education budget of 27656 crores benefitting nearly 42 lakh students.

However what is disconcerting is endemic mismanagement at the top level and need to make it more relevant for students in remote areas by inculcating specific skill based training and harmonizing ICT with IGNOU programs. The Economic Survey, 2013-2014 rightly mentions that skill development is vital not only for reaping the benefits of demographic dividend but also for greater inclusive growth. With effective use of ICT, e-study materials can be easily disseminated without having to send complete printed materials to remote corners of the country. Further the IGNOU course should be made a part of accreditation so as to ensure self regulation and quality building. The prime minister has also been strongly recommending for use of information technology in disseminating skill based knowledge to all sections of the society.

India's Global Competitive Index (GCI) has slipped from 61 to 71 this year. Higher education and training are considered extremely important parameters that contribute to GCI. China with a rank of 28 has a 7% share of 3.3 million internationally mobile students who benefit through distance education. It is, therefore, a pity that IGNOU is closing its partnership with institutes abroad and not helping out the Indian Diaspora. It is commonly acknowledged that India has a significant advantage globally in terms of labour arbitrage. However as Nobel Laureate Robert Solow had rightly mentioned the wage differential has to be bolstered by improvement in factor productivity. The programs through the IGNOU and open and distance learning can be a powerful knowledge multiplier and must not be abdicated in hurry.

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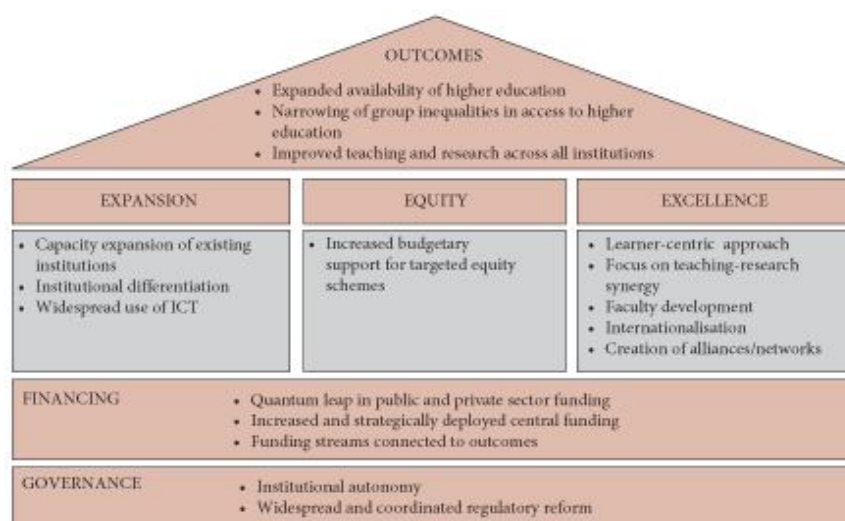
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Figure 1: Strategy Framework of 12th Plan



Source: 12th Five Year Plan 2012-2017, Social Sectors Volume-III, Planning Commission, Govt. of India, Page 91

Table-1: Growth of Enrolment in ODL Programmes in the Eleventh Plan

(Enrolment in Lakh)

Enrolment	2006-2007	2011-2012	Increase	Growth Rate (Percent)
Indira Gandhi National Open University	4.68	6.97	2.29	8.3
State Open Universities (SOU)	7.77	10.80	3.03	6.8
Distance Education Institutions (DEI)	14.96	24.24	9.28	10.1
Total	27.41	42.01	14.60	8.9

Source: Distance Education Council, & 12th Five Year Plan 2012-2017, Social Sectors Volume-III, Planning Commission, Govt. of India, Page-93

Table-2: Allocation to Open, Distance Education & ICT in Rs. Crore

Type of Programme	2012-13 (Actual)	2013-14		2014-15 Budget Estimate
		Budget Estimate	Revised Estimate	
IGNOU	157	101	73.8	135.5
ICT	191.8	340	106.2	180
Total	348.8	441	180	315.5

Source: India's Budget: 2014-2015