

Policy Perspective and Controlling Agencies for Distance Education in India

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Distance education is a branch of education where teachers and students are separated in terms of place and time. They communicate at times of their own choosing by exchanging printed or electronic media, or through technology that allows them to communicate in real time and through other online ways. Distance education has noticed drastic changes in the last few centuries. Its length and breadth has noticed both quantitative and qualitative changes. DE has been described as "a process to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both. In other words, distance learning is the process of creating an educational experience of equal quality for the learner to best suit their needs outside the classroom. Distance education courses that require a physical on-site presence for any reason (including taking examinations) is considered a hybrid or blended course of study. This emerging technology is becoming widely used in universities and institutions around the globe (Wikipedia). With the recent trend of technological advance, distance learning is becoming more recognized for its potential in providing individualized attention and communication with students internationally. Initially, developed countries were practicing distance education but off late developing countries have also gone for distance education in a big way. India has emerged as one of the biggest centre of distance education in the world.

History of Education in India

Education has continued to evolve, diversify and extend its reach and coverage to all since the dawn of human history. Every country develops its system of education to express and promote its unique socio-cultural identity and also to meet the challenges of the times. From ancient Bharat to modern India, higher education has always occupied a place of prominence in Indian history. In ancient times, Nalanda, Taxila and Vikramsila

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universities were renowned seats of higher learning, attracting students not only from all over the country but from far off countries like Korea, China, Burma (now Myanmar), Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Tibet and Nepal. Today, India manages one of the largest higher education systems in the world. There are moments in history when a new direction has to be given to an age-old process. The present system of higher education dates back to Mount Stuart Elphinstone's minutes of 1823, which stressed on the need for establishing schools for teaching English and the European sciences. Later, Lord Macaulay, in his minutes of 1835, advocated "efforts to make natives of the country thoroughly good English scholars". Sir Charles Wood's Dispatch of 1854, famously known as the 'Magna Carta of English Education in India', recommended creating a properly articulated scheme of education from the primary school to the university. It sought to encourage indigenous education and planned the formulation of a coherent policy of education. Subsequently, the universities of Calcutta, Bombay (now Mumbai) and Madras were set up in 1857, followed by the University of Allahabad in 1887. The Inter-University Board (later known as the Association of Indian Universities) was established in 1925 to promote university activities, by sharing information and cooperation in the field of education, culture, sports and allied areas.

NATIONAL POLICY ON EDUCATION:

In the post independence era, education continued to be there as a major priority area in the overall planning. Large number of Commissions and committees were appointed both at centre and state level to boost the educational network of the country. The most important challenge before the educational planners of the nation was to bring the entire population of the country under the educational fold. This could not have been possible without introducing distance education in a big way. The country has reached a stage in its economic and technical development when a major effort must be made to derive the maximum benefit from the assets already created and to ensure that the fruits of change reach all sections. Education is the highway to that goal. With this aim in view, the Government of India announced in January 1985 that a new Education Policy would be formulated for the country. A comprehensive appraisal of the existing educational scene was made followed by a countrywide debate. The views and suggestions received from different quarters were carefully studied. The National Policy of 1968 marked a significant step in the history of education in post- Independence India. It aimed to promote national progress, a sense of common citizenship and culture, and to strengthen national integration. It laid stress on the need for a radical reconstruction of the education system, to improve its quality at all stages, and gave much greater attention to science and technology, the cultivation of moral values and a closer relation between education and the life of the people. Since the adoption of the 1968 Policy, there has been considerable expansion in educational facilities all over the country at all levels. More than 90 per

cent of the country's rural habitations now have schooling facilities within a radius of one kilometer. There has been sizeable augmentation of facilities at other stages also. Perhaps the most notable development has been the acceptance of a common structure of education throughout the Country and the introduction of the 10+2+3 system by most States. In the school curricula, in addition to laying down a common scheme of studies for boys and girls, science and mathematics were incorporated as compulsory subjects and work experience assigned a place of importance.

A beginning was also made in restructuring of courses at the undergraduate level. Centers of Advanced Studies were set up for post-graduate education and research. While these achievements are impressive by themselves, the general formulations incorporated in the 1968 Policy did not, however, get translated into a detailed strategy of implementation, accompanied by the assignment of specific responsibilities and financial and organizational support. As a result, problems of access, quality, quantity, utility and financial outlay, accumulated over the years, have now assumed such massive proportions that they must be tackled with the utmost urgency.

NEW CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION

Today, education in India stands at the crossroads. Neither normal linear expansion nor the existing pace and nature of improvement can meet the needs of the situation (www.education.nic.in). In the Indian way of thinking, a human being is a positive asset and a precious national resource, which needs to be cherished, nurtured and developed with tenderness, and care, coupled with dynamism. Each individual's growth presents a different range of problems and requirements, at every stage from the womb to the tomb. The catalytic action of Education in this complex and dynamic growth process needs to be planned meticulously and executed with great sensitivity. India's political and social life is passing through a phase, which poses the danger of erosion to long-accepted values. The goals of secularism, socialism, democracy and professional ethics are coming under increasing strain. The rural areas, with poor infrastructure and social services, will not get the benefit of trained and educated youth, unless rural-urban disparities are reduced and determined measures are taken to promote diversification and dispersal of employment opportunities.

Life in the coming decades is likely to bring new tensions together with unprecedented opportunities. To enable the people to benefit in the new environment will require new designs of human resource development. The coming generations should have the ability to internalize new ideas constantly and creatively. They have to be imbued with a strong commitment to humane values and to social justice. All this implies better education. Besides, a variety of new challenges and social needs make it imperative for the Government to formulate and implement a new Education Policy for the country. Nothing short of this

will meet the situation. In nutshell, the targets set in these policies could not be achieved without making distance education an integral part of the overall educational system. Presently, there are more than 13 open universities and 200 other institutions imparting distance education in India.

CONTROLLING AGENCIES FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

Since, distance education is practiced in almost all parts of the world and hence, there are large numbers of international and national agencies are involved in controlling distance education.

International Bodies: The major international agencies engaged in distance education are as under:

The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) is the leading global membership organization for the open and distance education community, and is open to institutions, educational authorities, commercial actors, and individuals (www.icde.org). ICDE is an NGO in formal consultative relations with UNESCO and shares UNESCO's key value – the universal right to education for all. ICDE further derives its position from the unique knowledge and experience of its members throughout the world in the development and use of new methodologies and emerging technologies. ICDE was founded in 1938 in Canada as the International Council for Correspondence Education and today has members from over 50 countries worldwide. ICDE conducts world conferences on open and distance education on alternate years.

The International E-Learning Association (IELA) is dedicated to advancing the knowledge and practice of e-learning in the classroom and the workplace. With members from every continent, and from the business sector, industry, government, and academia, the IELA is a diverse community of e-learning professionals, researchers, and students (www.ielassoc.org).

Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) is a non-profit organization of higher learning institutions that are primarily concerned with education at a distance. AAOU was founded in 1987 by a number of open universities in the Asian region who realized the significant contribution of distance education in democratizing the provision of learning opportunities to mankind (www.aaou.net).

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organization created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning/distance education knowledge, resources and technologies. COL is helping developing nations improve access to quality education and training. The Commonwealth of Learning helps governments and institutions expand the scope, scale and quality of learning by using new approaches and technologies, especially those subsumed under the general term of open and distance learning (ODL) (www.col.org). These international bodies are basically coordinating agencies and hardly any role for controlling the functioning of distance education in

the various countries. However, these agencies provide valuable guidelines for developing conceptual and theoretical models for distance education in the different parts of the world.

National Bodies for Distance Education: Apart from international bodies, there are large numbers of bodies have been created at the national level to control and monitor the distance education in India. In a huge country like India where fruits of development are not equally distributed, the importance of distance education is tremendous. It can significantly improve the quality of life of the people by making technology-mediated education accessible to the remotest corner of the country and all those who cannot afford to attend regular classes. But maintaining the quality of distance education is a hilarious task. Therefore the Distance Education Council or DEC, as it is now popularly known, was established under the Indira Gandhi National Open University Act, 1985 primarily to determine the standards of distance education in India.

DISTANCE EDUCATION COUNCIL

Distance Education Council was constituted under statute 28 arising from Section 25 of the Indira Gandhi National Open University Act, 1985. The Distance Education Council (DEC) is responsible for the promotion and coordination of the Open University and distance education system and for determination of its standards. DEC helps in development of learner-centric open and distance learning (ODL) system and ensures high quality of education, meet challenges of access and equity to reach the un-reached, the Distance Education Council (DEC) has following initiatives:

- DEC started state governments/conventional universities to establish open universities/ distance education institutes and create a network of such institutions.
- Provides financial support and grants and academic guidelines to institutions of open and distance education
- Evolve norms, procedures and guidelines in respect of admission, evaluation, and certification
- Assess and accredit institutions of open and distance learning to ensure quality
- It uses of technology in education and provide opportunities for sharing technological resources and competencies through inter-university partnerships/consortia
- It facilitate development and sharing of self-instructional (multiple media) materials amongst different open universities/distance education institutions
- DEC helps sharing of student support services created by various State Open Universities (SOUs) and correspondence course Institutes (CCIs)
- Promotes convergence of conventional, ODL and other systems to facilitate mobility of learners through credit transfer/sharing

- Promotes research and innovation in ODL systems
- Facilitate training for indigenous capacity building in ODL systems
- Creates databases for SOUs, CCIs, distance educators and functionaries associated with ODL systems (www.indiaedu.com).
- It is also responsible for promotion and co-ordination of the distance education system.

The distance education council promotes the arrangement of programs of human resource development for the distance education system. The council collects and distributes information concerning to the different programs provided by various open universities. One of the major responsibilities of the council is to assign Review Committees at the proper time to study and evaluate the performance of distance education institutes.

UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMISSION

Soon after Independence, the University Education Commission was set up in 1948 under the Chairmanship of Dr. S Radhakrishnan "to report on Indian university education and suggest improvements and extensions that might be desirable to suit the present and future needs and aspirations of the country". It recommended that the University Grants Committee be reconstituted on the general model of the University Grants Commission of the United Kingdom with a full-time Chairman and other members to be appointed from amongst educationists of repute. In 1952, the Union Government decided that all cases pertaining to the allocation of grants-in-aid from public funds to the Central Universities and other Universities and Institutions of higher learning might be referred to the University Grants Commission. Consequently, the University Grants Commission (UGC) was formally inaugurated by late Shri Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the then Minister of Education, Natural Resources and Scientific Research on 28 December 1953.

The UGC, however, was formally established only in November 1956 as a statutory body of the Government of India through an Act of Parliament for the coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of university education in India. In order to ensure effective region-wise coverage throughout the country, the UGC has decentralized its operations by setting up six regional centers at Pune, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Bhopal, Guwahati and Bangalore. The head office of the UGC is located at Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg in New Delhi, with two additional bureaus operating from 35, Feroze Shah Road and the South Campus of University of Delhi as well (www.ugc.ac.in). In recent years, the Indian Higher Education System has become fully aware of the need for quality. Quality and Excellence could not be attained overnight. Organized and focused efforts are needed to achieve this goal. The unplanned growth of higher education coupled with lack of resources affects the quality of education. A careful distribution of

resources is mandatory to achieve quality and excellence along with access and equality. The UGC has taken upon itself this onerous task and has succeeded in maintaining the quality of education. It has launched many schemes, which have made some impact in the system. Nevertheless, UGC is mainly controlling formal higher education but it has vast powers to contain and regulate even distance education.

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

Apart from DEC and UGC, there are 13 more bodies which are engaged in controlling higher education in India. Although, these bodies are not directly linked with distance education but indirectly have serious repercussions for the growth and development of distance education in India. Recently Government of India has come up with new proposal to dissolve all these bodies and create a single body named as National Commission for Higher Education and Research. This can be considered as one of the most significant development in the post independence era in the field of higher education. The MHRD had cited the Yashpal Committee recommendation and that of the National Knowledge Commission to set up a regulator that would have jurisdiction over the entire spectrum of higher education. However, the PMO is clear that such reports and recommendations cannot override government policy as enunciated in the President's address to Parliament last June. The HRD Ministry had suggested the scrapping of the AICTE, UGC, DEC, NCTE etc. These bodies, which oversee the functioning of universities and engineering and business schools in India, have often received flak for restrictive policies and sometimes opaque functioning. The move to setup an independent NCHER is based on the recommendations of a panel setup by the government to review the functioning of the UGC, established in 1956, and the AICTE, which came into existence in 1987. A draft cabinet note for the creation of an overarching regulatory body in the higher education section has been prepared and circulated across ministries for consultations, on September 10, 2009. The process of replacing the University Grants Commission (UGC), All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) by the proposed National Commission for Higher Education and Research (NCHER) has commenced. The task of establishing a national testing scheme on the lines of GRE for university admission has also been in the pipeline.

A task force on a crucial bill for setting up of an overarching body to regulate higher education was finalized in June 2010 the draft legislation after two-month long consultations with various stakeholders. The draft bill on National Commission for Higher Education and Research (NCHER) will be brought before the Central Advisory Board of Education The panel also discussed the possibility of including health and legal education under the ambit of NCHER. There were divergent views among members on whether the

NCHER should enjoy the power of a civil court. The government wants to finalize the bill and introduce it in Parliament in the monsoon session. However, because of the divergent views of the various stakeholders, it may be extended to the winter session. Once this bill becomes a reality, it is going to have serious repercussions to the distance education also.

An Appraisal of Role of Controlling Agencies in Distance Education Although, number of institutions have been created for controlling higher education in India in general and distance education in particular but there is no clear-cut demarcation of powers of these agencies and because of which the distance education has to suffer a lot. There are large numbers of instances where serious discrimination has been done with the distance education. Few of the instances can be quoted as under:

B.Ed./ M.Ed. Courses: B.Ed course can be the most glaring example of discrimination in distance education. In conventional courses, the eligibility of a B.Ed student is 50 per cent marks in graduation and it is a one year course. While in distance education, from this year the pass percentage has been increased to 55 per cent with 2 years teaching experience and the duration of the course is 2 years. Similar is the situation of M. Ed. courses. This is really a strange that a student who does not have any teaching experience, he completes his degree in approximately 9 months but a student who has a teaching experience, completes his degree in 2 years. There can be any justification of such kind of discriminatory practices.

M.Phil and PhD. Courses: Initially, numbers of institutions were running M.Phil. And PhD. Courses through distance education but from last year UGC has issued a strange notification regarding stopping of these courses through distance mode. This has resulted in denying an opportunity to large number of students for improving their qualifications. This amounts to violation of fundamental principles of Indian constitution. Here it is important to mention that if distance education is to be governed by the guidelines of UGC then what is role of DEC? In other words, there is no clarity amongst the policy makers of the nation about the role distance education has to play in the present era.

Discrimination in Employment: There are large numbers of examples where students who pass their examinations from conventional universities are being given preference while the students who complete their degrees from distance education are being ignored. This has virtually made distance education as a second rated education.

Negligible Participation of Distance Educators in Academic Decision Making: In most of the dual mode institutions, the participation of teachers from distance education in academic decision making is almost negligible. Most of the guidelines even for distance education are framed by the persons who have no background in distance education. Obviously, the concept of students' centered education is rarely practiced.

DEC a Paper Tiger: Although, a so-called national body for distance education has been created but it has no approval of parliament and it has merely an appendage of IGNOU. It has already been stated that DEC is being governed by the statutes and ordinances of IGNOU. Even its office is located in the premises of IGNOU and has no independent identity. Obviously, unless and until some statutory body is created, the survival of distance education is quite difficult.

Separate Rules for IGNOU: Distance education is only a segment of education which is being governed by the two separate rules. There are separate set of rules for IGNOU and rest of the distance education institutes. UGC has banned research degrees from distance education institutions but IGNOU is running such courses. Even for B.ed. Course, the minimum eligibility in IGNOU is still 50 per cent while for rest of the institutions it is 55 per cent. Policy planners have yet to answer the rationale behind such discriminatory rules.

Colonial Character of Distance Education: It has been found that there has been a complete domination of conventional system of higher education over the distance education. Most of the policies relating to distance education are framed by the persons who do not have any background in this area. It may be the national bodies or various selection committees. It is because of this, distance education always remained as a neglected field and second rated education. The blame for this lies, purely on these so called national bodies and which can be consider as their biggest failure.

Misunderstood Concept: Distance education is a full fledged branch of knowledge; however, it is rarely projected as such. Anybody can be appointed as Director or Vice- Chancellor in the distance education institute. There is no weight age for having knowledge of distance education and work experience. Similarly, while formulating a national policy for education, hardly the services of the persons are availed who have expertise in the field of distance education.

An Alternate

The fundamental question here is that unless and until the root cause is not traced perhaps it will not be possible to find a solution to the problems of distance education. Here it is important to mention that distance education has played an important role in increasing the educational skills of the vast majority of Indian masses. Therefore, there is an urgent need of restructuring the entire structure of the distance education in the country. It is clear from the above analysis that national bodies have failed miserably to give right direction to the distance education of the country. Hence, there is an urgent need for redesigning the entire controlling framework of distance education in the country.

The modalities developed by the IGNOU and DEC must be scrapped where step motherly treatment is given to most of the distance education institutions. This is possible only by bringing all distance education institutions at par and supremacy of IGNOU must come to an end. It is an old saying that accused can not

be judge. Obviously, IGNOU being a distance education institution can never be a controlling agency for distance education.

Duration of courses in conventional and distance education must be equal. There can not be any justification of taxing the distance education students without any fault.

Serious efforts should be made to further widen the scope of distance education and all retrogressive decisions to restrict its scope must be scrapped like banning of M.Phil, PhD. etc.

The utmost need of the hour is that unless and until these so called national bodies are not restructured, the growth and development of distance education is not possible. Although, Mr. Kapil Sibal, Hon'ble Minister for HRD has assured of dissolving of all these bodies those are controlling higher education in India and these will be replaced by the National Commission for Higher Education and Research perhaps which can be considered as the most revolutionary decision but still the question remains that whether the problems of the distance education will be solved or these will continue to remain in the same state of affairs even under National Commission for Higher Education and Research? Obviously, unless, a strong case is not prepared by the people engaged in distance education; there is remote possibility of any solution. Therefore, the immediate task is to float a national level organization of distance educators which can take up the matter with the concerned ministry so that an alternate policy for distance education may be framed where these grievances of distance education can be addressed thoroughly. The bodies like DEC and IGNOU have miserably failed to address the discriminatory treatment given to the distance education. Last but not least, background in distance education must be a pre qualification for any person to be appointed in the policy formulation for distance education so that distance education must get its due place.

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