



Equal Opportunity to Learn through Open University System: A case study of IGNOU

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Available online at: www.isca.in

Received 19th July 2013, revised 30th July 2013, accepted 26th July 2013

Abstract

Colleges and universities have a crucial role to play in national, statewide and regional economic development efforts. Higher education and economic development are inter-linked to each another. For a country to be successful in economic and overall development, colleges and universities have to play a major role. Higher education in India is provided by both public and private institutes who are affiliated to different universities. Apart from having regular universities, India developed an Open University system to promote education system and encourage distance learning. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was the pioneer and now there are seven open universities in India offering over 500 courses. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), established by an Act of Parliament in 1985, has continuously contributed to inclusive growth by providing inclusive education. By offering high-quality teaching through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode it has tried to increase the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER). The present paper is a modest attempt to understand higher education system and the contributions being made by IGNOU in Indian education system.

Keywords: IGNOU, education system, Open learning, Higher education.

Introduction

Colleges and universities have a crucial role to play in national, statewide and regional economic development efforts. Higher education and economic development are inter-linked to each other. For a country to be successful in economic and overall development, colleges and universities have to play a major role. Many of our private and public colleges and universities have made significant contributions to economic development of India. Good education system is key to development of a country. For accelerated growth of our economy towards developed economy we need to have educated human capital. Our youth are our strength. Our Government also understands this and has done lot of reforms in education system in country and helped in development of higher education sector.

The Governments, both at State and Central level, has been the major source of funding in education sector in India. This is especially true of higher education — mainly due to the belief that education is a social obligation, an essential vehicle for individual empowerment and national development¹.

Structure of Higher Education in India

Over the last 50 years, the Government of India has provided substantial public funds and full policy support to create one of the world's largest systems of higher education. The growth of higher education in India has been phenomenal. Starting with 1950- 51, there were only 263,000 students in all disciplines in 750 colleges affiliated to 30 universities. This

has grown by 2005 to 11 million students in 17,000 Degree colleges affiliated to 230 universities and non-affiliated university-level institutions. In addition, there are about 10 million students in over 6500 in vocational institutions. The enrolment is growing at the rate of 5.1 per cent per year. However, of the Degree students only 5 per cent are enrolled into engineering courses, while an overall 20 per cent in sciences. The demand for professional courses is growing rapidly².

Main players in Indian Higher Education

University Grants Commission (UGC) which was set up under UGC Act 1956 is responsible for coordination, determination, and maintenance of standards of education in India. It is also responsible for release of grants to universities and research organizations. Government has created 6 central Universities and 156 Universities (total of 221 Universities). There is also a concept of Deemed University. UGC also gives status of Deemed University to colleges of exceptional excellence. There are 39 Deemed Universities and seven open universities. All of India's higher education is managed by the UGC and the various Councils. The UGC, established by a statute 1952, has been empowered to promote and coordinate university education in India and also approve grants to them²

Open University System

Open Universities can be highly cost effective as the cost of teaching through distance education comes down to a third compared to the traditional system. They also maintain a close

relationship with the industry and are especially helpful to those who cannot afford a regular university degree due to lack of time due to some employment or high cost. Distance education with new communication and information technology promises to expand the frontiers of Higher Education as never before. The reason being it costs 66 per cent less and the students do not have to leave their homes or profession. The internet and satellite technology is used to further the cause of distance education. The Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) is launching a satellite for educational purposes only. India developed an Open University system to promote education system and encourage distance learning. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was the pioneer and now there are seven open universities in India offering over 500 courses. IGNOU has enrolled about 11, 87,100 students .A distance education Council has been set up by IGNOU and a common pool of programmes is available for sharing².

IGNOU

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was established by an Act of Parliament in 1985. It has continuously striven to build an inclusive knowledge society through inclusive education. It has increased the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) by offering high-quality teaching and easy access education through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode.

The University began by offering two academic programmes in 1987, i.e., Diploma in Management and Diploma in Distance Education, with strength of 4,528 students.

Today, it serves the educational aspirations of over 4 million students in India and 36 other countries through 21 Schools of Studies and a network of 67 regional centres, around 3,000 learner support centres and 67 overseas centres. The University offers about 490 certificate, diploma, degree and doctoral programmes, with strength of nearly 420 faculty members and academic staff at the headquarters and regional centres and about 36,000 academic counsellors from conventional institutions of higher learning, professional organizations, and industry among others³.

The mandate of the University is to: i. Provide access to higher education to all segments of the society, ii. Offer high-quality, innovative and need-based programmes at different levels, to all those who require them, iii. Reach out to the disadvantaged by offering programmes in all parts of the country at affordable costs; and iv. Promote, coordinate and regulate the standards of education offered through open and distance learning in the country, v. To achieve the twin objectives of widening access for all sections of society and providing continual professional development and training to all sectors of the economy, the University uses a variety of media and latest technology in imparting education. This is reflected in

the formulated vision of IGNOU, keeping its objectives in focus³.

The University has made a noteworthy mark in the areas of community education, higher education and continual professional development. The University has networked with reputed public institutions and private enterprises for enhancing the educational opportunities being offered by it. It has also been conferred with awards of excellence by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Canada, several times. In January 2010, it was listed 12th in the webometric ranking of Indian universities, based on the calibre of its presence on the Internet.

The University is committed to quality in teaching, research, training and extension activities, and acts as a national resource centre for expertise and infrastructure in the ODL system. The University has established the Centre for Extension Education, National Centre for Disability Studies and National Centre for Innovation in Distance Education, to focus on specific learner groups and enrich the distance learning system. The Distance Education Council of the University helps in regulating and maintaining the ODL system in the country.

With the launch of EduSat (a satellite dedicated only to education) on 20th September, 2004, and the establishment of the Inter-University Consortium, the University has pioneered technology-enabled education in the country. There are more than 134 active two-way video-conferencing centres. All the regional centres and high enrollment study centres have been provided with network connectivity to facilitate transaction of interactive digital content¹.

IGNOU offers programmes in about 30 established disciplines and a few inter-disciplinary areas.

Research and Scholarship

IGNOU, with its diverse programmes, low cost and a wide network, has succeeded in attracting a significant group of learners. However, a significant cross-section of people still remains outside its reach. The University is mandated to reach out to them. Specific efforts are made for providing access to education and equity in opportunities to all sections of society in all regions of the country. Differently-abled students are also given special attention¹.

The thrust of the University is to generate a literacy movement, by involving all sections of the society and training the workforce to meet the challenges of the emerging professional and social needs. The focus is on extension programmes, which promote local, integrated development and create self-employment for the poorer sections and for those living in rural and backward areas¹.

Electronic Media in Education at IGNOU

ICT can provide effective and convenient tools to meet the emerging needs of diverse groups. IGNOU operates a 24-hour educational TV channel Gyan Darshan and a radio-cooperative Gyan Vani. There is provision for two-way tele-conferencing, interactive radio counseling, and for relaying educational programmes through local stations. The Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, has identified IGNOU as the nodal agency for collaborating with, and developing capacities in, State Open Universities¹.

IGNOU regional centres

IGNOU has created a wide network of Regional Centres (RCs) and Study Centres (SCs) across the country.

It has 56 Regional Centres, 6 IGNOU-Army Recognised Regional Centres, 4 IGNOU-Navy Recognised Regional Centres and 1 IGNOU-Assam Rifles Recognised Regional Centre which are responsible for the promotion of the Open University system; maintenance, development and monitoring of Study Centres and Student Support Services; and organization of staff development programmes in the region¹.

Regional Centres are established easily with full cooperation and support of the respective State Governments. The plan of IGNOU is to provide one Regional Centre for every state in the country.

Functions

The Regional Centre has been defined under Section 2(J) of the IGNOU Act as under: "Regional Centre" means a Centre established or maintained by the University for the purpose of coordinating and supervising the work of the Study Centres in any region and for performing such other functions as may be conferred on such Centre by the Board of Management (BoM)¹.

Further, under Section 5(1) (XXII) of the Act, the University is empowered to confer autonomous status to a Regional Centre have been established by IGNOU to coordinate and supervise the work of the Study Centres.

Facilities

Regional Centres act as the sub-office of the University for all practical purposes and also act as resource centres of the University in respective regions. Regional Centres are centres for training coordinators/counsellors/other functionaries and provide a venue for the students and the academic counsellors to express their responses with reference to a particular subject. Responsibility for random checking of student assignment also lies with Regional Centres. Following facilities are provided at IGNOU Regional Centres¹: Library

course material, Video cassettes, Audio cassettes, Computers, Telex/fax, TV/VCR etc.

Different Divisions of IGNOU: School of agriculture, School of education, School of foreign language, School of humanities, School of law, School of sciences, School of tourism and hospitality service sectoral management, School of computer and information sciences, School of engineering and technology, School of gender and development studies, School of inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary studies, School of social sciences, School of translation studies and training, School of continuing education, School of extension and development studies, School of health sciences, School of journalism and new media studies, School of performing and visual arts, School of social work, School of vocational education and training.

Outreach

The University has a considerable international presence. It encourages and funds the participation of its faculty in international conferences and seminars, and organizes several international conferences too¹.

There are regular visits of foreign scholars, for delivering lectures or to interact with faculty. The University has given copyright or permission to many foreign institutions to adapt/adopt/use its learning materials, apart from offering its academic programmes across the world through partnership arrangements¹.

Over the years, IGNOU has lived up to the country's expectations of providing education to the marginalized sections of society. Free of cost education is being provided to all jail inmates across the country. A large number of SC/ST students have been admitted to various programmes of the University¹.

An innovative Bachelor of Arts programme in Applied Sign Language has been launched in collaboration with the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) of Britain. The programme is the first-of-its-kind in the world¹.

Conclusion

IGNOU is doing a remarkable work in providing quality education and opportunity to grow in life to all sections of society. It has revolutionized education system in India and has made education accessible to everyone. Providing education in each and every corner of India and now its presence can be felt in other countries also. It is adopting all the means and is coming up with new ideas and technology to provide quality education. It is an important contributor in higher education and in development of India. IGNOU is not an Open University for masses but a literacy movement in

itself. It is well said about IGNOU that it is people's University.

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