

BOOK REVIEW

Higher Education and Open Distance Learning Trajectory in India: Reflections of an Insider

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The open and distance learning system in India has passed through different phases of development. It has experienced ups and downs in terms of growth, recognition, and programmes on offer. The programmes offered by the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions have a set life cycle and shelf life of their own. With an infusion of technology and extensive use of ICT in education, the shelf-life of programmes has shortened substantially. Over the years, the system has been able to expand its reach and use multiple models of instructional design and multiple channels of programme delivery. As a result, the contribution of the system has been immense in elevating the lives of people from the disadvantaged and marginalised sections of society to the mainstream. In pursuit of keeping itself relevant to the requirements of individuals and society at large, the ODL system has designed, developed and experimented with different strategies – some of which succeeded while others failed. In this journey of success and failure, the institutions have witnessed all-round growth from within and without. These experiences, if documented at an appropriate time, could provide important lessons not only to policy makers but to practitioners as well, who could then capitalise on these experiences without having to reinvent the wheel. However, we see a complete dearth of such literature in the area of open and distance learning.

The volume in hand is one such valuable repository that looks in detail into the ODL system through the pragmatic eyes of a legend who has experienced the system since he was part of it. The book is divided into three Sections – Section-A: Higher Education, Section-B: Open and Distance Learning, and Section-C: Quality Assurance. Each of the sections contains four chapters carrying forward the theme of that section. These chapters are collections of chronicle writings of the author in the form of lectures and research articles. The writings have been customised and updated appropriately so as to fit into the overall framework of the book for logical presentation and comprehension. Chapter 1 presents the framework of the ODL system in the Indian context and the philosophy behind its promotion. The author initiates discussion with the primitive structure of the higher education system in the country as far back as 700 BC, when “Takshashila” was established and is acclaimed as the world’s first university. The chapter focuses on developing a transparent regulatory mechanism for a higher education system so as to ensure “flexibility, autonomy and accountability” in the system. The system should insist on clear directions and the execution of policies. The contradictions between the



institutional objectives and practices need to be resolved to enhance the proficiency of the system. The author has rightly raised the concerns of limited and unequal access, questions of relevance, uneven quality and lack of excellence, privatisation of higher education, commercialisation of open and distance learning, low public spending on higher education, and ineffective regulations and monitoring systems.

Chapter 2 deals with aspects of institution building and leadership issues in Indian universities. As the author claims, leadership plays an important role in the building of an institution. However, universities in India are facing a crisis of leadership. On the one hand the leaders in these universities are “characterized by unfulfilled greatness”, on the other, the challenge of dealing with changing contexts makes their selection tougher. In order to cope with the situation, the leader needs to have “three forms of understanding: critique of the way things are; vision of how they should be; and theory of change about how to move from one to the other”. The “tempered-radicals”, who have the ability to face the challenges and opportunities inherent in these positions with pragmatic intelligence, are the ones who need to be placed in leadership positions in the universities.

Chapter 3 presents the extent of incremental change that has occurred in the higher education scenario, i.e., starting from “Gurukula” to the modern “global village”. The system in both eras has demonstrated distinct features, of course, commensurate with contemporary societal needs. However, the system has become more sophisticated in view of the challenges it faces and the opportunities it enjoys in the contemporary era. The author tries to identify all of these and presents a holistic scenario characterised by size and diversity, entry of private partners, questions of relevance, intervention of ICT, and governance issues in addition to regulatory framework and quality concerns.

In Chapter 4, the author claims that the system of higher education is passing through a deep crisis of “uneven, disorderly and direction-less growth”. He elaborates on the framework of “Dharma” that the universities should be professing but have, unfortunately, transgressed the path. He presents the social “Dharma” of the universities from two different perspectives, i.e., individual development and national development. The higher education system is expected to produce “intellectually competent”, “socially sensitive”, “morally upright”, and “spiritually oriented” graduates who could contribute to national development. They should be “public intellectuals”, “autonomous thinkers”, and “advocates of social justice”. The system should crucially focus on inclusiveness of education, quality of programmes and governance with accountability and transparency. Being in a new state, the universities functioning in Telangana (formed on June 2, 2014 as the 29th State of India) should pioneer the production of graduates who could play an active role in the all-round development of the state.

Chapter 5 discusses the policy perspective of distance education in the Indian context. The author takes us far back in the past when the Kothari Committee was constituted in 1961 to formulate a plan for the commencement of correspondence education in India. It was perhaps the first serious effort after independence for the creation of educational opportunities for the masses. Subsequently, the National Policy on Education 1968 further enhanced the scope of correspondence education, highlighting the success of a pilot project at the University of Delhi. The scenario changed completely with the establishment of the first open university (Andhra Pradesh Open University) in 1982 at Hyderabad. This experiment further aroused the need to establish an open university at the national level to promote distance education in the country. The National Education Policy (1986) and

Programme of Action (1992) further recognised the important role of distance education for the democratisation of higher education and, thus, paved the way for its expansion. The author is apprehensive that in the process, though, the number of institutions practicing ODL has gone up while the quality and credibility of the system have gone down substantially. While discussing the steps taken by the government in the form of the National Knowledge Commission (2007), draft National ODL Policy (2009), Distance Education Reforms Committee (2011), draft National Education Policy (2016), and UGC ODL Regulations (2017), the author rightly feels a need to put a National ODL Policy in place to promote, standardise and regulate distance higher education in the country.

In Chapter 6, the author focuses on the salient features on which the open university system functions such as multi-point entry and exit, economies of scale, optimum use of resources available, well defined goals, participatory governance, global standards, quality assurance and accreditation, recognition of prior learning, enhancement of learning opportunities, focus on skill enhancement and professional development, guided use and generation of open educational resources, use of Web 2.0 tools for pedagogy, extensive use of ICT in all student related services, and formative and summative assessment, among others. The author has divided all the elements in academic and administrative sub-systems, and advocates for them “to be understood in specific context of intersecting imperatives of the national educational system”. He invites policy makers to improvise the system for 21st-Century educational needs in such a way as to meet the local requirements without losing focus on the global agenda.

Chapter 7 sets the stage for deciding a future agenda founded on current realities while presenting the framework for developing such an understanding. The author poses some of the prominent but very basic questions faced by the current ODL system that would set the tone of future courses of action to keep the system still relevant to the changing requirements of society. He envisions the great potential of the system, though small, in meeting the Sustainable Development Goal (Goal 4) to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030”. While contending with the achievement of the system over a short span of three decades in India, the author expresses his concern over the credibility of the ODL system and it being the second choice. A robust quality assurance and accreditation mechanism would help the system reach its full potential and get due credit. The author suggests a set of seven steps to ensure yielding the desired results.

The integration of ICT in all the systems and sub-systems is an imperative in order to manage number (learners, programmes, courses, counselling sessions, study material packets, etc.) in ODL institutions. The regulatory agencies also reinforce this integration from time to time. In order to implement ICT systematically and in an organised manner, universities need to put an enabling policy in place that not only encourages the users but also provides an ambit and guiding principles within which ICT can be implemented. The author provides a broad policy framework in Chapter 8 for implementation of ICT in institutions, though policy development should be a “consultative process”. The policy could focus on different aspects such as access, cost-effectiveness, efficiency and effectiveness, relevance, transparency, privacy, and accountability, among others.

Chapter 9 defines the aspects of quality assessment as a process for “evaluating the institution’s performance against the goals and set standards”. The author relates quality assessment in the Indian context with the establishment of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in 1994. The methodology and process of accreditation adopted by the NAAC is narrated in this chapter

with a focus on a revised assessment and accreditation framework. The challenges faced by the NAAC in the course of gaining acceptance of its assessment and accreditation system have been prominently highlighted in the chapter, along with the need for development of “the future model of external assessment by drawing proper lessons from this experience”, and the establishment of more external assessment and accreditation agencies for institutional and programme-based assessment and accreditation.

Throughout Chapter 10, the author is vehemently hopeful that open and distance learning will be ubiquitous “as an important philosophy and form of education in the 21st century”. He emphatically claims that “fitness for purpose” is the rule of thumb for the system to stay relevant to the changing knowledge needs of society. However, the author seems to be concerned more about the sustainability of efforts to bring an acceptable level of quality in all aspects of ODL system. More research needs to be carried out in the area of quality assurance to establish the credibility of the system by example. Such studies could function as input for improving the quality in different domains of the system. The biggest challenge would be to imbibe quality as “habit of mind and habit of action” to make it sustainable.

Chapter 11 presents the framework of quality assurance for Open Educational Resources (OER) at the institutional level. The author revisits the goals of OER as set out in the Paris Declaration such as: “promotion of lifelong learning, contribute to social inclusion, promotion of gender equity, education for special needs, improving cost efficiency, and improving quality of teaching learning”. He discusses the quality of OER from the perspectives of “quality as fitness of purpose” and “quality as fitness for purpose”. In order for OER to play their crucial role in the promotion of education in general and distance education in particular through the open university system, the gap between the OER policies and practices needs to be bridged. The roles of management, staff, and learner need to be aligned with the techno-structure of the institution in order to achieve OER quality at the level of acceptance. The author advocates for external assessment as an objective and effective mechanism for quality assurance of OER.

Chapter 12 opens with a quotation “None of us is as smart as all of us” by Warren Bennis, setting the tone of the discussion that focuses on the synergy of the ODL system for attainment of total quality. Elaborating on the nature of a quality deficit in the ODL system, the author extends the scope of systemic synergy that includes the multiple goals of higher education, roles of multiple agencies, and external and internal quality assurance systems. This synergy may lead to development of a higher education institution into a world class institution with specific attributes as listed by the author.

The volume provides a critique on the functionalities of the ODL system, especially the open universities, with plausible arguments, and touches upon all the crucial aspects of the system broadly. The author takes advantage of being a witness of the system as an insider, which not only lets him analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the system minutely but also to present issue-based solutions with a futuristic approach focusing on the important aspects of relevance and quality. The aspect of quality flows as an under-current throughout the discussion by the author in the volume. The arguments framed by him are convincing and bring the readers on to the same page as the author. Though some typos can be noticed in the text here and there, the effort of the author in writing down the current and future scenario of the distance higher education system in India, with a focus on larger issues confronting the system, deserves appreciation. I do hope that the book will give food for

thought to all – the policy makers, the practitioners and the novice users of the ODL system, i.e., the learners at large.

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