OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN ASSAM– AN EMERGING TREND AND REALITY IN THE FIELD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Education is the most potent mechanism for the development of Human Resource. It enhances, enriches and improves all the aspects of human resources. The institutions of today are expected to impart quality education to develop competent and capable individuals who can sustain in the competitive dynamic environment of tomorrow. Higher education is accepted as a vehicle for sustainable development and realized as a powerful tool to build a knowledge society. . Higher Education provides people with an opportunity to reflect on the critical social, economic, cultural, moral and spiritual issues facing humanity. Development of such skills is required by one and all of the members of the present society belonging to all walks of life to shoulder their responsibilities properly. Higher education plays key role in this regard.

Viewing the increasing demand of higher education and a lot of limitations to face, Indian higher education needs a serious make over. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) provides a viable alternative mode with the objective to take education to the door steps of the learner, enhancing social equity, and creating flexibility for lifelong learning. . ODL system is being adopted throughout the world as an important tool to ensure access, equity and quality in the realm of higher education. Especially in developing countries where there is a need of providing training to large number of workers with limited recourses, in such a situation ODL system could play important and viable role in improving overall skills of workers. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to explore the potentialities of ODL system in a state like Assam.

Key words: Open and Distance Learning, Growth, Higher Education, Assam.

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Introduction

Education is the most potent mechanism for the development of Human Resource. It enhances, enriches and improves all the aspects of human resources. The institutions of today are expected to impart quality education to develop competent and capable individuals who can sustain in the competitive dynamic environment of tomorrow. Higher education is accepted as a vehicle for sustainable development and realized as a powerful tool to build a knowledge society. It is the strongest instrument to make the mankind productive, progressive and powerful. The Indian Higher Education system, which includes Technical Education, is one of the largest of the world, just after the United States and China. Higher Education is the most powerful tool to build a knowledge-based society for the future. Higher Education provides people with an opportunity to reflect on the critical social, economic, cultural, moral and spiritual issues facing humanity. It contributes to national development through dissemination of specialized knowledge and skills. Being at the apex of the educational pyramid, it plays a key role in producing quality manpower for the country. The role of higher education in the development of human resources for national development can never be disputed. Higher education can produce high level professionals, technical and managerial personnel generate new knowledge through research and impart such knowledge leading to development of human resources. In a world economy characterized by incredible technological advancements and cutting edge knowledge development, only higher education institutions can provide high level of competency for problem identification and solution for competitive development of manpower of a country. Recognizing the crucial role of higher education in the development of human resources, way back in 1966 the Kothari Commission (1964-66) noted that, "One of the major programmes in reconstruction is the development of our human resources and in this there can be no limit to the education to be provided." In the view of Kothari Commission all educational efforts should be directed towards the development of human resources. On a similar note the National Policy on Education (NPE-1986) also stated that, "Education develops manpower for different levels of the economy. It is also the substrate on which research and development flourish, being the ultimate guarantee of national self-reliance. In sum, Education is a unique investment in the present and the future. This cardinal principle is the key to the National Policy on Education". The policy further stated that, "Higher education provides people with an opportunity to reflect on the critical social, economic, cultural, moral and spiritual issues facing humanity. It contributes to national

development through dissemination of specialized knowledge and skills. It is therefore a crucial factor for survival". Movement of our economy from industrial to service and then to knowledge one and the recent international developments like opening up of markets for global players, market orientated of economies, increased competition between nations require that developing countries develop their human resources infusing in them qualities like innovation, productivity, collaboration, teamwork, reflection, adjustment to change, multiplicity of reactions and readiness to face the challenges of a globally competitive market oriented and knowledge society. Development of such skills is required by one and all of the members of the present society belonging to all walks of life to shoulder their responsibilities properly. Higher education plays key role in this regard.

Viewing the increasing demand of higher education and a lot of limitations to face, Indian higher education needs a serious make over. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) provides a viable alternative mode with the objective to take education to the door steps of the learner, enhancing social equity, and creating flexibility for lifelong learning (Koul, 2000). Education through distance mode indicates universalization and democratisation of higher education with an aim to provide cost- effective and relevant education to large sections of our population including those living in remote and far-flung areas. ODL has come into the educational scene as one of the most potent strategies to fulfil the demands of the mass education as well as individualising it. In a huge country like India where the fruits of development are not equally distributed, the importance of ODL system is tremendous. ODL system is being adopted throughout the world as an important tool to ensure access, equity and quality in the realm of higher education. Especially in developing countries where there is a need of providing training to large number of workers with limited recourses, in such a situation ODL system could play important and viable role in improving overall skills of workers. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to explore the potentialities of ODL system in a state like Assam.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the study are

i)   to study the growth of open and distance education in Assam

ii)   to study the potentialities of open and distance education in encouraging higher education

Methodology

The present study utilizes both primary and secondary data. Primary data have been collected from the sample institutions through questionnaires and interview schedules. Different institutional documents have also been analyzed. On the other hand secondary sources like books, journals, magazines and e-resources have also used by the researchers for the study.

Sample of the Study

The researchers have selected the three pioneer open and distance learning institutions from Assam for conducting the study. These institutions are: Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) Regional Centre, Guwahati; Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL), Gauhati University, Guwahati and; Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University, Guwahati (KKHSOU).

Analysis of the Study

i.   Growth of Open and Distance Education in Assam

North-East region of India comprise of eight states i.e. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The communication particularly surface transport is a great problem for the entire region. Various problems come underway of improving transport facility in the region. Even during the era of technological climaxity, there are many places in the North-East which are yet not reached by road ways. So, it is difficult for students of these areas to join institutions for higher education as a regular student for lack of communication and economic hardship. In recent times, the demand for higher education has been increasing nationwide. This is the need of the hour in North- Eastern region too. Despite of being affected by problems like militancy, high rate of infiltration , flood , political unrest , lack of any industrial development, lack of proper transport, etc. these has been progressive demands for higher education in this region. Most of the higher educational institutions face daunting admission demand for knowledge acquisition. But due to various constraints higher education institutions following the conventional pattern of education are unable to cope up with the increasing demand. Hence it was felt that distance education could serve as a viable alternative in fulfil the educational needs of these economically weaker section and people residing in far-flung areas. With this view of promoting higher education to those group, who had to

discontinue their education during to economic constrains or inaccessibility of communication, in-service personal.

Assam is one of the North Eastern States of India located in south of the eastern Himalayas. There are a number of students in the state who are unable to complete or pursue their higher education through regular institutes and universities due to various reasons. The opening of various distance learning institutes have provided opportunities to thousands of students who do not have access to higher education institutes in their place of residence and also to working professionals who wish to upgrade their qualifications. Distance education was started in Assam at higher level studies with the setting up of regional center at Shillong by IGNOU in 1986. This regional centre was established with the view of promoting higher education to those who had to discontinue their education due to economic constrains or inaccessibility of communication and for in-service personal. This centre was looking for all the eight states of North-East alone. With due to course of time IGNOU's Guwahati regional centre was established in the year of 1996. Guwahati regional centre of IGNOU was covering Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Sikkim. It is functioning only for Assam from February, 2001. IGNOU regional centre, Guwahati offers different degree, diploma, management, and computer science, technical and professional courses. In Assam correspondence education is also given by the two formal universities Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University. The leading university in Assam offering distance learning in Assam is the Post Graduate Correspondence School (PGCS), Gauhati University. This correspondence school was established in May, 1998 with an aim to facilitate higher education for the vast number of students who could not enroll as regular students for various reasons. The School provides students an opportunity to obtain a PG degree of the Gauhati University through the mode of distance education. The degree offered by PGCS has the same standing as the regular Post Graduate degree given that the syllabi for both courses are the same. Very recently this institute has changed its name as Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL). It provides different post-graduate degree programs only and the Directorate of Distance Education (DDE) of Dibrugarh University also conducts different post graduate programs along with the different management programs, and very recently the Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University (KKHSOU) first of its kind in the entire North-East and fourteen amongst the open universities in India was establish by the Assam Legislative Assembly by an act (xxxvii of 2005)

in 1995. The university formally started functioning from 11 December 2006. It offers a wide variety of courses for the development of the student as well as for the nation as the child of today is the citizen of tomorrow. The Directorate of Distance Education is established in 2011 with the aim of disseminating knowledge and quality education through open and distance learning mode in Tezpur University. The directorate offers various post- graduate, undergraduate, diploma and certificate programmes in emerging areas of science, technology & engineering, social sciences, management and humanities with flexible system to cater to the need of the learners who otherwise can not avail the regular mode of education. The basic focus of the directorate is to prepare human resources of the region and the country skilled and employable. So ODL system in Assam is becoming popular gradually among the new generation learners.

ii.   Potentialities of Open and Distance Learning System in Encouraging Higher Education

Open and Distance Learning offers a number of advantages to both learners and providers. Problems such as distance and time, which are barriers to conventional learning, are overcome in Open and Distance Learning with the use of ICT, self learning materials and a good student support mechanism. However, the following are the main contributions of ODL for higher education.

Potentialities of IGNOU Regional Centre Guwahati:

The following student support services are provided by IGNOU Regional Centre Guwahati for empowering students:

• 	Tele-conferencing, Interactive Radio Counselling, Audio-Video CD's, EDUSAT are the various modes available under Guwahati Regional Centre.

• 	Subject-specific academic counselling is provided by part-time academic counsellors.

•	Audio and visual viewing facilities.

•	Library facilities.

•	Opportunity for learners in Participating Teleconferencing, and

•	Information services related to rules, regulations, proceedings, schedules, etc. of the University through SMS.

- Variety of skill based vocational and innovative courses like Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education, P.G Diploma, Diploma and Certificate in Tourism Studies, Diploma in Dairy Technology, P.G Diploma in Financial Market Practice, Master Degree in Dietetics and Food Service, P.G Diploma in Hospital and Health Management etc are run by IGNOU Regional Centre Guwahati for empowering the human resources.

Potentialities of IDOL, Gauhati University, Guwahati:

The following student support services are provided by IDOL, Gauhati University, Guwahati for empowering the learners:

- Subject-specific academic counselling by academic counsellors at the Study Centres.
- IDOL has set up a library in its Gauhati University campus to fulfil the needs of its learners.
- Computer laboratory has been set up to facilitate practical classes for the learners enrolled into the programmes relating to computer sciences.
- A free SMS service has been launched. Students can enroll into this service and receive important updates.
- IDOL has developed its own web-site where from its learners can download assignments.
- Apart from this website, IDOL has also launched the first e-learning portal of this region http://www.bodhidroom.idolgu.org/. Through this e-learning portal, learners can consult the faculties of IDOL while staying at a remote location. This web-site also allows for having group discussion among the net users / students. Students can download selected study materials from this e-learning portal.

Potentialities of KKHSOU, Guwahati:

The following student support services are provided by KKHSOU, Guwahati for empowering the learners:

- Subject-specific academic counselling by academic counsellors at the Study Centres.
- Practical lab classes for the practical oriented courses.
- Library facilities to the learners.
- Computers have been provided to study centres having enrolments into the programmes relating to computer sciences.

•	Phone-in-programmes are telecast on through All India Radio on every fourth Sunday of the month at 11.30 am. In this programme, the Vice Chancellor of the University and/or other Senior Officials solves the queries of the learners from various parts of the state.

•	A free SMS service has been launched. Students can enroll into this service and receive important updates.

•	The University has already set up a sophisticated Recording Studio for the development of Audio-Visual materials.

•	Trial-run of the FM Station of the University has already been done. It is going to be operational within weeks. Lots of Audio-Visual materials have been already been prepared to telecast through the FM Channel.

•	Selected study centres are to be equipped with LCD Television, FM Radios along with DVDs to enable them to run the Audio-Visual materials developed by the University.

•	Various skillbased and innovative courses run by KKHSOU are diploma programmes in the area of Journalism and Mass Communication, Assamese Journalism, Tourism Management, Hotel Management, Creative Writing in English and Computer Hardware and Networking, Library and Information Science, Computer application and Sanskrit Learning. Moreover, various courses like Two-Wheeler Repairing, Automobile Electrician, Plumbing and Pump Installation, Cutting and Tailoring, Electrical House wiring, Hardware and networking, Basic Automotive Servicing, Welding/Fabrication, Electrical Motor Rewinding, Carpentry, Turner, Beautician, Computer Application, Phenyl Making, Screen Printing, Repairing of Electrical Home Appliances, and Embroidery etc. are the courses conducted by KKHSOU through ITIs and Polytechnics.

ODL system is popular among the learners because of its unique user friendly features like---

### i.	Overcoming Physical Distance

Open and distance learning can overcome problems of physical distance for:

•	learners in remote locations who are unable or unwilling to physically attend a campus

•	learners and teachers who are geographically separated; for example, teachers in urban settings instruct learners in rural settings.

Example: Indira Gandhi National Open University, IDOL, KKHSOU etc are the premiere institution that serves a widely scattered and remote population. The use of technologies like e-

learning, mobile learning, telephonic conversation, radio and television broadcasting etc. helps to overcome the problem of physical barrier.

ii.   Solving the Problem of Time and Schedule

Open and Distance learning can solve time or scheduling for:

*   client groups unwilling or unable to assemble together frequently;

*   learners engaged in full-time or part-time work, both waged and volunteer;

*   learners who have family and community commitments.

iii.   Expanding Access

ODL expands its way through establishing new campuses, broadcasting its programmes via radio and television, establishing more local study centers, increasing the numbers of partnership institutions and using modern technology for its programmes. IGNOU for example, has established 101 special study centers to cater to the demands of North-East region, tribal and other backward regions of India. Like IGNOU, IDOL and KKHSOU have also established study centres according to the demands of the regions. Open and distance learning also provides access where:

*   campus-based institutions are less in number; and

*   there are stringent entrance requirements.

iv.   Promotion of Equity

Open and Distance learning can deal differences in cultural, religious, and political considerations and consequently:

*   widens women's opportunities to learn;

*   helps the rural , tribal and minority groups and disabled to learn;

*   meets the needs of populations affected by violence, war, or displacement;

*   makes learning possible even when group assemblies are proscribed.

v.   Providing Need Based Programs and Courses

The ODL system always tries to launch need based programs and courses catering to the demands of different learners. For example, IGNOU and NSOU offers different innovative

programs in the areas of rural development, journalism, intellectual property rights, hospitality management, IT management, clinical cardiology, information technology, and computer literacy and HIV/AIDS awareness. Most of the ODL institutions especially NIOS, KKHSOU, IGNOU and IDOL runs a wide variety of uncommon and demandable skill based innovative courses. Even different distance education institutions buy or lease courses from other open and distance learning providers if they realize the need of that course for the target learners.

vi.   Producing, Reproducing, Storing, and Disseminating Materials

Almost all the ODL institutions have their own production house, storage and method of dissemination. This saves their time and promotes easy access for students. They have their own course materials like print, audio, video, or computer software; they disseminate through post, courier, transport companies, telecommunications, broadcasts, satellites; and in many cases they have specialized equipment and personnel required for storage, handling, packaging and dispatch.

vii.   Promoting Research Work

Many Open and Distance Education institution have higher courses like M.Phil. and Ph.D, where researches in various subject areas is carried out. They have provided enough flexibility to learners in conducting their research works.

viii.   Cost Effectiveness

ODL is cost effective from the side of learners and providers. Learners get education with a much less cost than that of formal education system. The institutions utilize both human and material resources to the best, and thus prove themselves to be cost effective.

A Learner Centric Approach to Education

❖   Students can learn at any time (before, during or after normal school hours, at the desktop in the workplace, "just in time learning" for a particular task)

❖   Students can learn at any place (in the traditional classroom, in a dorm room, at home, at a convenient learning centre, at work, on the road)

❖ Students can learn at their own pace, giving extra time to new material and speeding through material already known, with pauses for tutorial help or supplemental courses.

❖ Students can learn more efficiently when concepts are presented with multiple media so students can select those which best assist their own understanding and retention.

❖ Students can learn only what they need to know, reinforcing both retention and motivation learning and then applying individual modules of a course.

❖ The course content and course quality are constant; organizations can document training coverage and student learning over a wide geographical or temporal area.

❖ The need for costly, permanent teaching facilities is reduced; learning can take place at home, in dorms and workplaces, or in temporary facilities.

Conclusion

Open and Distance Learning system is an emerging field in higher education, particularly in India. It is definitely going to play a bigger role in the times to come. In Assam also the demand of ODL system is raising gradually. Despite the promises and significance of distance learning, there are lots of problems faced by learners that need to be resolved. However, if these are sorted out, then, certainly this system will emerge as one of the effective modes of propagating higher education in India as well as in Assam.

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