

*Governance of Open and Distance learning in a Dual-mode University:
A case study of the University of Delhi, India **

1 Introduction

Open and distance learning(ODL) is an emerging area to address the fundamental issues of access, retention and quality of higher education to improve human capabilities and achieving the vision of knowledge economy. In India, a higher proportion of younger population is found due to unique demographic transition. Providing quality higher education to such a large proportion of population, in a soft democratic country, is a Herculean task, where hardly ten percent of the youth are enrolled in higher education. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) of marginalized sections of society in the context of social and gender is even less than six percent.

The need for cost effective and need based quality education capable to produce employable youths is self evident. The Knowledge Commission of India (2006) and the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12) highlighted better governed participatory structures and processes for inclusive educational development. At present, more than 300 institutions of higher learning are functioning in different parts of India. The experience shows that the access has improved to some extent, but quality of teaching learning process could not be adhered to. In the context of soaring cost of higher education, reducing state funded subsidy and less availability of capable man power, even the issue of accessibility needs to be tackled strategically.

At present, two types of institutions are imparting higher education, namely, conventional and open learning. Conventional institutions could not be able to fulfill the mission of quality higher education to such a large number of youth spread widely in different geographic regions along with diverse social and economic characteristics. Moreover, the cost implications of expansion of conventional higher education work as major constraint. Under such a situation, expanding the opportunities of quality higher education becomes the responsibility of already established conventional institutions and universities blending conventional education along with ODL. It is, in this context, the status of ODL is being analyzed in the present article. University of Delhi is selected as a typical case study, which is imparting higher education to more than 350 thousand students blending the conventional and open learning.

2 Objective

The objective of the paper is to analyze the status of ODL in a dual mode university and to identify constraints as well to suggest the interventions to achieve the vision of quality higher education in participatory framework. The paper examines the strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the open and distance education being imparted in a dual mode university in India.

The University of Delhi is taken as a case study, which is the most prestigious dual-mode University in India established in 1923. It is important to mention that more than 65 per cent of

the total enrolled students in University of Delhi are being imparted higher education at School of Open Learning (SOL) that itself is the toughest mission.

3 Accessibility & Enrolment Issues

In the present context of imparting quality higher education in a cost effective manner, present case study is unique that may provide lessons for future. The starting point of quality teaching learning process is frictionless governance that starts with the student friendly structures and processes resulting into an improvement in accessibility, retention, quality and participation.

The University of Delhi is a distinctive example of expanding distance and open learning in a dual mode along with upholding the quality parameters. The University of Delhi is forerunner in implementing ODL within the conventional framework. Print material, assignments and contact programme based correspondence education was started in 1962. The think tank of the government on higher education supported the idea of strengthening open and distance education within the conventional university system. It was clearly visualized that the conventional and 'regular/formal' framework of higher education may not only be able to provide opportunities to the eligible young aspirants, who are demanding quality education at par with the other 'privileged' students. As a result, two centres were opened within Delhi and nine study centres were started in different cities of India. There have been more than thirty 'examination centres' established in different countries facilitating the children of the employees of Indian Embassies to get higher education. This initiative has been found successful and replicated.

There is a need to analyze the statutory interwoven structural features of University of Delhi resulting into uniformity between the conventional and ODL. Within the University of Delhi, the requisite parity between the correspondence and the conventional learning has been institutionalized by a set of rules. The equivalence is established in four ways; a. same set of admission rules for the students who take admission in the under graduate and post graduate classes; b. same syllabi offered to the admitted students; c. same set of evaluation/examination system that provides entitlement to a particular degree and very importantly, d. same degree conferred to both the 'formal/regular' and the distance mode examinees. These four components are the unique statutory strength of University of Delhi. Due to these four parameters, the vice-versa migration between these two modes is permissible. Keeping in view the strength, a large number of students enroll themselves for five under-graduate and five post-graduate courses offered at School of Open Learning.

Initially, SOL was catering the needs of a few thousand students. At present educational needs of around 260 thousand students are being addressed. Efforts have also been made to restructure the correspondence to ODL as well to improve the overall governance. Special mention is made to the restructuring efforts made in 2003 with the objective to enable the open learning system to impart quality education to the students. Vertical and horizontal linkages between conventional and open learning system have been introduced in the last five years.

However, keeping in view the institutional constraints, the SOL is partially successful in delivering the desired results. The core issues need to be addressed are the governance of

student support services and office management enabling student centric environment and accessible admission and examination processes. These problems are given priority in recent years and efforts have been made to reduce the inconveniences to the students for various support services. Other major constraints are concerned with providing space, faculty and library support, and self instructional print material. Significantly, key concern is the attitudes and the mind sets that keep the conventional learning at the core and push the open learning into the periphery in terms of teaching-learning processes. The 'core-periphery' relationship further marginalizes the students of open learning despite the statutory parity enjoyed within the dual-mode University. The data based analysis will provide some idea regarding the mammoth task.

The basic data on the present status of open and distance education within University is significant to mention. More than 65% of students are enrolled at SOL. Remaining 35% students are getting education through conventional mode imparted by more than sixty affiliated colleges. In the conventional mode, per institution around 2000 students are enrolled. The formal/conventional mode is highly subsidized in terms of resources and capacity building as well research support from the governments. However, the SOL has not grown in terms of better infrastructure, faculty support and other convergence related aspects as compared with the conventional educational institutions.

The extreme pressure of the students may easily be understood by collating the number of students enrolled in different courses. The existing numbers of students on rolls in various under graduate and post graduate courses offered at SOL are shown in table 1. The 'on-roll' status of students will help us in understanding the overall load on the existing system that may find difficult to manage the students' support services as well teaching learning processes within the dual mode arrangements.

Table 1 summarizes overall burden of students on the system, which was basically designed to handle a few thousand students only. It is clear that more than 266 thousand students are enrolled in various courses. Majority of the students are enrolled in under graduate classes. Around forty four percent of the enrolment is from amongst the girls. The girls prefer BA Programmes, whereas the boys prefer B. Com courses. Out of the total enrollment, around forty percent are repeaters including the students who could not clear the examination during the last academic year. There is less drop-out or failure rate among the girls comparing to boys. Around sixty percent of students are promoted. Girls perform better than the boys (Table1). The proportion of the admitted students in different courses is relatively larger than the students promoted. This happens due to repeaters, who could not clear the examination processes during earlier years.

Around ninety percent of the students are enrolled at under graduate 'programme' courses. The other ten percent are enrolled in the under graduate honours and post graduate programmes. This sets the priority to focus on the under graduate programmes for better governance. Improving governance to these students is vital in the context of economic, social and gender background of the enrolled students. Around ten per cent of the students offering B.Com. are representing the marginal sections of society. However, more than seventeen per cent of the students admitted at BA Programme level are from the marginalized communities. It is evident that lesser representation of marginalized communities is found in various courses

offered at SOL. Marginalization increases along with the courses, which are lower in hierarchy of preferences among the students. This is a reflection of lesser enrolment of these communities in higher education in aggregate.

Some of the students also get simultaneous admission in additional academic programmes offered by other institutions. A few students are employed as well enrolled at SOL to improve their experience and competencies. In the similar manner some of the students enroll themselves at SOL and use incentives provided by the market forces. Some institutional networking is being made to provide employment to the students.

The schooling background of the students enrolling in different courses offered at SOL is important to mention (see table 2). The students are divided into four broad groups, namely, students who cleared secondary examination from the government schools (highly subsidized fee charged from these students), students who are from private schools paying relatively higher fee, students who qualify their secondary examination from open schooling and students from the Kendriya Vidyalaya (Central Schools). We may draw a hierarchy of these schools on the basis of 'public perception' regarding the quality of education. The top of the hierarchy is private schools and Kendriya Vidyalaya, followed by government schools and open schooling. Around 76% of total students, admitted at SOL, are from government schools (table 2).

It is clear from table 2 that majority of students are coming from the government schools those mainly serve economically poorer sections (even those having higher social status). The students who secure higher percentage of marks at secondary examinations within the government schools get admission in the conventional institutions. Majority them are from the middle portion of the normal distribution of the eligible students. Simultaneously, these students are excluded from conventional system. As mentioned, they also correspond to poorer economic background. Practically, SOL is functioning as the alternative and hope to the economically marginalized students excluded from regular colleges. They are further marginalized if they are not provided better facilities and learning contents. In the context of democratization of quality higher education, these students are vital links that may help the University to further advance its ranking by improving the students support services and teaching learning processes.

The simple analysis of the access, enrolment and promotion related data indicates that the existing structure of the ODL within University of Delhi is overstretched and needed support in terms of adequate infrastructure, library facilities, capable manpower as well sufficient numbers of study centres within its catchments. It also highlights the consistent demand for quality education by the students. The students prefer to get enrolled in well accredited dual mode university, like, University of Delhi rather than getting admission in other institutions. The 'open' learning is found, but still 'distance' component needs strengthening. The learning signifies toward giving sufficient space to the ODL within the dual mode system in terms of policy, allocation of funds and developmental initiatives.

4 Quality of Teaching Learning Process

Table1 indicates that proportion of girls is relatively larger within the promoted students. The performance of girls is distinctively better at the post graduate level. It shows the buoyancy inherited within the dual mode system of higher education. It indicates that the quality of delivery of contents simultaneously increases the performance of students in evaluation process. Core components indicating quality teaching learning process includes, namely, better academic infrastructure to such a large number of students, library facilities, availability of capable faculty for counseling the students and conducting interactive teaching learning sessions, availability of self instructional study material, using ICT for problem solving as well getting feedback. However, the quality basically starts with the improvement in the governance of the core student support services made available in a user friendly manner.

The issues concerned with availability of physical infrastructure and faculty support within the dual mode university has strength as well as weaknesses. The strength is seen in terms of large infrastructure supported by the resources made available from both the government and the private sector. The civil infrastructure, library facility, faculty and the support staff of sixty institutions within the University need to be utilized for teaching learning process. At present very few institutions are providing their buildings resulting into a crunch of physical space, which is basic necessity for creating better learning ambiance. The faculty support from the affiliated colleges for teaching learning process and content development is inadequate. This inadequacy is seen in terms of faculty recruitment within the organization and using the services of the faculty available with the institutions spread around. At present, the number of faculty members available at the SOL is meager. Due to various factors, like, inadequate compensation and other priorities, many of the resource persons may not like to conduct the classes. Efforts are being made to conduct the skeleton contact classes for a small section of students. It indicates the urgency to initiate reforms, including legal and economic, facilitating affiliated institutions to provide space, library facilities and faculty support.

Under such a situation, the ICT could be found as viable solution. ICT interventions may help in both ways, namely, in improving 'on-line' accessibility as well creating interactive teaching learning processes to such a large number of students. Even the ICT may be used for assessing assignments, providing feed back as well student support services. The possibility of ICT based on-line evaluation may also be seen. However, at present the ICT is being used to improve the admission and examination processes, which itself is necessary in enhancing the quality of higher education. It may require essentially a process re-engineering and reform in the existing statutory provisions.

Specific information were sought from the students on the preliminary understanding about computers. Percent distribution of the students, collected on the basis of their response to our question, about their preliminary knowledge regarding the computer, is shown in table 3. Around 25 per cent of the new entrants have preliminary knowledge about computers enabling them to use simple software and other ICT requirements. The girls are relatively better equipped. However, these figures are not enough to analyze the potentiality of ICT at SOL. Only eleven percent of the students'

responded lack of knowledge about computers. Sixty percent of the students could not give their response. But it does not mean that they do not know or not interested in learning through ICT interventions. We anticipate a higher level of response once the learning contents are made more useful to the students and interactive website is developed (table 3). Our experience shows that ICT bridges the distance and increases the comfort level to the users resulting into saving of time and money. Accessibility to ICT is not the constraint; it is usability of the contents and e-governance that makes the difference. In the light of these realities, the learning coming out from students' opening responses is highly encouraging. .

5 The Learning and the Road Map.

It is evident that substantial numbers of students enrolled at SOL are from marginalized communities and excluded from the conventional educational institutions due to 'percent divide'. The 'percent divide' indicates that they could not secure higher percentages of marks at the secondary examination enabling them to enter in the conventional institutions. It seems that the last, least and lost students find a hope at SOL for capability building and empowerment. These students need requisite accessibility and quality interventions helping them to move away from the periphery.

The number of students has been over-blown during last ten years. It is apparent that the statutory support maintains the non-discriminatory framework. There are two critical elements of equal credence those have emerged during the recent years. First element is related to improve the accessibility to enroll such a large number of students in different courses as well provide all information related to admission, distribution of study material and examination to the students on time. Second important element is improving the teaching learning processes by developing user friendly study material and administering counseling and contact classes resulting into joyful learning.

The student support services have been improved during recent years by introducing the ICT in easing the cumbersome manual processes related to admission, submission of fees and evaluation/examination forms as well getting the examination hall tickets. It took almost three years to stabilize the automated process concerned with the critical student support functions to such a huge number of students. The ICT intervention has been supported by motivating employees to adapt to the new work culture, updating the software and hardware as well capacity building support along with on-job hand holding of employees. The whole process of ICT intervention looks deceptively simple. However, our experiences show that automation and process re-engineering is the most difficult challenge that mainly requires re-orientation and attitudinal change of primary stakeholders. More importantly, as it happened in a typical government organization, the automation process was not fully supported by some of stakeholders on various grounds. The under-currents of antagonism were mainly concerned with the vested interests and vicious cycles maintaining deliberate inefficiency developed along with the manual processes. Managing interest groups and pushing them to leave comfort zone remained a difficult task. These groups were handled using persuasion and proactive problem solving approach. With the help of these measures gradually the manual system is being

converted into a virtual environment. Presently, majority of students support services are automated resulting into saving of time, money and improving efficiency as well generating positive externalities.

The hard copies of the study material in various subjects are made available to the students at the time of admission and through correspondence. As a whole, the study material when blended with the counseling sessions or contact classes is an enabling strategy helping the students to improve their performance. Broad quality challenges are designing self-instructional material, putting e-learning contents on the website and designing interactive web-space helping students to use the material at their convenience. Other issue is concerned with technological options for e-evaluation. These need continuous capacity building support along with process re-engineering.

The learning of this experience indicates that automation is not merely an issue of technology, but, it is the game of attitudes and mind sets of primary and secondary stakeholders as well the leadership that facilitates the whole process of automation. We have renamed the whole approach as the 'e-educational governance'.

One of the weaknesses of the existing system is its inability to use the manpower and other resources available within the conventional institutions. Many a times, due to their reluctance the students of SOL are excluded to use state funded infrastructure of the conventional colleges. This shows a typical 'enclave' approach resulting into lesser participation of students in interactive teaching. The existing physical space, library facilities and manpower available within the conventional institutions need to be utilized for enhancing the quality of learning to these students. The students enrolled with SOL are the social priority corroborating with the government's policy of inclusive growth. These students should be given educational choices to participate not only in the teaching learning process, but in the other socially productive and creative activities available within conventional institutions. This also happens due to deficiency of policy guidelines available to all the concerned stakeholders related to convergence. These guidelines are to be issued by the central ministries and apex bodies controlling the grants.

The issues of cross subsidy are also observed. Relatively a large share of financial resources is provided by the students of SOL. These resources are used to fulfill institutional requirements (like, examination) of both the students getting education in the conventional and open learning system. The governmental agencies also allocate extra resources to the conventional system through grant, which is missing for SOL.

Better convergence between the conventional and open learning as well electronic governance are the key indicators for quality. The conventional and ODL complement each other to utilize the inherited potentialities. The ODL students may use the building/infrastructure, library and manpower resources available within the conventional system in the fullest sense and get the advantage of conventional education through arranging problem solving sessions. The students of conventional system may use the study material and e-learning resources prepared for ODL students. Interactive sessions between these two set of students may also be arranged.

The need to design and adhere to guidelines issued by the central authorities for convergence and break the 'periphery-enclave relationship' is self-evident. Face-to-face interaction of these students should be increased by identifying a wider network of resource persons, infrastructure and learning resources. Efforts are also being made to provide employment to these students at the time of admission at the SOL under 'earn while you learn' approach. However, more rigorous designing is needed to further expand such initiatives

Integration virtual environment through ICT, video and radio(which would be very effective), as well giving the students an opportunity to interact with the resource persons through organizing problem solving and counseling sessions are the necessary initiatives to be activated into the dual mode system. Apart from improving accessibility, retention and quality of education, the participation of the students and wider community members in this whole process need to be ensured. The open learning is needed to be converted into a mission to empower the students by using both virtual and face-to-face counseling as well reorienting the mind-set and attitudes at the apex. We require many big pushes to alter the present inherited imbalances as well to democratize quality higher education facilitating to achieve the vision of equity based knowledge society.

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Table 1: Details of Students enrolled in different under graduate and post graduate Courses offered at School of Open Learning, University of Delhi in 2007-2008.

Name of the Course	Total Students on roll			Percent of Ex-Students			Percent of Promoted Students			Percent of Admitted Student		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
B.A. Programme	67912	70026	137938	45	37	41	55	63	59	63	71	67
B.Com	69297	36398	105695	46	35	42	54	65	58	70	77	72
B.A.(Honours) English	1020	2783	3803	40	35	36	60	65	64	75	83	81
B.A.(Honours) Political Science	2653	2783	5436	36	31	33	64	69	67	81	86	84
B.Com.(Honours) New	7647	3717	11364	34	28	32	66	72	68	77	83	79
M.A. Hindi	82	138	220	39	29	33	61	71	67	73	92	85
M.A. History	82	138	220	39	29	33	61	71	67	73	92	85
M.A. Political. Science	159	438	597	32	23	25	68	77	75	80	91	88
M.A. Sanskrit	40	148	188	38	28	30	62	72	70	90	81	83
M.Com	236	473	709	37	30	32	63	70	68	72	78	76
Total	149128	117042	266170	44	36	41	56	64	59	67	74	70

Note: The actual numbers are given for total students on roll only; rest of the other columns show the percent of the students on roll. 'Total students on roll'- includes both the ex-students and the admitted students during the academic year 2007-08. 'Ex-students' includes the students who are failed in the examination conducted in May 2007. The difference in the per cent of the 'admitted students' and 'promoted students' is due to enrolment of the students who failed during the preceding examination.

Source: Computer Centre, School of Open Learning, University of Delhi, 2008.

Name of the Course	Boys				Girls				Total			
	Govt. school	Private school	Open school	Central schools	Govt. school	Private school	Open school	Central schools	Govt. school	Private school	Open school	Central schools
B.A. Programme	68.66	12.32	16.55	2.31	76.41	9.92	11.41	1.86	72.42	11.15	14.06	2.09
B.Com	55.10	35.17	7.07	2.52	52.82	40.27	3.89	2.90	54.31	36.93	5.98	2.65
B.A.(Honours) English	61.89	31.23	5.16	1.43	56.57	38.23	3.20	1.99	58.05	36.28	3.75	1.83
B.A.(Honours) Political . Science	87.33	8.37	3.19	1.10	88.38	6.58	3.40	1.64	87.86	7.47	3.30	1.37
B.Com.(Honours) New	42.94	51.51	1.94	3.50	37.68	57.29	1.16	3.86	41.14	53.49	1.68	3.63
M.A. Hindi	89.58	10.42	0.00	0.00	81.74	10.43	0.87	6.96	83.09	10.43	0.72	5.76
M.A. History	53.13	46.88	0.00	0.00	72.58	22.58	1.61	3.24	65.96	30.85	1.06	2.13
M.A. Political Science	71.43	26.71	2.86	0.00	74.73	23.12	1.61	0.54	73.83	23.83	1.95	0.39
M.A. Sanskrit	91.67	8.33	0.00	0.00	89.29	8.93	1.79	0.00	89.71	8.82	1.47	0.00
M.Com	50.00	46.43	0.89	2.68	38.27	56.79	0.62	4.32	43.07	52.55	0.73	3.65
Total	61.44	24.88	11.10	2.44	67.33	21.99	8.11	2.29	63.98	23.64	9.81	2.38

Source: Computer Centre, School of Open Learning, University of Delhi, 2008.

Table 3: Per cent distribution of students showing preliminary knowledge of computers enrolled at SOL in 2007-08						
Name of the Course	Boys		Girls		Total	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
B.A. Programme	25.23	10.26	26.18	20.38	25.69	15.17
B.Com	20.24	5.78	29.20	11.43	23.33	7.72
B.A.(Honours) English	25.21	2.29	28.51	7.40	27.69	5.98
B.A.(Honours) Political Science	19.49	9.80	22.92	14.25	21.21	12.03
B.Com.(Honours)	25.52	5.51	26.23	5.76	25.76	5.60
M.A. Hindi	2.08	0.00	11.30	5.65	9.71	4.68
M.A. History	15.63	3.13	12.90	9.68	13.83	7.45
M.A. Political Science	5.71	0.00	11.83	4.30	10.16	3.13
M.A. Sanskrit	0.00	8.33	5.36	3.57	4.41	4.41
Total	22.90	7.90	26.70	16.27	24.55	11.51

Source: Computer Centre, School of Open Learning, University of Delhi, 2008.