

## **Are Innovations Being Replicated in ODL?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The teaching-learning process of the conventional system has an innate mechanism for continuous assessment and modification. The teacher and the taught negotiate and compromise on a win-win process. All aspects of teaching-learning i.e. medium of instruction, choice of examples etc. are flexible and subject to modification and change by the teacher according to the group of learners he/she addresses. However, the learners are generally a homogenous group possessing common 'qualities' identified by imparting institution to eliminate others. The promise of open distance learning is to provide a chance to all irrespective of all handicaps.

To fully realize the goal of Education for All (EFA) the Government of India under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA) requested the Indira Gandhi National Open University in the year 2004 to undertake training of approximately 40,000 primary school teachers in the state of Jharkhand of which approximately 9000 teachers were admitted to Module – 1 in January, 2005 to the *Diploma in Primary Education* (DPE) Programme. The most challenging component of counseling for want of experts locally available and setting up centres was substituted by extensive use of radio. The experiment was a great success.

On the other end of the pendulum this paper narrates how another open university from India has evolved processes to help 'people with wisdom', with various types of handicaps like literacy, knowledge of research tools etc. to successfully complete doctoral research.

This paper narrates the innovative experiments made on two diverse groups in terms of level and also number of learners (i) primary school teachers, and (ii) research scholars to attain the overall objective of providing flexible and innovative methods to learners of various types overcome systemic barriers which can become examples to be imitated but are rarely replicated because of the inertia ODL has got into.

By and large the process of imparting courses through distance mode is similar across institutions. Similar processes are followed for designing, developing, imparting or evaluation of courses offered through distance mode. However, once in a while we come across novel intervention either in course development or imparting courses or in evaluation. Such innovations are either in course development or imparting courses or in evaluation. Innovations are also reported in seminars, conferences or in journals and books related to open-distance education. It appears innovations, which may be accepted as successful, are not often replicated.

This paper discusses two case studies one of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU, New Delhi) and another of Vardhaman Mahaveer Open University (VMOU, Kota, Rajasthan). The IGNOU example is to present a case of new experiment with broadcast technology as a substitute for face to face counseling and another of experiment with flexibility in eligibility for admission to persons with higher age who may not have essential qualifications as per the conventional system but have successfully earned the doctoral degree.

### **THE MUKTA SAMVAD: EXPERIMENT WITH STUDENT SUPPORT**

In an effort to fulfill the commitment of Education for All (EFA) the Government of India and different state governments undertook various initiatives to achieve total literacy by 2010. As part of the initiative the Government of Jharkhand employed a large number of teachers, mostly from the same village on the recommendation of the Village Education Committees (VEC). These teachers were employed to teach the new learners, often first generation, and with little family support. In most cases these teachers themselves had no more than 12 years of schooling. In spite of the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), the apex national body mandated to

monitor the maintenance of quality of teachers, there was no option but to employ untrained or irrelevantly trained teachers to fulfill the uphill task of achieving total literacy by 2010. Jharkhand is one of the least developed states and there is severe paucity of schools in rural areas. Most villages may not have even one graduate. In such a situation insisting on a trained teacher to undertake the job was a Herculean task.

The Government of Jharkhand decided to employ para-teachers, to undertake the task, and quite naturally they were mostly untrained and also frequently, under-qualified. Govt. of Jharkhand approached IGNOU and the university decided to undertake training of the newly appointed para-teachers. The School of Education, IGNOU had a Diploma in Primary Education (DPE) programme and it was decided to enroll the para-teachers in this programme. The programme is divided into three modules – first module named ‘Certificate in Primary Teaching’ (CPT) of 6 months duration, the second module named ‘Certificate in Primary Teaching and Curriculum’ (CPC) of another 6 months and the third module named ‘Diploma in Primary Education’ (DPE) of 1 year duration. In the first module there were 4 courses of 4 credits each and in the second module there were 3 theory courses, of 4 credits each and 1 course of 6 credits. Students were expected to undertake 4 credits worth practical activities. As per the IGNOU norms learners were to be provided 48 hrs of counseling in module 1.

The Regional Center (RC) Ranchi which was coordinating the activities in the field was finding it extremely difficult to identify centers, as well as resource persons for organizing face-to-face counseling sessions in the IGNOU model. The difficulty was compounded by the fact that the teachers enrolled in the programme were mostly from widely dispersed in rural areas. It did not seem possible to identify centers at close by locations to make it possible for them to attend the counseling sessions. The RC had also identified a qualified consultant to monitor the programme, but because of the logistic problems the RC was not able to sort it out. At this point a coordination meeting of the Programme Coordinator, for DPE Jharkhand from the School of Education (SOE, IGNOU), the Director of the Regional Center and the Consultant was held at the RC Ranchi. After examining the various options it was resolved to use radio broadcast for reaching and holding interaction with the learners. The challenge was to identify resource persons at Ranchi who could sit at the radio station and provide the academic input. This again was not possible as there were very few experts available who could provide counseling. Finally it was decided to record programmes in dialogue mode at the Electronic Media Production Centre (EMPC) of IGNOU, at New Delhi and send the programmes across to Ranchi (more than 1000 kms away) to be broadcast in repeat mode to facilitate all learners to hear the programmes, Monday through Saturday and Sundays were devoted to live interaction through phone-in facility for answering questions received from the learners. The whole state was not covered by the Ranchi radio station so the programmes had to be relayed from the Bhagalpur radio station simultaneously to cover the total area and population of Jharkhand. The proposal was placed before the university, which was vetted for academic and financial viability and it was approved.

Programmes were recorded for half hour duration and two programmes were broadcast every day from 4 to 5 pm over three months. The Coordinator (DPE, Jharkhand) was responsible was identifying resource persons, who were subject experts, to act as resource persons.

Rupam in his study of the usefulness and popularity of the programmes has reported that the programmes were a massive success. A major success of the programme was the high percent of female teachers' participation who otherwise could not have participated in counseling sessions, which is optional for IGNOU learners. It is also reported that learners sat with pen and paper to jot down points mentioned in the programmes. Students heard the programmes at their own place and convenience but often assembled at a common place to make phone call on Sundays. Learners also took turns to ask questions once they got connected to the radio station. RC also responded to the questions received through surface mail.

However, it can be safely said that the total interaction conducted on Sundays far exceeded the actual interaction normally taking place at face to face counseling sessions. Radio made it possible for everyone to benefit from the sessions because most learners could at least hear the questions and answers given to questions asked by other participants.

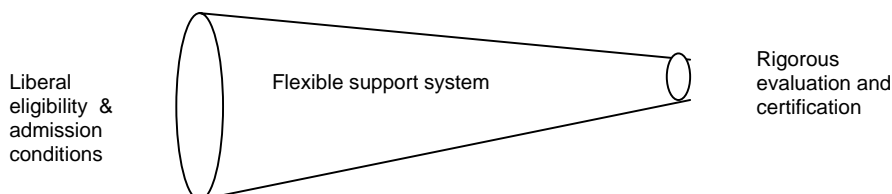
This has been a massive effort both on the part of the content providers and also the field personnel but the response has been of great satisfaction. The 'Mukta Samvad' – free uninterrupted dialogue actually proved to be a channel of great potential. Rupam sums up his study by ascribing to radio a great potential in supporting distance education in less developed areas like Jharkhand.

## **LIBERALISING RESEARCH**

Research has been considered as yet another activity of higher education leading to a degree qualifying candidates for jobs or perks. Even though it has been realized that research is primarily about documenting knowledge and information in society which need to be preserved for future generations and reference for further research, conventional universities cannot expand their research programmes because of paucity of infrastructure. Universities have been rigorous in selecting scholars for admission to their research degree programmes so that the prestige and aura around the highest degree in academia is not lost but with the open universities the myth of research needs to be broken.

ODL is suitably placed to expand the research activity because institutions are only acting as catalysts in bringing various stakeholders together. The various stakeholders are the students, the supervisors and the resources e.g. universities (libraries, laboratories etc). Resources at the disposal of public institutions many a times remain unutilized or under-utilized. A large number of professionals wish to pursue research, sometimes not realizing the rigor involved. However without providing them the occasion to pursue research activity they should not be denied the chance.

Like most courses desirous research-students should also be provided a chance to pursue research. It goes against the philosophy of ODL to deny a second chance to those who wish to 'try their hand' at research. One approach can be to provide admission to all and provide flexible support, pooling resources of other institutions, including experts who may not otherwise be available to researchers. However, institutions may devise rigorous evaluation procedures which may be considered necessary for maintaining quality of research degree. Some students may not be able to finally satisfy the evaluation conditions they may be awarded a lower degree like M.Phil. or a diploma or even a certificate in research. The process can be depicted like a funnel where the entry is extremely liberal but certification is restricted by rigorous evaluation, as depicted in the figure below.



## **Research Studentship to Non-degree holders**

Vardhaman Mahaveer Open University (VMOU Kota) then known as Kota Open University (Rajasthan, India) decided to launch doctoral programme during 1989-90. At that point of time no other ODL institution in India was offering doctoral degree. Various processes were examined and evaluated to make provision for the existing processes in the ODL system. It was realized

that doctoral programme was by nature distance mode. The researchers were largely independent and only required counseling or guidance from time to time to pursue research practically independent to study/research at their own time like a distance learner. The reason behind insistence on candidates possessing a master's degree in the subject or a related discipline in the conventional institutions offering doctoral degree, was just to eliminate large number of applicants. However we could also find examples of institutions, which did not insist on possessing a degree in the discipline or even a related discipline, but admitted students through admission test. The most remarkable example was that of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, which conducts all India admission test to select students for admission to its research degree. Degree in the same discipline is not insisted upon, nor is this a mandatory condition in most leading universities of the West. JNU is considered to be one of the leading research institutions of India, and research degree holders of JNU have made a mark globally. The Article 2.2.4 of the Ordinance on Research degree programme of Kota Open University provides:

*A candidate who has attained the age of 50 years but does not have formal academic qualification but shows ability and interest to pursue the research activity may also be considered for the research degree programme. The Research Board may decide the eligibility of such candidates for registration provided the application is forwarded and recommended by two professors of the subject concerned and a member of the Board of Management of Vardhaman Mahaveer Open University. The certificate should state that he/she has contributed and worked significantly in the area of his/her research work either by his published work or practical or social work. The committee constituted by the Vice-Chancellor shall review these certificates and research area of the candidate on the basis of concrete evidence and if the committee gives favorable opinion then his/her research proposal will be considered by the university. (VM Open University, 2005, p. 5-6)*

Kota Open University became the first open university of India to award a doctoral degree. The first Ph.D. degree was awarded in 1994 and by 2004 eighty one Ph.D. degrees were awarded. Nearly half a dozen degrees were awarded to such candidates who were granted admission invoking article 2.2.4. Some of these candidates had never attended formal education but were considered people with wisdom and accomplishment. They had created a place for themselves in the society and had some special qualities for which the university admitted them and they qualified for the degree.

However such candidates once admitted had to follow all other terms and conditions, like making presentations every six months, making a pre-submission presentation and defending the thesis before the examiners and other members of the academic community, as the viva-voce is open to all.

Researchers who did not receive any formal education but had made a place for themselves in the society by virtue of accumulating rare knowledge and long experience were admitted to the doctoral degree of the university. The first degree invoking this article was awarded to an official of the Digambar Jain Samaj and had constant feedback from the members of his community world over. The researcher recorded and brought to the corpus of knowledge what otherwise would have remained in the files and records of the society. Another researcher, who was awarded a doctoral degree, was an accomplished practicing printer without any formal education. He had researched on the art of Chhipa community.

It was because of the desire of the individuals, and the option created by the university to obtain a higher academic degree that they undertook the academic exercise or recording all relevant information and knowledge of which they alone were the custodians.

Some candidates who possessed graduate degree but did not possess either a master's degree or did not have adequate qualifying percentage of marks also got admission under this category,

as they were above the age of 50 years. Degrees under this category (of “candidate who has attained the age of 50 years”) was awarded to persons with rare experience and understanding. Candidates included businessman and also a political personality. One of the researchers was an elected representative of the area too. The research focussed on the political developments of the researcher’s area and recorded for the benefit of future generations many developments which no other ‘qualified researcher’ could do.

Some well established and successful technocrats from the cement industry and from the transport industry also qualified and were finally admitted to the doctoral degree. The research on cement industry argued in favour of ‘wet technology’ for cement industry specially in areas like Rajasthan where desert wind frequently flows. Since the award of the degree, the debate has started and there are chances of sick cement industry of Sawai Madhopur area of Rajasthan once again reviving. But for this opportunity the insight of this researcher could not have been recorded and debated as the researcher was above 76 years at the time of the award of the degree did not survive long to see the implementation of the findings and expired only six months after the award of the degree. Findings of similar other researches has positively influenced the transport sector of Orissa.

Countries like India, where the demand for degree is too high largely to get jobs. Already large number of people have acquired higher degrees and there are no jobs available. The system is largely developed to ‘eliminate’ rather than to ‘select’. Such provision for providing a second chance to in-service people with long and rare experience would not put extra burden on the system but add to the corpus of knowledge.

However, it needs to be recorded that the strong feeling in the academic community of the university is that the rigor expected of a doctoral thesis is lacking in all theses submitted under this category. Perhaps the university should also make provision for alternate forms of documents (other than a written thesis) for consideration of award of a degree. The other strong observation is that as only seven such candidates have reaped the benefit of this provision proves there is no substantial demand for this provision.

### Summing Up

A set of processes were developed during the early phase of ODL, largely perhaps at the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU). The system and understanding developed at the UKOU got replicated through the emissaries of UKOU who went to different countries under the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) and/or Department for International Development (DFID) assistance. Most institutions have been developing programmes on the same pattern. It is important to understand that the needs and demands of different clientele are different and their preferences must hold the primary focus. In heavily populated countries number of participants will always be high but the effort should be to provide most suitable pedagogic conditions to all aspirants. We need to focus on experiments and innovation.

It is felt experiments and innovations are rare, at least in the developing countries. It can be observed that by and large ODL programmes follow a set pattern and very little deviation is witnessed. Even when deviations are made, and they are successful, they are rarely replicated. We need to disseminate information of success-stories so that they can be experimented with at different locations so that the system grows and various models providing quality education develop.

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