

Need for National Policy on Open and Distance Learning in India

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Despite the practice of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) for over half a century, India lacks a clear policy on the subject. While policy makers have consistently favoured ODL in the past, there are growing concerns in recent years over the mushroom growth of franchise study centres of distance teaching universities all over the country. In general, the quality of ODL has been questioned as always, assuming that all face-to-face education is of same high quality. Not only the general public is confused about the status of ODL due to several changes in the regulatory practices, but also the intelligentsia of the country lacks common understanding of the rationale and relevance of ODL in India. It may be noted that there are deep rooted cultural practices in support of face-to-face education, and despite the emergence of ODL as a discipline, it has not attracted sufficient research in Indian context to substantiate the theories. There are gaps in espoused theories and actual practice of ODL. We need to view the discipline of ODL also as a professional practice dependent on philosophies and principles rooted in social, psychological economic and educational technology foundations. It is not only important to educate people about ODL, but also necessary to have leaders who understand ODL. In this context, this paper traces the policy perspective and argues for a national policy on ODL.

Early Policy Developments

The biggest rationale for the use of ODL comes from the fact that there is growing need for expanding access to education, and especially higher education. The Government of India (GOI) constituted an expert committee in 1961 under the Chairmanship of Dr. D.S. Kothari to look into the suitability of correspondence courses for expanding educational opportunities. The Committee gave certain important recommendations covering: (i) use of tutorials instead of lecture in the contact class, (ii) use of top ranking scholars and teachers to maintain quality, (iii) provision of increased time for completion of a graduate programme, (iv) initial higher fee with progressing lowering of fee from 1st year to 4th year, and (v) offer of science programme

after due preparation only (GOI, 1962).

The Education Commission (1964-66) identified individual lifelong learning needs of the people, and recommended that "correspondence or home study courses" can help millions who depend upon their own effort to study whenever they can find time to do so. The Education Commission also recognised that universities should not be the only agencies to offer correspondence courses, rather Government departments related to Agriculture, Health and Industry should also offer relevant correspondence courses (GOI, 1966). Consequently, the National Policy on Education (GOI, 1968) emphasized that "correspondence education should be given the same status as full-time education". The NPE (1968) believed that such a practice would encourage large number of people having the desire to educate themselves to take up correspondence courses, as they can't do so while in work. Thus, ODL is good for people already in work, and help them to improve their qualification, and also upgrade their knowledge and skills.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1974 released guidelines for correspondence courses, which specified the following objectives of ODL that are still relevant. ODL is useful for:

- (i) Those students who had to discontinue their formal education owing to different circumstances.
- (ii) Students in geographically remote area.
- (iii) Students who had dropped out of the system due to lack of motivation or aptitude, but later on developed interest and motivation and relevant aptitude.
- (iv) Those who could not manage to get a seat in a regular college or university.
- (v) Learners who see education as lifelong learning.

Establishment of IGNOU as a Policy Statement

With the success of the University of Delhi correspondence courses, and later the first Open University in the state of Andhra Pradesh, the Government of India established Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in 1985 by an Act

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of the Indian Parliament. It is normally seen as the recognition and importance given to ODL in India. The enactment of the IGNOU Act is a landmark in the history of ODL in India, as it gave IGNOU the dual rights to offer programmes as well as determine the standards of teaching, evaluation and research in ODL. Of course until the establishment of Distance Education Council in 1991, IGNOU could not put into practice the standard setting role in ODL. It was the first quality assurance agency in India—ahead of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council. The New Education Policy (GOI, 1986) subsequent to the establishments of IGNOU emphasized the role of ODL in spreading technical and management education. In addition to the strengthening of IGNOU, the revised NPE (GOI, 1992) also stated the need for strengthening the National Open School. In 1995, the CUBE Committee on distance education recommended establishment of open universities in each of the states. Interestingly, the Committee recommended that courses developed by any institute should be available to all open universities. Such thinking is in line with the current trends in Open Educational Resources (OER). However, in the absence of written policy, the system has been used and abused over the years. Despite the good work of the IGNOU and state open universities, in terms of producing high quality learning resources, the ODL system as such is seen with scepticism and cynical attitude about its potentials to deliver quality.

Objections to ODL Programmes

Probably the first recorded objection to ODL programmes were issued in 2006 by the State of Tamil Nadu to all the universities in the state to stop M.Phil./Ph.D. programmes offered through distance education. Similar regulation was issued in 2009 by the UGC, which do not allow research degree programmes through distance mode. Objections are also seen from time to time for offering of professional and technical programmes through ODL. At some point, there was a joint committee of All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), IGNOU and UGC to approve technical courses in Management and Computer Applications. There is also flip-flop approach to approve other professional courses such as Nursing and Dental Sciences. While it is acceptable to not to offer certain types of courses and programmes through ODL, it is necessary to have such decisions backed up by appropriate human resources needs of the country. For example, the number of trained teachers required in Indian schools can't be fulfilled through face-to-face

teacher education programmes, especially due to large number of untrained teachers currently in practice. Despite the need, ODL approach to teacher education is often questioned and challenged.

Recommendations of NKC

The recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) established by the Government of India reflects the importance of ODL, as it called for radical reform of the system of open and distance education (ODE) to achieve the objectives of expansion, inclusion and excellence in higher education. While it recognised ODL as a discipline, it recommended several measures to improve the provision of ODL in India. Some of the recommendations (NKC, 2007) are:

- Create a national ICT infrastructure for networking ODE institutions.
- Set up a National Education Foundation to develop web-based common open resources.
- Establish a credit bank to effect transition to a course credit system.
- Establish a National Education Testing Service for assessing ODE students.
- Facilitate convergence with conventional universities.
- Set up a Research Foundation to support research activity in ODE.
- Overhaul training programmes for educators.
- Increase access for learners with special needs.
- Create a new Standing Committee for the regulation of ODE.
- Develop a system for quality assessment.

While some of the recommendations have been taken up by the Government of India to implement, it is important to note that the NKC indirectly questioned the quality of ODL while recommending that graduates through ODL mode need to pass a national eligibility test apart from their university examination. Nevertheless, the NKC was concerned about the low Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in the country, and viewed ODL as a means to improve the same, but without compromising quality.

Draft National ODL Policy (2009)

The Government of India for the first time came out with a draft National Policy on ODL on August 28,

2009, and emphasized that while the danger of the large number of ODL providers turning in to “degree mills” is higher, ODL has important roles to play: (i) that providing opportunity of learning to those, who do not have direct access to face to face teaching, working persons, home-makers, etc.; (ii) providing opportunity to working professionals to update their knowledge, enabling them to switchover to new disciplines and professions and enhancing their qualifications for career advancement; (iii) exploiting the potential of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the teaching and learning process; and (iv) achieving the target of 15% of GER by the end of 11th Plan and 20% by the end of 12th Five Year Plan.

The draft policy highlighted some positive measures identified by the Government, while it largely detailed out the rules for controlling ODL practices by providing a regulatory framework. However, it also identified some of the important policy directions:

- ODL to be regulated by the Standing Committee of the National Commission for Higher Education and Research (NCHER), when established;
- Programme approval to be made mandatory with penal provisions for violators;
- Franchising of ODL not to be permitted by any institution, whether public or private;
- Offer of programmes through distance mode should be allowed for which there are required departments and faculties prior to offer of the programmes;
- Mandatory use of ICTs to delivery programmes and management of the student and university affairs;
- Optimal use of e learning contents for delivery/ offering their programmes through distance and enable student-teacher and student-student interaction;
- Distance education shall focus on providing opportunity of education to people at educationally disadvantaged situations such as living in remote and rural areas, adults with no or limited access to education of their choice etc.;
- Establishment of a credit bank and credit transfer system;
- Convergence of the face to face mode teaching departments of conventional universities with their distance education directorates/correspondence course wings to bridge gaps, if any;
- Reputed foreign education providers to offer

programmes subject to fulfilling of legal requirements;

- Creation of favourable environment for research on ODL;
- Encourage training and orientation for teachers and administrators of ODL system;
- Create national ICT infrastructure for ODL; and
- Provide educational opportunities for learners with disabilities and senior citizens.

While the regulatory provisions mentioned within the draft ODL policy (2009) were in detail, and some of those were controversial, the above policy directions identified were very positive. However, after the initial discussions, the policy could not be finalised.

Controlling of ODL Practices in Indian Educational Institutions

Indian higher education has several councils for regulating professional education, while the University Grants Commission has been established by the Government of India to determine the standards of university and higher education in India. However, ODL as a practice can be used for all disciplines and professions and therefore, is entangled in the web of higher education councils. The ODL system in India today stands tall with one National University, 12 State Open Universities, 2 State Open Universities (in the private sector), and over 150 ODL institutions. As indicated before, the IGNOU Act provided for dual role for IGNOU and till the establishment of the Distance Education Council (DEC) as an organ of the same University, the regulatory function remained with UGC. The dual role played by IGNOU was questioned at different platforms, including legal. Honourable Supreme Court in 2009 in the Civil Appeal No. 4173 of 2008 through a constitutional review opined that in matters of higher education, the UGC remains the apex body and the provisions of UGC Act is binding on all universities whether conventional or open. In August 2010, the Government of India constituted a Committee under the Chairmanship of Prof. N.R. Madhava Menon to suggest measures to regulate the standards of education imparted through distance mode (GOI, 2012). Accepting the Committee’s recommendation in principle, the Government of India issued directive in December 2012 to UGC, IGNOU and AICTE to implement the actionable points of the Madhava Menon Committee report. The debate on the dual role of IGNOU continued till recently, when IGNOU repealed the Statute 28 and dissolved DEC. However, it is yet

to be seen how the responsibility given in the IGNOU Act related to standards setting in ODL would be enforced or amended. The DEC is now part of the UGC, and renamed as Distance Education Bureau (DEB). The UGC after several consultations and discussions has come out with a draft regulation on distance education in December 2013. In January 2014, the UGC approved the regulations, and it is expected that this will formally be announced soon through the Gazette of India notification.

Need for a National ODL Policy

The quality of learning through distance education is a matter of concern, and has been challenged ever since its existence. This is primarily due to cultural bias toward face-to-face education and lack of understanding of the principles of ODL. Quality of distance education in India is also a reflection of the quality of face-to-face education. There are islands of excellence within sea of questionable quality. In fact, quality parameters for both face-to-face education and distance education should be same. After all learning is learning. There is enough research on "No Significant Difference" due to modes of learning or use of technology for learning. Thus, quality criteria, if any, should be uniform for all types of learning. One of the approaches is to look at a "process-centric" quality model rather than "input-centric" approach of buildings, infrastructure, etc.

ODL as a discipline has been developing fast due to use of technology. In fact, technology mediated education is one of the characteristics of classic ODL definition. The emergence and expansion of eLearning, OER and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have actually blurred the distance between ODL and face-to-face education. Therefore, regulatory mechanisms should also see the potentials of the technologies to improve quality of learning.

A policy is a quasi-legislative route to implement certain benefits to the citizens. The ideal way to look at policy is to have an integrated view of education, where ODL at all levels of education is considered. The National ODL Policy should find a comprehensive place in the National Education Policy. Otherwise, it is important to have specific national policy guidelines that ensure common understanding of ODL by all providers, teachers, students, and parents. Unfortunately for many, ODL is still a second rate system. A formal policy will help putting adequate budgetary resources in place to strengthen the system

with appropriate human resources. While there are no problems of financial resources, the ODL system faces difficulties as it is not adequately nurtured. Decisions in educational institutions are taken without philosophical understanding or practical operational knowledge of ODL. Mostly, either an increase in the number of students enrolled or revenue generated is the criterion of decision-making. In the absence of a policy, institutional leaders take *ad hoc* decisions, even to the extent of re-defining the nature of ODL. It is to some extent also due to the poor recognition of ODL as a discipline in the country. As is evident from the current practice, ODL institutions do not engage professionally qualified ODL practitioners to manage the systems, and resort to *ad hoc* measures suggested by those who have probably more experience in face-to-face teaching and/or research. ODL practice is considered as something that can be done by anyone with little in service training or no training at all. While this needs to be changed, if we need to change the status of ODL in the country, ODL expertise can also be developed over time through professional practice, and understanding of its philosophies, principles, and technologies.

A policy framework will help UGC, other Councils responsible for higher professional education, school education bodies in the Centre and states, and the general public, including teachers to understand and appreciate the relevance of ODL in the overall educational landscape of the country. A clearly laid out policy will provide the economic justification and rationale for ODL within the context of the new knowledge economy. As such, the policy should also answer the following questions:

- What should be the policy to provide access to quality education for all?
- Can we depend only on face-to-face education to provide access to learning opportunities to all at a time when citizens need regular up-gradation of skills and knowledge?
- Should institutions consider ODL/eLearning as cash cow?
- What are the responsibilities of educational institutions?
- What would enable institutions to create systems and processes to improve quality?
- Should ODL be treated as a "degree mill", and why not?
- What are the responsibilities of the learner and educational providers in ODL?

Structural Framework for ODL Policy

Given that the current Indian scenario for ODL policy is supportive, but unclear, it is necessary to have a common understanding. Any such attempt should also consider the policy perspectives in other developed and developing countries in context. From a historical perspective, ODL in India is seen as a cost-effective system to increase access to quality education for all. While this is sufficient reason to support ODL through a robust and clear policy, there is also a need to consider the emerging issues faced in the education sector. Not only the students in remote areas need quality education, they also need more freedoms from the time and place-based face-to-face educational systems. We not only need to provide education to those who fail to get a place in the face-to-face education, but also to those disadvantages, who can't attend classes as there are social, economic and personal disabilities. So, ODL is a system that helps provide flexibilities of different types (learn at own pace, place and time; choice of combination of courses; relaxation in eligibility conditions, etc.) to the learners. Today, ODL is increasingly relevant due to fast growth of technology and knowledge in all domains. Re-training of human resources is a major problem due to obsolescence of

knowledge and skills in the organizations. Use of ODL approaches, including the emerging technological ones such as eLearning and MOOCs could alleviate the problems of up-grading the skills of existing human resources. Thus, ODL should also be seen as a means of providing lifelong learning opportunities to the citizens to keep themselves up-to-date and help them upgrade their knowledge and skills. Therefore, the national ODL policy should have the following three objectives:

- (i) To provide increased access to quality educational opportunities in all domains of knowledge;
- (ii) To provide increased freedoms to the learners in terms of their choice of courses, place of study, time of study,
- (iii) To provide lifelong learning opportunities to working people, and those who have interest to learn.

Keeping these objectives in mind, ODL policy should articulate what should be, leaving the regulations to articulate how to practice the policy. A suggested structural framework for ODL policy is suggested in Table 1.

Table 1: Suggested Focus Areas for ODL Policy

Key ODL Policy Area	Descriptions
Definitions	Provides explanatory notes on terms used such as ODL, open education, OER, access, equity, quality, continuous assessment, term end assessment, learner support, self-learning materials, eLearning, etc.
Curriculum Design and Development	Statutory compliance of course design and development, need based programmes, credit transfer, admission criteria, accreditation of courses, nature of learning materials, media-mix, technology integration, adherence to academic calendar, etc.
Governance/Administration/Financial	Institutional mechanisms to grievance redressal, cost of tuition, charging overhead cost, profit from ODL, principles of budgeting, adherence to national accounting practices, fee reimbursement and distribution of bursaries, staffing, monitoring and evaluation, internal quality assurance, etc.
Staff Development and Research	Workload, staff training, performance appraisal, encouragement for research on ODL, publication of research output on institutional repository, etc.
Legal	Issues related to compliance with national policy on education, equivalence and parity of courses and programmes, use of OER, etc.
Learner Support and Assessment	Responsibilities of the learners, counselling, tutoring, continuous assessment, library access, laboratory provisions, partnership with other organizations for services, use of media for support, proctorial nature of term end evaluation, grading, etc.
Technical/ Infrastructural	Provision of technical support, call centre, hardware and software issues, use of open source and open format, accountability of performance of the systems, etc.

(Adapted from: King et al, 2000)

Conclusions

While the regulatory mechanisms for ODL practice and operations would be notified soon, it is also necessary to re-think ODL policy in long-term and develop a national policy on ODL for India. This is especially important to permit innovations in the field of ODL, in the light of emerging trends related to online technologies, and their possibilities to offer anyone, anytime, anyplace education using any content, in any format, in any device of the choice of the learner. The availability of OERs in almost all subject areas calls for a change in our approach to material development in ODL. A clear national policy will give the scope to innovate within the parameters of the openness that is at the heart of ODL. A national ODL policy will also help reduce duplication of courses, and foster resource sharing and networking amongst national and state open universities.

References/Notes

1. Parts of this article are a summarised version of the lesson written by the author for IGNOU's course on Distance Education for the B.Ed. students in 2000.
2. For the purpose of presentation, the paper covers the early developments related to correspondence courses in India as beginning of ODL practices, and does not make any distinction between the two.
3. The Draft ODL policy issued by Government of India in 2009 is no more available online.
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