UNIT 1 DEFINING DISTANCE EDUCATION

Structure
1.0 Objectives
1.1 Introduction
1.2 Distance Education vis-à-vis Traditional Education
   1.2.1 Learner-centredness/Learner-autonomy
   1.2.2 Indirect Education
   1.2.3 Education in Real-life Settings
1.3 A Clarification of Terms
   1.3.1 Correspondence Education
   1.3.2 Open Education
1.4 Attempts at Defining Distance Education
   1.4.1 Wedemeyer
   1.4.2 Moore
   1.4.3 Dohmen
   1.4.4 Peters
   1.4.5 Holmberg
1.5 Significant Aspects of Distance Education
1.6 In Justification of Distance Education
1.7 Let Us Sum Up
1.8 Check Your Progress: Possible Answers

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we intend to give you an overview of what we mean by ‘distance education’. However, it should be clear that we cannot capture the terms in a conclusive and straitjacketed definition. The attempt is essentially, therefore, to put together the views of various thinkers in order to arrive at a satisfactory working definition of the concept of ‘distance education’. In this context, we have also touched upon formal education, non-formal education, correspondence education, etc., because this will help us distinguish distance education from other learning systems.

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss that distance education aims at learning activity/knowledge society;
- distinguish distance education from other learning/teaching processes/activities; and
- explain how distance education becomes a structured system of learning.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Distance education is characterised by a non-conformist and non-traditional approach, which, in effect, questions existing norms of
Philosophical Foundations

traditional education and seeks to provide a new orientation to education processes. It assumes premises about the nature of learning that are vastly different from those governing the traditional system of education. Moreover, it has its own dialectic register which arises out of its endeavour to overcome the problems that are implicit in imparting instruction to students who are at a distance from the teacher and/or the institution.

This clearly shows that distance education does not exist in a vacuum. It is, in fact, an outcome of certain socio-historical compulsions and technological growth: it is a system which is firmly related to social and cultural environments. The most important development in this regard is the advancements made in the field of electronic mass media. For instance, technological growth opens up new channels of communication, which, when put to use, can replace the usual channel, i.e., oral communication. At some places throughout this block, we have used the terms ‘correspondence education’ and ‘distance education’ interchangeably. However, when we need to mean a particular system of education, we have indicated what actually we mean.

1.2 DISTANCE EDUCATION VIS-A-VIS TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

Distance education, in comparison with the conventional educational system, is a wider system in terms of both connotation and denotation. Its connotation is wider because it works in a much larger learning situation: a situation in which many factors remain indeterminate and inchoate. It has a wider denotation in that it covers a considerable distance in order to effect academic communication.

However, this does not mean that open/distance learning can be defined in any precise manner. It has as many critics as it has enthusiasts. It remains imprecise and that perhaps enables it to accommodate many different ideas and aims. Perhaps as Keegan (1986) suggests, it cannot be used in an administrative context. It can be carried out both in face-to-face encounters and at a distance. Many distance teaching universities have closed rigid structures and are slow to respond to the community’s educational needs. And yet what makes distance teaching distinct is perhaps the fact that educational technology plays a major role in distance education. Education technology itself is a developing field which today includes audio-visual aids, the computer, the mass media, etc. It is this fact (i.e., that educational technology is a developing field) that helps make distance education dynamic and exciting.

Along with distance education, one can also list various other nontraditional forms of education. The broad definition of distance education is that it is a method of teaching and learning at a distance where as open learning is a philosophy. These various forms of open and distance education we have already studied in the earlier block. These are extension programmes which make available the expertise of a university or of a college to new populations; adult programmes which provide non-traditional learning to adults in selected areas, and extended campuses that provide lectures at various locations which are far removed from the official campus.

Nevertheless, following Keegan, one can use ‘distance education’ as a generic term. It would then include a range of teaching/learning strategies referred to as correspondence education, home study,
independent study, external studies or teaching at a distance. Before we proceed any further, let us work out the following exercise.

**Check Your Progress 1**

Notes:  
1. **a)** Space is given below for your answer.  
2. **b)** Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Define the term ‘conventional education’.
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The concepts on the basis of which distance education operates distinctly distinguish it from the traditional educational system.

It operates mainly on the following concepts:

- **i)** Learner-centeredness/learner autonomy
- **ii)** Indirect education
- **iii)** Education in real-life setting

We have given below a brief account of each of these concepts.

**1.2.1 Learner-centeredness/Learner-autonomy**

Unlike formal education, distance education puts the client, i.e., the student, first and then the institution. It is well practiced in British Open University as ‘continuity of concern’ (Sewart) (from pre-entry stage of learners to Distance education, in fact, lays emphasis on the needs and convenience of the learners to exist point from the university). Distance Education, in fact, lays emphasis on the needs and convenience of the learners while taking into account the individual diversity among them and indeed makes this an operative condition. It works on a concept of time which is not arbitrary in the sense that it permits individual variation in the time span required.

We have reiterated in the earlier block that the gamut of open and distance education is the gamut of ‘Learner Support System’. The learner is the real stakeholder of the entire open and distance education. Learner is the purpose and beginning and end for the open and distance education. The market approach to education lays emphasis not on what one produces but it’s ‘after sales services’ which otherwise in distance educational context, designing and developing programmes are important but delivery strategies are more important to reach the unreached.

Flexibility, accessibility and educational equity are the essential features of open and distance education. Flexibility is a promise from the open learning institution. Further, it does not advocate a definite time frame for any course of study or its place of study. In the sense, it is a flexible kind of system which adapts itself to the needs of different types learners with diverse background. It does not distinguish between a young learners and an old learner between a slow learner and a quick
Philosophical Foundations

learner, but provides all of them with a possibility that permits them to programme their specific course of study.

Accessibility is the commitment to open learning system. Accessibility is in terms of people, places and methods.

Educational equity is the philosophy of education in general and open and distance education in particular. The equity principle differs from one institution to another. It is the overall philosophy of open and distance education.

These principles, however, should be understood not in the absolute sense but in the relative sense. For example, an on-campus educational programme of three years duration meant for young students of a particular age with prescribed previous education and economic and social status is restrictive. If the same programme is made a little flexible by relaxing the age limit, formal qualifications, the choice of place of study, and the duration within which the programme could be completed, then, the degree of learner centeredness will increase. In relative terms, a three year programme becomes learner centered, if it can offer the flexibility of completing it in six or eight years instead of three years. Similarly, in all other aspects too, if the programme is made suitable to the needs of the learners, it becomes learner centered. Open and Distance Educational institutions borrow knowledge seamlessly for their purpose and quality for seamless education.

1.2.2 Indirect Education

Indirect education suggests the existence of a form of education that is not direct. Direct education may be understood as one which assumes the presence of face-to-face communication. In this context, distance education can be called ‘indirect’ education because the provision for face-to-face interaction here is minimal. It is indirect also in the sense that it provides for as many inputs to learning as can be maintained and preserved. These inputs to learning are placed at the disposal of the learner, who makes use of these inputs to learn the course. Of course, the learners must have the minimum preparedness and the abilities to learn and complete the course. It is also felt that self-discipline and soft skills are essential pre-requisites of open and distance learning.

1.2.3 Education in Real-life Settings

One feels that distance education does not have the kind of recognisable and apparent structure that formal education possesses. It seems to be amorphous, supine and bloodless, lacking the obvious dynamism that an oral communicator necessarily imparts. While it is true that it suffers from an absence of a certain kind of vitality which only the presence of a teacher can generate, it nevertheless compensates for this by making use of as many inputs to learning as are possible and by structuring itself around the actual learning experience of the students. The recent developments in the telecommunication and computer technologies have increased the possibilities of teacher-student dialogue and peer group interaction. Through e-mail and internet facilities, collaborative learning has become a reality. It is otherwise strongly felt that any meaningful communication based on the context is useful to education or distance education process. Given the access to these facilities, distance learners would feel less lonely and alienated. It is otherwise also said that interactive communication technologies reduces the distance between the institution and learner.
Teaching-learning component in the form of summer schools/contact programmes neutralise the negative effects of isolation of distance learners.

Having touched upon the concepts on which distance education operates, we shall now unravel the mystery around a few terms which are commonly used in distance education.

The confusion over the use of the terms stems from the fact that various expressions, such as non-formal education, distance education, nontraditional education and open education, which are currently used in the field of education are either not properly understood or not adequately defined. The reason simply is that educational processes underlying the expressions are similar in one or the other aspect, either in terms of their philosophy or in their procedures. In other words unless one is clear about the philosophy underlying these expressions and also the procedures which they imply, there is bound to be an element of confusion, which we should resolve before we proceed any further.

1.3 A CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

Distance Education is an improvement over the single correspondence mode and it uses all the available media or multiple media for educational delivery. Open Education refers to the approach or the philosophy behind it. We shall explain these terms below.

By formal education we mean the campus-based education at the school, college and the University levels where curricula and syllabi have certain established patterns. The age groups, training, methods of teaching, materials (textbooks) used, evaluation methods etc. are known to the teachers and the taught. By non-formal education we mean any other approach to take education to those who have not been able to get formal education. Distance education refers to the ‘mode’ which does not require the physical contiguity of the “teacher and the learner at all times”.

It is not unusual to confuse the terms ‘Correspondence Education’, ‘Distance Education’ and ‘Open Education’ with each other. It is true that openness to methodology is a characteristic of distance education, but it should be noted that ‘non-distance education’ or ‘face-to-face education’ may also use ‘open’ methodologies. Moreover, ‘distance education’ is possible without being ‘open’. For example, it can be argued that distance education, as practised at the German Open University at Hagen, may not come under the category of ‘open education’, as this University is ‘open’ in a limited sense only. It should be clear that there can be various degrees of ‘openness’ of education. However, at the moment it is difficult to say as to which level of ‘openness’ may legitimize the nomenclature ‘open university’ for a university. ‘Distance education’ as an expression which officially replaced the earlier term ‘correspondence education’ in the Twelfth World Conference of the International Council for Correspondence Education, held in Canada in 1982. Since then the Council was renamed as the International Council for Distance Education. The debate on the search for an appropriate expression to encompass all the characteristics which had, of late, come to be associated with what was known as Correspondence Education till recently was accelerated by the emergence of the British Open University in 1969 and the consensus, as indicated above, was achieved.
in 1982. The expression marks a deviation from the earlier distribution-strategy-based nomenclature to the nomenclature representative of the spatial and temporal relationship between the sources and the receiver of education. Having said this, now let us touch upon ‘correspondence education’ and open education’ in sub-section 1.3.1 and 1.3.2 respectively.

1.3.1 Correspondence Education

The distinction between correspondence education and distance education lies in their aims, methods, and orientation. Correspondence education becomes an extension of conventional education as far as its imparting of prescribed knowledge for issuing of certificates is concerned. Correspondence education is said be the oldest and cheapest models of distance education. The aims of distance education, on the other hand, are more varied. These include personal growth, training for better job prospects and job enhancement, life long continuing education, change in attitude, etc., in addition to imparting of knowledge. Distance education also employs a multimedia approach including human contact (we will discuss this aspect in MDE-413). Correspondence education, on the other hand, depends mostly on printed materials distributed by post. The procedure adopted for admissions to the courses and examinations are more or less the same as have been in use over the centuries in the traditional college/university education. Thus, correspondence education is essentially a system based on the mode of:

i) distribution of teaching materials, and

ii) effecting interaction, if needed, between the teacher and the taught.

Distance education contrastingly is oriented towards pedagogy: it tries to build the teacher in the materials. Now we may turn to the concept of ‘openness’.

1.3.2 Open Education

We may define ‘open education’ as a system of education that does not operate through traditional conventions which are essentially restrictive in nature like admission, restrictions, attendance restrictions, restrictions on the candidature for examinations, restrictions on the period of time to be devoted to a course, restrictions on the number of examinations given and taken in a year, restrictions on subject combinations for a particular degree, restrictions on the modes of didactic communication and the didactic tasks, etc. The larger the number of such restrictions left unobserved, the higher the degree of the ‘openness’ of the type of education under consideration.

We should make clear our point that correspondence/distance education institutes may or may not be ‘open’ in the sense we have referred to above, or may be open only to a limited degree. And in the same way, even a traditional college/university may become ‘open’ to a recognisable degree. Research programmes like M.Phil and Ph.D. may be put under this category.

In what follows:

i) we shall avoid using the expression ‘correspondence education’, unless we have to use it in a specific sense.

ii) The expressions ‘distance education’ and, ‘open education’, will be used synonymously. (The distance mode allows the educational systems to be open and the openness of the education systems suits the promotion of distance education.)
What have we said above?

A diagrammatic representation of what we have discussed is given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(a) Correspondence Education</th>
<th>(b) Distance Education</th>
<th>(c) Open Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• refers to the earliest cheapest form of education given <em>mainly through printed materials</em>, by the postal system.</td>
<td>• refers to non-traditional innovative type of education that uses <em>all the possible means of communication</em>, the postal system being only one of them.</td>
<td>• refers to that kind of nonconventional education which has been ‘weaning away from the conventional constraints that characterise the traditional school, college or university education. This change is of the kind that was experienced a few centuries ago when <strong>sectarian education</strong> yielded to <strong>liberal education</strong>. (This change was essentially curriculum based). Now, <strong>liberal education</strong> is yielding to <strong>open education</strong>. This change is both curricular and Organisational in nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• All correspondence institutions are converted into distance education. Theme and correspondence is no more in vogue.</td>
<td>• It is a method/s of education with a meaningful communication of methods and media to facilitate learning at distance.</td>
<td>• Enough scope for innovation, experimentation and creativity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The difference between (a) and (b) is characterised essentially by the advanced strategies and technologies of communication used in (b). Obviously, the shift has been effected by advances that have taken place in communication technology.</td>
<td>• The relationship between (b) and (c) is that open education can be effected easily through distance education systems on the one hand, and on the other advances in the practice of distance education help and encourage education to become more and more open. Naturally, the two go together, and therefore, the visible ‘overlap’.</td>
<td>• Borrowing the best excellence from all available resources for seamless education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Technology has passed better means and methods to transform correspondence education into distance education by applying more methods to facilitate learning at distance.</td>
<td>•</td>
<td></td>
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Besides these three terms, there are a few more in use currently, but in the main their currency is localised. They are as follows:

i) **External system/studies:** This term is in use in Australia. It does confuse one, when one thinks of the ‘external system’ as it functioned in London years ago. The London model of ‘external system’ makes it possible for learners to sit for recognised examinations, but teaching is not necessarily associated with the system. It is obvious that the term does not connote all that is meant by the term ‘distance education’ today.

ii) **Extra-mural system:** This expression is used in New Zealand to convey what distance education means to most of us.

iii) **Independent study:** We shall discuss this term in some detail in our discussion of Wedemeyer’s definition of distance education. In fact, it is through his writings that this term gained currency in North America.

iv) **Home study:** This term is localized mainly in Europe, probably under the influence of Swedish schools of correspondence courses. However, it is also being used at a few places in Canada and the USA.

v) **Off-campus studies:** To denote a contrast with the on-campus traditional type of studied the expression ‘off-campus studies’ is widely used in the Pacific region – Australia and South-East Asian Countries.

vi) **Proximate Education:** The term is in vogue in legal distance education. It explains distance education with the help of technology; the gap between learner and institution can be reduced. Hence it is called proximate education.

Besides the above said nomenclature of distance education, we have also studied various other names prevalent those you have studied in the block one of this course. Above all, the system is open and distance education but called by many names otherwise one system with many names. You have already studied more ideas in Block-1, Unit-1.

As indicated above, these terms do have local currency. But the term ‘distance education’ enjoys international currency. It may be that these localised terms are not replaced entirely and immediately by the more acceptable term ‘distance education’. The fact, however, remains that most of the current literature and reports on all kinds of activity in the field are presented under the label ‘distance education’ and/or ‘open learning’. Both of these terms have already been touched upon in subsections 1.3.1 and 1.3.2.

Having discussed and attempted to resolve the confusion that prevails over the use of the term ‘distance education’ we shall study a few attempts made to define ‘distance education’ by various thinkers in the field. We have selected five definitions to serve our immediate purpose of highlighting the important aspects of distance education.

### 1.4 ATTEMPTS AT DEFINING DISTANCE EDUCATION

Attempts have been and are still being made to define distance education succinctly. It is, however, very difficult to arrive at a definition
that may bring together, by the processes of connotation and denotation, all the aspects that characterise distance education.

The term, as it has been mentioned, means many different things to different people depending entirely on from what angle one wants to view it. For example, given below are five ‘early’ definitions of distance education. The differences in these definitions are essentially based on the particular aspect of distance education which the particular thinker has made prominent. A brief comment follows each definition so as to help you understand what the main thrust of its author is. (We shall talk about some of these authors, more elaborately in units 2 and 3. In unit 4 of this block, we shall give you a brief account of the changing profile of distance education, focusing on the emerging trends of open distance education.)

1.4.1 Wedemeyer

Wedemeyer (1977) has used the terms ‘open learning’, ‘distance education’ and ‘independent study’ in his works, but favours the last term consistently. He defines ‘independent study’ as follows:

Independent study consists of various forms of teaching-learning arrangements in which teachers and learners carry out their essential tasks and responsibilities apart from one another, communicating in a variety of ways. Its purposes are to free off campus or external learners with the ‘opportunity to continue learning in their own environments, and developing in all learners the capacity to carry on self-directed learning and the ultimate maturity required of the educated person.

Notice that there is a suggestion for two kinds of ‘independent study’. One for the on-campus learner who may not want and/or need to attend lectures regularly; the other for the off-campus learners who are on their own. But, both these kinds are subordinate to the overwhelming idea of the ultimate social purpose of education – liberal education for social welfare. It is, therefore, not difficult to appreciate why in the United States of America; the expression ‘independent study’ is extensively being used to mean both ‘Correspondence’ and ‘Distance’ Education. Additionally, the expression does connote ‘open learning’ too, as one needs open access to education in order to become a truly ‘educated’ person. You could also see that the focus here is on the sociological aspects of education. As a society develops the facilities for better communication and faster mobility, the need for freeing the individual from the traditional fetters of social, economic and cultural institutions gets articulated. If unconventional arrangements can assure the same or even better quality of education, then, the traditional face-to-face education need not be shown as the only way of teaching or learning. Wedemeyer only gives expression to the changing social environment of the U.S.A. in the sixties and the seventies which saw the peak of liberalism and freedom in the American educational thinking.

1.4.2 Moore

Moore (1973) is more explicit in so far as the characteristic features of distance education are concerned. According to him distance teaching may be defined as the family of instructional methods in which the teaching behaviours are performed apart from learning behaviours, including those that in a contiguous situation would be performed in the
learner’s presence, so that communication between the teacher and the learner must be facilitated by print, electronic, mechanical or other devices.

At least three features of distance education are clearly discernible in this definition:

i) teaching behaviour remains separated from learning behaviour (e.g. correspondence courses);

ii) face-to-face teaching and learning forms a part of the system (e.g. contact programmes); and

iii) electronic and other media may be used to effect learning and teaching (e.g., use of audio and video cassettes).

The first two of these features are similar to the ones which Wedemeyer has pointed to. And if we interpret Wedemeyer’s expression ‘communication in a variety of ways’ broadly, even the third feature listed above finds a place in his (Wedemeyer’s) definition. While Wedemeyer talks in broad sociological terms, Moore makes his statements more specific to the context of educational communication. Moore implies that whether the situation is face-to-face or that of distance learning, the effectiveness of education would depend upon the nature of communication and the degree of dialogue. The Individuality of the teacher is acknowledgeable even if advanced mechanical devises are used in class room. But overall in DE everything becomes a collective activity: the degree of labour in distance education corresponds to a large extent to the division of labour as an industrial mode of operations. We shall discuss more of this in the next unit.

1.4.3 Dohmen

Dohmen (1977) of Germany defines distance education as a systematically organised form of self-study in which student counselling, the presentation of learning material and securing and supervising of students success is carried out by a team of teachers, each of whom has responsibilities. It is made possible at a distance by means of media which can cover long distances.

This definition places emphasis upon the importance of self-study. This feature of distance education is emphasised in Wedemeyer’s definition too. Like Wedemeyer and Moore, Dohmen also emphasises, and correctly so, the use of the media which is what enables distance education to reach out to the consumer of education.

We notice that all the three thinkers quoted above focus, partly explicitly and partly implicitly, on two aspects of distance education. These are:

i) self-study, and

ii) the use of media for educational communication.

Dohmen recognises the need for student support too, which is an important addition to the kind of self-study which distance learners pursue.

The point being made is that as against the oral communication used in the conventional classroom type of teaching, which is not a process of self-study, distance education uses print, electronic media and oral face-
to-face situations for purposes of self study which is the basis of distance education.

Now, we shall turn to a definition that presents a theoretical framework for the entire process of distance education.

### 1.4.4 Peters

Peters (1973) defined distance education as “a method of imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes which is rationalised by the application of division of labour and organisational principles as well as by the extensive use of technical media, specially for the purpose of reproducing high quality teaching materials which makes it possible to instruct great numbers of students at the same time wherever they live”. It is an “industrialised form of teaching and learning”.

Peters’ definition is interesting because, besides the use of technical media and mass education, he emphasises a specific principle which relates distance education to the nature principles of the industrial society. It is also possible to view distance education as a system arising from the new and specific needs of an industrialising society in which almost all activities, including education, have to fit into time schedules that are geared to more rigid working and learning conditions. The possible comparison between the conventional, face-to-face education and the ‘industrialised’ distance education is as follows:

In the artisan period of commodity production, the artisan as an individual had complete control over his art or trade. The skills of an individual artisan or worker could be distinguished by the commodity, and the individuality of the producer was thus maintained. Similarly in the ideal face-to-face classroom teaching, the teacher is solely responsible for the choice of the curriculum, syllabus, method of instruction and evaluation. The individuality of the teacher is very much recognisable, even if advanced mechanical devices are used in the classroom. But in distance education every thing becomes a collective activity – development of courses, their delivery, the process of evaluation, etc. Because of the size of the numbers, distance teaching operations become massive and the logistics become complex and at times cumbersome. The very nature of these activities, affects the individual identity of those involved in the practice of distance education. The difference between face-to-face education and distance education is that of the division of labour. The degree of division of labour in distance education corresponds to a large extent to the division of labour in an industrial mode of operation.

### 1.4.5 Holmberg

Holmberg (1981) defines distance education as that kind of education which covers. The various forms of study at all levels which are not under continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms on the same premises, but which, nevertheless benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organisation.

What is interesting about Holmberg’s definition is that distance education is being looked upon as an organised educational programme, which assures institutional support to the student. We shall elaborate on this and a few other points of view in the next unit.
1.5 SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

It should not be assumed that there are no other definitions except the five we have touched upon above, nor do we suggest that anyone or a combination of any two or more of the above definitions actually defines distance education comprehensively. There are other definitions too, and many more will come up as we explore this innovative system of education. Obviously, the question of defining distance education is open, and it will remain so for quite some time to come. The purpose of the above details will have been served if they enable you to identify the various characteristics of distance education as it is understood today. This is exactly what Keegan has already done for us. He brings together various aspects of these definitions in order to clarify the nature of distance education. Keegan believed that distance education is a distinct form of education characterised by:
Defining Distance Education

i) the separation of teacher and learner.

ii) the role of the educational organisation

iii) the place of the technical media

iv) two-way communication

v) the separation of the learner from his peer group

vi) industrialisation

Each of these may be considered briefly as follows:

i) The teacher and the learner are separated from each other and this is a central characteristic of this form of education.

ii) Distance education is an institutional kind of educational system. It is, therefore, distinct from private study which may result from private reading or watching TV or attending a talk, etc.

iii) Distance education makes use of the various technically advanced media such as printing, telephone, audio-video, broadcasting, computer, etc.

iv) It is two-way communication because the student is able to respond through assignment-responses or other media and therefore can receive feedback. The student thus enters into a dialogue with the institution.

v) Each student is separated from his/her peer group in the sense that although the learners form a fairly sizable population they do not have face-to-face interaction among themselves. Thus distance education becomes a highly individualised learning system. In this sense, it remains one of the most individualised of all educational systems. Even though study groups may be formed under distance education learning programmes, these may not be compulsory and the student is free to work entirely on his/her own.

vi) Distance education is a specific answer to a specific need. It is the developed industrial society that has created a need for a more capsular kind of education. At the same time, it is the same society that has developed the necessary technology to be able to structure an educational system that will cater to such a specialised kind of need for education.

In that sense, one can say that distance education is an offshoot of industrial development. Thus, today one can define distance education as that field of educational endeavour in which

- the learner is quasi-permanently separated from the teacher throughout the duration of the learning process;
- the learner is quasi-permanently separated from the learning group throughout the duration of the learning process;
- a technological medium replaces the inter-personal communication of conventional, oral group-based education;
- the teaching/learning process is institutionalized (thus distinguishing it from Teach-yourself Programmes) and,
two-way communication is possible between both the student and the teacher (thus distinguishing it from other forms of educational technology).

In essence, it represents individualisation of the educational processes.

Finally, one must recognise that the concept of distance education is basically a democratic idea. This is, perhaps, what makes it most unique. What a lecturer says as part of his/her oral and spontaneous communication within the classroom is in many ways private. At least, it is restricted to a definite and small number of persons and cannot be captured in any medium for review or revision.

On the other hand, the information that is communicated in a distance education learning programme is something that is open to public inspection. Such learning resources, therefore, can be subjected to both prize and criticism publicly criticised and can be reviewed and revised from time to time. Hence one might conclude by saying that the democratisation of the educational process is possibly achieved in some measure by the process of distance education.

1.6 IN JUSTIFICATION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Doubts have often been expressed about the nature of distance education and its true efficacy. Some have suggested that since there is no teaching function in it, distance education should not be described as an educational activity. Some have seen it more as a kind of business similar to what mail order firms carry out. To many it may appear to be a kind of industrial organisational selling of learning goods for financial profit.

One answer to this is to say that distance education is not a conventional kind of education. There is minimal face-to-face or interpersonal communication and institutionalised teaching. It is based on rationalised and technologically produced teaching programmes.

The above argument assumes that all learning does not depend on teaching. People learn from the time they are born until they die. They learn from books, television, from movies and from everyday life. This learning is different from on-campus learning which is primarily limited to teacher oriented communication. By implication, this means that we are learning all the time. And yet the concept of interpersonal communication is central to distance education. Since the quality and quantity of learning depends entirely on the kinds of material that are developed by the institutions, this inter-personal communication can be divided, following Keegan (1986), into the following functions:

i) Information : to provide information
ii) Expression function : to express feelings
iii) Control function : to get someone to behave in a certain way
iv) Social contact function : to relieve privacy
v) Stimulation function : to stimulate
These functions are carried out in distance education through printed or electronic or computer-based interaction. There is, therefore, a need within distance education to compensate for the following weaknesses of technology based education:

i) no heard language,

ii) an absence of immediate feedback,

iii) delayed reinforcement

iv) no physical contiguity (of teachers and learners).

Above all, the environmental factors of the learners are vastly different. What can compensate for these weaknesses, to a large extent, is a more rationally determined means-ends process: the use of a context-free language, a better emphasis on the learning of skills, etc. All these can be developed through an easy readable style. Distance Education involves anticipation of students’ problems, careful structuring of contents, self-testing questions, clearly enunciated instructional objectives, inserted questions and model answers.

Distance education, thus, is a movement away from labour intensive costs in education since it reduces the active participation of a teacher within the system of education.

All this leads us to a two-point conclusion:

i) an industrialisation of teaching, that is, inter-personal communication is replaced by mechanically designed systems of communication that lie in the printed work, in audio and video cassettes and in computer-based materials; and

ii) privatisation of institutional learning, that is, students learn at home and at their own pace. In other words, the individual student becomes the focus of learning

1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we attempted to give you an overview of the term ‘distance education’ – with a word of caution that it is not easy to define the term comprehensively. The attempt was carried out by distinguishing the system of distance teaching and learning from the other systems of education and briefly discussing the definitions presented by a few thinkers in this field. Queer ideas were discussed so as to give you a complete picture of the significant and conspicuous features of distance education. To ward off naive criticisms against this mode of teaching, we have, towards the end of the unit, said a few words in justifying distance education as a learning activity, which is more effective than the traditional systems of education.

With these ideas in the background, we shall now turn to the philosophies which underlie the concept of distance education. To these philosophies we shall devote two units, namely units 2 and 3 of this block. In unit 4 we shall discuss some of the emerging operational concerns of the nineties which should answer many of the questions raised about the effectiveness and relevance of distance education of the previous decades.
Check Your Progress 1

By traditional education we mean a system which operates primarily within a classroom setting. It tries to bring about learning mainly through and with the presence of an oral communicator, i.e., a teacher. In other words, in the traditional system, teaching as an activity finds fulfillment and consummation within a situation in which the teacher and the pupil work contiguously. For example, much of school and college education is of this type.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Peters

ii) Holmberg

iii) ‘Independent study’, ‘self-study’ or ‘learner autonomy’.