
UNIT 2 DISTANCE EDUCATION METHODS AND PRACTICES

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit is designed to run you through the complex world of distance education organisation, its styles and methods, its approaches and practices, and what makes a distance education system successful and effective. It is also intended to build on the brief treatment of technology interventions that we discussed in the previous unit, and explain how different technological interventions achieve the purpose of education in different environments and contexts. We shall also look at some of the key elements in the organisation of distance education systems, different types of organisational structures and the main features of each of them in relation to their specific objectives and functions. Needless to say, it would be the specific objectives and functions that would influence the organisation and structure of any system and it is, therefore, important to be clear about the specific objectives to be achieved before embarking upon the design and development of their organisational structures.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the different methods and practices that distance education systems employ to achieve different objectives and purposes;
- acquaint yourself with various technological means that have been deployed in running successful distance education systems;
- appreciate the factors that influence and shape the organisational structures of distance education systems;
- analyse the basic features around which a purposeful distance education system should be designed, organised and developed;
- critically assess the factors that would ensure the success and sustainability of distance education provision in specific environments and design the organisational systems to suit those environments.

2.3 DISTANCE EDUCATION METHODS AND PRACTICES

In Keegan's words, "in traditional education, a teacher teaches; in distance education, it is the institution that teaches". The uniqueness of distance education is the separation of learners from teachers in time and space. This separation is made up by some form of mediation between the two parties to the learning contract. In order to make this mediation effective, an organisational presence is essential. The structure and pattern of this organisational mechanism depends on the methods and styles that it intends to use for mediation between its teachers and learners. In order to understand the essential features of this mediatory role, and how it works, it would be worthwhile to look at the functions and tasks of the organisation in meeting the demands of, and the provision of various services to, its distance learners.

2.3.1 How does Distance Education Function?

The most important task of any distance education institution is to promote its products (programmes and services). The programmes will be determined by the specific objectives with which the institution was established and the specific groups of potential learners to whom they are addressed. The programmes and courses may all be developed internally, or may be acquired from other distance education institutions.

The first important task, therefore, is to ensure that the institution has the necessary programmes at its disposal. If internal development of all programmes is the preferred option, it has to ensure that the people who can produce the learning materials are in place. But then, this is what all institutions do: recruiting teachers and staff. If, on the other hand, the choice is to acquire materials, it is then necessary to identify institutions that offer their materials, negotiate the terms for acquisition, either in bulk or as single copies with rights for reproduction. In either case, it is necessary to make arrangements for the production and storage of a sufficient quantity of learning materials well before the academic operations commence. Therefore, a major functional requirement of a distance education institution

is to ensure that arrangements are in place for the preparation or acquisition, production, storage and distribution of its learning materials.

The finalisation of programmes is followed by arrangements for enrolling students at a number of places nearer their work/stay as they cannot be expected to travel to the headquarters of the organisation that offers the programmes. It is just not enough to enrol students and collect fees from them, it has to be ensured that they get their learning materials in time, and have access to different kinds of support like tutorial assistance, assignments and practice training, examinations and grade cards, and a variety of other information that is so vital to students who have no physical contact with their institutions. A distance education institution normally makes these arrangements by identifying and designating an appropriate number of centres at suitable locations within its areas of operation. They could be existing educational institutions, workplaces or other establishments and need to be suitably staffed and equipped. It would also be necessary to arrange for academic counselling and tutorials which again could be contracted out to teachers and other professionals in the neighbourhood of the identified learning support centres. Provision of this learning support to a widely scattered student body is one of the key functions of a distance education institution.

Monitoring student progress, preparation and distribution of their assignments, collection and assessment of these assignments and provision of feedback on them, holding examinations and getting the answer books assessed, preparing grade cards and final awards of qualifications are equally important functions. It is true that all educational institutions perform all these functions. Then, what is so special about the distance education institutions? Distance learners deal with a faceless institution, and so does the institution. They still have to be brought together, kept engaged and their needs satisfied. The organisational and managerial tasks involved could be massive, and often, extraordinary efforts would be needed to accomplish them. The internal systems and processes are key elements in the successful operation of a distance education system.

As we noted, technologies play a very important role in linking learners with the institution and the learning resources it provides. We have briefly discussed the evolution of the distance education technologies from its initial form of correspondence education to its latest ICT enabled versions in the previous unit.

2.3.2 Distance Education Technologies

Most distance education systems now use multi-media packages in their teaching-learning transactions. The most widely used medium still continues to be the printed learning packages. These printed packages are specially prepared for the distance learner in the form of self-instructional materials which attempt to build the teacher in to the text. The preparation of these packages requires specialised skills that combine subject matter competence, pedagogical skills and linguistic and writing proficiency. Very often, teams of experts drawn from each of these areas of competence work together in the preparation of these materials.

Printed materials are only one part of the distance learning kits. These are supplemented by most institutions with electronic media that add to the learning material packages or to the interactive processes of learning. These may include:

Radio: By far, the most ubiquitous and the most affordable electronic medium for communication is the radio. Radio lessons are regularly broadcast at specified hours by most distance education institutions. These broadcasts can reach the remote learners, distributed across vast and often inaccessible regions. Improvements in the broadcast mode are progressively being made in many cases by providing two-way audio communication to facilitate interaction between learners and teachers. Community radio continues to be a powerful medium in most of the developing countries even today. Multiplication of FM radio stations and arrangements for phone-in question-answer sessions have significantly contributed to the effectiveness of this medium in distance education.

Audio cassettes supplement radio broadcasts and provide the additional advantage of play back that broadcasts do not permit. Learners can use audio tapes any time at their convenience.

Television: Television has been pressed in to service as a medium of education during the last several decades. The Chinese Television University with over a million students enrolled in various programmes has established the primacy of this medium in distance education. Many other universities use this medium in different ways, mainly to supplement the printed materials. The association of BBC with the British Open University in its early days clearly established the effectiveness of educational TV. Specially designed and prepared video cassettes related to the curricular content of distance education programmes are telecast at fixed hours over national television networks or specially established satellite-based communication networks. The National Technological University in the USA exists because it has access to satellite communications.

This medium is also used to provide live academic counselling to learners through teleconferencing and videoconferencing. These systems use one-way video and two-way audio for communication as well as two-way communication for both voice and image. In some cases, even Cable Television Networks are pressed into service to reach educational software to learners' homes.

There are instances in which broadcast television is being replaced by DVDs that can be played on television and computers. For instance, the UKOU that used to broadcast its course materials over the BBC network from its inception for over three decades, has now switched over to use of DVDs (the last broadcast of UKOU course material over BBC Channel 4 was in December 2004).

Computer-mediated Communication: This is a fast developing area in educational technology. Computer networks – Local Area Networks (LAN) and Wide Area Networks (WAN) – are extensively used for transferring information and learning materials from the institution to the learners' homes or workplaces. A large part of the learner-institution transactions are carried out through the electronic medium- securing forms, registering applications, payment of fees, submission of assignments, issue of grade cards, and so on. The growing popularity of the Internet has in fact ushered in a new era of distance education technologies.

Electronic communication by written message, by audio interaction and by video exchange comprises the world of educational telecommunication. Three broad categories within which current technologies support distance education are:

- Text-based systems, including electronic mail, computer conferencing, real-time chat systems, fax and many uses of the Worldwide Web;
- Audio-based systems such as audio conferencing and audio graphics and audio on the Web;
- Video-based systems such as video conferencing – one way and two ways – video on the Internet with various products like webcasting, visual media like video clips on the Web, etc.

Text, audio and video are discrete media. While this is partially true today, the evolution of all these systems is towards integration – of real-time and asynchronous access, of resource materials, and communication of text and video: in short, of writing, speaking and seeing.

Web-based Education: There is a new category, perhaps the best, of this convergence. It is the Web that integrates text, audio and video, both as pre-prepared clips and as live interactive systems, both real-time and stored-to-be-accessed-later modules, and furthermore, providing text-based interactions as well as access to educational resources of unprecedented magnitude. The defining characteristics of the Web are:

- The use of URLs (Universal Resource Locators) that provide the addressing systems;
- The HTTPS (Hypertext Transfer Protocol Standard) by which the delivery of the requested information is transacted;
- The development of the HTML (Hypertext Mark Up Language) through which links between documents and parts of documents are made.

From train travels and cheaper posts to the newer ways of telecommunication, distance education systems have been impacted tremendously by technologies in the last few decades. Easier and more frequent interaction between learners and tutors has given opportunities to universities to reach out to new learner groups. Still, much of the developing world uses the new media on a modest scale. High costs of creating the technology infrastructure and the still higher costs of accessing new technologies, both for the providers as well as a large body of learners, force them to stay with printed material with the support of radio/television broadcasts or the use of audio/video cassettes. Television broadcasts have also become too expensive and there have been instances of a marked decline of the television broadcast components in several countries.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Space is given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with the one given at the end of the unit.

What is the advantage of audio/video cassettes over broadcast technologies for a distance learner? (Answer in about 30 words).

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2.3.3 Distance Learners: Problems and Needs

It is essential for distance education managers to be fully aware of the problems of distance learners and to understand their needs to be able to respond to them. It has to be accepted that a distance learner is an isolated client of a large system who is very likely to feel neglected. It is for the system to find ways in which this isolation is broken and they are made to feel that they belong and that there are systems and practices in place to address their needs and concerns.

To begin with, it would be a good idea to familiarise the learners with the methods and processes of the system, what they can expect and who they need to approach and where, and how to secure any support or assistance. When once this is done, distance education managers should ensure that it is done as promised. Any breach of this promise, and continuing frustration with the inadequacies and failures of the system to respond to their needs could lead to the system losing its goodwill and credibility.

From the distance learner's point of view, it would be useful to have some idea about what it means to be a distance learner. This package of pre-enrolment information should include:

- Information about course and programmes. This should clearly indicate who are likely to benefit from particular courses and what benefits might accrue to them in terms of job opportunities, including job changes, career opportunities including advancement in careers, further education, etc.,
- Some ideas about distance education methods and processes including study skills and techniques, time management and pacing of studies, balancing work and study pressures, and the availability and methods of accessing learning materials and other resources;
- Comprehensive information about the institutional processes including when to apply and where, how and when to pay fees and to whom, the likely costs, what facilities and services are provided for each course and programme, where assignments are to be submitted and when, what, when and where tutorial support is available, the arrangements made for practical experience and experiments, the mandatory requirements for completion of each course and programme, the methods and arrangements for holding examinations and their schedule, and so on.

This information package is very crucial as it provides the essential inputs for the conclusion of the learner's contract with the institution.

After their enrolment, students will require a variety of services and facilities. The provision of these services and facilities constitutes what is commonly called the "Learner Support Services" system of a distance education organisation. The organisation and maintenance of these services and facilities is critical to the success of the system. How are they organised?

Distance education managers have several strategic options to choose from. The choice will depend on one or more of the following:

- Delivery of different services face-to-face or at a distance. For instance, while course materials can be delivered by post or through electronic transfer, tutorial support can be provided face-to-face or through electronic media;

- Delivery of these services at the homes or workplaces of the learners or at a designated centre in their neighbourhood;
- Provision of services, especially tutoring and academic counselling, synchronously as in face-to-face mode, or asynchronously with gaps in time for giving and receiving, as in correspondence tuition;
- The delivery of services in standard format as in handouts, newsletters and schedules and those that are differentiated as in the case of programmes, courses and special groups of students.

The system of delivery of services could be structured in different forms and patterns. The critical factors that determine these forms and patterns are the nature of the institution, the range and levels of its programmes, the size of the enrolment, the territorial spread of its enrolment, the methods of delivery including infrastructure available and accessible, and so on.

2.4 DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEMS: ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE

You will have noticed from the foregoing discussion that the key to the success of a distance education system is its organisational effectiveness. The management and organisation functions are, therefore, central to the system itself. The form and nature of these functions as well as their organisation and structure will vary depending upon the objectives of the system, the range of programmes, the technologies used, the student characteristics, and the general education and training environment in which the system operates.

We shall now look at some typical organisational models that will help us draw the general principles governing the organisation and management of distance education systems.

2.4.1 Distance Education as an Extension Function

For long, higher education was perceived to be an elitist pursuit and the universities were known to be ivory towers far removed from the reality of life. This was primarily because entry to higher education institutions was highly selective and often, it was only the upper strata of the society that managed to gain entry into them. With pressure mounting on these institutions to open up, many of them took up extension work by offering their facilities and resources to the community to run short, unstructured programmes, organising lectures and taking up problem-solving initiatives. Many of them encouraged people who were not formally admitted to their programmes to take their examinations through private home study and qualify for their degrees. Soon enough, many of them began to get involved with external students by offering them postal tuition, besides encouraging part-time studies and off-campus teaching. These earlier initiatives of extending the benefits of higher education institutions to persons who were not formally admitted to their privileges were, perhaps, the beginning of what has now evolved as distance education. The limitation of these initiatives was that they did not become part of the mainstream activities of universities and neither the faculty nor the community considered them as constituting the core functions of universities.

Even after distance education has evolved into its present form, most universities consider these activities as add-on efforts and, therefore, are peripheral to their primary purposes. In consequence, distance education programmes of many universities suffered from poor resource allocation, inadequate facilities and little or no attention to qualitative improvements.

2.4.2 Dedicated Open Universities

Open Universities dedicated exclusively to open learning have now a forty-year old history. It all began with the establishment of the UK Open University in 1969. Initially conceived as a University of the Air, the UKOU, within a short period earned considerable popularity and goodwill and soon emerged as a viable model for similar initiatives in other countries. The shortcomings in the approach of the traditional universities to distance education, and the imperatives for introducing innovation and flexible learning initiatives in higher education prompted governments in several countries to establish open universities as part of their higher education reform measures. The emerging information and communication technologies (ICT) also provided the necessary impetus. The success of this experiment in providing good quality higher education at an affordable cost to large numbers of people made it an attractive and imaginative approach to meeting the ever expanding demand for higher education.

We have seen in Unit 1 how the establishment of single mode open universities captured the imagination of the political establishment as well as the education planners and policy makers across the world in all continents. The rapid growth of these institutions and their increasing popularity and acceptance, especially by most employing organisations has made these institutions an effective alternative to the traditional universities. They also established that:

- higher education can truly and effectively be delivered through mass education programmes;
- high quality higher education programmes can be offered at an affordable cost;
- education can be provided on a global scale without affecting its local and regional relevance;
- They can raise new and additional resources for higher education even as the traditional sources of funding for higher education are drying up;
- Traditional functions of universities as well as the established ways of their functioning need to be reviewed and refined if they have to become effective instruments of change.

2.4.3 Radio and Television Universities

In the discussions on the emergence of open and distance learning in the last 70 years or so, no great attention seems to have been given to the establishment of Radio and Television Universities in the People's Republic of China and Myanmar. The China initiative had made significant contribution to the growth of higher education in that country. We shall take a close look at this innovation.

Higher correspondence education had become a massive enterprise in meeting the manpower needs of the emerging Chinese economy. During the 1950s, some 840 higher education institutions in China were offering correspondence education to over one million students.

During the 1960s, China decided to involve radio and television in a big way in augmenting educational provision. The Beijing Television University was established in 1960, and it was followed by the creation of similar universities in other metropolitan areas as well. There was however a serious interruption to this experiment during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Thereafter, the experiment was revived and a comprehensively reorganised system of Radio and Television University Network was put in place in 1978. The Chinese Radio and Television 'Universities Network consists of:

- A Central Radio and Television University (CRTVU) responsible for planning, policy making, macro-management and development of core curriculum in key areas of national development;
- 28 Provincial Radio and Television Universities (PRTVUs) with similar responsibilities and functions at the regional/provincial levels. These Provincial universities are also involved in the design and development of the curricula for key areas of regional development. They perform the functions of production and distribution of multi-media learning packages for all programmes (national and provincial), holding examinations as per standards prescribed by the CRTVU, training of teachers and undertaking research in higher education through distance mode;
- 330 or so District centres, called Branch Schools to which are attached over 2200 or more TV classes and work stations supported by an unlimited number of ground level TV classes located within local communities. This three-tier structure of district, county and community level networks support the teaching-learning transactions of the CRTVU network.

In the initial stages, the network operated through microwave links. From 1980, the network is using satellite-based communication to link the whole country.

The overall structure of the network is designed on the principle of vertical interdependence of a five-layer edifice. Till about 1986, the whole system functioned on the basis of centralised planning and control structures. There was uniformity in all spheres – planning, enrolment, curricula and syllabi, course materials, radio and TV lessons and examinations. The regime of liberalisation and economic reforms initiated in 1986 witnessed several changes in the management of the CRTVU network as well. The constituents of the network now function on the basis of a decentralised system with much greater initiative at the regional and local levels in the management of the network.

It would be interesting to look at the learning models established by the CRTVU network. The learning activities include:

- Independent study with the help of printed materials provided to every student;
- Learning with the help of audio-visual lessons in groups which are based at the workplaces or in local communities at the grassroots levels;
- Watching TV or video programmes or listening to radio lessons or audio tapes in groups at fixed venues;
- Compulsory face-to-face tutorials as prescribed for each course;
- Compulsory assignments and practical work.

TV classes are organised at different levels depending upon the size of enrolment, nature of courses and such other relevant factors. These include:

- Single independent TV classes organised at the grassroots level;
- Joint TV classes organised by several medium and small size units;
- TV classes organised by the local government departments;
- TV classes held by the Regional and Provincial Radio and Television networks;
- TV classes organised by local communities and social organisations.

By 1990, the Television universities had enrolled 1.83 million students, produced 1.25 million graduates and had 420,000 students on roll. In 1996 China reported that 1.4 million or 24.4% of its 5.8 million students in higher education were studying through distance education (H.D. Perraton, 2000; *Open and Distance Learning in the Developing World*, Routledge). According to Herraton, Chinese Television Universities are significantly different from other open universities in the world. Most students are enrolled full-time and receive a salary and benefits similar to those of other full-time workers. They attend classes in which they work from printed texts, but also follow broadcast lessons which are distributed terrestrially and also by satellite and made available through video cassettes. Learning is a classroom activity. The strength of the system is its use of centrally prepared materials and its capacity to expand university level education with more modest, and less costly, buildings than conventional universities (Perraton, *ibid*).

The University of the Air established in Japan in 1985 is another variation of the Chinese experiment. It uses radio, television and other technologies in its teaching-learning processes. Since radio and television are the principal media for its teaching, the University of the Air functions not as a teaching institution within the discipline of a university framework, but as a licensed broadcaster under the national broadcasting law. It was set up with the objective of: (a) providing working people and housewives with a chance for college education (b) providing an innovative and flexible system of higher education which is open to all high school graduates; and (c) cooperation with existing universities in making full use of the latest knowledge and the newest technology in order to offer a system of higher education that meets contemporary needs.

The University of the Air offers teaching through satellite-based video transmission which reaches the entire Japanese Archipelago. It has to be remembered that the inhabitants of many of these isolated islands would have had no access to higher education if it were not for the opportunities provided by the University of the Air. In order to reach its students, the University of the Air sets up study centres which are in fact video reception centres that also function as fully equipped video libraries. Countrywide over 70 such video centres disseminate the university's courses and programmes.

2.4.4 Networking Systems

This preliminary discussion on the organisation and structure of the distance education systems will not be complete without drawing attention to the more recent trends of distance teaching networks emerging in

different parts of the world. The emergence of these networks can be attributed to the following reasons:

- It is no longer possible for any single institution to satisfy all the learning needs of vastly heterogeneous learner groups;
- As learner groups get diversified, so do their learning needs and no single institution can respond to all these needs;
- Emerging globalisation of education provides a unified market; organisational ingenuity lies in the fact that resources and facilities at the providers' level are pooled to respond to these needs to cut costs and enlarge the market;
- Modern communication technologies offer the means to bring together a number of consumers and providers on a single platform.

The National Technological University (NTU) of the USA is one such network. A small central coordinating unit functions as the vehicle for accreditation and delivery of graduate programmes in engineering recorded on video tapes at over 30 engineering schools of the US universities. These video lessons are delivered by NTU at client sites which are generally large US firms. NTU's courses and services are bought by these firms for the benefit of their employees. The NTU's role in this enterprise is effectively to link a number of providers with a number of clients without having to create any significant infrastructure except the communication network.

Another example of a networked system is the Open Learning Foundation in the UK established in the early 1990s. At a time when the UK was considering a major expansion of higher education enrolment from 20% to 50% (of the relevant age group), and when it was evident that changes in learning techniques were significantly influencing teaching patterns (the impact of distance education methods), some 30 or so institutions of higher education/universities came together to create a network for providing flexible(open) learning materials and faculty training support to its members. The OLF does not enrol students, but it does help member institutions to raise their enrolment by pooling and sharing teaching resources and helping them maintain the highest quality in education.

Check Your Progress 2

- Note:** i) Space is given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with the one given at the end of the unit.

What is the main reason for the establishment of networking systems all over the world? (Answer in about 50 words).

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2.5 KEY ELEMENTS IN THE ORGANISATION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

As a student of distance education, you have already learnt a good deal about the foundations on which the whole body of knowledge of, and practices in, the field of distance education have been built. While discussing the specific aspects of distance education as a system, we may repeatedly have to come back to the theoretical foundation to ensure a better appreciation of the practical dimensions of its organisation. In the following sections of this Unit, we shall run through some of the essential elements that will influence the nature and type of the organisation that one has to design and develop to establish a sound system of distance education.

2.5.1 Openness

We have already discussed at some length the major features of open learning and how distance education is distinct from open learning. We also noted that nearly all open learning systems adopt distance education practices though the converse is not always true. From the organisational and functional points of view, the composite term 'open and distance learning' emphasises too much on learning, and too little on all other activities that guide and support the process of learning, normally known as teaching, training, etc. The 'open' nature of education is institutionalised by such policies and practices as open admission, freedom to choose the subjects for study, and pacing the studies according to the choice and convenience of the learners themselves. In other words, 'openness' implies flexibility in several requirements normally associated with formal, classroom-based education, namely, well defined prior learning attainments, fixed duration, pre-determined course combinations set by the institutions for most programmes of studies, and so on.

As most open learning systems adopt distance mode of delivery for their programmes and services, distance education planners and managers need to be fully aware of the principles on which open learning systems need to be structured and organised. Open learning systems are built around and defined by certain key principles, each of which is aimed at opening up particular features or aspects of learning for the benefit of learners. These are the principles that can effectively inform and transform educational practices. We shall now look at some of these key principles in the following sections.

2.5.2 Learner-centeredness

The whole principle of openness is structured around the idea that programmes of education and training are organised to respond to learner needs. Learner-centeredness is, therefore, one of the primary pre-requisites for openness. This principle, in essence, acknowledges that the learner should be the focus of the educational process and should be regarded as an active participant in an interactive process of curriculum transaction. It implies that education is not a transmission procedure in which there is a one-way flow of information from the source of knowledge to a passive learner. Education should, in reality, be a process that encourages independent and critical thinking; it should help learners develop problem-solving skills and competencies. Combined with independent and critical thinking, these skills empower learners to engage confidently and effectively with society. Learner-centred education also builds on learners' own

experiences, using them as the starting point and the basis for any structured learning process. While the academics and instructional design experts would take care of these features in designing and developing the learning materials and other learning resources, planners and support system designers too need to be fully aware of these requirements.

2.5.3 Autonomous Learning/Learner Independence

Open learning and distance education methodologies encourage learning as a resource in itself, and not simply as an end. In order to make teaching/learning processes effective in the open learning and distance education system, learners have to become independent and rely more on themselves than on their teachers, tutors or institutions. The separation between the teaching and learning process places the responsibility for learning on the learner rather than on the teacher. It is this learner maturity that good distance education systems foster. Academic performance depends as much on the proper design of courses as on the acquisition of efficient learning skills that ultimately develop learner independence.

2.5.4 Lifelong Learning

Openness and lifelong learning mutually support each other. Although the idea of lifelong learning was being talked about for some decades now, it was not until the emergence of the structured open learning systems that it turned out to be a workable proposition. If the concept of lifelong learning is central to openness, openness is the engine that drives lifelong learning. If learning has to continue throughout life, and not limited to childhood and adolescence, such learning should be of direct relevance to the needs and life experiences of the learners. Also implicit in this concept is the acknowledgement of the reality that all people are inevitably involved in the process of learning all their lives, and consequently, it would be useful and necessary to make structured educational opportunities available to them throughout their lives to enrich their learning experiences. It needs to be emphasised here that it is beyond the physical capacity of the conventional education systems to venture out with lifelong learning opportunities to all who seek such opportunities. Open learning systems are ideally suited to make this happen.

2.5.5 Flexibility in Learning

We have already talked about flexible learning systems in some detail in Unit1. That was mainly in the context of traditional systems incorporating flexibilities in their education delivery methods by integrating distance education methodologies with face-to-face education. But flexibility also involves, from the perspective of learners, availability of provisions and facilities to choose learning programmes that respond specifically to their needs, and to determine when and how they want to learn. Building these provisions in to the system at the design stage requires a critical understanding of learner styles and preferences and the competence to organise, manage and maintain complex data management systems effectively and efficiently.

2.5.6 Removing Barriers to Access

Open learning is all about removing all barriers in accessing educational opportunities. These barriers take a variety of forms and contexts. For some, it could be economic reason that forces them to opt out of education to join the work force early in life. For some others, it could be family life, requiring

them to stay at home to help parents or siblings; for many, it could be geographical isolation; quite a few might not make it in a competitive environment that determines entry into institutions of higher studies; and some could feel discriminated against for reasons of race, religion, gender, language, age or physical disability. Another barrier could be the prevailing practices that restrict entry into certain professions by denying access to learning and development of expertise. Whatever the reason, there are large numbers of people who encounter the problem of exclusion. Any attempt to establish open learning systems will have to acknowledge the existence of such barriers and make provisions to ensure their removal.

2.5.7 Prior Learning Experiences and Current Competencies

We have just mentioned the prevalence of practices that restrict access to educational opportunities. One of the most restrictive of practices is the insistence of prior educational attainments at a specified level, and standing. As we noted earlier, people generally learn all their lives, especially those at work. Practice creates knowledge and education is all about acquiring knowledge in structured forms. The knowledge base of people at work is generally sound though unstructured. Recognition of current competencies that potential learners possess as prior learning experience is a sure way to open up opportunities for people at work. These might include short courses that people at work often attend, unfinished formal education programmes and, of course, the learning at work. Systems need to be built to assess and accredit such experiences and competencies and establish their equivalence with appropriate stages in the curves of learning outcomes.

2.5.8 Learner Support

Efforts to open educational opportunities cannot become effective without the provision of adequate support to learners. Though we talked about learner autonomy and independence, it is possible that many new learners might lack the essential learning skills. Many among them might need relevant information; some might need advice and counselling; and most of them would need to know clearly what they are being offered and what the implications of their learning choices are. It might also involve provision of continuous support, advice and counselling throughout their stay with the programme. Generally, the type of support would include both face-to-face contact and other forms of communication (telephone, post, computer links, etc.) and encouragement of interaction between learners on both group and one-to-one basis. Provision of access to the necessary facilities including space in which learning activities and interaction between learners can take place, as well as access to computers, laboratories, and other resources that might be necessary requirements for the learning processes, are all essential components of the learner support system that contributes to making any distance education environment effective.

2.5.9 Expectation of Success

Open learning is not just about opening access only; it is also about providing people with a fair chance of success. It involves provision of an environment in which learners feel that they have the opportunity to complete learning programmes successfully, and also that the qualifications they earn have value in the employment market place. Educational providers can do this by consulting both employers and workers in their curriculum development process. Associated with this is the issue that the education offered is of the highest quality that can meet the expectations of

success created by opening learning opportunities. Accreditation of institutions, programmes and qualifications as well as the implementation of a range of measures that assure the quality of the teaching and learning processes can help build this confidence in potential learners.

2.5.10 Cost-effectiveness

Another critical principle of open learning, which draws together and expresses many of the tensions inherent in combining the various issues discussed earlier, is the one related to cost-effectiveness. Cost-effectiveness is distinct from cost-efficiency. The latter is about input-output relationship, that is, the product is the least costly relative to the input, while cost-effectiveness is about striking the optimal balance between cost, student numbers, and educational quality; a balance that will be entirely different for different educational contexts. In many ways, the concept of cost-effectiveness influences decisions on the choices for educational provision and represents the balancing act that favours open learning. Cost-effectiveness needs to be measured on an ongoing basis.

2.5.11 Working with Legacy Systems

The whole concept of open learning and distance education is significantly undermined if it is not located within the practical context of the existing education system and the ways in which it is providing opportunities for education. It is simply unrealistic to assume that open and distance learning systems can be put in place without exploring the strengths and weaknesses of what already exists and its impact on the strategies for incorporating elements of open and distance education systems. Commitment to working with what already exists, and an understanding of the need to improve legacy systems is implicit in any effort to expand educational opportunities through open learning and distance education. This commitment does not imply maintenance of status quo. The central thrust of innovations is to effect ongoing changes in what already exists, and decisions to implement new systems have to be taken with direct reference to their impact on existing systems.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Space is given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with the ones given at the end of the unit.

i) Why do you think learners need support in DE? (Answer in about 30 words).

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ii) What do you understand by working with legacy systems? (Answer in about 30 words).

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2.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit an attempt is made to discuss the basic principles of distance education and related technologies; distance learners needs and their problems. Organisation structure of DE institutions namely dual mode, single mode and networked systems have been dealt briefly. Key elements that are essential for any DE system such as – openness, learner centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility in learning, learner support, cost effectiveness etc. have been explained in brief.

2.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

Broadcasts over radio and television require that the learners are glued to their sets at the scheduled time. They have no opportunity to pause and absorb what is broadcast. Audio/Video cassettes on the other hand, are capable of being stopped, replayed and repeatedly listened to, or viewed, depending upon the inclinations of the learner and at any time of his/her choice.

Check Your Progress 2

No single institution in the world can cater to all the diverse client groups and their needs which are increasing continuously in a competitive global society. Pooling of resources and expertise of various institutions through networking systems with modern technologies would help to meet the growing needs of heterogeneous client groups.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Though DE promotes autonomous and independent learning, many learners particularly newly joined ones need support to choose their courses, to know the processes and rules, to understand the instructional design and related study skills etc. Hence learner support has to be provided by DE institutions.
- ii) Any innovation even the present case i.e. distance education institutions cannot be established and operated in isolation, without looking into the strength and weakness of existing educational institutions or legacy systems whether conventional or any other form. So that DE institutions can be strengthened alongwith existing institutions and bring in the expected change.