

Unit 25

Critical Issues in Open and Distance Learning

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Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- Understand the importance of ODL in bringing about equity and access in the field of higher education;
- Comprehend that ODL is an economic mode of providing education;
- Appreciate the contribution of technology ODL;
- Internalise the need for networking and research in ODL;
- Understand the need for maintaining quality in ODL; and
- Comprehend the apprehensions regarding ODL.

25.1 Introduction

In Unit 24 you have studied the social and philosophical foundations of ODL. In this unit we shall discuss certain critical issues that affect the functioning and growth of ODL systems. Earlier, distance education was considered to be an alternative to the conventional system of education that provides instructions in a face-to-face manner. However, now it is no longer merely an alternative or the second choice but a system in its own right that is gaining popularity as the first choice of thousands of people seeking higher education. Since it started in 1962 in India as correspondence education, it has covered a long way. Mainly due to the great degree of flexibility and openness attached to it, it is today popularly known as Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system. The popularity of this system lies in its ability to reach out to people from geographically different places, remote areas and to those with varying social and academic backgrounds. The thousands, who for a variety of reasons find themselves unable to enroll in institutions requiring physical presence of the learners find in the ODL system the answer to their problem.

The term 'Open' in ODL implies greater access to educational system, greater flexibility within the system and greater independence of the learner studying through this system. Although learners may or may not be at a distance from the institution offering ODL, the greatest advantage for the learners is that they need not be physically present in at institution. This is the main reason why ODL as a system is undergoing rapid growth and expansion. For ensuring that the growth of this system is not only rapid but also healthy, there are certain critical issues that need to be addressed appropriately. In this unit, we shall study some of the critical issues pertaining to ODL such as equity and access, cost effectiveness, use of technology, networking, quality, need for research and apprehensions as to the impact of the rapid growth of ODL.

These issues are considered to be critical because they have a direct bearing upon the healthy growth of the ODL system and its ability to achieve its goals.

25.2 Equity and Access

In this section we shall discuss first the role of ODL in bringing about equity in educational opportunities and thereafter about access to such opportunities. First let us discuss the need for equity and the means for achieving it. The system of ODL as we know, emerged mainly to equalize educational opportunities and thus democratise it. It was being increasingly felt, the world over that the conventional system of education can cater to the educational needs of only some of the aspirants seeking higher education while the rest are left out. At the same time it was accepted that education is the only means of ushering in social development and that more than the erstwhile important land, labour and capital, knowledge is becoming the driving force of the economies of the world. Therefore, for the progress of the individual and the prosperity of the nation, ODL is the only potential means of bringing in equity through educational opportunities for one and all. As we know, the barriers to admitting huge number of students in the conventional system are their limited infrastructure and the limited teaching force. But in the ODL these barriers can be easily overcome and the benefits of the infrastructure and the teaching force already available can be multiplied several times to serve a huge population of students simultaneously. Therefore, in a situation with ever escalating demand for enrolment along with the paucity of human and financial resources, one practical choice was to opt for open universities in order to provide higher education (Yadav and Panda 1999).

The rising popularity of the democratic form of governance all over the world during the last century resulted in national policies that led to the democratization of educational opportunities too. With the realization of the potential of distance education, state policies were framed in this regard, as a part of the national policies on education. It was felt that the needs pertaining to egalitarianism, modernization, rural development, continuing education for providing training to those in-service, economic means of providing education, etc. that are directly related to social development could be fulfilled to a great extent by resorting to ODL (Rumble 1986). These needs are mostly the needs of the nation and its masses. Hence, ODL while attempting to fulfill these needs purports to uplift the masses through equalizing educational opportunities.

There are people in our country who live in geographically remote and isolated places like difficult hilly terrains, remote border areas, isolated islands, etc. where people are deprived of proper educational facilities due to the lack of institutions offering higher education. Such people can benefit through the educational opportunities brought to their doorsteps by ODL. There are also many people who had to drop out of the formal system of education and discontinue their studies due to a number of reasons. They may find it too late or inconvenient to rejoin the conventional system of education with its too many rigidities. Distance education, which is more flexible, can be the choice of such people. Also the people, who are in-service and require professional development will constantly need to update their knowledge and skills, undergo orientation programmes and other sorts of training, with the demands placed by the changing economic and technological scenario and the ever-expanding knowledge base. ODL happens to be the viable means for providing training and fulfilling the educational needs of the in-service people.

Access to education

We have discussed that ODL is the means for bringing about equity in the field of education and making it accessible to a wide cross section of the people. However, accessibility in the true sense means not only the availability of

educational opportunities but also that following enrolment in the educational programmes the learners are not deterred in any way by the complications of learning from a distance. This requires adequate student support services. Moreover, the nature of the programmes should be such that they fulfill the divergent and dynamic needs of the learners.

Let us discuss the first issue, i.e., necessity to provide student support. It is well known that the dropout rate in distance education is quite high and there is also the allegation that quantity (huge enrolment) is not matched by quality of student support, leading to high attrition rates. It is not enough to provide educational packages to the adult learners, especially those who may be new learners. It is more important that they are provided with adequate student support so that they remain motivated and do not drop out. Student support in the form of adequate academic and non-academic counseling, tutoring, face to face contact programmes, wherever necessary opportunities for practical training, etc. should be an integral part of the educational programmes so as to improve the accessibility of available educational opportunity.

Now let us discuss the second issue, i.e., need for socially relevant programmes. It is important that through ODL, educational programmes that would fulfill the educational needs of the masses in the true sense are provided. Unlike the earlier practice which emphasized that educational programmes are mainly of academic value, ODL has to be treated as the channel that would provide education which is not only of academic value but is also need-based and caters to the diverse requirements of the learners. For instance, there are today pressing social problems like illiteracy, female foeticide, AIDS, etc., that require mass education programmes. There is also the need to provide educational programmes that would bring about rural development and women empowerment. Programmes for adult education, for training those in-service and for improving the functioning of those pursuing different occupations like farming, running poultries, etc. are required for mass education, continuing education and above all for making education a guarantor of social and economic development. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and several other open learning institutions of our country have educational programmes of academic value as well as those that can fulfill these requirements. Teacher education programmes that are training thousands of teachers at different levels of education every year, programmes for generating awareness about AIDS, and for empowerment of women, those catering to the needs of farmers, engineers, doctors, nurses, are some such programmes that have social relevance.

Accessibility has yet another connotation. While offering programmes it is to be seen if the technologies integrated keep the programme within the reach of the target group. Hence, while designing educational programmes, whether the expenses incurred for purchasing the hardware and the software is within the means of the learners needs to be considered. Also whether the infrastructure generally available permits their use has also to be seen. A course with softwares integrated into it that requires heavy financial investment by the learners can adversely affect accessibility.

Therefore it has to be ensured that ODL not only makes education accessible to many but also fulfills their diverse needs so as to bring about human resource development in diverse areas. Then only would the social development brought about by education spread out evenly throughout the country and not just in urban areas.

Reflection and Action 25.1

How can ODL democratize educational opportunities? How can ODL opportunities be made accessible in the true sense to the adult and in-service learners?

25.3 Cost Effectiveness

Since independence, with increasing demand for higher education, the conventional system of education has undergone great expansion. There has been tremendous increase in the number of institutions as well as in the enrolment at the tertiary level of education. Due to the priority accorded to elementary education, the government is finding it difficult to contribute adequately towards higher education. Therefore, it is becoming necessary for educational institutions to exercise economy without sacrificing the quality of education. There have been studies indicating that ODL is cost effective and in the long run it turns out to be the more economic means of providing education. As we know distance education can use the physical and human resources already available with it for increasing enrolment without incurring significant additional expenses.

There have been studies that reveal that the unit cost of teaching is lower in the distance mode than in the conventional mode. Greater number of learners can hence be educated by spending less amount of money through the distance mode. As underlined by Rumble, (1986) a cost analysis carried out in institutions offering distance education in different parts of the world reveals that they incur less cost per student, per graduate and per credit. Also when we consider the cost incurred in distance mode and conventional mode, the per capita expenditure for providing instructions is found to be lower in the distance mode. The average annual recurrent cost incurred for providing instruction to a learner of an open university has also been found to be significantly lower than that of a conventional one. It has been found that in open universities, following an investment of a certain amount of capital the recurring expenses get lower in the successive years if the enrolment figures can be maintained at a high level.

Education offered by ODL is cost effective mainly because it adopts a sort of industrial approach with mass production and distribution of learning material with the help of the infrastructure already established to a much larger student population that has been enrolled. The need for a bigger campus, buildings, and more classrooms and more teachers does not arise. Teachers are inbuilt in the pedagogically designed learning materials. There is thus substitution of teachers or labour of conventional systems with media i.e. capital in ODL systems. Also, a small group of teaching and non-teaching staff can operate the entire network of headquarter, regional centers, sub regional centers, study centers and programme centers with the help of information and communication technology.

In ODL the initial investment is quite heavy with expenses being incurred for establishing the infrastructure, which requires facilities for telecommunication through the electronic media and even satellites. Thereafter significant costs are incurred in designing, developing and launching academic programmes by producing learning materials in the print and electronic media. But it has been experienced that the initially high investment, is overcome by subsequent high enrolment mainly because reproduction of learning materials requires comparatively less cost. It has also been found that ODL systems become financially self-supporting earlier due to the regular income generated from fees, sale of forms, etc. and lower recurrent expenditure. In this regard certain instances have been cited by Ramanujam (2000). The Open University of Hong Kong became self-supporting within a span of just four years from its establishment. IGNOU, established in 1985, could meet 93.7% of its recurring expenditure through government funding in 1986-87. Within a decade it attained a financial position whereby it could meet 80% of its recurring expenditures from the fees paid and other sources and received Government grants only for the development of its infrastructure. Key to such financial self-sufficiency lies in the greater enrolment in ODL systems.

Now let us have a further discussion on the impact of enrolment on the various types of costs in ODL systems. We know that budgetary allocations are required for activities relating to academic functioning, for instance development of learning materials in the print form and software where a multimedia approach is adopted for imparting instruction. Related activities such as counseling, training and orienting staff for their professional development, conducting seminars, workshops, etc, undertaking research based activities, development and maintenance of the infrastructure, providing student support services, administrative functions, etc. also require budgetary allocations. According to Pillai and Nanda (1999), among the various operational costs in ODL, the fixed costs on development and production of self-learning materials do not change significantly with increase or decrease of enrolment. Variable costs on the other hand that include expenditure on student support services, delivery of learning materials, counseling, term end evaluation, etc. vary with enrolment. However, higher enrolment generates greater income and helps in recovering these costs and even in generating surplus funds for the institution. Therefore, having a large number of academic programmes, unable to attract significant student population, will enhance the unit cost.

We thus see that ODL is an economic option of providing education. Rumble (1986) has suggested certain guidelines that could further cut down costs. Some of them are discussed below:

- In ODL, a higher proportion of the costs such as those incurred for developing learning materials are in no way related to the student strength. Such developmental costs cannot be recovered if enrolment is low or for some reason if the courses are not allowed to run for a reasonable duration. Reducing expenses and managing costs being difficult in the distance education system, it is necessary to carry out a cost analysis of developing the courses, taking into account the fixed and variable costs. Instead of lowering the fixed costs that could affect the quality of the programmes, the individual elements of a course can be considered and some of them like the tutor marked assignments could be reduced. Also, instead of frequent replacement of old courses with new ones, the old ones should be allowed to run for a reasonable duration to save money.
- Choice of media is also important for reasons of economy. For instance, it has to be seen whether offering CDs would suffice or over the air transmission is also required for a particular topic.
- Purchasing the rights to adapt and use academic content developed by other institutions could also be economic.
- Appointing temporary staff for tutoring, counselling, etc., as and when required, can bring down costs.

Besides following these steps, it is necessary to base practices on principles of financial management such as subjecting proposals and plans to a cost benefit analysis, zero-based budgeting, etc. to efficiently manage the financial resources.

Reflection and Action 25.2

Explain any two ways that help in cutting down expenses in ODL systems.

important role in revolutionizing distance education in its present form. Since the last century, technology has developed a lot. There have been new inventions and their integration in different fields such as medicine, defence, etc. The field of distance education too depends heavily on technology today and its functioning is becoming more and more dependent on technology.

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Today almost every aspect of distance education is supported by technology. In the teaching - learning process, technology is becoming an integral part. Also the development of learning materials, their delivery through different media, evaluation of learners, and many other things related to the academic processes depend on technology. In distance education, technology is resorted to for preparation, maintenance, revision, storage and rapid exchange of academic and other types of documents and information. It goes without saying that administration becomes easier when it is supported by technology. In ODL since the enrolment figures are quite high therefore manually preparing and maintaining records is difficult.

In the field of distance education the faculty being involved in the process of material development needs to be provided with the necessary technological facilities and know-how for the preparation and transaction of the curriculum. In India, in most of the programmes offered through the distance mode, the print medium still happens to be the master medium and students rely on this medium the most. Later on usually in a supplementary mode, along with the print medium learning materials are provided through other media. Nowadays with the availability of facilities for desktop publishing with the help of computers, the process of preparing learning materials through the print medium is easier. Also the availability of the Internet in ODL institutions provides facilities such as online libraries, online encyclopedias, scope for discussions with experts, etc. that help the process of course preparation.

Word-processing the units, editing, preparing and inserting necessary illustrations are all aided by technology. Thereafter proof reading, for errors in spellings, grammar, computations, etc. are all aided by computers. Networking of the computers at the local and wider level facilitates teamwork through computer conferencing facilities. Soft copies unlike hard copies are also easy to exchange. Computerized typesetting can be used in conjunction with word processing systems (using direct electronic communication or optical scanners for both texts and graphics). Laser printers also aid in the preparation of camera-ready copy from discs on which texts and graphics have been merged (Rumble 1986).

ODL systems today impart instructions through multimedia approach. Apart from the print medium, audio and video cassettes, computer discs, telephone, programmes on radio and television, many of which are interactive in nature, satellite mediated teleconferencing, computer conferencing, etc. are used for providing instructions and counselling. Virtual universities with provisions for online learning are also becoming popular. In India IGNOU too offers online programmes in certain areas.

We thus see that technology is indispensable for the smooth and efficient

investment being made in a particular technology is worthwhile. Instead of succumbing to the pressure to go for the latest technology, those already available have to be put to full use. Heavy investment in technology can be justified only through its regular use. Softwares produced for the electronic media and teleconferencing if not used by the learners lead to waste of resources. The pedagogic value of a technology is also to be deliberated upon before it is integrated into a particular course. Therefore, investment in technology calls for adequate planning and budgeting. Another aspect that calls for caution in technology driven ODL systems is that today through the Internet many virtual universities are trying to attract students from all over the world. Such cross border provision of education requires monitoring for its operation, accreditation, quality, curriculum and other aspects. The student community has to be aware that foreign education providers should have credibility and abide by certain norms established by the Government of the recipient nation.

We thus see that technology is indispensable for the functioning of the ODL systems. Academic activities as well as administration are aided by technology. Moreover for the multimedia approach to imparting instruction, technology is used by the ODL systems. However, while integrating technology caution has to be exercised to avoid waste of financial and other resources.

Reflection and Action 25.3

What are the benefits of using technology for developing self-learning materials?

25.5 Networking and Collaboration

Nowadays it is being increasingly realised that an organisation cannot function successfully in isolation. It has to develop and nurture linkages with other institutions and thus be open to the environment in which it is operating. Interchange of academic and other material resources, information and human resources help in invigorating the organisations. Therefore, in the field of distance education too, ODL systems are developing linkages with each other to form a network. Such networking can be at the regional, national and even international level.

ODL systems are nowadays developing collaborations with not only each other but also with institutions of other types, such as institutions offering conventional education and organisations sharing common interests with the ODL system. An ODL system can enter into collaboration with an industrial organisation, or a hospital or a college that teaches through the conventional mode. Such collaborations are usually formed for specific purposes. For instance, an ODL system with educational programmes related to an industry can collaborate with that particular industry and the two can jointly function in certain areas. Then ODL systems can collaborate with hospitals and clinics for programmes on health. The participants are bound by certain rules and regulations that govern the collaboration and they stand to benefit from each other as a result of the collaboration. Networked collaborations today provide greater flexibility to the students who enjoy the option of learning from different institutions and interact with peers and teachers from these institutions. Learning thus gets a wider perspective.

As underlined by Rumble (1986), networking and consortia formation provide a forum for diverse participation and reduce territoriality and competition. In addition, there are several other benefits that are encouraging modern trends of network formation by open universities. In Europe there is a European Association of Distance Teaching Universities. In Asia there is the Asian Association of Open Universities. Such associations of open universities also

exist in the other parts of the world. The Commonwealth of Learning, an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning/distance education knowledge, resources and technologies too undertakes activities that encourage partnerships and networking for the sharing of resources and joint functioning. There are also multinational regional universities that promote regional cooperation in the field of distance education by linking their campuses and centers. In India, IGNOU and other open universities of the states are functioning together in certain areas and a network committee set up by the Coordination Council of IGNOU in 1988 identified broad areas of cooperation such as institutional development, material development and student support services (Singh 1999).

Networking, consortia and collaboration formation bring different institutions closer and there are several benefits such as the sharing of infrastructure, with buildings and equipments that may be pooled for joint use. Study centers and programme centers can also be used on a shared basis. There can also be the exchange of faculty members among different institutions offering ODL. Then programmes for the professional development of teachers, orientation programmes for counselors, tutors can also be held jointly. Procuring learning materials from one institution and then adapting/translating by others can also be done. All these steps not only help in economizing but also in accessing the best that is available in the different institutions. It thus widens the perspective of functioning. The learners have a greater choice of courses and facilities for credit transfer and student mobility brought about by networking add to the flexibility of the ODL system. The institutions as well as the learners both stand to gain through networking as there is access to a wider choice and resources.

Reflection and Action 25.4

State any two benefits of networking among ODL institutions. Collect information about the main objectives of any consortium that has been developed in the field of ODL

25.6 Quality Concerns

Today terms like quality assurance, quality control, total quality management, etc. earlier used in the field of industries are gaining popularity in the field of education. It has been realised that as with goods and other different services, in the field of education too quality is important and has to be maintained. Earlier providers of educational services often considered students to be their beneficiaries who were supposed to remain obliged to them for the services received. But today, with rising cost of higher education and the growing importance of the need for professionalism in every field, it is being felt that students too, like consumers, have certain rights and expectations that have to be fulfilled to ensure the growth of the organisation. In this regard it has been pointed out by Tait, (1997) that students are no longer in a subservient position, accepting poor services or care from the teachers and administrators. Thus there is widespread concern regarding the quality of education provided by educational organizations.

What does the term quality mean? Quality has been defined by Harvey and Green (quoted by Mohan 1999) as being synonymous with several things such as being exceptional or of strikingly higher levels of perfection with consistency, being a well designed process with zero defects, having fitness of purpose indicating that the institution is capable of fulfilling the stated objectives, providing value for money that translates to accountability and satisfies the needs of the customer, etc. From this definition we do get an idea about the concept of quality but at the same time it has to be noted that in the field of education unlike in industries, it is difficult to develop specific and

measurable criteria for assessing quality since human beings and not goods and services are the focal elements of educational institutions. Nevertheless in the field of distance education, which adopts an industrialized approach with mass production of learning materials, transportation, need for timely delivery of the right type of materials, criteria for assessing the quality of the educational services can be developed.

Quality is to be maintained in every aspect of the functioning of institutions offering distance education. Development of learning materials and as we have discussed earlier, their production, timely despatch and delivery, student support services, evaluation, etc, are the major areas that are required to maintain quality. The concerns regarding quality are not merely to satisfy the users or the beneficiaries of the educational institutions but also to continuously improve the functioning of the institution. In the industrial sector quality is often maintained by checking the finished goods but in the field of education, the entire process is important because there is no such well-defined finished product. Therefore, quality assurance, which takes care of the entire process rather than quality control that is more concerned with the finished goods, is more important in the field of education.

Quality assurance, is important in the field of education but it all the more so in the field of distance education. Why is it so? In several countries, distance education is yet to fully establish its credentials as an educational system, which is at par with the conventional system. Still there are questions as to its credibility and it is often considered to be the second choice of learners. Therefore, any compromise regarding quality would aggravate such doubts. Therefore, practices related to quality assurance are important in distance education institutions. Moreover there is another issue, which happens to be related to the target group of distance education programmes. The target group comprises learners from heterogeneous socio- academic backgrounds and could be highly dispersed not only with in the country but also internationally. They are adults and many of them are in-service. Therefore they are mature enough to be aware of their rights and assert them. They may not hesitate to seek legal recourse if they feel that they have not got the full value for their money. Also study materials of distance education programmes reach far and wide and are subject to much greater and wider scrutiny by adult learners.

Let us try to explain certain elements of the definition of quality that we have given earlier. When we say that quality refers to the fulfillment of the intended purpose, in the ODL system, it can be equated to the students graduating being in demand in the fields of further education and jobs and also the educational needs of those enrolling are fulfilled. Value for money can refer to the students being satisfied with the services provided to them as well as the programmes being quality ones and getting popular following the investment made in developing them. But can we emulate the standards maintained in the reputed institutions at the national or international level? Bo (1977) has rightly pointed out in this regard that quality assessment system that has been adopted by one institution cannot be transported to another because of the varied socio cultural and organizational differences. Again standards are not fixed but dynamic and this has to be taken into account. Then maintaining consistency in the standards achieved is also a challenge in ODL and calls for dedicated efforts on a continuous basis.

Reflection and Action 25.5

Why are concerns regarding quality all the more important in ODL?

John Daniel (quoted by Ramanujam 2000) has highlighted the main aspects within distance education that demand quality. Let us discuss some of these aspects:

Learning materials: In distance education the learning materials produced are very important as they substitute the teachers and in places without the facilities of libraries and other such resources are the only printed materials available for studying. Therefore the quality of the content in terms of its richness, adequateness and pedagogy is important. In this respect Koul (1999) has also specifically underlined that quality is to be maintained in the designing and development of the course materials. Quality needs to be assured in every step in the academic inputs, in editing, formatting, proof reading, preparing camera ready copies, quality of paper, print, illustrations, timely despatch of materials, adherence to schedules handling assignments, counselling services, revising the courses, etc.

Student Support Services :It has been found that ODL systems have greater number of dropouts than the conventional system. To check this it is necessary to improve the quality of the student support services so that the morale of the distance learners is maintained.

Logistics: Quality of the logistics is required so as to ensure the proper delivery of the learning materials to the widely dispersed student population.

Research base: A sound research base is to be maintained to use it for future developmental activities of the institution. For instance, a record of the feedback collected on a continuous basis helps during the revision of courses.

With the growing demands for higher education there has been mushrooming of institutions offering ODL and many directorates with thousands enrolling in them have been opened in conventional educational institutions. However it is alleged that in spite of the huge funds collected through them they are accorded neither the status nor the recognition they deserve. Consequently the quality of the learning materials and student support system both suffer. Hence the drop out rate is also quite high. In some of these directorates there have been efforts towards revamping the delivery system, student support services and revising the course materials. Still there is a concern that there are hardly any integrated efforts that are essential for total quality management. Nowadays for maintaining quality in distance education, the Commonwealth of Learning, the University Grants Commission (UGC) and mainly the Distance Education Council (DEC) are functioning actively (Manohar 1999). It is therefore, important to ensure through quality assessment measures that the allegation that ODL caters to quantity at the cost of quality does not arise.

Reflection and Action 25.6

Go through the provisions of GATS that pertain to the educational services and consider the impact of foreign education on local culture. Also deliberate upon whether education through ODL is the only threat to the local culture or if cultural exchange is an ongoing process and is caused by other agencies too.

25.7 Research in ODL Systems

Institutions offering higher education have two main functions - knowledge dissemination and knowledge generation. Educational institution at the tertiary level especially universities under the conventional system of education are actively involved in carrying out research work. For adding to the corpus of existing knowledge, testing theories and principles developed earlier under new circumstances, finding solutions to the problems existing in the concerned field are some of the major objectives for carrying out research work. In distance education institutions, apart from research in the disciplines taught, that in the area of distance education is indispensable for strengthening the system since it is a relatively new area, which is still developing. There are several areas in this field that need in-depth study to sort out the pressing problems.

We shall now discuss some of the areas that merit research in the field of distance education:

Learners: The socio- economic and academic background of students who enroll in distance education, their learning styles, constraints, level of motivation, etc.

Educational programmes: Pedagogic aspect of the content, integration of technology, etc.

Media: Use and integration of different types of media in the educational programmes so as to have a multimedia approach, use of media by learners, etc.

Enhancing cost effectiveness: Studying the expenses incurred in different areas, devising means to make the system cost effective and making optimum use of funds.

Student support services: Improving student support services not only for the learners who are enrolled but also for those who have graduated for their placement.

Assessing achievement: Assessing achievement of those graduating as far as their further education and placement are concerned.

Unlike some of the open universities of the western world where research is a regular activity, in the open universities of India it is yet to gather momentum. Therefore, it is necessary for these institutions to formulate definite and comprehensive policies so as to encourage and regulate research work. Research in distance education institutions as in others can involve both the qualitative as well as the quantitative methods. Therefore, experimental studies, historical studies and descriptive studies such as case studies, surveys, causal correlation studies, etc. can be carried out. There have been some descriptive studies such as surveys and some empirical studies too but it is still not enough as a development oriented exercise (Koul quoted by Ramanujam, 2000). As research is an important tool for the development of the discipline as well as the system, it has to be taken up earnestly in distance education institutions.

Reflection and Action 25.7

Why is system-based research important in ODL systems?

25.8 Apprehensions Regarding ODL

We have been discussing in this unit some of the critical issues in ODL. Let us also discuss some of the apprehensions regarding ODL such as the commercialisation of education through ODL by certain institutions and the cultural impact of ODL from abroad.

a) Commercialisation of Education

The ODL system is today indisputably the means of democratizing educational opportunities. One of the reasons for this is its ability to enroll huge numbers simultaneously. But today not all such institutions operate with the altruistic motive of bringing about equity in the field of education. There are instances when the potential to enroll huge numbers has been grossly misutilized to earn money through the fees collected. For instance, in India teacher education programmes through the distance mode were once used to enroll a huge number of learners but these institutions possessed neither the necessary infrastructure nor the student support required. This was adversely affecting the quality of education provided. The prime motive of these institutions appeared to be to make financial gains. This continued till the National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE) clamped down on such institutions.

As per certain estimates, the business of education the world over runs into trillions of dollars. More and more ODL providers are joining the fray. It is seen that huge profits earned through ventures in the field of distance education are bringing entrepreneurs from the western world to the developing nations with huge student population eager to possess degrees from abroad. There is the emergence of a global market where education especially that provided through the distance mode is being traded. There is the allegation that the claims of education anywhere, anytime, is becoming like edibles that are prepackaged and delivered at home by the multinational companies. The prepackaged educational services are produced through mass production techniques, whereby the students become the customers and the teachers the workers. Hence, it is felt by some people that more than altruism, profiteering is the motive of some ODL institutions. According to Greville (2000) the commercial approach of some ODL institutions with less concerns for student support is responsible for the high dropout rate.

As we know several distance education institutions are adopting a multinational approach in providing educational services. This trend is further facilitated by the General Agreement in Trade and Services (GATS). It is feared that as in goods and other services, the developing nations would find it difficult to compete with the developed nations because of their inadequate infrastructure and poor economic development and the agreements for globalising educational services may not work in their favour. The educational scenario of these countries would then be captured by the technologically advanced developed countries and their educational services would thus flood the markets of the developing world.

It is therefore necessary to check such commercial motives and formulate norms to regulate the operation of ODL institutions. In India the DEC, UGC, NCTE and other professional educational councils are monitoring distance education institutions to check profiteering and commercialisation.

b) Cultural Impact of ODL

As we have discussed earlier, owing to globalisation and agreements like GATS, educational services including ODL from across jurisdictional boundaries are expected to enjoy steady growth in coming years. The former would be the provider while the latter would mainly be the receivers. We know that education is the means of preserving and transmitting culture. Therefore, there is an apprehension that educational services from abroad would bring along with them, the cultural influence of the service providers. If there is one-way traffic of education from the technically and financially rich western countries towards the developing nations, there could be cultural hegemony whereby the western culture would dominate that of the developing world, resulting in a new kind of imperialism-neocolonialism. In case there is exchange of educational services among different nations, there would be a cultural homogenisation with the loss of the richness and uniqueness of different cultures. It is also feared that the curriculum designed by foreign nationals may not reflect the ethos, values, traditions and aspirations of the local people.

The apprehension regarding the cultural influence of ODL is, however, only for ODL from abroad. Because of the several benefits of ODL, especially that it allows learners to access the best educational services from any part of the world coupled with the fact that globalisation as well as ODL from abroad cannot be wished away, a pragmatic view has to be adopted. ODL services should not weaken national initiatives and their accreditation, entry and operation should be regulated by norms prepared by the government for foreign education providers. If necessary the curriculum may also be adapted as per the local needs. It is to be ensured that the curriculum takes adequate care to preserve and transmit the local culture and is sensitive towards it.

Reflection and Action 25.8

How can ODL bring about cultural hegemony? Do you think ODL can be misused for commercialising education? Why?

25.9 Conclusion

In the modern world, education is the key to allround progress. In the globalised economy only knowledge-based societies can thrive. Hence, it is necessary to ensure that education reaches one and all. The conventional system, because of its inherent rigidities and limitations cannot take education to one and all. Hence, ODL is the only recourse which can overcome all barriers imposed by geographic isolation, social problems, etc. For ODL to achieve its goals there are certain critical issues that merit our attention. These issues, if adequately addressed, can help the ODL system in the attainment of the goals that have been set. The issues discussed here are equity and access to educational opportunities through ODL, cost effectiveness in ODL, integration of technology that may facilitate the overall functioning of the ODL institutions, networking and collaborations that facilitate the sharing of material and human resources quality concerns of distance education, research in ODL, and apprehensions regarding the impact of ODL.

25.10 Further Reading

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