CHALLENGES TO HIGHER EDUCATION AND ROLE OF OPEN UNIVERSITY: WOMEN EDUCATION & EMPOWERMENT

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Received on 12 January 2019
Accepted on 20 April 2019

Abstract

Higher Education is a powerful tool for social, political and economic change of any country. In a country like India with its large population, human resource development should be assigned a key role in the development strategy which has five energizers such as Health and Nutrition, Environment, Employment, Political and Economic freedom and the most important is Education. It contributes largely to the quality of the people through the country’s Economic development especially to the Empowerment of women & weaker section. The focus of this paper is on improving the quality of higher education system by knowing & overcoming the quality issues & challenges in front of Open University & Distance Learning institution to meet the demands of the society (Specially of Women & Weaker Section). Total quality management in higher education is a multidimensional concept. Quality of higher education & specially Open University & Distance educational institutions depends on the quality of academic staff, infrastructure, facilities & academic environment. Quality can be achieved by introducing, Monitoring or Evaluation process continuously. This paper attempts to study the challenges and quality issue in the way of imparting Higher Education to the Women through Open Universities & Distance Learning Programs.

Keywords: IOU (Indian Open University), IGNOU

DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In India we have built a vast higher educational system. In 1950-51, there were 27 universities and 696 colleges with an enrolment of 3.68 lakh students and teaching faculties of 19,047. Within a span of 60 years the rate of growth has been very impressive. In 2011-12 there were 634 universities including deemed universities and 33,023 colleges.
The system of Higher Education in our country is being put to test. In view of the emergence of an era of global consciousness, it is imperative to face the new challenges by the higher educational institutions by identifying the challenges and then respond correctly.

CHALLENGES TO HIGHER EDUCATION

• Supply of competent manpower with research and development support

In the regime of New Industrial Policy and Globalisation of Indian Economy, the level of skills is going to be high. Industries need to have a workforce having a scientific bent of mind, scientific temper and skill to maintain high quality of productivity. They need the help of higher educational institutions to respond effectively to meet the emerging challenges to train man and women of caliber and competence of world standards and provide the needed research and development capability.

• Making of provision to meet the deficit Resources

Due to poor economic condition of the country, the Govt. of India is not in a position to meet the financial need of the educational sector particularly at the higher educational level. Therefore, it is necessary that the universities and other institutes of higher learning have to take up measures for resources generation to meet their financial deficit without govt. intervention.

• Dissemination of Value Education

At present there is a considerable fall in the moral, social, ethical and national values both in personal and public life. In this context higher education has the added responsibility to strengthen the value system in the society.

• Undertaking of International Interaction, Collaboration and Consultancy Activities

In the present day scenario due to globalisation, interaction and interdependence are the two major tools to be pronounced in the context of research crunch situation. The institutes of higher education and research must be or need to interact with the outside world for national development.

• Building up Linkages

It is the attention drawing challenge in the field of higher education. It is to build up strong linkages between universities, industries and other national research and development labs. Its sole aim is to share and maximum use of resources, development of indigenous technology, adoption imported technology to meet global competition, enriching teaching and research in universities and fund generation. If this linkage will be developed then the system of higher education will be more purposeful.

• Quality vs. Quantity

There is a general feeling in India that the quality of education imparted at the higher level of education is unsatisfactory and the standard is deteriorating day by day. Due to this there is a large gap between students of national and international standards. In order to eradicate these maladies the higher educational institutions need to be improved in terms of their neither quality nor quantity.

• Cost Effectiveness

A main constraint in the conventional system of education has been lack of flexibility and low productivity. It means whether university research resources are being used effectively? Practically not. For this while allocating funds for research, the students who have really made some contribution to knowledge can be taken care of. As a result a greater cost-effectiveness should be focused on.
To meet all these challenges, the higher educational system in India should be prepared to respond adequately to cope up with the changed situation. An open university can be of a great help to meet all these challenges of higher education if given a chance. Except the above mention Challenges there are few common challenges that are given below

- Infrastructure.
- Availability of Modern/ Latest Technologies.
- Trained and Skilled Human Resources.
- Conducive Environment for Teaching and Learning.
- Commencement of Timely Teaching Sessions.
- Requirement of proper Consolidatory duration.
- Shortage of staff and proper funding.
- Too much of paper work.
- Proper framing and Implementation of the Policies.
- Academic Structure & Curriculum.
- Quality improvement Programmes for Teachers.
- Effective feedback and monitoring system.

**ROLE OF OPEN UNIVERSITY**

From the above discussion we came to know that the conventional higher educational institutes have not been an effective means to equalize educational opportunities, are rigid and most of the time irrelevant to the needs of the learners. The need therefore arises that the closed educational system has to be made open. This is possible only through the open education with distance teaching. For this the Open University scheme is expected to meet the requirements of large section of people hunting for knowledge.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF OPEN UNIVERSITY**

In operational terms the essence of open learning lies in its being imparted and received in a non-institutional setting, making use of multi-media packages of distance education like print materials, audio and video cassettes, Radio and T.V. programmes, etc. and supplementing this packaged programme by contact programmes. So open learning system is distinct from the rigidly formal traditional institutional system in respect of age, educational background, curriculum instructional packages and evaluation methods.

The Open University system has been imitated in order to augment opportunities for higher education and as an instrument of democratising education.

The conventional attraction for degrees and the desire of many a secondary certificate holder to acquire further qualifications while in employment or working for employment led to the demand and provision of external degree course. The very idea of Open University may be reckoned to have its beginning with the establishment of the Open University in U.K. in the year 1969.


**OBJECTIVES**

- To facilitate by providing equal opportunities of education to citizen of India including the disadvantaged groups Weaker Section of Society & Women.
- To provide education and training as well as orientation of various segments of the population to achieve self-employment managerial skills.
To build up the capabilities of educational functionaries for achieving UEE and to make provision for substandard demand for Secondary education.

To provide diversified academic and vocational education or good quality at Secondary level and beyond to meet the emerging needs for personal, social and academic growth.

To provide wider access to higher education to a large population and maintain high quality of education on a part-time or own-time basis.

TARGET GROUPS

- Those that could not go for higher education at an early stage but wish to do something about their higher education now.
- Dropouts who want to have a second chance for higher Education.
- Those who want to make their education a lifelong affair.
- Housewives and other groups of people who want to pursue their studies without disturbing their normal life.

MERITS OF OPEN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

- Supplement the efforts of traditional system.
- Expand Geographical access to Education.
- Expand the capacity for Education in new areas.
- Education in Natural Environment.
- Flexibility.
- High Potential for In-service Education.
- New Methods of Instruction.
- Student Support Services.

The Open University is not aimed at replacing the existing conventional university system. It aimed at providing an alternative form of education to widen educational opportunities to those who have been denied access to education for reasons of eco- or socio consideration or for family reasons by using modern technology. It caters to the need of every individual pupil.

But despite of all above mention objectives & merits of OU’s. The present Scenario of Open Learning & Distance Education has failed to attain complete success in imparting education to women specially of rural or backword region of our nation. To seek the attention of policy makers, Administrators or Educationist on this alarming aspect of Open Learning. I want to share my findings as I with my colleagues done the ground survey of Mewat Region to take an account of the Practical deformities and access of open universities to the women.

Challenges faced by Women Learners to attain higher education through OU are underlying.

While the general mission of the Open University is to enhance adults' access to education, special mission is to promote the education of women, because their only hope of attaining higher education is by the distance mode. Despite of various efforts to attract female students, the extent of women’s participation in Conventional education is limited. As a Vibrant Citizen or Faculty member of Education College. I have been concerned with the low participation rates for women. I believe that unless the Indian Open University fully understands the underlying causes of women's low enrollment, inadequate participation, and unacceptable completion rates, it will be unable to adjust its planning, managerial, and administrative procedures to provide appropriate learning opportunities for women.

During the last two years when I travelled to various regional and local study centers of Rural & Backword Region of our Country, Specially of Mewat District and its adjoining region of both Haryana & Rajasthan, where Minority Classes are residing in large number. I met with over 120 women’s students and non students and listened to and recorded their Problems. What I heard has
helped me to understand the extent of the challenge for the IOU/D-Learning Programs in its goal to enhance and sustain women's access and academic success.

The Women's Real Experiences/Problems

The Problems I heard dealt directly with the everyday realities of the female students' lives. Many had to overcome *time constraints, cultural expectations, and financial obstacles* regarding their higher education. I discuss each in turn.

**Time constraints**

All the time I feel tired due to too much work. If I try to study, I feel sleepy. If I force myself to study, I find myself reading with very little understanding because the brain and the body are tired. They need some rest, but I cannot rest because at 5:30 in the morning I required to be up again to prepare for the family breakfast and go to a full day's routine work.

A fourth-year student told me that since she enrolled with the IGNOU Study Center, she was compelled to study in the brief periods between her chores and other demands in her life. This tired her and was a contributing factor to her poor academic performance. She protested that in addition to her tight family and work schedules, she had to be away approximately 85 days per year to attend compulsory study activities at the regional center. While away from her family and employment, she had to pay for transportation, food, accommodation, and health care. She also had to make trips to libraries for books and journals and to the local study center to find course colleagues and part-time tutors to discuss the difficult parts of her studies.

A fourth-year student in law complained that many students did not receive their study materials, yet the IOU demanded that they pay full fees. She commented on the OU’s “lopsided” service provision saying, “This is one-way traffic!” Many other women told similar stories about the difficulties of obtaining study materials on time and then having enough time at home to study. They saw these time problems as barriers that discouraged many women from even enrolling with the OU, & Distance Learning Centers explaining that a major reason why most enrolled women abandoned their studies was their inability to meet the logistical demands placed on them by the OU system.

When I asked about the possible use of alternative learning technologies, one woman suggested that her most pressing need was not for learning technologies, but for other technologies such as washing machines, cookers, and vacuum cleaners, which could help shorten the time she spent on housework and increase the time she needed for studying. Her answer applies to many female students facing similar situations.

These factors have serious implications for the IOU. First is the time stressed position of the woman who is entirely responsible for all household tasks. In many situations, not only does she run the household, hold a full time job, and look after the children, but she is also responsible for small farming projects such as raising chickens or cows or tilling gardens and fields to augment her income. Many women who seek Distance & Open learning courses see a university degree as a means to improve their economic status.

**Cultural expectations or Bondages**

If the husbands would allow their wives freedom to make decisions for their own lives and act on them, many women would be studying with the Distance & Open University Centers by combining their multiple roles in whatever circumstances are possible in their families.

Many stories convinced me of the accuracy of this statement from a young female would be student. I first met this young schoolteacher with her daughter when I visited her regional center. On my second visit some months later, I learned that although she had registered with the Regional Centers of the Open University and paid the initial sum of 60 per cent of the total fees, she had failed to start
her studies because her husband refused to give her permission. When I tried to get him to change his mind he told me, “At the moment she has so many other family responsibilities, and if she starts now there will be nobody to take care of the family.” He further argued that if she began studies, she would concentrate on them and have no time to think about family matters. At another center I heard from a primary school teacher who was married with five children. She complained that her efforts to be a student had been stifled after only six months of struggle. Her husband prevented her from doing anything on weekends other than take care of family responsibilities: the children, the cows, the farm, receiving visitors, and visiting.

Male Dominated Family System

One regional director told me of cases where the men picked up their wives' study materials and did not allow them to participate in the learning activities. Any attempt to negotiate with a husband to allow his wife to participate in the activities generally led to termination of the wife's studies.

Traditional cultures and some religious practices in Their Race empower men (husbands, fathers, brothers, grandfathers, or uncles) to control female relatives in all aspects of their lives. Women (wives, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, or aunts) are not allowed to take any action or make any final decision that might affect their lives or those of others, including other women or children in their families. Through culture and socialization, most women are taught that husbands and other men will not participate in any tasks or roles usually ascribed to women. Many women thus unquestioningly carry out all the unpaid family work, their paid work in employment, and other life tasks such as studying. Without their husbands' permission they cannot use their own money to enroll with the Regional Study Center. Even with changes in the law the men, especially in rural areas, tend to follow the traditional power structure.

The stories the women Specially of Rural Region of India indicate that the IOU has not yet provided a flexible and convenient distance education system suitable for women who live under this culture of male domination. The women have to travel to the centers, which are in towns usually some distance from their homes. But for cultural and religious reasons, rented accommodations (guest houses or hotels) in towns are not considered respectable places for women to stay without their spouses. Social mores claim this is for the women's own safety and protection. In fact it enables the men to exercise their authoritative power over the women by denying them permission to participate or spend funds on rented accommodation and by requiring them to be unquestioningly obedient to male family members.

An even more sensitive issue is that when in the centers, the women have to interact often and over several days with their tutors (often male) and study with male students. This situation has prevented many women from enrolling because their husbands will not allow them to participate under such conditions. Nor can the women easily ask permission of their husbands as they themselves understand the culture and abide by its traditional restrictions. Additional constraints on choices for women students may arise in the workplace: female employees need to negotiate frequent absences from work, but many women have told me that their male bosses demand “personal” favors as a condition to giving permission for the absence. Complying with such demands could severely damage both their marriages and their health.

Taking examinations and tests presents further logistical challenges to Open University Enrolled women. The long distances, the uncertain state of the country's transportation system, and the pressure to take the least time possible away from family and work cause difficulty for many women. At present a student who misses the tests must wait to write supplementary examinations (sometimes up to three months). This delays a woman's ongoing studies or may extinguish her motivation to continue her education.
Financial obstacles

A young woman had wanted to become an OU student, but she could not meet the required 60 per cent of the annual fee that must be paid before students receive any study materials. The annual fee is much more than they can save from their small household moneymaking projects. And Mostly the Rural Women were not economically self reliant in our Country. Many told me that their difficulties in understanding the course materials were eclipsed by their continual need for enough money to continue their studies. Such complex problems unless the whole sociocultural system is changed.

Suggestions for Change

• Although the difficulties appear were huge & Complex, we need to attempt changes if we are to encourage more women students. I identify three areas where we might make changes: a review of the Open University’s & Regional Study Center’s teaching and learning system; a re-examination of the financial requirements; and a reassessment of the OU’s position with regard to female students.
• To ensure that the pedagogical system in use at IOU is supportive of women’s circumstances.
• To ensure the timely availability of reference materials, tutorials and examinations, and the design of the course materials.
• Women need to be made aware of the time requirements
• To ensure that the study materials are delivered before the course begins to give the women maximum time for study.
• Frequent visits & Inspection of study centers were to be made for tutoring and regional centers for examinations and practical needs to be reassessed
• Course designers need to be made aware that female learners do not have easy and frequent access to libraries or the freedom or resources to travel to study centers.
• To provide woman friendly, clean, and safe hostel accommodation in the regional centers, which would help more women to gain access to OU programs?
• To involve more women in its planning and administration to ensure that decisions include gender analysis.
• To enhance the learning opportunities of women students.

CONCLUSION

We can conclude that the above discussed challenges in the way of imparting higher education to women through open university & distance education institutions can be overcome by adopting the above mentioned suggestion, but the utmost important thing is that any attempt or effort can be succeed only when we work as whole, with dedication and devotion. Resources are abundant but its the willpower of a person or nation, who assures judicious use of them. And this willpower can be attained through valued, qualitative and Indigenous Education. Which has the capability of mending adequate social mentality, which is required to attain the ultimate aim of education?

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