

Date: 2nd November, 2007

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC) believes that a radical reform of the system of open and distance education (ODE) is imperative to achieve the objectives of expansion, inclusion and excellence in higher education. The significance is obvious. For one, more than one-fifth of the students enrolled in higher education are in the ODE stream. For another, ODE has an enormous potential to spread higher education opportunities beyond the brick and mortar world. But there are reasons for concern. First, the quality of higher education provided in large segments of ODE, particularly in correspondence courses in universities, leaves much to be desired. Second, it is not sufficiently recognised that ODE provides educational opportunities not only to those who discontinue formal education on account of economic or social compulsions, but also to young school leavers who are simply unable to secure admission in the formal stream at universities. It is time to address these problems. There is a clear need to improve the quality of ODE and to make it more appropriate to the needs of society. It is just as important to expand opportunities in higher education through the use of technology in ODE. It would not be possible to attain a gross enrolment ratio of 15 percent by 2015 without a massive expansion in ODE. In this endeavour, we must not forget that ODE is seen as inferior to conventional classroom learning. This perception, and the reality, both need change. We must realise that ODE is not simply a mode of educational delivery; but an integrated discipline engaged in the creation of knowledge.

In light of the above, we constituted a Working Group composed of distinguished experts in this field, chaired by Prof. Ram Takwale, former vice-chancellor, IGNOU. The names of the members of the working group are listed in the annexure. Based on inputs provided by the working group and consultations with stakeholders, we recommend the following reforms:

1. Create a national ICT infrastructure for networking ODE institutions: A national information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure must be set up through government support for networking all ODE institutions. In this regard, we recommend that the digital broadband Knowledge Network proposed by NKC should have provision for interconnecting the major ODE institutions and their study centres in the first phase itself. Eventually, minimum connectivity of 2 mbps must be extended to the study centres of all ODE institutions. A national ICT backbone would enhance access and e-governance in ODE, and enable the dissemination of knowledge across all modes, that is, print, audio-visual and internet based multimedia.

2. Set up a National Education Foundation to develop web-based common open resources: A National Educational Foundation with a one-time infusion of adequate funds must be established to develop a web-based repository of high quality educational resources. Open educational resources (OER) must be created online through a collaborative process, pooling in the efforts and expertise of all major institutions of higher education. The OER repository would supply pedagogical software for various programs run through ODE and be available for utilization by all ODE institutions. An enabling legal framework that would allow unrestricted access without compromising intellectual authorship must be devised for this purpose.

3. Establish a credit bank to effect transition to a course credit system: Transition to a course credit system must be carried out to enable the learner to undertake programs across all ODE institutions and disciplines. As a part of this process, an autonomous credit bank must be established for storing and filing credits acquired by every learner. In addition, admission criteria and the system of credits should be as flexible and adaptable as possible. Provisions must be made for multiple entry points and exit points, a flexible time-table and assessment mechanisms for supporting life-long learning.

4. Establish a National Education Testing Service for assessing ODE students: An autonomous National Education Testing Service (NETS) must be established through legislation and invested with functional powers and responsibility for assessing all potential graduates in ODE. This unified examination system would test the learners' ability to perform intellectual and practical tasks. All courses, degrees and activities offered through ODE should be certified through this system.

5. Facilitate convergence with conventional universities: The lack of convergence between programs run by open universities and correspondence courses offered by the distance education wings of conventional educational institutions is a cause of great concern. Rather than function as parallel systems at odds with each other, open universities must forge organizational alignments with conventional universities geared towards common goals and strategies. They must engage each other in the collaborative creation of pedagogical resources via OER and its delivery along shared modes. Programs and courses offered by each should be subject to the same stringent norms of quality assurance. This implies that the distance education departments operating within conventional universities must be encouraged to put correspondence courses through the NETS for purposes of assessment. At the same time, universities must also ensure that their distance education programs are not stand-alone, but should benefit from regular interaction with university departments in concerned disciplines. The aim of such convergence is to eventually enable learners to move freely from one system to the other.

6. Set up a Research Foundation to support research activity in ODE: An autonomous and well-endowed Research Foundation must be established to commission and facilitate multidimensional and multidisciplinary research in ODE. In addition, a favourable environment for research must be created by setting up infrastructure like libraries, digital databases and online journals, holding regular workshops and seminars, granting sabbatical leave for undertaking research, establishing a peer reviewed journal to provide a platform for publication for scholars, and other such measures. A robust research environment is essential to accord ODE value as a discipline, as opposed to it being consigned to a 'mode'

7. Overhaul training programs for educators: Training and orientation programs must be conceptualised to enable educators and administrators to effectively utilise technology to cater to diverse learners' interests. The content of the training modules must promote familiarity with the theories and practices of self-learning. Their delivery should take place through several modes, including web-supported, audio-visual and face-to-face interaction on a regular basis with experts, practitioners and peers. Most importantly, these packages must be updated regularly and administered directly. The B. Ed. curriculum must also be revised, updated and made to emphasize theories and practices of self-learning.

8. Increase access for learners with special needs: Special Education Committees must be set up in all ODE institution to address the needs of learners with disabilities as well as senior citizens. These committees must devise mechanisms to ensure their participation and provide

effective mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation of policies, and collection of feedback. Admission criteria and time tables must be flexible enough to provide diverse options for meeting program requirements to differently able learners and senior citizens. Pedagogical tools and components from the open educational resources must be adaptable to alternative formats for special learning needs. This could include, for example, Braille, colour-contrast texts and voice recordings for the visually disabled.

9. Create a new Standing Committee for the regulation of ODE: At present, the Distance Education Council (DEC) under IGNOU arbitrates standards and disburses funds for ODE institutions across the country. We believe that this arrangement cannot provide adequate and appropriate regulation. A new regulatory mechanism must be established by appointing a Standing Committee on Open and Distance Education under the Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education (IRAHE) proposed by NKC. This statutory body would be responsible for developing broad criteria for accreditation as well as laying down standards for quality assurance. It would be accountable to stakeholders at all levels and to IRAHE, and have representation from public, private and social institutions involved in the education and development sectors; these include the central open university, state open universities, private open universities, conventional education institutes, as well as chairpersons of the specialised bodies to be set up to look into infrastructural requirements of ODE.

In addition, two specialized bodies should be established under the aegis of the Standing Committee:

- (i) A Technical Advisory Group with representatives from the IT sector, telecom, space and industry should be constituted to provide guidelines, ensure flexibility and track the latest developments in application. The most important function would be to devise common standards for labelling learning content developed by different agencies in order to support indexing, storage, discovery and retrieval of this content by multiple tools across multiple repositories.
- (ii) An Advisory Group on Pedagogical Content Management with should be set up to provide guidelines curricular content and development of repositories, exchange of material, access to students and other such issues.

The Standing Committee on Open and Distance Education would also serve as the nodal agency for the National Educational Foundation on open educational resources, the National Education Testing Service (NETS) and the Credit Bank.

10. Develop a system for quality assessment: Reliable external assessment is valued by employers, students and other stakeholders in the given context of a market driven economy. In view of this, a rating system to assess the standard of all institutions imparting open and distance education must be evolved and made publicly available. The Standing Committee would stipulate grading norms and independent rating agencies would be licensed by IRAHE to carry out this function. In addition, it is recommended that every ODE institution have an internal quality assurance cell to ensure that statutory quality compliances are regularly met.

Establishment of the new organisations proposed above, namely, the National Education Testing Service, the Credit Bank, the National Educational Foundation for developing common open resources, the Technical Advisory Group and the Advisory Group on Pedagogical Content Management would initially require financial support from the government. Additional finances for networking ODE institutions and creating access centres, developing training programs for educators and administrators and providing scholarships and services for needy students would also be required.

Through our recommendations, we aim to bring about reform in open and distance education with a view to meeting the demands of the market while providing quality education to the largest number. We look forward to being involved in consultations for their speedy implementation.

Thank you and warm personal regards,

Sam Pitroda
Chairman
National Knowledge Commission

CC: Sh. Arjun Singh, Minister, Human Resource Development
Dr. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission

Annexure

Members of the Working Group on Open and Distance Education

1. Prof. Ram Takwale(Chairman)
Former Vice-Chancellor, Indira Gandhi National Open University, Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University
2. Prof Badrinath. Koul
Former Pro-Vice-Chancellor, IGNOU
3. Prof. Salil Mishra
Reader of History, School of Social Sciences, IGNOU
4. Prof. Parvin Sinclair
Director, School of Sciences, IGNOU
5. Dr. Vijay Kumar
Assistant Provost and Director of Academic Computing, MIT
6. Prof. V.S. Prasad
Director, National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), Bangalore,
Former Vice-Chancellor, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad
7. Dr. B.S. Bhatia
Former Director, Development and Education Computing Unit (DECU)
Space Applications Centre (SAC), Ahmedabad
8. Mr. Rajendra Pawar
Chairman, NIIT
9. Dr. Surabhi Banerjee
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