

DEMOCRATISATION OF EDUCATION

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What is the potential for democratisation of education through distance learning in the Indian context ? The plausible factors that are operating as catalytic agents include:

Economic Factor

Distance learning offers a good solution to one of education's most pressing problems: scarcity of resources. In the face of shrinking cashflow for education, very few institutions in India will be able to maintain their present levels of enrolments, much less improve access and quality. In the future, demand for education is not likely to wane; nor budgets for education are likely to be liberal. In this situation, distance learning provides an alternative that can still enhance quality and extend educational opportunities.

Pedagogical approach

In recent years, diversity amongst the aspirants for educational opportunities is on the increase. The average age of these aspirants is also on the increase. Adult education is imposing new demands on education. Vocational training needs new institutional setups and delivery systems to meet the increasing and diverse demand on education. Distance learning has the potential to offer flexibility in respect of diversity in educational requirements for the variety of learners.

Aspect of timeliness

Technological gaps are experienced more in the field of providing services like banking and transportation. This is necessitated by increased competition in the shrinking world. The increasing use of telecommunications in the Western world is an example of such a gap. If we are to market our products and services in the competitive international markets, we must equip our people with the latest information processing technology. With ever appreciating value and simultaneously ever depreciating costs of electronic media, we have to make increasing use of the medium of telecommunications to provide support to our ever increasing clientele of learners. Today's programs and projects demand interdisciplinary environment.. Microcomputer-based technologies encompassing systems that support complex operations demand more skills and interfacing with the electronic media. This necessitates acquisition of these skills by the industry and business people. The responsibility of imparting these skills rests with the educational institutions, especially those devoted to distance learning.

Challenges ahead

Distance education, however, still has a long way to go and poses some formidable challenges. To improve the credibility of

distance education, researchers need to address major areas like:

I. Student access

The idea of open access transmits ambiguous messages to the prospective learner. Distance education, in fact, is not easier than traditional education. Learners must be clearly informed about their chances to succeed in a distance learning program, and be helped to succeed. The flexibility offered by distance learning should not only be used to increase enrolments, but also to meet learner needs by offering alternative courses.

II. Instructional design

Motivation is the key to learning. The absence of the teacher and the peers has to be balanced by intrinsically motivating and carefully designed instructional materials. The use of instructional design techniques and the adoption of existing materials and models can help improving the quality of instruction.

III. Support systems for Learning

Learning is essentially a social act. Cognitive psychologists would concede that learning is highly influenced by external, social factors. Peer-tutoring and collaborative learning are proven instructional techniques. Strengthening learning support is a key to successful distance learning projects. The era of telecommunications is in the offing for us. Computer-based distance learning programs in the west illustrate that learners spend at least as much time interacting with fellow students over computer lines as they do studying. Interactivity, feedback and socio-emotional support are at least as important to sustain motivation and performance as are other components of distance learning programs.

IV. Evaluation and Accreditation Procedures

External evaluations of costs and effectiveness, peer-review committees, tracer studies of graduates and accreditation boards are essential tools to establish and improve the credibility of distance learning programs.

Breaking into new Horizons

Distance learning cannot promise, and cannot be expected to solve all of the problems of education. However, experience, evidence, and recent developments show that there are special niches and situations where distance learning can play a major positive role.

- Secondary education- where there is a lack of specialised teachers and resources to expand schools;
- Teacher training- where combinations of distance and in-residence workshops can help teachers upgrade and update their knowledge and skills;
- Undergraduate and graduate education, where students are more independent and able to choose appropriate courses of action;
- Technical pre-service, in-service and on-the-job training, where the need for the standardisation of skills and opportunity costs are at a premium.

In addition, use of open broadcasts or video cassettes can contribute to, substitute for or supplement conventional face-to-face instruction. Increasingly, materials prepared for distance learning institutions will be used more and more in conventional courses. Combinations of distance education and in-residence sessions can result in maximising the cost savings and the

cooperative advantages of both face-to-face and distance learning. All these innovative experiments can help in overcoming the barriers that exist between distance and traditional education.

With the technology of telecommunications developing at a fast pace, quality distance learning will soon

become a matter of international competition. Given this new wave of technology, we will be able to do little to hinder the challenges that good quality and alternative learning can bring to local standards and practices.