Collaboration and Networking in Open Schooling towards Reaching to the Unreached

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Abstract

The fast pace of change in recent years has brought numerous challenges and opportunities in the different spheres of society, be it economic, political and cultural spheres. This is true for education system as well. While educational system as a whole is affected by the financial crunch due to state's commitment to invest on other social sectors, the demands of creating well informed and responsible citizens, who will ensure peace, drive our economy and solve pressing problems in the future has created further challenges for the educators and educational administrators. Further, open and distance education system, where the contacts between learners, tutors and educational administrators are less than that of formal education system, instilling the values of citizenship though updated educational contents and providing adequate support though different resource base becomes more challenging. But it is true that schools and colleges of education have to play a vital role in this changing world connected by the powerful influence of information technology where the influence of other agents of socialization such as family and neighborhood has declined gradually. Therefore, there is need to adapt and develop new approach to education.

Open Schooling system in India, which began with the far reaching goal of providing education to the special targeted group for achieving equity and access in education in late 1990s has traversed a long way but many challenges still exist in the system. The NIOS alone with its limited infrastructure cannot provide adequate responses to the educational challenges that could be met through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode in the area of open schooling/continuing education. Thus, there is a need to create a network of apex organizations for open schooling at national and state level. The paper reflects on how collaboration between different institutions are needed not only to improve educational access but also to facilitate sharing of rich knowledge and resource-based attuned to the new global environment by promoting creativity and improving the quality of education and training. The different areas of collaboration are also discussed in the paper. Based on the review of literature and review of existing practices of NIOS, the paper highlights that collaboration through various consortiums and partnerships have innovated institutions and leveraged the support services for the effective functioning of learning mechanism in open schooling, yet they have much to offer in different areas for improving open schooling system.

Introduction

The fast pace of change in recent years has brought numerous challenges and opportunities in the different spheres of society, be it economic, political and cultural spheres. This is true for education system as well. While educational system as a whole is affected by the financial crunch due to state's commitment to invest on other social sectors, the demands of creating well informed and responsible citizens, who will ensure peace, drive our economy and solve pressing problems in the future has created further challenges for the educators and educational administrators. Further, open and

distance education system, where the contacts between learners, tutors and educational administrators are less than that of formal education system, instilling the values of citizenship though updated educational contents and providing adequate support though different resource base becomes more challenging. But it is true that schools and colleges of education have to play a vital role in this changing world connected by the powerful influence of information technology where the influence of other agents of socialization such as family and neighborhood has declined gradually. Therefore, there is need to adapt and develop new approach to education.

Open Schooling system in India, which began with the far reaching goal of providing education to the special targeted group for achieving equity and access in education in late 1990's has traversed a long way but many challenges still exist in the system. In India, the Open Schooling System is being operationalized by the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) at the national level having the study centers throughout India and the State Open Schools (SOSs) at the State level. The NIOS alone with its limited infrastructure cannot provide adequate responses to the educational challenges that could be met through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode in the area of open schooling/continuing education. Thus, there is a need to create a network of apex organizations for open schooling at national and state level. In order to translate this idea into practice, the NIOS has been pursuing with the states for quite some time to set up the State Open Schools (SOSs). Sixteen States (Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi) have already set up State Open Schools. Some more states viz., Orissa, Jharkhand, Goa, Bihar and

Himachal Pradesh are also in the process of setting up SOSs.

The upcoming of these state open schools will not only help in meeting the challenges at the regional level but even networking of these state open schools with other universities and distance education institution will further improve the academic and support services to the stakeholders. Similarly emergence of many NGOs and CSR initiatives for offering educational services particularly in open and distance learning offers new avenues for networking and collaboration. Thus, Sharing and partnership with the institutions of similar interest will benefit to a large extent will provide a viable solutions to the resource crunch and can provide service to growing number of learners, who have greater and more varied kind of expectations.

Rationale of Collaboration and Networking

Accelerating progress in education particularly at the school level is an urgent necessity at the moment which needs mobilizing greater amounts of political will. Identifying drop-outs and learners at risk and enrolling them to the open schooling system needs considerable effort and strategic planning, which is challenging for system existing at the central level. Therefore, there is a need to network with a number of institutions to provide access to the potential learners to open schooling system.

Secondly, the opportunity to improve the 'quality of learning materials and to ensure the relevance of studies to the students' needs requires collaboration between different institutions (Neil 1981, pp. 142–144) related to open and distance education and even NGOs as well at both national and regional level.

Thirdly, the desire to make 'better or more extensive or new use of resources that are available within one or more communities (Neil 1981, pp. 142–144) encourages collaboration with different institutions of similar interest. Coming up of many ICT based institutions and industries will help to innovate the programmes and also improve the education facilities for the stakeholders.

Fourthly, imparting relevant and effective programmes also trigger off institutions to partner with each other (Gupta, Kaushik and Garg 2004). With the fast pace of change in technology, the demands for updated learning mechanism and programmes necessitates for the institutions to take help from each other and design new kind of programmes to cater to the dynamic learners to provide them industry relevant skills or to match to the present day market and society.

Areas of Collaboration

At the turn of new century, there have been unprecedented demands of diversified and integrated knowledge to build up the citizens of future for sustainable development. No doubt, India has the education system with diversified field, catering to the fulfillment of needs and expectations of the society but there have been great challenges in terms of financing, unparalleled and traditional curriculum, untrained staff, relevance of programmes and employability of pass outs from education system. Further, distance education system where the learners and other stakeholders are scattered and dependent on formal education system for its smooth delivery has to play a very innovative role. Therefore, collaboration between different institutions are needed not only to improve educational access but also facilitating a rich knowledge and resource base attuned to the new global environment by promoting creativity and improving the quality of education and training. New model of

schooling and education system overall needs to expand connections and collaborations with Schools, education practicing teachers, counsellors, principals, university faculty, employers, parents, employees, senior citizens, volunteers, and more.

Course development and delivery

In the age of information and technology, all learners in the educational system, present and future, need to become knowledge workers with strong symbolic-analytic and collaborative skills (Wirth, 1992). The learners not only to be provided with the up to date knowledge but also the relevant life-skills and the diversified and integrated knowledge. On the other hand, inculcation of local values in integration with global knowledge among learners are desirable for the present day learners. While the teachers in the formal education system are able to streamline local knowledge through specific and local relevant situations, the education system in open and distance learning provides less opportunity to learn both local and global cultures. Therefore, drawing diversified expertise and experiences not only in terms of disciplinary knowledge but representations in terms of different geographical area also need to be taken under considerations. For example: For development of Diploma in Elementary Education course in NIOS, the expertise are drawn from different institutions with expertise in different subjects. While the course on Science Education was written by the faculty members of Homi Bhaba Centre of Science Education, who are the renowned experts in Science Education in India, the contents in Pedagogy were developed by experts from School of Education, IGNOU, who have the expertise both in Pedagogy and distance education. Similarly, experts in other subjects are also involved. Involvement of experts from different institutions has not only expanded the horizon of content enrichment but also a scope to acquaint learners with various local examples in parallel with global standard of

knowledge. But there is a need of orienting the content writers with the vision, mission and pedagogical style of NIOS in the beginning. The review of these lessons also need to be done in the light of target group and also the goals of the institutions.

New Teaching models in Open Schooling stem must include learning with livelihood concepts tying real work experience and real-life skills to student learning. Unlike formal school set-up, the learner enrolled in the open schooling system are either employed or in the preparation stage for employment. Therefore, learning firsthand knowledge and practice with regard to various job skills are needed for learners (Schmitz et al. 2000). Involving experts from Industry and corporations in designing curriculum and writing lessons would advantage to the learners in learning real work situations and also acquire the requisite skills to compete in the job market. Collaboration with Tata McGraw-Hill in designing course related to retail management are the step towards designing the courses with real job experiences. In vocational related courses, course delivery mechanism also need to be devised in consultation and coordination with industries and corporations linked to the course. Industries and corporations should also be consulted and Study centers be instituted in these industries so that these industry personnel and mentors can help the learners to learn how the concepts they learn are applied in business, professional, or manufacturing situations.

Collaboration in course development has multiple advantages not only to the learners but the institution's capacity to provide breadth and depth in particular subjects also expands. Since approaches, facilities and materials are shared, more pedagogical and technological strategies become available and these factors may in turn raise the standards of learning materials and teaching across the institutions (Neil 1981; Moran, 1990; Pritchand and Jones1985a). There are also cost advantages in using human and material resources effectively and economically, and political advantages in demonstrating that such things can be accomplished (Moran and Mugridge 1994). Further, the credibility and acceptance of the course also got enriched since the resources and expertise are involved from each level whether national and regional level.

Capacity building

Open schooling system in India has seen tremendous transformation in recent years as an offshoot of commitment of states towards universalization of school education. While many state open schools are new and at the state of expansions, in some other states, state open schools are yet to come into existence. No doubt, NIOS as a the open schooling system overall is playing a vital role catering to the needs of millions of population, looking at the future role of streamlining many children and adults into education system all over the country, state open schools has to take up a crucial role at the state level in enrolment, retention and designing local specific material and planning, designing and implementation strategies at the state and regional level. But in most of the state open schools, the employees of the state Boards of education are performing their duties and their positions are more administrative than academic. Hence, the role of NIOS as a national resource organization for capacity building in the field of open schooling becomes very stringent and has to play a very proactive role in capacitating them be it curriculum development, planning, research and development or student support services and Information and communication technology.

Further, NIOS has thousands of Tutors who are teaching in Accredited Institutes (AIs), Accredited Vocational Institute (AVIs) and Accredited Agencies(AA) located at the regional centre level in each subjects, thousands of Academic Facilitators who are monitoring the academic programme and are instructed to observe the academic transactions of different

tutors and also go through the evaluated TMAs and further thousands of Team Leaders/observers/Evaluators who are the part of support mechanism to complete the examination and evaluation process effectively. But in most of cases, these functionaries have the background of working in formal educational institutions and use their expertise in different activities based on their prior experience dealt with formal educational set-up. Therefore, capacity building of these functionaries become very important. While NIOS has the limited human resources and NIOS faculty members may not reach directly as a trainer to each functionary, involvement of resource persons from Teacher Training Institutes, state Education Department, vocational educational institutes and Universities at state level becomes very important. However, these trainers need to be trained as master trainer, orientation with regard to open schooling in particular in the initial level. The training modules need to be designed looking at the social and cultural scenario of different states and also the training manuals also need to be developed in different regional mediums.

With increase in technology and the fast pace of change in economy demanding a new space to be filled up with the human resources with new and innovative skills to produce quality manpower for future, NIOS has a role to fulfill all these expectations in the field of Open Schooling. Therefore, bringing international expertise and experience and adding the dynamics to the level of functioning in terms becomes very important in the era of globalization to make curriculum need based and relevant and mechanism of delivering learning matching to the expectation of world of work. However, it's applicability and delivery of training needs to be seen in the national context. In recent years, capacity development of NIOS staff on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in collaboration with New Zealand Poly-technique is one of the examples. Recognition of Prior Learning is a pioneer

exercise, which is one of the successful practices and benefitted New Zealand in recognition of traditional skills and expertise and overall in enriching industrial output of the country as found very innovative and thus a new collaboration developed. Faculty members those who are principally involved in the development of curriculum and contents and also the future implementer and Regional Directors who are the implementers of policies in open schooling are trained.

Adapt materials for local use

The nature of distance education has made similarity of courses and unnecessary duplication of efforts. The courses and programmes having a good recognition and credibility encourage many distance teaching institutions to reassess their policies to develop and purchase these courses (Brindley and Paul, 1994). In India, formation of Council of Boards of School Education in India (COBSE), to which all the boards and educational institutions designing curriculum and syllabus and its continuous emphasis for uniform curriculum has further pushed the movement for sharing of courses. The self-learning materials for the learners at secondary and senior secondary level are developed looking at the clienteles at the All India level. These courses are translated in some regional medium looking at the cost, affordability and the size of learners opting for the courses. While NIOS has to consider different policy implications before translating in some regional medium since it is a national level institutions, state open schools may translate in the languages used in their state without much hindrances for their own learners. While NIOS must share their Self-learning Materials for translation, State Open Schools must also share the translated materials to NIOS so that it can be used for learners of NIOS. Even the arguments or explanations used can be adapted to reflect the polity, economy and culture of the regions though the basic content of shared teaching and learning materials stays the same.

But these changes must be informed to the sourced institutions and reviewed before it is being used by the local learners group (Sharma and Chaudhary 2003).

Sharing technology

The potentiality of ICT-based education to facilitate high quality learning anywhere - anytime and support students' development as creative and active participant has encouraged many distance learning institutions to set up ICT infrastructure and integrate ICT in teaching learning mechanisms. But providing accessibility to learners in open and distance learning is very challenging given that the learners are at the distance and are from diverse background. Therefore, there is a need to create a collaborative mechanism with the institutions having already developed ICT infrastructure to provide access to students at the regional level. A collaborative relationship with the institutions with ICT capability to be used for facilitating learners will help institutions in the long term to access, purchase and maintain their ICT, as well as with ongoing training of staff to properly use the equipment (Sharma and Chaudhary 2003). In exploring these collaborative mechanism, it is desirable to be mindful of safety and security of the institutions partnered. There is need to respect the rights and responsibilities of each other. It must be ensured that the existing and emerging technologies are used effectively, efficiently and ethically.

Advocacy

Instituting Open Schooling in the country is mainly targeted to provide access to the disadvantaged section of society. No doubt, with the increase in years, the enrolment of learners has increased manifold through enriching policies and programmes of NIOS and many state open schools. Still there are millions of children are unaware of the benefits of open schooling, thus are not able to access the provisions. Therefore, streamlining these disadvantaged groups of population into open schooling is the need of the hour. Therefore, strong advocacy is important to providing access to wide spectrum of potential learners.

Press, Non-Government Organizations, various educational institutions having wide visibility in nook and corners of the country must be given a role to advocate and Raise awareness about open schooling system and particularly the facilities for girls education, by highlighting priorities through dialogue and consultation.

It is also essential that along with public advocacy, strategic alliances at national and international level must be constituted to discuss, design planning and policies with regard to effective functioning of open schooling. The evolution of COMOSA as a non-profit and collaborative organization in the field of open and distance learning is a milestone With the vision of development of open schooling as a means of providing educational opportunities for all, COMOSA is established with the objective to cooperate and collaborate in development, promotion and introduction of innovative, high quality, relevant, equitable, gender-sensitive and cost-effective programmes of school education for sustainable development in commonwealth countries through Open and Distance Learning Mode, and thereby targeting to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) of the United Nations (COMOSA 2011).

Conclusion

Open and distance learning institutions has to offer a lot in the coming years with the fast changes occurring worldwide and demands from state and market for human resources with multiple skill sets are continuously rising year by year. While collaboration through various consortiums and partnerships have innovated institutions and leveraged the support services for the effective functioning of learning

mechanism in open schooling, they have much to offer in different areas for improving open schooling system. However, there is need to retain institutional uniqueness and ownership of curriculum and pedagogies by the institutions amid collaboration with other institutions.

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