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Developing a Model for borderless and trans-national education through the ODL system

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My theoretical paper cuts across all the themes of the conference in general. It presents a model "WINDOW" which will facilitate borderless and trans-national education by converting 'incoming' and 'out-going' courses / programmes, suitable for the zone/ state / country in which they are implemented.

Global development mainly emphasises quality education bridging cultural distance through Open Distance Learning. The ODL system, being **open** in all respects, as per its stated **philosophy**, committed to a **methodology** of **bridging the distance** between the learner and the teacher through **technology**, and operating through a **process** of providing necessary learning experience through a **learner-centered approach**, has been adapted/adopted as an appropriate system of education by many developing countries including India. ODL in India has made its impact in the educational scenario of our country and in the forthcoming 11th plan it is envisaged as a policy matter that at least 40% of the total enrolment in the higher education sector should be brought under the ODL system.

At present, there are 150 dual-mode Distance Education Institutions, 13 State Open Universities (SOUs), one National Open University, one National Institute of Open Schooling, and five Open Schools in various States. In addition to the fact that IGNOU has its jurisdiction in the whole country, it has also established study centres in 46 foreign countries. It is in this context, my paper proposes out of a model for the cross-cultural transfer of a 'learning experience', such as a course/ programme/curriculum from one cultural zone to another so that the learning experience could be suitably adapted in that zone thus leading to considerable savings in time, efforts, and cost involved in reproducing courses while tailoring them to region specific needs.

After analyzing the national and international experience in this area my paper presents a model through which a programme or a course developed in IGNOU or in any other ODL Institute/State Open University could be suitably and effectively transformed and transferred to any other zone/state/country cost-effectively to make the content, dissemination and evaluation of the course not only region-specific but also target-specific.

Developing a Model for borderless and trans-national education through the ODL system

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Introduction:

Global developments in information and communication technologies have facilitated quality education to the masses, bridging cultural distance through Open Distance Learning. The ODL system, being **open** in all respects, as per its stated **philosophy**, committed to a **methodology** of **bridging the distance** between the learner and the teacher through **technology**, and operating through a **process** of providing necessary learning experience through a **learner-centered approach**, has been adapted/ adopted as an appropriate system of education by many developing countries including India. Many of these countries were inspired by the first Open University in the world established in the UK – the UKOU, and they have adopted the same model while establishing OUs in their respective countries.

Though most of these open universities have been successful in expanding the educational opportunities of the people, in general, they have miserably failed in providing such educational opportunities to the marginalized and those at the grass-roots level. In other words, these open universities, to a large extent, could only cater to the needs of the middleclass people in society, and contribute to widening their educational opportunities and due to some reason or the other, could not reach the grass-roots level people who have always been deprived of educational opportunities.

Open-Distance Learning in India has made its impact in the educational scenario and in the 11th plan of the Government of India, it is envisaged as a policy matter that at least 40% of the total enrolment in the higher education sector should be brought under the ODL system. In a country like India, reaching the masses through cost effective ways is of utmost importance since there are millions of uneducated people compared to whom the number of trained teachers and such other manpower that is available, is inadequate. Even with those learners already enrolled in the open universities, the ODL system faces three major challenges: (i) the task of changing the mindset of people who have become accustomed to the conventional mode, to acceptance of the distance education mode (ii) providing quality education to the masses with the optimum use of ICT to provide a variety of learning experiences in a cost effective way and (iii) addressing the diverse educational

needs of people belonging to various social, economic, cultural, linguistic, and educational groups at different levels. The present paper focuses on all these challenges in general and the third challenge in particular.

Borderless and Trans-national education through ODL: the international scene

The concept 'Transnational education' (TNE) is defined by UNESCO as "...all types of higher education study programmes, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based" (Riga, 2001), and therefore may be seen as describing the current and emerging trends in course and programme offerings. The concept 'borderless education,' however encompasses a much wider meaning to "include mobility of education programmes, student mobility and partnership agreements across borders and e-learning offerings with partnership programmes" (University of Melbourne, 2005) which points towards the future trend of the global delivery of education. Both terms in fact imply "crossing the cultural, linguistic, legislative" (<https://www.cinema.it/servlets/resources>) national and inter continental borders posing complexities in adapting and harmonizing various systems of education.

UKOU is the pioneer in offering educational opportunities to learners around the world, transforming people's lives across geographic frontiers (Open University, 1995). Using the global internet facility Athena Electronic University is also providing education globally (<http://www.athena.edu>). Collins and Berge (1996) also mention the case study of a Certificate Programme in Distance Education in a university in the USA which is being shared by countries such as Mexico, Finland and Estonia through a combination of audio-conferencing, computer conferencing etc (qtd in Mason, 1998). After discussing a few examples of Global education such as Global Executive MBA, Duke University, North Carolina; IBM Global Training and Education; Graduates Certificate in Open and Distance Learning, USQ etc Mason observes that " a good many areas of the curriculum are inherently global in nature and some particularly lend themselves to course development on an international scale, providing students with a much broader perspective than a course presented by a single lecturer or developed by a single institution" (Mason, 1998:6). He also mentions the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities' initiative in launching two transnational courses: the 'European MBA' and 'What is Europe?' as good examples of borderless, transnational initiatives in ODL.

Sharing the views of Field (1995) and Edwards (1995), Mason underlines the present trend of viewing education " as a commodity to be shaped according to consumer demand." According to them "the kinds of courses which the global consumer is demanding are flexible, adaptable, portable and interactive"(1998:7). It is in this global context that my paper discusses the potential of IGNOU as a national open university to evolve a model for borderless education within a country like India which has

diversified cultural zones and also for transnational education at least for South Asian countries.

Though shaping 'education' according to the 'consumer demand' as a 'commodity' reminds us of the 'industrialised feature' of distance education (Keegan, 1986:49; Holmberg, 1977:11), it has a wider meaning and broader implications in the era of globalization. Since skill training is more emphasized than the cognitive aspects of education at least in the IT related sectors, presenting knowledge and skill as an 'educational experience' is the current trend. Hence ODL has to address many more challenges to provide such 'experiences' in a portable, interactive and cost-effective way. This task is extremely challenging in India considering the cultural / regional diversity among its states.

Borderless and Trans-national education through ODL: the Indian scene

IGNOU was established in 1985 through an Act of Parliament with a mandate to widen access by offering high quality, innovative and need-based programmes at different levels, especially to the disadvantaged segments of society at affordable costs by using a variety of media and technology. It is also mandated to promote, coordinate and regulate the standards of education offered through open and distance learning in the country. At present, there are 150 dual-mode Distance Education Institutions, 13 State Open Universities (SOUs), one National Open University, one National Institute of Open Schooling, and five Open Schools in various States. In addition to the fact that IGNOU has its jurisdiction across the whole country, it has also established study centres in 46 foreign countries (IGNOU, 2006). It is in this context, that this paper attempts (out of a 'felt-need') to develop a model for the cross-cultural transfer of a 'learning experience', such as a course/programme/curriculum, from one cultural zone to another, so that the learning experience could be suitably adapted in that zone thus leading to considerable savings in time, efforts, and cost involved in reproducing courses while tailoring them to region specific needs. It is hoped that the discussion generated by this paper will provide valuable insights that will enable us to develop a model through which a programme or a course developed by IGNOU or any other ODL Institute/ State Open University could be suitably and effectively transformed and transferred to any other zone/state/country cost-effectively to make the content, dissemination and evaluation of the course not only region-specific but also target-specific.

Review of research on cross-cultural transfer of ODL:

- **International Status:** Marland (1989) while commenting on the need for research in distance education observes that "...since the 1970s, there has been a dramatic worldwide upswing in the numbers of distance learners and of institutions offering distance learning programmes. Very little research into distance teaching and learning has been conducted that provides a basis for the evaluation of traditional assumptions and practices in the design and conduct of distance education programme" (p.178).

Marland invites our research attention to the "...effects of contextual variables, such as study background, career and family commitments, study environment, work environment and collegial relationships and subjects being studied on both espoused and in-use theories and mediating process" (p.180).

The contextual variables that Marland identified may or may not have telling effects on students / learners in a particular region, as the influence of other unidentified variables may compensate for or nullify the effects of the above variables. This is true not only for regional aspects but also for the nature and characteristics of the course and curriculum design. For example, the lack of peer-group interaction may be compensated by providing sufficient interactive inputs in the course design. The absence of practical / hands-on experience can be compensated by providing simulation situations in the curriculum. Hence it is very important to identify the variables, the absence or presence of which, will influence the learning process especially in the context of cross-cultural transaction.

Michael Moore (1995) in "Distance Education Research Symposium: A Research Agenda" has identified priority areas for research in distance education as (i) access, equity and social impact of programmes in relation to a market driven approach, socio-economic impact and consumer protection policies, (ii) the extent to which research looks at learning in its total context, and (iii) effect of work styles and life styles on distance education which the present research seeks to address. Minnis (1985) also critiques extant research in distance education and comments that such "...research lacks meaningful cross-cultural or comparative perspectives" (p.191). The present research tries to mitigate this drawback of research in distance education. Also, it is important to mention that existing research that focuses on intercultural and cross-cultural issues are mainly related to online education. Studies made by Goodfellow et.al. (2001), Gunawardena et.al (2001), Ziegahu (2001), and Williams et.al. (2001) are founded mainly on online learning to examine the cultural differences in perception, environment, nature of courses etc. (Parhar 2003: 96) and do not take all modes of distance education into consideration.

National Status:

Reviewing the research studies on Distance Education in India, Prof Lokesh Koul made a very significant observation that "... barring a couple of studies, the researches did not show any qualitative trend with respect to the theory and practice of distance education" (Koul, 2006:460). He points out the lack of region-specific, target-specific type of researches. "Studies are based on arbitrary combinations of variables relating psychology, economics, sociology, pedagogy, media, management, etc. without taking into consideration their implications for the clientele and catchment area, thus lacking long-range perspective and relevance to future planning of distance education programmes" (Koul, 2006: 461). While pointing towards the future research priorities in India, Prof Koul rightly foresees

that by 2025, with an approximate population of 130-140 crores, India will present an extremely diverse scenario where,

“The degree and level of education varies from place to place, depending on the nearness or accessibility of a village to urban centres, the rate of literacy, the quality of local leadership; the traditional roots and attitude towards modernization; communication network and exposure to the outside world; basic economic problems as a result of poverty, and the interaction at the socio-economic levels. In this context, the education system requires to handle large numbers and be accessible to people at large especially at the bottom of the ‘socio-economic pyramid’ (Koul, 2006: 463).

Panda (1992) while reviewing the research literature of distance education in the Indian context places “Curriculum planning and development and developing a comprehensive model with room for variations, within a given socio-cultural setup” as one of the broad research areas needing urgent research attention (qtd. in Mishra 1998: 277).

The experience of the University of Melbourne regarding their offshore courses in Singapore and Hong Kong validates Panda’s observation quoted above. “ In Hong Kong some tutors are used to complement the teaching conducted by the University of Melbourne staff. These tutors are staff of the Hong Kong Institute of Education. Their focus is on applying course concepts to local situation ... Subject content and assessment is the same offshore as it is on shore. Some content and class reading material may be selected as appropriate to the local context” (University of Melbourne, 2005). This contextualization of learning experience within a ‘given socio-cultural setup’ could be done much more methodically if one could identify the parameters of cross-cultural transfer.

Thus the proposed study is tuned to identify parameters affecting cross-cultural transfer and to evolve a model WINDOW for the effective cross-cultural transfer of a course / programme to bridge the gap in research on the ODL system and inadequacies in its practice. The review of available research on the ODL system reveals that both on the national and international fronts very few studies have been done in similar aspects.

Research Model for developing a WINDOW facilitating borderless & transnational education through ODL

In the above context, I present a research model for developing a WINDOW which could facilitate borderless / transnational / cross-cultural transfer of a learning experience through ODL. The objectives, hypothesis, methodology, data collection, analysis and discussion etc of this model mentioned below, are all confined / limited to the cultural zones within India, more specifically within and across various states. Hence this model could only be considered as a pilot study to identify the

parameters of cross-cultural transfer of a learning experience which may be extended suitably to study the extended scene of trans-national and borderless education of the present era. The study is also limited to the ODL system whereas transnational / borderless education has to be viewed from a much wider perspective.

Objectives and Hypotheses :

A. Objectives:

- (i) To identify the parameters affecting cross-cultural transfer of a course/programme.
- (ii) Evolving a method to incorporate the characteristics of the parameters in SLM development.
- (iii) Evaluating the impact of the cross-culturally transferred course, and
- (iv) Suggesting a Model for the effective cross-cultural transfer of a course/ programme.

B. Hypotheses:

- (i) SLMs developed in tune with the socio-political-economic and cultural aspects of a particular region will be well received among the learners from that region.
- (ii) A suitable working model can be developed for facilitating the transfer of SLMs from one cultural zone to another so that learning/ teaching/educational experience can be cross-culturally transferred and transformed without repeating/replicating the efforts resulting in time/ cost effectiveness.

Methodology:

The methodology of this study will combine several approaches, the rationale of which is given below:

Review of related literature: Research studies and other published research papers on similar subjects or approaches will be reviewed to gain insights into the various aspects related to the research questions and objectives on the basis of the hypotheses cited. Reports on the experience and feedback of the course/ programme coordinators, counsellors, students etc. of both IGNOU and selected State Open Universities (SOUs) also will be analysed, to arrive at useful insights for the research.

Case Studies:

- a) Selected courses of IGNOU which are evenly spread across all States will be studied as case studies.
- b) Selected courses of IGNOU vis-à-vis similar courses (in terms of subjects/nature) of SOUs will also be studied to compare the effectiveness of these courses separately in the specific regions as well as specific target groups concerned.

Experimental Methods: In order to study the impact of cross-culturally transformed courses/ programmes in specific regions and comparing it with the impact of non-transformed courses, experimental methods will be used. Certain sample groups will be general while certain other groups will be 'controlled groups' as detailed below:

Population and Sample:

- **Sample-I:** Around 50 IGNOU students each in specific regions of 3-4 States pursuing the same courses/ programmes will be selected randomly.
- **Sample-II:** Around 50 SOU students pursuing similar kind/type of courses as in Sample-I will be randomly selected in specific regions of 3-4 States.
- **Sample-III (Controlled/Experimental Groups):** Roughly 50 students will be selected from each of the specific regions of 3-4 States and they will be exposed to - (a) **Non-transformed**, and (b) **Transformed Self Learning Materials(SLM) of IGNOU** and the impact will be assessed by using the following research tools and techniques.

Tools and Techniques:

- Questionnaire,
- Semi-structured Interviews and rating scale,
- Evaluation test.

The data collected by using the above tools will be analysed as follows using suitable qualitative and quantitative methods to arrive at meaningful conclusions.

Data Analyses:

- Comparing data from Sample-I and Sample-II, to identify the parameters of cross-cultural transfers.
- Comparing data from Sample-I and Sample-III (a) and Sample-III (b), will reveal the effectiveness and impact of transformed IGNOU material in each specific region.

- Comparison of data of Sample-II and Sample-III (a) and Sample-III (b), will reveal the impact of transformed SLMs of IGNOU and SOUs in each specific region.
- Comparison of data from Sample-III (a) and Sample-III (b) at the specific regional level will reveal a difference of impact of transformed materials at various regions and different target groups.

Discussion of Research and Implication of Studies:

The above data analysis will be followed by interpretation and discussion of results to arrive at meaningful suggestions and recommendations under the following headings.

- The insights gained regarding the parameters of cross-cultural transfers,
- Characteristics of each parameter and ways in which it can be incorporated in SLM,
- Developing a model for cross-cultural transfer of courses/ programmes,
- Implications of cross-cultural transfer of SLM between:
 - (a) SOUs, (b) SOUs and IGNOU, (c) SOUs and Distance Education Institutes (DEIs) of Dual-mode States Universities, and (d) IGNOU and DEIs in Dual-mode States Universities.

While interpreting the results of the research, one should incorporate approaches and concepts from the disciplines of Political Economy of Education, Sociology of Education, Anthropology of Education and Comparative Education Research. The analysis of the findings should also include theories of human and social capital from the perspective of sustainable development discourses. The Vector Analysis model adopted from the discipline of Physics will also be useful in interpreting the results both diagrammatically and quantitatively.

Conclusion

It is hoped that such an interpretation and discussion of the research results will provide sufficient insight to develop a WINDOW for facilitating borderless and cross-cultural transfer of educational experience between the 'source' countries and the 'host' countries. Prominent parameters identified with respect to cultural, linguistic, social, political, economic, geographic, demographic and educational characteristics of the zones / states / countries and the ways in which these parameters are suitably incorporated in the curriculum to contextualise the educational experience or to creatively transact the

curriculum in a most acceptable and comprehensible manner or style provides the structure of the WINDOW. This WINDOW will convert the 'out-going' courses / programmes of the 'source country' suitable for the 'host country' and also vice-versa convert the 'incoming' courses / programmes received from the 'source country' to make it suitable for the 'host country'. The two way facilitating functions of the model 'WINDOW' will substantially save time, efforts and cost involved in reproducing courses which are already produced by some institutions somewhere. If we can achieve and popularize such WINDOWS for cross-cultural transfer of educational experience from one zone to another, ODL can be effectively used to achieve borderless and trans-national education globally.

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