

Education at Your Doorstep: Does the Doors Open for All?

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Education is a liberating force, a democratizing force cutting across distinctions of birth, gender, caste, geographical location, political position, social status or economic position.

Theme: Social Justice

Sub Theme: Scaling Up Quality Education for All

Introduction

The growth and development of education in the developed and developing countries occur along diverse parameters. In the words of Prof Ramanujam, "What really distinguishes the distance education of the developed countries from that of the developing world is the overall aim set for it. In the developed countries the broad aim is to provide education to individuals who need it at different levels with different individual needs. In the developing countries the aim becomes collective one such as nation building, eradication of illiteracy, rural development, health education, women's education, tribal education, education of the socially disadvantaged etc, besides the usual academic, technical and vocational programmes. (Ramanujam, 2002, 33). ODL has crucial significance in addressing critical educational challenges posed due to globalisation such as access, equity, cost, reaching disadvantaged groups and communities, need for lifelong learning and relevance (Khan, A., 200, p.462). But the world of globalization has been one where the rich have become richer while the developing world struggles to gain a share of world's wealth.

The potential of distance education is stretched too far to meet every individual need which has not been met so far. This has put tremendous pressure on the systems of distance education, which are yet to take firm roots. (Ramanujam, 2002, 32-33) In one way, distance education is perceived as the solution for all the shortcomings of conventional face-to-face education in the developing countries. In another way, it is projected as the cost-effective, and therefore a cheap way of meeting the demands of education. In the process too little money is allocated to meet too many educational needs. As a matter of fact, much of the economic crises in the developing world can be traced to the same economic arguments. Because the educational budgets in these countries have been usually small, the standard and quality of education have not been very high. The spread of literacy and the expansion of education at different levels have suffered precisely because of the meager allocation made to all the educational projects. (Ramanujam, 2002, 33)

The educational advancement of a country over other countries is determined by the quality of education imparted through both the face to face and distance modes of teaching as well as the quantity of people who are benefited from such programmes. In other words, as long as the enrollment of learners in a system is not directly proportional to the rate of their success, no educational programme can be successful. Besides, the rate of success has to be uniform across all sections of students, particularly the disadvantaged ones.

Objectives

The main objectives of the study are:

- (a) to study the enrollment pattern of the learners for different programmes

- (b) to highlight the participation of the SC/ST participants in the IGNOU programmes
- (c) to find out the problems of SC/ST learners that interfere with their studies
- (d) to suggest affirmative interventions to increase the enrollment of SC/ST students in different programmes and enhance the possibilities of their success in the ODL system

Methodology

This study is primarily based on the admission data obtained from the Computer Division of the Regional centre for three years (viz 2008, 2009, 2010) which includes the fresh and re-registration(RR) data for both the cycles. Besides the responses of the learners to a questionnaire as well as personal discussions with the learners have been incorporated to authenticate the observations. Questionnaires were administered to a random group of 100 SC/ST students from five selected Study Centres in and around Koraput. These learners included the learners who have completed the programmes, the learners who have withdrawn from the programmes and the learners who have been continuing with different programmes in these five Study Centres [Council of Analytical Tribal Studies, COATS, Koraput, (2123), Vikram Dev College, Jeypore(2110), Laxmipur College, Laxmipur(2173), Semiliguda College, Semiliguda.(2145) and Nabarangpur College, nabarangpur(2139)]. Out of the 100 respondents, 10 learners have successfully completed their programmes, 32 have dropped out and the rest have been continuing with different programmes under the selected Study Centres. Out of the learners who have been continuing with our programmes, 17 are girls and the rest are male learners. The admission data as well as the responses of the learners have been calculated through the percentile method to show the trends of learners over the years.

Disadvantaged Learners: An Introduction

The disadvantaged students are always at risk and in the absence of a well-knit support system they languish in disabilities of various kinds. Fraught with challenges from their immediate environment, these people often tend to drop out in the middle or end up with mediocrity. This problem is acute in case of the students hailing from the rural areas as the tools and techniques, infrastructural facilities, communication facilities, knowledge base and human resources available in a rural area do definitely differ from the availability of these resources in urban locations. In view of these it is worthwhile to quote Macdonald " A consensus is beginning to emerge that opportunities and provisions of lifelong learning will require a reconsideration of the ways in which the educational environment is constructed, organized, structured, governed and financed" (2006, p.75).

When we talk about the educationally disadvantaged learners, we usually include three types of learners: At Risk Learners, Disadvantaged learners and Learners with Disabilities. Under the first group, we can include learners who are less motivated, learners who come from a low economic background, learners who lack aim/goal in professional life and learners who need constant counseling and academic support. The term disadvantaged is defined as "indicating individuals or groups who have low status in a particular society for reasons of race, sex, ethnicity, economics, language, geographical location, environment, education and disability." (Ramakrishna and Nembiakkim, 2007, 141). Consistent negligence of a group of belonging to a particular section of society due to their subjection to racial, ethnic or gender prejudice, irrespective of their qualities, make them eternally disadvantaged. Women, Learners belonging to Scheduled Castes(SCs), Scheduled Tribes(STs), Other Backward Castes(OBCs) and minorities fall into this group. Likewise, people with blindness, low vision, leprosy, hearing impairment, locomotors disability, mental retardation and mental illness can be grouped under the disabled people. (Ramakrishna and Nembiakkim, 2007, 141)

The challenges encountered by the disadvantaged groups of learners in an Open and Distance Learning System are more than that of their counterparts in the Face to Face mode of learning. Separated by long distances from the Study Centres and the Regional Centres, the learners find

it difficult to face the challenges and often succumb to them. Their problems may range from getting information about the programmes on offer under a university to taking examinations for the term End Examinations. In the absence of adequate support facilities at every level, the learners, particularly the disadvantaged ones, look for assistance from all corners. The responsibility of a university, therefore, does not simply end by offering programmes and making them accessible to people; it must ensure that the programmes are useful to all sections of society to improve their, life, help them enjoy the liberty that they seem to have been born with and earn their livelihood in a dignified manner.

IGNOU Regional Centre, Koraput: A Brief Prelude

IGNOU established in the year 1985 with only -----learners has 3.0 million students now and has acquired the prestigious position of being the largest university of the world. The 'Mission' of the University is to "advance frontiers of knowledge and promote its dissemination through sustainable ODL systems seamlessly accessible to all, including hitherto unreached, from among whom the leaders and innovators of tomorrow will emerge"(www.ignou.ac.in) The Student Support System of IGNOU, with a wide network of about 3000 Study Centres, has been consistently engaged in making efforts to take education to the doorsteps of people. But the mission which it started with seems to have been diluted. In spite of the best efforts of the University to enhance the quality of support services and facilities for the disadvantaged, most of the services and facilities remain unknown to them and thus go unutilized and leave much to be desired.

Regional Centre, Koraput, set up in 2005 to cater to the educational needs of the poor and disadvantaged people of one of the most backward regions of the country, is a burning example in this regard. Suppressed under the multiple burdens of illiteracy, extreme poverty, lack of adequate communication facilities, unfamiliarity with the medium of instruction and Maoist menace, majority of the students of this area discontinue their studies, very few complete their education and the rest don't dare to take up higher education. In comparison to their counterparts in other parts of the country, they languish in eternal social injustice. The average rate of literacy in the entire region (nine districts of Orissa and two districts of Chhatisgarh is only 43.14. Similarly, the percentage of people living below poverty line is as high as 71%, which is a shameful fact when the Country is celebrating its 64th Independence Day today. This is even higher in the southern districts where it ranges from 78 to 88.88% (Economic Survey, 2007-08, GoO). Poverty among the STs in the southern region has been estimated at 82.8 per cent. (Food Security Atlas of Rural Orissa, 2008, p.15) Implementation of anti-poverty programmes has not substantially reduced the number of families below the poverty line income. (Panda 2000)It is no wonder that all the 11 districts under the jurisdiction of this Regional centres have been included in the list of the 120 educationally most backward districts in the country identified by the Ministry of Human resource development, In the KBK region, about 90.6% people live in the rural areas. Out of these, 16.1% people are SCs and 38.3 are STs.

The Regional centre which started with only 12 Study Centres in 2005 is now rich with 45 Study Centres out of which as many as 27 Study Centres are Special Study Centres located in rural areas or established for SC/STs and other backward castes. This again indicates the backwardness of the region. Out of the 364 programmes on offer at present, only 46 programmes have been activated till date, the major reason being the absence of institutions of higher education offering similar programmes. Though BSc (Nursing) is in great demand, it is not possible to activate this programme in the entire region in the absence of a Medical College or nursing College in the region.

Learners' Profile

A cursory look at the enrollment pattern in the region over the last three years reveals startling facts about the percentage of students from the weaker sections. The multiple handicaps of

gender, poverty, caste and rural location notwithstanding, the students of this region have exhibited courage and confidence in making use of the opportunities made available to them by IGNOU. Out of a total of 11,923 students, the SCs constitute 18.48%, the STs constitute 13.86% and the OBCs constitute 24.18%. The SCs and STs together form almost one third of the total enrollment (32.34%) whereas when the numbers of SCs, STs and the OBC are taken together, the percentage touches a whopping 56.52 which is clearly indicative of the backwardness of the region. Likewise, the percentage of students belonging to the rural area is as high as 61.15%, excluding the 9.08% of learners from the tribal areas.

In spite of the discouraging female literacy rate of 29.10% in the region (in contrast to the State average of 50.5%), the IGNOU students have always exhibited very encouraging signs. A cursory look at the enrollment trend over the years reveals that the percentage of women candidates has always been more than 25%, which is an achievement in itself. Contrastingly, the percentage of successful women candidates has shown a decreasing trend. The percentage of women candidates receiving degrees and diplomas at the 19th, 20th and 21st Convocations has been 27.7%, 26.8% and 18.7% respectively. This paradoxical situation needs a through study which only can bring out the reasons for the attrition, drop out, retention and success rate of women in this region,

Analysis of Admission Data

When we come to the enrollment pattern for individual programmes, we find that about 40.63% of students from SC/ST communities mainly go for the Bachelors Preparatory Programme and 36.25% of them take admission in the Bachelors Degree Programme. This enormous presence of the SC/ST learners in the BPP and BA programmes could be ascribed to the availability of Study Materials in Oriya for BPP and for three courses (Political Science, History and Sociology) in BDP. The lower fee structure of BPP and BDP could also be one of the reasons. Most importantly, the lower educational background of the learners is mainly responsible for their enrollment into the Bachelors Preparatory Programme (BPP) and subsequent admission into BA. Learners who have not been able to pursue their education due to various reasons, especially those who have not been able to clear HSC or +2 in the conventional mode, find BPP an easy outlet to overcome the hurdle of HSC or +2. On careful study, we can see that 31.89% of students take admission into the Bachelors Degree programme whereas 39.19% of students take admission into the Bachelors Preparatory Programme and the a meager 28.92% of students take admission in all other programmes. But unfortunately, with the increasing number of courses and their level of difficulty, many of them get disappointed at later stages. That could be the reason why the drop out rate is highest among the learners who take admission into BA Second Year (39%). Students who are able to clear BPP with a little effort find it a Herculean task to complete all the courses of BDP. .

The enrollment of SCs/STs in other programmes is very low. For example, in BSW, one of the most popular programmes the percentage of SC/ST students shows significant variations over the years. Same is the case with CAFÉ, BCom, MSO, MSW, PGDRD, MARD, MEG, MP, MPS etc. The percentage of SCs and STs in all these programmes ranges from 9% to 15% for the SCs and from 3% to 15% for STs, which is very much disheartening. Strikingly enough, the percentage of SC students in BSW has been 25%. This could be mainly due to the demand of this programme for entry into the NGO sector, which has a visible presence in the entire region. For the same region, the percentage of participation of rural learners in the PGDRD programme is as high as 60% and in the MARD programme it is 55.59%.

In the absence of an Open University in the State, many students heavily depend upon IGNOU programmes to cater to their higher educational needs. But the non-availability of study materials in the regional language deters them and adversely impacts the enrollment pattern in the region.

Analysis of Learner Responses

Analysis of the data collected from the students reveals that the dropout rate is highest among the people from the BPL families. Many studies have been conducted to find out the reasons for drop out and prominent among them have been: (a) family circumstances (b) late receipt of Study materials, (c) high rate of fees (d) lack of proper guidance (e) marriage (f) less retentive power in studies (g) inadequate or less qualitative (h) occupational commitments (i) social factors and (j) psychological factors (Selvam, 1999, 267-268). In our survey, we have found that majority of the students(37%) cannot complete the programmes due to the difficulty level of the contents and non-availability of study materials in the regional language, 24% of them drop out due to poor family background and 19% discontinue their studies due to lack of support from family. The rest of them attribute their failure to health factors, lack of communication facilities and lack of academic support in the immediate environment. Various personal problems coupled with social backwardness force them to stay away from the mainstream and thus dwindle into dropouts.

Out of those who have completed different programmes, 65% are happy with the student support services, 13% are dissatisfied with the system of evaluation and the inordinate delay in the declaration of results, 7% are discontented with the delayed supply of study materials which adversely impacted their performance and the rest have reservations regarding the system of admission and re-registration. Majority of them have complaints about the non-availability of audio-visual facilities available at the Study Centres which they had hoped to make use of during the course of their study.

Among the students are continuing with various programmes under our Study Centres, 68% of them are happy with the student support services, 8.5 % of them are not happy with the counseling sessions, 4% of them have complaints regarding the non-reflection of assignments in their Grade Cards and the delay in the declaration of results, 2.5% have problem with the information regarding the dates for re-registration, filling up the examination forms and 6% of students have complaints regarding the non-receipt of assignments in time, 5.4% students have problems regarding the change of address, elective and names, 3.6% students have difficulties in understanding the correspondence from the regional centre, Study Centres and headquarters and only a negligible percentage of students 2% have some problem with the receipt of the Study materials. .

As regard the reimbursement of fees, only 18% students have been found to have got their fees back , 28% of them do not know that such a facility exists for them and the rest have applied for reimbursement and are still waiting for their turn. Reimbursement of fees in time would have been a great booster for their academic progress but their lack awareness about the scheme and the layers of bottlenecks existing in the system deprive them of this facility.

In response to their access to technology, 84% of the learners were of the opinion that they had no access to any of the technologies through which academic transactions are made by the University. Only 6..5% learners among the SC/ST communities have access to technology either in the form of computers or televisions. The rest make use of the technology in external environments like cyber cafes and Study Centres. In a region where 70% of learners reside in the rural areas and 71% of people live below poverty line, it is next to impossible to see a proper or perfect integration of pedagogy and technology in the design and delivery of our academic programmes, Most of the advanced forms of technology employed by the University for transacting the academic programmes, are therefore, either inaccessible or unaffordable. Only one percent of the learners have internet at home and a still smaller percentage (0.17%) make use of internet for academic purposes. Because of the heterogeneity of the learners, the plan for delivering academic programmes through multimedia often falls flat due to some inherent challenges. To quote Prof Ramanujam, " The first challenge here is that of the number of learners who need education-the number runs into millions. The next challenge is that of access. Only a small number, comparatively speaking, of rich and urban based students in the developing world can hope to have access to have a variety of media and technology used by the advanced countries. The third challenge is that of familiarity with the technology and the ability to use it for effective learning. Quite often the changeover to technological media results in crating

psychological stress and anxiety in the user rather than making the teaching-learning process easier" (2002, 58)

Discussion

We must know that "a satisfied distance learner is the best and most powerful publicity medium for the institution than any other media which may swallow huge money to no effect. On the other hand, a dissatisfied learner would be positively injurious to the interests of the institution. Nowadays the field of distance education is becoming highly competitive and even a slight rumour about any aspect of management on the part of the DEIs would ultimately lead to disastrous consequences.(Selvam, 1999, 268-269). Hence it is imperative that the needs of the learners are taken into account while making new plans or policies about the Student Support Services. As we have seen from the analysis above, the problems and needs of the learners may vary from person to person, from one context to another context. The different problems faced by the students mainly pertain to: lack of proper information about the examinations, admissions, assignments, late receipt of study materials and assignments, lack of adequate study skills, lack of academic support, delay in the reflection of assignment marks in the grade cards and declaration of results, problems related to wrong entry of admission data, lack of qualitative counseling sessions at the study centres and non-availability of technological facilities like computers, TV, dish-antennae, telephones, FAX and xerox machines at the Study Centres. If the funding of education is rationalized on a scientific basis, perhaps distance education could meet the demands much faster and more efficiently than the lumberous, rigid and expensive structures of campusbased education. (Ramanujam, 2002, 33)

Conclusion

The problem of distance learners have to be addressed immediately on a regular basis in order to clear discontentment from their minds. In order to enhance the reach of the university to the larger audience, particularly the disadvantaged sections like the SCs and STs, the University should:

- collect regular feedback from the students in regard to the counseling sessions and other support facilities
- take measures to translate the popular programmes into the local languages
- authorize the Regional Directors to reimburse the fees to the students directly and get it back from the Department of tribal Welfare later on.
- Special counseling sessions for the disadvantaged sections of people, particularly people located in difficult geographical areas
- Provide adequate number of computer and other multi-media equipments to make the academic transactions fruitful
- Take suitable measures to get the assignment marks uploaded by the Regional Centres only and declare the results of the examinations in time
- Operate more mobile Study Centres to make the student support services full-fledged

With a clear and concerted efforts to implement all the changes suggested above, the University should be able to fulfill its mission of reaching the unreached and become a real Peoples' University.

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