

Can Open and Distance Education bring Social Justice to the Weaker Sections of the Society: A Case Study on Directorate of Distance Education, **University of North Bengal, West Bengal, India**

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Access to Justice

1.0 INTRODUCTION:

Education, among all the forces and factors that influence in provisioning social justice, emerges strong as it creates social awareness that further leads to the realization by the individual for greater opportunities in social life. Open and Distance Learning (ODL), which is a non contiguous form of study, affords a learner the flexibility of study, independent of time and space (Jegade, Barry & Fisher 1995). By virtue of this intrinsic characteristics, ODL has immense potential that can be harnessed to promote higher education by first lowering social, cultural, perceptual and economic barriers and then leveraging the incremental quantum of educated individuals to foster socio-economic growth. Having ensured easy access to higher education and creating equitable opportunities for provision and recognition of lifelong learning, ODL can further contribute significantly to social justice through capacity building that would add considerably towards poverty alleviation and sustainable development. As participants of ODL programs are usually individuals who are motivated to enrich themselves, their knowledge and skills can be further harnessed for sustainable development of the societies, which otherwise would not have been possible in a formal, regular learning framework. The National Policy on Education (GOI 1986) places a special thrust on Distance Education by prioritizing life-long education as a cherished goal of the educational process.

2.0 ATTRIBUTES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL):

In a developing country like India, which has large social, religious and cultural diversities, significant gaps in socio-economic standards of people and absence of equity in accessing quality education at a lower cost; a well formulated ODL policy and efficient delivery system can serve as an effective instrument in ensuring social justice. Distance learning and educational equity both began with an emphasis on access, on providing underserved students with an increased access to education. Although, defining social justice and equity as '*Access to Education*' has important ramifications for ODL policy makers (Campbell & Jennifer 1996), however, ODL should also be able to provide '*Equitable Opportunities*' for participation in the process of higher education. Such opportunities can be in the form of existence of a wide range of programs that enable individuals to enroll in the programs that are relevant to their context and situations. Further, the extent of equitable opportunities can be supplemented by assuring students the '*Equity in the Ownership and Control*' (Goel & Goel 2009) of the learning process. The students, especially those who cannot afford or are opportune to enroll in regular course, could be able to ripe optimum benefit of higher education if ODL programs are flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of learners regardless of who they are, where, when and what they want to study.

While on one hand, the ODL as a system might thrive for providing equitable access and opportunity to higher education, on the other, it also needs to meet the challenges to overcome barriers to higher education and creating opportunities for participation in the knowledge development cycle. The barriers to higher education can have many facades. Many developing countries, including India, the rules of the society are predominantly based on male culture and norms of caste and creeds, as such, the conventional modes of delivery in higher education are traditionally biased against women and underprivileged section, whose participation are sometimes delimited by their biological and designated social roles. However, ODL can overcome this '*Socio-*

Cultural barrier' by providing non-conventional and flexible opportunities for those who would have found it difficult to fit in the conventionally structured education system. Moreover, in most developing countries, India is not an exception, educational structure happens to follow a pyramidal structure where the majority misses out at the lower level of the education and they later find it difficult to get admission in higher education programs for want of entry prerequisites. A well formulated ODL program can also effectively remove this '*Structural and Perceptual Barrier*' to education especially to those who had missed the formal schooling process. Easy access to ODL can thus not only expand avenues for getting requisite educational qualifications but also can break the myth that education can only be obtained through formal schooling. In developing countries, economic factor is a major impediment for expansion of education in general and higher education in particular. Poor students are generally excluded due to unavailability of competing economic resources to support higher education in preference to subsistence of the family. The challenge of ODL is therefore, to ensure that these participants have equitable chances of benefiting from the respective programs without putting significant additional financial burden on their households. Being freely accessible to learners at minimal cost, ODL can effectively lower '*Economic Barrier*' thus providing more equitable chances to students from backward socio-economic background and status. Since ODL can also act as an enabler for developing of skill, social justice in the context of ODL might be expanded to include opportunities for '*Capacity building and skill development*' and facilitating upward '*Social Mobility*'.

3.0 DISTANCE EDUCATION IN NORTH BENGAL:

University of North Bengal (NBU), a State University, is situated 10 km away from the main Siliguri town in Darjeeling district in the Indian state of West Bengal, India. The university was established in 1962 to fulfill the growing socio economic need for educated manpower in a geo-politically sensitive region that connects strategically with Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim in the north, the Gangetic Bengal on the south, Bangladesh and Assam on the east and Bihar on the west. The catchment of NBU is a heady mixture of diverse religion, culture, language, traditions, and ethnicity. The University continues to cater to vast rural areas of mostly agrarian communities of North Bengal, neighbouring hill state of Sikkim and SAARC nations like Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. A significant population of students also belongs to weaker section (Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes) of the society.

In 2000, the Directorate of Distance Education (DDE) was created under the aegis of the University of North Bengal with the objective for providing 'education for all'. DDE currently (2010) offers two years master's courses in subjects namely, Bengali, English, History, Political Science, Philosophy, Mathematics and Nepali. The quantum of enrollment continued to grow and now stands at the level of about 3500-4000 per session. About 70% of total enrolled students normally complete the course on first attempt whereas about 20% of enrolled students leave the course midway.

DDE normally follows the same academic syllabus as in vogue for regular Post Graduate (PG) Courses of NMU. While continuous remedial counseling is being given by full time teachers specially engaged by DDE throughout the year, for making the programme more effective, two weeks duration Personal Contact Programme (PCP) is also organized every year. The student support services in DDE campus offer library facilities, information kiosks and internet facility. Self instructional materials (SIM) are also provided to the students in English at the time of admission. Two dedicated enquiry nos. which are open in daytime on weekdays facilitates students throughout the year. DDE has also hosted its own website where model question papers, examination results and other information are uploaded regularly for facilitating easy access by the students. Students can also interact with the faculties through e-mail or over telephone.

4.0 OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY:

DDE envisages at reaching out to students who have limited accessibility to higher education because of unfavourable topographical and socio-economic conditions and thus acting as a principal agent for providing social justice. The study makes an attempt to assess 'quantitatively' through the perception of the end-user or students, whether the ODL policies and

practices of DDE has been able to effectively serve as an instrument for provisioning 'Social Justice' to the weaker section of the society including women.

In order to formulate the study, a measuring instrument has been developed with the help of eight (8) constructs which has been identified in the preceding section while describing the concept 'social justice' in the context of ODL (para 2.0). The constructs namely 'Access to Education', 'Equitable Opportunities', 'Equity in the Ownership and Control', 'Socio-Cultural Barrier', 'Structural and Perceptual Barrier', 'Economic Barrier', 'Capacity building and skill development' and 'Social Mobility' are further disintegrated into items or dimensions for developing appropriate measurement variables. A 24 items survey questionnaire was then developed to represent these items which are measured in a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represents 'total disagreement' and 5, 'total agreement'. The questionnaires were then administered to a 'convenient mixed samples' of 125 currently enrolled and ex-student of DDE, NBU for getting their response on these dimensions. Out of 125 questionnaires administered, 117 responses were received back for evaluation. Besides, the dimensions, a demographic profile of the sample e.g., gender, age group, employment status, household income etc. were also collected.

5.0 DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS:

The demographic profile of the sample indicates (Box-A) that DDE has been able to expand its reach and now enrolls students with wider demographic profile including those residing more than 100km away and with less household income.

The mean value of all eight constructs along with their upper and lower bound with 95% confidence level indicates (Box-B) that there is a general agreement among students that DDE has been able to provide easy 'Access to education' (Mean: 3.63)¹ while been able to lower the barriers to higher education: 'Social and Cultural' Mean: 3.76), 'Structural and

Box-A

Demographic Profile of the Sample

| Employment Status | | |
|--------------------------|----|-------|
| Employed | 56 | 47.9% |
| Not Employed | 61 | 52.1% |
| Age in Years | | |
| <25 | 57 | 48.7% |
| 25-35 | 40 | 34.2% |
| -45 | 18 | 15.4% |
| >45 | 2 | 1.7% |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 69 | 59.0% |
| Female | 48 | 41.0% |
| Marital Status | | |
| Married | 40 | 34.2% |
| Not Married | 77 | 65.8% |
| Distance from Institute | | |
| <20 km | 34 | 29.1% |
| 20-50km | 19 | 16.2% |
| 50-100km | 10 | 8.5% |
| >100km | 54 | 46.2% |
| Category | | |
| SC | 32 | 27.4% |
| ST | 14 | 12.0% |
| OBC | 15 | 12.8% |
| General | 56 | 47.9% |
| Household Monthly Income | | |
| <5000/- | 49 | 41.9% |
| 5000-10000/- | 38 | 32.5% |
| >10000/- | 30 | 25.6% |

Descriptive Statistics

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------|-----|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| Access | 117 | 1.75 | 5.00 | 3.6325 | .70142 |
| Equity | 117 | 2.00 | 5.33 | 3.5355 | .59986 |
| Opportunity | 117 | 1.75 | 4.75 | 3.3697 | .65043 |
| Socio_Cultural | 117 | 2.67 | 5.00 | 3.7694 | .60418 |
| Struct_Percept | 117 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 4.2137 | .94531 |
| Economic | 117 | 1.67 | 5.00 | 3.4725 | .72766 |
| Capability | 117 | 1.75 | 5.00 | 3.5705 | .69624 |
| Mobility | 117 | 1.83 | 5.00 | 3.6297 | .63482 |
| Overall_Index | 117 | 2.75 | 4.81 | 3.6492 | .43304 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 117 | | | | |

BOX-B

¹ 1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly Agree. If the lower bound at 95% confidence level falls below 3.0, it is considered that the construct is not supported.

Perceptual' (Mean: 4.2). It is also able to provide 'Equitable' (Mean: 3.53) higher education while offering opportunities for 'Social Mobility' (Mean: 3.62) and development of 'Skills & Capability' (Mean: 3.57). However, students do not feel that DDE has been able to break the 'Economic' (Mean: 3.47) barriers of higher education significantly and the current system of provisioning of education does not offer sufficient 'Opportunity' to the students to take control of the process (Mean: 3.36).

A comparative analysis was also attempted to understand the difference of perception of students belonging to weaker section of the society to the rest (Box-C). Although, no significant difference (95% confidence level) was noticed in the perception level of the students belonging to SC or ST communities (Category:1) compared to others (Category: 2), however, their level of perception about facilitating 'Social Mobility', removal of 'Socio-Cultural' and 'Structural-Perceptual' barrier are found to be less than others. On the other hand, the students belonging to weaker section more strongly feel that DDE provides easier access (Mean 3.72) to higher education. The findings also indicates that no significant difference in perception exists between male and female students (BOX-D) and among students belonging to relatively lower income group (Monthly household income <Rs. 5000/-) and others (BOX-E).

Therefore, we do not find any significant difference in level of perception among students with respect to the measured dimensions irrespective of their caste (SC, ST), gender (Male/Female) or household income level. The overall index (3.64) computed as the mean of eight constructs is found to have 95% confidence level lies between 3.56 and 3.72. Moreover, the findings show that none of the constructs has the lower limit of 95% confidence level below 3.0.

Among all the questions, "Women are greater beneficiaries to Distance Learning as families can now allow them to pursue higher education as the course curriculum does not demand full time engagement" (Mean: 4.21) and "This is only because of DDE I can pursue higher studies without disturbing my household" (Mean 4.17) have come out with maximum mean score. Students also feel that "the Institution provides supporting environment to poor students and students belong to weaker section of the society" (Mean: 3.77). However, "DDE, NBU does not offer much choice, the student have to opt for a course even though he/she may not like the same" has the lowest mean score of 2.72.

| Group Statistics | | | | |
|------------------|-------------|----|--------|----------------|
| | Caste_group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
| Access | 1.00 | 46 | 3.7228 | .66506 |
| | 2.00 | 71 | 3.5739 | .72259 |
| Equity | 1.00 | 46 | 3.5072 | .60718 |
| | 2.00 | 71 | 3.5538 | .59868 |
| Opportunity | 1.00 | 46 | 3.4130 | .68357 |
| | 2.00 | 71 | 3.3415 | .63138 |
| Socio_Cultural | 1.00 | 46 | 3.6743 | .66120 |
| | 2.00 | 71 | 3.8310 | .56043 |
| Struct_Percept | 1.00 | 46 | 4.1087 | 1.12008 |
| | 2.00 | 71 | 4.2817 | .81386 |
| Economic | 1.00 | 46 | 3.5074 | .73619 |
| | 2.00 | 71 | 3.4499 | .72643 |
| Capability | 1.00 | 46 | 3.5163 | .73296 |
| | 2.00 | 71 | 3.6056 | .67435 |
| Mobility | 1.00 | 46 | 3.5033 | .62503 |
| | 2.00 | 71 | 3.7115 | .63196 |
| Overall_Index | 1.00 | 46 | 3.6191 | .45731 |
| | 2.00 | 71 | 3.6686 | .41874 |

BOX-C

| Group Statistics | | | | |
|------------------|--------|----|--------|----------------|
| | SEX | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
| Access | Male | 69 | 3.6558 | .66435 |
| | Female | 48 | 3.5990 | .75748 |
| Equity | Male | 69 | 3.5648 | .57743 |
| | Female | 48 | 3.4933 | .63452 |
| Opportunity | Male | 69 | 3.4022 | .63335 |
| | Female | 48 | 3.3229 | .67823 |
| Socio_Cultural | Male | 69 | 3.7345 | .61754 |
| | Female | 48 | 3.8196 | .58722 |
| Struct_Percept | Male | 69 | 4.1739 | .93866 |
| | Female | 48 | 4.2708 | .96182 |
| Economic | Male | 69 | 3.5020 | .67805 |
| | Female | 48 | 3.4300 | .79906 |
| Capability | Male | 69 | 3.6268 | .68683 |
| | Female | 48 | 3.4896 | .70891 |
| Mobility | Male | 69 | 3.6161 | .61229 |
| | Female | 48 | 3.6492 | .67198 |
| Overall_Index | Male | 69 | 3.6595 | .41540 |
| | Female | 48 | 3.6343 | .46129 |

BOX-D

Since, ODL is envisaged to cater to students who have not only easy physical access to the Institute but also for those who are located far away, an enquiry appears to be worthwhile to examine whether there is any difference of perception between students who are located far away (>50km) and the rest. The findings exhibits that significant difference of perceptions exists between students who are located more than 50km away on all constructs except 'Equity' and 'Opportunity' and the rest. The remotely located students have significant lesser perception about 'Ease of Access' (significant level: 99.5%), 'Improvement in Capability' (significant level: 98.2%), 'Social upward Mobility' (significant level: >99.8%) and removal of 'Socio-Cultural' (significant level: 98.5%), 'Structural Perceptual' (significant level: 99.5%) and 'Economic barriers' (significant level: 99.9%). Even on the 'Overall Index' (mean of all eight constructs), there is a significant (>99.9%) lesser overall perception of social justice by the students residing more than 50km away.

| Group Statistics | | | | |
|------------------|----------------|----|--------|----------------|
| | Distance_group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
| Access | 1.00 | 53 | 3.8302 | .67542 |
| | 2.00 | 64 | 3.4688 | .68502 |
| Equity | 1.00 | 53 | 3.6289 | .70886 |
| | 2.00 | 64 | 3.4581 | .48413 |
| Opportunity | 1.00 | 53 | 3.3726 | .67515 |
| | 2.00 | 64 | 3.3672 | .63460 |
| Socio_Cultural | 1.00 | 53 | 3.9181 | .63361 |
| | 2.00 | 64 | 3.6462 | .55385 |
| Struct_Percept | 1.00 | 53 | 4.4906 | .79958 |
| | 2.00 | 64 | 3.9844 | .99988 |
| Economic | 1.00 | 53 | 3.7100 | .65742 |
| | 2.00 | 64 | 3.2758 | .72899 |
| Capability | 1.00 | 53 | 3.7453 | .81673 |
| | 2.00 | 64 | 3.4258 | .54314 |
| Mobility | 1.00 | 53 | 3.8238 | .78440 |
| | 2.00 | 64 | 3.4689 | .41978 |
| Overall_Index | 1.00 | 53 | 3.8149 | .46576 |
| | 2.00 | 64 | 3.5119 | .35209 |

BOX-F

| Group Statistics | | | | |
|------------------|--------------|----|--------|----------------|
| | Income_group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
| Access | 1.00 | 49 | 3.6990 | .66336 |
| | 2.00 | 68 | 3.5846 | .72869 |
| Equity | 1.00 | 49 | 3.5506 | .55139 |
| | 2.00 | 68 | 3.5246 | .63631 |
| Opportunity | 1.00 | 49 | 3.5000 | .58630 |
| | 2.00 | 68 | 3.2757 | .68177 |
| Socio_Cultural | 1.00 | 49 | 3.7080 | .60723 |
| | 2.00 | 68 | 3.8137 | .60256 |
| Struct_Percept | 1.00 | 49 | 4.1429 | 1.04083 |
| | 2.00 | 68 | 4.2647 | .87447 |
| Economic | 1.00 | 49 | 3.4549 | .75053 |
| | 2.00 | 68 | 3.4851 | .71608 |
| Capability | 1.00 | 49 | 3.5051 | .68368 |
| | 2.00 | 68 | 3.6176 | .70641 |
| Mobility | 1.00 | 49 | 3.5676 | .52935 |
| | 2.00 | 68 | 3.6744 | .70151 |
| Overall_Index | 1.00 | 49 | 3.6410 | .44255 |
| | 2.00 | 68 | 3.6551 | .42928 |

BOX-E

The findings presented above on the various dimensions of ODL at DDE would have important implications for enhancing the efficacy of the systems and processes. In the following section a brief review of some of the major implications for policy makers is being enumerated.

6.0 DISCUSSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATION

ODL has a long history of considering educational equity primarily as access. Indeed ODL began with a goal of increasing access to education among underserved students and to provide rural students with increased access to a variety of courses that they otherwise would have had no opportunity to take (Campbell & Jennifer 1996). Our finding reveals that DDE has been able to extend opportunities for higher education even to the weaker sections of the society by lowering social-cultural and structural-perceptual barrier. Moreover, the very nature of ODL that allows pursuing study without attending regular classes has helped it to become popular among students from remote places, employed individuals and among women students (51.8%) who outnumber male students (48.2%) in terms of enrollment. The congenial policy support by state government which reimburses full admission fees to students who belong to weaker section (scheduled caste and scheduled tribes) and 50% fees waiver to the those below poverty line; has further helped to expand the reach of higher education.

However, distance education is not just creating opportunities for higher education. The opportunity needs to be supplemented in such a way that it helps enhancing the skills and capabilities of the individuals. Thus, what is offered is an integral part of ODL is also an issue for

equity in distance learning (Campbell & Jennifer 1996). Little or no diversity in curriculum content can, therefore, create a severe impediment to social justice. The current policy of DDE of not offering any professional course or vocational courses besides offering seven core subjects in PG course (Mathematics, English, Bengali, History, Political Science, Nepali and Philosophy) limits the opportunity for skill development and employability of students. Eventually, the passed out students have to either look for teaching openings in local schools or opt for other small professions. This might have further consequential impact on social mobility especially for students belonging to weaker sections and women. Students initially hold degree in high esteem but after some time due to lack of employment opportunities, they also feel that there is limited or no improvement in their social mobility.

ODL envisages teaching, guiding and supporting the students on a continuous basis even though the learners and the educators are separated in both time and space dimensions. The most important feature for characterizing distance education is not its morphology but how a continuous communication between teacher and student is facilitated (Goel & Goel 2009). In many situations, it may also demand transporting 'learning' to the students rather transporting students to the place of learning (Chitnis & Phillip 1993). The catchment of DDE includes largely hilly and remote areas of North Bengal and Sikkim, where many students are first generation learners who have no graduate in their family (29.9% of sample size). Accordingly, these students might not be acquainted with the techniques of self study and thus, they need hand-holding on a continuous basis. However, many students cannot have easy access to information and services that are only offered locally by the DDE. For example, the Personal Contact Programme (PCP) which is organized only in the campus in the evening time (5-8pm) on weekdays and daytime (10am-5pm) on weekends are not convenient for many. Women and remotely placed students cannot avail this opportunity as many a time it is not possible for them to attend the classes at night. Although a few students can afford to rent rooms nearby the campus during the two week program but many of them could not. Moreover, student support services are currently provided only on-campus, which makes the students to be physically present in the campus for availing the services. Once again, this arrangement is not convenient for many students.

Remedial measures can be in the direction of de-centralizing PCP classes, franchising with IT service providers for widening the reach through ICT to create an interactive virtual classroom, digital library services, and collaboration with local colleges for decentralized and distributed library access etc. Adaptation of modern technology for effective design and delivery of services would also be necessary. Last but not the least, the educators and policy makers need to understand, appreciate and be sensitized about the subtle differences between conventional and distance mode of education.

7.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In general when access to any desired resource is limited whether it is the teacher or a piece of information, or when the transaction or opportunity the cost is significantly high, unless remedial measures are taken, at the foremost, the students belonging to weaker section including women get excluded. Therefore, to make change, the process of provisioning social justice must be made integral to the ODL system. Ensuring equity and opportunity must not be considered complementary while formulating ODL policies and implementing them. Although, the issues related to increased access are of prime importance, the policy makers cannot afford to overlook other components of ODL as deliberated earlier.

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