

Role of Community Colleges in Transforming India into a Knowledge Society

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Augmentation of human resource capabilities has become the need of the day when our country is moving toward faster economic growth and development. Universalisation of education has therefore been recognized as a priority in our national policy initiatives targeted at human resource development. The extant institutional infrastructure for both general and technical education has assumed structure and styles that precludes universal accessibility and therefore, it often lags behind when it comes to inclusiveness in educational opportunities. Moreover, contemporary education has very serious lacuna in as much as it is asynchronous with the type of requirements of skills by the businesses and industries, given the type of competition which they face in a globalised world. Progressive democracies such as that of ours can only ill-afford to ignore models of education that are critical to resolve the current impasse of a widening mismatch between demand for and supply of skill-sets required to scale up opportunities for economic and social development. Rethinking new models of innovative alternative education which would be flexible, cost-effective, egalitarian and at the same time relevant and useful, has become the need of the hour.

The community college system which originated in the early years of twentieth century in America, is considered as an important landmark in the history of education. Research on different aspects of community colleges in US have reiterated the significant roles played by community colleges toward enhancing the quality of human resources in different contexts as well as the issues related to performance and accountability of such colleges.

Several research studies have focused on the role of community colleges in promoting education to different types of students, especially disadvantaged students and the policies and practices adopted by them for ensuring commitment and positive student outcomes. (Bailey 2008, Jacobs 2007&2008, Dougherty & Townsend 2006, Jenkins 2006, Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey & Jenkins 2006, Alfonso 2006, Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl & Leinbach 2006, Jacobs & Voorhees 2006). Zeidenberg & Bailey (2010) point to how community colleges are designed to make college education accessible to all, through their open access admission policies, low tuition costs and convenient locations. Research has also highlighted the role of community colleges in adult education and literacy (Morest, 2004). Brag and Hamm (1996) point to the ability of community colleges to provide occupational training as well as traditional liberal arts training.

J. W. Quinley & M.P. Quinley (2000) look at community colleges from the point of view of a 'second chance institution' for students who fall under the definition of 'reverse transfers'. Bridges to Opportunity for Underprepared Adults: A State Policy Guide for Community College Leaders (2008) throws light on the practical strategies and tools for addressing the need to provide large numbers of working-age adults with education and training, so that they are assured of comfortable levels of wages and opportunities of social mobility.

Van Noy and Zeidenberg (2009) stress the roles community colleges can play in imparting necessary skills to cope with the downturn as well as to help out the displaced workers to cope with such conditions and gain the necessary skills to re-enter the job market when the downturn eases. The study highlights

the need for community colleges to operate with a continual "ear to the ground" to detect changes in labour market .

Zeidenberg (2008) details three key challenges that community colleges face namely, unprepared students, financial stress, and high dropout rates. Dougherty, Hare and Rebecca Natow (2009) caution the need for community colleges to demonstrate accountability by using measures that allow true evaluation of programs based on nationally recognized standards.

Need for Expanding Educational Opportunities: The Indian Scenario

India, with its huge population, needs massive efforts for skill-oriented and knowledge based education. There has virtually been a knowledge explosion in the last lap of 20th century and in the beginning of 21st century with the advent of internet revolution, emerging technologies, new media, open sources movement and opening up of economies as a result of globalisation. As a nation, we cannot fail to appreciate the need for skill-based, work related as well as universal education. The relevance of community colleges to meet the educational aspirations of the community for a wide variety of academic requirements in an economy like that of ours which is progressively moving towards a knowledge economy cannot be ignored. By enhancing access to higher education to student populations, these institutions trigger in a virtuous cycle of egalitarian opportunities, sustained income generation and the consequent improvement in quality of life.

Illich (1971) has made a vehement appeal in his "De-schooling Society" to replace existing schools and school systems with skills centres, as schools in his view were instruments of regimentation and creates conformity of thought rather than nurturing life skills in its subjects. Educational experts have time and again underlined the pitfalls of conventional educational systems which are not able to kindle creativity in students nor able to develop any tangible skills. Given the present growth trajectory of the country, community colleges will act as the right vehicle for skill development, skill upgradation and gainful employment.

The percentage of people with requisite skills in our economy is far less compared to the developed and industrialized countries. It is generally felt that if India has to compete in the emerging global economic scenario, especially with developing countries like China, it has to accelerate its efforts to develop the skills of its citizens. Moreover, certification of skills has become a necessity to facilitate recognition in the job market. Education becomes meaningful to the community at large, when it has close links with job markets. Preparing students for the modern work force, either by offering skills-specific courses which meet established standards of excellence or by providing certification of existing skills enhances their employability.

Responsiveness to social needs and issues of the local community is central to the mission of community colleges. A community college which appropriately understands and visualizes the needs and opportunities of the local community and forges linkages with its agrarian and industry initiatives, would go a long way in meeting the specific development needs of the locality and the people. Moreover, these initiatives are most likely to be culturally compatible as well, due to the geographic proximity and local friendliness which the community college offers. Cost-effectiveness and the consequent ability to control or altogether eliminate the growth of a discriminatory and inequitable system of education can be considered as another important positive effect of community colleges.

Different stages of economic development need different kinds of skills. The prevailing educational system should be able to inculcate community-specific skills in people which will contribute towards the

overall growth of the economy. Besides imparting skills, community colleges also have to act as facilitators of learning and help in transforming India into a Knowledge Society. They can act as hubs for harnessing digital technologies and also design web-enabled information system that will aid e-learning. Digital access can be mobilized and made available to the local community, so that they recognise the full potential of a connected world. Programmes can be streamlined not only for enhancing the conceptual and theoretical knowledge of students, but also for making them capable of applying them in real life situations.

The significance of community colleges as an alternative system of education also arises from the need to establish equality and inclusiveness into the education system. They are best suited to cater to the educational needs of the disadvantaged, who, for various reasons, have dropped out from the formal system of schooling. Pragmatic and adaptive education which is within reach of people who are likely to be marginalised or peripheralised can be ensured through these colleges. Community colleges also help fulfil the distinctive needs of adult education. Increasing the employability of people and thereby enhancing their earning potential are felt as significant steps towards improving the quality of life of people.

A serious challenge that the present day societies face is that of environmental degradation. Due to persisting diversities and region-specific nature of environmental issues, concerns of environment need to be addressed at the local level. Community colleges can play a pivotal role in codifying and documenting knowledge about local resources and in addressing environmental issues by taking leadership in initiating projects that will integrate useful indigenous knowledge. Knowledge modules can be designed for dissemination to the local community and to larger people so as to enlighten them on the various aspects of environment.

The IGNOU Initiative

The model of community colleges visualised by IGNOU under the Scheme of Community Colleges, is aimed at enhancing the levels of skill formation and skill development in our society. Creating and maintaining multiple options for learners have been the hallmark of IGNOU right from its inception in 1985. IGNOU has already proved itself as having great potential to reach different segments of our society with a bouquet of courses that are relevant for the community. The underlying ethos of new knowledge landscape is democratization, a theme which is dear to IGNOU.

We are progressively moving towards a market economy in which education and knowledge are private commodities. Efforts are needed to decelerate this commoditization process and to lay emphasis on universal access to knowledge. In the emerging scenario, IGNOU can embark upon wider dissemination of knowledge and help build skills in the larger community. In this context the Scheme of Community Colleges, as envisaged by IGNOU, is likely to make a qualitative change in the local communities where they are established. IGNOU also has provided operational freedom to community colleges to have linked study centres, so as to run purely academic programmes for the community colleges. Community colleges also have freedom to offer programmes with practical components.

The Study

Although the scheme of community college was started by IGNOU in 2009 the scheme is still in its nascent stage. As such, it would be too early to evaluate the impact that the scheme had on the society or to accurately predict its future. However, it would be desirable to study about the scheme of community

colleges at this juncture, to fully understand the potential of these colleges and to assess how best they can act as catalysts for a Knowledge Society.

The present study aims at constructing an overview of the programme offerings made by the IGNOU community colleges in Kerala and also of the profile of the student beneficiaries who have enrolled for such programmes. The system of community colleges has not matured enough to provide reliable data on its actual impact. However, considering the great potential these institutions have for achieving the proximal goals laid down for them, it was felt pertinent to look into certain select variables such as, programme offerings and student enrollments. The outcomes of the study are expected to shed light on how far these colleges are focused on their mission and also on the scope for re-engineering these colleges in the future to empower them to add greater value to the local communities.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the nature and scope of programme offerings made by the community colleges under study
2. To investigate into the patterns of student enrollment for various programmes
3. To explore the student profiles in terms of select demographic variables

Methodology

The method of the study comprises of two components namely:

- Focus group discussion and interviews
- Survey of sample colleges using a structured questionnaire

The focus group discussions and interviews were conducted with the functionaries and students of community colleges at various places in Kerala to understand their perception about the programmes run by the community colleges and to get acquainted with various problems that are faced by the community colleges.

The discussions mainly focused on discussants' perceptions on:

- i) Academic programmes initiated by community colleges and their employability potential.
- ii) Potential of community colleges to act as educational hubs and knowledge centres of the local community.
- iii) Issues and prospects in terms of societal outcomes

The outcomes are presented later in this study.

The IGNOU initiative is slowly catching up in the state of Kerala. Currently, there are altogether, **26** community colleges in the state which are functional and offer about 130 different academic programmes cutting across different knowledge domains. Out of these colleges, six colleges were randomly selected for an intensive study about the nature of courses offered and the profile of students enrolled for various programmes. Data obtained about 510 students who have enrolled for various programmes in the sample colleges were analysed and the results of analysis are presented below.

Results of Analysis

Data pertaining to the sample community colleges were analysed to examine the distribution of such colleges with respect to the different variables under study, namely, nature of locality, programmes offered; age, gender, current occupational status and levels of education of students on joining the programme.

Student Enrollment, Programmes on Offer and Nature of Locality of Sample Community Colleges

To facilitate better comprehension of the results of the analysis, it is relevant that we understand the distribution of sample community colleges on the basis of student enrollment, programmes on offer and the nature of locality in which the sample community colleges are situated.

Data set on sample community colleges show the following distribution for student enrollment, number of programmes offered and nature of locality in which the sample community colleges are situated.

Table 1

Distribution of Sample Community Colleges on the Basis of Student Enrollment Number of Programmes Offered and Nature of Locality

Name of Community College	Nature of Locality	No. of Programmes offered	Total Number of Students	Percent
Royal Community College,	Urban	1	23	4.5
Pravasi Community College, Mankada	Rural	7	110	21.6
GSGSK Community College	Urban	4	24	4.7
Christu Raj Community College, Pala	Semi Urban	5	63	12.4
Vivekananda Community College Nilambur	Rural	10	254	49.8
Costford Community College, Trichur	Urban	3	36	7.1
Total		30	510	100.0

Student enrollment depends upon many factors, the most important of which relate to the number of programmes offered by the community college. The figures presented in the above table shows uneven distribution with respect to student enrollment, mainly due to differences in number of programmes offered.

Programmes Offered by the Community Colleges

There are usually a large number of variables that influence programme choice. However, although cost factors do play a significant role, it is reasonable to conjecture that potential for employment is a major

consideration while choosing a particular programme. The following table shows the distribution of students in the sample community colleges on the basis of the programmes of study chosen by them.

Table2

Distribution of Students Colleges on the Basis of Programmes Chosen

Programme	Frequency	Percent
Certificate course in Fashion Design	94	18.4
Diploma in Pharmacy Assistant	59	11.6
Diploma in Laptop hardware and Wi fi	55	10.8
Diploma in Hardware Maintenance	49	9.6
Certificate course in Desk Top Publishing	33	6.5
Diploma in Computer Application	25	4.9
Associate degree in Hotel Management	23	4.5
Associate degree in Construction Technology and Management	22	4.3
Certificate course in Basic Counselling	21	4.1
Diploma in Fashion Technology	20	3.9
Associate degree in Commerce	16	3.1
Associate degree in Business Administration	13	2.5
Certificate course in Office Automation	12	2.4
Diploma in Medical lab	12	2.4
Associate degree in Computer Application	12	2.4
Associate degree in Microfinance	10	2.0
Certificate course in Functional Hindi and Translation	8	1.6
Associate degree in English	7	1.4
Diploma in Foundry Practices	6	1.2
Diploma in Tailoring and Embroidery	3	.6
Associate degree in Construction Technology and Management	2	.4
Diploma in Computer Teaching and Training	2	.4
Diploma in Information Technology	2	.4
Associate degree in Survey and Levelling	2	.4
Diploma in Dental Technology	1	.2
Diploma in Cosmetology and Beautician	1	.2
Total	510	100.0

The distribution shows a relatively higher concentration of frequencies in certificate course in fashion designing followed by diploma in pharmacy assistant programme.

Gender wise distribution of Students

Gender difference in access to formal education is a much contested topic. Since education plays a vital role in empowering individuals, the gender related aspects of enrollment is of considerable importance in

determining the ability of community colleges to provide value to the society. The gender-wise distribution of students enrolled is presented in the following table.

Table.3

Gender- wise distribution of Students

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Female	308	60.4
Male	202	39.6
Total	510	100.0

The distribution shows that the total enrollment of women is much higher than that of men, with the respective percentages as 60.4 and 39.6. There is prima facie evidence that women have access to educational initiatives of community colleges and that they can play a critical role in enlarging the prospects of women employment.

The nature of programmes chosen by women reveals the pattern shown in the table below.

Table 4

Nature of Programmes Chosen by Female Students

Sl. No	Name of Course	No of female student enrollment
1	Fashion Technology/Fashion Design	110
2	Diploma in Pharmacy Assistant	58
3	Basic Counselling	21
4	Computer Application /Office Automation/ Desk Top Publishing	58
5	Other Programmes	61
	Total	308

We find that female enrollments were heavily concentrated in fashion related programmes, with 35.71 percent of them getting enrolled for these programmes. This is followed by pharmacy assistant programme and computer application related programmes, with 18.83 percent of the total enrollments in each. Another programme which found favour with female students is basic counselling. Briefly put, as high as 80.19 percent of the total female students enrolled for various programmes were crowding into these four programmes and only 19.81 percent got enrolled in any of the other 23 programmes.

Gender-wise distribution of Students in Different Localities

The study also proposed to examine gender wise distribution of students in different localities

Table 5

Gender wise Distribution of Students in Different Localities

Nature of Locality * Gender Cross tabulation			
Nature of Locality	Male	Female	Total
Rural	142	222	364
Semi-urban	8	55	63
Urban	52	31	83
Total	142	308	510

While the enrollment figures related to community colleges in rural and semi-urban locality show conspicuous evidence of relatively higher enrollment of women in comparison with those of men, the urban based community colleges have shown lower enrollment of women. This has to be read keeping in mind the programme preferences of women as shown in table 4. Evidence suggests that nature of courses on offer in urban areas has influenced the rate of women enrollment.

Academic Achievement of Students Prior to Enrollment

Investigation into academic achievements of students prior to enrollment reveals the type of student population which the community colleges cater to. The following table shows the distribution of formal academic qualifications which attained by students enrolled in the selected community colleges.

Table 6

Academic Achievement of Students Prior to Enrollment

Education	Frequency	Percent
Plus two	304	59.6
SSLC	165	32.4
Less than 10th Standard	23	4.5
Degree	10	2.0
Technical Diploma	6	1.2
Post graduation	2	.4

As can be observed from the table, as high as 59.6 percent of the students had education equivalent to plus two and nearly one-third of the students (32.4 percent) had education up to tenth standard.

Employment Status of Students Enrolled

Since community colleges offer flexible options, employed people can also benefit from programmes offered. The distribution of students in sample community colleges on the basis of employment is presented below.

Table 7

Employment Status of Students Enrolled

Employment Status	Frequency	Percent
Not Known	18	3.5
Not employed	475	93.1
Employed	17	3.3
Total	510	100.0

From the above table, we find that most of the students were unemployed. The percentage of students who had employment was only 3.3.

From the quantitative analysis given above, we find that community colleges mainly cater to the educational needs of students who have not been able to pursue formal education beyond plus two levels. Students who seek education are mostly unemployed and female students outnumber males in nearly all community colleges, except urban community colleges. Women students are represented more than proportionately in programmes such as, fashion designing, basic counselling, pharmacy assistance and computer application.

Some of the findings of the focus group discussions and interviews are as follows:

- 1) Generally students and Community Colleges prefer courses with employability potential.
- 2) Identifying such courses and programmes become difficult for want of exact need assessment surveys.
- 3) Functionaries of Community Colleges lack necessary academic orientation to design and structure courses that lead to development of skills which are very much required by the community
- 4) Some of the academic programmes offered lack rigour in content and training components because of the lack of experience and expertise on the part of the Community College functionaries.
- 5) The gestation period between starting of Community College and launch of academic programmes is very long because of the delay in identifying need-based programmes to be launched. Added to this these are administrative delays.
- 6) Efforts are required to prepare a catalogue showing inventory of skills that are required by the local community that the Community College can offer.
- 7) In-built mechanisms are to be designed to make the courses offered financially self-sustaining.

The stakeholders felt that the community colleges will go a **along** way in:

- Fostering a culture of entrepreneurship especially region-specific rural entrepreneurship
- Developing as the best channel by which our country can increase the stock of human capital in a cost-effective manner
- Development of workforce in tune with the requirements of the labour market. While the formal system may be ill-equipped to meet the dynamic educational needs, the community college system, being more flexible and less bureaucratized can be more responsive and adaptable to such needs

- Serving the interests of semi-skilled and unskilled labour force who would prefer to migrate to other countries
- Accommodating training requirements and practice of emerging jobs (such as healthcare of old, in the Kerala context)
- Promoting education of disadvantaged women who, for various socio-economic reasons, lack mobility to pursue educational opportunities outside their locality. Consequently, the opportunities of women for income earning potential and empowerment are likely to get enlarged.
- Improving the relatedness and enhancing networks of learners. Community colleges will thus play a social function as well in promoting cohesion in the local society in which it functions
- Skill upgradation for higher order jobs for people who landed up in jobs which are less skill-intensive
- Helping out people who experience the trauma of displacement or job losses
- Providing flexible, multiple options to choose from or to simultaneously pursue more than one programme.

Conclusion

The prospects of community colleges in India is bright .The scope of the existing programmes would enhance and the richness and variety of programs offered by community colleges will proliferate to make it the kingpin of academic initiatives to ensure accessibility and preparedness of students to meet the job market challenges of the present century. It is a 'mission unrivalled' for IGNOU toward preparing students for the contemporary work force and for constructing a community of learners who have undergone meaningful education. The university has to shoulder the responsibility of fine-tuning its systems and procedures and monitoring its implementation to ensure that the system is rendered efficient and sustainable. As the system of community colleges evolve and mature, both qualitative as well as quantitative research needs to be undertaken to investigate into the educational and employability outcomes of community colleges.

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