

Theme: Community Development Sub Theme: Innovative Paths to Knowledge society

REGIONAL COOPERATION AMONG OPEN UNIVERSITIES: A CASE OF SOUTH ASIA

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There is perhaps no region in the world that can boast of an antiquity rivaling that of South Asia . When man in distant reaches of the world was still occupied with concerns of bare survival from Human and Environmental challenges, South Asia was grappling with the issues concerning the mind and the intellect. However, times changed and South Asia that once was testimonial to the towering heights of intellectual achievements became self content and over confident with regard to its own achievements and shut its eyes to the outside world. Exploration of mysteries and travelling to the outside world became uncommon. Considerations related to the differences among humans based on birth became the source discrimination in the attainment in the attainment of education and cultivation of the faculties of the mind. Thus South Asia that was once the hub of world intellect and production became one of the weakest performers on this front.

Southern Asia is also a region (as we will see shortly) which requires a robust Open Education System in place due to the emergent socio-economic realities. The strength and vibrancy of the Open and Distance mode institutions will determine how quickly the region moves out of the specter of backwardness enveloping the region.

South Asia: A Brief Introduction

South Asia is the worlds' most densely populated region with the richest varieties of flora and fauna found anywhere on the planet. As diverse as these resources are the problems facing the region. South Asia as a region consists of seven countries, namely, India, Pakistan, Srilanka, Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal and Afganistan. The Human Development Index of the region is not something that its inhabitants can be proud about. The table presented below gives a bird's eye view on the economic status of the region.

Table 1: South Asia –Basic Demographic and Economic Indicators

Country	Population	Nominal GDP in Millions of USD	Per Capita Income(in USD)	Area (in Km square)
BANGLADESH	162221000	94507	573	14570
BHUTAN	697000	1269	1880	38394
INDIA	1198003000	1235975	1030	3287240
MALDIVES	396334	1357	3932	298
NEPAL	29331000	12615	451	147181
PAKISTAN	180808000	166515	1016	803940
SRILANKA	20238000	41323	2041	65610

Source: (YES PAKISTAN)

If we take a look at the Human Development Indices of the region, the glaring gap between the region and the rest of the world becomes starkly clear and illustrative. Table No.2 presents the Human Poverty Indices of the region.

Table 2: **Human Poverty Indices of South Asia**

Country	Population	HPI Rank	HPI Values (%)
BANGLADESH	162221000	73	43.3
BHUTAN	697000	NA	NA
INDIA	1198003000	55	34.3
MALDIVES	396334	25	15.8
NEPAL	29331000	77	44.2
PAKISTAN	180808000	65	39.2
SRILANKA	20238000	31	18.0

Source: (YES PAKISTAN)

When ever we talk about South Asia, the lions' share of attention goes to the largest country in the region, that is India. India, in essence represents all that is good and bad in South Asia. Ever since liberalisation has made ground in India, the country has been touted along with China as the next big thing in the growth of the world economy. However, in order to sustain the recently achieved growth (which had in part been aided by the idle capacity existing in a closed economy and the unutilized pool of scientific man power), the country has to build up its pool of educated man power. As far as Gross Enrolment Ratio in India goes, it is as low as 12%. If we compare this rate with other countries, we find that the country's position is abysmally poor. For instance North America's GER is 70%, USA's is 85%, Russia's is 70% and even the World average is higher at 25%. Added to this is the lower Gender Disparity Index of the country at 0.7 as against 1.4 of USA, 1.6 of Sweden, 1.3 of Russia and 0.9 of China. Even the targets of India are less than ambitious. The country plans to raise its GER to 30% by the year 2020 AD. This means that there has to be additional enrolment in Higher Education systems of the country to the tune of 288 Lakhs between the years 2012 and 2020 AD. In such a scenario, the role of Open and Distance education systems becomes paramount.

Why is Distance Education Important in South Asia?

The importance of higher distance education in South Asian countries is great. These countries are at different stages of their development. But the only common factor among them is that all of them are in need of high quality human resources. In this endeavour higher distance education can play the following important role.

1. The CIBE report on higher and technical education states that higher education is a quasi-public good that produces a range of social, economic, demographic and cultural externalities (CIBE, 2005). Higher technical education also brings in technological and dynamic externalities.
2. Higher education including higher distance education is also a merit -2 good as recognized by the Ministry of Finance, with the implication that it needs to be funded by the government (CIBE, PP.9, 2005).

3. Investment in Higher education is important from both the individual and social points of views. Investment in higher education leads to the creation of “specialised human capital” which can over the course of time result in increasing returns to scale (CABE, 2005). The same is true of investment in higher distance education because of its openness and wider reach.
4. Higher education leads to a holistic change in the society. It leads to the creation and dissemination of knowledge, destruction of the moribund and diversionary concepts covering traditional societies, supplies knowledge workers according to the needs of the society and promotes higher living standards through increased growth.
5. In the wave of globalisation, there may be trends that promote inequality among the general population due to the sudden influx of high quality education that is accessible only to a few (CABE,2005). In this context Distance education is an important tool in ensuring access and equity.

Open Universities of South Asia: A Brief introduction

The Open University system in South Asia is perhaps the most well established in the whole world. Among the South Asian countries too India occupies the best position in terms of depth as well as the range offered by the Open University system in the country. Apart from the 13 entrenched Open universities in the country, almost every major university has its own directorate of Distance Education. Despite the overwhelming advantage of Distance Education system of India, there could still be gains from specialisation and cooperation. For the present study, 4 Open Universities of the region have been selected- one each from India, Pakistan, Srilanka and Bangladesh.

India

India has the strongest Open University system in the whole of South Asia. The Indira Gandhi National Open University is the largest Open University in the Democratic world. The table presented below gives an eye-view of the range of activities engaged in by IGNOU in comparison to other South Asian Open universities.

Table 3: Open Universities of South Asia : A Comparison

OPEN UNIVERSITIES ⇒ PARAMETERS ↓	INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY	BANGLADESH OPEN UNIVERSITY	ALAMA IQBAL OPENUNIVERSITY, PAKISTAN	OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRILANKA
STUDENTS ON ROLL	3MILLION (APPROX)	600000	1.8 million	25000
REGIONAL CENTRES	65	12	10	4
LEARNER SUPPORT CENTRES	3300	1106	1274	17

PENETRATION IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES	36	Data not available	Data not available	Data available not
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As can be seen the achievements of IGNOU towers over those of other Open Universities in South Asia. The achievements of the university have come against the backdrop of intense strategic planning. The essentials of the strategy adopted by IGNOU to create a credible brand over a period of time are:

- IGNOU, right from the outset held the realisation that in a country of such size and variability as India, it would be difficult to create infrastructure of its own through out the country. At the same time most of the infrastructure of the conventional institutions, including their academic infrastructure remains under utilised. IGNOU utilised this under utilised infrastructure to create a network. Rigorous standards were laid down for the selection of learner support centres and thus quality was never a casualty. As on date the university possesses a network of more than 1400 study centres in the country covering its every nook and corner.
- The university laid stress on multiple modes of programme delivery and more particularly, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to maintain quality. It started off with its Interactive Radio Counselling (IRC) Programme. Then it graduated to one way video and two way audio Teleconferencing in collaboration with Doordarshan. As a logical extension of this process it associated itself with the Gyan Darshan Network that provides it with exclusive coverage and academic freedom through a bouquet of dedicated channels. As the nation rode on the crest of the satellite revolution, IGNOU became the nodal agency for the EDUSAT network. All these innovations were implemented with the singular aim of providing its students with a common high quality through put the land.
- The university also emphasised upon the point of expanding the coverage of academic areas without diluting the standards. As a result the university today boasts of more than 300 academic programmes covering all conceivable aspects of academic enquiry. There by it was able to create an image of a university that is a one point store for any academic programme.
- Perhaps the most important strategy adopted by IGNOU was to keep a consistently high standard for its study materials This was done by ensuring that the university procured the services of the most prolific resource persons in each area not only to frame syllabi abut also write the study materials.

Pakistan

Named after the visionary Alama Iqbal, the open university of Pakistan was one of the earliest initiatives in the field of Distance Education in Asia in the year 1975. Like India, the problems Pakistan are also essentially about providing access to high quality education with equity. Eventhough Pakistan has a lower population than India, its population density is lower. A large segment of its education is still under the grasp of outdated Madrassa based curricula. In this scenario, the Alama Iqbal Open Universtiy has played a vibrant role in reaching the unreached.

While the university has been on the forefront of riding on the crest wave of the the technology revolution by using television and internet for programme delivery, it has done so by adopting a strategy that has seldom hurt its bottom line. If we take the year 2008, we find that the revenues of the university stood at PNR 1921.84 million as against an expenditure of 1430.048 million (Wikipedia).

With more than a million students on its rolls, the university has emerged as the major educational services provider in the Islamic world. More than 1200 Learner Support Centres of the university and a

slew of Audio-Video programmes deliver a range of quality academic programmes with in Pakistan and abroad.

Bangladesh Open University

The Bangladesh Open University was among the latest entrants in the field of Distance Education in South Asia. Bangladesh was often known as the basket case of South Asia, but due to imaginative policy initiatives like micro-credit, the country has redeemed itself to a great extent. However, it was soon felt that the teeming millions in the country need to be equipped with real and tested skills for propelling the country to an economic take-off. The needs of the country have inspired the Open University to launch 42 programmes in a span of 18 years and enrol more than 6 lakh students (Indira Gandhi National Open University).

Open University of Srilanka:

With 17 Study Centres, 4 Regional Centres and around 40 programmes on offer the Open University of Srilanka has succeeded in making its presence felt in the most effective way in an ethnically diverse island nation. With more than 25000 learners on its rolls (Open University of Srilanka), the open university has launched a number of need based programmes that serve its learner community effectively.

Regional Cooperation among the South Asian Open Universities – the SACODiL way:

It was decided at the 10th SAARC summit that the Vice-Chancellors of the Open Universities of the region would meet to discuss the possibilities of cooperation among themselves in various academic and administrative fields. In accordance with the same, the Vice-Chancellors met in the year 1999 to discuss the possibilities for the joint development of programmes, credit transfers and promotion of avenues for access to knowledge. The SAARC Consortium on Open and Distance Learning (SACODiL) was formed as a result. At the second meeting of the SACODiL, a decision was taken to create a rotational secretariat to monitor the progress made on various fronts. A board of governors was also instituted which met for the first time in 2005. The third meeting of SACODiL at Islamabad decided to create resource centres in member institutions for ICT. It was further decided to collaborate regionally on staff training, networking etc. The modalities for mutual recognition of degrees and diplomas awarded by Open universities in the region was also discussed.

Plausible Areas of Cooperation among Open Universities in South Asia

It needs to be admitted that in a region such as South Asia, there always remains a number of areas where Open Universities can cooperate and prosper to mutual advantage. Let us examine a few of them.

1. Programme Designing and Maintenance:

Educational institutions from the Developing Countries can leave their mark on the world scene in the field of cross border trade. With the onset of the internet revolution it is now possible to reach Distance education courseware to the farthest corners of the world. CDs have discounted the requirement for elaborate textbooks. It is interesting to note that the course-ware relevant to South Asia is equally relevant to most developing countries. For example in economics the issues of development as well as of economic dualism are equally applicable through out the third world. If appropriate country specific modifications are made, South Asian education institutions and especially Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) can carve out a special niche in the third world education markets. The concepts of Non-Discrimination and National Treatment introduced by GATS imply that new markets will be opened up around the world for Indian Distance Education. On the other hand it also implies that the Indian Distance education institutions will also have to frequently update their syllabi as well as upgrade their

student support services so that they are not only rendered ineffective in foreign markets but also are not outsmarted in the domestic market by better-equipped foreign players.

However, as far as South Asia is concerned, if all the open universities of the region cooperate, there can be common benefits accruing to all. All these institutions have faculties working on similar programmes. Instead of the faculty members of similar areas working towards designing similar programmes, a core group drawn from all these institutions could work towards designing a core curricula which could be disseminated in all South Asian Open universities. However, the resident faculty of individual universities could work towards creating the elective curricula that would encapsulate local realities. Thus Division of labour could benefit all without harming anyone.

2. Niche Programming

There are certain areas in which educational institutions of the South Asia can gain a great deal by entering into international trade in services. The population ethnic to these countries has a sizeable presence in many of the Developed Countries. This is especially true of Countries like India and China. For instance, if programmes related to Vedantic thought, oriental philosophy, Ayurveda etc are formulated then these can be effectively marketed in those countries where there is a deep interest in Indian culture and where there is a large Indian diasporas (Deodhar, 2002). Success on this front can be had only if the research component of Indian Distance Education institutions is very strong.

Needless to say the benefit of shared culture and tradition could be used to the great advantage of South Asian Open Universities as far as programming is concerned. For instance, the tradition of unani medicine is shared between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. With the raging debate over patented and generic drugs and the affordability of the same raging the world over, a well packaged programme, encapsulating the shared knowledge of these countries in the field could find numerous takers the world over. For this to happen, the academics of the open universities of the region have to come together in a very big way.

3. Testing Services

Many developing countries especially in South Asia and the African continent do not have a well-structured and well-defined testing system for entry to both jobs as well as to many educational programmes. There are many educational service providers in countries like USA which can provide testing services under the GATS framework. However, these opportunities can also be reaped by Developing Countries too (Deodhar, 2002). For Example, Indian Distance Education institutions especially, IGNOU have evolved a well-defined testing system. IGNOU conducts its entrance exams for management as well as other professional programmes round the year. It also has a time-tested system of screening candidates for various jobs. These are services that can be factored out to agencies, institutions and governments of other countries for a fee. The U.S government has already made its demand that testing services should be included under GATS purview. If included, institutions like IGNOU should refine its testing system so that it takes full advantage of the change.

In the South Asian context, it should be stated that cooperation among the Open Universities of the region could result in the designing of a rational and effective testing regime. A number of testing schemes could be effectively evolved by cooperation among the open universities of the region like language proficiency testing, job testing, psychological testing, entrance testing and so on. Large sums of money are currently lost in subscribing to foreign grown tests like the TOEFL, GMAT, GRE etc.

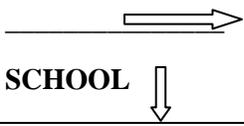
Gains from trade and cooperation among South Asian Open Universities

International trade in distance education as, matter of general fact is showing signs of adhering to the basic principles of the theory of comparative advantage. This implies that each Distance Education institution will produce that programme in which it has comparative advantage in terms of production parameters (lower costs, easy availability of experts, lower cost of programme delivery etc). Following the **Hecksher-Ohlin- Stolper-Samuelson** theory of international trade we may conclude that factor

endowments play a defining role in determining the programme export potential of countries. Here allocation of financial and technical resources for programme development can be regarded as the main factors that determine the international competitiveness of educational programmes.

However the author here proposes a different mechanism to identify the Comparative Advantage among South Asian Open Universities. This is by using the programme output per school in each of the selected open universities. The out put box is as given under:

Table 4: Mainstream Programmes launched per School in South Asian Open Universities

OPEN UNIVERSITIES 	IGNOU	AIIOU	SLOU	BOU
ARABIC & ISLAMIC STUDIES	0	10	0	1
EDUCATION	13	13	1	3
ENGINEERING & TECHNOLOGY	9	3	7	-
SOCIAL SCIENCES	23	10	2	2
HUMANITIES	10	7	2	4
SCIENCES	9	15	4	2
MANAGEMENT	7	5	3	5

Source: websites of IGNOU,AIOU,OUSL&BOU

Limiting factors of the study:

The proposed model works under certain strong limiting factors. They may be stated as follows:

1. Only mainstream programmes of each school can be considered for the study. Certificate courses and appreciation level programmes are not taken into consideration.
2. Regional need based programmes of the university have not been taken into consideration. Only the programmes developed by the core faculty working in different schools of study in these universities have been taken into consideration.
3. The study assumes approximately equal levels of academic competence of the academic faculty cutting across universities. This is a crucial assumption since the model can work in cases where there is a uniformity of the factors of production involved.

4. Tariffs and non-tariff barriers do not impede the flow of trade in educational services among these countries.
5. The quality of output (programmes) is approximately the same in each open of the universities under consideration.
6. The school academic strength is approximately same among open universities in the departments taken for the study.

Working of the Model¹:

Table No.4 shows some interesting results. For enabling comparison, the author identified those disciplines those were common to all the 4 Open universities. A cursory look at the result indicates that production of programmes in these open universities follows the natural factor endowments available in the country in question. For instance, AIOU, Pakistan has launched 10 Islamic studies programmes, which is a direct off-shoot of the availability of high quality Islamic experts in the country. Similarly, IGNOU has a pre-ponderance of Social Science related programmes, due to its ideal location, that is in Delhi, which houses some of the biggest names as far as social science education in Asia is concerned.

We can easily see that AIOU, Pakistan has an Absolute Advantage in the production of Islamic Studies programmes. It produces 10 programmes in this area. On the other hand its nearest competitor in this area BOU produces only 1 academic programme in this field. It therefore makes sense if these two open universities can cooperate with each other by allowing AIOU produce exclusively academic programmes in this field while BOU devotes its resources initially used for Islamic studies to other areas where it has better production potential. Better still would be if BOU transfers those resources to AIOU and let it specialize in that field. On its side, AIOU could allow BOU to use its programmes in the field of Islamic studies in Bangladesh through its network for a commonly arrived at fees. Both Open universities stand to benefit. BOU can now run 11 educational programmes in the field of Islamic Studies (including one of its own), while AIOU will have the benefit of having greater access to resources transferred by BOU as well as greater market access for its programmes in Bangladesh.

On the other hand IGNOU has an Absolute Advantage in the field of production of social science programmes. If in the pattern mentioned above IGNOU specializes in the production of Social Sciences based academic programmes, then the whole region would have the benefit of having not less than 37 academic programmes in the field, while IGNOU itself would have the benefit of greater market access and higher revenues.

Does this in anyway imply that the Open Universities of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka will not have an opportunity to specialize in any discipline set because, AIOU and IGNOU have Absolute Advantages in all the fields concerned? The answer is no. They too have a chance of specializing in various academic segments. For instance, let us take the Discipline of Engineering and Technology. SLOU with 7 programmes is the nearest competitor to IGNOU. IGNOU's productivity in this area is lesser compared to the disciplines of Social Science, Education or Humanities. If IGNOU, AIOU and BOU could let SLOU specialize in this field, the region could benefit from having 19 programmes, while IGNOU itself could divert greater allocation of resources in future to those areas in which it possesses Absolute Advantage and in the process strengthen the same. The same argument goes with BOU for Management Programmes.

It should however be remembered that this model would work only under the operation of free trade in educational services in the region. For the scheme to work we would need substantial liberalization of Mode 1 and Mode 4 under the GATS regime. Mode 1 implies **Cross Border Trade that is** producer

¹ Mathematical complexity has deliberately been avoided to make the model intelligible to a wider audience.

exports a service from own territory to a consumer in a foreign country. Eg. Online Educational services of IGNOU for consumers in other countries. Mode 4 on the other hand implies **Movement of Natural Persons**. A member of the service-providing firm goes to the domestic territory of another country to provide a service there. Such movements are only for a short period of time. For Example, IGNOU sends its administrative officer to Dubai to manage the affairs of its branch there for a period of Five years. For this to happen there should also be the mutual recognition of qualifications. Some lessons could be learnt by South Asia from in this regard. A small step in the direction of framing uniform standards was initiated by the Bologna process for the European countries. Similarly, under the initiative of the European Commission, the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) were formed under their programme Socrates/Erasmus. Apart for ensuring mere equivalence, there is also a need for ensuring that the degrees and other certification of institutions enjoy world wide recognition. The restrictions on the international movement of trained professionals also need to be removed to ensure wider dissemination of distance mode of higher education.

However, the present state of negotiations in GATS does not inspire enough confidence in this regard. For one, Educational services are among the least important among the services discussed for liberalization. Only a few countries such as India have proposed for Autonomous liberalization in this field and finally the GATS disciplines in this area are also least developed.

Suggestions:

Some suggestions can be laid out for the future on the basis of the foregoing paper:

1. Greater cooperation among Open Universities of the region while being beneficial can occur only if a feel good factor exists among the concerned parties. For this a sustained period of close interaction is needed among South Asian Open Universities.
2. A two tier structure is preferable among South Asian Open Universities as far as cooperation is concerned. The first tier of Open Universities would be those which wish to move forward at a fast pace for cooperation among like minded Open Universities. Tier two would consist of those open universities that would move at a slower pace towards cooperation.
3. Cooperation among open universities would not succeed till such time that there is substantial liberalization in Educational Trade under the auspices of GATS. For this to happen, countries have to adopt not only the multilateral route but also the plurilateral and bilateral routes of negotiation. Better still, trade in education has to be subject to horizontal disciplines under GATS. Otherwise, rule making on the same may take notoriously long time in occurring. Similarly, the process of Quality determination can be instituted on the same lines as that of financial services.
4. At the international level there is the need for a global standard setting institution that will recommend and maintain standards, especially in the field of higher education. This will work in favour of making decisions on the equivalence of educational standards at the global level much easier to make. This will also make cooperation among South Asian Open Universities much easier to achieve.
5. The revitalisation of the SACODiL process is essential for taking cooperation among South Asian Open Universitis to the next stage.

Conclusion:

There can be no doubt that cooperation among South Asian Universities has a great future if taken in the right spirit. For this to happen, the right policy mix both within the region and globally through the influence of WTO has to take place. Greater cooperation would not only result in better qualities of programmes produced but also wider reach of these programmes. Needless to state, cooperation would result in a win-win situation to all concerned.

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