RESEARCH PAPER

Open and Distance Education for sustainable development of knowledge society: with reference to ODE methodologies in India

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Biography

Dr. Shikha Vyas-Doorgapersad obtained her Ph.D. from the University of Rajasthan, India. She is specialized in Public Administration with additional qualifications in Business Management. She has authored three books and contributed chapters to books. She has published 33 research papers in accredited and non-accredited journals. She has presented 40 research papers in conferences in South Africa, India, Japan, Namibia, Mauritius, Italy, Greece, Uganda, Indonesia and United Arab Emirates. She is a life-member of nine professional bodies of Public Administration and Higher Education in India and South Africa.
ABSTRACT

Open and Distance Education (ODE) is considered as a significant medium for sustainable development of a knowledge society\(^1\) in the information age of advanced learning. India, the biggest and longest democracy in the world, is facing the challenges of knowledge and information upgrading. In order to meet with the demands of globalization for sustainable development, the Government of India has established the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) by an Act of Parliament in 1985 at national level. Furthermore, the Open Distance Learning (ODL) methodologies are utilized to empower rural masses and functionaries.

The role of this paper is to explore open and distance education methodologies with reference to India. The paper discusses the relationship between distance education learning and sustainable development of a knowledge society in general and conceptual context in particular. The paper suggests the futuristic model(s) of distance training as transformed forms of capacity-building. There is a need for a developmental model of education that meets with the quality of education, and provides ethical development to learner, job seekers and society as a whole.

**Key words:** Open and Distance Learning, Indira Gandhi National Open University, Panchayati Raj, knowledge society, sustainable development, capacity-building.

INTRODUCTION

The UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is an international recognition of the key role that Education and Communication can play in enabling and enhancing sustainable development efforts, and processes leading towards these. The recognition that education is a critical agent of transformation in terms of changing lifestyles, attitudes and behaviour, in increasing participation in visioning and realizing a sustainable world (Sarabhai, 2005), needs to be strengthened through the utilization of Open and Distance Learning as an alternative means of education. The
“credibility of the Distance Education System has made the Distance Learning System as one of the options for the aspirants of education, to pursue/continue higher education” (Kumar and Dorothy, 2010) to achieve the objectives of Education for Sustainable Development. In “the last few decades, there has been a surge of institutions which have applied distance education to the provisions of higher education. The mode of teaching/learning in distance education is less formalized, diversified and flexible as compared to campus-based education. The recognition of its potential influence on the present and future educational system has been gaining ground in India due to its easier access, independent learning opportunities, lower costs and relaxation in student entry requirements and ability to cover wide geographical area” (Kaur, 2010).

Open and Distance Education (ODL) has now attained a pride of place in the world. The burgeoning population with millions of eager seekers of Knowledge has made it imperative. Indeed, this mode of learning is today accepted not only as an alternative to formal education but also as an efficient, cost effective process enabling huge student numbers to acquire degrees, diplomas and certificates in several areas of knowledge. For long, Distance Education (DE) was regarded as a poor cousin of the school and university system and the products from this stream were considered as ‘second class citizens’ in the realm of academia and society at large. The pioneering and excellent efforts by the UK Open University have largely served to neutralize this concept and accord a respectable status to ODL. This model of this university in fact became the basis for the establishment and administration of many open universities in different parts of the world including India (Rajagopalan, 2007).

India, the biggest and longest democracy in the world, is facing the challenges of knowledge and information upgrading. According to the statistics of World Population 2005 India has a population of over 1080 million with a literacy rate, as per the 2001 census, stands at 65.38 percent for the country as a whole. In order to meet with the demands of globalization for sustainable development, the Government of India has established the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) by an Act of Parliament in 1985 at national level. Furthermore 13 State Open Universities (SOU), one National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and over 100 institutes/centres of distance education in state universities are offering more than 100 programmes in various fields of specialization.
The local self-government in India is known as Panchayati Raj and traditional democratic institutions of local self-governance is known as Panchayats. These grass-roots level require progressive-ridden education and training opportunities for sustainable development. The Open Distance Learning (ODL) methodologies are utilized to empower rural masses and functionaries.

In India, “a non-formal training intervention to reach out to millions of elected members of Panchayats calls for an innovative approach through the distance mode, which can, at one and the same time, address the different learning styles, varied preferences and lack of study skills of such a clientele. They need education and training at regular intervals. Since their number is large, it is not possible for the conventional system of training to reach all of them. Given the nature of their work, they cannot afford the physical dislocation caused by formal modes of training” (Aslam, 2010). The paper explores the ODL methodologies with reference to India emphasizing their significance in non-formal settings for sustainable development.

**NATURE AND EXTENT OF EDUCATION IN INDIA**

In the “post-independent era in India, even now one-third of the adult population is illiterate, and only 12% of the school eligible age children complete 10th standard” (Pillai, 2008). Due to the awareness programmes initiated by Government to meet with the Millennium Development Goals, “the demand for higher education in the country has grown enormously. The growth of enrolment in conventional universities has been 5% in the 9th Five Year Plan. Moreover, the higher education system caters only to about 9 million learners, which constitute about 7.5% of the eligible group (between 17-23 years)” (IGNOU, 2010). Can conventional methods cope up this scale of educational challenges? Can we [India] make a foray into educational technology by launching open and distance learning system? (Pillai, 2008). If conventional learning methods were effective, we would not be exerting much energy and resources today trying to bridge the many divides which traditional educational systems are partly responsible for. Age-old methods of learning are not enough. There is a clear need for ‘business-unusual’ approaches, particularly in order to reach the un-reached (Khan, 2010).
The world is stressing on agenda “Learning for Development. Professor Amartya Sen portrays development as freedom, expressed concretely in the widely accepted programmes for bettering the human conditions that includes the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, the Goals of Education for All, the Commonwealth objectives of peace, democracy, equality and good governance and sustainable development. Expanding human learning is essential to the achievement of every element in this agenda and knowledge is the path to freedom. Conventional teaching-learning methods cannot cope up with the scale of educational challenges, particularly in highly populated developing countries” (Pillai, 2008).

AN OVERVIEW OF ODL IN INDIA

In the wake of the UN Millennium Development Goals, which emphasize on education for sustainable development, there is a need and demand for innovative methodologies and programmes in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system that would meet the quality requirements of the large and diverse communities of the country, for their overall development. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) is a pioneer in ODL in India and is among the prime educational institutions not only in the country but also in the Indian subcontinent (IGNOU has been ranked 17th among the Universities of the Indian Subcontinent by Webometrics ranking of World Universities) (Das, Kumari and Saini, 2009). Along with one National Open University, there are 13 State Open Universities (SOUs) offering ODL in many states. IGNOU assist SOUs regarding academic issues. The Distance Education Council (DIC), a unit of IGNOU, formulates guidelines and frameworks for SOUs. DIC is furthermore responsible for “promoting research and innovation in ODL systems; facilitate training for indigenous capacity building in ODL systems; and create database for SOUs, distance educators and functionaries with ODL systems” (DEC, 2010). The courses offered by Distance Education Institutes are required to be certified and approved by the DIC.
IGNOU, being the pioneer in distance education in India and recognized as the largest university (IGNOU, 2009) in the world, is considered as a case-study to explore the ODL methodologies in Indian context.

In 1970 (International Education Year), the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare in collaboration with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the University Grants Commission and the Indian National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO, organized a seminar on ‘Open University’. The seminar recommended the establishment of an open university in India on an experimental basis. The Government of India appointed eight member working group on Open University in 1974. In 1985 the Union Government made a policy statement for establishment of a national open university. Subsequently, the National Open University came into existence on September 20, 1985. It was named after later Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) (established by the Act of Parliament) is responsible for introducing and promoting distance education at the university level. In 1989, the first Convocation was held and more than 1,000 students graduated and were awarded their diplomas. IGNOU audio-video courses were first broadcast by radio and television in 1990 and IGNOU awarded degrees received full recognition by the University Grants Commission in 1992 as being equivalent to those of other universities in the country. In 1999, IGNOU launched the first virtual campus in India (IGNOU, 2010).

IGNOU “strives to provide cost-effective and quality education to all sections of the society, including those living in remote and far-flung areas through the ODL system. The infrastructure of IGNOU comprises a three-tier system. The headquarter is placed at the top tier, under which are placed the Regional Centres² and Sub-Regional Centres³. The Study Centres in India⁴ and abroad⁵ form the third tier and form the interface or connecting point of the University with the students. Each component of this huge ODL infrastructure is capable of playing a very important role in devising new and innovative solutions to provide quality, cost effective and user-friendly services to the learners through distance mode. IGNOU, recognizing the need for such an innovation system in the
ODL system, established the National Centre for Innovations in Distance Education (NCIDE). The NCIDE is an innovative system, that is a ground for nurturing bright minds whose ideas are expected to revolutionize the ODL system” (Das, Kumari and Saini, 2009).

IGNOU was established in New Delhi with the aim to enhance higher education and in particular provide educational opportunities to disadvantaged communities of the society. IGNOU currently serves approximately 2 million students in India and 35 countries abroad. 10% of all students enrolled in higher education in India are enrolled with IGNOU to obtain various degrees, diplomas and certificates in diverse fields of specialization through inter-disciplinary perspective. The University offers 175 programmes through 1100 courses with a learner-centric approach of teaching-learning. In addition, a number of non-accredited extension and skill-oriented programmes are on offer through twenty-one Schools. The University has established Programme Study Centres (PSCs) and Special Study Centres for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes, minorities, people with physical and related challenges (differently-abled), prisoners, and personnel of defence and para-military services (compiled from IGNOU, 2008, 2009, 2010).

In the emerging scenario, the ODL is probably the only sustainable system for enhancing seamless access to education in the country. The University has continuously strived for improving the credibility and quality of the system. The opportunities stem from: ever increasing demand for higher education and upgradation of life-coping skills; need for continuous training of a huge workforce in the developing countries with large populations, projects and plans; enhancing access to education to the employed (with low qualifications), drop-outs, adult learners; convergence between the open and conventional university systems (and other educational and training organizations) to enhance sustainable access; and focussing on disadvantaged groups and less developed regions (obtained from IGNOU, 2010).

The IGNOU utilize varied forms of media to offer academic programmes. viz. audio, video, radio, television, interactive radio, video counselling, tele-conferencing, and recently through iPods. About 750 interactive nodes spread all over the country offer two-way interactive tele-counselling, tele-
teaching, tele-training, tele-discussion and extended contact programme. The facility has gone digital and is now available through INSTAT-3B. With the availability of EduSat, which has its footprints all over the country, the University has established two-way video and two-way audio Edusat supported networks; 134 Satellite Interactive Terminals enable students to interact with faculty and experts in a virtual distributed classroom. It is now possible for the University to take education to the remotest corner and address the last mile question. 186 radio stations across the country broadcast interactive phone-in counselling every Sunday (4:00-5:00 p.m.). The students participate from their home through toll-free telephone to interact with the experts at various All India Radio (AIR) studios. IGNOU has also been identified as the nodal agency for coordinating a bouquet of educational TV channels under the banner of Gyan Darshan (GD). Of these, GD-1 is a 24-hour exclusive National Educational channel. Teachers/resource persons address ‘live’ from EMPC studio through video and audio satellite links to the student groups assembled at various centres across the country. It is also used to interact with Regional Centre and Study Centre functionaries on various operational aspects. GD-3, called Ekalavya channel, is exclusively devoted to technology education for the benefits of students of Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and other engineering colleges in India. GD-4, called Vyas channel, is to telecast high quality higher education programmes to bridge the knowledge and information gap between different areas and institutions in the country. Gyan Vani is a ‘Radio Cooperative’ devoted exclusively to education and community development. Its main objective is to bridge the gap between educationally privileged and deprived. 21 FM radio stations are fully operational and three are under test run. These interactive, participatory educational stations are aimed at greater empowerment of the people, particularly the disadvantaged (IGNOU, 2010).

The University has the unique distinction of combining the conventional role of a University with that of an apex body in the promotion, coordination and maintenance of standards in distance education through continuous assessment and accreditation of the Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions. The University established the Distance Education Council in 1991 as a statutory authority to ensure high quality education through open and distance learning systems. The ODL system has reached a stage where highly professionals are required for the design, development and delivery of education.
IGNOU has developed in-house expertise to design, develop and deliver multi-media self-instructional materials. The strengths of the system include Centre of Excellence for disseminating knowledge through the distance mode; leadership in technology-enabled education; internationally acclaimed quality instructional materials in diverse need-based areas; developing mechanisms and capabilities to compete internationally to advance frontiers of knowledge to emerge as the leader of ODL system; and continuing professional development of capacity of faculty and staff, especially for technology-enabled education and training (compiled from IGNOU, 2010). Due to the quality of education offered at IGNOU, the University is recognized as Centre of Excellence in Distance Education by the Commonwealth of Learning in 1993. In 1999 the University further received the Award of Excellence for Distance Education materials by Commonwealth of Learning.

**ODL in non-formal setting**

Non-formal education\(^{10}\) and community development represent other sectors where open and distance learning is increasingly used. Programmes at a distance often reach substantial numbers of women, in societies where women lack equal opportunities for participation in conventional forms of education and training. Open and distance learning approaches lend themselves to the teaching of many of the complex issues of the modern world, in which input from a variety of disciplines is necessary (Moore et al, 2002). The non-formal and adult education programmes, offered through the conventional systems in India, typically emphasize the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills. In recent years, however, it has been recognized that these programmes must be integrated with a variety of development objectives that enable learners to apply their skills in the process of lifelong learning (Aslam, 2010). Providing an ever-widening access to growing numbers of individuals, particularly from disadvantaged groups, and ensuring the relevance of educational/training programmes to the emerging needs and requirements of a fast-changing society is a colossal challenge in India. Among many of its kind, one such challenge was thrown up in 1993 when a historic amendment was made to the Indian Constitution to endow panchayats, the grassroots level democratic institutions, with the strength and prestige associated with the institutions of self-government so that they could play the
desired significant role in determining the direction of development (Empowerment of People, 1997; Aslam, 2010).

Article 40 of the Indian Constitution directs the government to establish panchayats to serve as institutions of local self-government. In the “history of Panchayati Raj in India, on 24 April 1993, the Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 came into force to provide constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj institutions. The Act aims to provide 3-tier system of Panchayati Raj for all States having population of over 2 million, to hold Panchayat elections regularly every 5 years, and to constitute District Planning Committee to prepare draft development plan for the district. The 3-tier system of Panchayati Raj consists of a) village level panchayat b) block level panchayat c) district level panchayat” (Wikipedia, 2010). The popularly elected village council (gram panchayat) is the basic unit. Village council chairs, elected by the members of the village council, serve as members of the block council (panchayat samiti). A block is a large subunit of a district. In some states, blocks are coterminous with taluqs or tehsils. In other states, taluqs or tehsils are divided into blocks. The district council (zilla parishad) is the top level of the system. Its jurisdiction includes all village and block councils within a district (India-Local Government, 2010).

As a result of this amendment and the subsequent elections, over 3 million people, more than one-third of them women, were elected to various tiers of local self-government throughout the country. The absence of preparedness on the part of these key personnel, who would be the agents of change, was perceived as a major constraint in engineering the process of social transformation. Keeping in view its limited capacity, it was not possible for the conventional training system to face the challenge of training these millions of peoples’ representatives. Empowerment of the elected members of panchayats through appropriate awareness programmes therefore acquired the highest priority in the agenda for social action (Empowerment of People, 1997; Aslam, 2010). In order to improve this challenge, the IGNOU with the assistance of the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India offers an education and training project entitled ‘Panchayati Raj Project’ to elected members of panchayats. The Project aims “to conscientise the elected members of the Panchayats of about their
roles and responsibilities in management of development activities at the grassroots through education and training. The multi-media package produced under the Project included 23 booklets of self-learning print material (SLPM), and six video and twelve audio programmes. The print material is being translated in a phased manner into major regional languages. Audio-video packages are also being dubbed into regional languages. The distance education material produced under the Panchayati Raj Project received the Commonwealth of Learning President's Award of Excellence by the COL in March, 1999. It was adjudicated as best material among commonwealth countries” (IGNOU, 2010).

The educational and training programmes are also offered through knowledge centres. It is “called a Rural Knowledge Center (RKC), Village Information Center (VIC) or a Community Learning and Information Center (CLIC). It is a new institution in the Indian rural milieu. It is a one-stop center of the village where community members can be assisted with information ranging from how to manage pod borer infestation in their pigeonpea crop to what are the government schemes currently in operation in his/her village. These are increasingly seen as vehicles of capacity-building and educational change in rural India. Home to nearly 65% of the country’s population, rural areas have little opportunity for the communities to learn life skills. The incidence of poverty, illiteracy and malnourishment experienced in this part of the country is much higher than its urban counterparts. The information needs of the poor rural communities in agriculture, animal husbandry, health, governance and the like had so far been considered impossible to address owing to the vastness of the nation and remoteness of the areas to be created. Success of many ICT for Development (ICT4D) projects, a wealth of institutional knowledge and a long standing in open and distance education, have created opportunities for the country to provide right kind of information to the needy at the right time. Technology mediated non-formal distance education with a focus on development and supported by rural knowledge centers is perceived as a new paradigm in distance learning” (Dixit et al, 2010).

In order to empower the disadvantaged people, the IGNOU has also aligned the extension education with teaching-learning and strengthening it:
*to encourage capacity building in agriculture, animal husbandry, horticulture, natural resource management, health, human rights, literacy, life coping skills, legal literacy, vocational skills, entrepreneurship, computer literacy, design, media studies, etc.;

*is guided by the principles that education is accessible, affordable and relevant to the lives of the marginalized and the disadvantaged and available at a place of their convenience; should improve the quality of life of the people; encourage income generation and promote self-employment; and build on learner experience and indigenous knowledge;

*forge partnerships with government and non-government organizations, research institutions, universities, vocational institutions, industries, international agencies like UNESCO, COL, World Bank, WHO, ADB and other engaged in extension; and

*disseminate knowledge through technology enabled multi-purpose community learning centres in rural and urban areas” (IGNOU, 2010).

The University presently offers 138 academic programmes that are need-based, unconventional, and vocation-oriented with a focus on socio-economic development and serving the disadvantaged (IGNOU, 2010).

**ODL FOR CAPACITY-BUILDING AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

It seems that many ODL systems are simply ‘expanding’ the existing traditional classroom system. In other words, they are just creating virtual classrooms without really reaching out to the most marginalized. In many cases, the ODL does not provide an alternative because ODL is also not accessible to the most marginalized for various reasons, i.e. lack of access to technology, absence of connectivity (whether electricity or digital) and for reasons of technology (computer) illiteracy (Khan, 2010). This scenario raised some questions that need to be answered. How can ODL assist in achieving the goal of Education for All for sustainable development? How can ODL build capacities amongst deprived population to enhance sustainable livelihoods? How can ODL reach geographically
remote areas and assist rural communities to be social and economically sustainable? The answers to these questions lie in the following recommendations:

- “Contributions are needed from a number of different disciplines and specialists in different areas to ensure quality.

- ODL packages can be delivered through local partners such as NGOs. Such partners can also make a valuable contribution towards content.

- Sharing experiences will also contribute to the development of effective ODL for Sustainable Development programmes and courses.

- Non-formal learning is a means to bringing educational opportunities to a diverse range of learners, but particularly those groups that are the most marginalized from education. Advantages of non-formal learning include the ability to incorporate local specificity. Existing programmes in the non-formal education sector frequently already address sustainable development themes, although, there is the need to make sustainable development a more deliberate framework for such efforts, and a more consistent thread in adult learning.

- Education for Sustainable Development can make a valuable contribution when integrated into learning for professional development. Moreover, given that professionals can rarely take time out from work to attend classes in a face-to-face mode, ODL presents a useful tool for facilitating their life-long learning process and delivering to them information and education that will enable/capacity-building their profession to adopt practices and philosophies of Sustainable Development” (compiled from Centre for Environment Education, 2005).

- “Distance Education programmes must be adapted to local communities and contextualized taking into account local competencies (e.g. in terms of language), curricula and content.

- Distance Education programmes should be integrated in the life of community to be sustainable” (Khan, 2010).
According to Oakley et al (FAO, 2010) “it is generally accepted that strategies and programmes to alleviate poverty and promote economic development cannot succeed unless the poor themselves are able to participate directly in the development process”. Yet there can be no participation without information, and education is the basis for informed and effective local participation. The links between local participation and education are clear and direct. However, the majority of the rural poor have little access or opportunity for formal education. In many areas, extension training and other non-formal educational programmes are the only opportunities for education available to rural households […] Non-formal educational and training approaches are generally external to the formal educational system (such as primary and secondary schools and universities), and generally do not use conventional pedagogical or didactic methods. Non-formal methods emphasize direct reaming experiences, individual and participatory problem-solving, group dialogue and conscientization, self-guided educational programmes (such as distance teaching), and other nonstandard approaches. Non-formal approaches to education have been found to be most effective in reaching adults and nontraditional learners. However, many extensionists have been trained in traditional formal pedagogy. For this reason, retraining in non-formal adult education methods is recommended, to better serve the educational needs of rural households, and of nontraditional learners. Many participatory methods and non-formal educational approaches build upon the body of indigenous knowledge and existing social groupings, thereby strengthening local capacities. The role of the trainer in these methods is to facilitate the learning process, rather than to simply instruct. As such, trainers must reorient their personal teaching methods, style, materials, and even their role -- from ‘teacher’ to ‘facilitator’. Trainees themselves must learn the conscientization process, along with new participatory techniques that provide farmers with direct, immediate problem-solving, learning and capacity-building experiences (FAO, 2010).

It is also being realized that in order to achieve sustainable development, there need to be policy changes, changes in the systems of work, changes in the technologies we use, etc. What is also getting better recognition is that, for this to happen, we need to use education and communication to raise awareness, capacity building communities to vision and participate in bringing about the change, and
equip societies with the kinds of expertise required to make the change (Centre for Environment Education, 2005). There is a paradigm shift towards sustainable development, i.e. education is now a process that is “life long and continuous” rather than confined to a specified period. Institutions have started a variety of in-service courses. Increasing adult education programmes are available. Non-formal opportunities and opportunities for community education have increased manifold […] Distance education is emerging as a major alternative way for learning” (Sarabhai, 2005). Technology is furthermore offering a significant contribution to this shift in educational paradigm. The “idea that the new knowledge media can bring about radical changes in pedagogic methods and in the processes of educational communication reflects a decisive paradigm change. This new relationship between technology and pedagogy has led to a break with the tradition of a teaching methodology based on the ‘recommended’ manual, the teacher’s role as primary source of knowledge, and the observance of a fixed curriculum” (Trindade, Carmo & Bidarra, 2000, 1).

In view of the changes and possibilities brought on by new markets and new technology, the most suitable educational model for the 21st century must be devised with care and with a keen eye on the processes of the information age. Under modern conditions, the development of a knowledge society rests mainly upon linking economic growth with cognitive growth. Neither can exist meaningfully without the other. Industry or modern economy is engendered by knowledge and knowledge exists primarily as an industry. However, we need to understand cognitive growth in a larger fundamental and philosophical sense and not just in the instrumental, applied and vocational sense. Complex modern and modernized societies certainly need a literate population and a large number of managers, engineers and operators. But they also need a pool of experts seriously and collectively engaged in the task of explaining and exploring the society and making it more intelligible to the rest. Knowledge cannot and should not be reduced only to its applied and vocational aspects (Takwale et al, 2010).

Therefore, the recommendations regarding utilizing ODL methodologies for expanding multi-disciplinary approach of teaching-learning, empowering people, building capacity, linking with extension education for enhancement of skills, and exploring technology for easily accessible education and multi-sourced training are considered as new “developmental model of education that
will not only provide quality education for all, but also strive towards the economic, social, cultural, environmental and ethical development of the learner and the society” (Takwale et al, 2010).

The United Nations have proclaimed the years 2005-2014 as the World Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Sustainability is the key goal for the 21st Century. It means that future generations should have the same change of leading a fulfilled life as the earlier generations. At the same time, the opportunity to live a quality life must be more fairly distributed around the world today. Sustainable development combines economic progress with social justice and conservation of the natural environment. Sustainability is as pressing a task as it is great and noble one. It cannot be merely decreed from the top hierarchy; it must be learnt. In this context, Education for Sustainable Development instils the competencies that are required if we were to build our lives in a manner fit for the future (Pillay, 2008). Whether “or not expanded educational opportunities will translate into meaningful development- for an individual or for society- depends ultimately on whether people actually learn as a result of these opportunities, i.e., whether they incorporate useful knowledge, reasoning ability, skills and values […]” (World Education Report, 2000; Aslam, 2010) in their struggle for development, individual as well as societal (Aslam, 2010).

**CONCLUSION**

The relative importance of the major determinants of development has been changing over the past decades and the shift is taking place from manufacturing to services and from capital resources to knowledge resources. Increasingly, the element of knowledge is considered to be the key to escape poverty and marginalization which in essence is the vision of the Millennium Declaration...[.]

Education is *sine qua non* for the creation of knowledge societies. A knowledge society cannot exist without highly educated citizens and a well-trained workforce (Khan, 2010) required for sustainable development. In this regard, the main challenge to “ODL is how to be an alternative and not simply a mechanism to expand an educational system. The areas for review or perhaps re-engineering include: instructional design, delivery mechanisms (especially with the advent of broadband wireless
technology), learners’ access and participation, quality assurance and accreditation” (Khan, 2010). Furthermore, “indigenous knowledge systems are tenacious and enduring. They must be protected to ensure that valuable skills and knowledge are not lost or forgotten. Similarly, local innovations in the context of a global scenario must be mapped out and mainstreamed in order to forge valuable partnership between local creation of knowledge and the market. The ODL system, with the technology and outreach at its disposal, is well-equipped to undertake this task” (National Knowledge Commission, 2010).

A common question raised in higher education circles is ‘should Standards for Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning be different from Quality Assurance in Conventional Education?’ In order to maintain equivalence and credibility of programme offerings it is generally agreed that while standards and benchmarks should be the same, the assessment framework should reflect the special features of ODL. Sustainability and credibility of new and emerging ODL systems would depend on good quality assurance mechanisms which are responsive to the needs of society and the national economy (Srivastava et al, 2009). A pragmatic approach to counter the opposition to ODL is to judge quality in terms of consumer satisfaction. The full specification of objectives to be attained in a given programme will provide users with a yardstick to assess not only their own performances, but also the reliability and adequacy of the teaching system or institution they have chosen (Trindade, Carmo & Bidarra, 2000, 1).

It is worth mentioning that “a large number of organizations and educational institutions are involved in dissemination of knowledge and imparting skills training at the basic education level but their experiences and contributions are not properly communicated or shared with others, who are working for similar purposes […] a large segment of research work in the education discipline is about effectiveness and impact of programmes offered through ODL systems. The research works usually focus on post-implementation phases of the programmes. The other planning and implementation phases of the educational programmes are neglected research areas. This scenario leads to creation of islands of knowledge. These islands of knowledge need to be bridged to share knowledge and resources so that the education planners and administrators will get lessons from others’ experiences
and minimize unnecessary repetition of works. There is no need to reinvent wheel” (Kumar, Chaudhary & Shankar, 2008, 6: 17-31).

The paper concludes with the recommendations stated in the Report of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Report, 1997; Foster, 2000) that “in the next century, the economically successful societies will be those which become learning societies...When capital, manufacturing processes and service bases can be transferred internationally, the only stable source of competitive advantage (other than natural resources) is a nation’s people...The pace of change in the work-place will require people to re-equip themselves, a new knowledge and new skills are needed for economies to compete, survive and prosper...This requires a learning society, which embraces both education and training, for people at all levels of achievements, before, during and, for continued personal fulfilment, after working life...the long-term demand from industry and commerce will be for higher levels of education and training for their present and future workforce”.

NOTES

1. The knowledge society is “an empowering social vision which encompasses plurality, inclusion, solidarity, and participation. It is based on the principles of freedom of expression, universal access to information and knowledge, promotion of cultural diversity, and equal access to quality education” (UNESCO, 2005; Khan, 2010).

2. 59 in total (IGNOU, 2010).

3. Seven at present (IGNOU, 2010).

4. 2300 in total (IGNOU, 2010).

5. 52 at present (IGNOU, 2010).

6. Belong to the lowest level of social hierarchy
7. Racial groups other than Hindus

8. Meaning ‘Witness Education’


10. Since the time of the Greeks, there have been two fundamentally different approaches to pedagogy: one is based upon telling people what they should know; the other (the Socratic approach) assumes that people have a fair amount of knowledge that can be made explicit and effective through a process of questioning. The two approaches have manifested themselves respectively as traditional educational pedagogy and as ‘progressive education’. Progressive education is oriented toward the process of learning, and in recent years has become favoured as the best way of teaching adults (Seltzer in FAO, 2010). Several philosophers and education theorists, notably Mahatma Gandhi, A.T. Mosher and Mohammed Anisur Rahman, have developed effective non-formal approaches to training and social reform that have been widely tested and adopted in developing countries (FAO, 2010). In many instances, non-formal training has become, explicitly or implicitly, a vehicle for making poor and powerless aware of their condition, and is often aimed at empowerment of the poor and oppressed. This political aspect of non-formal education combines with the Socratic-progressive pedagogic approach to make non-formal education strongly concerned with the process of education (Seltzer in FAO, 2010).

11. The evidence of the effective correlation between distance education and empowerment of marginalized (Khan, 2010) is Government of India’s initiative called ‘Every Village a Knowledge Centre’. The Grameen Gyaan Abhiyan is Rural Knowledge Movement in India which has been working with an aim to achieve ICT enabling of 6,37,000 villages of India, has built a multi-stake holder partnership with the different ICT4D models present in India with intention of creating a Knowledge revolution in rural India (compiled from Mission 2007, 2010).
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