



HARNESSING & OPEN & DISTANCE LEARNING SYSTEM

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Summary

Education provides the foundation for development of individuals and nations. The Indian government is combating issues like equitable access to education, inclusive education and reach to far interior areas. The country's Eleventh Plan (2007-12) is termed as India's Educational Plan, with emphasis on use of ICT in achieving educational goals. Emphasis is laid on spread of open & distance learning for mass education. Distance education coupled with innovative ICT solutions can provide excellent education to people living in rural areas

An intensive program for use of ICT in education is planned which as a way to provide new directions in pedagogical practices. Under this program each school will be provided with 10 computers, a server, a printer on LAN and a broadband internet connectivity of 2Mbps. Teachers will be trained in the use of ICT for classroom learning. Steps have been taken for leveraging ICT at the higher education level also.

At the SCDL, importance of ICT in education is well recognized. Technology is used in simplest form yet appropriately and effectively. Emphasis is laid on use of cost-effective technology. ICT is used for providing accurate and real time information, administrative queries, delivery and academic enquiries, e-learning and pre-recorded DVD lectures, online assignments, examinations, web-portal etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

That education provides the foundation for development of individuals and nations is now an accepted theory. Thus education has a tremendous emphasis while planning the growth of nations. Governments all across the world and especially in developing countries are combating important issues such as equitable access to education, reach of education to remote corners, ensuring inclusive growth by using education as a growth driver. The Indian Government's 11th Five Year Plan for the country has a significant emphasis on both education and ICT. The 11th Plan is termed as "India's Educational Plan." It places highest importance on education as a centered instrument of achieving rapid inclusive growth. Education and skill development are at the core of our government's Plan. The Indian Government's 11th Five Year Plan for the country has a significant emphasis on ICT for education. Today there are 378 Universities, 18064 colleges, 4.92 lakh teachers and almost 140 lakh student enrollments in higher education, making the Indian higher education system as one of the largest in the world. There are 23 Central Universities, 216 State Universities, 110 Deemed Universities, 11 private Universities and 38 institutions of national & state importance in India. The Government plans to setup 30 new central universities and several

additional colleges in order to achieve the gross enrollment ratio in higher education from the present 11% to 21% by 2015. The government has pledged to raise public spending on education from the present 3.6% to 6% of GDP. Education has a 19.4% share in the total plan outlay - by far the largest and much more than earlier years. These targets seem difficult if not impossible.

The Indian government's plan also highlights on "inclusive growth". Many sections of our society have been left out of the growth that India has achieved in recent times. The rates of poverty and illiteracy are higher among the under-privileged and backward sections of our society as compared to the affluent sections. The 11th Five Year plan has laid down policies and guidelines to focus on this inclusive growth which will enable participation of all sections of our society, in the growth process, irrespective of class, creed, gender, race and geographic location.

II. DISTANCE EDUCATION, WHAT IT IS AND WHY

In general, distance education can be defined as the system of teaching by someone who is removed in space and time from the learner. Use of different types of media besides the print is an essential part of distance education. Student support services through electronic networking have been adopted by many institutions.

Fair and equitable access to education has been the main objective of the education system in most of the civilized countries. However, in large countries like India whose geographical conditions are such that small human habitations are dispersed far away from each other, equity in access to education has posed serious problems in extending the conventional systems of education. It is not only the physical infrastructural facilities but also the human resource in the form of teachers, which have posed a serious constraint. The potential of distance education to promote universal access to education has been realized now and governments across the globe are looking at it more seriously. The system is also capable of providing a second chance of education to those who are eager for it. It is also capable of providing orientation and refresher courses to those already gainfully employed and also those who wish to acquire knowledge in fields other than their own.

Although India has one of the largest primary education systems with 150 million children enrolled, 37% drop out before the 5th grade.

There is no single effective solution to this problem. However, some of the possible solutions could be:

- Increasing the number of schools at a much faster rate
- Getting good trained teachers
- Adopting the ODL system for mass education coupled with ICT solutions

Increasing the number of schools so as to match the rate of population growth is an extremely difficult if not impossible solution (it would mean opening a new school every day for next 10 years). Distance education coupled with innovative ICT solutions, can provide excellent education to millions of people living in rural areas by using multi-media system especially audio-video educational facilities.

It has been found that students who often do not perform well in conventional examination systems demonstrate high success levels in the use of IT and IT-enabled learning. One in 50 Indians now has access to PC's. Educational institutions and business houses form the largest user base of computers. In a country such as India, where the teacher is a scarce resource, distance education coupled with innovative ICT solutions can create a model of education delivery and learning where the need for a teacher is reduced, if not eliminated. Online learning via WBT's, CBT's and laptops in local languages are classic examples of this type of a model if appropriately woven into the learning and education system.

Thus, the appropriate use of distance education coupled with efficient systems and technology can indeed bring about major changes in the delivery, content and reach of education.

III. IMPORTANCE OF ICT IN EDUCATION

The education that developing nations desperately need is one which equalizes the opportunities for the poor and the disadvantaged, acts as a system of mass education and which generates employment opportunities thus raising the livelihoods of millions of people. New technologies can help distribute education from the world's best sources to all the people irrespective of age, sex, creed, religion, socio-economic status, etc. who are in need of education, thus crossing all geographical and social barriers. New technologies, namely satellite communication, fiber optic cable, computers, internet, wireless and the web have dramatically enhanced educational capabilities. Technology has allowed faster delivery and continuous updating of content in order to enhance quality, reach and application. It is already seen that through the use of new technology and communication, access to good educational programs has been significantly enhanced and larger audiences can now conveniently access content from almost anywhere, at anytime.

Fortunately, the world at large has seen tremendous developments in the field of science and technology, and education technology has not remained far behind. The emergence of the information technology in the field of education has brought about a revolution. This revolution has in a way removed the barriers of classroom learning.

The governments of most developing countries are today fighting to provide this equitable access to ICT for all segments of society. It would be apparent that unless the less developed countries are able to create an appropriate technological infrastructure to support the kind of learning needed in the 21st Century, they would be left far behind. The need of 21st Century will be to exploit the information and technology revolution to the fullest possible extent. Economic development will depend to a large extent on creating and optimally using the technological infrastructure. Countries which would harness the power of multimedia communication for education and training purposes may be the economic powers of the present century.

The Indian Government through its 11th Five Year Plan has put in a tremendous focus on ICT in education and has decided to significantly increase the IT infrastructure in schools and colleges. IT is now being looked at to provide new directions in pedagogical practices. An amount of Rs. 5000 crores is being provided during the 11th Five Year Plan of Government of India in order to provide ICT infrastructure in schools. **Under this program each school will be provided with at least 10 computers, a server, a printer on LAN and broadband internet connectivity of 2Mbps. Training of teachers in the use of ICT for classroom learning will be an important component of this initiative.**

A number of steps have also been taken for leveraging ICT at the higher education level also. EDUSAT, UGC INFONET, INFLIBNET and SAKSHAT are some innovative projects undertaken by the Government of India. A national mission in education through ICT will be launched to increase ICT coverage in all the 378 universities and 18064 colleges.

IV. INNOVATIONS IN ICT

Information Technology and Communication solutions can be implemented with 7 key objectives:

- Providing learning opportunities to those seeking knowledge irrespective of their geographic location, socio-economic or cultural backgrounds
- Providing access to education in order to ensure inclusive growth
- Building IT literacy especially in young children
- Providing low cost & low energy consuming solutions in delivery of education
- Providing better student services
- Providing opportunities of learning from good teachers coming from cities to students based in rural areas without physical movement of teachers or students
- Improving the quality & delivery of education

V. CASE STUDY – INNOVATIVE USE OF ICT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION –

- Symbiosis Center For Distance Learning

Symbiosis Center For Distance Learning (SCDL) is a private ODL institute in India and is known as a quality education provider. Symbiosis Center For Distance Learning has been offering blended learning programs since 1994. Our programs are extremely popular as they meet the market needs and provide employment and career advancement opportunities to thousands of youth from all states of India and over 42 different countries. Our curriculum is constantly upgraded and quality is our prime focus. At the Symbiosis Center For Distance Learning, we realized the importance of ICT in education long back. Since 2004 we have focused significantly on implementing technology solutions which will increase access to education, improve quality, provide fast response to student queries and provide better student support services. We are the only educational institute in India to have a “paper-less” office and a dedicated student call center. Each student call including grievances is tracked for call history and carefully monitored for quality of response by trained professionals. We also house a “communication center” which answers student queries sent via email and guarantee a response of 1 business day. Technology has been used in its simplest form yet used appropriately and effectively. **Rather than spending on costly software, we have focused on implementing cost-effective, simple yet efficient systems which have benefited our students tremendously.** Our students can access all the learning facilities such as e-learning, faculty chat sessions, exam booking, academic performance etc through our sophisticated web portal and thus feel a part of a large virtual campus created by appropriate use of ICT. Our institute has thus gained significant reputation and popularity not only for offering high quality education, but also for bringing out innovative student support services with appropriate and effective use of modern technology. This has in fact been one of reasons for our exponential growth from a mere 8000 students in 2001 to an overwhelming 200,000 student strength in 2008.

ICT has been used innovatively and effectively at SCDL to fulfill the following objectives:

- Provide accurate and real-time information to distant learners about their academic progress.
- Provide information regarding administrative queries via web site to reduce calls to SCDL for routine queries.
- Student Information System to track all aspects of delivery and academics – provide fast response to students – a backbone to all departments
- Well established call center – for accurate reply to students with dedicated student telephone lines handled by trained call operators.
- E-learning / online learning facility to enhance understanding of key concepts of the subject matter.

- Pre-recorded lectures from expert faculty members to provide facility for self-paced, self-styled learning, anywhere & at anytime.
- On-line assignments and On-Demand examinations to provide students ability to attempt an exam at their choice of date, time & location throughout the year.
- Sophisticated web portal with personalized student interface.

The ICT implementations at Symbiosis have resulted in higher student-satisfaction ratio and in lowering the drop-out rate amongst distant learners.

VI. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I can only say that those of us actively involved in providing distance education to a large number of learners are greatly helped in our mission by the advent of new technology in the field of education per se, and distance education in particular. The new technological devices like the computer, internet and the web have greatly enhanced our reach to the disadvantaged sections of our community; the snag, however, is that many of them have still no access to the technical devices to derive the full benefit of distance learning. I am optimistic that in the coming 5-10 years, technology will penetrate down to the smaller villages and hamlets of our great country, empowering all our people to benefit from the country's economic growth and enabling us to achieve higher literacy rates while providing education opportunities to all sections of our society irrespective of class, creed, race or gender. Let us all set forth with this optimism. Let us today pledge to take education to every nook and corner of this world and bring into its folds all those especially the under-privileged who are desirous of seeking knowledge but have been left behind in this race of economic development and growth.

Ms. Swati Mujumdar is currently the Director of Symbiosis Center For Distance Learning, a highly reputed private ODL institute of India with over 200,000 students from all states of India & 42 different countries. She is an MBA & Masters in Computer Science from USA. She has many years of experience in Information & Communication Technology and Education and has been invited to present key note address and papers on Distance Education and ICT in Education in International Conferences organized by ICDE and UNESCO in the past.