

**POSSIBILITIES OF UTILISING THE POTENTIAL OF OPEN DISTANCE
LEARNING (ODL) RESOURCES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
MAJOR SCHEMES OF GOVERNMENT OF INDIA: NOTES TOWARDS
EVOLVING A PRACTICAL FRAME WORK**



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By

Prof. P. R. Ramanujam*

A strategy to mobilise the available resources and use them optimally within the existing infrastructure, in a cost effective manner.

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BACKGROUND

A major challenge faced in implementing various developmental schemes of the government of India relates to uncertainty in the planning and preparation process and the competence levels of the individuals responsible for implementing said schemes. The nation has made but limited progress in establishing institutions that could deliver the trained quality human resources to successfully implement projects of national importance. Severe shortage of quality human power adversely impacts the implementation effort, and consequently the development process slows down.

The Union Budget of February 1, 2018, made reference to huge outlays in three critical sectors: Agriculture, Health Care and Education. Post the budget announcement, both commentators and experts on the subject, while having divergent views, were unanimous on one point: that the gaps in planning and execution of schemes in India, no matter which political party was in power posed a major challenge. A view expressed repeatedly was that India lacked the quality manpower to implement such critical schemes on a mass scale.

Quality manpower is however available, but the need is to identify the available talents within the country, harness such talent for a common national cause and unleash its creative energy in the implementation of all major national schemes.

What is required is a strategy to mobilise the available resources and use them optimally within the existing infrastructure, in a cost effective manner. Open Distance Learning (ODL) is a feasible and effective strategy to achieve quality outcomes in short time, with less cost and on a mass scale. This is best illustrated with an example.

Let us assume that a specific scheme requires 1000 personnel, all of whom need to be trained for the task. Let us further assume that such training was to be carried out in a face to face classroom setting in a specialised institution, which had the capacity to train 100 personnel in a three month period. The time required would hence be ten times and so would the cost. However, if we properly and imaginatively use the ODL methodology, including online programs with the same training content, we can save time, money and effort, because of greater reach and flexibility of ODL and the technology based content. This statement can be backed up with available success stories of open universities around the world. The United Kingdom, China, Korea, Thailand, Indonesia and India are good examples.

ODL RESOURCES AVAILABLE IN INDIA

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has highly sophisticated ODL resources which are at present lying under utilised. These pertain to the existing resources (human, physical and financial), the excellent mechanisms that have been created at IGNOU over the past 32 years for education and training purposes, the enormous regional services networks, the wide range of communication technologies including audio/video recording facilities teleconferencing, dedicated education channels for 24x7 broadcasting, and FM Radio technology based MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses) in the form of Swayam, SwayamPrabha and Shakshaat. These ODL Institutions in India can play a significant role as facilitators in planning, training, managing and implementing

the major schemes announced in the budget, under the guidance of an able institutional leadership. IGNOU could provide this leadership and the 14 State Open Universities and about 240 Distance Education Institutes of conventional universities in India could be effective partners in this huge national project.

The tremendous potential of all these resources together with the human resources available in the 21 School of Studies many Centres, 14 Research Chairs, more than 20 service Divisions, including a Computer Division of the Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE), The Inter University Consortium for Technology Enabled Education & Development (IUC-TEFED) and Electronic Media Production Centre (EMPC), constitute a national resources centre waiting to be used. The huge professional expertise and experiences available at IGNOU can be imaginatively and creatively used for the implementation of all national schemes in general. For instance, more than 30,000 graduates of Diploma, Post-Graduate, and Masters Programmes in Distance Education with various subject specialisations carefully trained and oriented during the period 1987-2017 to apply ODL strategy and methodology in various fields and contexts to contribute in the Nation Building have been largely ignored, though these talents are all longing for an opportunity to give their best to the nation. There are many more such trained human power houses in 14 State Open Universities (OUs) and 240 ODL Institutes located in as many Indian /State/Central universities waiting for a green signal to swing into action. The faculty of ODL institutions, the 30,000 IGNOU ODL graduates who have the knowledge of ODL philosophy, pedagogic principles and instructional design together with 45,000 Academic Counsellors (of IGNOU alone—the numbers from other OUs and ODL Institutes have to be obtained) who have taught through distance and face to face and blended modes can get involved in new situations to train more personnel depending on the requirements of each scheme.

CONTEXTUALISING ODL POTENTIAL TO IMPLEMENT THE MAJOR SCHEMES OF GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

The major initiatives of the Government of India such as Agriculture Credit Scheme worth Rupees 11 lakh crore of investment, the historic Health Care Scheme to cover 50 crore of the population and the huge training needs of teachers of the primary and secondary school systems through integrated B. Ed. Programme is easily achievable through optimal utilisation of the resources and experiences as well as infrastructure readily available at IGNOU and ODL institutions. While the overall leadership and supervision will continue to rest with the Central Government, ODL professional expertise and methodological nuances can come from ODL leaders and other staff. From needs assessment to completion of the scheme, including monitoring and the necessary practical interventions can be negotiated between government and OUs, if necessary with other institutions specialising in domain knowledge as well. Details can be worked out in special meetings, depending on the specific requirements of a particular scheme.

IGNOU can provide the leadership and guidance for the purpose of planning, management and implementation of the various national schemes/projects which look for resource persons with knowledge, skills, experience and confidence. It also has the potential to get involved in a very productive way in the implementation as well as innovation of future schemes for the overall development of the country. Replication of successful experiences and multiplier effects of the well trained professionals and skilled work force will be essential to scale up the training in diverse fields.

Planning and execution of any project, small or big, always depends on a number of factors such as the leadership for a given project, knowledge and skills available in the form of supervisors, managers, researches and the labour.

Availability of all the necessary resources as well as the clearances from the Ministries and other agencies connected with the projects and schemes are also very important. Timely action and time management on the part of all concerned will be imperative for the success of the schemes. The present schemes are government schemes, and so evidently, the ownership will be with the government administrative machinery. Hence, the academic leadership role and guidance of IGNOU and other OUs will be in tune with the overall goals to be achieved by the government and not independent of them. IGNOU will take the lead in this sense only.

WHY CHANGE IS NEEDED

Professionalism demands a particular task to be assigned to an individual or a team that possesses the necessary knowledge, skills efficiency and commitment. Political compulsions make parties in power look for loyal men and women rather than level headed professionals and leaders to implement the projects/schemes that require massive talents with practical skills and competence. This needs to change. As of now, we do not exercise enough patience nor exhibit the ability to choose the right kind of professionals and leaders to systematically plan for a scheme or a project or to establish an institution.

A first step in this direction can be taken by creating an environment of collaboration where the existing potential, competence and experiences of a huge number of institutions could be tapped through innovative methods and strategies based on new technologies. Universities, research institutions, institutes of technologies, institutes of management and other professional bodies dealing with schemes relating to agriculture, health care and education can be brought together to cooperate in implementing the three major schemes announced by the Finance Minister. ODL institutions would act as catalysts.

The next important step is to identify and create the right kind of teams of professionals and put them under able leadership to first get oriented, trained and then to carry out well defined tasks with the necessary degree of trust and freedom. Without leadership, trust and freedom, it is not possible to create committed teams with shared vision, a common understanding of the national priorities and a commitment to the people's overall development.

ODL's UNIQUE POTENTIAL

IGNOU is a unique institution which is very different from the conventional universities (47 central universities and 400 plus state universities and centres of excellence such as IITs, IIMs, IISc, IISERs and other institutes of repute). The mandate of the university, as given in its Act 1985, allows education, training, research and extension activities to be carried out through innovative means, open philosophy and all kinds of modes and combinations thereof, which we now term as blended learning.

The first schedule of the IGNOU Act 1985, mentions among other things, nation building, preservation of India's culture and promoting the educational well being of the entire population through the right kind of initiatives which have already been experimented and found to be very useful in all the areas of education, training, research and extension activities normally assigned to any university. One can also see from the nature and character of hundreds of programme developed and implemented by IGNOU over the last three decades that these are the programmes urgently needed throughout the country. These resources therefore must not be wasted but put to good use in the national development effort.

USING EXISTING ODL RESOURCES

A brief outline of the various arrangements and mechanisms that are already available in IGNOU would help in understanding how they could be utilised to assist in implementing major schemes of the Government of India. IGNOU has the Schools of: Agriculture, Computer and Information Services, Continuing Education, Engineering and Technology, Extension and Development Studies, Foreign Languages, Gender and Development Studies, Health Sciences, Humanities, Inter Disciplinary and Trans-disciplinary Studies, Journalism and New Media Studies, Law, Management Studies, Performing and Visual Arts, Sciences, Social Sciences, Social Work, Translation Studies and Training, Tourism and Hospitality Services Management, Vocational Education and Training. About 350 regular teachers have been placed in these 21 schools of studies.

In addition, Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE), Inter University Consortium for technology enabled flexible education and development (IUC-TUFET), Electronic Media Production Centre, National Centre for Disability Studies (NCDS), National Centre for Innovations in Distance Education (NCIDE), National ODL Centre for Local Governance (NOCLG) and Indira Gandhi Centre for Freedom Struggle Studies have huge potential, including 11 chairs established in IGNOU and supported by some of the ministries and other agencies. These Chairs include Bahadur Shah Zafar Chair, General Shah Nawaz Khan Chair, INA Chair, Shaheed Kartar Singh Sarabha Chair, Indian Institute of Banking and Finance Endowment Chair, Bombay Stock Exchange Chair, Dr BR Ambedkar Chair, Catholic Bishops Conference of India-IGNOU (CBCI-IGNOU) Chair, Sindhi Language and Culture Promotion Chair, Sir CV Raman Chair, Rabindranath Tagore Chair, ISRO Chair, Technology Promotion Chair, Sustainable Development Chair and a few other equivalent units such as special community colleges for the three wings of our Armed Forces

known as Gyan Deep, Akash Deep, Sagar Deep etc, are some of the potential structural mechanisms that can get engaged with relevant schemes and projects announced in the budget.

The 12 major divisions for academic coordination, administration, computers, construction and maintenance, finance and accounts, international activities, library and documentation, material production and distribution, planning and development, regional services (with 67 regional centres of which five are exclusively for the three wings of armed forces + 3500 study centres located across the country) student evaluation, student registration can be involved appropriately in the implementation of schemes that fall within the domain and mandate of the university. In addition, there are five other units such as campus placement cell, horticulture cell, vigilance cell, public information unit and research unit which are linked with the school of studies as well as other academic and service units.

In all, 785 full time teachers, 523 academic staff, 2500 administrative staff and 1396 support/secretarial staff have been working on a full time regular basis for the university. In addition there are about 45,000 part time academic counsellors who work at the 3500 study centres. The university also engages hundreds of consultants and daily wagers for various activities as and when required. As a test case, therefore, IGNOU can be initially given a few pilot projects and the same could be expanded and replicated through collaboration and cooperation of various other institutions in course of time. Of course planning, management and implementation must be continuously monitored and independently evaluated in a transparent manner before taking decisions for the future plans and activities in the respective areas of national development.

We could also count on the 14 State Open Universities and 240 plus Distance Education Institutes of the conventional universities as well as the private ODL

institutions that would constitute a huge national network that can rise up to the occasion of meeting the unprecedented demand for knowledge, training and modern skills to make India a strong global hub of labour force and economic activities. We could easily link ODL institutions with other educational institutions, including the Centres of Excellence such as IITs, IIMs, 400 plus CSIR laboratories and other institutions with domain expertise in different fields that are in our present focus: Agriculture, Health Care and Education for training and skills development. Every further detail can be worked out, as and when the Government of India decides to deploy this unique strategy of ODL in different forms and integrate it with the development effort.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the above, the following is recommended:

- Setting up a National Coordinating Agency to activate all the available ODL resources to achieve specific targets leading to the achievement of a common goal.
- Sector-wise resource mapping through surveys, consultations etc, to identify the best resources in all the major sectors—Agriculture, Health Care (primary and rural health centres), the needs of industry and entrepreneurship (looking for relevant skills for enhancing productivity), financial institutions such as banks etc. that would mediate between the government and the people as per rules and norms, and the human resources available and further training or orientation as required by them.
- Sector-wise coordinating units and experts with sufficient knowledge experience, skills and the necessary grounding in ODL practices to venture into new areas.
- A framework to combine the domain knowledge in the identified sectors already available in abundance in the faculty, research communities, libraries, laboratories etc. in many institutions within the country.

- A public notice to identify additional human resources along with the thirty-thousand plus distance education experts available in the country and orienting them to combine pedagogy, technology, content and specific and appropriate instructional design.
- Start with the three major schemes – Agriculture, Health Care and Education for Training and Skills development with a view to using the experiences and the lessons learnt to enhance efficiency in other fields.
- Review the experiences of IGNOU's Community Colleges Scheme (600+ now stopped), Special Community Colleges of the Armed Forces (Gyan Deep, Sagar Deep and Akash Deep), Convergence Scheme, other special initiatives introduced between 2007 and 2011 (but now stopped since 2012), similar innovative schemes by the 14 other state open universities and conventional universities.
- Creation of a grid of knowledge centres, technology centres and ground level operations going on at present as isolated, individual schemes through networking ODL centres aiming at scaling up the present small scale operations to meet huge targets with the help of ODL expertise in reaching the unreached and meeting the unmet needs with speed, quality, cost benefit and releasing the mass energy of the community.

When the leadership is in place, ODL will be one of the real game changers in our overall nation building effort.

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