

Basic Education through Open Schooling

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Abstract

The Open Schooling system has emerged as viable system for providing education to out of school groups for achieving Education for All (EFA) . The successes of the National Literacy Mission's programmes have opened educational opportunities for neo literates especially women. In order to provide a learning continuum from literacy to secondary education through open schooling, National Institute of Open Schooling has initiated the Open Basic Education Programme. It is the first programme using ODL methodology at a national level.

The strength of the OBE programme lies in its collaborative nature. At every stage there is synergy between different partners, whether for determining policy, curriculum development, delivery mechanisms, capability building or certification. The partners include educational providers within open schooling, non formal and formal schooling, from government and NGO sector. Academic support for curriculum development is provided by field functionaries, community persons, local subject experts. The infrastructure used is of NLM as well as government schools. The emphasis is on sharing of resources and ensuring minimal costs.

This paper attempts to highlight the successful collaboration between partners that has enabled OBE programme to be implemented in India and hopefully this could serve as a model for other developing countries.

INTRODUCTION

In India, the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system has made remarkable progress in the last few decades. Both at the university and higher education level as well as at the school level, the ODL system has firmly established itself as a major education provider for those who cannot go to the formal education system. This is in keeping with the thinking expressed by different scholars. According to Perraton (2004) the aims and purpose of open and distance learning at the secondary level for open schools in countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia is to make up for a shortfall of places in the formal secondary school, while also making it possible for young people at work to study part time.

The background for the importance given to ODL systems lies in the massive thrust given by the government to the literacy and school enrolment programme. The decade of the nineties saw many innovations in planning and implementation strategies with respect to both these programmes. The initiation of the District Primary Education Programme focused on the enrolment of the 6-14 age group into school, while the initiation of the campaign mode resulted in the adult literacy programme becoming a mass movement. The total number of persons, who have become literate, according to the Census 2001, is 560.68 million. For the first time since India's Independence, there has been a decline in the absolute numbers of non-literates during the decade. The literacy rate in 1947 was 14% with the female literacy figure being 8%. In the Census 2001, the literacy rate has gone up to 64.84% with male and female literacy at 75.26% and 53.67% respectively.

The national education scenario also created an environment that called for providing

opportunities for primary education. The need and importance of open schooling and distance education is seen in the statement given in the National Policy on Education (1986) which said that “The future thrust will be in the direction of Open and Distance Learning.” (NPE 1986). In keeping with the commitment of the Constitution of India to provide free and compulsory education to all upto the age of 14 years, the 86th Constitutional Amendment (2002) made elementary education a fundamental right for all children in the age group of 6-14 years. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was launched by the government in 2000 to ensure that the performance of the school system is improved. The specific objectives of the SSA are that all children complete five years of schooling by 2007 and eight years by 2010. Besides these, the National Literacy Mission also began implementing its Continuing Education Scheme which included the component of Equivalency Programmes (EPs) for adult neo literates. EPs are defined as an alternative educational programme equivalent to the existing formal general or vocational education. (UNESCO, 1993)

At the international level there has been a strong focus on the universalisation of primary education. As early as 1993, the post Jomtien E-9 Summit of Nine High Population Countries adopted the Delhi Declaration wherein a specific resolution was made “... to work in collaboration on a distance education initiative ... to better reach neo-literates and marginalised groups...”. The Dakar Framework For Action (2000) asked countries to set a timeframe within which the goal of Education for All would be achieved. The UN Millennium Development Goal also included goals for EFA especially for girls’ education. India, which was a signatory to the Dakar Framework For Action, made its National Plan of Action (2003). According to this, priority areas to address the regional, social and gender disparities were framed.

This backdrop was based upon the thinking that alternate channels of learning for early schooling had to be devised. The Open Basic Education Programme (OBE) was initiated by the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), an autonomous organization of the Government of India, to meet the challenge of primary and upper primary schooling. The strength of NIOS lies in its strong secondary and senior secondary programmes which have a cumulative enrolment of 1.4 million. The NIOS secondary programme is offered in 7 mediums and has many flexibilities. It was the success of the literacy and school enrolment programmes on one hand and NIOS’s own experience in the field of ODLE that convinced NIOS that open education at the primary and upper primary levels needed to be initiated urgently.

The OBE programme today (2006) is the largest Equivalent Programme in the country. It is based upon collaborative planning and implementation. At every stage there is synergy between different partners, whether it is for determining policy, curriculum development, delivery mechanisms, capability building or evaluation and certification. The partners include educational providers within open schooling, non formal and formal schooling systems, both from the government and NGO sectors. The academic support for curriculum development is provided by field functionaries, community persons, local subject experts, national level resource persons. The infrastructure used for face-to-face learning is that which is already existing in the field.

The rationale for collaboration lies in the need to optimize the utilization of available resources. India has a very widespread formal school network as well as a huge resource of trained teachers. In addition to this there are many schemes and programmes supported by

the government through its Ministry of Human Resource Development, Rural Development, Health, Women and Child Labour Departments . The emphasis is on sharing of these resources and ensuring minimal costs.

TARGET GROUP

The target group of the Open Basic Education programme includes children who have dropped out of school, or participated in a programme of non formal education. Most of them have competencies of Class II level which need to be further consolidated. They belong to the 6 to 14 age group. In the case of adults, they include those who have become literate through the literacy programmes of the National Literacy Mission. Most of them are first generation learners.

The priority groups of the Open Basic Education programme are those that are common to other government schemes too. They include women, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, daily wage earners, those living below the poverty line, rural persons, and persons living in urban slums.

PROGRAMME LEVELS

The OBE programme has been designed in such a way that the levels studied are equivalent to three levels of the formal school education system. Level A is equivalent to standard III, Level B is equivalent to standard V and Level C is equivalent to standard VIII of the formal school system.

EQUIVALENCY AND COLLABORATION IN MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT

The open learning system has to face the acid test of ensuring that the standards offered by it are equivalent to those of the formal school. In the case of OBE there has been a conscious attempt to develop the curriculum and the learning materials as such that they are equivalent to the formal education system. This has also been felt necessary, as this equivalence would give a chance to learners to move both vertically and horizontally from one system to the other. Hence the development of curriculum and materials has involved a close working relationship between the formal and open learning experts.

The OBE curriculum reflects openness and flexibility. While it essentially follows the guidelines of the national curriculum framework, there is however space in the curriculum for local concerns. The NIOS has developed a model curriculum, which is competency-based, and text free. This curriculum is provided to the Accredited Agencies, which are running the OBE programme. It is visualized that the curriculum would be transacted through appropriate course material developed through collaborative efforts of national, state, district level educational institutions and field level functionaries. Thus each agency has the freedom to either develop its own materials or adapt NIOS materials. In the case of agencies catering to the 6-14 age group, they also have the option to use books prescribed by the national and state educational Councils.

As regards adult neo literates, efforts have been made to collaborate with institutions working in the field of literacy. The NIOS along with the State Level organization like State Literacy Mission Authority and the State Resource Centres have developed OBE materials. These materials are developed in a decentralized manner by a varied course team. This

usually consists of NIOS experts, teachers from the formal schools, experts working in literacy and post literacy programmes. Further there has been involvement of government officials as well as field functionaries from the NGO sector.

The subjects include Language, Environmental Science (Science and Social Science), Mathematics and vocational education. The vocational subject is an added feature of the OBE programme. This has been offered so that adults can be given training in a particular skill, which can later be a source of livelihood for them.

OBE DELIVERY MECHANISM – A WIDE NETWORK OF PROVIDERS AND SUPPORTERS

The OBE programme is implemented in the field with the support of national, state and district level organizations. The NIOS has a system by which these agencies are accredited to it. These Accredited Agencies (AAs) perform both academic as well as administrative functions. They are responsible for registering learners, and maintaining their records. The agencies draw up time tables for teaching and also arrange for competent staff to teach the course. Motivating learners to remain in the course and to appear for examinations is also part of the agency's role. In some states, nodal state level agencies have been identified to act as the linking agency as well as to monitor the programme.

However the most significant aspect of the OBE programme is that there is flexibility in terms of this implementation strategy. While there are guidelines laid out for the implementation yet the 'who will do what' aspect changes depending upon the most competent partner available in the field. Thus these Accredited Agencies include both government and non government agencies. There are as many as 267 Accredited Agencies across the country that are running this Programme.

The OBE is offered as an Equivalency Programme under the Continuing Education Scheme of the National Literacy Mission (Govt. of India) through district level organizations like District Literacy Councils (Zila Saksharta Samitis). It is also reaching out to girls and women through the National Programme for the Education for Girls at the Elementary Level (NPEGEL).

The programme also works in collaboration with NGOs running institutions for differently abled children. The openness in the programme makes it feasible for such learners to remain in the system and learn at their own pace.

ACCREDITATION AND CERTIFICATION – AN EXERCISE IN COLLABORATION

In the present scenario in India, there are National and State level Examination Boards that conduct and certify Secondary and Senior Secondary Examinations in the country. The NIOS is a National Board authorized by the government to certify open school learners.

Under the OBE programme, the NIOS has made a major departure from its established examination practice. NIOS has instituted an examination policy based upon a bond of mutual trust and responsibility. As per this, NIOS shares the responsibility of certification with its partners and a Joint Certificate is given upon successful completion of this course. Such collaboration between the teaching learning agency and the certifying Board is unique and exemplifies the high degree of collaboration between partners.

The certificate of the OBE programme of NIOS has been recognized by the Ministry of Human Resource Development Government of India for purposes of higher education and employment. The certificate enables learners in the younger age group to find a place in the formal schools while some others have been able to find jobs or get loans for self employment.

As regards the conduct of examination, the system reflects openness. A learner is enrolled for a period of five years and can appear in the examination for each subject depending upon his/her preparedness for a subject. The examination schedule is decided by the agency as per the convenience of the learners. The NIOS has developed sample question papers that help the agency to determine the design and difficulty levels of each subject. The examination can be answered in Hindi, English or the regional language. Grades are awarded and certificates given only when the learner has completed the required number of credits.

The conduct of examination is also an exercise in collaboration. In states like Rajasthan where the OBE programme is being run through the State Literacy Mission Authority, the examination is conducted with the support of the formal school department. The classrooms of the primary and middle schools serve as examination centres while their teachers are engaged as invigilators. The answer scripts are also examined by this large resource of teachers. The monitoring of the examination is done by the State government. In other cases, the existing infrastructure of NGOs is used for examination purpose.

TEACHING LEARNING AT THE STUDY CENTRE

One of the hallmarks of the ODL system is that it is able to utilize the best talent across different systems. The open schools in India in keeping with this thinking have associated the teachers and tutors from different programmes in OBE. While some NGOs have teaching staff that is appointed by them for teaching the OBE courses, in other instances the Preraks (motivators) of the Continuing Education Scheme of the NLM acts as facilitators for the OBE learners. The other persons associated with the educational activities of the programme include non-formal education instructors, formal school teachers, educated youth, retired teachers and community persons.

TRAINING AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Training is extremely important for this comparatively new programme. There are different categories of persons involved in the functioning of the OBE programme. They include persons who are responsible for policy making and those who are at the managerial level. These persons have to be oriented to understand firstly the Open Learning philosophy and then specifically the OBE programme. There are also those who are involved with lesson writing, examination processes such as paper setting, evaluation of answer scripts. Further there are those who are doing the teaching and interacting with the learners at the study centre level.

It is accepted that no one particular agency can carry out all the trainings. The NIOS carries out training for lessons writers and Coordinators who are heading for the study centres. In addition trainings are carried out by State Governments and by the State level agencies like State resource Centres and SLMA. There is a need to develop training manuals in different regional languages so that capacities can be strengthened. Using distance education methodology for trainings also needs to be planned.

THE PATH AHEAD

The OBE programme is based upon trust, sharing and freedom to innovate between partners. But the challenge lies in ensuring that all partners function at optimal levels. Moreover collaborations have to be nurtured and individual goals have to make way for a collective goal. Maintaining the balance in partnerships are key reasons for its success for the programme.

The goal of universalisation of education is huge and a lot of ground has to be covered before 2015. The role of not just the formal education but the non formal education and open learning systems becomes very significant. The hard to reach groups need a flexible system which provides education of the same quality as the formal system. Programmes like OBE have a strong future provided that they retain their inherent innovative character. The challenge lies in constantly enhancing the flexibilities of the programmes so that it encompasses all those who are outside the educational fold and thus contributes to the goal of Education For All.

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