

## **STAFF DEVELOPMENT: POTENTIAL AND USE OF DISTANCE MODE AMONG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN INDIA**

**Prof. P.R. Ramanujam**

STRIDE, Indira Gandhi National Open University, India

### **Introduction**

One of the strongest and the most emphatic statements about the 'openness' of distance and open learning (DOL) is the one that affirms its potential to break the traditional barriers obstructing educational access to disadvantaged groups, including people with disabilities. Ironically, it is the same potential which is actually used by the already privileged groups to enhance their educational and career opportunities much more extensively than by the disadvantaged. While the expansion of the DOL system is identified with the increase of educational access to the disadvantaged, the actual advantages which reach the disadvantaged through DOL is questionable. Whether in the developed world or the developing world, it is the urban middle class, which is educationally, and socially privileged, that reaps maximum benefits from DOL (Perry, 1976; Mathewson 1995). While the slogan about DOL's equity principle helps the privileged to gain more, the potential to reach the really disadvantaged remains either neglected or poorly addressed. The case becomes stronger if one looks at the education of people with disabilities.

Take a quick look at the content pages of the proceedings of the two major regular conferences of DOL - the ICDE world conference and the AAOU annual conference. The hefty volumes of the World Conferences of the ICDE 1995 and 1997 do not contain a single paper on the contribution of DOL to the education of people with disabilities. Similar is the case with the AAOU Annual Conferences of 1997 and 1998. The general literature survey too shows that the journals and the books on DOL do not have much to offer. With considerable difficulty one comes across papers or chapters on disability issues vis-à-vis DOL in journals and books which otherwise deal with an array of relevant issues and themes. Judi Walker (1994), Rainer Ommerborn (1995) and Tom Vincent (1995) are a few noteworthy exceptions who have addressed the issues related to the education of the disabled in depth. Heather Mason and Carol Miller (1991) recognised the need and the possibility to train special educators through distance mode but did not elaborate on how the training can be effected. In the developing countries, though special education has made some impact; the potential of DOL to meet the educational and training needs of the disabled is hardly touched. Certainly in India a meaningful engagement, if not a wedding, is yet to take place between DOL and disability issue. The present paper attempts to build a care to effect such an engagement or marriage at the earliest.

### **DOL and Disability Sector in India**

Distance education in India began in 1962 in the form of correspondence education. The first Open University in the country came up in 1982 in the State of Andhra Pradesh. The Indira Gandhi National Open University was established in 1985. At present there are eight state level open universities, one National Open University and about 60 institutes of distance education located in the conventional universities. Until recently not a single university or institution thought of seriously the need to study the disability issues in relation to the policies and practices of distance education in one from or another. What remain as the mission statements of all the universities stop with general claims, often unsubstantiated, that they cater to the educational needs of the 'disadvantaged' - a term that means different things to different people. That there is not much information available on the education of the disabled in any of these 70 odd distance teaching institutions is a testimony to the fact that the disability issues have not yet been able to attract the attention of the leaders of distance education in India.

With the setting up of a 'Task Force For making Education Accessible to the Disadvantaged Groups in India', the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) promises to be a path breaker in tackling the much neglected education of the disabled too. But a lot of spadework needs to be done before IGNOU could mount programmes in this area.

The IGNOU Act 1985 states that one of the major objectives of the University is to:

*advance and disseminate learning and knowledge by a diversity of means, including the use of any communication technology, to provide opportunities for higher education to a larger segment of the population and to promote the educational well being of the community generally, to encourage the Open University and distance education systems in the educational pattern of the country . . .*

Though it does not make any specific reference to the education of the disabled, it is implicitly understood that the 'larger segments' and 'the Community' will include the education of the disabled.

Over the last decade, IGNOU has been able to achieve the following in terms of enrolment of students from the above mentioned disadvantaged groups.

The following table gives some information on the enrolment of learners with disabilities for a few IGNOU programmes over the years.

Table 1: Enrolment of Students With Disabilities for Some IGNOU Programmes

SL. No.	Year	Programme	Total Enrolment	No. of Disabled students
I	1994	DNHE	1227	34
	1995	DNHE	998	116
	1996	DNHE	1454	4
	1997	DNHE	952	78
	1998	DNHE	976	47
II	1993	PGDDE	577	23
	1994	PGDDE	446	19
	1995	PGDDE	448	43
	1996	PGDDE	504	3
	1997	PGDDE	346	28
III	1993	MADE	268	88
	1994	MADE	52	1
	1995	MADE	51	4
	1996	MADE	49	0
	1997	MADE	21	2
IV	1993	CIG	1081	10
	1994	CIG	801	0
	1995	CIG	782	0
	1996	CIG	633	1
	1997	CIG	516	46
V	1993	PGDHE	937	0
	1994	PGDHE	395	0
	1995	PGDHE	-	-
	1996	PGDHE	496	2
	1997	PGDHE	331	64
VI	1993	DRD	2254	110
	1994	DRD	1738	224
	1995	DRD	1525	78
	1996	DRD	2059	11
	1997	DRD	1473	219

- DNHE - Diploma in Nutrition and Health Education
- PGDDE - Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education
- MADE - Master of Arts in Distance Education
- CIG - Certificate in Guidance
- PGDHE - Post graduate Diploma in Higher Education
- DRD - Diploma in Rural Development

From Table 1 we can see that IGNOU's success in catering to the education of people with disabilities is extremely modest and uneven. However, given the necessary will and resources, IGNOU can achieve much more than what it has been able to do so far.

## **Disability scenario in India**

India, the largest democracy and the second most populous country in the world has, as per the official estimates, 55 million disabled people of different age groups. Unofficial estimates put the figure at 100 million. In other words, 10% of the Indian people are disabled. 'The disabled' in the Indian context usually constitute these four categories: Visually Handicapped, Orthopaedically Handicapped, Hearing-Impaired or Deaf and Dumb and the Mentally Retarded. If we include the other categories of the disabled too as recognised in the developed countries, the disabled sector in India will be much larger than what it is supposed to be at present. As per the UN standards, every sixth Indian is disabled in some way or other.

People with disabilities of different types are dispersed through out the country and in all the states. State-wise statistics with a degree of accuracy can be obtained only through the Special Employment exchanges, which give only figures of adults with disabilities waiting for employment. The overall estimate by the National Sample Survey (NSS) is 5 per cent (i.e. 50 million) and the estimate by NGOs puts the number of the disabled at 10% (i.e. 100 million). Of this 80 per cent are in rural India and 20 per cent are in the urban areas.

In the educational field, much needs to be done to create the necessary environment conducive for educating the disabled children, their parents, the general public and the teachers themselves. In the employment field, the picture is dismal. The major problems of the disabled persons such as education, employment and their social integration, particularly their family lives remain as major challenges, in spite of efforts made by special educators in India. Even by liberal estimates just 5% are educated

The total number of disabled persons in the life register of the Special Employment Exchanges was 3,13,393 in 1991; 3,23,220 in 1992; 3,37,602 in 1993; and 3,40,304 in 1994. The placements in the same period have been 4599,4306, 4551 and 4485 respectively. The gap between the need and the provision of employment is very obvious. The percentage of employment is .5 (Annual Report, 1996, Ministry of Welfare, Govt. of India).

## **The possible intervention of IGNOU**

From the foregoing analysis it must be clear that the task is too enormous to be tackled by any single institution. With the growing trend of collaborative approach to education and training, IGNOU too can and should bring in a number of governmental and non-governmental agencies together and urgently intervene at least in two areas of utmost importance:

- i) higher education of the disabled persons
- ii) training of persons who work for or with the disabled persons

Both these areas promise a fertile ground for DOL to take root and contribute. There is a need to impart training to policy makers, teachers, trainers and rehabilitation workers in both the areas.

## **IGNOU and higher education for people with disabilities**

Read any document on the education of the disabled in India. Three terms invariably catch one's mind: Special education, vocational education and technical education. Special education stops with primary or at the most secondary level. The other two are cited as essential means to assure employment and economic independence of people with disabilities of different types. No document mentions the need for providing higher education to the disabled. The recent talk about integrated and inclusive education of the disabled too stops with a discussion on school education.

The underlying principle behind this strange silence about the higher educational needs of the disabled is that higher education of this group is not seen as important as their school education that can teach them some vocational and technical skills through which the disabled could fend for themselves. The basic assumption behind this unstated principle is that the disabled are not really crying for higher education, and even if there is a need for it, it can wait and it is not a priority right now. Clearly, this is keeping in tune with the general attitude towards and the political discourse of the education, employment, empowerment and social justice of the disadvantaged groups in general.

The condescending attitude and the patronising tone of the declarations of the governments and the mission statements of the educational institutions, however, cannot deliver the goods without coming to terms with the harsh reality. Notwithstanding the numerous debates over the strategies and methodologies to meet the educational needs of the disabled, the fact remains that it is not the question of approach and method that is in focus but the question of making the necessary resources available to both institutions and individuals that is

important. If 'special education' in the conventional face to face situation is to be given to millions of children and adults with different types of disabilities, then enormous amount of resources (both material and human) must be made available. This is not going to happen in the near future. On the other hand, if integrated, inclusive education is to be put into practice, then again all the educational institutions must make the necessary provision and provide appropriate facilities. In either case, the present strength of the trained professionals is awfully low and even if some money is allocated to the institutions they won't be able to use it purposefully. Policy makers and teachers themselves need to be sensitised about these issues.

While the efforts to make education at all levels accessible to people with disabilities should continue in the face to face education system, at the higher education level IGNOU and other DOL institutions need to make their programmes and courses accessible to people with disabilities who face all kinds of difficulties in the campus based environment. The curriculum needs to be redesigned, while the core academic content can still be retained as common to both the normal students and the students with disabilities.

In the first place, the content should be presented in the accessible and useable media. Secondly, appropriate minimum support services must be made mandatory for the institutions of higher education. Thirdly, methods of evaluation must be made flexible enough to accommodate the special needs and requirements of learners with disabilities. Let me explain these three propositions in some detail with a few examples.

1. **Curriculum** While designing the curriculum, special attention must be paid to the accessibility aspect of any DOL programme (this is different from designing and developing special programmes only for the disabled). For example, a Bachelors Degree Programme of any distance teaching institution must be made accessible to people with disabilities, if they wish to do the programme. The blind or learners with low vision, for example, will not be able to use the print medium. In such a situation, the Braille version of the courses or audiocassettes may be made available to the learners. Similarly the mentally retarded and the learning impaired would need special considerations regarding the media of learning and support services. At the time of framing the curriculum, DOL institutions should look into these aspects. The technical aspects of these tasks must be assessed and the personnel involved in the job should be trained.
2. **Support Services** For the orthopaedically disabled, the medium of instruction can remain the same as the one for the normal students but the former would need assistance in their mobility, access to study centres, transport etc. The hearing impaired will need counsellors and tutors who know the sign language. The blind learners may need 'readers' who would read out the text materials for them. The mentally retarded would need the speech modifiers and interpreters to understand their communication. One can enumerate on such special support, depending on the types of disabled learners and their actual needs. Barrier free buildings must be chosen for setting up special study centres. Those who manage special study centres need relevant training. Counsellor trainers by DOL institutions too must be redesigned appropriately.
3. **Methods of Evaluation** This is another area where a lot can be done. Access to examination centres, the duration to write or answer the questions, time limit to complete the programmes successfully etc. must be flexible and helpful. Attendants, scribes, interpreters etc. must be provided to learners who need them with a little effort the existing programmes and courses of DOL institution can be made accessible to many learners with disabilities special programmes too can be developed for people with disabilities only.

### **DOL and training of trainers**

This is the second area where DOL can intervene very effectively to solve many of the problems of the government agencies and NGOs working in the disability sector. The problem of numbers of persons to be trained in the shortest time possible with limited financial resources. To give just one example. The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) has to train about 362300 personnel by the end of IX plan period (by 2001 AD) and 724600 by 2007 AD. The number of trained personnel is a mere 13,365. By any estimation, the present arrangements for face to face training arrangements cannot meet the training needs. But DOL can considerably lessen the burden if the methodology is appropriately adapted.

Unfortunately, even in the developed countries, training of special educators and others working with or for people with disabilities *The Special Education Conference* at Vancouver in 1989 recognised the need for training of special educators in the face-to-face situation. Graham Upton (1991) in his introduction to the book

*Staff Training and Special Education Needs* admits that though 'many appear to recognise the importance of specialised staff training in relation to special educational needs, few have written about it or spoken about it at national and international conferences'. He also points out that in the United Kingdom 30 per cent of the special educators are untrained and in the USA, 16 states allowed untrained teachers to teach the blind and visually impaired children. Japan too has not emphasised much on the training aspect, although many other facilities are available there for people with disabilities.

In the developing world, generally there is severe shortage of resources for the education and welfare of people with disabilities. Commenting on the relevance of appropriate training materials for community based rehabilitation (CBR) projects in the Asia-Pacific region Robyn L. Twible and Elizabeth C. Henley (1997) emphasise that:

*Manuals for CBR should be designed for the lay person or village worker and be much more practical in nature, focusing on the knowledge and skills need to enhance the quality of life and independence of the disabled persons in their community environment.*

The above statement clearly indicates the training needs of those involved in CBR projects. Thakur V. Hariprasad (1997) points out the inadequate training of personnel working for the disabled as follows:

*Heterogeneity exists still in the duration, inputs and outcomes of various training programmes for different professionals and para-professionals. Though the Rehabilitation Council of India has been constituted as a statutory body to monitor programmes, its pace of functioning is not matching with the national goals. Many people with disabilities are designated to the treatment/interventions of unqualified practitioners by families who have no access to trained personnel.*

The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) itself has developed some 47 training programmes which are offered by 87 institutions recognised by RCI as training institutions. However, the trained personnel are very less in number as compared to the actual needs (RCI, 1996). Leaving the parents and general teachers aside, the RCI document mentions 19 categories of personnel who need specialised training. If we include the other categories such as parents, policy makers, general teachers, institutions heads and others, the list will become longer. In any case, the number of persons who need training of different types is very large (see p.8) and the conventional training methods cannot simply meet the requirements. The potential of DOL is to be tapped exactly at this point.

### **The tasks before IGNOU**

The immediate agenda for IGNOU is to set up an appropriate mechanism to look after Disability Studies. Such a mechanism would help prioritise the issues in a professional manner and embark on time bound result-oriented projects. IGNOU will have to involve both governmental and non-governmental agencies in its efforts to intervene in a) the higher education of the disabled adults and b) the training of different categories of personnel working in the disability sector. A survey must be immediately conducted to assess the demand for IGNOU's general programmes and also the need for special programmes. Similarly, the training needs of RCI and other agencies must be assessed and workable collaborative strategies could be worked out. MOUs between IGNOU and other relevant agencies must be signed. The working group of the Task Force concerned is already on the job. Given the necessary institutional will and the committed leadership, IGNOU can achieve in practice one of its major social goals, which has hitherto remained an ignored slogan.

### **References:**

AAOU (1997) 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, *Quality Assurance in Distance and Open Learning*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 11-14 November 1997. Volumes 1-3

AAOU (1998) 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, *The Asian Learner*, Hong Kong, Volume 1-3

*Annual Report* (1996) Ministry of Welfare, Government of India, New Delhi

COL (1997) *Special Education: Exploration of Strategies to Meet the Needs of the Disabled in India*, a Project Report by P. R. Ramanujam

Hariprasad, Thakur V. (1997) Background *Paper* for the Mid-point Seminar of the Asian Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 16 July 1997, New Delhi, Sankalp, Vol.7, No.2 p.9

ICDE (1995) 17<sup>th</sup> World Conference *One World and Many Voices*, Conference papers, edited by David Sewart Volumes 1-3

ICDE (1997) 18<sup>th</sup> World Conference *The New Learning Environment: A Global Perspective*, Conference abstracts.

*IGNOU Act* (1985), Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi

Mason, Heather & Carol Miller (1991) 'Training Teachers of Children with Special Needs', in *Staff Training and Special Education Needs*, Graham Upton (ed.), David Fulton Publishers, London.

Mathewson, Claire (1994), 'Whose Development, Whose Needs? Distance Education Practice and Politics in the South Pacific', *Journal of Distance Education*, Vol. ix. No.2 pp. 35-47

Ommerborn, Rainer (1995) 'Handicapped students at Distance Teaching University - ten statements and comments', *epistolo didactica*, 1995/2, pp. 55-67

RCI (1996) 'Report on Manpower Development' RCI, Ministry of Welfare Govt. of India, New Delhi.

Twible, Robyn L and Elizabeth C. Henley (1997) 'The Development of Teaching Packages on Home based Therapy Skills for CBR Programs', *Asia Pacific Disability Rehabilitation Journal*, Vol.8 No.1 p.3

Upton, Graham (1991) 'Introduction', *Staff Training and Special Education Needs*, Graham Upton (ed.), David Fulton Publishers, London

Vincent, Tom (1995) 'Information Technology and Disabled Students Overcoming Barriers to Learning', in *Open and Distance Learning Today*\_Fred Lockwood (ed.) Routledge, London and New York

Walker, Judi (1994) 'Open Learning: The answer to the government's equity problems? A report of a study on the potential impact of the Open Learning initiative on people with disabilities', *Distance Education*, Vol. 15, No.1, 1994. pp. 94-111.