

Spreading Quality Education For The Deprived In Our Millennium: A Proposal For A Regional Open University For South Asia

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ABSTRACT

To reach maximum number of deprived people with the benefit of education in the developing countries in particular, some regional open universities are needed. Suggestion for one such private sector institution for South Asia is presented. Similar institutions will function alongside public universities at less cost and at greater flexibility.

INTRODUCTION

As distance learning has been in existence since the sixties, and since this kind of education has seen an inexorable growth in many countries, including in quite a few in Asia, it is only expected that a model regional open university be established, in collaboration with similarly positioned neighbors in Asia. They could be from the members of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Gulf Countries for Cooperation (GCC), etc. As an initial effort, one such university could be established for South Asian region. Dhaka could be an ideal location for the purpose. This new open university could receive aid from the government; external financing would also be needed to offset high investment particularly in infrastructure, course materials and technology development. World Bank, Asian Development Bank, other donor agencies and international NGO's could come forward to meet such financial requirements. UNESCO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), Open University of UK (OUUK) could step in for technical know-how and academic support, and for helping in and monitoring quality. Bangladesh, being the host country, could extend physical and other logistic facilities.

DISCUSSION

OLDE STILL THE BEST OPTION

By making it partly online but greatly through the neo-traditional media like radio, television, video, print and the correspondence practices, open and distance education in the region could further develop. To fulfil the need of the new millennium for quick globalization and rapid development by reaching the masses, and specially in outlying or rural areas, there is no alternative to open learning and distance education (OLDE). The overwhelming number of deprived adults, particularly women and other semi-professionals, could only come out of the scenario of no higher education or education dropped halfway and join the national or regional streamline by expediting the development efforts of their countries. This great mass of newly educated and higher educated adults and women could simultaneously contribute to the open university programs on removal of illiteracy (for instance, through varying manifestations of open schools within the OU system) and thus to poverty alleviation. The deprived people of the society will have that great advantage of receiving education and training at less cost, anytime anywhere.

Once the importance of OLDE is felt vital to further accelerate similar efforts alongside the existence of several public sector universities in many countries at national level, an innovative approach in founding a regional open university be considered now. . This should preferably be in the private sector. Such an institution should start functioning at the earliest feasible time, say, in two to three years (which would take more than double time if managed by the public sector). In South Asia, it can serve over a million people every year from a total population of 1.4 billion. A large chunk of the recipients would benefit from higher post-secondary and professional education like teaching, nursing, agricultural technologies and economics, media studies, business studies, IT studies and some applied sciences. It has been proved again and again that traditional ways of delivering training in such job-oriented disciplines is 'time consuming, labor intensive, socially disruptive and costly'.

A REGIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH ASIA AND INSTRUCTION IN ENGLISH FOR HIGH QUALITY

It has been observed that in South Asian countries in particular, multilingual teaching has been a reality. It has also been experienced that wherever an international language like English remained the medium of instruction, the standard automatically improved to make it compatible with the advanced countries. It is for this reason that reasonable

proportion of adult learners in higher and professional education in the open university system should receive education in English. Online, internet or other information communication technology facilities as they are available till date would be more advantageous in this medium. For example, in Bangladesh, already all the fifty-one fully private universities (unfortunately most of which are otherwise not properly equipped), all established in the last 12 years, against 21 public universities established over a long period from 1921 to 2004, follow English as the medium of instruction. All but one public university carry out instruction in the national language, Bengali. And the difference of quality of education specially in job oriented modern disciplines has been conspicuous, being much better in the common international language, English.

In this respect, the multicultural community of deprived people in the region would benefit. This group would include those, particularly working people and women, that are socially disadvantaged and can hardly afford to enroll in traditional universities.

In the process, imparting part of the instructions in English, the character of regional or international faculty and students would be maintained, thus paving the way for attaining universality, compatibility, dynamism, greater harmony and collaboration within any multilingual region itself. Besides, for easier access to the internet, online or information communication technology facilities till date, it would be advantageous in this medium. Through open university system, we will attain on the one hand, high quality education. On the other, maximum and quicker education to the general people should also be aimed at, where part of the learners would continue to be taught in some common languages of the region, too, such as in Bengali, Urdu, Hindi, etc. The latter medium will be specially targeted to those from the rural masses and from those receiving more locally or nationally oriented courses.

For greater success of high quality distance education in the Third World, another approach could be by establishing several regional open universities as models in different locations. All such world class education, higher and professional training, from any model regional open university at less cost, would reinvigorate efforts of the public sector universities – traditional or open..

The following Table (outlines) will shed light on the structure, nature and scope of a private open university for a heavily populated region, like South Asia:

REGIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY FOR SOUTH ASIA

Board of Governors / Directors (with representation from all concerned quarters)

= Responsible for Policy / Guidelines / Overall control / Funding / Image building

1 Chief Executive / President or Vice Chancellor

2 to 3 Vice Presidents or Pro-Vice Chancellors, for Academic, Finance, Administrative, Research & Development affairs

Some responsibilities will include :

- Faculty affairs
- Curriculum & Instruction affairs
- Quality control or monitoring
- Teaching materials, tools, aids, etc.
- Libraries, laboratories
- Media
- Publishing, printing, distribution
- Technology development
- Logistic support
- Student support services
- Regional and international cooperation & coordination

Funding sources may include:

Donors (NGO's, international agencies, individuals, corporate establishments, etc.)

Student tuition

Endowments

Miscellaneous income (from sales of educational products, investments, real estates and other properties, etc.)

Sources from the host country should comprise major contributions in funding, for example, in arranging Grants and some infrastructural facilities (like land, premises, etc.)

OPEN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

In Bangladesh, one of the least developed of the heavily populated Commonwealth countries in South Asia, literacy has just reached 52%, enrolment of secondary education age group is 21%, post-secondary education is still at its infancy, with 4% of the age group. The situation is alarming, with a population of 135 million. With the founding of the first and only Bangladesh Open University (BOU) there since 1992, realization for the need of more open and distance education has strengthened in the light of further democratization of education. This would contribute to the upliftment of the educational opportunities to a larger section of the needy, and subsequently to assist in the overall human resources development. It is through open and distance education that transformation of the vast human resources into an educated and trained workforce is workable at less expense to the government and at convenient pace of the recipients of both formal and non-formal academic courses. Over a million people can receive such education annually in Bangladesh alone, thus adding to capacity building, where only a

smaller fraction of this number may be served through public sector open university system and that too at a much higher cost to the government.

Besides, higher and professional education has been considered an effective solution to several national problems. This has been reflected in the setting up of over twenty public and over fifty private universities there. Since independence of Bangladesh in 1971, public sector universities have increased from eight while all private sector universities were born in the last twelve years. Then why not an open university in the private sector, too? BOU alone cannot fulfil educational requirement for over one hundred thousand enrollees whereas the need for educating over one million post-secondary adults remain unattended every year.

WHY MORE STRESS NEEDED IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

When public resources are limited, and procedures and systems are bureaucratic in nature, slower in implementation and less flexible in all programs, it is only desirable in this age of privatization that more avenues should be opened up for the participation of the private sector. In this, together with private entrepreneurship, the government and international agencies could collaborate. as it may be too difficult for the former alone to support all initial costs.

Neo-traditional practices to continue

A new priority could be considered here. Until ICT's or modern technology – like online, internet, etc. – are more in commonplace, reaching the most, or until financial and other resources are sufficiently available for wide access to other electronic media, like radio, television, videos, CDs, etc. for some more time, pragmatic strategies should continue to include somewhat conventional practices like correspondence and print media. In this last, whether for preparation or delivery of course materials or notes or instructions, the print media can act effectively. In fact, the raising of educational standards by producing high quality print materials as well produced and appropriate books or reading materials, goes a long way in assisting the adult learners, most of whom are working people. Hence special efforts for suitable and effective publishing and distribution system in the modern way would be required. To address the deprived segment of the society who are half educated but who would be genuinely desirous of improving their lot, the role of open and distance education via the print media or publishing system has proved significant. In fact, some of the publications including course materials and other relevant reference literature (as produced by the Open University of UK) could as well be acceptable to those who receive traditional

education. Thus from quality open and distance education also, contribution of knowledge, skill and scholarship to the overall development of education itself, and hence to the national or regional development is not only possible but desirable, too.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded that the objectives of the conference theme would be met considerably if the foregoing steps and programs are implemented by the earliest possible time, say, within two to three years. First, this would be through the creation of a model regional Open University for South Asia, with several more in other regions of the Third World. In our millennium, more and more learning communities will be built across the participating countries or regions, through a network of Resource Centers or Tutorial Centers, in a faster but less expensive way.

Second, this kind of approach will enable the beneficiaries in capacity building and in reaching the maximum of the target learners, both in rural areas and among urban adults. By distance education, a receptive and wider audience will converge in the catchment areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America and will soon eliminate or minimize illiteracy.

Third, through practical and feasible approach, somewhat conventional though, spread of quality distance education in the less advanced countries is still widely necessary by means of effective print media that should follow practices of modern publishing and distribution system. This would be apart from the new technology that created online or ICT facilities which are also to be gradually adopted in the open universities from a regional perspective, taking into view constraints and opportunities alike.

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