Problems and Prospects of Open and Distance Education in Nepal

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Abstract

Distance education as a mean of providing access to education, particularly secondary to tertiary level education, has gained great prominence in the world. Nepal has taken giant steps of recent to introduce open and distance education programme. This paper explores the major terms inherent in open and distance education, its potentials, possible factors that may inhibit successful implementation of the programme, and the use of low and high technological tools for its implementation. The paper recommended the use for its planning and implementation, and also stressed the need for improvement in electricity and communication services.

Keywords: Distance education, Nepal, Effective communication, Instructional delivery.

Introduction

Every nation invests in education because it can produce unquantifiable benefits for individuals, organizations and the society as a whole. Education is provided through formal and informal means. In formal settings, the conventional (face-to-face school instruction) and distance education (offered with separation in terms of physical location of instructors and students) have been used to provide educational opportunities to recipients. Open education though not new in Nepal has been given much prominence of recent. Many Nepalese benefited through the open education (success in S.L.C exam). Distance education is one of the major pivots, on which the present Democratic system in Nepal hopes to improve the quantity and quality of instruction in Nepalese open schools. It is also a means of providing basic education for Nepal. Policy statements and actions have given fillip to the determination of the government to make a success of the programme. The main overviews of the aim in distance education of Nepal are:

- Provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied.
- Meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their work place.
- Encourage internationalization especially of tertiary education curricula.

To achieve these aim it is stated that the Democratic government of Nepal should ensure that distance education programme are equivalent in structure and status to those offered by face-to-face mode of instruction, and that the government shall encourage and regulate distance education programme in Nepal. It should also establish Educational manpower development center and National Curriculum Development Center on distance education and it promote distance education, nation wise, liaise with media establishments, encourage provide efforts and other non-governmental organization the provision of quality distance education.

Meaning, Nature and Characteristic of Distance Education

The need to clarify common terms used to describe distance education becomes important in order to give direction to discussion of its implementation in Nepal. Several terms are used interchangeably to refer to distance education. These terms include distance learning, distance teaching, correspondence study education, home study, external study and independent study. The compound concept distance education subsumes other terms as most of the terms merely address specific aspect of distance education (Keegan, 1996). Distance learning time, pace and place. However, this is misconstrued as independence from an educational institution which is not usually the case (Keegan, 1996; Kaufman, Watkins & Guerra; 2001).Term to describe the student-centeredness of distance education and it deals with the use of print and electric technologies to present individual lessons to learners at a distance. Distance teaching refers to the didactic strategies of delivery of instruction to students, and this is instructor-centered.

Correspondence study entails distance education through the postal sub-groups. That is, learning at home and communicating with instructors using the print materials as fundamental element of distance education. Home study was used extensively in United States of America but condemned as a term for distance education because distance learner may not, in fact, study at home or may study part at home and part at other places (Keegan, 1996). External study is a form of education that is external to but not separated from the faculty staff of the institution offering distance education programme. Independent study is used for a range of teaching-learning activities, which indicates students' control over learning.

Distance education has within its purview elements of these terms. Thus, Holmerg (1990) defined distance education as:

> *The various forms of teaching and learning at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or in the same premises but which nevertheless benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition (i.e. tutoring, teaching) of the staff of the tutorial organization. Its main characteristic is that it relies on non-contiguous, i.e. mediated communication (p. 1).*

Therefore, distance education means the delivery of useful learning opportunities at convenient place and time for learners, irrespective of the institution providing the learning opportunity (Kaufman, Watkins & Guerra, 2001). Generally, distance education has four major characteristics as identified by ADEA Working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning (2002). These characteristics are: institutional accreditation where learning is certified by an institution or agency; use of variety of media for instructional delivery; provision of two-way communication to ensure tutor-learner, and learner-learner interaction; and possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials for leaner-learner interaction, laboratory or practice session or library study.

Distance education not only shares the goals of conventional education, but it also aims at providing access to historically under-served, place bound, and highly motivated population. Distance education is said to be open because of students' freedom and

programme flexibility. It is flexible and opens in terms of its admission requirements, that is, not as rigid as in conventional institutions, freedom in terms of place of study, time, place, and composition of study programme, content and didactic approach. It is intended to offer useful learning opportunity to recipients at a time and local environment convenient to them. Contacts between the student and institutions are provided through interactive and non-interactive media. It may also be provided through some contact at study center. Unlike the conventional face-to-face instruction, the delivery medium plays a crucial role in minimizing the gap between teaching and learning (Keegan, 1996).

Communication in Distance Education Programme

Conventional or distance education programme is dependent on good communication for successful learning to take place. Good communication promotes needed interactions (teacher-teacher and student-student) in teaching /learning situation. This is because interaction is essential to students' learning intention to the overall success and effectiveness of distance education. Many studies by distance educators have confirmed that interaction in distance learning environment may lead to increased academic achievement (ADEA Working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning, 2003; Lenning & Ebber, 1999; Neibuhr & Neibuhr, 1999), and also greater retention rate of instructional content (Lenning & Ebber, 1999).

Since distance education entails the absence of face-to-face contact embedded in conventional education, media with high interactivity must be used. That is, media which can promote both teacher-student and student-student interactions. In this context interactivity in the words of Garrison (1993) is the "sustained two-way communication among two or more persons for the purpose of explaining and challenging perspective" (p. 160. In a learning context it is the interaction among two or more people for the purpose of task/instructional competition or social relationship building (Gibert & Moore, 1998). Media must be used in distance education to ensure both asynchronous and synchronous communication (Huang, 2000; Liaw & Huang, 2000). Asynchronous communication gives learners the freedom of choice in learning. This communication is not dependent on learners being present together at a specific time to conduct teaching and learning activities.

Asynchronous communication environment provides learners with discussion that allows participant access to the conference or instruction at different times. Therefore, learners can work at their own convenience, when or where they want and at their own place, thereby providing learners more time to reflect on their own ideas and encourage them to do more critical thinking. On the other hand, synchronous communication occurs in real time as all participants in the interaction, including instructors must be present at the same time, although they may not necessarily be at the same physical location. Thus, synchronous communication serves the role of a thinking device for collaborative construction of knowledge and enhances learners' high-order thinking skills and creative abilities (Huang, 2000, Liaw & Huang, 2000).

Problems Associated with Instructional Delivery at a Distance in Nepal

In spite of the enthusiasm generated by the new thrust in open and distance education, overall problems that may impede proper implementation are better understood and taken

care of. These problems are discussed as follow:

1. *Lack of consistency in programme/policy implementation:* It is a known fact that success in any educational policy is contingent on the involvement of all stakeholders and sponsorship of funding agency, that is, the government. A succeeding government truncated the attempt at open and distance education in past few years. Thus successive governments in Nepal must not only allow the continuation of open and distance education programme, it must be supported through adequate fund.
2. *Problem of electricity*: Since successful distance education cannot be assured without the use of communication and technological tools (e-mail, fax, Internet, television, radio, etc.), then the problem of electricity comes into focus. Several rural areas in Nepal are yet out to have electricity, while the urban areas experience epileptic power supply. This will create problems for effective integration of most technological media in the delivery of distance education programme.
3. *Poor state of telephone has led to increase in dial-up cost for most Nepalese. Poor telecommunication facilities and lacks of access*: Just like electricity most Nepalese do not have access to telephone and other telecommunication facilities. Even, telephone lines in the urban centers are not adequate to serve the teeming population. Services for those who have access are in most cases epileptic. These may make the integration of telecommunication in the delivery of distance education difficult. In addition, poor state of telephone has led to increase in dial-up cost for most Nepalese.
4. *Poor Postal System:* The postal system in the country is not yet up to international standard, in terms, of safety of goods, quick delivery of correspondences, accessibility to remote areas, and so on. Although of recent improvements have been made in the level of services, cannot guarantee efficient two-way communication between distant learners and distance education institutions.
5. *Poor economic situations and its effects on middle level manpower:* The poor state of the nation's economy has pauperized most Nepalese. Even an average middle income earner cannot afford basic technological and communication gadgets. Thus, computer related telecommunication facilities might not be useful for most Nepalese, as computer is still a luxury in institutions, offices and homes. This may make the integration of necessary on-line resources (e-mail, newsgroups, world-wide-web, etc.) into distance education in Nepal difficult.

These problems if not addressed will impede proper implementation of open and distance education in Nepal. Therefore, efforts should be intensified to improve electricity, telecommunication and other communication facilities in both urban and rural area.

Communication and Technology Tools for Effective Distance Education in Nepal

There is an array of communication and technological tools available for the delivery of distance education programme in Nepal. The nature of distance education and the need to provide opportunity for learners to interact with instructors and other learners makes it imperative for the use of media, which can ensure effective communication.

It should be emphasized that media in themselves cannot ensure good teaching but the

way they are integrated. Therefore, courses using "media mix", that is, printed materials, electronic media, interactive and non-interactive media are essential. There is the need for appropriate mix of "low-tech" delivery approach using the print media and technology based delivery system.

Since learners are social beings, no technology regardless of its interaction ability can serve as perfect substitute for human interaction. Thus, the use of study centers for adding face-to-face communication where appropriate is important. This will provide opportunity for teacher-student and student-student interaction which can greatly enhance the delivery of distance teaching (Willis, 1998).

Relevant "high-tech", latest technology will be needed to provide both asynchronous and synchronous communications. This deals with computer networks and computer based multi-media. These include using computer-based instruction (CBI) as self-contained teaching machine to present individual lessons. CD-ROM can provide structured courses with well-designed programmes. Distance learners can study the content through their own computer, thus providing opportunity for individual drill and practise. Electronics mail (e-mail), computer conferencing, and World Wide Web (web) applications can also be used. The web has the capabilities to include several audio and video facilities, textbooks, study guides, workbooks, and course syllabi (Huang, 2000). Distance learners can use online search to conduct research or collect relevant information to assist their learning. The introduction of virtual library into the nation's educational system will also serve to promote the use of computers in distance education.

Traditional technological tools can also be relevant. Distance education course materials can be delivered through broadcast radio and television, videotape, interactive telephone, satellite, cable or Integrated Service Digital network (ISDN) lines. Many would be distance learners in Nepal have access to radio, television, and videotape; this makes these media potential delivery systems for distance education.

With the combination of communication and technology tools discussed earlier the delivery of distance education may be effective. This can be ensured through integrated involvement of all stakeholders and effective planning to ensure successful implementation of the distance learning programme in Nepal.

Conclusions

Open and distance education can provide needed access for Nepalese who are presently disadvantaged through the conventional educational system. The enthusiasm shown by government and steps taken so far can only be sustained through proper planning and monitored implementation. For distance education goals to be achieved, proper steps must be taken not only to involve all stakeholders (community leaders, business groups, conventional educational institutions, etc.). Various communication and technology tools have been identified for distance education; their successful use can only be assured through proper selection for specific group of learners and their relevance (quality, attributes, and instructional strategy). Since distance education lacks the face-to-face contact in conventional education, necessary infrastructures, equipment and fund must be available to

provide means of communication with students and offering counseling services to them. Such means should not only be for the delivery of instructional contents to students but also for guidance, time management techniques, technology training and assistance, and also initiatives to guard and encourage students' progress.

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