

VOCATION-BASED HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Education is general and higher education in particular is considered to be a powerful instrument for the socio-economic development of a country. It is difficult to over-emphasize its significance as an essential source of acquiring new knowledge and vocational dexterity. It has a crucial role in generating skilled manpower for national development. The present higher education system does not fully inspire a spirit of service among the students. The system bristles with examples of showy and glamorous institutions at all levels, while educational programmes and the courses that are offered have left much to be desired. An educational system of a developing country like India will have to be committed to launching vocational programmes at various levels related to employment and work. There is a need at various levels related to employment and work. There is a need to find out what is happening in work-related educational programmes in other countries. A few important employment sectors have been largely neglected and deprived from vocational higher education and vocational training. This paper deals with some of the foundational aspects of higher education system and an attempt has been to analyse the related problems. Relevance of vocation-based distance education has been examined to solve these problems and the role of an open learning system like Indira Gandhi Open University has been justified to remedy the situation.

KEY WORDS: Vocational education, Distance education

Introduction

Education as a social institution is a boon to humankind for prosperity, progress and peace. To keep pace with the world wide scientific and technological advancements, continuous innovation in the higher education system is dispensable. In the modern society, if one has to lead a happy life and be a useful citizen he has to acquire the required knowledge and skills. Only then, he may find himself economically, socially, culturally and politically attuned to take part in various activities. To perform these duties correctly and satisfactorily one should at least be a literate. "Education for all" is, therefore, a must for all citizens in a democracy.

India operates one of the largest systems of higher education. There has been a spectacular expansion of higher education during the last 40 years. According to figures available in the documents of National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 and Programme of Action (POA) 1992 (Government of India, 1986), at present, there are about 200 universities and over 7000 colleges offering traditional academic programmes both at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels. The student's enrolment is likely to touch the figure of 5 million in the near future. Although, India is considered to be one of the biggest producers of educated man power in the world, yet the situation is far from satisfactory because of some deep-rooted maladies.

The huge expansion of higher education has been accompanied by several problems— mushrooming growth of sub-standard institutions, deterioration in quality and standards of education, pollution of the academic atmosphere, malfunctioning and mismanagement of the educational institutions. Some of these major problems, coupled with the recent resource crunch, have contributed to the prevalent chaotic situation of higher education in the country. This has equally badly affected the system of vocational education in

the country. The main problem with vocational education is that its programme structure is not in tune with the needs of the employment sector including the industrial and agriculture sectors. Also, vocational education is not easily accessible to the people living in economically backward and rural areas.

Tremendous efforts are needed to rectify the situation. While educationists all over the country have been quick to recognise the malaise, they have not been able to suggest a workable remedy although nostrums have been suggested in many ways. There have been several national level seminars and workshops to debate all such aspects, yet the proposals have been hampered by several bottlenecks in the system.

This paper deals with some of the foundational aspects of higher education system and an attempt has been to analyse the related problems. Relevance of vocation-based distance education.

PROBLEMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

The present higher education system does not fully inspire a spirit of service among the students. The system bristles with examples of showy and glamorous institutions at all levels, while educational programmes and the courses that are offered have left much to be desired. The situation in most of the campuses of the universities and colleges is disconcerting with several forces committing with each other in polluting the academic atmosphere.

The continued socio-economic crisis in the country has badly affected higher education system to provide basic educational services. It lags far behind the developed countries of the world in imparting education and training which provides work and employment. There is a big gap of knowledge and competence between the developing countries of Asia, Africa and South America and some of the developed countries of Europe and America with serious implications for the former.

An overview of several reports, literature and researches suggest that the rapid expansion of higher education has been limited to the number of educational institutions and the students' enrolment. Another serious lacuna in the higher education system is the total absence of accountability of the various categories of people involved in it, namely, the education administrators, heads of the departments/institutions, teachers, managements including the government agencies, students, parents and even responsible citizens of the society. The lopsided and unbalanced expansion of education diverted the efforts and resources of the government towards mass education through higher education to elite education at the cost of vocational training. This produced an enormous number of unskilled and unemployed graduates with devalued degrees. The process directly led to unemployment. It also lowered down the quality of education due to overcrowding of the educational institutions, curriculum constraints and lack of time.

Most of the institutions of higher education are autonomous with regard to their objectives, educational programmes, course structures, entrance and graduation criteria without much socio-economic relevance and commitment to provide need-based services to the society. Very few institutions produce top-level professionals like doctors, engineers, managers, bureaucrats, executives, scientists, academicians, teachers, etc. No doubt, such professionals are essentially needed in every country and greater emphasis will have to be continuously given to the programmes related to these professions. But equally needed are the skilled workers, technicians, nurses, computer operators, etc. to assist these top professionals in their respective jobs. In fact, trained and qualified persons with vocational competence are required in all spheres of national development including administration, health, education, engineering, technology, agriculture, industries and business sectors. But most of the institutions and universities do not offer the much desired vocation-based education and continue with the traditional system of only knowledge-based education. As a result, there is a big gap between what is being produced and what is needed by the society. Some of the elite educational institutions live in their own academic world without being accountable to the society and having no interaction with the employers in trade, industry and technology for exploring employment opportunities for their students. This is perhaps one of the greatest dilemmas of education in general and higher education in particular in several developing countries including India.

Most of the teachers are appointed and promoted on the basis of considerations other than merit and academic achievements. As such the teachers, or at least a good percentage of them, have imbibed the trade union culture. Devotion to teaching and academic work is given the go by. Students, teachers and administrators indulge in unproductive activities and political conflicts based on caste, region and religion.

RELEVANCE OF VOCATION-BASED DISTANCE EDUCATION

To tackle the problems of higher education system, serious and sincere efforts are required to devise policies on some of the major aspects of education such as linkage with employment and work; accessibility and quality; role of the youth in national building and resource mobilization. These aspects are related to the relevance of vocational education [Laulo & Lillis, 1988, p.5] and the role of the distance education system in some of the following ways among others.

Generally, higher education programmes are designed to provide academic knowledge of humanities, sciences and social sciences for advanced studies and research pursuits. These programmes mostly develop traits essential for a bureaucratic and elitist culture. This approach is not entirely in tune with the needs of the present society. In fact, it is generating a large number of educated unemployed without any vocational skill. Such an approach has created a gulf between education and work. To bridge this gulf, educational institutions will have to be the centres for generating working skills and employment avenues. For this, adequate vocational programmes will have to be designed which require students to absorb knowledge and develop traits for leadership, adaptability, negotiating abilities, initiatives, self-employment, etc. Work-based education is, therefore, essential to fulfill the socio-economic aspirations of the society.

The main emphasis in the educational programmes will have to be on vocational training, professional competence to solve practical problems, capacity to learn by doing, and awareness of the need of the society. Education will have to be linked with productivity and national development. The conventional programmes will have to be drastically modified or redesigned and even replaced so that the courses have direct relevance to socio-economic development.

Vocational education, in general, aims at providing knowledge of technologies and sciences and learning of practical skills related to the occupations in various industrial and economic sectors. It has a special relevance because of its need in solving scientific, technological and economic problems. The applications of several courses in disciplines like economics, commerce, mathematics, sciences, engineering, etc. can be found not only in business and industry but also in dealing with several other situations encountered in defence, health, planning, management, agriculture, software, communication and media technologies, etc. The rationale, therefore, to have vocation-based and application-oriented courses in higher education system is to bridge the gap between education and vocation by providing scope for acquiring the necessary professional dexterity that is required in a wide range of situations for socio-economic development.

A debate (Twining *et al*, 1987) is continuously going on whether vocational education should form an integral and in-built component of general higher education system or it should be treated as a separate area of education and offered in the form of employment-based provisions including various apprenticeships. The influence of industry, commerce and modern technology on every aspect of human life is gradually forcing the removal of such partitions under the present system. In the developing countries where the problems of youth unemployment and low economic growth are far more severe and serious, such controversies are irrelevant and unnecessary. For them, both the approaches, together in an integrated form or even separately, are essential so long as they are meaningful and effective for work and employment. The distinctive feature of the integrated approach is that a student does not forfeit his option of continuing with higher education in areas unrelated to vocational speciality. It also means basic conceptualisation as a preparation for advanced training. The main concern of specialised and separate, vocational institutions, on the other hand, is to provide employment-based vocational training. Pure vocational programmes are meant for youth employment to give direct advantage in access to work in the area of specialisation. Such programmes are aimed to discourage unrealistic ambitions for further academic study. In a developing country like India, both separate systems for pure academic and vocational education as well as a mixed (dual) system are desirable so that there is an opening for each type of skill and talent.

An educational system of a developing country like India will have to be committed to launching vocational programmes at various levels related to employment and work. There is a need to find out what is happening in work-related educational programmes in other countries, to know about the responsibilities and achievements in this field, to identify problems and be introduced to innovations, to seek information about recent developments in vocational education and, generally, to give proposals in the light of the experiences of other institutions in vocational courses pertaining to various areas of education.

The world is passing through the last decade of the 20th century in a state of serious socio-economic crisis due to the population explosion during the past few decades. The crisis, in particular, is causing tremendous sufferings for the people of the developing countries of Asia, South America, South Pacific and Africa overwhelmed by the effects of foreign debts, inflation, unemployment, poverty, diseases and disasters. It is estimated that about one billion persons will need work and employment only in these countries by the end of this century (International Council for Distance Education, 1990). This is generating growing demands on the role of education. The educational needs of the developing countries are more demanding because of their problems related to their size and population. A peculiar problem of a developing country like India is the migration of people from rural to urban areas in search of work, employment and higher education. Provision of appropriate vocation-based education

can mitigate the sufferings of the poor and check the tendency of migration from villages to cities.

A few important employment sectors have been largely neglected and deprived from vocational higher education and vocational training. These are widespread both in rural and urban areas and may be broadly classified as the informal urban sector, the rural non-farming sector and the agriculture sector. They encompass a large number of traditionally inherited occupations restricted only to family, caste, tribe or clan and cover a wide variety of vocational activities, e.g., tourism, farming, crafts, handlooms, etc. The activities of these sectors are carried out in small units established, owned and operated by one or a few individuals. These units are generally not technically efficient, are ill-equipped, have inadequate infrastructure facilities and are not well-organised. The persons working in these sectors are mostly self-employed. They are helpers or apprentices. They may be relatively well-off or poor but they are getting increasingly educated. This is because the modern industrial and economic sector cannot absorb all the products of the school and higher education system. Entry to these sectors, particularly for the young educated but unemployed, may be through casual labour and temporary work in unskilled jobs, later on stepping to regular employment. Levels of vocational skill in these sectors may be modest and there is ample scope for upgrading these skills to improve productivity, quality of goods and efficiency of services. The sizes of these sectors are growing rapidly and there is a corresponding demand for the development of work-related and employment-oriented educational programmes in these sectors.

The educational needs of the people in the developing countries cannot be adequately and appropriately met by the formal system alone. The limitations of total dependence on the formal system have been acknowledged by the education planners. It was realised in early sixties that the total reliance on the formal system of education could not deliver the goods, particularly in the context of productivity and national development. Formal university system could no longer cope up with the huge demand for higher education. Further, the conventional or traditional courses seemed to have little relevance to the developmental needs of the present times. A system of non-formal education was evolved to meet these educational requirements. Many universities of Europe, Asia and Latin America adopted the non-formal system to meet the demand of the overflow of enrolment from the formal system. However, proper priorities are yet to be fully accorded to the educational programmes in the non-formal system. Most of these programmes are tied up with those of the formal system in terms of their programme structures and methodology to provide mainly non-vocational education for advanced academic studies and research. This has made the non-formal system yet another channel for the production of the educated unemployed.

In most of the developing countries, education is highly subsidised and requires huge investments by the government agencies. In the face of the current resource crunch, the first among the areas to attract financial cuts is the education sector. How higher education can be made accessible to a large number of people even in the face of resource crunch, is a serious problem which the educational planners have to tackle. This is where the distance education system can bring about greater accessibility, flexibility and innovation to the form and content of education in general and higher education in particular.

At present, the higher distance education system accounts for about 11.5 per cent of the total enrolment in the higher education system of India. This is likely to go up to 16.5 per cent (Government of India, 1947) by the end of the Eighth Five Year Plan of the country which means an additional 4 lakh students are expected to be enrolled in the distance education system.

The question, therefore, is: How can the distance education system at the university level offer the vocation-based education in a systematic, effective and widely acceptable way?

ROLE OF OPEN LEARNING SYSTEM AND REMEDIES

Education in a developing country like India has to meet two challenges: (i) the removal of deficiencies and inadequacies in the existing formal system and developing distance education system as the latest educational system to meet the socio-economic needs; and (ii) the growing unemployment, limitations of finances and making the vocation-based distance education available to various sections of population, particularly the poor and the deprived.

A properly blended and comprehensive, system of formal and vocation-based distance education can successfully meet such challenges. Vocational higher distance education provides the desired break-through not only to expand higher education but also to provide the much desired employment-oriented, work based and quality education.

To achieve these objectives successfully, the main emphasis will have to be focussed on: (a) the process of thinking and policy-making for an educational system linked with the needs of the modern industrial sector and the informal economic sector in both the rural and urban areas, and (b) the formulation of an operational mechanism for providing vocational higher education through the system of open learning in a developing country like India.

For this, following remedies may be useful:

1. The open university system should continuously meet the educational needs of the manpower already employed in different sectors. Programmes should be developed in close cooperation with the employing organisations for training, upgradation of skills and improving qualifications of the employed persons. In this direction, the IGNOU has launched a few programmes to meet the

requirements of this category of people. Still, a lot more is yet to be done.

2. An open university like the IGNOU should have a centre for vocational programmes, say, through its newly established Distance Education Council (DEC), to identify vocational programmes in distance education system in India.
3. Field studies and surveys should be conducted on a regular basis to find out what is happening in vocational education in other similar institutions of the world, highlight the achievements of some important educational institutions in this field and their responsibilities, identify problems and innovations in vocational education relevant to the Indian situation, make substantial contributions to the area of curriculum development and structure of vocational-programmes at all levels relevant to the socio-economic needs, exchange views and experiences on the latest developments in research and methodology on learning/teaching of vocational (work-related) programmes through the system of distance education, and formulate corresponding proposals for implementation.
4. Open universities and professional institutions should have more mutual and active interaction. Industries, agriculture and Business sectors should build up confidence in the capabilities of these universities and have collaborative activities for mutual benefit. The open universities, industries, business agencies, government departments and other relevant establishments together hold the key to technology development and employment generation in many of the core areas. For example, India is a preponderantly agricultural country with over 70 per cent of the population engaged in cultivation and agro-based vocations. Hence, it will be in the fitness of things that an open university like the IGNOU and agricultural institutions should collectively design vocational programmes in farm sectors and rural development so as to give employment to the rural unemployed youth and boost agricultural production. Such agriculture-oriented vocational programmes in collaboration with an open university can be useful to all sectors, viz. horticulture, livestock, fisheries, sericulture, etc. These programmes will address themselves to the problems of rural unemployment, underemployment, malnutrition, agro-based industries, storage, processing and marketing of agricultural products. Such programmes will ensure improved farm produce, both qualitatively and quantitatively, promote agricultural exports, augment the nation's foreign exchange and help reduce rural unemployment. Similar programmes can be developed for the non-agricultural sector.
5. There should be a shift from the objectives of pure academic educational programmes to those of vocational programmes. The outlook of an educational programme including its contents should be viewed as a means for

achieving major socio-economic goals. 'Not pure academic excellence only but vocational dexterity also' should be considered as a sufficient justification for inclusion of any particular content in the curriculum. In a goals-driven programme, decisions about course-structures will have to be made on the basis of the perceived themes of the curriculum relevant to basic socio-economic objectives. A systematic effort to design vocational programmes as strategies for accomplishing these basic goals will go a long-way towards eliminating unemployment and economic hardships being faced by a developing country like India.

6. A research system in the field of vocational education should be Evolved to do research relevant to industry, trade, technology and a few other areas such as health, agriculture and management; modelling of vocational problems and development of collaboration between universities and employing agencies; and training of personnel through the joint efforts of the traditional universities and distance education institutions. To execute the above activities, meetings, workshops and seminars must be organised to involve the experts in the relevant area, the employers of public and private sectors, the industrialists, etc., using education as a vocational source. Interaction with the personnel in industrial and agriculture sectors, in professional and technical institutions will help one in knowing their specific requirements for curriculum development and possible suitable placements.
7. In the developed countries, a balance has always been maintained between theoretical research and vocational training in education in the sense that the results of the universities research in natural/human sciences have been translated into technological products. This, unfortunately, is not true of most of the developing countries.
8. Distance education is now accepted as the most modern system of education in the world. It has played a tremendous role in imparting education to a large class of people and enabling them to improve their living conditions. How far can this system systematically and effectively offer vocational programmes in developing countries? This question will have to be examined in detail. Along with it, the following questions should be analysed:
 - Why vocational education? What, then, should be the basic objectives both for those who provide vocational education and who undertake it?
 - What should be provided in vocational education?
 - For whom should it be provided?
 - What is the role of employing agencies? How should they be associated in designing the structure of the vocational programmes? How should they be committed to provide employment

to the successful vocational students?

9. An effort will have to be made to determine the scope of vocational education in developing countries and their policies and structure. Also, a comprehensive and acceptable meaning and purpose of vocational higher distance education will have to be worked out. How can the developing nations modify their priorities and policies with regard to their educational system for economic development? To examine these questions as well as others in order to assess the role of education in economic development, four categories (groups) of countries may be identified, namely:
 - Good economy due to natural wealth like oil but educationally backward (the countries of West Asia, Africa and South America).
 - Developed and having sound educational system (Commonwealth countries among others), and
 - Economy developed through vocational education (the well-known industrialized countries of South-East Asia and Europe),
 - Developing economy and education (SARRC region in particular).

The target groups for data collection may be some of the universities of these countries providing vocational education through the open learning system. A study will have to be conducted in their institutional systems, programme structures, curricula, methodologies, strategies for programme implementation, system evaluation, development of course materials etc. The information regarding the changing socio-political systems and economic policies affecting the educational challenges, the educational barriers and their reasons, infrastructure facilities and other related information shall have to be processed.

It is the author's conviction that in the last two decades, social, economic and political changes have created situations in which the role of vocational education is increasingly becoming significant and crucial. Vocational education is being recognised as a vital component of the educational system in view of urgent socio-economic demands. However, vocational education in general and vocation-based higher distance education in particular is perhaps the least explored area of education. This is mainly because of the following constraints (Lauglo & Lillis, 1988) among others:

Vocation education is subject to continuous change in response to the pressures of technology advancements,

- Shortage of competent and trained teachers to prepare the course materials for the vocational programmes suitable for distance learning, and
- High costs involved in the availability of adequate infrastructure facilities in terms of materials and maintenance.

- Attitudes towards the distance education system regarding the operational feasibility of vocational programmes,
- Lack of clarity of curriculum in terms of the nature and contents of the course structures of the vocational programmes,
- Designing and planning of vocational programmes by some of those who have not been themselves through a vocational education system,
- Apprehensions about the availability of employment and possible placements after the successful completion of a vocational programme through the open learning system.

The distance education institutions of India have to plan optimal strategies in the light of the above constraints and help the nation meet the challenges of unemployment and poverty.

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