

Draft speech of Smt. D. Purandeswari, MoS-HRD to be delivered in Mumbai on 11th July, 2006 on the problems and perspectives of distance education on the occasion of launching 'Dur Vidya Abhiyaan' by Madurai Kamaraj University.

I am glad to be present here today as the Chief Guest on the occasion of launching a special distance education programme organized by the Madurai Kamaraj University. This university is one of the pioneer institutions which floated the distance education scheme to help the persons who could not otherwise be reachable for availing of the benefits of the formal educational system. I am glad to acknowledge that this university has done yeoman's service in this field and I hope that it will continue to maintain its record in this regard.

The 'distance education' has been variously defined. Greenberg defines it as a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning". Teaster and Blieszner have observed that in "the term distance learning has been applied to many instructional methods: however, its primary distinction is that the teacher and the learner are separated in space and possibly time". Desmond Keegan however gives the most thorough definition. He says that distance education and training result from the technological separation of teacher and learner which frees the student from the necessity of travelling to "a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained"

The concept of distant Education or learning is not of very recent origin as is generally believed. One of the earlier forms of distance learning was done through correspondence courses started in Europe. This continued until the middle of the last century when instructional radio and television became more popular. As technology went on changing so was the definition of distance learning. Videotaped lectures have been a standard in university and professional courses for the last two decades. Audiotapes and lessons sent through the mail have been used in correspondence courses to teach subjects for quite some time. Today, the Internet and compressed video have taken distance learning in new directions. Live video instruction is the most popular and fastest growing delivery mode in the United States.

The original rationale of distance learning appears financial in nature. Universities hope to save money by delivering education to students who are unable to attend classes because of time or distance. The theory is that class size increases while the overhead remains the same. The developing countries are turning to state run distance education programs to take the place of ever increasing enrollments and a lack of physical building space. Places such as Beijing, Jakarta, and South American countries such as Brazil and Argentina have all begun to use distance-learning techniques to reach those that would by any other means be unreachable.

In Australia, Curtin University uses compressed video conferencing to reach remote students in Western Australia, and to enhance classes in Business Studies by connecting with students in Singapore. Other

examples can be found in the UK and Norway where several sites have been linked together.

Drawing upon the well known model of the British Open University, countries such as Pakistan, India and China have combined modern methods of teaching with emerging technologies in order to provide low-cost instruction for basic literacy and job training. Turkey has recently joined those nations involved in large scale distance learning. Only twelve years old, their distance education program has enrolled almost one million students and is the 6th largest distance education program in the world.

No wonder, Indian universities top the charts on the number of Distance Education courses at both undergraduate and post graduate levels. Most universities in India now have Distance Education programs offering a wide variety of courses. The Indian government while realizing the need for distance education opened the prestigious Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in 1985, which offers students degrees widely accepted in the job market as any other recognized Distance Education course.

IGNOU, New Delhi is a premier open university in India that has more 7,50,000 students with extremely varied profiles, spread throughout the length and breadth of the country. The University has an efficient and effective networking of 46 Regional Centers (5 of which are Army Command Centers, 8 are IAF Command Centers and 4 Navy Command Centers) and over 630 Study Centers, all over India. As an Open University, IGNOU has come a long way since 1985, having crossed

national boundaries providing higher education as well as assisting other developing countries in this regard.

It will thus appear that Distance education is a planned education that normally occurs in a different location from teaching. It provides student with a second chance at a college education. It can reach those who are disadvantaged by limited time, distance or physical disability.

Distance mode of Education also helps to update the knowledge base of professionals at their working places. So it always requires special techniques of course design, instructional techniques & methods of communication as well as organizational and administrative arrangements. In this mode students are offered study material. The students can also attend the class in regular intervals which is optional.

Due to continuous increase in the population and scarcity of infrastructure, financial, and personnel resources, distance education systems help million of students to fulfill their educational aspiration. But among the various method of education this mode has inherent potentialities to curb our national problem of illiteracy.

Getting education through Distance learning is economical and less time consuming. Distance Education mode paves way for an access to latest technologically-rich environment. Students can determine place and time of class in this Distance mode of Education. Students in the Distance Education are always in the advantage of getting exposed to the latest study material developed in high academic atmosphere.

Distance learning and its relationship to emerging computer technologies have together offered many promises to the field of education. In practice however, the combination often falls short of what it attempts to accomplish. Some of the shortcomings are due to problems with the technology; others have more to do with administration, instructional methods, or students.

To improve the present system of distance education based on the use of sophisticated computer net work, several problems have to be addressed and several loopholes tied up.

First the target population will require training in the use of the tools, and so will the providers. Instructors will need focused training in order to make effective use of the technologies involved. Care must be taken to ensure that distance education programs are as well developed as their in-house counterparts. Mechanisms need to be developed for faculty evaluation of programs originating at their institutions. There need to be well laid standards for course evaluation and program accreditation. There is a need to avoid simply providing information, rather than instruction; or of simply transmitting lectures through this new medium. This would be a disservice to the learners, and a *reduction* in content and functionality over the intended result. Avoid focusing on the technology rather than the instructional design and support

Faculty should be involved in the whole process, and should understand that while one goal may be to reduce costs, this will not be at the expense of faculty jobs. Distance education technologies are not alternatives to teaching.

Academic institutions must remember that course content is just one element of the education they provide. If distance learners are being sought, they will need to be provided with similar support to that received by on-campus users. This includes everything from *full* library support to academic counselling.

These are some of the issues which ought to be taken care of to make the system of District Education as effective as the system of direct teaching. I hope the authorities of Madhurai Kamaraj University will take care of these and other deficiencies. The process of improvement in the distant learning mode must be an ongoing process and where there should always be scope for improvement and further improvement

With these words, I once again thank the university authorities for organizing this special programme to sensitize the common people about the merit of distance education system and dispel some of their misgivings in this regard.

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