

TEACHER EDUCATION THROUGH OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Teacher Preparation programme is a rigorous and skill oriented programme. It focuses more on institutional based training to address many specific problems to cater different needs of children. Open and distance learning system has proven its importance in basic training to teachers and their continuing professional development as well. Variety of the programmes in teacher education is being offered by Universities through open and distance learning. Open and distance learning system emerged as a potential system through integration of various technologies. The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCTE, 2010) also found that open and distance learning as a powerful instrument for providing professional support to the teacher, particularly with a view to overcoming the barriers of physical distance.

The Background :

Universalisation of elementary education is the stated goal of the country as well as of global community. In 1990, the global community pledged at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien Thailand, to achieve universal primary education (UPE) and greatly reduce illiteracy by 2000.

In 2000, when these goals were not accomplished, it again pledged to achieve UPE, this time at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, with a target date of 2015. Binder (2006) puts the numbers of children (age group 12 to 17 years old) who are not receiving education throughout the world, it was 400 million (Danaher & Umar, 2010). Govt. of India estimated that more than 8 million children only in the age group 6-13 are out of school in a study by Department of Elementary Education & Literacy, Ministry of Human Resource Development (Govt. of India, 2009).

According to UNESCO's Institute for Statistics, half of the world's countries need to expand their strength or number of teachers significantly if they are to enroll all primary school age children by 2015 (UNESCO, 2009). This creates an obvious pressure on the teacher preparation system globally. To meet the goal of UPE, a global total of 10.3 million teachers should be required between 2007 and 2015 (UNESCO, 2009). It adds salt to the wound when we come to know that the UPE goals are not likely to be achieved by 2015 with its current rate of progress. An estimated 299 million school age children will be missing primary or secondary school in 2015; of these, an estimated 114 million will be missing primary school (Cohen, Bloom & Malin, 2007). These data suggest that providing

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education of high quality to every child will require time, resources, and colossal efforts. These all hurdles in global education scenario creating a demand for open and distance learning (ODL) to develop a way and lead this avenue

Teacher Education: Introduction :

There are several expectations from teachers that they will enable themselves to develop the potential of their pupils in different areas. These lead to a group of expectations from teacher education and hence the teacher education and training has to respond to the demands of the various stakeholders to do a number of different jobs:

- enable teachers to develop the potential of their pupils
- help them serve as role models
- transform education and through it society
- develop changed attitudes to their work and to education and
- encourage their own self-confidence and creativity.

Teacher education is likely to have a two-fold relationship with schools, at once influencing them and reacting to them. Short periods of teaching practice will take the student-teachers in the school and may take the staff of teachers' training institution into schools as well. Where schools are responsible for mentoring trainee teachers, they become directly involved in teacher education. While this involvement may reduce the likelihood of conflict between teachers' training institution and school, it has also been criticised as weakening an opportunity of changing school culture through external influence (Perraton, 2003).

ODL: The Potential :

Open distance learning (ODL) is an organised educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimised in terms either of access, or of time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these. The term ODL is an umbrella term to cover educational approaches to provide learning resources, to qualify without attending college in person and open up new opportunities for keeping up to date no matter where or when one want to study (UNESCO, 2002). Open and distance learning often makes use of several different media. Students may learn through print, broadcasts, the internet and through occasional meetings with tutors and with other students. ODL may use print, broadcasts, cassette recordings, computer-based materials, computer interaction, videoconferencing, and face-to-face learning. The essence of it is that it enables students to learn without attending an institution. That has made it attractive for students who, for practical, economic, social and geographical reasons cannot get to college. It also makes it appropriate for learners that are scattered, and learners that cannot leave their jobs to attend full-time courses.

Teacher Education through ODL: Opportunities:

There is shortage of teachers and still large numbers of under qualified teachers. At the same time there are many individuals who need further professional education and training as they work as teacher. Unless we get more teachers, and better teachers, we will not reach the target of making quality education available for all by 2015. Conventional approaches to teacher education have not met all the demands upon the profession and this has led to an interest in open and distance learning alternatives. The balance between these four elements is important. This leads to two distinct important areas of teacher education. First is the initial education & training of teachers and second is their continuing professional development. It is recognized that ODL can be strategically employed in continuing professional development of teachers, particularly with a view to overcoming the barriers of physical distance. However, the primacy of direct human engagement and actual social interaction among student-teachers as the core process of initial teacher preparation needs to be emphasized. ODL, as a strategy, can be a powerful instrument for providing continued professional support to the teacher practitioner.

All of this clearly showed the importance and

place of ODL in initial teacher education as well as continuing professional development as it allows way:

- to find ways of using existing resources,
- to access learning opportunities at affordable cost,
- for alternative pathways to initial teacher training,
- to attract new unreached population to work as teachers,
- to use technologies to enrich teaching and support practice,
- to stimulate and support teachers' active learning.

A modular approach to the development of teacher education curriculum along with focus on independent study and on-line offering involving interactive modes of learning has indeed a potential to make education reach to unreached (NCTE, 2010). Distance media can also be effectively used to keep teachers in touch with other professionals in the field and to give access to professionals in education as well as in pure academic disciplines (NCTE, 2010). Professional development through ODL contributes extra access to technology and resources in teachers as well.

Teacher Education through ODL: Challenges:

Open distance learning can be alienating when it means waiting for communication from the centre or from tutors. Any form of helplessness is frustrating and this shows how important it is that course providers respond promptly, be it to questions, sending materials or providing feedback to students (Evans & Shortall, 2011). In the classroom, there is always a dynamics between teacher and the learners. The results showed clearly that when a teacher connects well with a class, the experience is better for a student than the written word. When planning to use ODL for teachers we need to ask not only about how it can work, but also about curriculum policy. Some challenges in this regard are: the balance between the four elements of the curriculum of teacher education (general education, subject knowledge, pedagogy, and practical teaching); the balance between pre-service and in-service teacher education; the balance between traditional and progressive approaches and views about the appropriateness of defining teacher education in terms of a set of stated competencies; realistic expectations that will help the progress of curriculum reform. (UNESCO, 2002).

Access to literature remains a frustration. It is now possible to get almost anything that the on campus student can access, but not with the same

immediacy. The ODL programs are not necessarily cost-effective all the time. The development and teaching of online programmers may cost as much or more than face-to-face equivalents, though the cost structure will be different from that of face-to-face teaching or other kinds of distance education. Since students will often need to bear some of the costs, this may affect their access. The experience of joint collaboration between institutions is often very limited. The educational sector faces chronic shortages of resources and personnel and hence the pressure felt by the distance education providers to expand access both in numbers and in geographical coverage and the scarcity of resources (Nhavoto, 2005). Print plays an important role in ODL system, either as lead or supporting medium. It is convenience, low cost, familiarity and suitability for combining with a variety of other media. But, there are certain areas in teacher education where printed materials are not much helpful.

Conclusion:

Open and distance learning has been widely applied to teacher education and there is some record of success in its use. With differing emphases on different parts of the programme it has been deployed for teachers at different stages of their careers, and in support of national programmes of development. By realizing importance of teacher education,

National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC, 2007) developed quality indicators in teacher education for assessment of teacher education programme offering through on campus mode or ODL mode.

They have six broad key areas representing six dimensions of a teacher education including its entire academic as well as administrative activities. The six key areas are: a) Curriculum Design and Planning, b) Curriculum Transaction and Evaluation, c) Research, Development and Extension, d) Infrastructure and Learning Resources, e) Student Support and Progression, and f) Organisation and Management. Good quality of distance education programs provision will be another key factor of successful implementation because, if achieved, it will demonstrate that

distance education methods can provide courses and programs of good quality and, in some cases, it can provide better quality than in face to face programs (Nhavoto, 2005). Teacher education programmes often involve partnerships with: schools, local education officers, teachers' training institutions, school inspectors and district authorities.

Initiatives from Universities committed to implement distance education programs must be coordinated in order to rationalize resources in the training, in the infrastructures, in resource partnership, in student support and production & delivery of instructional materials. The broad goal is to discourage dispersion and duplication of efforts and resources. Distance education programs run by different providers must be integrated and articulated in order to facilitate the mobility of students and instructors (COL, 2005).

Universities engaged in teacher education through ODL should have inflexible requirements as a way of ensuring standards.

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