

Running head: EDUCATIONAL COMPARISON AND IMPLEMENTATION

**Educational Comparison and Implementation  
of Distance Education in India and the United States**

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## Educational Comparison & Implementation of Distance Education in India

### Introduction

The problems identified by the distance education students in India have a striking similarity to the problems voiced by the distance education students in the U.S. This paper analyzes aspects of the implementation of distance education in India and how the country is implementing measures to improve the ability to deliver distance education to more students.

### Cultural Issues in Distance Education in India

India lacks the number of colleges needed to educate its growing population. Women and girls are left behind as the education gap widens between those who would like more education and those who have access to it. Literacy rates in the villages are low even though India produces the second-highest number of computer engineers in the world (Overland, 2000). Much of India remains in extreme poverty and millions live a life of misery. Education is the only way many individuals can break away from generations of discrimination and destitution. Schooling allows people to join the middle class. A huge gap exists between supply and demand, but India remains very education-conscious. Both parents must speak English and must have college degrees to get their children into India's highly competitive nursery schools. That placement helps determine the child's acceptance into a prestigious kindergarten, which is necessary to get into a good grade school, then high school, and college.

### Establishment of Distance Education in India

Ambedkar Open University was established in 1981 as the first open university in India (Overland, 2000). The university has state-of-the-art television and radio studios where lectures and panel discussions are recorded. The programs air a few hours a week on state-run television and radio. Muslim women in India are forbidden to attend traditional colleges where they would mix with men. Once per week these women in the distance education program enter the school, pull off their veils, pull out their books, and take their place in class.

### India's Attractive Distance Education Market

Foreign companies and universities are attracted to India because of the size of the English-speaking population, the fact that India is becoming more connected to the Internet, and the market of the individuals who fall into the ever widening gap between those who want more education and those who have access to it. Overland (2000) cites the following statistics. Of the more than one billion people in India, fewer than three million have computers. Of India's more than 200 universities, 63 have a distance learning component; in developed countries, 30 percent of high-school students go on to higher education, compared with just 6.5 percent in India. According to the state government, 25 thousand kilometers of high-speed fiber optic cable have been laid, and 90 percent of towns with more than 50,000 people are connected by fiber-optic lines. Government plans call for fiber-optic lines to reach every village and for every village to have at least one computer.

## Indira Gandhi National Open University

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), established in 1985 to provide higher education to large segments of the population and maintain standards in education using innovative technology to deliver a uniform curriculum throughout the country, has emerged as one of the mega open universities of the world (Reddy and Srivastava, 2001). IGNOU's gradual shift from traditional programs and diplomas to professional and vocational degrees has mirrored the changing job market in India to the computer programming and management professions. IGNOU introduced three programs through the virtual campus concept in July 1998 for the first time under a pilot project. The three programs were certificate in Computing, Bachelor Degree in Computer Application, and Master Degree in Computer Application. The program provided course materials through IGNOU Websites and practicals at more than 250 designated Internet access points across country. The university could not continue these programs due to non-availability of adequate access points to the Internet and PCs in the interiors. It was unable to cope with large enrollments in providing Web-based support and other support required. The university continued the program for about 4,000 urban-based working professionals who remained in the Internet mode despite various issues they encountered.

### Teaching Learning Methodology

The components of teaching methods at IGNOU include one hour of satellite based teleconferencing lectures per week; recorded video lectures; two one-half hour lab facilities per day five days per week at the Tele Learning Center (TLC); two tutorial sessions of two and one half hours in duration at the TLC; Internet Learning Resources by Internet browsing; online interactive chat with peer group, faculty, external experts; and the IGNOU Web site for course

materials and assignments. The distance learning sessions resemble that of the U.S. distance learning sessions. A teacher hosts each course on the Web, provides materials for about a week's study, and informs the learners about what materials will be hosted during each week. The schedule is also available on the Website. The learners pursue the materials, complete self-check exercises, and interacts with the peer group and the mentor / instructor through e-mail. The course coordinator posts a summary session at the end of the week to move the class on to the next week's activity. The entire material with all interactions that took place are made available some time before the term end to aid in preparation for the examination. The learning materials are divided into smaller, intensive, interactive sessions of about 25-30 minutes each. Each study session has content, self-check exercises, and links to other parts of the course. During the first trimester, the learners rely mainly on an instructor delivered video lecture format, supplemented with self-learning through Internet-based resources. They shift gradually towards a greater self-learning and mentoring approach.

### Delivery Method

The program is delivered through the learning centers which allow tele-conferencing based lectures, two-way audio, and one-way video so distance learners can interact with experts and faculty members in the studio. Learners can access the course material through CD-ROMS, IGNOU's Website, and through the Internet. A Frequently Asked Questions and answers to these questions are provided. The learners submit a form through e-mail to ask questions that are not covered in the Frequently Asked Questions area. The academic team in charge answers the questions over a period of time. The e-mail is used as an effective asynchronous mode of counseling. The learners are assessed periodically through case studies, assignments, time-constrained assessments, work-based projects, and final examinations.

### Student Experiences with Virtual Campus Programs

A study was initiated in 2001 to analyze the attitude of the learners towards resource-based learning; critically examine the use of the resources provided by the University; and suggest measures for improving the effectiveness of resource-based learning (Reddy and Srivastava, 2001). Out of 1266 learners, 433 (35%) returned the completed questionnaires. Three quarters of the respondents replied positively. Students expressed concerns that downloading course materials through the Web was time consuming and expensive in regards to telephone charges, paper and printing, and Internet usage, but 80% of them downloaded the materials and 20% used printed materials of friends. The students reported reading from the screen was strenuous for their eyes and many felt constrained because they could not underline or highlight the material or take notes. The reasons given for downloading the materials included 66 percent of the students did not possess a PC/Internet and had no choice except downloading.

### Issues Raised by the Students

The students mentioned very limited hours provided at the learning centers, unsatisfactory Internet facilities at the learning center (frequent disconnections of the Internet), lack of proper guidance, lack of previous experience in resource-based learning, limited storage on the servers which made their assignments bounce back, power failures as hurdles in pursuing their studies. Others cited limited proficiency in typing and the slow speed in which they enter data on the personal computer. In addition to the insufficient lab hours, the students reported that with the lack of an academic counselor or the right counselor, the practicals were not effective. Some mentioned that the sudden power failures caused them to lose the data they had entered

while answering an examination. Many with slow typing speeds could not complete the examinations and performed unsatisfactorily.

### The Study's Recommendation

Findings of the study mirror the sentiments that are expressed in many of the U.S. distance education courses. Suggestions as a result of the study included allowing more lab hours, face-to-face contact, and library facilities at the learning centers; providing availability of a few hard copies of the course materials at the learning center or library instead of requiring the students to download the materials; having a few full-time on-line academic counselors to answer the students' academic and operational queries; giving the students interactive CDs for topics that come under practicals; establishing regional centers with leased line-LAN facilities for Internet use because many of the students do not have access to the Internet in their homes; making Regional Centers more accountable for more effective and efficient functioning of the learning centers and regularly monitoring the services of the learning centers.

### IGNOU Today

IGNOU is a national open university catering to the educational needs of the vast population of the country. The university coordinates and determines standards for all distance learning institutions in the country. It is a resource center that promotes and supports distance education. It promotes the distance education system in developing countries with its manpower and material resources.

## Conclusion

India faces many of the challenges of distance education that the U.S. faces. The potential is great for many students in each country to begin a distance education program. In both countries, the infrastructure is beginning to allow broadband Internet connections. Both countries are adopting viable, cost-effective, and credible distance education programs, which provide education and training at a large scale to diverse populations.

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