PROMOTING OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) AND ONLINE COURSES

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Introduction

The National Policy on Education was framed in 1986 and modified in 1992. Since then several changes have taken place that calls for a revision of the Policy. The Government of India would like to bring out a National Education Policy to meet the changing dynamics of the population's requirement with regards to quality education, innovation and research, aiming to make India a knowledge superpower by equipping its students with the necessary skills and knowledge and to eliminate the shortage of manpower in science, technology, academics and industry. The focus of the policy is to address gender discrimination, the creation of educational tribunals, and a common curriculum for science, mathematics and English.

For the first time, the Government of India is embarking on a time-bound grassroots consultative process, which will enable the Ministry of Human Resource Department to reach out to individuals across the country through over 2.75 lakh direct consultations while also taking input from citizens online.

Motto, Vision and Mission of New Education (NEP) 2016

The draft of National Education Policy (NEP) 2016 was released recently by the Ministry of Human Resource Department.

The motto of the new policy is "Educate Encourage Enlighten". Vision is to "create a credible education system capable of ensuring inclusive quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all". Among others, the missions include: "Ensuring equitable, inclusive and quality education for all; foster quality education with strong focus on education reforms; promote acquisition by all learners of relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for work and entrepreneurship".

Salient Features of New Education Policy (NEP) 2016

- Pre-school Education

- Curriculum Renewal and Examination Reforms

- Learning outcomes in School Education

- School Education

- Protection of Rights of the Child & Adolescent Education

- Inclusive Education and Student Support

- Literacy and Lifelong Learning

- Skills in Education and Employability

- Use of ICT in Education

- Teacher Development and Management

- Language and Culture in Education

- Self -Development through Comprehensive Education

- School Assessment and Governance

- Governance Reforms in Higher Education

- Regulation in Higher Education

- Quality Assurance in Higher Education

- Open and Distance Learning & MOOCs

- Internationalisation of Education

- Faculty Development in Higher Education

- Research, Innovation and New Knowledge

- Financing Education

Open and Distance Learning & MOOCs

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is recognized and accepted as an important mode for achieving enhanced access, developing skills, capacity building, training, employability and life –long learning. It has contributed significantly to the development of education in India, with over 4 million students enrolled under ODL. There are several variants of providing distances education courses which are being offered by both public and private institutions. These provide avenues to those students who are not able to leave their jobs or are not able to attend regular classes due to any other reason. At present, open and distance learning in the country is provided mainly by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and State

Open Schooling (NIOS) is the main provider in the field of school education. However, there are issues of quality in distance education, which call for reforming the ODL system.

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) provide free access to cutting edge courses at relatively much lower cost. Various higher education institutes/universities are putting their courses online by setting up open learning platforms. The demand for MOOCs is likely to rise in future with growing aspirations and need for continuous upgrading of knowledge. MHRD has planned to launch Study Webs of Active – Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM), a web portal where Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) on various subjects will be available. There is a felt need to create a body to promote, coordinate, regulate and maintain standards of (MOOCs) and to develop a mechanism for recognition, transfer and accumulation of credits.

The following policy initiatives will be taken:

1. An autonomous body, responsible for the promotion, coordination, regulation and maintenance of standards in the ODL/MOOCs system, will be set up. It will prepare norms, standards and guidelines for systematic development and regulation of ODL/MOOCs. It will also develop a mechanism for recognition, transfer and accumulation of credits earned through MOOCs and award and recognition of degrees.

2. All institutions offering course and programmes in ODL/MOOCs mode will develop and standardize programmes based on the national and local needs as per the norms and standards prescribed by the autonomous body referred to in para -1to facilitate recognition and accumulation of credits towards the award of degree.

3. A quality assurance mechanism for accreditation of all universities/institutions offering ODL/MOOCs courses will be put in place to ensure quality, promote, innovation and reshape and modernize the ODL/MOOCs courses and programmes.

4. Learner support services will be institutionalized by all ODL institutions and will include hosting courseware, repositories, Open Educational Resources (ODERs), MOOCs, 24x7 help desk services, tutoring and counseling services, conduct of webinars, discussions forum, webcasting, library facility, virtual labs, e-learning modules, delivering of online programmes, providing assignment and timely feedback of performances, online examinations, declaration of results, redressal of grievances, etc.

5. The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), in collaboration with Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, will redefine itself to address the large potential demand for vocational education. The issues of management, monitoring and oversight of NIOS will be addressed appropriately.

Conventional education alone cannot meet the needs and aspiration of higher education. What proactive policies and strategies need to be devised and developed to encourage online education and overcome any implementation issues which are currently hindering its optimization? Also how can we strengthen ODL systems so as to ensure their quality and gain greater acceptability?

Open and Distance learning needs to be reformed

The open and distance learning system in the country needs to be reformed to deal with quality issues and bring it at par with the learning from full-time or regular courses, IGNOU Vice Chancellor Nageshwar Rao has said.

Distance education system is emerging as an important means to cater to the increasing demand of the education system but there are issues of quality in the open learning which calls for reforming the ODL system," Rao said.

The varsity is presently in the process of preparing a draft on "Promoting Open and Distance Learning and Online Courses" for the New Education Policy (NEP) which is being formed by the government appointed experts.

"Government has entrusted IGNOU with huge responsibility of formulating the theme on 'Promoting Open and Distance Learning and Online Courses' for the New Education Policy (NEP) which is under formulation," he said.

"The Madhav Menon Committee formed by the HRD ministry has also suggested several changes in the implementation of ODL within the country," he added.

The university's Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE) has organised a two-day national consultative meeting in which 55 papers were presented on the best practices adopted by distance learning institutions and ODL philosophy and operations followed there.

Besides Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) there are 14 State Open Universities in the country offering degree, diploma and certificate courses.

"Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) have recently received a great deal of public attention and can form important feature of distance learning. The issue of quality assurance

of such courses is a big concern for Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). The modalities are being worked out," Rao said.

Other questions which the experts preparing the draft are pondering upon include-should open course ware and MOOCs supplement/complement learning in colleges and universities? What impediments are likely for implementing online courses and how they can be resolved? What are the constraints to access MOOC courses in rural areas? Should DTH facility be given to students for anytime learning? Should On-line testing account for 20 per cent of grading?

Few Responses and Suggestions given to NPE 2016

- While autonomy and accountability frameworks are needed at every stage in education, having a separate regulatory body for ODL carries the risk of a lower status to continue being accorded to degrees obtained in this manner.

- MOOCs are untried in our country on a large scale; their use needs to be carefully studied and extensive trials carried out otherwise they have the potential of perpetuating the inequities of the digital divide.

- NIOS is performing a very important role; its needs to be strengthened further as opposed to being converted into an arm of the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship.

- The same body should regulate similar programmes whatever be the mode

- Strengthen NIOS significantly and retain its focus on making school education accessible to those in difficult circumstances

Promoting Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and online courses

ODL systems are systems wherein instruction does not require the students and the teachers to be present in the same physical place at the same time. The instruction and timing of the courses are flexible without compromising on the quality of instruction. This often involves the use of technology in order to allow flexible access to the instruction at times suitable to the student and to improve the kind of instruction available to students requiring this kind of flexibility. Recently, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) were created which use the internet to exponentially increase the potential participation in distance education programmes.

Distance Education in India is coordinated by the Distance Education Bureau (earlier the Distance Education Council (DEC)) established by the University Grants Commission which

took over the DEC in 2013. It is responsible for promotion, coordination and maintenance of standards of ODL Systems. There are several Open Universities operating in the country that offer a diverse range of courses ranging from distance education courses, online courses and regular classroom courses. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has also established the National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL). The NPTEL is a joint initiative by the IITs and IISc and provides e-learning through online courses in Engineering, Sciences, Technology, Management and Humanities.

Recently, the Madhava Menon Committee Report for Streamlining of Distance Education, 2011 provided several suggestions regarding the regulation and implementation of distance education programmes. These include the implementation of a more robust framework for approval of distance education courses and the enhancement of the contribution of distance education to the targeted 30% gross enrolment ratio in higher education in India by 2020. The committee recommended that conventional universities be encouraged to switch over to a dual mode of imparting education by offering ODL programmes in addition to the conventional programmes offered in these universities to increase access to quality instruction. Furthermore, this suggestion allows for the infrastructure of existing universities and institutions to be used for providing distance education as well. However, because the regulatory framework for distance education is weak, the support system available to students participating in distance education programmes is inadequate. The committee recommended that (a) a better regulatory and legal framework for ODL be implemented; and (b) quality benchmarks for degrees and learning materials be developed prior to existing universities switching over to providing ODL programmes. Further, it was recommended that the ODL degrees be treated on par with traditional degrees in order to increase quality assessment thresholds. The MHRD has sought to implement several of the suggestions in this report. An amount of approximately Rs. 57 crores has been sanctioned to 12 State Open Universities and about 45 Directorates of Distance Education of the dual mode Universities during 2013-14 in furtherance of this objective. However, specific implementation plans for the recommendations on regulation of ODL programmes need to be formulated.

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