Management of ODL Systems:
Reflections on the Indian Experience

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Introduction

The concept and practice of management in business and industrial organisations is a few centuries old. 'Profit' is the key motive of management in these organisations. Thus, the effectiveness of management is highly related to the profit motive. Accordingly, the concept and processes of management have undergone a transformation over a period – with socio-economic changes and technological invasion, innovations, and changes. Most of the management scientists and students are trained along these lines.

Management as a concept as relatively new to the education sector in general, open and distance learning system in particular. The second half of the 20th century had seen management of educational institutions in professional way and gradually gained momentum due to increasing competition, internationalisation and globalisation of education in general and higher education in particular. Another significant development is technological invasion into higher education institutions both in teaching-learning and in administrative, operational and financial management as well.

These factors led Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) to adopt the concept of management as a practice, not only for effective outcomes, but also to demonstrate the quality the institution has to offer and thereby attract more and more students to survive in the competitive

market. To survive in this competitive sector, HEIs must follow management concepts and depend upon technology.

Precisely in 1969, the first open university – The Open University of UK— was established. It was around this period that educational institutions began to follow managerial concepts, methods and practices. This became the milestone and turning point in the history and the evolution of Open and Distance Education system in the world. But the history of correspondence and distance education dates to Pitman shorthand courses of 1850s. Next, it was followed by the University of South Africa's correspondence courses and University of London's external studies. After the establishment of UKOU, many countries started distance education institutions and open universities, particularly in the Asian continent. Among those establishing open universities are those in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh, marking the advent of many dual mode institutions in the continent.

Conventional Higher Education Institutes (HEIs)
General HEIs all over the world are increasingly facing competition and accordingly shifting from traditional administrative operations and governance to modern management methods and techniques. This trend has gained momentum during the last six decades. The emergence of open and distance learning systems around the same period gave more challenges to general HEIs. The ODL institutions and regular institutions must face tough competition from each other. ODL institutions must also face rigorous guidelines/norms of regulatory bodies of respective countries.

Managing the general HEIs are altogether different to that of ODL institutions mainly on the following counts:
● HEI is physically located in a campus allotted and operations are simple and familiar to all teachers and other personnel involved in – admissions, finance, library, infrastructure, playground, classroom-based teaching learning and examinations etc.
● Number of students (intake capacity) taken in every admission cycle is fixed and not more than fifty to hundred in a session for a particular programme/course.

● All departments and personnel of an HEI are working for the students enrolled for face-to-face programmes in a planned and coordinated manner on the campus.

● Each HEI may be having total student enrolment in the range of a few hundreds to a few thousands, which seems manageable in an effective manner.

● Teachers/faculty of all the disciplines and support staff along with institutional management are largely stay on the campus to manage these institutions round the clock and meet any unforeseen eventualities and crisis situations.

These managerial issues related to any HEI are similar to a large extent in any part of the globe.

Rationale for the Paper

The base of this paper is deep and intense reflections of the author based on his long working experience in open and distance learning systems in particular and conventional higher education systems in general. Thus, it is a reflective piece rather than a theoretical one on the theme. The emphasis will be on the management of ODL institutions and how these managerial challenges are different to conventional institutions. We discuss these challenges under a few major heads in this paper.

Vision and Mission

The vision and mission of the ODL institutions, broadly consisting of democratisation, access, equity and quality of higher education to masses, are different from conventional institutions - to a large extent. Different cultures, systems, sub-systems, management structures and processes are exclusive to conventional institutions. Is the management of ODL institutions different? if so, to what extent, and how they are different? Are there any established practices, procedures, models in managing ODL institutions of wide variety?

We shall try to find out answers to the above important major questions and subsequent issues and sub-questions in the following pages. The over four decades experience of the author with the ODL system as -

distance educator, trainer, practitioner and promoter of distance education in different contexts, cultures and countries, are reflected in this paper As the author is from India, experiences largely reflect various institutions of India, along with other countries/situations where he had associated as trainer and promoter of distance education.

Brief History and Evolution of Distance and ODL Systems
History of correspondence education goes back to 1850s when Issac Pitman started shorthand courses, where postal tuition as main medium was used to teach shorthand courses to students in USA and other countries. Erstwhile USSR used correspondence method to train large number of soldiers to impart new knowledge and skills. In the UK also, many employees of oil refineries, both offshore and onshore, were trained through correspondence method in new knowledge and skills. Gradually, these experiences from non-education sector had gained the attention of educators around the world and started using the correspondence method/education. As mentioned earlier, the University of South Africa (UNISA) correspondence courses and University of London'sadmission of external students can be considered as the beginning of correspondence education in the second half of 19th century or early 20th century. Later, the potential of correspondence method was realised gradually to impart education to large numbers and in different places by many institutions across the globe.

The first school of correspondence courses in India was established at the University of Delhi in 1962. Later, the other universities of India started offering correspondence programmes. The turning point in the history and evolution of correspondence education to distance education by following the principles of openness and open philosophy was the outcome of the establishment of the Open University UK in 1969. After watching the success of UKOU in a developed country, many developing countries, started Open Universities.

In India, the first Open University was established by a provincial/state government in 1982 in the state of Andhra Pradesh known as Andhra Pradesh Open University (APOU) in the city of Hyderabad. In 1985, the national Open University, with national jurisdiction, was

established in India - Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) - at New Delhi, the capital city of India. Subsequently, many State Open Universities (SOUs) were established by respective provincial governments/legislatures. In all, there are eighteen SOUs, one national Open University, and one private Open University in India today. In addition to these, there are over a hundred dual mode institutions offering academic programmes through distance mode and thus contributing to the Indian higher education system significantly. This huge network of IGNOU, SOUs, and dual mode institutions are different in size, types of programmes offered, governance structures and process followed, learners and faculty profiles, and quality of product produced.

Below are some of the major issues confronted by ODL systems and their management.

Management of ODL Systems/Institutions
Management of conventional institutions, as mentioned earlier, is, to a large extent, standardised on established patterns of governance, leadership styles, and technology applications across the institutions in the world.

Management of ODL institutions and systems are different from conventional ones because of the features peculiar to them, which include types of institutions and functional areas.

Dedicated/Single Mode/Exclusive ODL Institutions
The ODL institutions are known as single mode/dedicated, which offer academic programmes through distance mode only. The size of these institutions may vary in terms of faculty, students' population, number, and types of academic programmes offered, etc., across the world. When it comes to the Indian context, there are State Open Universities (SOUs) in respective provinces established by the state legislatures with the jurisdiction of respective province/state. There are seventeen SOUs, one national Open University i.e. IGNOU (jurisdiction all over the country), and one private Open University in the state of Tripura, India.

The organisational structures of these universities are similar, to a large extent. These universities vary in terms of resources, size, and types of programmes offered. The size of IGNOU is huge in every dimension and management of the same is different and complex.

The dedicated/single mode institutions examples from other countries are The Open University UK, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Sri Lanka Open University, Bangladesh Open University, to mention a few. These single mode institutions broadly consist of three different cultures namely:
●   Academic
●   Industrial
●   Bureaucratic

The above typology is peculiar to ODL system. You will not find such diverse cultures exist together in any other conventional institutions.

Academic Culture
Academic culture is common to any educational institution including ODL. The nature of it is different in conventional institutions where `one find teachers and large number of students and continuous interaction among them. Whereas, in ODL institutions, students are largely absent on the campus, except at learning (study) centres. Teachers in ODL are mainly responsible for designing and developing the resource material, which is discussed in the later part of the paper. Faculty strength varies from institution to institution. For example, at IGNOU, about 400 teachers across the disciplines, supported and complemented by another 400 academics, are responsible mainly for delivery of academic programmes developed by teachers. In SOUs, the faculty size also varies, subject to number of disciplines, strength of teachers – which could range from 25 to 100, and at times even less than that.

Industrial Culture
Industrial culture appears on ODL campuses, with large numbers of godowns to store printed resource/course materials in huge numbers and printing paper in bulk. Human resources with machines to maintain these godowns and retrieve the materials to dispatch to the students

regularly is no way different to that of a feature one finds in any industry. Hence, it is called the industrial culture in ODL system. There are aslo exclusive post offices in ODL campuses to deliver the materials by post to distance learners. Based on this culture and his own experiences with the ODL system, renowned German distance educator, Otto Peters, called distance education an industrialised form of education.

Bureaucratic Culture

Apart from faculty, teachers, and academics, there is also the presence of many other officials in significant numbers who deal with administration, finance, estate management, computer professionals, media professionals etc. on in ODL campuses. They add bureaucracy and bureaucratic culture to ODL system. These officers are involved in running the multifarious tasks in the management of these institutions. This category of officials largely come from different bureaucratic setups and join the ODL system. The tasks of these officials have to be performed in consultation/coordination with teachers and academics and vice-versa. ODL system is based on teamwork, with highly interrelated activities; any break in the chain of these activities may result in disruption and halt the entire system and its functioning. Such situations arise because of clashes/conflicts /egos among the team members i.e. teachers, academics, professionals, and officials. If the leadership at various levels of the institution are sensitive enough to the system and its functioning, these conflicting situations can be addressed to a large extent.

Ego clashes and subsequent ramifications among diverse categories of personnel are inevitable in the ODL system. However, at IGNOU, teamwork, team spirit, and interrelatedness of activities in the professional development programme for various categories of employees, are rigorously promoted. These have helped to address conflicting situations to a significant extent. This is one way of creating team spirit and a culture of teamwork in ODL institutions.

Management of Functional Areas

Functional areas and its management are presented below:
● Design and development of course materials (print)

- Material printing and distribution
- Learner Support Services (LSS)
- Management of registrations and admissions
- Management of examinations and evaluation systems

Design and Development of Course Materials (print)
ODL institutions across the world follow different methods and procedures for design and development of print materials.

The Open University, UK, initially followed the Course Team Approach for design and development, which was very expensive and time consuming. IGNOU follows Expert Committee Model (Editor – Writers' model) largely. In a few cases, the workshop model and seminar model are adopted. SOUs in India also followed the Editor – Writers' model, with modifications, to suit local needs, and in some cases, they adopted the material of IGNOU and other institutions with Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the two institutions. In IGNOU, along with the faculty of the concerned discipline, faculties from other institutions also contribute to the development of course materials as external course writers, who are given academic credit along with token amount of honorarium. More or less, a similar method is followed in other SOUs in India, but dependence on external writers is high, as core faculties strength is less in every discipline.

Managing these operations related to course materials development is challenging academically and financially. Another challenge is maintaining the quality of course materials. IGNOU, since her inception, invested both academic and financial resources adequately in the development of quality material, which brought popularity and credibility to the institution.

Material Printing and Distribution
Some ODL institutions like UKOU, STOU, and Thailand have their own printing press for printing course materials, and to cope with related challenges in the form of industrialised features and its management. OUs without printing press depend on private printers, with clear cut terms and conditions. Even after all these precautions,

delays from printers, quality of printing, etc. are major issues for management.

Distribution of the materials to distance learners spread far and wide within the country and outside is also a major challenge, both operationally and financially. IGNOU had experimented with alternative mechanisms for distribution to overcome the challenges, but could not address most of the related issues fully. IGNOU and other ODL institutions in India continuously faced delays in sending course materials to distance learners, resulting in disturbances in academic schedules of learners and institutions at times. This is a major issue that needs to be addressed and managed by the any ODL institution.

Learner Support Services (LSS)
Learner Support Services (LSS) are essential components of the ODL system to facilitate distance learners in overcoming their problems/challenges and completing their programmes successfully. The services provided by each ODL institution varies from one to other. Many institutions cannot afford the creation and management of LSS because of the huge financial implications o; hence, they provide limited services, which affects the ultimate quality of the product/learners.

For example, IGNOU maintains the three tier system of support services consisting of Regional Services Division (RSD) at headquarters; policy making body in creating network of Regional Centres (RCs) in respective regions; and learner/student Support Centres (SC) at institutional level as third tier. About 67 RCs and around two thousand SCs across the country and beyond is a huge network, working for the development of their learners and guiding/leading them to complete the programmes successfully. Maintaining this three tier network of LSS, IGNOU spends about 35 – 40 % of its total budget. Small ODL institutions like SOUs and dual mode ones cannot maintain the same level of LSS network like IGNOU because of financial, human, and infrastructural limitations.

Many ODL institutions started providing technology-based support to address the needs of distance learners. The author with long experience

of handling students through both Face-to-Face (F2F) and technology, firmly believes that F2F contact with distance learners has significant advantage in motivating and sustaining the same. The quantum of F2F contact can be worked out in relation to technology-based support to distance learners based on concrete criteria. ODL institutions catering to geographically remote area learners and marginalised groups must rely on F2F contact to a large extent, especially through the creation of study centres. The School Open Learning, University of Delhi, is a dual mode institution is providing F2F contact to their learners through Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs) at its regional centres spread in four regions of Delhi. Though PCPs are optional, many learners, particularly in UG programmes, do attend to get the benefit. Significant resources are spent by the institution to improve the quality of learning. Managing the wide network spread far and wide, keeping the concerns of learners, and sensitivity towards distance learners is a major challenge, which will determine the quality of ODL institutions and its product i.e. successful learners.

Management of Registrations/Admissions
Admissions are crucial to any ODL institution for survival in the competitive market. Depending upon the territorial jurisdiction of the concerned institution, publicity for its academic programmes is given through print and electronic media and through the institution's website as well. For example, IGNOU, with jurisdiction all over the country, gives publicity through its network of regional centres located in major cities, and through national and regional newspapers in print and electronic media. With increasing competition among ODL institutions, the role of publicity becomes crucial. IGNOU admits students twice in an academic year - January and July.

Manual methods were used for admission process - students used to submit physical copy of applications. But with the use of technology, the entire process is done online – the student submits application online, uploads the documents online; then after verification of the documents, the student pays the fee online. The use of technology has reduced the time and increased the efficiency of the system. One major challenge is faced in remote rural areas, where learners are not familiar with online system, and depend on private business centres, who

exploit them by charging more money. Institutions need to take appropriate measures to address this challenge.

The process described above is more or less similar to any SOU and dual mode institution in the country, with little modifications to suit the local requirements.

Management of Examination/Evaluation Systems

Ultimate credibility of the institution depends upon their examination process, conduct of exams, and declaration of result in time. In the competitive market, this aspect is given lesser importance/priority by some ODL institutions, which affects the quality of education. IGNOU conducts final term-end examinations twice in a year - in June and December. It is a huge exercise conducted all over the country and abroad (for students of other countries) for a few hundreds of courses/ papers for more than 200,000 students in each exam cycle, a month-long exercise in about five hundred exam centres in the country. Maintaining confidentiality of examinations is simply unimaginable. However, with proper systems in place, and perfection attained over the years, this huge exercise is conducted successfully. Still, a few problems surface by way of students copying, paper leakage, etc. These create doubts in the minds of the public. Institutions must address such issues and manage the system, to give confidence to learners and the society at large.

This process is similar in SOUs and dual mode institutions, but with minor variations. However, in terms of hugeness in every aspect, when compared to IGNOU, SOUs and dual mode institutions experiences appear relatively less and manageable.

Managing examination system requires trained manpower, relevant technology, necessary security systems to maintain confidentiality, support from other institutions, etc. Evaluation of large number of answer scripts in time to declare the result is a tough and complex task. For this purpose, IGNOU has created six Regional Evaluation Centres (RECs) in different parts of the country and decentralised the evaluation of answer scripts, to save time and use of evaluators optimally from all regions. This mechanism worked reasonably well.

Managing Dual Mode Institutions

So far, we discussed managing IGNOU and SOUs with the help of functional areas. But dual mode institutions have different set of managerial issues – as they are part of conventional parent university, without any sort of autonomy to operate and to meet their requirements. Dual mode institutions must follow the curriculum of respective parent university, same examinations conducted for regular students by the examination branch of the university. This usually leads to hardship and problems to institutions and to distance learners. Some of the parent universities feel their distance education units should them offer financial support, sometimes at the expense of the latter's administration. This approach reduces the quality of dual mode institutions to a significant extent. Apart from these challenges, dual mode institutions face hurdles from regulatory body's norms and procedures.At times, there is not much rationale in some of the norms, but institutions should accept and follow these regulations, otherwise they may lose the recognition of the regulatory bodies. Such type of policing from the regulator will not help in improving quality. Rather, academic guidance and support from the regulator would help in improving the quality of dual mode institutions.

Conclusion

Each type of ODL institution and each functional area demands a detailed chapter. But in this paper based, on the reflections of the author and putting all major issues together as one piece, is too ambitious and difficult to justify. With his reflections on the system and ODL institutions (others may differ), an attempt was made to present the gist of managing complex, dynamic ODL systems and institutions. For any factual errors, inconsistencies and misinterpretations (if any), the author takes full responsibility. The author is confident that the Indian experiences in managing ODL system and institutions will be useful to researchers, ODL experts, and distance educators across the globe.