

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE, ECONOMICS & MANAGEMENT

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# CONTENTS

Sr. No.	TITLE & NAME OF THE AUTHOR (S)	Page No.
1.	MANAGEMENT OF NON-PERFORMING ASSETS: A STUDY ON RAS AL KHAIMAH BANK, UNITED ARAB EMIRATIES <i>DR. K. DURGA PRASAD &amp; BANDA RAJANI</i>	1
2.	INVESTIGATING THE KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IMPLEMENTATION IN THE DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN IRAN <i>MOHAMMAD LASHKARY, ESMAEL KHODAI MATIN, BEHZAD HASSANNEZHAD KASHANI &amp; KOLONEL KASRAEI</i>	9
3.	REPORTING EDUCATION AND EDUCATIONAL MATTERS IN NIGERIAN MEDIA <i>IFEDAYO DARAMOLA</i>	15
4.	EMPLOYEE SELECTION IN ETHIOPIAN CIVIL SERVICE: PREDICTIVE AND CONTENT VALIDITY OF SELECTION INSTRUMENTS: A CASE STUDY IN BUREAU OF CIVIL SERVICE AND CAPACITY BUILDING <i>ABEBE KEBIE HUNENAW</i>	19
5.	CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF HETEROSKEDASTICITY IN TIME SERIES <i>DR. FREDRICK ONYEBUCHI ASOGWA &amp; AMBROSE NNAEMEKA OMEJE</i>	24
6.	EFFECTS OF FRAUD AND FORGERY AND PERFORMANCE IN HOTELS IN NAIROBI, KENYA <i>MOSES MURAYA, JACQUELINE KORIR &amp; KIMELI KORIR</i>	29
7.	MEGHALAYA: SWITZERLAND OF THE EAST? <i>DR. BALWINDER NONGRUM BEDI</i>	34
8.	CORPORATE GOVERNANCE IN EMERGING ECONOMIES IN INDIA - A REVIEW <i>KAISSETTY. BALAJI &amp; DR. Y. VENU GOPALA RAO</i>	38
9.	STUDY OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS SELECTION OF HOTEL MANAGEMENT STUDIES AND THEIR WILLINGNESS TO PURSUE THEIR CAREER IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY AFTER COMPLETION OF THEIR COURSE <i>MILIND A. PESHAVE &amp; DR. RAJASHREE GUJARATHI</i>	42
10.	WOMEN AWARENESS ON CONSUMER RIGHTS – A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO VELLORE CITY <i>DR. N. SUNDARAM &amp; C. BALARAMALINGAM</i>	51
11.	DETERMINANTS OF DROPOUT OF TODA CHILDREN IN NILGIRIS DISTRICT-AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS <i>DR. R. ANNAPOORANI &amp; K. KRITHIGA</i>	55
12.	IRRIGATION WATER PRICING IN KARNATAKA: TRENDS AND ISSUES <i>GOWRISH P &amp; DR. B. K. TULASIMALA</i>	60
13.	INFLUENCE OF BANKS' DEMANDS FOR SECURITY ON PERCENTAGE OF LOAN SANCTIONED FOR FARMERS UNDER: SERVICE AREA APPROACH (SAA) <i>DR. C. VETHIRAJAN &amp; S. CHANDRASEKAR</i>	66
14.	BUDDING CHAIN OF CO OPERATIVE SOCIETIES IN INDIA-ITS REASONS AND IMPACT (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JODHPUR AND PALI DISTRICT) <i>DR. PUNITA SONI &amp; DIVYA SHARMA</i>	69
15.	OPEN DISTANCE EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT <i>DR. SHIVAJI BORHADE</i>	72
16.	A STUDY ON HIGHER SECONDARY STUDENTS' FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT IN ECONOMICS IN TIRUNELVELI DISTRICT <i>M. RAJAKUMAR &amp; DR. M. SOUNDARARAJAN</i>	77
17.	GROWTH IN STUDENTS ENROLMENT, NUMBER OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN INDIA <i>V. D. DHUMAL &amp; DR. A. J. RAJU</i>	81
18.	ANALYTICAL STUDY ON AWARENESS LEVEL OF ELECTRONIC BANKING IN KADAPA TOWN <i>DR. PADMASREE KARAMALA &amp; DR. BHARATHI DEVI ANCHULA</i>	84
19.	UPLIFTMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH SELF HELP GROUP ACTIVITIES: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN KANCHEEPURAM DISTRICT SHGs <i>J. SANKARI &amp; DR. R. NAGARAJAN</i>	89
20.	SOCIO ECONOMIC IMPACT OF CONFLICT: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF YOUTH IN KASHMIR <i>DR. ANISA JAN &amp; UNJUM BASHIR</i>	93
21.	EXTERNAL DEBT OF SRILANKA: GROWTH AND ECONOMIC GROWTH <i>DR. G. JAYACHANDRAN</i>	100
22.	FOOD SECURITY IN INDIA – CHALLENGES AHEAD <i>DARSHINI.J.S</i>	112
23.	THE PERFORMANCE OF SELF HELP GROUPS A STUDY OF DHAN FOUNDATION, JEWARGI TALUK, GULBARGA DIST, KARNATAKA <i>BHIMASHA K. B.</i>	121
24.	BLACK MONEY AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIAN ECONOMY AND COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INDIA AND CHINA <i>JATINDER KUMAR, VINAY KUMAR &amp; ANITA KUMARI</i>	126
25.	INCIDENCE OF POVERTY AND INTRAHOUSEHOLD ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES: A GENDER ANALYSIS <i>P.KANAKARANI</i>	129
26.	PROGRESS OF SHG's AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF WOMEN BENEFICIARIES IN HAVERI DISTRICT (KARNATAK STATE) <i>DR. RAMESH.O.OLEKAR &amp; CHANABASAPPA TALAWAR</i>	139
27.	A STUDY ON ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF CHILD LABOUR: WITH REFERENCE TO GARMENT INDUSTRIES IN BENGALURU <i>KRISHNA MURTHY.Y &amp; S.MANJUNATH</i>	143
28.	STRESS AND COPING BEHAVIOR AMONG HEARING IMPAIRED CHILDREN IN CHITTOOR DISTRICT <i>G. JANARDHANA &amp; V. RAMESH BABU</i>	150
29.	VOLATILITY TRANSMISSION BETWEEN CRUDE OIL PRICES AND INDIAN EQUITY SECTOR RETURNS <i>ANAND.B</i>	157
30.	NEED OF HOUR: ACTION TANKS NOT THINK TANKS <i>NAGURVALI SHAIK, PUJITHA VALLBHANENI &amp; VINOD ADAPALA</i>	161
	<b>REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK</b>	165

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## OPEN DISTANCE EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

DR. SHIVAJI BORHADE

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, YASHWANTRAO MOHITE COLLEGE; &  
ACADEMIC CO-ORDINATOR (COMMERCE PROGRAMME)

SCHOOL OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

BHARATI VIDYAPEETH DEEMED UNIVERSITY  
PUNE

## ABSTRACT

Education is the key to human development and progress. It is essential to bring about changes in attitudes, values, and behaviour. Used ethically, distance education may enable people to make informed choices about their present life and future. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is considered one of the most important educational innovations of the last century. It is an alternative to conventional education. For it to be so, the public, governments, employees of labour and other stakeholders need to be convinced that ODL institutions are not providing half-baked education. Therefore, for the enthusiasm and interest that are usually hard earned to be sustained, there is need for total commitment to the implementation of some established indices of sustainability. ODL is able to sustain a knowledge-based economy and reinforce it with a highly skilled workforce, capable of contributing to national and regional competitiveness. It is fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of the mainstream of the educational system in almost all the countries of the world. This is because of the recognition of the fundamental rights of all people to learning. The aim of ODL is to integrate the idea of a form of development which is environmentally, economically and socially sustainable into education around the world. The globalization of ODL has provided us in the developing countries a lot of opportunities for the realisation of our educational system-wide goals. Across both developed and developing countries, there seems a general consensus that the system holds the potential for the achievement of developmental and educational objectives of nations. The purpose of this article is to introduce readers to the subject of ODL and its role in sustainable development.

## KEYWORDS

Distance Education, Human Capital, Open and Distance Learning, Sustainable Development.

## INTRODUCTION

Education has become one of the most important instruments for the attainment of rapid socio-economic, political, scientific and technological development in modern societies. In fact, there is usually a higher correlation between the overall level of development of any given society and her system of education. Thus, a high rate of development in any society is a product of a well organised, managed and supervised educational system. Education is a requirement for the empowerment of individuals in any given society and is generally regarded as a passport for entry into modern sector jobs. To a large extent, it determines the individual's level of participation in governance.

Education contributes to the growth of national income and individual earnings. In today's information societies, knowledge drives economic growth and development. Higher education is the main source of that knowledge - its production, dissemination and its absorption by any society. Experiences both nationally and internationally have shown that conventional education is extremely hard pressed to meet the demands of today's socio educational milieu especially for developing countries.

Education plays a very significant and crucial role in the development of human resources in any given society. The general definition of education is that it is a preparation for life. This entails that education is the preparation for every aspect of living; that is, for the satisfaction of people's material needs, the growth of their personal talents as well as their personal character. It is, above all, the vehicle for national development and prosperity. Education and learning are widely recognised as essential to processes of development and poverty reduction. In many developing countries, issues of educational access, equity and quality have been identified as pre-requisites to the achievement of developmental goals. Given the inadequacies of conventional systems of education, training, and agricultural extension, many developing countries have introduced innovative approaches to ODL.

The United Nations have proclaimed the years 2005-2014 as the World Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Sustainability is the key goal for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It means that future generations should have the same change of leading a fulfilled life as the earlier generations. At the same time, the opportunity to live a quality life must be more fairly distributed around the world today. Sustainable development combines economic progress with social justice and conservation of the natural environment. Sustainability is as pressing a task as it is great and noble one. It cannot be merely decreed from the top hierarchy; it must be learnt. In this context, Education for Sustainable Development instills the competencies that are required if we are to build our lives in a manner fit for the future.

Education for sustainable development is equally relevant to learning in kindergartens, schools, universities, further education and cultural institutions, or research institutes. The necessity of realizing the objectives of achieving a balance between economic efficiency, social justice and conservation of ecosystems and the responsible use of natural resources has to be integrated to the teaching-learning at all levels.

Today all over the world, we hear the agenda, Learning for Development. Professor Amartya Sen portrays development as freedom, expressed concretely in the widely accepted programmes for bettering the human conditions that includes the UN's Millennium Development Goals, the Goals of Education to All, the Commonwealth objectives of peace, democracy, equality and good governance and sustainable development. Expanding human learning is essential to the achievement of every element in this agenda and knowledge is the path to freedom. Conventional teaching-learning methods cannot cope up with the scale of educational challenges, particularly in highly populated developing countries.

One of the pillars of socio-economic development of any region is its human capital development. Closely related with this is the development of higher education and its perceived role in the overall development of a nation. Higher education as we know it is critical in providing the necessary human intellectual input to transform a nation or region into a knowledge-based and innovation-led society. The role of universities in human capital development can be seen in two ways; first, to supply the skills for national economies; and secondly, on the demand side, to increase the drive within the national population for a process of 'upskilling' by opening doors to greater access in higher education. Human capital is a step higher than 'labour power' and should be seen as 'the learned capacity to create added value from an existing system'. Thus, human capital, or rather knowledge capital, is becoming increasingly important for productivity growth and also national competitiveness.

Distance Education is considered as a solution provider in that it is aimed at assisting the society solve some major problems like: provision of equitable and equal in educational opportunity, eradication of mass illiteracy, eradication of ignorance, diseases and mass empowerment of the people. The primary advantage of distance learning is its capability to overcome participation barriers that would normally arise due to remote location of the learner, constraints of employment, family responsibilities, and physical disability. Distance learning also appears to have opened new opportunities for second chance learning to those, who could not attend first chance. Many students of distance learning are much older, and mature people, who realise at a later stage in life, a need to improve their academic qualifications in order to rise to higher ranks in their career. Most second chance learners are people who at their time did not have secondary school qualifications required for enrollment in conventional universities. Most open and distance Learning institutions have now in place, foundational programmes, that enable such learners to enroll for degree programmes.

**OBJECTIVES**

In view of the above discussion, this paper is intended to achieve the following objectives:

- To study the role of open and distance learning in sustainable development.
- To highlight the merits and demerits of open and distance learning.
- To list the challenges before open and distance learning.
- To suggest remedial measures for sustainable development through ODL.

**METHODOLOGY**

This paper is entirely based on secondary data. To make it easy, this paper is divided into three parts. At the very outset, a discussion on the ODL in the world and in India is presented. The second portion of the study deals with the sustainability, education for sustainable development and ODL for sustainable development. It gives a content of sustainability, factors of success and sustainability and education as well as ODL for sustainable development. The third part deals with the challenges before the ODL and some recommendations.

**OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN THE WORLD**

The earliest account of distance learning can be traced to the first century AD when St. Paul used his letters or epistles to the young churches around the Mediterranean. This was a powerful form of distance learning as can be judged by the substantial growth of the Christian church. St. Paul's epistles are, because they continue to be read today, the most successful application of distance learning in history.

The next phase in the history of ODL started with the age of printing and posting. An Englishman, Isaac Pitman, is credited as an early pioneer. He began teaching shorthand by correspondence in Bath, England in 1840. Students were instructed to copy short passages of the Bible and return them for grading via the "new" post system. The establishment of the British Open University (BOU) in the United Kingdom in 1969 marked the beginning of the use of technology through well-designed courses. The BOU which is acknowledged as the most innovative university in the world has played a major role in the development of much of the important research in distance learning. The success of the BOU was the major reason for the development of open universities in other countries such as USA, Japan, India, China and Turkey. Today, India is the undoubted world leader in ODL not only by the volume of its activity, but also its diversity.

The Declaration of the period 2005-2014 as the United Nations' Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), has given the much required global recognition to education as an important part of environment and development strategies. Education has been recognized as a critical tool for achieving sustainable development and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

In today's environment of globalisation, there seems to be no boundary for knowledge transfer, with human capital remaining very mobile, and restricted only by the economics of supply and demand. Fast developments in science, technology and innovation have created knowledge-based economies and have also accelerated the speed of globalisation. The emerging economies of India and China are characterised by fast increase in academic output in terms of graduates and research, spurred by cross border education initiatives. The higher education enrollment rate in China, which was about 2-3% in the 1980s, had risen to 17% by 2003. The number of doctoral students jumped from 14,500 in 1998 to 48,700 in 2003. The number of people attending universities in India almost doubled in the 1990s from 4.9 to 9.4 million.

**OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN INDIA**

The open and distance education system is a crucial vehicle in the sustained development of a knowledge society. However, as India prepares to face the knowledge challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, higher education presents a rather dismal picture. According to the Ministry of Human Resource Development, India, only about 10% of the population in the relevant age-group is enrolled in higher education, and a mere 5% graduate with degrees. With the rapid growth of the service, knowledge and associated sectors in the economy, it is imperative that the populace is equipped to contribute to and benefit from these developments. This requires a radical overhaul of the higher education system, with regard to access, enrolment and most importantly, quality. Failure to address this need and foster more inclusive growth will adversely affect India's future economic prospects and the welfare of its citizens. We believe that this crisis in higher education gives us the necessary impetus for radical change.

Existing 'brick and mortar' campuses alone cannot cope with the current and future demand for higher education, given the limited resources for their construction and management. Even so, it is imperative that the state provides and commits to universal access to higher education. Open and distance education (ODE) holds the promise to address questions of access and provide new, alternative forms of capacity building.

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC) was established by the Prime Minister of India in 2005 to recommend and undertake reforms in order to make India knowledge based economy and society. The most important part of this mandate, therefore, is to build excellence in the educational systems in order to meet the knowledge challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and increase India's competitive advantage in the fields of knowledge. The open and distance education system forms a crucial component of higher education systems. In the light of its significance, the NKC has decided to constitute a working group with the following terms of reference:

1. Redefine the objectives of open and distance higher education.
2. Identify constraints, problems and challenges relating to the open and distance higher education sector.
3. Recommend changes and reforms to address the problems and challenges relating to the open and distance higher education sector, to ensure a holistic human resource development which is necessary for a knowledge society.
4. Take necessary steps to mobilise and upgrade the existing infrastructure, delivery mechanism and pedagogy, taking advantage of the latest advances in Information and Communication Technology.
5. Explore possibilities for innovation and initiate new programs relevant to our national needs. Suggest methods to bridge the gap between the needs of the employers and employable human resources developed by the open and distance education system, and to continuously upgrade skill sets.
6. Suggest means of raising standards and promoting excellence in open and distance higher education, including training of professionals in the same.
7. Suggest mechanisms to preserve and give access to indigenous knowledge.
8. Develop mechanisms to monitor activities and evaluate the outcomes of open and distance education programs and to make it a sustainable developmental activity.
9. Examine any other issues that may be relevant in this context.

The most challenging problem which India and developing countries all over the world, have to face in coming decades will be to provide food, health, and economic security to millions of our population. This requires a careful matching of scientific and technological vectors with social dynamics. Building up sustainable regenerative capacity of the land and water resources to provide basic food and economic security to the people at large, without compromising on the ecological and environmental integrity is the challenge before all of us. In this context, it is absolutely imperative that we make use of advances in Science and Technology for building up the carrying capacity of the country on a sustainable basis.

All the developed countries have achieved universal literacy. That is over 95% of the adults can read, write and count. The female literacy levels are also equal or even higher in these developed countries. The completion of school education of the school-eligible age children in the developed countries is near-universal, over 85%. The post-school higher education opportunities are there for between 50 and 80% in all developed countries. In spite of our significant efforts and achievements in the post-independent era in our country even now one-third of the adult population is illiterate, only 12% of the school eligible age children complete 10<sup>th</sup> standard, and only 10% of the university eligible age group gets enrolled in our colleges and Universities. These educational gaps are characteristics of all developing countries.



About 10% of the relevant age-group in India currently enrolled in higher education, whereas in developed countries corresponding figures stand between 30%-50% of the relevant population. Out of this 10%, the ODE system in India accounts for about 20% of the total enrolment. Distance education has been particularly helpful for women. In South Africa, 4 out of every student enrolled in higher education study at a distance. In India, women make up 40% of distance students compared with 28% in the conventional face-to-face mode.

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was established in 1985 by an act of Parliament (IGNOU Act, 1985) as the first national university to impart open and distance education and also the nodal agency to coordinate, encourage and set standards for the same. Its degrees are recognized to be at par with other universities by the UGC (as of 1992). In addition, IGNOU also allocates and disburses funds for open universities and distance education systems in India through the Distance Education Council (DEC). Authority to do so has been granted to IGNOU under Clause 16 and Statute 28 of the IGNOU Act 1985.

### CONCEPT OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL)

There are several approaches to defining the term, Open and Distance Learning Creed (2001) defined distance learning as 'an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone far removed in space and /or time from the learners'. Open learning, in turn, is defined as 'an organized educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which the constraints on study are minimised in terms of access, entry, or time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these'. Thus, the concept of open and distance learning suggests an educational approach designed to reach learners in their homes/offices/shops, etc, provide learning resources for them to qualify without attending formal classes in person, or create opportunities for lifelong learning, no matter where or when they want to study.

Demands for opportunities at university level continue to increase as a result of population growth and the necessity for continuing education in order to upgrade or learn new skills. This means that the majority of learners in ODL are generally adults who have other commitments or responsibilities. They form a highly disparate and heterogeneous group with varying cognitive processes, existing stock of knowledge, skills, values, prior experiences, age and worldly responsibilities. This in effect, is a new situation reflecting a change in learner profile.

### MERITS AND DEMERITS OF ODL

#### MERITS OF ODL

- (1) It makes education open to many people irrespective of age, sex, religion, location, qualification and time; thereby providing access to education for all.
- (2) It provides opportunities for employees to combine education and work.
- (3) It provides affordable, cost effective and flexible educational opportunities to many.
- (4) It is a veritable instrument for lifelong education.
- (5) It provides opportunities for drop-outs of the formal school system who are still interested in learning to continue their education.
- (6) It increases access to education for women irrespective of cultural and religious background.
- (7) It reduces inequalities in educational services.
- (8) It provides speedy and efficient training for target groups.
- (9) It provides technology for learning and research.

#### DEMERITS OF ODL

Although the advantages of ODL are numerous, it also has some demerits.

- (1) The probability of deceit and fake candidates taking into account the Nigerian system (corruption).
- (2) Poor communication net-work, where the internet is malfunctioning, the speed of the progress of ODL can be retarded.
- (3) Possibility of certificate racketeering in a country where deceit and corruption are the order of the day.
- (4) Prospect of transmitting error to all parts of the country and the world if the preparations of the fundamental documents are not well done.

### SUSTAINABILITY

The concept of sustainability has attracted a lot of interpretations. The reason for this is not far-fetched. As a concept, it has its early reference on issues relating to biodiversity and environmental education. However, with UNESCO declaring the years between 2005 and 2015 as Decade for Education for Sustainability, the concept has assumed much relevance not only to environmental and biodiversity issues, but also to education practice. According to Wikipedia-the Free Encyclopedia (2008), the root-word in sustainability is 'sustain' which may mean any or a combination of the following options:

- nourish somebody-to provide somebody with nourishment or necessities of life;
- support something from below-to keep something in position by holding it from below;
- provide somebody with moral support-to keep somebody going with emotional or moral support;
- withstand something-to manage to withstand.

According to KLD (2008), sustainability means meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need. KLD definition is more applicable to open and distance education. It then means that sustainability of open and distance education is one in which it is operated to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need. By implication, sustainability in open and distance education is one that is developmental in nature.

### FACTORS OF SUCCESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Daniels (2004) identified six factors of success and sustainability. These are:

- Clarity of purpose and intention
- Economic structure
- Institutional structure
- Leadership
- Effective and balanced teaching and learning system
- Intellectual excitement

The UNESCO (2005) suggested some key elements to achieve sustainability especially at the national level. Although, the elements are focused at the attainment of sustainability at the national level, they have many semblances to the submission of Daniels. The key elements are: leadership, government structure, administrative support, human resources, financial resources, operating procedure, accountability, evaluation, tracking and reporting, vision-building, and engagement and retention.

### CONTENT OF SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is a content-laden concept. Sustainability is not done in a vacuum. Therefore, what is to be sustained must be identified and indeed judged to be extremely valuable and worthy of being sustained. In terms of open and distance learning, even though there are variants of operations and practices, certain elements seem to have general applicability. We term these as content of sustainable ODL. They include: available programmes in the system, available courses in a programme, leadership styles, examination systems, learner support systems, information and communication technology system, local and international collaborations, study centre management, management of senate and other institutional committees, academic culture, accounting system, registry systems, admission / registration and convocation system, award of degrees and certificates system, library system and study material publication system. The issue of

the worth of what is sustainable leads us naturally to the consideration of such related concepts like: Quality Assurance (QA), Quality Control (QC), Total Quality Management (TQM) and Sustainability.

## EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (ESD)

Sustainable development is about empowering; it is about enabling critical thinking, developing analytical and problem solving skills, ESD is a life-long learning process that leads to an informed and involved citizenry which has creative problem-solving skills, scientific and social literacy, and commitment to engage in responsible and cooperative actions. This is what quality education is all about as well. ESD thus:

- Focuses on learning rather than teaching and enables knowledge creation;

Sustainable development requires ability of being able to contextualize, thus ESD needs to support learning rather than teaching, in its strictest sense of 'one-way instruction'. Knowledge is constructed and hence every individual carries a unique set of knowledge and learnings. It is therefore important that a good learning process is open enough to allow multiple role-playing at different points of time-all learners can be the teacher as well, thereby creating new knowledge in that field.

- Builds learners' ability of critical thinking;

Since development situations may not have a 'right or wrong' answer, it is required that individuals are able to think critically in a given context to arrive at the most plausible action.

- Banks upon multidisciplinary approach to learning;

Environment is all encompassing. Learning for environment and development thus requires an approach which does not compartmentalize various disciplines, rather which encourages exploring linkages between ecological, social, economic, political, cultural, scientific and technological aspects of development.

- Is multi-sourced and accessed rather orchestrated;

It is imperative that any learning process derives knowledge and information from a variety of sources, instead of the conventional 'linear' process of having only one source of information and knowledge

- Is continuous and life-long;

Since the context (environment and development) are in a continuous state of flux and change, it is required that every experience is taken as a learning experience irrespective of how old or young we are. Professionals also need to continuously update their understanding in the field; continued education is thus critical to sustainable development

- Leads to empowerment rather than indoctrination

Since ESD requires ingenuity and innovativeness, it is therefore very important that learners are empowered to take appropriate actions in a given situation. Such ability can be developed in the learners only when the learning process is not only learner-centred but also learner controlled.

## ODL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The past 20 years have seen a growing realisation that the current model of development is unsustainable. In other words, we are living beyond our means. Our way of life is placing an increasing burden on the planet. The increasing stress we put on resources and environmental systems such as water, and land and air cannot go on forever. Especially as the world's population continues to increase and we already see a world where over a billion people live on less than a dollar a day.

A widely used and acceptable international definition of sustainable development is: 'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Globally, we are not even meeting the needs of the present let alone considering the needs of future generations.

Distance education is an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner. Open learning, in turn, 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 'open and distance learning' is used as an umbrella term to cover educational approaches of this kind that reach teachers in their schools, provide learning resources for them, or enable them to qualify without attending college in person, or open up new opportunities for keeping up to date no matter where or when they want to study. 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 classmates.

The emergence of the system of ODL is an inevitable and phenomenal evolution in the history of educational development internationally. Unlike the formal system of education which has its inherent limitations with regards to expansion, provision of access, equity and cost- effectiveness, the growth of open and distance mode of education has now made education to be flexible, learner-friendly and multi-perspective in approaches to teaching and learning. This has helped to enhance creativity, leadership and integrated development of human personality.

## CHALLENGES

Sustainable development reflects the process that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Companies and industries need workers who are willing and able to update their skills throughout their lifetimes, hence open and distance learning programmes become a serious avenue for upgrading their knowledge. It is also crucial for preparing workers to compete in the global economy. It is a source for improving people's ability to function as members of their communities. However, there is a need of acceptability of the certificate by labour market because of suspicion and fear of quality compromise. This is a natural occurrence for any new product. It is therefore appropriate to be aware of this fact.

The ODL materials must meet certain prescribed criteria, such as the following examples identified in the *Consumer Based Quality Guidelines for Learning Technologies and Distance Education* which may serve as a useful guide for policy makers and providers of technology-assisted learning on the essential components of a quality course or programme:

- Clearly defined and achievable learning objectives;
- Relevant, scholarly and up-to-date curriculum content;
- Well-designed teaching and learning materials;
- Well-supported total learning package;
- Appropriate use of learning technologies
- Sound technical design;
- Appropriate and necessary personnel support;
- Provision of additional learning resources;
- Planned resource provision; and
- Outline review and evaluation cycle.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) The universities should have comprehensive orientation for the school-based students before starting the programme.
- (2) There should be progressive review of university curriculum to reflect changes and to meet the needs of the society.
- (3) There should be regular national and international academic conferences, workshops and seminars to review curriculum on ageing.

- (4) Periodical assessments by concerned authority to ensure universities have the required standard for social welfare curriculum.
- (5) It is imperative to explore the use of distance education for human resource development in various aspects of human endeavour.
- (6) ODL should not be seen as a cost-saving educational measure, which can be implemented without serious planning and good implementation but rather it should be seen as an educational innovation that requires greater attention to planning and guided implementation for the development of manpower.
- (7) For a sustainable learning outcome in ODL, there must be quality course materials for the students, which is one of the criteria considered in setting up a new programme; it is also used by the public to determine the quality of education the students are expected to receive.
- (8) Aside from domestic conventional universities, collaborative activities should be encouraged with foreign universities which could in the final analysis lead to the sharing of infrastructure, ICTs, and intellectual resources.
- (9) The learning programs should be selected very carefully, taking into consideration the market demands as well as the felt-needs of the learners.
- (10) Human resource training must be undertaken for developing and maintaining the systemic ability to allow one to learn as one wants, where one wants, when one wants and what one wants. We have to create a human resource cadre with the capability to develop, provide and maintain updated and appropriate infrastructure for each program, as well as the general infrastructure.
- (11) Teacher training packages should be devised and administered directly for in-service upgrading, without intermediaries. Teachers should receive special training to serve the needs of learners with disabilities.
- (12) Efforts must be made to provide support to faculty and teachers in the form of forums where they can exchange and discuss their ideas and experiences.
- (13) To meet the global challenge and global economy by producing effective manpower, quality of ODL should be ensured.

## CONCLUSION

The emergence of the system of ODL is an inevitable and phenomenal evolution in the history of educational development internationally. It is the process of teaching in which the learners are separated in time and space from the instructor (teacher). It utilises a variety of media and technologies to provide and enhance quality education for a large number of learners wherever they may be. It is fundamental to the achievement of sustainable development. We must accept that ODL has become a viable alternative to the traditional mode of learning in developing countries, particularly in their human capital development efforts and consequently, raising their respective socio-economic status. It is important because it allows education to break out of the vectors of access, quality and cost.

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