

increasingly political role. This is not only due to the proliferation of actors but also to the loosely defined rules of the political game.

Conclusion

The resulting situation is paradoxical. The federal government is seeking to improve universities through a centralized planning process that rationalizes inputs. Far from being a neoliberal retreating state, the government is actively intervening in the operation of programs. This process has its pitfalls, because the government cannot impose compliance on autonomous universities; it can only induce them to comply by making special funds available. It can thus be said that the federal government lacks the capacity to regulate the public universities.

At the same time, the politically inspired agenda of decentralization leads to a situation in which existing government capacity is effectively undermined, by turning crucial decisions over to ill-prepared local governments. This invites rectors to engage in politics in order to obtain additional funds, instead of implementing educational policies.

The current paradox can be expressed as follows: if the federal government could design and create the public university sector, then what is the role of state governments? Or if state governments are in a better position to define local needs, then why introduce a national planning approach that does not take those needs into account? ■

Myths and Realities of Distance Education in India

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The emergence of ICT (information and communications technology) in recent years has led to the concept of open and distance learning (ODL) as the panacea for the growth, cost reduction, and quality of higher education in India. Some people even seem to imagine that the new systems will replace

traditional campus-based education. A closer look at the purpose, clientele, costing, potential, and limitations of the technology should resolve the myths and realities concerning distance education.

Myth 1: ODL Is the Only Way to Expand Higher Education in Developing Countries

It should be noted that ODL and the traditional system differ in purpose and origin. Recognition of education's essential role in enhancing the citizenry has resulted in the development of a massive formal educational system. Young people devote almost one-fourth of their lives to full-time formal education, and the state and society are committed to providing traditional formal education. Formal education promotes the academic skills and competencies that are essential for further learning. ODL, however, cannot help to provide such serious training for the relevant age group.

In India, distance learning (DL) evolved to cater to adults who were either left out of or dropped out of the formal system.

In India, distance learning (DL) evolved to cater to adults who were either left out of or dropped out of the formal system. ODL is just a variation of DL that offers greater flexibility, without an age limit or qualifying prerequisites. The demand for flexible forms of continuing education resulted from the changing contexts of rapid knowledge expansion and globalization. ODL thus functions as a parallel stream to the traditional universities. Purely distance education institutions appeared later.

Myth 2: ODL Is Less Expensive Than Campus Learning

The proponents of ODL assume that it has a larger potential reach through ICT than classrooms and will be cheaper. No authentic costing has yet been done for ICT-based ODL. Any well-designed ICT-based education should cost more as all the facilities are cost intensive, both for establishment and maintenance. Besides, the hardware will quickly become obsolete and the expense of frequent renewal will be prohibitive. Students may also need their own computers. Additional requirements include widespread Internet connectivity and broadband capacity—factors that depend on the national infrastructure. The system will need the support of technical personnel as well as specially trained academics. In a country like India, ICT-based ODL would require adequate support facilities at hundreds of study centers since not all distance learners could afford to have personal high-tech environments. It is unrealistic to expect the government to offer subsidies for adult learners. All the 120 ODL units in the country are self-supporting, except for the centrally funded Indira Gandhi National Open University.

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Myth 3: ODL Should Be Subsidized Like Traditional Formal Learning

The learner profile clearly indicates that ODL predominantly serves employed and well-established adults who want to update their skills and qualifications for career development. Such a clientele can certainly afford to pay for their further learning. It is estimated that adult learners in many countries outnumber the regular student age cohort. Subsidizing the adult learners would imply a major shift in the funding priorities of the government. Additional public subsidies would be difficult to come by in a country like India that has shrinking resources and that barely provides access to 6 percent of the relevant age group. Supporting distance education cannot occur at the expense of educating the relevant age group.

Myth 4: Campus-based Formal Education Will Be Replaced by ODL

This can never happen. There is no evidence of any fresh secondary school graduates enrolling in ODL anywhere in the world. The educational benefits of human intellectual interaction are undisputed, especially for fresh high school graduates. Good teaching is aural, visual, animated, and interactive. Online courses today are by and large textual, no matter how much ICT is integrated into them. Competent literacy and the related cognitive skills are essential for learning through online lessons. The profile of the normal age groups in India that attend school and undergraduate education does not indicate any such potential for independent on-line learning.

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Myth 5: ODL Is Highly Flexible in Contrast to Rigid Campus Education

Campus-based formal education intended for full-time young students should be well structured, selective in terms of curriculum and intensive enough to complete the necessary learning within a stipulated time frame. Public funding of education cannot support slow-paced learning without any time limit. Flexibility in the choice of courses is essential, and the choice-based credit system (“cafeteria model”) is gaining ground in the formal system.

Realities: Upholding the Relevance of Distance Education

As long as the educated population base continues to increase due to globalization of the economy and other trends, the education market of adult learners will continue to expand in India as well. But, the 20th-century form of ODL that catered to people who were excluded from or dropped out of the mainstream will need to undergo radical change to remain relevant in the 21st century. Very little research is under way to help bring

about such radical changes. Currently, many of the initiatives in ODL are chosen based on their novelty rather than their relevance.

The convergence between distance and campus-based education is already occurring. When technology is integrated into formal education and used as the “distributed education” for both on- and off-campus students, the distinction between the two types of learning gets blurred. This appears to be the general intention of the Indian University Grants Commission in committing enormous funds for ICT to promote distributed education in the traditional universities. That makes one wonder how the ODL providers like the national and state open universities are going to uphold their relevance and the distinct purposes they wish to pursue.

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Judicialization of Education: The Fee Cut Controversy in India

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Of late we find the Supreme Court of India playing a proactive role in matters pertaining to higher education. It seems to be a fallout of the judicialization of politics in general. Every sundry issue comes before the apex court for a hearing—ranging from the liberation of 241 caged monkeys to the playing of the national anthem as part of a Hindi movie.

Judicialization is very much in vogue these days. It implies a process whereby the judiciary engages in administrative supervision. It also implies the proactive role played by the judiciary in social engineering through laying the foundations for desirable behavior on the part of the public institutions and the masses alike.

The judiciary is supposed to be in a better position to resolve the contentious issues in pluralistic and modern complex societies as the judges appear to be apolitical, neutral, and fair to the vast majorities. Moreover, they can give equal attention to all the aggrieved parties and take a nonpartisan and long-term perspective, a feat that cannot be performed by the other two organs.

The judges not only adjudicate between the two litigants in whom the “better boxer” wins the game but also take sides with the “just party.” They can do so because they are capable