



Research Paper

MAKING HIGHER EDUCATION INCLUSIVE: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH FOR LINKING HIGHER EDUCATION AND PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN TAMIL NADU (INDIA)

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“Making education work for democracy and democracy work for education”

BACKDROP

Distance education in India is undergoing critical transformation in the context of new Technological developments, increased competition from globalization and growing concerns over making higher education inclusive and response to the development needs of the country. Changing public expectations of higher education, coupled with rapid shifts in public policy is creating new challenges for distance education while traditional problems are being reconfigured. In this context higher education institutions operating within traditional university systems are expected to respond innovatively and seek creative balance between social service orientation and job demands. Meanwhile higher education institutions are expected to shed their elitist orientation, clime down from their 'ivory tower and re-orient themselves as a mass movement that seeks to empower people through universal access to quality education. Simply put higher education is no more the privilege of 'few' but a right for the 'many'. However to put this principle into practice requires rethinking distance education.

This brief note offers an innovative approach for enabling distance education institutions to achieve the balance between social inclusion and market imperatives. The problems facing distance education in India is best exemplified through an examination of opportunities and threats facing University of Madras' Institute of Distance Education (IDE). From the same vantage point innovative solutions adopted in this esteemed institutions can also offer valuable lessons and workable model for meeting the growing demand for new modes of educational service delivery.

THE PROBLEM

Traditionally distance education programs have attracted students from diverse background. However recent growth youth population in India, what economist have called “demographic dividends” has meant that a larger proportion of students from rural and marginalized communities are drawn to distance learning mode as a means to gain higher education. Flexibility, cost-effectiveness and adaptability are seen as a main advantage of distance learning. Many youth find distance learning attractive because they are able to learn while they earn, while offering courses that meets their specific job requirements. Other reasons for pursuing higher studies through distance education include career advancement and personal learning interests.

However, students from many rural regions, even those within the proximity of urban centres continue to face several problems in enrolling in distance learning programs. Chief challenges includes a) accessibility to study centres within rural neighbourhood b) limited availability of study resources such as qualified teachers and c) limited accessibility to up-to-date study support material d) gender specific concerns such as long distance travel that are necessary for attending classes and examinations, need for companions for safety reasons e) slow administrative procedures.

There is also growing concerns over the quality of existing profit-oriented study centres that often becomes 'educational brokers' rather than service providers. Further the much touted Public-Private-Partnership Model(PPP Model) has shown mixed results in the field of higher education. There is a growing concern that PPP model might not meet the developmental imperatives of the education and can potentially tilt the balance towards institutional and organizational imperatives of the partners. Given this dialectical conflict between developmental and institutional imperatives, it has become necessary to consider alternative modes of service delivery. Given these conditions, there is a growing imperative to find new institutional delivery mechanisms that can minimize the hazel for students while improving the quality of service delivery especially for youth from rural regions. However prohibitive cost of establishing new institutional mechanisms for distance education necessities the need



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to seek creative alternatives grounded in rational cost-benefit analysis. Also any proposed model should be in a position to meet the demanding standards of national accreditation agencies. Therefore we need to develop models of educational service delivery that are sustainable, financially independent, transparent and quality driven. The ethos of accountability should also be built into the legal forms such organizations take.

PROPOSED IDE-PRI HYBRID MODEL

The proposed model is premised on the recognition that for an optimal delivery of distance learning programs to rural people, the potential of pre-existing grass root level institutions could be harnessed. Such an option can be readily found in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI).

PRIs are well established institutions that are currently implementing central and state level development interventions. These institutions are well networked and are available in most remote regions at various levels of public administrations-village, block and Zilla levels. Central and state governments have invested heavily in establishing infrastructure facilities, adequate human resources and technological support base in the form of e-governance projects.

PRIs are supported by an enabling legal framework and have been guaranteed financial autonomy. Further PRIs are accountable to local communities and are expected to engage in transparent governance. For these reasons PRIs can be appropriated to enhance support for distance learning. PRI can thus serve as a link between University of Madras and hard-to-reach rural aspirants-they could be adopted and redeployed to address the “last-mile” problems that plague distance education today.

The proposed model involves engaging PRIs as a spot admission centres that are accessible to rural population. PRIs can take over some of the critical functions of distance learning programs such as a) hazard free admission and enrolment through a single window system b) delivery of self-study material c) easy registration for examinations. PRIs are currently accessible to local population both in terms of convenient work timing as well as proximity. These work culture can also benefit students enrolling through the proposed hybrid IDE-PRI Model.

Local Govt. Institutions in Tamil Nadu (India)			
Rural		Urban	
Name of the institution	Total	Name of the institution	Total
Village Panchayats	12,619	Town Panchayats	611
Panchayat Unions	385	Municipalities	102
District Panchayats	28	Corporation	6

Distance Education Programmes offered by Tamil Nadu State Universities

1. Madras University
2. Madurai Kamaraj University
3. Annamalai University
4. Manonmaniam Sundaranar University
5. Mother Theresa University
6. Bharathiar University
7. Bharathidasan University
8. Alagappa University
9. Periyar University
10. Tamil Nadu Open University

Source: Policy Note 2000-2001, Rural and Urban Development Dept, Govt. of Tamil Nadu.



WHY HYBRID MODEL COULD WORK?

There are several advantages to engaging PRIs for distance education. Firstly PRI's can act as a intermediary between the students and the distance education institution. They reach and spread at every major as well as minor regions are well established (PRI data-ref). Using PRI model can have the benefit of increasing civic and public engagement of youth. Such engagement can contribute to the trust in local institutions and these institutions can in-turn can be further integrated with local communities. The hybrid model will also enhance the credibility and support rapid integration of PRI within the educational systems of the state. The growing disconnects between higher education and local community can be bridged through the hybrid model. This can be realized, for example, in situations where the local representatives of PRIs become partners to the Universities. Therefore PRI representatives in Board of studies can make the syllabus responsive to the needs of the grass-roots conditions. Thus hybrid model can be support synergic relationship between University and the Community as represented through PRIs. While the PRIs can leverage the strengths of the universities in terms of access to resources and infrastructure, the Universities can also see this as an opportunity to increase outreach. To draw an analogy, the proposed hybrid model can be equivalent to gramsabha (village level parliament) for higher education.

The model challenges the stereotypical and narrow conception of PRIs as institutions involved only in developing infrastructure such as roads. The model would make PRI self-confident and can enable them to make substantive contribution to national educational policy objectives.

The notion of knowledge society can be realized only when local knowledge of the people is integrated with the higher learning. PRI can be a facilitator of such local-national-global knowledge sharing networks. There are few concerns that need to be addressed. One objection to the proposed hybrid model could relate the existing capacities of PRIs to meet the demands of educational service provision. In Tamil Nadu such concerns can addressed if we consider the progressive approach taken by the state governments in improving PRIs. The state government have been proactive in supporting PRIs through technological enhancement and capacity building. Further the enabling legal framework has ensured that PRIs have financial autonomy that sometimes are not even available for Universities.

PRIs are now becoming e-ready with state and central government initiating several e-government policies and practices. The e-government facilities provided by the government often remain unused for lack of appropriate services. Currently, most e-government project focus on improving the efficiency of transactions with the government departments (such as registration department, land records, tax collections). The hybrid model suggests that these existing e-government facilities can be easily extended to PRI-DE linkage. They provide opportunities to optimize and rationalize the investments made in e-government. The expectation is that the capacities of e-government will be fully utilized under the proposed scheme without the need for additional investments or training.

Another standard objection can be anticipated: Can the rural or marginal localities be expected to adopt technology driven solutions embedded in the proposed hybrid model? the answer is yes. Firstly the myth that rural poor are not technology savvy needs to be questioned. The growth of mobile phones, including smart phones in rural regions in India clearly suggests that people are willing to adopt new technologies if it reinforces the activities within their life world. Also encouraging data can be found by considering the number of applicants already using online forms to register for government schemes or recruitment examination. For example in (TNPSC) recently introduced online applications and found that over 5000 applicants have registered through online services. The activities of TNPSC are all modelled into their online services (e.g. issuing hall tickets for examination). The interesting data is that over 60% of the applicants where from rural regions of the state. Hence it is clear that adoption of technology increases when people find the services useful and relevant to their everyday life and livelihood. Education through online media, supported by the hybrid model has a potential to meet this demand.

THE APPROACH

Established Universities can develop a working arrangement with willing PRIs to serve as a channel for its distance education programs. The University can enter into an MOU with the state government's Department of



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rural development for extending distance learning programs as an add-on to PRIs existing services. PRIs could also benefit from such an arrangement because they can avail the same financial incentives that have propelled the profit-oriented private study centres. The proposed model thus is both sustainable financially and socially. The model also has a potential to create new job opportunities for local people who can be recruited as support staff. Monitoring and evaluation activities can be carried out by elected members of the local bodies and PRI officials. Operationally, the model could be implemented through a series of consultations with PRI members and other stakeholders. This could be followed by capacity building workshops that can train newly recruit staff on various administrative procedures relevant to the distance education programs. The MOU can also specify the sharing of financial commitments.

CONCLUSION

The proposed model seeks to make every village a knowledge centre and establish PRIs as a hub of local learning. PRIs premises have the potential to offer the “college culture” and thus reduce the sense of isolation felt by the local students. The model embeds higher education into community outreach activities, while still meeting the traditional expectations of the students. The model reduces risk of commercial private study centres from exploitation.

Most significantly, the proposed model can address one of the single most critical hurdle faced by poor students from accessing educational services. Students often complaint about complex and slow procedures with regard to delivery of educational service. Most students find the administrative procedures much more complicated than the content of the courses themselves. As a result students are frustrated and prefer dropping out of the course rather than face the hazzle of facing administrative requirements. However under the new model, the scope for local leaders and parents to monitor student’s scholastic performance can be greatly enhanced.

The PRI-DE Model has the capacity to substantially reduce the procedural cost (financial, temporal and human) for the students because of the social and locational proximity of PRIs. Finally the PRI-DE model has a high likelihood of working with the younger generation because the model makes learning enjoyable, fun and creative. It is capable of anchoring knowledge in local communities. This is perhaps single compelling reason for considering a hybrid model.

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