

Tech-Driven Open, Distance and Flexible Learning in Global Era

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ICT; Open, Distance & Flexible Learning; Globalization

The open, distance and flexible learning provides ample space for information and communication technology enabled free and flexible educational provisions such as SWAYAM, SWAYAMPRAKASH, MOOCs etc. and commits to ensure enhanced access and equity in education. Research indicates that open and distance learning has emerged as an important tool for empowering human resources through higher education. However, many ODL institutions provide the enhanced opportunity of interactivity based on synchronous and asynchronous learning resources. Too often, the distance learners' profile containing their choices, preferences and aspirations are not taken into account by the ODL institutions. However, the write – up deals with the ICT and its many ramifications to be integrated in ODL in a bid to enhance the accessibility, raise the quality and lower the cost. Looking to the outreach capabilities of tech – driven ODL, the possible benefits, challenges inherent and policies required for transforming it into more open, flexible and virtual learning environment are also accentuated.

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The openness and flexibility at greater level in the educational system arose with the use of new technological tools, devices and other applications, and were influenced and strengthened largely, at the turn of the 21st century. One may also observe that the system of open, distance and flexible learning is eclectic in nature. It contains programme of studies and learning resources designed and developed in a diverse forms and from various perspectives. Open, distance and flexible learning may be described simply i.e. a system of learning and development that bridges distance of time and space with least restrictions. Given the contemporary response pattern of ICT and its many ramifications, it is more likely to become imperative on the part of education providers to ensure extended opportunities to a vast majority of learning groups. Access and equity, among others, are the major driving forces getting strengthened in the information and communication enabled learning situations.

As often argued, all is not well with the present system of open, distance and flexible learning. For instance, many academics are sceptical about the modus operandi of ODL and call for the abolition of whole provision all together. According to John Daniel "Governments are well aware of the challenges created for higher education by the phenomenon of degree mills, a general term for spurious enterprises that sell qualifications without the demonstration of learning competency required by genuine institutions" (Daniel, J, 2008, p.08). Such institutions, in many instances, are not found to be serving any useful purpose other than for selling degrees. Researchers, like, Wolcott (1996) maintains establishing rapport and collaboration among class members and between class members and instructor (Wolcott, L.L. (1996). Given the situation, the inert-connectivity of all the stakeholders seeking robust and verifiable

system of open, distance and flexible learning may play a vital and crucial role.

On the other hand, one may also argue that a vibrant ODL system may be tough to set-up and at the same time slow to develop, though, in the context of globalization, it has the potential to provide more flexible, interactive and enriched learning experiences. ODL through innovative technological initiatives such as SWAYAM, SWAYAMPRAKHA, MOOCs etc. play a vital role especially in the developing countries. More than one-fifth of the students enrolled in higher education are in the open and distance education stream (NKC, 2007, 48). It has a kind of potential to make over the social as well as educational fabric addressing the pertinent issues on priority in education like access, success and quality and equity at a wider scale. As having been emphasized by many scholars, it is more likely that the participation and GER of eligible age group learners in higher education, on par with those of the developed countries, can be achieved by relying more on ODL institutions. Given the importance of current scenario, the institutions of open and distance learning need to be restructured in tune with the ongoing technology - enabled infrastructure, delivery mechanisms and design and develop quality learning materials to ensure reaching to the unreached more particularly in the Indian scenario where knowledge divide is relatively significant.

ICT – Driven Learning Resources

The institutions committed and engaged in open, distance and flexible learning need to upgrade the quality of, and enhance the access and equity to, technology driven learning resources. ICT driven teaching learning resources such as online free e-learning platform portals like SWAYAM, SWAYAMPRAKHA, MOOCs, are being utilized in open and distance learning in order to bridge the digital divide among learners.

As technological tool SWAYAM (Study Webs

of Active Learners for Young and Aspiring Minds), offers lifelong learning opportunities catering to the three cardinal principles of education i.e. access, equity and quality.

A group of DTH channels, SWAYAMPRAKASH offers quality learning resources through telecasting 24x7. A large and growing number of learners are actively learning through such ICT driven initiatives in ODL.

According to Wikipedia "A massive open online course (MOOC) is an online course aimed at unlimited participation and open access via the web"(Wikipedia, 2019, p.01). In this connection, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) offers free online courses available to all. MOOCs are considered as the changing landscape of learning. The success of ODL, now a days, largely depends on the use of such emerging technology driven learning resources.

As National Knowledge Commission,

2007 reports that "One of the most effective ways of achieving this would be to stimulate the development and dissemination of quality Open Access (OA) materials and Open Educational Resources (OER) through broadband Internet connectivity"(NKC, 2007, 51). Tech-driven ODL offers enormous learning media and resources i.e. instant access to quality learning resources, telephone tutoring, audio-video-conferencing, learner friendly self learning materials (SLMs), CDs/DVDs, computer - based instruction, computer - conferencing, multimedia conferencing, social media and collaborative learning, mobile learning, app - based learning, web - based learning, virtual learning environment etc.

Technology driven innovative initiatives such as e-learning, e-library, e-school, e-laboratory, e-resources etc. play a decisive role towards a vibrant ODL system in the country. "Educational

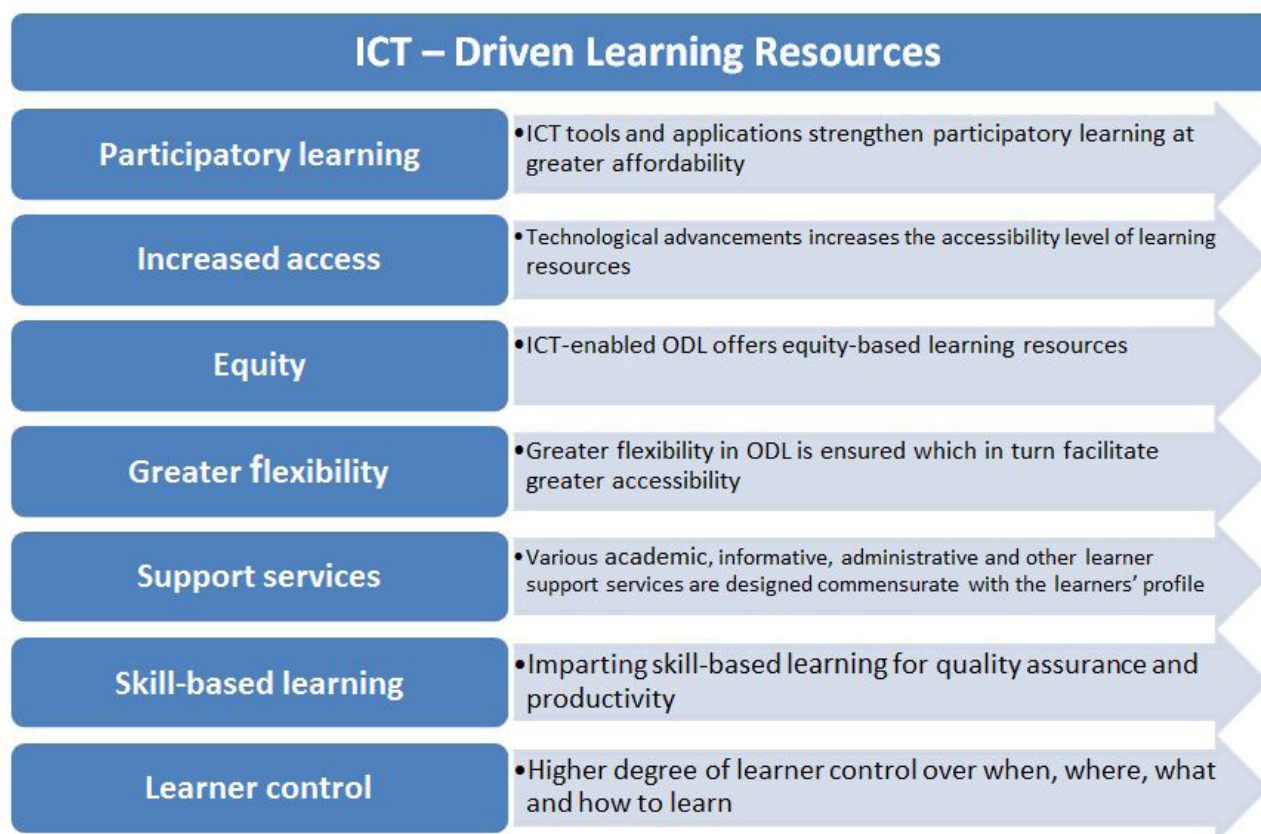


Figure 1: ICT-Driven Learning Resources

support for students in the field of open and distance education is a multifaceted and decisive parameter for enhancing and promoting student engagement and academic progress”(Lionarakis, A. et al., 2018, p. 38).

Various ICT-based learning resources usually offer and present relevant information often connected with hyperlinks. “Besides, it attempts to explore the 3600 support in open, distance and flexible learning, and examines the opportunities and challenges in the avenues of support to ensure a robust and vibrant ODL institution”(Ahmad, S., 2019, p.1031). Researchers such as Ellington, et al, 2005 reports that “video presentations as an effective lecture-substitute are particularly useful if the content has a high visual impact, where a variety of techniques such as animation,

time-lapse photography and close-up work can be used to good effect”(Ellington, H. et al, 2005, 67). That way, ODL offers a kind of educational provision that offers an alternative route which is flexible in nature, time / place - independent and increased accessibility to learning resources and open education for all those who require it.

Challenges in ICT-Driven ODL

In today’s digital learning environment, the role of ICT and its many ramifications has become central in the business of ODL - based instructional transactions. A considerable amount of literature has been published and in the context a report reiterates that “modern higher education system requires extension facilities, sophisticated equipment and highly specialized knowledge and competent teachers”(CARRHE, 2009, 65). Accessibility has been one of the major

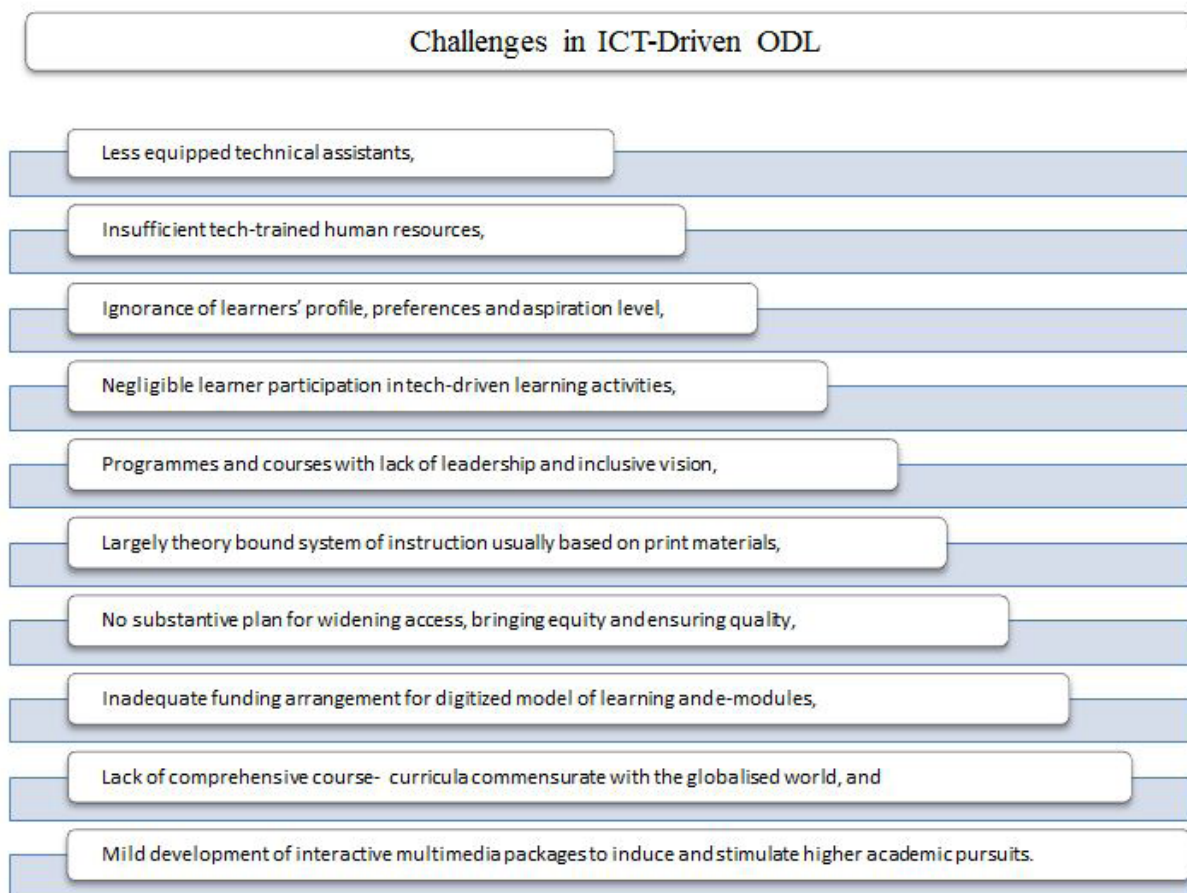


Figure 2: Challenges in ICT-Driven ODL

challenges on part of ODL institutions. Daniel states that “to reach the masses we need to use the mass media and other technologies, because face-to-face communication cannot be scaled up to meet the challenge”(Daniel, John et al, 2007, 24). In the connection, the role and function of the teacher and instructor will have to necessarily change to that of a more accessible mentor and distance learning facilitator.

Integrated with new information and communication technology and its many ramifications, the agreement is that open and distance learning promotes preferably blended learning approach which requires improved computer capabilities, tech - enabled infrastructure and other innovative pedagogical interventions. Ostensibly, ICT has become one of the major driving forces in the global era that necessarily offers enormous opportunities in creation, dissemination and application of knowledge. However, given the current ICT enabled support in ODL, it also poses a few challenges. Apart from synchronous and asynchronous resources, learning, now-a-days, causes to share the technology enhanced tools, devices and applications, and many would agree that these were unheard of only about a decade ago.

Today, ICT has transformed the way of interaction between the teacher and learner. ODL offers some degree of learner control over when, where or what is learnt (Freeman, R. 1997, p.01). Based on the technological interventions, the emerging interaction process marks a historic moment in the areas of ODL instruction, evaluation and research.

As our attention is focused on the issue, the ODL system is said to be afflicted with the syndrome of theory bound system of instruction usually based on print materials i.e. self – learning materials. In the context, a few of the challenges in ICT - driven ODL are outlined below:

In addition to the above, there are many more challenges in the pursuit of integrating

information and communication technologies in the instructional transaction through ODL that need to be taken care of on priority basis.

Policies Required

The issue of scope of ICT in reference to the Indian education system has been dealt at length from time to time. To help promote better ICT – integration, ODL institutions need to re-pattern and reconstruct as they tend to share and adapt in the present global scenario. At the same time, tech - driven learning processes should incorporate the significant aspects of learning resources such as access to varied resources, resource sharing and resource application at a wider scale. As Shah & Godial, 2009 mentions that “there is global support and interest across the whole education sector for the development and integration of ICT into education policy, curriculum and practice”(Shah, A. & Godiyal, S. 2009, 105). The significant point to note here is that ICT integration must offer high quality academic and professional programmes to enable to the learners and distance learning facilitators to make it shared and adapted to the emerging needs and aspirations of the target learning groups. Above all, assurance of quality and standards has to remain as one of the important and decisive factors in the planning, designing and developing ODL programmes, courses and modules. Furthermore, the scope for a reciprocal and interactive relationship between ICT and ODL to empower the outcomes oriented learning is also required.

From the policy perspective, there is an urgent need today for considering tech-driven ODL institutions, programme of studies, support mechanism and course modules commensurate with the present day requirements. The new policies should throw light on all such relevant issues and concerns along with the alternative route of development. Bates (2005, 91) maintains that there is a strong role for government in widening access to the use of information and communication technology for higher education,

especially for disadvantaged groups. From the perspective of unbelievable advances made, policies to meet such challenges of ICT – integration for quality ODL must be outlined and executed on priority basis. In the context, a vibrant ODL system rooted through technology integration is the need of the hour. Certain degree of flexibilities in policies will certainly offer a distinctively sustainable pattern of ODL development in global era.

Conclusion

The open, distance and flexible learning is envisaged to fulfill the long cherished dream of education for all be it locally or globally. However, the problem behind achieving this goal lies in the current practices and its pedagogical implications. E-resources, e-learning, e-library and more importantly open educational resources should prioritize broader goals, facilitate borderless education, redefine accountability provisions, offer incredibly rich academic and professional programmes and more importantly link the entire educational processes for widening access, bringing equity and ensuing quality. This means, for instance, that while educating the young learners and new clienteles, ICT integration could determine in a way the learning outcome and skill-oriented learning, required attitude and heightened experiences as part of preparation to life as well as career. The technology - driven new learning models, collaborative engagement, networked and distributed learning, digitally matured target learning groups and more importantly new breed of technologies – SWAYAM, SWAYAMPABHA, MOOCs etc. - all these call for proactive multifaceted roles from different quarters to work together for the cardinal principles of education i.e. widening access, assuring equity and enhancing quality.

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प्रकाशन शोध प्रक्रिया का अंतिम और अत्यंत महत्वपूर्ण चरण होता है। शोध समाज की मूल्यवान उपलब्धि है। इसे समाज के बीच आना ही चाहिए जिससे समस्त मानवता लाभ उठा सके। प्रकाशन के सीमित अवसर शोध को संकुचित करते हैं।