INTEGRATION OF PRIOR LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT IN THE IGNOU COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM FOR SKILL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has come to stay as an alternative mode to meet the higher educational requirements of diverse groups. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), a system leader in India, plays a major role in giving access and equity, besides maintaining and coordinating standards of distance education in the country. IGNOU has started Community College Scheme in the year 2009 to impart skills to school drop-outs, unskilled workers, unorganized sector and industrial workers. The success of IGNOU Community Colleges lies in their ability to evolve need-based programmes and incorporate the essential academic flexibility in the instructional methods. Prior Learning and Assessment (PLA) method is widely acknowledged the world over as a tool to enhance skill development at the work place.

This work proposes a model forthe integration of PLA method in the IGNOU Community College Scheme to bring the desired academic flexibility for skill development. Thus, applying the proposed model, this article also attempts to evolve a working model curriculum at the levels of Base-Line workers, Assistants and Supervisory level workers and Above Supervisory level workers. The integration of PLA with community Colleges is expected to enhance academic flexibility and thus promote skill-based human resources though ODL system in the country.

Keywords: Open and distance Learning; Community College Scheme; Prior Learning and Assessment; Skills; Skill Development

INTRODUCTION

Indian higher education system is considered to be one of the largest in the world and consists of more than 520 Universities, 26,000 colleges, 6,000 Industrial Training Institutions with an output of 2.3 million non-technical and 500,000 technical graduates. In the traditional approach, the role of the higher educational institutions is mostly confined to the generation of information and knowledge rather than focusing towards the application of the learning and skill development.

With the existing academic infrastructure, the Indian higher education system comprising conventional and Open and Distance Learning (ODL) systems are able to fulfill only 12-15% in the relevant age group and among which only 10% of the non-technical and 25% of the technical output is employable.

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From the existing trends in the development of higher education system in the country, the major problem prevailing is the huge mismatch between educational standards and its suitability towards employment, resulting in "talent gap" of five million by 2012 and an expected shortfall of 750,000 skilled workers in the next five years (Patil & Arolkar, 2011).

Development of employable work force with relevant skills is the process by which the target manpower is trained in a planned manner to acquire/sharpen knowledge, attitudes, skills and capabilities required to perform various tasks and functions effectively. Skill Development is an important area for a developing country like India and it needs a sustained effort to bridge the skill gap and meet the demand of required technical and non-technical work-force. National Skill Development Corporation, India has predicted a demand of 500 million skilled manpower by the year 2022. Further, the labour statistics point out that 90% of the workforce at present are employed in the unorganized sector and in low productivity jobs besides, have not got any structured training and certification. On the supply side of the manpower training in India, even though Community Polytechnics(training about 4.5 lakh people a year within the communities) and Jan Shikshan Sansthan (offering 250 types of courses to almost 1.5 million people, mostly women) undertake training, these programmes are not evaluated rigorously (Skill Development in India, The World Bank,2008). It is of paramount importance to note that the best efforts are not able to meet the requirement of skilled work force of the country and hence there is a need for viable and vibrant mechanism for skill upgradation. The Skill upgradation can be considered as a part of the education, training and evaluation in which focus is towards the application of knowledge. Attempts have been made to provide work place learning and certification through Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) method, a new approach initiated by many Universities, especially in developed countries (Shirley Amichand et. al., 2007). National Vocational Qualification Framework (NVQF) in India is more or less in line with the concept of PLA through which the evaluation is done with the purpose of setting standards for maintaining the equivalence adopted in many academic bodies and Universities.

NEED FOR A FLEXIBLE ACADEMIC SYSTEM

Many experts are of the opinion that the academic system should have in-built important components like flexibility and adaptability. In globalised educational scenario, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system offers such option/autonomy for the learners to choose the courses for individual career development. Learners have also got the wide opportunity to access to a variety of academic programmes and thus one can make own choice of courses for his/her skill development. In the present era of learner centric environment, students should also be free to select courses irrespective of his/her place, age and pace. The ODL system offers such flexibility. It is also a known fact that the employers of the industries/institutions or corporate sectors are also in need of the people with multi-skill and multi-tasking capabilities. People with a variety of combinations of competencies are in great demand. They are easily absorbed in the employment sectors depending upon their level of proficiency. Therefore, flexible academic system is required to produce the manpower with necessary skills by providing hands-on practice/field orientation. Though one cannot underestimate the conventional system of universities, relevant academic flexible features does not exist in this system.

SKILL UPGRADATION

Nowadays, adult learners are exploring ways to increase and expand their skills and marketability in an effort to retain their current jobs, find employment, and compete for higher-paying positions.

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Many adults look up to their local colleges and universities to deliver quality education and training in a timely manner. But, for too many adults who want to earn postsecondary credentials, the traditional structure and organization of higher education pose significant barriers to access and, particularly, persistence and success. Entering and completing a higher education programme is more challenging for adult learners than for young students who come straight out of high school to the college campus. Research has shown four barriers very significant for adult learners:

➢ **The lack of time to pursue education**
➢ **Family responsibilities**
➢ **The scheduling of course time and place**
➢ **The cost of educational courses**

Against this background, "Experiential Learning" is a process of learning in the context of a real-life situation or learning that occurs through the events in one's life, whether that is from classroom study, gaining new skills at work, through training, from online programmes or also from a mixture of all these components. In many cases, the learning happens through the evaluation of one's everyday experiences. In fact, in ODL system, a variety of educational programmes in different disciplines are designed based on the principles of experiential learning. This is the kind of learning that our organizations promote through workforce development programmes, lifelong learning initiatives, and continuous training. The conventional universities focus academic learning through more abstract, classroom based techniques, whereas experiential learning gives exposure to a concrete experience, gained from self directed or informal learning.

In general, in this era of globalization, and rapid advancements in the area of Science and Technology, Information Technology etc., the employability of both graduates and non-graduates/school drop-outs is closely linked to acquiring of essential skills. The industries, business enterprises, large, medium and small scale industries normally look for survival, growth, expansion, profit maximization, stakeholders well being, good will generation, community development etc. In this regard, organizations now-a-days are looking for people who accomplish these objectives effectively. For accomplishing these objectives, skills required are numerous. The core skills and higher order skills essentially expected in the organizations/industries and work places are:

➢ **Core Skills**
  • **Life Skills**
  • **Life-coping Skills**
  • **Work-based skills**
  • **Hands-on Experience**
  • **Job-related Skills**
  • **Entrepreneurial Skills**
  • **Interpersonal skills**
  • **Computer skills**

➢ **Higher Order Skills**
  • **Presentation Skills**
  • **Problem solving Skills**
  • **Documentation Skills**
  • **Case study and Interpretation Skills**
  • **On the job and Internship Skills**
  • **Practical Demonstration Skills**
  • **Simulation of skills in a real-life Situation**
➢ **Work-Integrated Learning**

The UK government's White Paper on the Future of Higher Education (2003) also highlights the work-based learning as a significant initiative in higher education. This type of learning can also help to develop skilled workers who can apply their theoretical knowledge in a creative and entrepreneurial way in response to international challenges and opportunities.

In addition, learning at the work place can support social justice by giving access to those who have not traditionally studied at university level. Thus, work-integrated learning encompassed by the open universities seeks to achieve three goals:

- to give the learners, already studying, the opportunity to gain academic credit for their work experience;
- to encourage those who are not yet got into higher education to use their existing work experiences to study at higher education and
- to able to connect work and learning.

➢ **Objectives of Work-Integrated Learning**

- **Identification of trades/skills**
- **Identify industries for skill implementation**
- **Offer skills to Workers, Assistants & Supervisors**
- **Skill training to be given at the work spots**
- **Assessment of skill acquired at the work places**

➢ **Possible Stakeholders of Work –Integrated Learning**

- **Local community**
- **Industries**
- **Rural development organizations**
- **Commercial Sector**
- **Service Organizations**
- **NGOs and local bodies**
- **Institutions of higher learning**
- **Open universities**

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT METHOD AND OPEN UNIVERSITIES

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) method is a process by which learners demonstrate that they possess college-level knowledge of a subject that has been acquired outside a traditional classroom setting, such as at work, through volunteer service or other experiences. Learners work with a mentor, who has experience and exposure in the subject, to develop an electronic portfolio that documents a student's mastery over the subject. The important aspect about the PLA programme is that students do not get credit for experience; they earn credit by demonstrating that they possess college-level equivalent knowledge about a subject.

PLA provides learners with the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of already-acquired college-level knowledge in a specific subject area. PLA is not an independent study.PLA is a participatory initiative taking place in a real life situation/environment/work place so that the participant can able to demonstrate the acquired learning experience. This method is called Prior Learning and Assessment (PLA). PLA method is in fact more applicable to the target groups working in unorganized sectors, this target group lacking in education, training, skills and recognition. In unorganized sectors, the target groups which can acquire skills through PLA method are:

Technicians, semi-skilled and skilled workers in a variety of large, medium and small-scale industries, rural craftsmen, small-scale vendors, workers in business concerns, construction workers, agricultural workers, medium and small-scale farmers, meager wage earners etc. The method of PLA is already in vogue in many universities of developed countries (Shirley Amichand, 2007). The Open Universities/ODL system can play a vital role in reaching these target groups by adopting PLA method among the unorganized sectors so as to create framework for assessment at work place (Kishore,2009).

In this context, the ODL system needs to address these unorganized sectors through a flexible system of PLA method by which a linkage with marginalized, under privileged and disadvantaged is created. This is possible in ODL system through integrating PLA method by way of imparting skills and training to unorganized sectors, through the recognition of experiential learning by ODL institutions. This novel PLA method of recognition of experiential learning aims at assessment of mastery of skills gained or learning acquired during real life situation as well as at work place instead of at institutional campuses. This method actually gives scope to verify, assess and recognize learning and is not an isolated process, but a collaborative effort. Therefore, recognition of work place learning normally is taken up with individuals or groups and expected to be acquired at work spots preferably in presence of supervisors/employers.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT METHOD IN ODL

The solution to quantify learning through experiential learn
ing in ODL is to develop methodology thereby the target groups are subject to assessment of learning gained from work experience at work sites. The assessment methods are possible at different levels. The guiding factors/methodologies for assessment of experiential learning in ODL system are:

- Identification of areas/trades/skills/training.
- Non credit awareness training for base-line worker
- Credit based certificate programme for Assistants level
- Credit based diploma programmes for Supervisory level
- Practical manual/modules for hands-on experience.
- Fixed number of hours for hands-on training.
- Fixed contact hours for imparting life skills, work skills, leadership skills, analytical skills, technical skills, writing skills etc.
- Project/Internship
- Documentation of the experiential learning including records maintenance/report presentation.

The specific skill sets like work skills, life skills, practical skills, demonstration skills, etc., constitute the part of the experiential learning. The assessment is normally done based on oral test, interview, problem solving ability, role play, observation, self-evaluation, skill demonstration and self-documentation all of which have link with real-life situation to test the experiential learning. Assessment criteria required to measure learning outcomes are:

- ➢ Oral test in the form of interview
- ➢ Written test: Objective and Short-answer type
- ➢ Practical demonstration by individuals/group
- ➢ Presentation of documentary evidence for self-learning
- ➢ Collection of materials, demonstration of samples and product
- ➢ Project/Internship reports
- ➢ Case study, Field work Reports

COMMUNITY COLLEGE SCHEME OF IGNOU:
Integration with PLA Method for Flexible Academic System

Community Colleges are an alternative system of education which aims to empower individuals through appropriate skill development leading to gainful employment in collaboration with the local industry and community. They offer tailor-made programmes to local needs and requirements by using approaches that will be most acceptable to workers in the given community.

Community Colleges generally have a 2-year curriculum that either leads to an Associate Degree for transfer to an undergraduate degree or allows the students direct entry into any occupation or trade. These colleges are a source of economic growth because they provide an educated and skilled workforce that improves the quality of life for individual students, communities, and the nation. Community College system is a very flexible mode of offering academic/training for the benefit of the masses not possessing any formal qualification. In this system, any institution also has the freedom in designing and development of courses curriculum for the requirement of the community. The curriculum offered must be standardized on the lines of National Vocational Quality Framework (NVQF) envisaged by Directorate of Employment and Training, Government of India and Ministry of Human Resources and Development, Government of India for benchmarking the training, developing industry-related modular courses and establishing assessment requirements and methods.

The Community College scheme was introduced and institutionalized by IGNOU in the year 2009 to provide skill-based, livelihood enhancing education and eligibility for employment to the disadvantaged and underprivileged sections of the society. During the inaugural address of the launch in July, 2009, Smt. D. Purandeswari, Minister of State for Human Resource Development, Government of India pointed out the role of IGNOU in taking a lead in this alternative mode of education for the unreached community in the following words (National Launch of Community Colleges, IGNOU, 2009):

"The Community College is seen now as an innovative educational alternative rooted in the community providing skill-based, livelihood-enhancing education and eligibility for employment to the disadvantaged and under-privileged like the urban poor, tribal poor, and women. Appropriate skills development leading to gainful employment in collaboration with the local industries and community is the major target of the community colleges.

The success achieved by the system encourages the strengthening and consolidation of the existing colleges along with the step-wise expansion of the system to all the States in the country". After two years of the launch, as on today there are 456 IGNOU Community Colleges functioning having launched 2500 skill-oriented programmes with 1.3 lakh students on the rolls in the entire country (IGNOU Vice-Chancellors Report, 2011).

In this structure, any institution/college/non-gvernmental organization can start IGNOU community college. The administrative and academic control of the community college lies with the local committees constituted. The academic/administrative structure of the community college consists of Community College Board, Academic Committee and Examination Committee.

The regulatory bodies envisaged in IGNOU Community Colleges Scheme are (IGNOU Community College Scheme, 2009):

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Community College Board (CCB)

The Community College Board (CCB) shall consist of the following members:

1. Four members-representing the Trust or Management and Chairman or President as Chairperson of the host institution.
2. Two members-Teachers of the college nominated by the Principal.
3. One Member-nominated by IGNOU.
4. Three members-representing industry/local community/local government administration.
5. A representative from the local university
6. Principal of the Community College (Secretary).

The term of membership will be two years and the Board meet at least twice a year.

Role of the members of the Community College Board

- To check the credentials of the Trust/Management/Body which runs the Community College
- To oversee the academic infrastructure and give necessary advice.
- To advice regarding linkages with industry, local community, local government Administration in respect of placement opportunities.
- To make an assessment about the financial resources of the college vis-à-vis its communities.

Academic Committee

The Academic Committee shall consist of the following members:

1. Principal (Chairperson) of the host institution
2. Four teachers of the college representing the programme sectors.
3. Three experts from outside the college representing industry, University and Community.
4. Statement Government or local administration representative.
5. A Regional University representative.
6. Two local community leaders.
7. Two members of Community College Board.
8. Nominee of IGNOU.

The term of membership will be two years and the committee will meet at least thrice a year.

Role of the members of the Academic Committee

- To validate the definition of the Community (Every Community College is supposed to define the Community it is going to serve. It may be local, region-based, trade-based, ICT enabled service based and so on).
- To assess the need analysis done behind identifying the academic programmes for the community.

- To validate the level of the programme(s). There can be four levels :
  - Certificate (16-20 Credits)
  - Diploma (32-36 Credits)
  - Associate Degree (64-86 Credits)
  - Non-Credit Customized Programmes
- To help the Community College in categorizing the programmes.
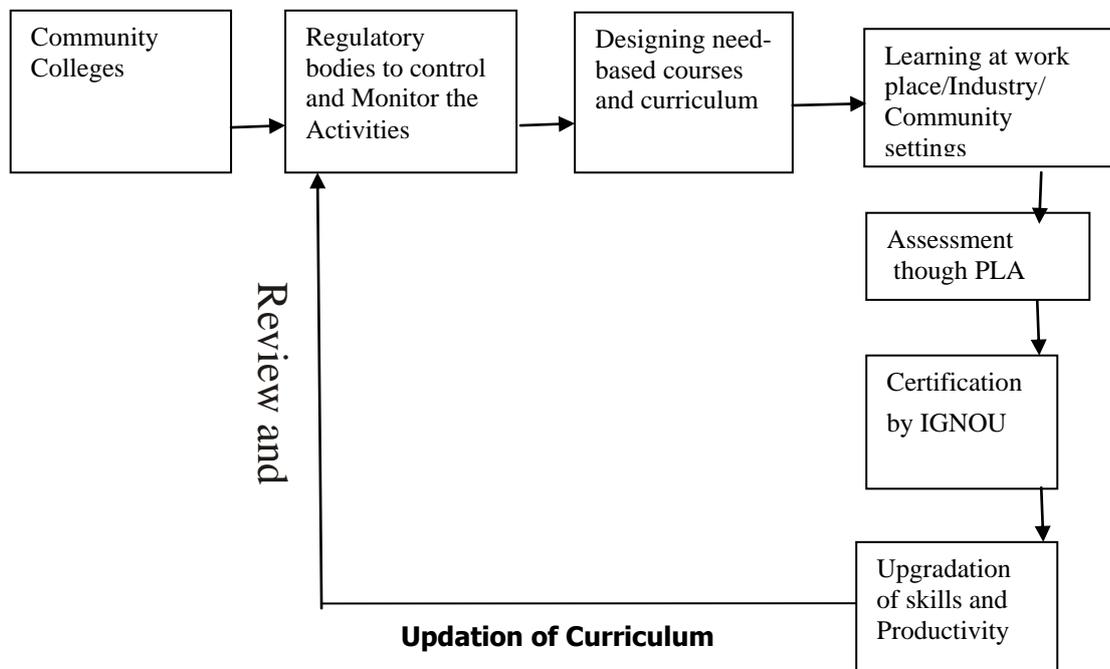
There can be three categories as detailed below :

> **Category 1-IGNOU Programmes directly taken up by the Community Colleges.**
> **Category 2-IGNOU Programmes being handled differently by the Community Colleges.**
> **Category 3-Programmes conceived by the Community Colleges based on the needs of the community.**

The Examination Committee

The Examination Committee shall consist of the following members:

> **Principal of the College of the host institution**
> **Two teachers of the college from the Programme Sector**
> **One external academic to be nominated by the College Board**
> **A representative of the industry/community from the relevant Programme sector.**
> **A nominee of IGNOU.**

The term of membership will be of two years and the Committee will meet at least twice a year. The responsibility of certification in different levels like certificate, diploma and Associate Degree with due credits and weightage showing the equivalence in the statutory bodies lies with IGNOU. Thus, the model for massive skill development though the Community Colleges –integrated PLA method can be visualized as follows:Through the Community College model, a systematic approach is made to address the skill gap in the country by identifying employment skills and competencies. This proposed model of community Colleges integrating with PLA method offers suitable academic flexibility and helps in preparation of flexible curriculum to suit the market needs to prepare communities and society to prepare for employment and entrepreneurship skills. Besides, the major advantages are identification of skill-based courses at local/regional level through need-assessment study in collaboration with industrial, commercial and service sectors.

Community Colleges → Regulatory bodies to control and Monitor the Activities → Designing need-based courses and curriculum → Learning at work place/Industry/ Community settings → Assessment though PLA → Certification by IGNOU → Upgradation of skills and Productivity

Review and Updation of Curriculum

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The skills acquired and assessment of skills is done through the PLA method in Community Colleges of ODL system, so that the target group does not feel the pressure of time, pace and place at present existing in the examination and evaluation systems followed in the conventional mode. Thus by this integration of PLA method, ODL system facilitates in massive skill upgradation leading to enhancing human resources potential, employment opportunities, and higher productivity among the unorganized sector through IGNOU community college scheme in the country.

Proposed Model Curriculum for Courses in Community Colleges integrating Prior Learning Assessment Method

Level 1:

For Base-line workers
Non-Credit Level

Duration: 3 months

- ➢ **Hands on Training**
- ➢ **Assessment at work place**
- ➢ **Certification**

Assessment Methods

- ➢ **Oral**
- ➢ **Documentary evidence**
- ➢ **Demonstration**

Level 2 :

For Assistants & Supervisors
Credit based Certificate = 16 credits; 240 hrs

Duration: 6 months

- ➢ **Life Skills and Leadership Skills** - **4 credits**
- ➢ **Technical & Communication Skills** - **4 credits**
- ➢ **Practical Module : Hands-on Training** - **4 credits**
- ➢ **Project/Internship** - **4 credits**

Assessment Methods

- ➢ **Oral test**
- ➢ **Written (Objective) test**
- ➢ **Documentary Evidence/Records**
- ➢ **Project Reports**

Level 3:

Above Supervisory Level
Credit Based Diploma = 32 Credits: 480 Hrs

Duration: 1 year

- ➢ **Life Skills & Leadership Skills** - **4 credits**
- ➢ **Technical/Communication Skills** - **4 credits**
- ➢ **Practical – Module:1 – Hands-on-Training** - **4 credits**
- ➢ **Practical – Module:2 – Hands-on-Training** - **4 credits**
- ➢ **Practical – Module:3 – Hands-on-Training** - **4 credits**
- ➢ **Internship** - **4 credits**
- ➢ **Project/Field Work** - **4 credits**
- ➢ **Demonstration/Record/Viva-Voce** - **4 credits**

Assessment Methods

- ➢ **Oral test**
- ➢ **Written (Objective & Short answer) test**
- ➢ **Demonstration**
- ➢ **Record/Documentary evidence**
- ➢ **Project Report**
- ➢ **Internship Report**
- ➢ **Viva-Voce**

CONCLUSION

- ➢ **The unorganized sector gets opportunity to gain skills/structured training at the Community Colleges**
- ➢ **IGNOU certification is possible for the skill and unskilled work force.**
- ➢ **Certification gives opportunity to create productive human resources**
- ➢ **Creates opportunity for unorganized sector to earn higher wages**
- ➢ **Massive skill Upgradation among the unskilled is possible.**
- ➢ **The flexible Community College Model paves the way for increasing Gross Enrolment Ratio in India.**

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Dr. SHANMUGHAM obtained his Ph.D degree in Statistics and he worked as Lecturer before joining IGNOU as the Deputy Director. He has become Regional Director in the year 2007 and instrumental in developing IGNOU Regional Centre, Mdaurai in Tamilnadu, India as a separate region to take ODL to remote/rural areas. He has published in National and International Journals. His key areas of interest are Management education, Teacher Education and its Quality, imparting Computer literacy to School Teachers and School students, training teachers in disability area. He is also currently Member, National Expert Committee for Community Colleges, IGNOU, New Delhi. Recently, the Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India has sanctioned him a project to develop two short-term textile programmes for skill development.

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