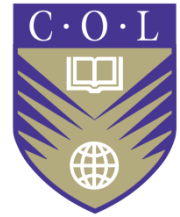


Remarks



INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY

National Seminar on Student Support Systems in Distance Education

7 - 8 February 1996

*Remarks by
Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan
President, The Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver*

Mr. Chairman,

Colleagues,

I bring you greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning; thank you for inviting me to this important meeting, to learn from you of developments in student support systems here in India and to share with you a few thoughts of my own on the subject. It is always a pleasure to be in this country and more particularly this University which has become a unique symbol of good quality distance education all over the Commonwealth. Through your Vice Chancellor, former Vice Chancellors and academics, you have given much help to the Commonwealth of Learning. Of particular importance to us, is your whole-hearted support and participation in the Rajiv Gandhi Fellowship Scheme that is currently enabling some 100 students in 18 Commonwealth countries follow a postgraduate programme in Distance Education. I see this scheme not only as a fore runner of many similar programmes that can be delivered across nations but also as an opportunity to learn from that experience. It is indeed very courageous of IGNOU to take on this challenge on behalf of distance educators all across the Commonwealth. We thank you for your enthusiasm and support.

Right in the middle of every distance education system is the student. It is for this person that we, collectively, come together to conceive and create course materials, scheme out ways and means of having it delivered, prepare challenges to test if learning outcomes are being met and finally celebrate the success of the student as well as the teaching/learning venture. As a community, we go through this complex and demanding sequence of protocols to ensure that those who participate in these ventures with us succeed in their efforts.

There are lots of reasons why those who promote and practice distance education need to be mindful of

the interests of those who seek out their services. Perhaps, most important of these has to be the fact that this form of educational delivery is fast becoming a mainstream rather than a sidestream activity. More and more, governments, institutions and individuals are beginning to look at Distance Education as the only alternative for them as they aspire for an educational provision. Consider this: in 1990, globally, some 48 million students participated in higher education. Of these, 17 million were from Asia. Based on present trends of growth this number will grow to 97 million by the year 2010 and perhaps up to 159 million by the year 2025. The anticipated participation in India alone will number 25 million by that year. When we couple this volume to the increasing inability of governments to support, through taxes, conventional means of delivering higher education and in parallel (to this inability) the emergence of affordable and sophisticated communication technologies, the attraction of distance education becomes fairly obvious. In such a context our community of educational providers must not only demonstrate excellence in the way we deliver education but also excellence in the way we support our clients to succeed.

A course is much more than a package of study materials. No matter how perfect and sophisticated it may be, a study package is still no more than well presented print, visuals, audio tapes, video and perhaps computer-based instructional material. If students are to benefit from the special circumstances of self study at a distance, then they must be supported in various ways. They may be distant from their teaching institution, but they must not be isolated. They should have a mentor on call with whom they can communicate. They should be put in touch with peers in the same course who are also available for exchange of views, information, provide clarification when needed and, where feasible, meet them regularly to discuss their studies and provide mutual support. They also need a place to study, whether at home, at their work place, or at a study centre not far from home. Students taking courses with practical requirements must have access to experimental kits, laboratories, workshops and computer facilities. The key element in the strategy of course design is that it should be student centred.

To survive and complete their studies successfully, students must develop appropriate coping skills and strategies. One of the roles of tutors and counsellors is to assist them to do this. All students enrolling for the first time in distance programmes and many students at the beginning of each new course need to have regular access to academic tutors. Such tutors must be thoroughly trained and be acquainted with the course materials and its requirements. The relationship between tutors and students has to be personal, friendly and fairly frequent. Besides learning from course materials and their tutors, students should also be encouraged to learn from each other, and distance education institutions should actively encourage self study groups among learners. Tutors employed to support learning must be knowledgeable, trained in mentoring adults, and must be supported by the institutions that employ them. Tutors must be monitored and be provided with regular feedback on their performance.

Colleagues your deliberation during this meeting will no doubt examine all of these items and measure the impact they make on learner success and identify options to make the systems more effective and efficient. We at COL will be interested in your discussions and the improvement they will make to the practice of distance education. I wish you well and every success. NAMASTE!