

Extraordinary Education for Ordinary People



Extraordinary Education for Ordinary People, NETAJI SUBHAS WEST BENGAL OPEN UNIVERSITY, Endowment Lecture, 15 April 2005

*By: Sir John Daniel, President & CEO
Commonwealth of Learning*

Introduction

It is an honour and a pleasure to be here with you today. Ever since I first visited Netaji Subhas Open University for your convocation ceremony last year I have been looking forward to coming back. I thank your inspiring Vice-Chancellor, Professor Surabhi Banerjee, for inviting me to give this endowment lecture.

My title today is Extraordinary Education for Ordinary People. Netaji Subhas Open University leading a revolutionary modern trend in education. My aim today is to put that revolution in context and to explain the significance of what this University is doing.

Globalisation is the best word to describe the wider developments that have created the context for Netaji Subhas Open University to thrive. I pronounce the word with hesitation, because it resonates with both negative and positive echoes. Globalisation is a new word, but it designates a phenomenon that is not new, namely the exchange of ideas, products, services and technology across the world. I shall draw your attention particularly to movements of ideas and technology.

As the world has grown smaller through easier travel and faster communication, ideas from many sources have flowed together and blended into new syntheses. Among them are some of the core values from the great religions of the world. Open universities emerged from the blend of two core values: the importance of education and the importance of the individual.

The Individual and Education

The great texts of Hindu and Muslim scriptures contain many references to the importance of education and wisdom, but rather fewer to the importance of the individual. By contrast the Christian scriptures have rather little to say about education and wisdom but return constantly to the idea that each individual is made in the image of God and infinitely precious to him.

We can understand that great assertion of secular humanistic values, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as a bringing together of all these great religious traditions. That is especially true of the statement that education is a human right, which combines the assertion of the importance of each individual with the belief that it is through education that individuals can fulfil their personal identities and contribute to the cultural, economic, social and spiritual development of their communities.

Many of the great figures of our era have demonstrated in their own lives the dual commitment to the individual and to education. When I visited Vice-Chancellor Banerjee's office, I felt privileged to be in a building which had known the presence of Mahatma Gandhi. How can I mention the name of Mahatma Gandhi, one of the great founders of the Indian nation, in the same breath as the word globalisation? But Gandhi was an internationalist. He wanted people of diverse origins to live together peaceably and believed that education could remove the obstacles of prejudice that stand in the way of harmony.

The same is true of Nelson Mandela. What a coincidence it is that both Mandela and Gandhi shared the experience, at an interval of fifty years, of spending time in a South African jail. Both were imprisoned for standing up for human rights. Nelson Mandela has written an interesting comparison of their experience. In those fifty years between their times as prisoners, the conditions in gaol, even the prison uniforms, had hardly changed at all. What had changed - for the worse - was the repressive apparatus of the state. Gandhi purposely broke the law and then gave himself up. The security police came for Mandela in the middle of the night.

Global Trends

Open universities are a river of opportunity created at the confluence of two vigorous streams: the growing respect for individual human rights and widening belief in education for human fulfilment. Other global trends have given practical reinforcement to these fundamental values. In its position paper Higher Education in a Globalised Society, UNESCO identifies four key elements of globalisation:

First there is the growing importance of the knowledge society and the knowledge economy, something that features strongly in your political discourse in India and colours the choice of your programmes at NSOU. A key implication of changing economies is that people have to continue learning throughout their lives.

Second, there is the development of new trade agreements that cover trade in education services. What is known as cross-border education is, for the moment, a negligible phenomenon within India, but NSOU is taking Indian education to other countries, not least through your teaching of the Bangla language to the large worldwide diaspora of Bengalis through the medium of eLearning.

Third, there are innovations related to ICTs. India is a global player in the provision of services using ICTs and this too is reflected in your courses and programmes at NSOU.

Finally, the emphasis on the market and the market economy is an important support to the development of open universities, as I shall show in a moment.

Expanding Higher Education in Developing Countries

These four elements of globalisation have combined to reinforce the conviction amongst policy makers that higher education must be made widely available. In the last fifty years student numbers in higher education have increased massively, both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the population. That increase continues. China has recently doubled its enrolments in a short period.

Making higher education available to all who can benefit from it must start with the will to do it. But will alone is not enough, governments, institutions and people must also have the means to expand access. The great expansion of higher education in the rich industrialised countries that occurred in the later decades of the last century was achieved essentially through the expansion and multiplication of conventional institutions. There were two reasons for that. First, the means were there to expand higher education, largely through public expenditure, because the countries were rich. Second, at least in the early years of the expansion, there were no obvious and effective alternatives to face-to-face teaching.

Now we are in a different era. Even though demand for higher education continues to expand in some developed countries, the main challenge is to transform the higher education systems in developing countries so that they can serve a much larger part of the population. The conditions for this transformation are very different. First, these countries do not have the wealth for a massive expansion of the system on the old model. Even where economies are growing briskly, as here in India, there are many other calls on public funds, not least the expansion of basic education and the modernisation of the infrastructure. Second, there are now effective and cost-effective alternatives to face-to-face teaching.

Netaji Subhas Open University is a brilliant exponent of one of those alternatives. I ask you to bear with me whilst I try to explain why the significance of the application of technology called distance learning goes far beyond its manifestation in particular open universities like this one.

The Iron Triangle

The metaphor that I use to explain why distance learning is a revolution I call the iron triangle. The challenge that has always faced those who want to expand education is to achieve a balance between three objectives. The first is to make education accessible to as many as possible; the second is to ensure that the quality of the education provided is worthwhile; and the third is to do this at a reasonable cost. The triangle is made up of these three vectors: access, quality and cost.

I call it the iron triangle because it explains why it is taking the world so long to achieve education for all, despite declarations about the importance of bringing education to all that go back 50 years.

Face-to-face teaching is a successful and durable form of education that will always be important. Its strength is that it requires one individual to plan and execute every step in the teaching process. The teacher plans the lesson, prepares any materials that will be used in the class, teaches the students, assesses what they have learned, and then reflects on the whole process to see where it might be improved. Individuals are flexible, so face-to-face teaching is a robust method that can be applied in many

different situations, from the teacher who gathers children under a tree to the professor taking a graduate seminar in the historic halls of a university.

But look at this method of teaching through the lens of the iron triangle. First, the access that it allows is limited because a single teacher can only handle so many students. If you want to increase access you must find more teachers, which costs money. Second, quality is variable. Well-trained and motivated teachers stimulate high quality learning. But not all teachers are well-trained and motivated, as you know only too well in India. Third, providing well-trained and motivated teachers is costly, and the cost increases in a linear fashion as the number of students increases. There are, in other words, no economies of scale.

The basic constraints of the iron triangle have been a brake on the development of education throughout history. Indeed, when many people think about education they instinctively link quality with exclusivity, usually without realising what an insidious link they are making. They assume that access to good education must always be limited, for reasons of cost. They then restrict entry through examinations and other barriers. The final step is that those barriers become the surrogate for quality. We assume that an educational institution must be good if it is difficult to get into, regardless of what actually happens to students once they are admitted.

Once the linkage between quality and exclusivity has been made it is only a small step to assume that a quality education for all is a hopeless delusion. Fortunately technology has now broken the insidious link between quality and exclusivity. How has it done so?

Breaking the Iron Triangle with Technology

Let us first be clear about what we mean by technology. Technology is the application of scientific and other organized knowledge to practical tasks by organizations consisting of people and machines. I emphasise two parts of this definition. First, we are not engaged in a futile search for the perfect method of learning. We are applying 'scientific and other organised knowledge'. That can mean tacit knowledge, crafts and organisational experience, not to mention a good dose of common sense.

Second, we are living in a world of people and machines. Good use of technology always involves people and their social systems. A simple and useful way to think about how to combine people and technology in education emerges when we reflect that learning involves two types of activity.

Learning blends two types of activities. First, there are activities that the learner conducts independently, such as reading a book, viewing a TV programme, listening to a lecture or an audio-cassette, writing an essay and doing mathematical calculations. These activities constitute the bulk of the student's learning, at least in higher education. They are also - and this is the key - the activities that allow you to use technology to increase access, improve quality and cut costs. That is because the basic tools of independent learning such as print, audio material and TV programmes cost relatively little to reproduce in volume once you've made the investment in the first copy.

Volume helps to increase access and cut costs. It also allows you to improve quality, because once you are producing materials at scale you can afford to invest in making them excellent.

That's fine, but the evidence shows that most learners do not succeed on independent activities alone.

Technology must involve people and their social systems. You also need interactive activities.

'Interactive' is a very slippery word that gets a lot of abuse. I use it to mean a situation where an activity by the student evokes a response by another human being - a teacher, a tutor, or another student - that is specifically tailored to that particular student.

Today is an obvious example. As you listen to me now you are each involved in independent learning. If you ask me questions afterwards we shall have an interactive event. Other interactive activities are face-to-face sessions with other students or a tutor in a study centre, having your assignment marked and commented on by a teacher, getting a response to a query by e-mail, and so on.

These kinds of activities are important to the success of most students. However, they are also more expensive because they do not lend themselves to economies of scale in the same way as independent activities. Making twenty extra copies of book costs relatively little whereas additional interactive activities require more people. However, even here it is possible to improve quality and cut costs compared to traditional instruction.

What I am saying is, of course, well known to those of you associated with Netaji Subhas Open University. The world's open universities provide a good example of independent and interactive learning at work. NSOU's extraordinary growth, from 3,000 students in 2001 to 50,000 today has given you direct experience of the benefits of operating at scale. Now that you have large numbers you can produce high quality materials at relatively low cost. You are becoming an important publisher and I was delighted to read of your increasing success and impact at the Kolkata book fair.

The ability to make a significant investment in order to create a quality product also applies to new media. I congratulate you, for example, on the online course in Bangla that is bringing the Bangla language to the vast Bengali diaspora. What a brilliant example of the positive benefits of globalisation!

Even though interactive activities are more expensive they too benefit from what we can call effectiveness of scale. When you had 3,000 students they were well scattered around the state. Now that you have 50,000 there are far more NSOU students in any one locality. This means that you can provide them with better service. I am so pleased to see the expansion of your system of student support through the steady growth of the number of NSOU study centres to well over one hundred, the creation of special centres for tribal and disadvantaged communities, the development of the personal contact programme, and your new campus at Kalyani. I count it a great privilege to be associated with its formal opening.

These student support activities are vital parts of NSOU's academic life, but it costs relatively more to expand them than to print more books or to repeat a radio broadcast. However, by using part-time tutors, taking advantage of their specialised knowledge and by training them to tutor in a distance learning system you can give students high-quality support in a cost-effective manner.

Cost Curves for Open Universities

You can represent this schematically by plotting the cost curves of independent and interactive activities, which I have done here in a very simple manner (Figure 1). The total costs of the system are plotted against student numbers. Depending on how you blend the two you can get a steeper or a flatter curve, in other words the marginal cost per additional student can be greater or smaller.

These cost curves show the great benefits that NSOU can derive from its impressive growth in student numbers. Because of the efficiency of the system, even with low fees, the University becomes a very solid financial operation. This is the key to the successful further development of NSOU because it gives you the freedom to make choices. It should also make you very popular with government, because you can expand your programmes and services without having to go to the government for funds all the time.

One of the important developments that NSOU is promoting is the use of media, like the Gyanvani FM educational radio channel, whose hours have been extended, your use of video conferencing, your interactive radio counselling and your application for time on the EDUSAT satellite.

The use of media in the interactive aspects of the programme, like your radio counselling initiative, is an important new development. The cost curves for these kinds of activities fall somewhere between lines for independent media and the lines for face-to-face interaction (Figure 2). Obviously it will be a terrific breakthrough if media with the cost characteristics of independent learning could be used in a genuinely interactive manner. If we could achieve this then there would be no effective limits on the size of the University except our ability to manage it.

So search for genuinely interactive media is important and I am glad to see that NSOU is engaged in it. But let us be cautious. The people who matter are the students. Only they can really tell us whether a medium is interactive in the true sense of responding to their particular queries and concerns. Only they can tell us whether a new medium is a convenient part of their study pattern or a tiresome additional obligation. The deployment, use and evaluation of new media must be done in consultation with the students so that they can become increasingly effective.

The Quest for Quality

The growth of numbers in NSOU is truly impressive. However, the best advice that I can give you is not to judge yourselves by numbers alone. Numbers are important, because serving many people is better than serving fewer people. Numbers are also important because, as I said a moment ago they give you the opportunity to develop the University. That development should always go in the direction of enhancing the quality of NSOU, and most especially the enhancement of the student experience.

Never forget that not very long ago distance learning had a poor reputation, here in India and around the world. That was because the earlier form of distance learning, which was called correspondence teaching, did not bother much about quality and, in particular here in India, did very little to support students on an individual basis. The creation of the national network of open universities was meant to change all that -

and it has done so to an impressive extent.

However, you can never take quality for granted. Being called an open university does not, in and of itself, make you better than a correspondence school. What makes you better is constant attention to quality in both the independent and interactive aspects of learning.

Creating an Academic Community

A quality teaching and learning system is a springboard for creating a vibrant academic and intellectual community. Here I must congratulate Vice-Chancellor Banerjee and all the staff for the very impressive strides that you are making. Too often, open universities content themselves with being good systems of open and distance learning. That is indeed the vital foundation, but beyond that the aim must be to create a university in the fullest sense of the term.

Traditionally we identify the mission of universities as teaching, research and service. Having rapidly built up a large teaching operation, I am delighted to see NSOU now promoting the other two elements of the mission, research and service. I am delighted to see the creation of the Research Department, and it is right and natural that it should focus first on research into open and distance learning. That is your core business and historically universities around the world have spent too little time and money researching their core business.

I am sure that research will lead you in other interesting directions. It leads naturally, for example, to research on ways of using information and communication technology in the development of communities and societies. I am delighted to see that, like the Commonwealth of Learning, NSOU has links with the inspiring M.S.Swaminathan foundation, whose impressive work spans the range from high science to social mobilisation.

That is one aspect of another admirable feature of NSOU that helps to build the base for a great academic future. I refer to what the NSOU Newsletter accurately calls a 'spate' of seminars, symposia, workshops, conferences and memorial lectures. It is clear that the Netaji Subhas Open University is an intellectually exciting place and that is good for students and staff alike.

Such activities nourish the research undertaken at the University and also support and extend its function of service to the community, another area where you are in full expansion. One of the great assets of open universities is their mastery of media and technology, so what better way of serving the community than using media to open up the work of the university to the public gaze. You may like to note that this was an important part of the motivation of Harold Wilson, the former British Prime Minister who created the UK Open University.

He had been an academic himself, at Oxford University, and he believed that it was important to open up the work of universities to the general public, not just so that they could see what their taxes were being spent on but, more importantly, so they could see the issues that were being debated in universities and take part in those debates themselves.

Through your course in the Bangla language, through your presence on radio and soon on satellite, through your publication of books, and through your Centre for Tribal and Disadvantaged Communities, NSOU is doing that. I congratulate you. Open universities have a special opportunity to bring the benefits of education to a community that extends far beyond those enrolled as students.

Development as Freedom

Last time I was here I quoted the great Cuban poet, José Martí, who said: 'To educate is to give people the keys to the world, which are independence and love; granting them the ability to walk alone, at the happy pace which is that of natural and free individuals'.

I began this lecture by pointing out that open universities bring together belief in education and commitment to the rights of the individual. India is the world's largest democracy, so its people are free, at least in the important matter of choosing who shall govern them. But as Martí said, education provides the keys to the world that allow people fully to enjoy that freedom.

That links directly to the future of India, which the rest of the world calls 'a developing country'. What development is being sought? What is development? The distinguished Indian Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen answers these questions in his book *Development as Freedom*, whose title sums it all up. The purpose of development is to expand freedom. That expansion of freedom drives further development because development depends on the free agency of people.

We are talking about many dimensions of freedom: freedom from poverty, hunger and homelessness; freedom to hold beliefs and to express views; freedom to fulfil our destinies within the rule of law. I believe that it is the special role of open universities to embrace the whole gamut of freedoms from the most basic to the most abstract. Your great poet Rabindranath Tagore expressed those higher freedoms beautifully when he said that 'the object of education is to give man the unity of truth'. He also observed that 'true modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action'.

It is that independence of thought and action to which Amartya Sen refers when he says that development depends on the free agency of people.

Conclusion

It is time for me to conclude. I called this lecture *Extraordinary Education for Ordinary People*. I have argued that through the way that they have applied technology to higher education by making possible open and distance learning, the world's open universities are offering extraordinary education to ordinary people.

The Netaji Subhas Open University is now in the vanguard of that movement. A constant theme of this lecture has been my admiration for the vision behind the broad road to the future that this University is taking. It brings to mind another observation by Rabindranath Tagore when he said: 'We can look at a

road from two different points of view. One regards it as dividing us from the object of desire; in that case we count every step of our journey over it as something attained by force in the face of obstruction. The other sees it as a road that leads us to our destination; and as such is part of our goal. It is already the beginning of our attainment.

NSOU already has attained great things. That is important for its students, it is important for the State of West Bengal, and it is important to India. No country has made a greater commitment to open universities than India. Distance learning is a major plank of the national strategy for increasing access to higher education. It already accounts for 23% of enrolments in higher education and the plan is to increase that to 40%.

Governments can make policy but it is up to people and institutions to make it work. The Netaji Subhas Open University is making a stellar contribution to the achievement of India's farsighted policy. You are not simply enhancing access, although that is vital, but also showing that an open university can be a fully authentic university. You are creating a new and richer notion of the academic community and giving new meaning to the traditional mission of universities: teaching, research and service.

It has been an honour to give this Endowment Lecture to you and I wish Netaji Subhas Open University a great future.

Reference

UNESCO (2004) Higher Education in a Globalised Society: Education Position Paper, 28pp. Paris