

APPLICATION OF TECHNOLOGY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: YCMOU EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system has grown exponentially in the last two decades particularly in developing countries to meet the demands of quality education for all and lifelong learning at affordable cost. Since the ODL system is dynamic and lends itself to technology, it can accommodate and imbibe changes in development and delivery of Programmes. That is why it has graduated through five generations in a short span of time. Through these the learners get access to a flexible learning system that allows them to learn as per their pace, choice and ease. The State Government of Maharashtra with these noble motives has established this university and has made a revolutionary move and taken a great leap in educational arena of the State.

The Act of Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University clearly states the objectives and approaches of the University in its first schedule. One of the objectives states that the university will '*provide innovative, flexible and open system of education by using distance-teaching methodology and by applying modern communication technologies to education*'. This paper tries to explore how far the university is using technology in dissemination vocational, technical and higher education to the rural and urban masses across the state.

Keywords: Technology, Distance Education, Open Learning, YCMOU.

Digital University

The Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) has always, since its inception in 1989, placed a premium on the use of technology in its day-to-day operations. In fact, keeping pace with the latest advances in the field of Information and Communication Technologies to serve its learners more efficiently has over time become a salient feature of

the university. Among the various technological strides taken by the university in recent times, one may mention the university's concerted attempts at going Digital.

In the very first academic year itself, the university took up 94 academic programmes covering over 150 thousand learners spread across remote locations in the State under the DU Framework – a gigantic task indeed and one that surpassed every other university in the State in terms of scale and range of operations. In the current year 2012-13, the number of academic programmes considered under the DU Framework has risen and with the consequent new entrants into the Framework, E Suvidha will now be provided to a much larger number of students.

Apart from a dynamically updated university portal that gives the latest information about the university as a whole, the university's portal as it has so far evolved, provides access to every authorised study centre and duly registered student through a Login ID and Password for getting customised and easily downloadable information like list of study-centrewise programmewise enrolled students, studentwise fee receipts, updated student profiles carrying all their academic and past examination records, coursewise syllabus, past question papers, examination time-tables, studentwise examination hall tickets, various kinds of pre and post examination reports and the like. Furthermore, a messaging system that allows quick communication with specific university officials is already in place and a customised SMS service for students conveying their Permanent Registration Number, Examination Seat No., etc is already operational. Besides, specific provision is available for students and study centres to send in their requests/suggestions/complaints through the electronic medium. In addition, as students activate their individual Logins, they have access to a service titled EASY (Employment Assistance Services to Youth) wherein there is a rich variety of vocational information that the students can access based on their specific preferences like for instance, career openings in keeping with their qualifications, essential qualifications for certain positions, scholarship schemes, training opportunities, schedules of important Govt. conducted examinations, guidance regarding filling up various kinds of employment-related forms, loan schemes, banking services available, etc. In addition, the Post-graduate students of this university through their personal logins can access a rich database of internationally reputed journals and books through a link provided with the university-subscribed EBSCO database.

During the next phase of the DU portal's development, in addition to improving E-governance facilities, there will be a focus on providing E-learning resources to students and giving them proactive help in their learning process.

Aakashwani and Doordarshan

The university students could also see these audio-video programmes telecast on Aakashwani and Doordarshan before the launch of virtual learning classrooms facility.

Virtual Learning Classrooms

In India the success achieved in Development of Distance Education and use of ICT during the last 14 years propelled the country to launch a dedicated satellite GSAT-3 (EDUSAT) on September 20, 2004 with extensive efforts of Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) to cater the need of dedicated countrywide space-based educational network. GSAT-3 Applications (GAP-3) Project is a pilot project planned in Maharashtra (MH), Karnataka (KA) and Madhya Pradesh (MP) for distance education. The GAP-3 pilot project has a combination of interactive television programming, computer networking and multimedia multicasting elements. This provides profound opportunities and also poses new challenges for effective use of ICT in Programme delivery.

To enable dissemination of quality education in the most cost effective manner across the State of Maharashtra the university has been using Virtual Learning Centres (VLCs) through EDUSAT up linking established with assistance from the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). The HUB of VLC, 'Yash Bharati' is situated in the university headquarters. The classes run at Nashik studio can be simultaneously viewed by the students on a large LCD projector screen across Maharashtra. The students can ask their questions to teacher teaching from the teaching end i. e. studio in the hub. Earlier it was a two-way audio and one-way video system, however now the teacher sitting in the studio can also see the students across various classrooms.

Considering the availability of expert resource persons in various fields, the university has established a sub-studio at Pune and Mumbai. The sub-studio in Pune is completely operational and lectures of various experts are being transmitted from there, however work of Mumbai sub-studio is in progress.

Since last year M. A. in Sociology, MPSC/ UPSC Composite Guidance Programme and Soft Skills Programme are offered through Virtual Learning Classroom (VLC). It will be an enriching opportunity for the students of conventional university colleges as well. Here, in

addition to the print material the learners are also provided with support in other media. Therefore, it is a fulfilling experience for many to earn higher education through open and distance mode and command respect in society. Till today 14 Lakh students have fulfilled their aspiration of earning higher education by availing this opportunity.

Web Radio

The university has now ventured into yet user-friendly technology and that is web radio. On the university website a link is given where on a click of a mouse a live lecture would be able to be heard, at the given time slot. The students can interact with the expert in the studio via various modes such as email, text message on the platform, telephone call etc. The expert in the studio can listen to the questions asked and answer. Moreover, if someone misses the live lecture, then one visit the website in his own time and listen to the recorded lecture in archive. These lectures can be downloaded and listened to later in one's own time and ease.

Conclusions

Considering the huge cost of physical and educational services in the existing educational system it is a great challenge to provide education to the growing number of learning population. Thus, through the intervention of quality educational content development and delivery by the use of ICT can give quality education, cost-effectively anywhere anytime. The use of ICT can definitely make the learning experience an enriching, effective and engaging one.

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