

Delivery of non-formal education through open and distance learning: Role of CSR

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ABSTRACT

Non-formal learning includes competent based learning, problem based learning, quaternary learning and self-directed learning for skill enhancement. Open universities in Asia have been providing non-formal education (NFE) through functional education projects. In India, extension and community education programmes are provided by many universities including open universities such as the Indira Gandhi National Open University that has played a pioneering role in providing education through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to the disadvantaged groups and people working in both the unorganised and organised sectors. These programmes aim to enhance professional skills and upgrade existing knowledge levels. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has been gaining prominence in engaging directly with local communities, and in integrating their needs with the business goals and strategic objectives of companies, after the passage of Companies Act 2013. This paper contextualises CSR in assisting the State to improve the effectiveness of public education system by implementing Non-formal Education (NFE) through ODL programmes. Project based approach in informal learning will help in shifting focus from the learning content to the problem to be solved. Collaborative efforts with the private sector should expand, to include communities.

Key Words : Non-formal education, ODL, communities, CSR, Development, Partnerships

INTRODUCTION

The role of any educational system is to channelize knowledge to the learner. Traditional learning system was built on the 'elitist' model through which the learner who emerged was considered successful. Yet there is another form of learning that considers learners successful. It is called non-formal learning. This form of learning is flexible, learner-centric and participatory in nature.

Non-formal education and ODL :

Any organised educational activity that occurs outside the formal educational system is termed 'Non-formal Education.' Non-formal Education (NFE), as a term appeared first in Philip Coomb's book called 'The World Educational Crisis: a systems approach,' in a chapter titled 'Non-Formal Education: to catch up, keep up and get ahead.' Ever since then, discussions, discourses and debates started on NFE, which continued through the 70s, early 80s and ended in 1986. The term was revived again in 1990s, and spread across the world, including western and developing countries.

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Non-formal learning does not follow standardised education and regulations that is used in the formal system of education or traditional education. In this form of learning education is personalised, and not standardised (Chow, 2015). NFE practice increased and widened its scope throughout the world, often with donor support. It has been influenced mainly with 'lifelong learning' discourses. Many countries including India have used NFE through their programmes in order to universalise education and educational requirements. According to Rogers (2005), the approaches to NFE are distance education, correspondence education, continuing education, rural education, andragogy and dual education.

Distance education is a mode of delivering education and instruction to learners, when the source of information and learners are separated by time and distance. Open and Distance learning (ODL) has been leveraged to considerable effect in non-formal and community development sectors of education. The Canadian Farm Forums of 1940s were an early influential prototype that used the motto – read, learn, discuss; and this was used later in India and Ghana. Another powerful and influential approach was the radio campaigns which became popular in India and have been evidenced by research. One of the studies on effectiveness of three modes of presenting information on nutrition to rural women through radio, conducted by Lady Irwin College, accords special mention. The study conducted in 1979 on rural women of Mehrauli block in Delhi, by using three modes, folk songs, informal dialogue and talk through radio revealed effectiveness in terms of gain and retention of knowledge. The women were receptive, open-minded and interested in topics such as weaning, child nutrition, gain in knowledge after exposure and retention of knowledge fifteen days after exposure. In Botswana, the radio approach in 1976 succeeded in raising awareness on a new policy for cattle on tribal owned land. Another radio project was successfully run by the cooperative movement in 1982 in Zambia. Small-scale NFE has successfully supported projects in Sudan and Mongolia. Likewise, television dramas have also been successfully used in countries like India, Nigeria and Gambia.

ODL often helps to create values, over paper qualifications. An ODL institution can institutionalise such activities through project based learning in a non-formal setting, so that learning can happen in alignment with the learning needs of society. Non-formal learning refers to ideas such as Competent Based Learning (Bates, 2015), Problem Based Learning (Tan, 2003), Quaternary Learning (Meyer-Guckel *et al.*, 2008) and Self-directed Learning (Garrison, 2003 and Boyatzis, 2002) for skill enhancement. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) suggested the concepts of 'tacit knowledge' and 'explicit knowledge' in their knowledge management model called SECI model. Tacit knowledge is part of knowledge that is embedded in memories, and is hard to articulate. Explicit knowledge, on the contrary, is a type of knowledge that can be codified, captured on paper, and prepared as database and files, which can also be shared with others. Conversions of 'tacit' and 'explicit' knowledge occur across four quadrants – socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation (SECI), to enable learning to take place.

Socialisation occurs during 'tacit to tacit' conversion. This quadrant represents social interaction through face-to-face conversations or communication technologies. *Externalisation* is represented when 'tacit to explicit' conversion takes place. This happens while publishing knowledge, recording or articulating knowledge. Externalisation process can be carried out through written documents, media, drawings, physical products, other creative media and illustrations. *Combination* refers to conversion of 'explicit to explicit' knowledge. In other words this refers to creation of explicit knowledge by combining other available explicit knowledge such as writing and editing with texts, audios, videos and images. *Internalisation* happens during conversion of 'explicit to tacit' knowledge.

This means that when an individual or a group learns from the available explicit knowledge, and turns it into one's own, internalisation takes place. The process involves reading, listening and watching.

These four processes enable learning to take place in a non-formal setting. The perceived value creation in in-formal or non-formal learning is problem solving or product creation as outcomes. In NFE, activities are designed around clear objectives. This helps in incorporating project based learning. Such projects can support inclusive goals. Project based approach in informal learning will help in shifting focus from the learning content to the problem to be solved. The outcomes of non-formal learning process are the experience and skills that learners acquire.

Universities like the Allama Iqbal Open University, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), the African Institute for Economic and Social Development, the Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University and several other universities have been playing a proactive role in extending NFE. In ODL universities, vocational training imparts specialised skills and knowledge to learners engaged or not engaged in the unorganised sector, and those who are employed or unemployed. It develops their social and behaviour patterns, besides income-generating skills, in a non-formal setting. University-based extension projects by ODL universities, agricultural universities, departments of agricultural extension, and home-science extension, have been using indigenous and affordable communication media as part of functional educational projects, for farmer and women's education. For fostering learning outcomes in such settings 'Community Colleges' were also introduced in India in 1985. The open university system was a new approach to NFE and it was first initiated in the United Kingdom. Later, in India, an open university was established in the State of Andhra Pradesh by an act of legislation, followed by establishment of IGNOU in 1985 by an act of Parliament, with approval from the National Policy on Education, 1986. The university provides higher education to disadvantaged groups including people working in the unorganised and organised sectors to enhance their professional skills, people living in remote areas and rural areas having no access to education, and to adults who wish to upgrade knowledge. The mode of education adopted is both flexible and open. Learners are being benefitted by various programmes of study in fields like rural development, nutritional sciences, human development, extension, development studies, urban planning, family therapy, animal welfare, panchayat level administration, early childhood care, environmental studies, social work, resource management, watershed management, sericulture, organic farming, and many other scientific / art fields. The School of Continuing Education in IGNOU specially follows the life-long learning approach in every stage of life, and hence contributes to developing the competencies of people. The point of contact for students is study centres and regional centres that provide a linkage between students and institutes, contact programme facilities and praxis learning. To impart NFE, the ODL institutions develop centrally produced materials, like print, audio and video, that are used at various learner study centres (in a decentralised fashion). These are combined with face to face learning support including home visits sometimes. The objective is to increase livelihood opportunities, thus contributing towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The 'Centre of Excellence Award' and 'Award of Excellence for Distance Education Materials' was conferred on IGNOU by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). To cite a significant example on its contribution towards inclusive and sustainable learning, the university is providing NFE vocational training programmes in the north-eastern region, through the EDNERU (Educational Development of North East Region Unit), with the objective of strengthening the work force amongst youth, both in unorganised and organised sector. The purpose has been to develop human resources

in the region, by conducting programmes on skill development, vocational training and entrepreneurship, based on the ethos and requirements of the region. The IGNOU Centre for ODL in Research and Training in Agriculture in Agartala, conducts training programmes through lectures, field visits, collaboration centres, E-learning portal, video studios, call centres, hands-on training in technical vocational skills, electrical repairs, weaving, tailoring, rain water harvesting, writing and public speaking skills, food processing, training for rural artisans in bamboo based handicrafts, barefoot technicians, information and technology, use of multimedia packages and many more.

Contextualising CSR :

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) refers to the contributions undertaken by a company to contribute to a better society through its business activities and social investment. UNICEF (2013) defines CSR as ‘referring to a company’s responsibility when it comes to the impact of its activities on the environment, consumers, employees, communities, stakeholders and all other members of the public sphere.’ As defined by the European Union, ‘CSR is a concept whereby companies or corporations integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis’ (EU Business, 2006). A number of companies across the world have started promoting their CSR strategies in an active manner because the investors, customers and the public expect them to act sustainable and responsible. Known popularly as the process where there is continuous commitment by a business to behave ethically and contribute to economic and social development, CSR improves the quality of life of the workforce and their families, as well as of the local community and society at large. In this process, the company leverages its products, business practices, networks, employee strengths, and profits to a certain extent so that it creates sustainable changes for marginalised communities (Bijli, 2016). Merely depending on the government’s social development programmes to bring people into the mainstream of development is not enough. Today, companies are trying to align their CSR policies with major governmental policies, as the government seeks support on development.

Delivering changes on different levels is not only an implicit priority on the CSR agenda, but a key contribution of all organisations to move towards new intentional policies and programmes (Seitanidi, 2013). In India, the landmark Companies Act 2013 underlines mandatory spending of two per cent of net profit in the last three years on CSR activities, and also provides a framework within which listed companies will have to operate. Programmes for inclusive growth have been highlighted in Section 135 of Company’s Act (Chhabra, 2014). Schedule 7 of the Companies Act lists out activities, which a qualified company can take up in discharging CSR. It includes promotion of education, gender equality, empowering women and employment-enhancing vocational skills.

NFE through CSR: A Few Glimpses :

Companies are establishing a trend where demography, health status, gender equality, literacy rate, sex ratio, health status, GDP and other Human Development Indicators (HDI) play a significant role in determining CSR activities of an organisation. These developmental needs can be integrated into a company’s social and environmental mission, and NFE activities initiated. Of late, CSR is beginning to play a useful role in assisting the State to complement the public education system, apart from other activities. In this context, CSR engages directly with local communities, identifies their basic needs, and integrates them with business goals.

Schedule 7 in the Company’s Act specifically mentions preference to be given to a local area where a company operates. The Azim Premji Foundation, Microsoft Corporation (India), Citibank,

Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL), Citibank, Gujarat Ambuja Cements Limited, are some of the companies that are playing a major role in delivering NFE. The HPCL has been undertaking projects called 'Unnati' for 3000 school students in semi rural / urban areas of Mumbai and Vishakapatnam, by providing computer training. Another project called 'Vikas' aims to ensure that children get educated through remedial classes, library access and later on becoming self-sufficient through vocational training. 'Nanhi kali,' yet another project, supports girl students from the marginalised sections so that they do not drop-out of school mid-way and enables them to grow up as empowered women. The Azim Premji Foundation run by Wipro provides elementary schooling for thousands of underprivileged children. It has partnered with the governments of 15 Indian states for more than 14,000 schools by building the capacity of government organisations through structuring and training; in this way it endeavours to strengthen the education delivery system. NFE is imparted as financial education to financially illiterate people and housing support is provided to needy people, by Citibank, through its CSR arm- the Citigroup Foundation. The Ambuja Cement Foundation of the Gujarat Ambuja Cements Limited focuses on women's development, natural resource management, AIDS awareness, adoption of schools and setting up of schools for mentally challenged children.

Non-formal learners are active participants in constructing their own knowledge, from a constructivist's point of view. With the literacy rate at 74.04% according to Census 2011, India has the world's largest illiterates. The government is taking measures to improve the literacy rate of India through several education programmes for children and adults residing in rural areas. In non-formal learning, learning takes place as a result of interactions between learners, by using signs, tools, language and symbols, that exist in a particular environment's social, historical, cultural setting or context. Hence learning occurs both individually and collectively in groups - small or big teams, or in an online community. This suggests that collective knowledge is greater than the sum of knowledge gained by individuals. The role of the teacher here is to create appropriate learning environment and material for learning, to enable the construction of individual learning, for example, through ICTs in Project Shiksha, by the Microsoft Corporation (India) Pvt. Ltd. in collaboration with Partners in Learning. This project aims to provide affordable software solutions, curriculum leadership, training and IT literacy to about 10 million students and 2,00,000 school teachers of government schools, within five years. The project through ICT has impacted over 32 million students. The objective of Microsoft is to reduce the 'digital divide' and 'content gap' between the technologically empowered and technologically excluded segments of the society, by creating a digitized classroom environment. The project aims at bringing about innovation in the classroom teaching-learning process and empowering teachers with ICT skills. 'Partners in Learning' is an inclusive teaching school alliance that has collaborated with Microsoft. This international organisation's vision is to create a sustainable, inclusive and productive partnership. It works in association with governments and education leaders around the world, to deliver professional development of teaching, learning and digital inclusion through tools, resources and curricula. This partnership with Microsoft is well in alignment with India's development goals of achieving inclusive education and employability through ICT skill building.

The road ahead :

The above examples signify the efforts in CSR activities towards NFE for societal development. Keeping this in view, it is suggested that ODL institutions across the country prepare a policy paper to the Central and State governments, that underlines emphasis of CSR activities in leveraging

NFE programmes towards institutes across the country, for skill development and vocational training. Effective linkages of the learner study centres and regional centres with CSR companies operating in that region can make NFE sustainable.

Non-formal learners are experienced people having strong tacit knowledge. They know what needs to be learned, given relevant guidance and stimulation. ODL institutes have been acting as facilitators in this. The International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) is an umbrella body for institutions around the world providing online and e-Learning education with the aim of providing equal educational opportunities in each member country. Currently ICDE links 173 institutions and organisations worldwide across 60 countries, India having the highest number of member institutions (14), followed by China (11 institutions) (Uthman, 2015). Realising the membership potential of India as compared to other countries, CSR activities in NFE should be scaled up in India, for attaining literacy and skill development. The dropping out from schools continues due to ensuing costs in education, inaccessibility and ignorance. There is a need for policy formulation and investment of certain percentage of mandatory CSR to ODL sponsorship. In countries where there is mandatory CSR (like India) or education fund (TETFUND in Nigeria), a reasonable percentage of the fund should be made obligatory for ODL sponsorship scheme (Uthman, 2015).

The different components used for teaching / learning in established ODL institutions include self-instructional print and audio-video materials, radio and television broadcasts, face-to-face counselling / tutoring, laboratory, hands-on experience, video conferencing, teleconferencing, interactive radio counselling, interactive multimedia CD-ROM and Internet based learning. Networking with CSR companies by such ODL institutes to further strengthen the ODL system in the delivery of the above teaching components will reinforce learning mechanism of NFE. The same can be applied to community colleges as well. In the digital age, creating ICT awareness in the community is a welcome move, as depicted in Project Shiksha. Such projects should be replicated as teachers get empowered by using innovative ICT skills. This helps in making their lesson planning interesting. Such projects become inspirational when students demonstrate issues on water, sanitation, AIDS awareness and hygiene. Digital presentations make learning an interesting process. Digital combined with indigenous presentations motivate the communities to participate in the learning process. CSR arms of companies work with local NGOs for the delivery of activities. Every village is a hub of different resources and demands of every community vary. Collaborative efforts of CSR with government programmes like 'Digital India' can be used to promote ICT-based NFE. If CSR activities for NFE through ODL institutions are made mandatory across the country ODeL (Open and Distance e-Learning) can be promoted in a big way. NGO support can play a significant role here. ODL practitioners can be trained and qualified online to save costs; this enables networking among organisations.

Conclusion :

CSR today addresses sustainable social welfare by aligning towards current socio-economic requirements of India. Social partnerships have the potential to function as flexible, non-regulated mechanisms of organisational and social change. They are the facilitating hubs for solutions in NFE. The delivery of Non-formal Education through ODL should be done strategically by CSR as this will contribute largely in enhancing CSR impact and livelihoods.

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