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Bringing Higher Education from Far to Near in India: The Role of Distance Education

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Abstract

Twenty first century is driven by a knowledge economy. Skill, training and information are the foundations of a knowledge economy. Education is a means to attain these foundational components. Education, particularly higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping country's human resource. But at the beginning of the century, higher education in India was limited to a few, had a strong gender and class orientation and was elitist in character. To break these trends and to have an inclusive approach in higher education, distant mode of education was promoted in the country. But till date, distance education has its limitations with conventional curriculums, limited contact class facilities, lack of adaptation of hyper technology and lack of post monitoring. All these defeat the purpose of the system. The present paper makes an attempt to locate the evolutional and growth track of distance mode of education in the country and to point out the shortcomings that can be met with to make higher education reach near every door step and every individual to cut across its gender, caste, class and elitist orientation and ensure equity, justice, human rights and inclusiveness.

Keywords: Education, Distance Education, Curriculum, Enrolment, Accessibility, Gross Enrolment rate, Inclusion, gendered character

Introduction

Higher education since long was the monopoly of the higher caste group, the dominant class group, the urban centered population and the dominant gender group. As such, it was elitist, patriarchal and urban centric in character. This led to regional and intra group discrepancies in higher education. In general, the higher education statistics was poor and dismal. This disadvantage of groups and localities in higher education contributed towards development delay and development deficit of the country.

Distance Education in the Recommendations of Committees and Commissions:

Keeping this dismal educational scenario in view, the Government of India geared massive efforts to increase access to higher education by creating opportunities. Distance education which had its inception in the educational planning of the west, appeared in the educational thinking of the planners in the country. The early idea on this emerged with the appointment of the Kothari Commission. The Government of India appointed a Committee under the chairmanship of Dr. D.S.Kothari in 1961. This committee clearly asserted the need for distance mode of education to spread education, but along with access it recommended to utilize the services of qualified teachers, longer hours of contact classes and lowering the fees to ensure inclusiveness and quality to distance mode of education[1]. The Education Commission (1964-66) clearly visualized the need for lifelong learning needs of the individuals and recommended to create correspondence and home study courses to enable the people having constraints of time and opportunity to go for higher learning. Added to this, it recommended that along with the universities, Government departments to be allowed to provide correspondence education to improve the learning level, skill and training of the people[2]. Subsequently, in 1968 the National Policy on Education clearly mentioned that correspondence education be given the same status with regular full time education. In 1974, the Government of India developed guidelines for Distance mode of education. This guideline clearly stated that distance education need to priorities students of remote

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geographical areas, students who consider learning as a lifelong process, who have discontinued their studies, students who fail to get regular seats in higher education institutions. The New Education Policy (1986) subsequent to the establishment of the IGNOU, recommended to cater technical and management education through distance and correspondence mode. In 1991, the Distance Education Council was established. The National policy on Education, 1992 stated the need for strengthening the National Open School. In 1995 the CABE Committee on distance education recommended for the establishment of Open Universities in each state to create better opportunities on regional basis for the students and to bring higher education from far to near. It also sensitized the significance of creating open education resources. The National Knowledge Commission, 2007 emphasizing on the trinity of 'expansion, inclusion and excellence' in higher education perceives the yeomen's service distance education has to provide in the Indian society to make higher education reach each door step and to be a resource and right of each adult individual. It has recommended several reformations to make distance education reach its target. The major recommendations include: networking of the distance education centers, to generate web based open educational resources, to transit to credit system, facilitate convergence with traditional or conventional educational institutions, create research base in open learning systems, to create better regulations etc. The premier Policy on open and distance Learning was drafted by the Government of India on 28th August, 2009. The Policy clearly prevents the system of distance education to become degree distribution mills and to stress on quality, equity and access. In 2010, the Government of India appointed the N.R. Madhava Menon Committee to study the issues and challenges faced by the distance mode of education. In this context, the committee clearly asserted that quality needs to be protected in higher education through distance mode which is often compromised[3].

The Madhava Menon Committee questioned DECs authority as the apex regulator of the ODL system mainly on the basis of conflict of interest and lack of adequate manpower and technological support. According to the Madhava Menon Committee, DEC being a unit of IGNOU and working under the control of IGNOU, lacked the moral authority to regulate other universities which are also autonomous bodies created by the Acts of various state legislations and have the authority to prescribe their own norms and standards. The Madhava Menon Committee observed that DEC, UGC and AICTE do not have the wherewithal to enforce their norms in the distance education space. The Committee found the ODL system practically unregulated and recommended the dissolution of DEC and the establishment of an independent and effective regulatory authority to regulate ODL system[4].

Distance Education on the Evolutionary Track
The term distance education is fairly young. However, it has its root in correspondence system of education which had its birth in the industrial west as early as the 1800s. Distance education, in the form of correspondence study, was established in Germany by Charles Toussaint and Gustav Langenscheidt, who taught language in Berlin through distant mode. Correspondence study crossed the Atlantic in 1873 when Anna Eliot Ticknor founded a

Boston-based society to encourage study at home. In 1886, H. S. Hermod, of Sweden, began teaching English by correspondence. In 1898 he founded Hermod's, which would become one of the world's largest and most influential distance-teaching organizations. At the same time, the university extension movement in the United States and England promoted the correspondence method. Among the pioneers in the field were Illinois Wesleyan in 1877 and the University Extension Department of the University of Chicago in 1892. Correspondence study continued to develop in Britain with the founding of a number of correspondence institutions, such as Skerry's College in Edinburgh in 1878 and University Correspondence College in London in 1887.[5]

Development of technology in the post industrialization period and hyper technology in the post globalization period have contributed for the expansion and strengthening of distance mode of education. The invention of radio during the First World War and television in the 1950s gave a new twist and turn to class room delivery. Traditional class room teachings started getting dissipated to the outside class room environment. Class room disseminations and transactions started cutting across space and species catering to the needs of a greater number of beneficiaries and covering wider geographical areas. Thus education broke its conventional elitist orientation and was brought from far to near making its availability, accessibility and affordability to the common milieu of the society. Gradually the term correspondence course underwent a metamorphosis. It gained formal recognition in 1982 when the four decades old International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE) changed its name to the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE)[6].

Launching of distance education Centers: A Milestone in India's Higher Education Map
Distance Education originated as Correspondence Courses in India in 1962. Government of India had the intent to make higher education percolate across gender groups, ethnicities, communities, cultures and territories. Delhi University became the pioneering institution to establish correspondence course in 1962. With the success of the correspondence courses offered by the Delhi University, the first Open University came up in Andhra Pradesh. With the recommendations of the education Commission, (1964-66) expansion of correspondence course took an added momentum. Consequently, the University Grants Commission (UGC) formulated guidelines for introducing correspondence courses in Indian Universities. Three more Institutes of Correspondence Studies were established in the late sixties. Twenty one more universities introduced correspondence programmes during the seventies. In the early eighties seven more universities started institutes of correspondences studies. At present there are 45 universities including four deemed universities which are offering correspondence programmes in the country.

Distance education in India started getting a boost with the establishment of the IGNOU. In, 1985, the Indira Gandhi National Open University Act, was passed by the Indian parliament. The Indian government while realizing the need for distance education opened the prestigious Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in 1985. State Open Universities (SOUs), Institutions and Universities offering education and including Correspondence Course Institutes

(CCIs) in conventional dual mode universities were also introduced as follow up steps to scale up the process. This over the years has contributed towards unbroken, inclusive, equal educational opportunity for many. Further the spill effects of distant education is noted trough the imparting of skill, training and generating an innovative mind in the people who are in service and educationally disadvantageous locations. This has also served as an aid of social mobility, ensuring equality, distributive justice, basic human rights, inclusion and empowerment of many. The educational deficiencies of the deprived are now supplemented with educational sufficiency making them mainstreamed in the higher educational process.[7]

This was followed by the establishment of open learning system in three more state open universities in the late eighties. These three open learning systems are: Kota Open University in Kota (Rajasthan), Yashwant Rao Chavan Maharashtra Open University at Nasik (Maharashtra) and Nalanda Open University at Patna (Bihar). States of Madhya Pradesh, and Karnataka have also emulated the system by establishing Open Universities. Open universities have been established in different states in the new millennium. Odisha has also got the privilege of accommodating an open university within its higher education fold.

Today distance education is not a luxury, but a compulsion for many. Particularly, for the groups who are devoid of higher education due to some constraints either stemming from families, economy or time, it is an easy source of giving a fillip to their ambitions. The Madhava Menon Commission has suggested the major objectives of distance education system as:[8]

• To provide a system of learner-centred self-paced learning.
• To provide a flexible, diversified and open system of education.
• To develop wider access to higher education for persons of all ages, particularly for working persons and for economically or otherwise handicapped persons including those residing in remote areas.
• To provide opportunity for up-gradation of skills and qualifications.
• To develop education as a lifelong activity so that the individual can replenish his or her knowledge in an existing discipline or can acquire knowledge in new areas.

Distance Education: A Mono concept with Multi Names
Distance education gets different labeling in different times, by different agencies. This includes a plethora of names like:
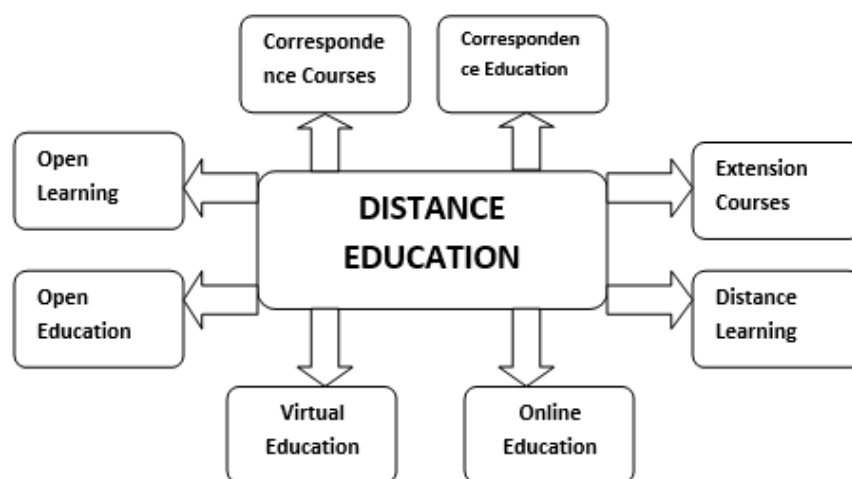
Review of Related Studies:
Kondapalli (2010)[9] opines that, distance education institutes in India are offering well-structured and academically well-supported education. With these developments in distance education, it is desirable that the distance education programmes run by different institutions are limited to a reasonable neighborhood of their locations to maintain quality delivery programmes. Enrolments in Open Universities have increased in high-speed and it is stated that distance education would take-up substantial share of the planned expansion of higher education. Mujiaba(2001)[10] opines, distance Education is an important milestone in the development of higher education and has great potential to equalize opportunities and take higher education to the door steps of women. It is expected that this school of distance education will lead to empowerment of women especially among rural and tribal women. Mehta (2011)[11] reveals that the Open Distance Learning System (ODL) has emerged as a vibrant and dynamic component of higher education infrastructure in the country. It provides access to quality education; about 23.35% of the total population of learners in Higher Education has taken the advantage of Open Distance Learning System. Making a social profile analysis of the students, the author indicates that the caste wise enrollment of learners in Western Maharashtra through distance mode shows positive result as about 23 percentages of students belonging to the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe categories are enrolled into the system. More than 50prcent of learners turn out to be unmarried. Most of the distance learners are employed; they have taken admission in Distance mode with the intention to get promotion and or for better job prospects. She concludes that there is still a large number of learners that have yet to be reached and providing access to them is a challenge before the system. Further, ensuring equity poses definite challenge for ODL system.

Kumar (1999)[12] observes that married students possessed significantly higher positive attitude towards distance education when compared with unmarried ones. No significant difference in the attitude is observed among distance learners varying on the other nine background

variables of gender, age, locale, social class, academic stream, educational level, employment status, and experience in distance learning and discontinuity in studies. Significant differences in attitude exist with regard to the parts of attitude towards admission procedures and self instructional materials for distance learners of different marital status. Attitude differences are also found in respect of the part of counseling sessions for the subgroups based on academic stream. Sukati *C.W.S.et.al* (2010)[13] notes the learning achievements of the distance mode students vis-à-vis the regular students. The author states that overall there are no significant differences in the performance of the students in the full time programme and of those in the distance education programme. Saxena (2000)[14] conducted a study to draw profiles of distance learners at Indira Gandhi National Open University. The study indicates that there are more number of females enrolled in ODE, they live in smaller houses with 2-3 children and 4 -5 family members, most students belonged to lower or lower middle income group, are employed in the public sector and want only the printed text material to study. Most of them feel that IGNOU should be an evening university. Students want to pursue higher education from IGNOU but want new programmes like Environment and Traditional wisdom of India.

Distance Education in India: A Stocktaking
IGNOU, New Delhi is a premier open university in India that has more 7, 50,000 students with extremely varied profiles, spread throughout the length and breadth of the country. The University has an efficient and effective networking of 67 Regional Centers and over 2667 Learners Support Centers, all over India and 29 overseas partner institutions. As an Open University, IGNOU has come a long way since 1985, having crossed national boundaries providing higher education as well as assisting other developing countries in this regard.[15]

The distance mode of education was also initiated at the level of the states in order to ensure inclusive education for the students who due to various handicaps and limitations were not able to attend regular courses in the educational institutions. The spread of this mode of education at the state level began as early as 1982. In the eighties the country witnessed the booming of four such institutions, in nineties five and in the post 2000 four institutions were launched on distance mode. There are at present 13 State Open Universities set up by the respective state grants shown in table no.1.

Table. 1: State Open Universities with their year of Launching

Sl. No.	Name of the State Open University	Year of Launching
1	Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU), Hyderabad, A.P	1982
2	Vardhman Mahaveer Open University (VMOU), Kota, Rajasthan	1987
3	Nalanda Open University (NOU). Patna, Bihar	1987
4	Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU), Nashik, Maharashtra	1989
5	Madhya Pradesh Bhoj Open University (MPBOU), Bhopal, M.P.	1991
6	Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University (BAOU), Ahmedabad, Gujarat	1994
7	Karnataka State Open University (KSOU), Mysore, Karnataka –	(1996)
8	Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU), Kolkata, W.B.	1997
9	U.P. Rajarshi Tandon Open University (UPRTOU), Allahabad, U.P.	1998
10	Tamil Nadu Open University (TNOU), Chennai, Tamil Nadu	2002
11	Pt. Sunderlal Sharma Open University (PSSOU), Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh	2005
12	Uttarakhand Open University, Haldwani, Distt. Nainitall, Uttarakhand	2005
13	Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University, Guwahati, Assam	2005

Added to the state open universities, different private universities, deemed universities and the U.G.C. sponsored universities starte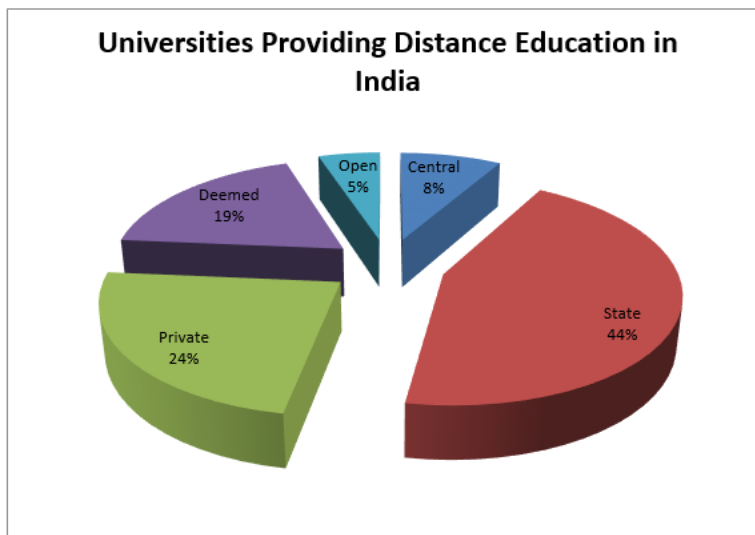d their distance mode of education looking at the lucrative possibilities of attracting students. A state wise categorization of such distance mode of learning is presented in table no. 2

Table. 2

Sl. No.	Name of the State	Total no. of Distance Education Institutions	Nature of the Institution				
			Central	State Government	Private	Deemed	Open
1	Andhra Pradesh	20	4	12	0	3	1
2	Arunachal Pradesh	1	1	0	0	0	0
3	Assam	7	2	2	2	0	1
4	Bihar	6	0	5	0	0	1
5	Chhattisgarh	4	0	1	2	0	1
6	Delhi	12	3	2	4	3	0
7	Gujarat	5	0	2	1	2	0
8	Haryana	8	0	4	2	2	0
9	Himachal Pradesh	1	0	1	0	0	0
10	Jammu & Kashmir	2	0	2	0	0	0
11	Karnataka	15	0	9	2	3	1
12	Kerala	4	0	4	0	0	0
13	Madhya Pradesh	9	1	7			1
14	Maharashtra	24	1	5	10	7	1
15	Meghalaya	2	1	0	1	0	0
16	Mizoram	1	0	0	1	0	0
17	Nagaland	1	0	0	1	0	0

18	Odisha	6	0	5	1	0	1*
19	Puducherry	1	1	0	0	0	0
20	Punjab	6	0	4	1	1	0
21	Rajasthan	12	0	3	5	4	0
22	Sikkim	4	0	2	2	0	0
23	Tamil Nadu	26	1	12	2	11(4)(7 to be)	0
24	Tripura	2	1	0	1	0	0
25	Uttara khand	6		1	3	1 to be	1
26	Uttar Pradesh	18	2	2	5 Inst+5 State 10	3	1
27	West Bengal	7	0	6	0	0	1
	Total	**216**	**18**	**96**	**51**	**40**	**11**

Source:https://university.careers360.com/articles/list-of-approved-distance-education-universities-in-india

Thus, it becomes evident from the above table that the number of distance educational institutions is taking an upward trend in the country. This is a post globalization syndrome. Competitive employment market, knowledge economy, importance given on skill, training and capacity building, desire for higher education and the efforts for inclusive education are the factors that are contributing for generating a need for continuous education. Another important observation is that private mode of distance education is taking a momentum in the country. So distance education no longer remains the state monopoly. But this may result in a dangerous outcome and defeat the very purpose of the institution. Private institutions with the demand of higher capitation fee are likely to exclude the needy to come into the ambit of higher education. Further, the gender consideration may also prevent women from getting into higher education through distance mode[16.]

Enrolment in Distance Mode in India
Enrollment in distance education is on rise which indicates its growing need and popularity in the country. A report reflects that in 1962 there was only one distance education institution in the country with an enrollment of 1,112 students. According to the report of a seven-member committee headed by NR Madhava Menon, the share of distance education increased from 2.6% in 1975-76 to 8.9% in 1985-86 and further improved to 10.7% in 1990-91 and to 20.56% in 2008-09. The number has touched 200 institutions and the enrolment being 36.6 lakh in 2009-10. In fact, the enrolment in distance education has been increasing approximately at the rate of more than 10% in last two decades.

Distance education has become one powerful medium of obtaining degrees for large number of students who are staying in far off and remote areas and for whom accessing universities on regular basis is still a dream. Distance enrollment constitutes 11.5% of the total enrolment in higher education, of which 46.3% are female students. Table No. 2 reflected the enrolment of students at various levels of education on gender basis.[17.]

Table. 3: Gender based Enrolment of students at various levels of Education

Distance Enrollment			
Level	Male	Female	Total
Ph.D.	87	49	136
Post Graduate	510526	597836	1108362
Under Graduate	1421708	1077682	2499390
PG Diploma	41383	27252	68635
Diploma	64175	40053	104228
Certificate	17374	26775	44149
Integrated	1	0	1
All	**2055254**	**1769647**	**3824901**

Source: AISHE 2015-16
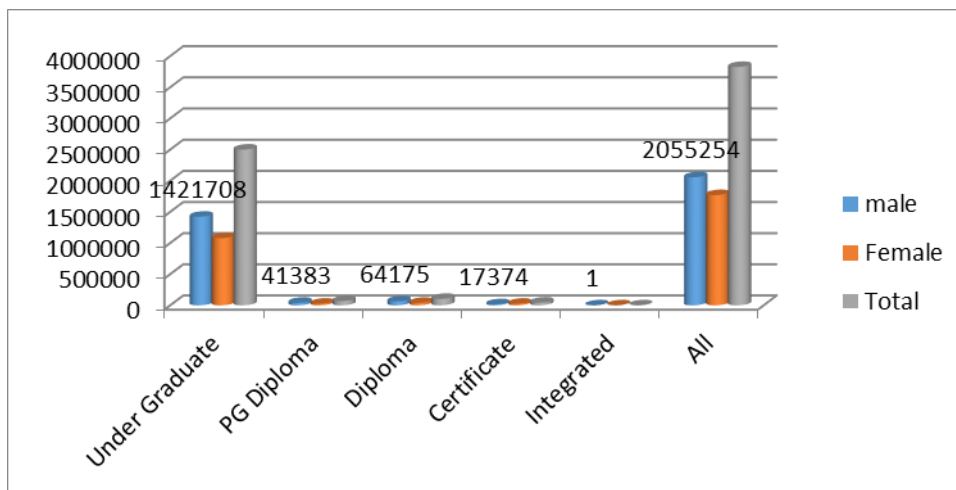
According to *All India Survey of Higher Education 2015-16*, the total enrollment in higher education has been estimated to be 34.6 million with 18.6 million boys and 16 million girls. Girls constitute 46.2% of the total enrollment. Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education in India is 24.5%, which is calculated for 18-23 years of age group. GER for male population is 25.4% and for females it is 23.5%. Thus, there is still a gender gap in the enrolment in distance education. Distance education fails to bring gender symmetry till date and as such is not inclusive in character. Further, the aforementioned table clearly projects the gender asymmetry in enrolment at different stages through distance mode. At Ph.D. level the gap is distinct which suggests that till date distance education has not been able to promote education mobility and highest degree enrolment still continues to be a male monopoly. At the post graduate level, women's enrolment share far exceeds that of the males. This is more a scenario because of the reason that women's' enrolment into humanities subjects is higher through distant mode of education. However, in diploma courses it is drastically low compared to the males. The reason being that diploma courses are short term courses demanding more money, devotion of quality timing which is not affordable by the common women. In certificate courses women's share is just the opposite. Certificate courses very short term courses delivering a certificate and are less expensive. This entails women to go for this course.

Thus, the impression that emerges from the foregoing discussions is that distance education in India emerged to make education an instrument for ensuring social justice, equality, human rights to every citizen and inclusiveness. But till date all these features are not fully marked with the system. Gender differences are perceptible. There has been a phenomenal growth of higher education through distance mode. This is visibly reflected through the number of institutions mushrooming in the country. Enrolment has increased. Subjects offered are being diversified. But innovations are still lacking and professional courses have not been much diversified. Now distance mode of learning needs a rethinking and revisit. For this, the following few points may be taken into account.

- Particularly courses that can create sustainable livelihood opportunities and self-sufficiencies need to be introduced. Certificate courses on geriatric care, baby seating, home care of permanently ailing patients, courses for mothers to take care of their newly born,

disadvantaged children, home treatment are yet to be introduced to meet the demands of the current market and needs of the people.

- Committees have been set up to expand distance education and they have been successful for giving a quantitative leap to institutions and enrolment. But quality is rarely assessed. The needs of the stakeholders are never taken into consideration in designing the distant mode curriculum. This is an urgent need of the hour to assess the needs of the beneficiaries and reflect them in the designing of the curriculum.
- The dividends of distant modes are rarely weighed. Monitoring mechanisms are absent and post distant education impact analysis is missing.
- Increasing the number of contract classes is on demand. The enrolled professionals and women home makers prefer contact classes during holidays which can be more suitable and delivering to them.
- Market surveys while designing the curriculum is a need of the hour to make distance mode of learning more dividend paying for the students and to make it more fascinating.
- Distance education need to adopt hyper technology to reach a greater number of young beneficiaries. Virtual class rooms, satellite teachings can increase the rate of enrolment phenomenally.
- Educational hubs and camp contact classes in some concentration areas can create a better interface between the teachers and students and provide a better enabling environment to the enrolled students who fail to attend the contact classes at far off places.

If these few points can be kept in mind and distance education can be given a new face with these few renovations, it will become an efficient institution for not only bringing higher education from far to near, but can make higher education a mechanism of real change and nation building.

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