

Supportive role of the “CBCI Chair” at IGNOU in ODL programme development

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Abstract

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI) Chair at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was established with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between CBCI and IGNOU on 29 February 2000 to plan, design, develop and launch socially relevant programmes of study in the areas of HIV/AIDS social work, philosophy, etc. The one-time endowment grant of US\$125,000 facilitates the programme development process without any financial contribution from IGNOU. In the 13 years of its existence, the CBCI Chair has developed eight programmes — from Certificate to Doctoral programmes. Some of these programmes have been revised. Over 30,000 students have enrolled for these programmes, which are being offered in 12 countries. Although the chair follows all the prescribed procedures for programme development and launch, the nature, scope and financial viability being enjoyed by the Chair facilitates timely decision making and achievement of targets. The CBCI Chair is a success story in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as it has helped in the establishment of the first School of Social Work in ODL, the Centre for Tibetan Studies and the Mother Teresa Chair. The Chair has been instrumental in providing scholarships and awards to several students. This paper examined the what, why and how of the CBCI Chair and the implications it has as a model towards targeted interventions in ODL systems, quality assurance, maintenance and sustainability.

Introduction

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has established 13 Chairs for various academic purposes. The first Chair, the UNESCO Chair, was established in 1996 in the School Education. Subsequently, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference (CBCI) Chair was established in 2000, followed by the Bahhadur Shah Zafar Chair, Chair for Sustainable Development, ISRO Chair, Tagore Chair, Chair for Technology-Enabled Education, MHRD Rajiv Gandhi Chair for Contemporary Study, Chair for Industry-Academy Interfacing, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Chair, Raman Chair, Visvesvarayya Chair and the Mother Teresa Chair (IGNOU Website, 2012; IGNOU Profile, 2011).

CBCI Chair

The CBCI is the apex body of the Catholic Church in India (CBCI Website, 2012). In the Catholic world, the CBCI is the fourth largest ecclesiastical conference after the United States, Brazil and Italy. The CBCI has 166 dioceses, 180 bishops, three cardinals, about 125,000 nuns, 30,000 priests and 900 religious congregations. They own and manage over 20,000 educational institutions, 300 colleges, two universities, 1,500 technical institutions, 2,000 social welfare organisations, 130 schools of nursing, 5,000 hospitals and health care clinics, half a dozen medical colleges, 100 seminaries, and several other institutions of education and training across the country (Catholic Directory, 2005–06). About 85 percent of their involvement is in rural India where around 70 percent of India's population reside. The Christian population is about 2.3 per cent (Census of India, 2001) and the Catholic population is about 1.6 per cent.

With the unabated spread of HIV/AIDS in India in the late 1990s, the CBCI decided to embark on a mission to create awareness and educate the masses about the what, why and how of the disease and strategies for its prevention. IGNOU was chosen for this collaborative endeavour because of its reach across the country and beyond its national boundaries. Towards the actualisation of this mission, CBCI and IGNOU agreed to establish a 'Chair' which would facilitate the planning, designing, developing and launching of various programmes of study on HIV/AIDS and related subjects, including social work (India Education Review, 2012). In this process, the CBCI provided a one-time endowment grant of US\$125,000 (5 million Indian Rupees) which is kept in a long-term investment by IGNOU. Apart from the annual interest, the Chair also gets 10 per cent of fees from various programmes being offered by the Chair.

Functioning of the Chair

For the smooth functioning of the Chair, there is a provision for a joint advisory committee (JAC) comprising five representatives from IGNOU and CBCI respectively. Prof. Gracious Thomas, who was instrumental in the establishment of the Chair, is the coordinator while the President of the CBCI (who is elected once in two years) holds the honorary post of the Professor (Chair). IGNOU has opened a separate bank account in which the annual interest (from the endowment grant) is credited along with 10 per cent of the fee of the programmes being offered by the Chair.

Over 30,000 students are currently pursuing the various programmes offered by the Chair through the School of Social Work. Apart from this, several thousands are being enrolled for the three elective courses in BDP and the two compulsory courses in the teacher education programme, namely, B.Ed. The annual programme fee currently being generated by the university is over one billion Indian rupees (1 US\$ = 50 Indian rupees) and the Chair gets 10 per cent of the amount annually. Since this amount is not considered as part of the university's annual budget (plan and non-plan budget), the Chair has the flexibility to use it depending on various requirements. As a result, the Chair has become self-sustaining and does not require financial support from the university.

Programme development process

The first programme developed by the Chair was a six-month Certificate in HIV and Family Education (Information brochure: CBCI Chair, 2011). For the development of this programme, the Chair organised a brain-storming session involving experts from NGOs, FBOs, school teachers, parents of adolescents and academics specialised in social work, psychology, sociology and medicine. During the meeting, it was decided that the university may make two types of interventions: (i) an awareness programme for all fresh ODL students of IGNOU using a well-designed folder, namely the “HIV/AIDS prevention guide for students” (IGNOU, 1999) and (ii) formal programmes beginning with a certificate of six months’ duration.

Awareness campaign

For the proposed awareness campaign aimed at fresh students, a colourful folder that provide vital information about the what, why and how of HIV/AIDS, and the importance of its prevention and control was prepared. Apart from the CBCI Chair, World Health Organisation and the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, also provided financial and technical support. This folder is mailed to all the fresh students along with the print material free of cost. Initially, about 300,000 students received this programme package printed in English and Hindi every year. The folder has a questionnaire with 12 questions which are filled in by the students and returned to the coordinator. The analysis of the responses received from the students showed that the annual readership of this folder is about a million.

Programmes of study on HIV and family education

The Chair made the proposal to develop and launch the first certificate programme on HIV and family education in early 2000. The proposal was discussed in the School Council followed by presentations before the School Board, Planning Board and the Academic Council. In all, three expert committee meetings were convened for the certificate programme.

The programme has four courses of four credits each and has been offered as an undergraduate programme since July 2002 in both English and Hindi. The programme development process included meetings of the course preparation team, assigning of each unit to qualified and experienced experts, content editing, format editing, language editing, translation to Hindi, vetting of the material, preparation of illustrations and finally printing. All expenses for the preparation of materials were met by the Chair.

The meticulously conceived programme development strategy for the certificate programme and the initial overwhelming response from across the country by admission seekers, facilitated the Chair in adding four more courses and offering a one-year diploma on HIV and family education following a modular approach from July 2003. About 1,000 students enrol for these programmes each year. Apart from IGNOU, most of the state open universities are also offering these programmes. These programmes also have hundreds of students abroad, including students under the Pan-African e-network (IGNOU Profile, 2011).

Entry to the degree programme

The Chair subsequently facilitated and funded the development of three elective courses on HIV and related topics, namely: (i) introduction to HIV/AIDS, (ii) introduction to family education, and (iii) substance abuse and counselling (eight credits each). These courses are offered as electives in the Bachelor Degree Programme (BDP) across the board.

The Chair was instrumental in facilitating the School of Education's development and launch of two compulsory courses in its teacher training programme, namely: (i) HIV and AIDS education, and (ii) adolescence and family education, for which over 26,000 students are admitted every year. UNICEF and the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) of the Government of India were also partners in this collaborative endeavour.

From 2004, IGNOU launched the Bachelor in Social Work programme developed by the Chair. From 2008, the university has been also offering the Master in Social Work and from 2009, the Post-Graduate Diploma in Social Work using a modular approach. There is much demand for the Master in Social Work programme in Ethiopia (over 500 students are currently enrolled) and Nepal. In all, 11 courses for the MPhil (pre-doctoral) and PhD programmes were developed by the Chair in 2008-2009, for which the School has admitted 56 students. The CBCI Chair took the initiative in developing and launching the BA and MA Philosophy programmes in 2009 and 2010 respectively (IGNOU Profile, 2011).

The Chair meticulously followed the same programme development process, which was used for the certificate programme on HIV and family education, for developing all courses and programmes. Since the Chair has its own funds, delays in getting budget allocated (usually once in a year), and bureaucratic and administrative delays are avoided.

Financial viability

The Chair supports the salaries of consultants who are appointed from time to time to support and maintain the programmes. Apart from the salaries, the Chair also supports some of the Research and Teaching Assistants (RTAs), students who require scholarships under on-campus regular programmes as well as several cash awards given to meritorious Social Work students every year.

The Chair also financially supports the Annual National Seminar on Social Work response to HIV/AIDS (since 2004), regional and state-level seminars, expenses for the revision of existing courses and programmes of study, as well as the development of new courses (IGNOU Website, 2012). One of the major co-curricular activities of the Chair is the organising of the Annual Mother Teresa Memorial lecture in IGNOU since 2008.

A success story in ODL

The CBCI Chair is a success story in the ODL system of the country. The establishment of the Chair has facilitated the launch of several courses and programmes of study which were not popular or common both in higher education as well as in conventional systems. The collaboration of the CBCI, which has numerous institutions across the country, was timely and much helpful. The proposal from the CBCI for programmes of study in the area of HIV/AIDS as well as Social Work for its thousands of functionaries spread across the country received positive response from the university.

The CBCI Chair made history for Social Work education in the country on several counts (Information brochure, SOSW, IGNOU, 2008): (i) the establishment of the first school of Social Work in ODL with the approval of the President of India (as Visitor of IGNOU) on 16 August 2007 (IGNOU Act 1985 – revised edition, 2005); (ii) the single largest provider of Social Work education in the country, having more than 30,000 students pursuing its programmes; (iii) the only School of Social Work reaching people all over the country in every state and union territory (including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands about 1,400 kilometres away from the mainland which do not have any school/department providing Social Work education); (iv) the first school to have indigenously prepared learning materials on Social Work both in English and Hindi (universities and colleges offering Social Work programmes in India mostly depend on books which are authored and published abroad); (v) the first school to have access to multimedia for Social Work education (being a central University directly under the Government of India, IGNOU has access to the All India Radio and Doordarshan(TV) of the Government apart from IGNOU's own Gyandarshan (TV) and Gyanvani (radio) stations); (vi) the largest network of social work teachers, academic counsellors and practitioners involved in Social Work education; (vii) the largest provider of Social Work education at undergraduate level (over 80 per cent of the existing Social Work education programmes in India under the conventional system are at postgraduate level); (viii) the only school in India offering Social Work programmes abroad; and (ix) the only school that has provision for walk-in admission and on-demand exams.

Another feather in the cap of the School of Social Work through the CBCI Chair was the establishment of a Mother Teresa Chair and a Centre for Tibetan Studies (IGNOU Open Letter, March 2011) to commemorate the visit of the Dalai Lama to the university to deliver the Mother Teresa Memorial Lecture.

What was initiated in the year 2000 to address the issues of HIV/AIDS through the establishment of a Chair by IGNOU and CBCI has crossed several milestones and has shown the world that there is no limitation to the extent collaborative endeavours can blossom and produce lasting results.

Quality assurance, maintenance and sustainability

With a limited regular faculty of seven academics, it is a stupendous task for the school to maintain quality as well as to ensure the smooth sustainability of the 14 programmes of study (including the eight programmes developed by the Chair) along with the co-curricular activities discussed in this paper. The collaborative initiative with the CBCI facilitates the recruitment of several academics and support staff on contract basis to facilitate the running of the school, the two Chairs, as well as the Centre for Tibetan Studies without depending on the university for financial support. This arrangement also helps in the timely revision of learning materials, extending interactive radio counselling and teleconferencing sessions by involving external experts. The relaxed academic and administrative freedom vested with the Chair enables the school to get involved with a wide range of activities for which approvals are received from competent authorities without bureaucratic delays.

Conclusion

Universities and institutions of higher education that are owned, funded and managed by the government often face bureaucratic delays. Often, such academic institutions also face hurdles, particularly in following set norms, procedures, rules and regulations with regards to financial and administrative matters. Collaboration with credible institutions facilitates the execution of projects in a timely fashion while ensuring accountability.

The IGNOU-CBCI collaboration is a success story in the ODL system. The CBCI Chair has done commendable work in planning, designing, developing and launching several socially relevant programmes of study. In ensuring quality and standards within the academic framework of the open university, such endeavours have become all the more relevant and desirable in times of global and national crisis such as recession.

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