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*"Changes call for
innovation, and
innovation leads to
progress. "*

-Li Keqiang

Innovation in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system in India: The Need to Remove Systemic Barriers

Introduction

Innovation in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system is a concept, which dates back to the early 2000s. Prior to that, worldwide, the concept of 'Best Practices' was prevalent, which had emerged from the quality issues in the ODL system, mainly in the nineties¹. At that time quality issues were a major concern, and from these concerns arose the adaptation of best practices. Creativity and innovation were considered aspects of best practices. The best practices in the ODL system were believed to be spread across six diverse principles (VARIES), namely i) *flexible*, through *various* use of educational resources, ii) *social*, by facilitating *access* and collaboration iii) *deeper*, by encouraging *reflection*, iv) *relevant*, through *interactive* exercises, v) *transparent* through *explicit* design, and vi) *personal* through tutor *support*². Innovation in ODL system may be defined as a product or a process that is new, useful and feasible to be implemented in the ODL system.

The ODL system in India has shown a tremendous growth during the past few decades due to its unique feature of user-friendliness. In this system, the students are free to learn at their own place, in accordance with own pace and convenience while being located far away from the institution. This uniqueness and the ease of obtaining knowledge have a pivotal role to play in facilitating today's emerging knowledge society. In India, there is one National Open University, namely the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), and 14 State Open Universities (SOUs)^{3,4}. Today millions of students enrolled in higher education are learning through the ODL system.

However, in spite of possessing the capabilities of catering to the millions of students, the problems of efficiency, equity, quality and benchmarking still persist in the ODL system. All this is reflected in the low acceptability of students from the ODL system in reputed traditional universities for higher degrees. Further, the students of the ODL system find gainful employment with much more difficulty compared to their conventional counterparts. The need for innovation in the ODL system in India is, therefore, obvious and pressing, which has arisen from the growing necessity of

providing quality services to the learners.

The Government of India has declared 2010-2020 as the “Decade of Innovations” for inclusive growth. Further, the UN Millennium Development Goals emphasize on education for sustainable development. In the light of this, efforts towards innovation in the ODL system should be stepped up to facilitate sustainable development through quality education.

Areas of Innovation in the ODL System

The canvas of innovations is broad in the ODL system⁵. The areas of innovation may include policy initiatives, design and development of courses, course content, methods and strategies of instruction, media used in learning, student support services, evaluation methodologies, and management and finance^{5, 6}. There is an increasing use of ICT in every aspect of the ODL system, such as educational administration, learner management, learner preparation for readiness, curriculum construction, instructional design, support services including tutoring and library services as well as learner evaluation⁵. The best practices at the Regional Centres of IGNOU could be classified into the areas of promotional issues, student registration, support service, academic initiatives, monitoring and special initiative⁷. The areas of innovation were classified by the National Centre for Innovation in Distance Education (NCIDE) IGNOU into six categories, namely: Academic Programmes, Application of ICT in delivery mechanism, Admission procedures and learner support, Evaluation methodologies and practices, Convergence of systems, and Quality management and benchmarking⁸.

The Innovation Process in the ODL System

There are mainly two methods of innovation in any system, including the ODL system. The first method is to carry out in-house efforts in the system to create innovative solutions and introduce it to the system. The second method is to identify suitable innovations that have been tried and tested elsewhere in a similar system and adapt it suitably to meet the needs of the system.

The in-house method follows a process that comprises the following major steps:

1. Identification and collection of ideas through various sources and methods.
2. Idea enrichment through various creativity and innovation tools.
3. Development of project proposal.
4. Approval of the Project Proposal by the University Management.
5. Development of prototype.
6. Implementation.

The second method begins with the identification of an existing innovation, followed by its suitable enrichment, gap analysis, proposal development, approval, and implementation or adaptation in the system.

For implementing these processes, a concerted study of the diverse components of the ODL system becomes essential to identify gap areas where innovations are required. Simultaneously, efforts are

made to introduce the innovations in the system to enhance its quality of functioning. This is a continuous process as problems keep on cropping up from time to time in the system, which require innovative solutions.

Innovation in ODL System and the Systemic Barriers

Several SOUs are in the forefront in innovation, such as the Bhim Rao Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU) and Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU). They have put in place innovative mechanisms to improve the system.

The BRAOU has been using technology based teaching and learning system to reach the unreached and provide education for all. It has adopted a multi-media approach for instructional delivery which comprises printed course materials, contact cum counseling sessions on Sundays, Winter/Summer schools of short duration, extension lectures, radio lessons and interactive radio, audio/video programmes live teleconferencing, hands on laboratory practice and continuous evaluation through assignments⁹. However, it has also been found that there is a felt need for the flexibility in the top management to bring in a positive change. There have been suggestions that if the higher management is not enthusiastic in effective management, the enhancement of the system would be an unattainable task¹⁰.

The YCMOU has adopted several best practices mostly in tandem with the emerging social needs pertaining to the areas of institutional commitment and support, flexibility in curriculum and learning strategies, and assessment and evaluation. The most notable innovations are in the areas of technology enabled teaching-learning. The University has laid special emphasis on staff training and professional development, which has resulted in efficiency in work. The lack of administrative support is one of the major constraints faced by the University and a proactive management is required¹¹.

At the IGNOU, several innovative products and processes have been developed and implemented in diverse areas of academic programmes, evaluation methods using ICT, learner support, administration, and convergence of systems. A database of about 125 ideas and innovations in the ODL system have been compiled and made available at <http://navdharana.ignouonline.ac.in/navdharana/>. The systemic barriers to innovation at IGNOU has been studied as well ^{12, 13}.

Systemic barriers and reasons

John Maynard Keynes, the British economist, had distinctly identified the underlying attitude for raising barrier to new ideas, way back in 1935. He had written "The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds."¹⁴ Apparently, this attitude is still found in the ODL system. Several systemic barriers or bureaucratic impediments to innovation have been studied and identified by M. J. Kirton ¹⁵. These impediments are in the form of either delays in introducing the idea, or objection to new ideas and/or rejection of individuals. The findings of his study are presented below:

1. *Delays in Introducing Change*

The management took a long time to accept an idea to be acted upon. The time lag between the first presentation of many of the ideas studied, and the date on which an idea was clearly accepted was sometimes as much as two or three years.

2. *Objections to New Ideas*

Several attempts were made to block the new ideas by 'well-argued and reasoned' objections such as lack of need, lack of resource, etc.

3. *Rejection of Individuals*

Many ideas put forth by the individuals who were outside the organization or on the edge of the 'establishment' group were rejected. Their opposition continued even when the ideas were accepted and even rated as highly successful. At the same time, the ideas of individuals within the establishment were seen as more plausible. Even if these ideas were later rejected or failed, these individuals were not seen as having personally failed – more a case of 'brave try' or 'bad luck'.

These kinds of impediments have been observed in the ODL system as well. There could be many reasons for these bureaucratic impediments; the most crucial among them are the temperament and attitudes of the bureaucrats towards new ideas and innovations. At every step we need the support and understanding of bureaucracy. The bureaucracy has a tendency to tread the beaten track. Whenever a new proposal is submitted, normally it is found that the bureaucrats look for precedence. They need to realize that a suggested innovative measure cannot have precedence. So there ought to be ways and means to make the attitude of bureaucracy friendlier towards innovations¹².

Recommendations

Innovations can be successful in any system provided we are ready to take the trouble of not always treading the path of least resistance. If only the stakeholders in the system are duly sensitised about the nature and process of innovations, there is some hope of moving forward¹³. The university officials, especially of the finance, planning and administration departments, should be sensitised about 'Innovations in the ODL System' through meetings, workshops and training programmes. Similarly, the university officials should themselves organise periodic training programmes for the academics to make them conversant about financial norms and administrative rules and regulations. The spirit of innovation must get inculcated among one and all. It is time now to escape from old ideas and overcome all mental and systemic barriers to usher in a culture of new ideas and innovation in the ODL system.

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Some Useful Educational Tools

Education is being redefined by new and innovative methods of teaching and learning. A large number of instructional are available on the internet for the educators and learners. Some of the useful educational tools and websites are mentioned below:

Udutu (<http://www.udutu.com/>)

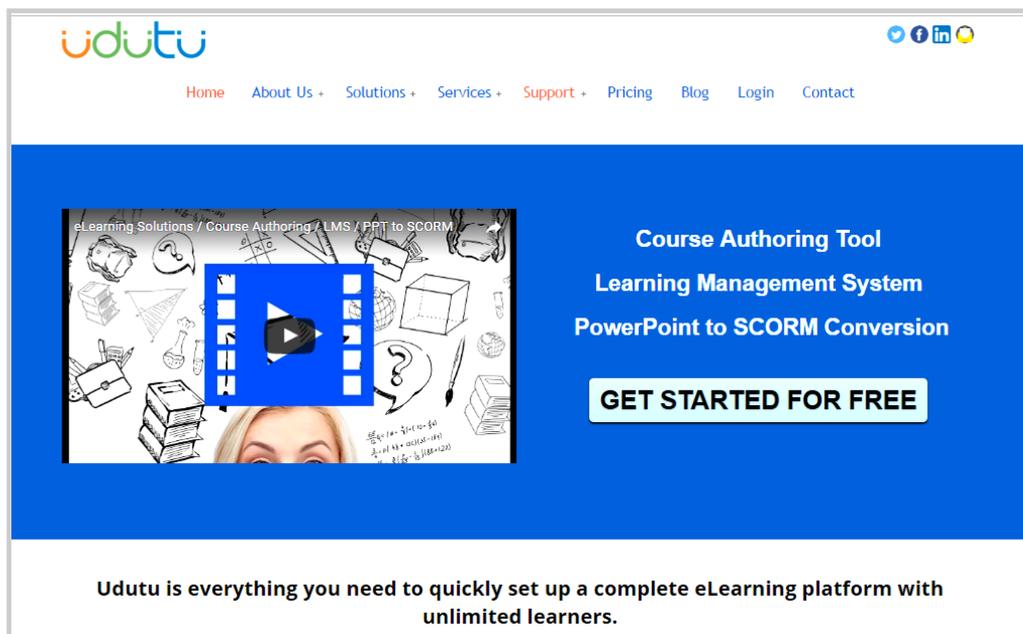


Figure 1: Udutu Home Page

Udutu is an online learning solution built for providing online courses. The site was founded by Roger Mundell, Ron Hart, Chris Coldwell and Richard Mundell. The site is easy to use, has a designer-friendly format and enables to create interactive online courses quickly. One has to set up a free account MyUdutu website and then start creating the first course. It has features such as AICC / SCORM compliant, content management, course publishing, interactive content, template management, and quiz creation.

SmartBuilder (<http://www.smartbuilder.com/>)

SmartBuilder is an authoring tool for creating and managing elearning courses. It does not require any programming knowledge and any one can easily create interactive online courses. The site provides an object-based system for creating courses, and has features such as intuitive interface, SCORM- and AICC-compliant, and content management. The tool is useful for providing scenario based learning. It provides templates, content library, collaborative tool, and drag and drop facility for creating online courses.



Figure 2: SmartBuilder Home Page

Scratch (<https://scratch.mit.edu/>)

Scratch is a project of the Lifelong Kindergarten Group at the MIT Media Lab. It is provided free of charge. It enables allows users to create interactive stories, games, and animations, and share with others in the online community. Scratch helps young people learn to think creatively, reason systematically, and work collaboratively — essential skills for life in the 21st century. Scratch can be used for a wide range of educational and entertainment such as creating simulations and virtual experiments, recorded lectures with animated presentations, and animated stories.

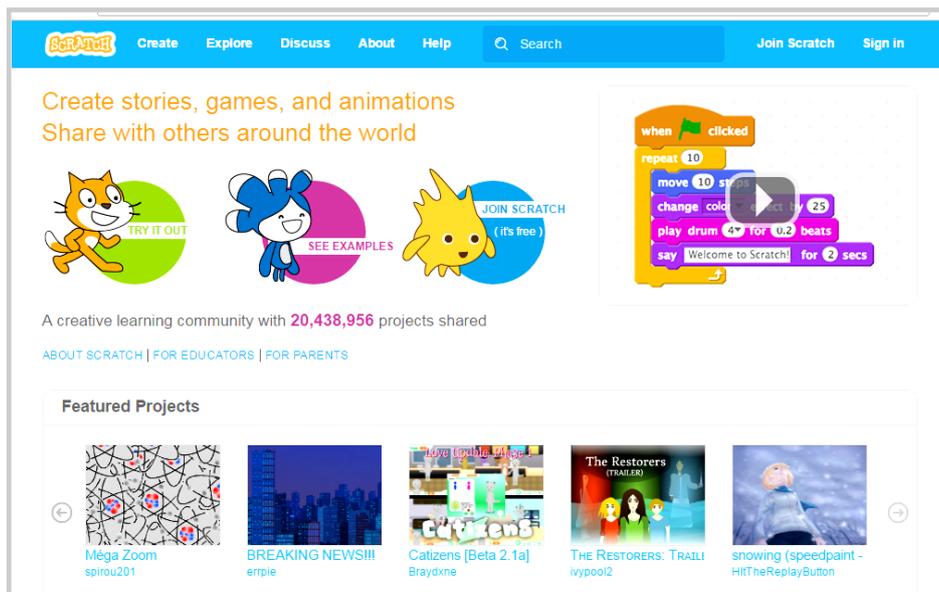


Figure 3: Scratch Home Page

[Book Builder \(http://bookbuilder.cast.org/\)](http://bookbuilder.cast.org/)

Book Builder is a free online tool that enables its users to create digital books and publish them. The site facilitates creation, sharing, publishing, and reading of digital books. It facilitates designing flexible books and media, with a combination of text, audio, and video catering to a variety of learners. It can be used for creative writing projects. The tool is meant for a variety of learning styles and this makes it a useful for students and teachers.

The screenshot shows the CAST UDL Book Builder home page. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Skip to Content' and language options: 'English', 'Español', and 'Português'. Below this is a login section with fields for 'Username:' and 'Password:', a 'Sign In' button, and links for 'Create An Account', 'Forgot Your Password?', and 'FAQs'. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Hot Tip!**: A section with a cartoon horse icon and a link to 'Provide Royalty Free Music to Students on a Network', with a 'Send Us Your Hot Tip!' button.
- Welcome to Book Builder!**: A central message encouraging users to create, share, publish, and read digital books.
- Spotlight Book**: A section titled 'If you Build it They will Read' with a 'View More' link.
- Read Books**: A section with a photo of a person reading, containing sub-sections for 'Model Books' and 'Public Library Books'.
- Create & Share**: A section with a photo of a laptop and notebook, containing sub-sections for 'Create and Edit My Books' and 'Shared Books'.
- Learn More**: A section with a photo of a person using a laptop, containing sub-sections for 'Learn about UDL' and 'Tips and Resources'.
- What People Are Saying**: A quote from Judith Schoonover of Loudoun County Public Schools, with a 'Read More' link.
- Connect With Others**: A section with a 'UDL Connect' link.
- Contact Us**: A section with a 'Send Feedback' button.

 The footer features the CAST logo and text stating that the tool is supported by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, NEC Foundation of America, The John W. Alden Trust, and The Pinkerton Foundation. It also includes copyright information for 2006-2017 and links to various site features.

Figure 4: Book Builder Home Page

[Weebly](#)

Weebly enables the teachers to build websites. The site can be used to create course website, blog, online store or an announcement page with the help of a simple widget-based site builder. The site is very easy to use and has drag and drop features. When a website is created, a mobile version of the website is automatically generated. The website tool supports basic features for blogging and e-commerce. It provides several responsive themes for building a professional website without any technical experience. The users can also track visitor statistics with the help of an in-house tracking tool.

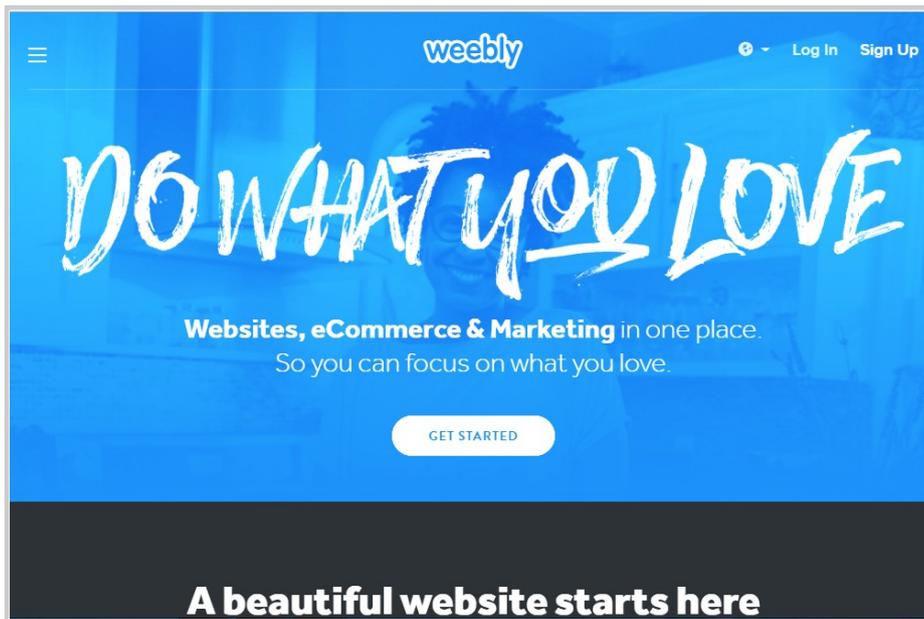


Figure 5: Weebly Home Page

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The National Centre for Innovations in Distance Education (NCIDE) was established in December 2005. It is a facility for promoting, supporting, re-engineering and disseminating innovations in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system. The NCIDE is a ground for nurturing bright and inquisitive minds whose ideas and explorations are expected to revolutionise the ODL system to suit the needs of Gennext. The Centre's goal is to develop a culture of continued search for new and innovative solutions to offer seamless education for all, achieve cost efficiency in its operations and provide borderless access to quality education and training.

We look forward to receiving your suggestions for this e-newsletter. We also welcome your contributions for the future issues. Please send us your emails addressed to the Director, NCIDE at: ncide@ignou.ac.in.