Chapter 16
Equivalency Programmes Through Open and Distance Learning:
Towards Lifelong Learning for Adults

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines the beginnings of equivalency programmes in India through the Open Basic Education programme, which was initiated by National Institute of Open Schooling(NIOS) and supported by the National Literacy Mission. An equivalency programme is an alternative educational programme equivalent to existing formal general or vocational education. The chapter traces the genesis of the Open Basic Education programme and shows how the growth of adult literacy in India led to a demand for equivalent education for neo-literates. The open and distance learning system with its inherent flexibilities became the appropriate vehicle for equivalency programmes. This chapter describes the concept of equivalency, its international context in the developing world and its relevance for out of school adults. The author outlines the design and development of the curriculum, course materials as well as the process of examination and certification. The chapter describes the close partnership between different stakeholders leading to its successful implementation in India.

INTRODUCTION

The new agenda is a promise by leaders to all people everywhere. It is a universal, integrated and transformative vision for a better world. It is an agenda for people, to end poverty in all its forms. An agenda for the planet, our common home. An agenda for shared prosperity, peace and partnership. It conveys the urgency of climate action. It is rooted in gender equality and respect for the rights of all. Above all, it pledges to leave no one behind.

BAN Ki-Moon, Secretary-General, United Nations

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a call of nations to "leave no one behind". The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) which have been implemented from the year 2016 recognize that there is a need to implement a global vision to meet the challenges. The 17 SDGs identify the important concerns that each nation has to address and make a part of its national policy. The overriding concern is reflected in Goal 1 which states "*End Poverty in All Forms Everywhere*". The need to raise the standard of living and to provide opportunities for decent work is the prime responsibility of every government. It is significant that Goals 4 of the SDGs states: *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*. This goal focuses on "the acquisition of foundational and higher-order skills; greater and more equitable access to technical and vocational education and training and higher education; training throughout life; and the knowledge, skills and values needed to function well and contribute to society." (SDG Report, 2016)

The SDGs reinforce that education is necessary instrument for the people to participate in the process of governance. It is acknowledged that an educated population helps in improving both the quality of governance and life of the people. There is enough research to show that education leads to better health and nutrition. There is also evidence to show that mother's education has a positive impact upon the health of the children. Education is also seen as a key component in the alleviation of poverty and in raising the standard of living. Education is a means to help people to acquire skills, get training and seek employment and thus obtain decent work for their livelihood.

However despite best efforts of nations, there still remain large numbers of persons who are outside the ambit of education. As per UNESCO estimates (2013), there are still 742,799 adults who are yet to be educated in different parts of the world. Regions of Sub-Saharran Africa, South and West Asia, have largest numbers of non-literate persons. Even within countries, there is uneven distribution of education with vast disparities from one region to another. Within populations also, there are wide variations in the levels of education, with some groups being more marginalized and deprived of education. Further the study of gender disaggregated data shows that in all parts of the globe except Central Asia, it is the females who have lower literacy rates than the males. They therefore need greater support in ensuring that they are able to pursue education (UNESCO, 2013). There are a number of reasons as to why these groups are not able to participate in schooling and remain out of school. Such persons who drop out of school fall back into the ranks of those who may be only literate. But even those who become literate cannot remain literate unless their literacy is continuously strengthened. Their literacy remains fragile and has to be reinforced. Further growth of a knowledge society has meant that even those who have education have to constantly revisit their education and work towards acquiring new knowledge and skills. The changing demands of society and economy have necessitated the need for a lifelong education – from a one time linear acquisition, education has become lifelong – an engagement that persons have to enter into at different points of time in their lives and sometimes even as parallel events in their life. In such circumstances, the need for strengthening alternate equivalent forms of education becomes inevitable.

These changing developments have been reflected in policy statements that have been accepted by nations in the last few decades. The World Declaration for Education for All was adopted by 155 countries in 1990 at Jomtien in which The *Framework for Action to Meet the Basic Learning Needs* was defined. Here the emphasis was on "an expanded vision of education". This Framework was revisited at the World Education Forum at Dakar in 2000 where a Framework for Action was adopted in which six goals were identified for achieving EFA. Goal 4 of the Framework aimed at "Achieving a 50 per cent improvement

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