# Policies Regulating the Assignments of the Bachelor of Education Programme of Indira Gandhi National Open University: A Case Study

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**Abstract:** This case study examines the policies formulated by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), an open and distance learning university of India for regulating the practices related to the assignments of its Bachelor of Education programme. Following the examination it argues that some policies are formulated in the context of the pedagogic significance of assignments in distance education and aim to support learning, while others seem to have been formulated for coping with the financial and administrative limitations imposed by the high enrolment in the programme. It infers that the dichotomy in the policy objectives reflects the diverging perspectives of the policies that have not been reconciled during policy formulation. It also suggests the way the policies that subordinate quality to quantity can be revised.

**Keywords:** Distance teacher education; assignment; policies; perspectives

## Introduction

In India for the past several years the annual growth rate in enrolment in distance education has been over 10 per cent (Government of India, 2013). The steep rise in enrolment is particularly evident in distance teacher education programmes and the soaring enrolment in the teacher education programmes offered by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), an open and distance learning (ODL) university of India is a testimony to this. The Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programme offered by the School of Education (SOE) of IGNOU to untrained secondary level teachers is one such programme with high enrolment that has exceeded 30,000 during the last several years. As a Programme Study Center (PSC) has been admitting 100 students, the number of PSCs, activated at the conventional secondary level teacher education institutions for delivering the programme has also been on the rise. The B.Ed. prospectus (IGNOU, 2015) lists 347 such PSCs. Further, the theoretical component of the programme comprises a number of courses of 4 credits each (one credit at IGNOU requires 30 hours of relevant academic work) and for every course assignment submission is compulsory. Therefore, millions of assignments are submitted at the PSCs. A huge work force of academic counselors is required for assessing assignments and they are recruited from the institutions housing the PSCs. High enrolment therefore helps in clearing the backlog of untrained teachers but it is also likely to pose administrative and financial challenges to ODL operations, such as the management of assignments.

The scale of operation of the activities pertaining to assignments is thus challenging when the enrolment is high but assignments are essential in the ODL teaching learning process. This is mainly because assignments are one of the potent means for supporting distance learners (Commonwealth of Learning, 2005) and enable formative assessment (Koh, 2008). Further, the feedback on the assignment

work introduces the dialogue needed for supporting learning and keeping learners motivated, especially in distance education (Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011; Chokwe, 2015; Court, 2014; Perera, Nguyen & Watty, 2014; Segoe, 2013; Tait, 2004; Wilson, 2015). Therefore, IGNOU has retained tutor-marked assignments as a compulsory component of the B.Ed. programme and has formulated policies to regulate the practices pertaining to assignments. This article examines these policies and determines the perspectives guiding the policy formulation. It also suggests ways in which the policies that contradict those assuring the quality of assignments can be revised.

## The Policies Related to Assignments

The policies regulating the B.Ed. assignments of IGNOU are as follows:

### Policy on Development of Assignment Questions

For every course there is only one assignment but as per this policy, a set of three questions is developed for it. To discourage the sale and purchase of readymade answers, the questions of the previous academic year are excluded from the set. Further, it is mandatory that the set of questions includes at least one question that requires learners to apply their knowledge for finding the solution of a problem. This ensures that learners apply the knowledge they gain from the self learning material (SLM). Hence, the policy objective is to challenge learning, induce critical thinking and promote deep learning, and the resulting practice introduces in the predominantly behaviouristic instructional system, a pedagogy that situates the learner in a real world scenario and nurtures problem solving skills.

### Policy of Using Multiple Media for Making Assignments Accessible

This policy requires the use of print for dispatch through the postal service the assignment questions and the programme guide that includes information about the date and place for submitting assignments and other such aspects. The policy also requires that assignment questions of the previous several years along with those for the current year are available on IGNOU's website so that those who had registered in the programme but have not completed it can access the current assignment questions, which they are expected to answer.

### Policy for Integrating Assignments into the Instructional Design of the Programme

For integrating assignments into the instructional design of the B.Ed. programme, there is a policy that makes assignment submission not just compulsory but a precondition for taking the term end examination (TEE). The ensuing practices not only integrate assignments into the instructional system but also ensure that learners are serious about assignments and their submission. Further, by fixing the deadline for assignment submission, two months prior to the TEE, the policy ensures that learning is not delayed till TEE but is a continuous process. Integration of assignments into the instructional design is also secured through a policy that weights the TEE 70% and assignments 30% in the overall scheme of assessment, thereby making assignments a weighted component. It also requires only those getting a failing grade to resubmit assignments. The policy is therefore likely to elicit serious efforts at writing assignments but there is a likelihood that this derives from anxieties over grades rather than from the urge to learn and, in such cases, the SLM becomes the source of answers for assignments rather than learning material.

**Policy Regulating the Number of Assignments**

Earlier, there were three assignments for a course and an assignment would comprise one or more questions but students submitted assignments thrice, but this policy requires only one assignment and makes assignment submission a one-time activity. Although a set of three questions is included within the single assignment, there is a threefold decline in the frequency of establishing the tutor-student linkage through assignments. Regular assignments and comprehensive feedback is, however, central to distance education and there is a need to capture students' time and effort through assignments and distribute them across topics and weeks (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-05) but this policy impedes the distribution of assignments across weeks and topics. Further, it allows the assessment for only a small part of the instructions. Therefore, this policy makes assignments a tool for one-time assessment and counters the claim made in the B.Ed. prospectus about assignment being a tool for continuous assessment.

**Policies Regulating Assessment of Assignments**

Several policies have been formulated for regulating the assessment of assignments. In keeping with one such policy, the bio-data of the prospective academic counselors are scrutinized first at the regional center of IGNOU and, thereafter, it is cross checked at headquarters at multiple levels to ensure that those engaged as tutor counselors possess the necessary academic qualifications.

There is also a policy for orienting academic counselors to assess assignments and this requires that academic counselors are oriented to the systemic issues of ODL and the academic aspects of the programme. During the orientation programme tutoring skills, including skills for writing tutor comments, are developed. This policy takes cognizance of the fact that academic counselors are from the conventional system and their association with the programme begins usually after it has been designed and developed and, hence, they need to be oriented before they begin to function as academic counselors. However, this policy makes orientation programmes a one-time event, organized after the programme is launched. Hence, orientation programmes do not keep pace with the continuous recruitment of new academic counselors. The policy therefore overlooks the dynamic nature of the workforce of academic counselors, caused by transfer, superannuation and other reasons. These reasons lead to the exit of academic counselors who have been oriented and the entry of those who have not been oriented. Moreover, unlike in old study centers, at the new ones that are activated later to accommodate the growing enrolment, the scope for workplace learning from peers who had been oriented earlier is also unlikely. Although orienting the academic counselors who continuously trickle into study centers that are numerous and spread across India requires huge investments in terms of financial resources and time, nevertheless, over the years the workforce becomes populated with those lacking the understanding required for supporting distance learners. Further, the quality of feedback on student essays is important and the provision of appropriate feedback is a topic of concern (Chokwe, 2015; Wilson, 2015) but the duration of the orientation progammes is only 2-3 days, which is inadequate for orienting academic counselors (Srivastava & Reddy, 2002). The policy determining the duration thus allows little time for mastering the skills required for assessing the gap in learning, and bridging the zone of proximal distance through tutor comments that are concise but explicit enough to be meaningful to the distance learner, and powerful enough to guide learning and support future learning efforts but are not authoritative and the evaluator does not provide the final word.

**Policy for Monitoring Assessment of Assignments**

This policy requires the study centers to send 2% of the total assignments submitted for a course during an academic session to the SOE. The sample offers to the faculty members who have designed and developed the programme an idea of students' learning, the effectiveness of the course design, the adequacy of instructional inputs and the pedagogic efficacy of the self-learning material. Besides, it reveals the way assignments are assessed and feedback is provided. However, the policy dictating the sample size for monitoring assignments requires a sample of only 2% of the 100 assignments to be submitted for each theory course from each study center during an academic session. Hence, the monitoring is effectively of only two assignments sampled purposively by the study center. The sample size and its nature are not fit for drawing credible inferences about the feedback but since the study centers and the courses are numerous, increasing the sample size will only increase the workload pertaining to monitoring. Therefore, as Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011) say, tutors receive initial training in how to give feedback and samples of their subsequent work are regularly monitored but no explicit checks are carried out on the efficacy of feedback.

**Policy Regulating Mode of Assignment Submission**

This policy disallows online submission of assignments although it is hard to check for plagiarism with handwritten assignments. The policy also does not clarify the institution's stand on plagiarism. Since questions are set usually from the SLM and only one question compulsorily requires knowledge application, the chances for the rest of reproducing content from the SLM cannot be ruled out and, in such cases, a major part of the learners' response may provide poor evidence of learning and learning gaps. However, in the absence of explicit instructions for preventing plagiarism, an answer comprising content copied from the SLM can be construed only as a poor quality answer but not as content with a copyright violation. The policy allowing such leniency, coupled with the practice of including two questions that usually require straight answers, may limit deep learning but can shore up the pass percentage even as learner support gets stretched due to high enrolment.

**Policy Regulating Dispatch of Assignments Following Evaluation**

Feedback on assignments should be timely (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-05; Weaver, 2006) but this policy does not stipulate the deadline for the dispatch of evaluated assignments to learners. It has also not generated the mechanism that allows learners to track the assignment. Therefore, learners may remain unaware for a long time not only about their grades and feedback but even about the assignments submitted.

## Inferences from the Examination of the Policies

The policies can be divided into two distinct categories on the basis of their objectives. There are policies that aim to support learning and lead to practices that ensure quality in aspects like access to assignments, recruitment of academic counselors and their capacity building. The objectives of the other set of policies are, however, to accommodate a large enrolment and help the institution to cope with the administrative and financial limitations this imposes. Therefore, these policies aim at keeping in check aspects like resubmission of assignments, the number of assignments, the duration and frequency of orientation programmes and the sample size of the assignments to be monitored. High enrolment, therefore, does not increase the workload on these aspects and the investment in resources also remains low.

There is thus a dichotomy in the objectives of the two sets of policies that apparently emerge from different perspectives that do not seem to have been reconciled during policy formulation. While the policies seeking quality emerge from the perspective of the pedagogic utility of assignments in bridging the transactional distance between the teacher and the learner in distance education, the rest sidestep the pedagogic concerns and emerge from a perspective that takes a pragmatic view on using assignments as a tool for initiating and sustaining dialogue between the tutors and learners when the numbers are large. It foresees that an iterative process of learning, receiving feedback and relearning will require large-scale submission and resubmission of assignments, their dispatch, and data processing. This effectively prevents the scaling up of these processes and, thus, the rising cost. Therefore, the concern expressed by Gibbs & Simpson (2002) that when class sizes increase, economies of scale are difficult to achieve as assessment costs go up in direct proportion to the number of students, is addressed by these policies.

## Conclusion

In India the enrolment in distance education has been contributing heavily towards the attainment of national targets like enhancing the gross enrolment ratio in higher education and clearing the backlog of untrained teachers. It also helps ODL institutions in bringing down the unit cost of education and mobilizing resources. However, supporting learners may be challenging when the number to be supported is high, as deployment and scaling up of resources, especially developing qualified persons to match the growing enrolment is difficult. This results in policies that support the accommodation of large numbers but restrict the obligation of ODL to teaching and certification and diminish its role in supporting learning. Further, such policies may contradict some of the policies that consider assignments as interventions for supporting learning. For instance, the policy making assignments a tool for continuous evaluation is contradicted by that curtailing the number of assignments. Similarly the policy requiring the orientation of academic counselors is weakened by the policy dictating the duration and frequency of the orientation. Policies with such contradictory objectives indicate that the policy formulation has been carried out without efforts to converge the demands of diverging perspectives.

The perspective of quantity is, however, likely to weaken, since, from 2016, in keeping with India's new norms for teacher education, a study center will include only 50 students, which is half of that presently accommodated, while the net enrolment will be capped at 2,500. The new norms are apparently an admission of the difficulty in balancing the perspectives of quantity and quality. Nevertheless, it is unrealistic to expect that with declining enrolment, assignments will automatically cease to be a tool for measuring and grading learning and become an intervention that measures as well as supports learning.  Unless the policies that subordinate quality to quantity are revised, the status quo on assignments may continue.

For creating some of the conditions under which assessment supports learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-05) these policies should be suitably revised. Accordingly, there may be a policy for increasing the number of assignments so that from the present one-time event, they become more frequent events but to ensure that learners do not indulge in long hours of surface learning, the questions should be suitably designed. The implementation of this policy will, however, require two more policies. One, for curtailing the time lost through postal dispatches by allowing and supporting online submission and assessment of assignments and enabling the SOE faculty members to access and

monitor the digital repository of evaluated assignments; and two, for ensuring that when face-to-face orientation programmes cannot be organized, academic counselors are oriented at least through SLM, in print and video media and online sessions for developing tutoring skills, so that they can provide feedback that actually supports learning. Further, in order to ensure that learners act on the feedback, there may be a policy of awarding grades only after the student does act on it. For creating these conditions technology will be useful and given that B.Ed. study centers as well as many learners have access to it, it may not present a barrier.

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