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Community participation in open and distance learning systems in India

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Abstract: The Three Tier system of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) which was put in place with 73rd amendment in the constitution of India, is a major initiative for democratic decentralization. PRIs are acting successfully and gradually becoming more powerful and resourceful. Now most of the Panchayats, including block and village level, are having their own buildings with basic infrastructural facilities like internet and computers. They are the representative institutions of people at grassroots. The villages Panchayats also share a common concern to strengthen educational opportunities. With increasing role being played by Village Panchayats in rural developmental arena we feel that Open and Distance Learning Systems (ODL) support services operations should converge with them (Gargava 2017). Authors of this paper have been engaged in the promotion of Indira Gandhi national Open University (IGNOU)'s Programmes and Policies in the state of Madhya Pradesh for quite some time. It is in this context that authors have planned a new strategic intervention for the sensitization operations and delivery systems of IGNOU, India, and results have been encouraging. The paper describes the experiences of the authors while using some out of box strategies to sensitize the people through Panchayats. It helped the IGNOU Regional Centre to generate the participation in IGNOU's academic programmes. Further, the delivery of academic services in the villages had positive impact on the participation of students in the counseling sessions and success rate of the students. This paper documents varied learning experiences in this experiment.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Rural, Panchayat Raj Institutions, Community, Sustainable.

Introduction

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) has placed renewed emphasis on Rural Livelihoods across the world. Sustainability in livelihoods patterns cannot be achieved as long as the people are given diversified options for income generation. It is in this context that the issue of skills up gradation in rural sector has taken a centre stage in the developmental agenda of the country. Community engagement of the universities is therefore on the fore front of development agenda across the world (Pandey & Kumar, 2019a).

Indian situation is most challenging as most of the target groups requiring immediate attention are too vulnerable, poorly capacitated to adopt new practices and nearly cut off from the urban centered educational facilities. It has been a big challenge to reach out to such disadvantaged population, sensitize them and equip them with necessary skills & scientific knowhow to strengthen their livelihoods. However, despite sincere efforts of the conventional systems of education the situation on

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the ground leaves much to be desired. The areas requiring immediate attention are poorly connected by the transport and communication infrastructure and the intended beneficiaries find it difficult to travel long distances to get educated. It is well realized and understood that capacity building systems for such target groups need to be radically different from “business as usual approach”. There is a growing realization to employ “out of box approaches” primarily aimed at helping the people to get knowhow right at their doorsteps at an affordable cost. In such a scenario Innovative and Flexible Capacity Building systems have a major role to play in the livelihoods promotion (Pandey, Gargava & Patel, 2015). With its mandate to reach out to disadvantaged communities, Open and Distance Learning systems have been grappling with these issues for a long time

Background

IGNOU's Regional Centre Bhopal caters to some of the most challenging socio economic settings across the country. Though the enrolment from urban centers has picked up over the years the situation across the deep rural interiors leaves much to be desired. Conventional methods of advertising have little influence in such areas due to extremely low penetration of newspapers/TV/Radio. People are vulnerable, lack the ability to comprehend their problems and show a lack of enthusiasm to seek information as a result of which the rural interiors have low level of awareness about IGNOU's academic programmes. The people inhabiting such areas constitute IGNOU's prime target groups but despite the sincere efforts from the side of the University their participation in University's academic programmes has not come up as per expectations.

The community participation based approach for understanding the community and their issues is well appreciated and most practical approach (Chambers, 1987). There is an urgent need to proactively approach the people at their doorsteps and help them articulate their livelihoods solutions rather than just waiting for them to approach our Support Services Centers (Sharma, 2005). There is a growing realization that there should be paradigmatic difference between University's delivery systems in urban and rural areas. Rural communities need to be approached through credible agencies perceived by them as their own, suitably take care of local sensibilities and provide information to them through their most trusted community members. We felt that there was a need to take in to confidence village Panchayat functionaries, teachers and parents who have a strong bearing on the choices available to prospective students. It is required to take the grass root level institutions & community leaders in confidence and assure them services right in the villages.

Poor Information services in the villages

There are issues in the creating efficient information services for the students. The people in remote areas do not get information through conventional ways like Print, Radio/TV /Internet. Despite our best efforts, our initiatives to sensitize the rural folks are seriously constrained by poor reach of print and electronic media in rural sector (Pandey, 2012). The situation gets worse due to low per capita income and poor transport & communication networks which prevent the people to come to our Support Services Centers. Result is poor response to our programmes in rural areas. Rural people cannot comprehend their problems and lack the initiatives to come forward for finding a solution for their problems. Even in those cases where the “Word of Mouth” reaches them they find it hard to reach our Support Services Centers to purchase the prospectus.

Till 2017, IGNOU's admission process was primarily through printed application forms. Prospective students had to travel up to district HQs to purchase prospectus or send a requisition to Regional Centre through post by way of sending a demand draft or Postal Order. It used to cost them (in addition to actual cost of prospectus) as below:

- a) For getting by post:

- Prepare a demand draft /Postal order for which they have to travel up to nearest postal office /bank and pay bank commission totaling Rs 100/- on an average.
- Post the demand draft by speed post/registered post thereby spending a minimum of Rs 50/-
- Wait for at least 10 days to get the response from Regional Centre

b) For getting by personal visit to District HQs

- At least Rs 150/- for travel and other associated expenditure
- Leave workplace which costs them additionally

It amply shows that to get the prospectus rural students had to incur a minimum of Rs 150/- in addition to the actual cost of prospectus. So what we needed was to initiate preadmission drives in rural areas, provide prospectus at an affordable cost and also assure academic support services in the villages.

Problems in Expansion of Learner Support Centers

The conventional approach of the Learner Support Centers (LSCs) does not work well in those areas where population density is abysmally low, transport networks are poor and people struggle for bare survival (Pandey, 2012). The conventional LSCs are not able to reach out to the people living beyond a distance of more than 20-25 kilometers. Such a situation arises primarily due to the poor transport network around the LSCs, Livelihoods pursuits of the people and the low per capita income of the people. The people cannot leave their livelihoods commitments and spend their hard earned money to take counseling services at LSCs. As the population densities in such areas are low, the effective number of aspirants of higher education within a circle of 20-25 kilometers, which constitutes the catchment area of such centers, is very small. The response of the community from such a small area hardly picks up to the level of 50 which is the threshold strength for a LSC to become functional under Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). The services of IGNOU, therefore remain confined to a very few people living in and around the LSCs.

Quite often such LSCs if opened in such areas find it hard to maintain minimum threshold of enrolment for few years and then have to be closed down. Demand arises in some other area for few years and then meets the similar fate after some time. What follows is that Study Centers virtually have a tendency to keep moving their locations. It has huge implication for the fixed cost of the study centers. The Study Centers cannot be opened everywhere as the infrastructure and academic expertise is the critical issue. Entire population is difficult to be catered if the conventional approach of LSCs establishment continues. Therefore, either the students have to come to urban based LSCs or have to leave their course of studies. The people inhabiting such areas are mostly Tribal Populations suffering from multiplicity of vulnerabilities. We cannot expect them to visit our urban based LSCs for academic support, spending their hard earned money and travelling long distances ignoring their livelihoods commitments. There is dire need to proactively approach them right at their doorsteps, give personalized services by way of involving their community members and at a time when they are relatively free from their basic livelihoods' commitments. There are intermittent periods of low economic activities in such communities which can be fruitfully utilized for such purposes. We have always been facing the challenge of sensitizing the people from rural and tribal communities about the educational opportunities available to them. Our Regional Centre has been focusing to reach out to such areas, sensitize rural communities and expand our network deep in rural interiors. However, despite the sincere efforts, the results were less than perfect.

We had following three objectives on our immediate priority

- a) To expand our network deep in to rural interiors.
- b) To sensitize the communities about our programmes
- c) To make the Support Services available at the nearest place of the students.

However, we have increasingly realized that conventional methods cease to work deep in rural interiors and therefore require radically new strategies. Following key questions had to be addressed to have a perceptible impact in rural areas:

- a) What are the target groups in the villages?
- b) How can we sensitise the rural folks about the opportunities of Higher Education?
- c) Who are the representatives of rural communities who can be involved as intermediaries?
- d) How to make the delivery of academic support services coping with rural livelihoods?
- e) How to create information and guidance services in the villages?
- f) What kind of institutions and organisations need to be involved in the delivery of information and guidance services in the villages?

IGNOU's Interventions in KHANDWA

A Special Study Centre opened by IGNOU in district HQs of Khandwa has long been struggling to gain even minimum enrolment to be economically viable. The centre was activated for following programmes:

- a) Certificate of Food and Nutrition (CFN)
- b) Diploma in Nutrition and Health Education (DNHE)
- c) Bachelor's Preparatory Programme leading to General Degree Programmes like BA/BCOM/CFN/DNHE

However, despite the sincere efforts the enrolment did not pick up for a long time. The study centre remained nonfunctional and could take up only around 50 enrollments in BPP, CFN and degree programmes in January 2013 session for the first time. In context of livelihood promotion and the major role to be played by Open and Distance Learning institutions in this kind of socio economic set up, it is utmost important to proactively approach these people without expecting them to approach our Support Services Centers and inform them about the options available for them. The study centre took some radically new initiatives in July 2013 cycle of admissions e.g. directly sensitizing the key stakeholders like Village Panchayats. The major strategic decisions were as follows:

Starting the proactive information services in the villages

We felt that the rural communities around Khandwa needed to be approached through their community-based organizations and diversify from the conventional approaches. To put the preadmission and guidance activities in mobile mode was a key strategic initiative of study centre. It was felt that study centre will not be able to reach the people if its information services do not get proactive as the rural communities find it hard to come to Khandwa. The idea was to move into the community to sensitize the key stakeholders in rural areas and assure services at accessible locations in villages to the students. Mobile operations of the Study Centre started at the preadmission phase itself as the coordinator proactively started visiting the villages. It was certainly a major paradigm shift from conventional view of the LSCs as fixed points of academic delivery to a fluid like systems with enhanced focus on information services. (Pandey & Singh, 2014)

Rationale for involving Village Panchayats

As institutions of Grass root Democracy, Panchayats are ideal places to bring about community participation. With the increasing role being played by Village Panchayats for implementation of developmental projects the Panchayats are becoming more and more empowered and capacitated. We felt that "Village Panchayats" could be a viable platform to effectively converge with IGNOU's publicity operations in rural areas. It will involve them in the mission of expansion of IGNOU and capacitate them to demand educational services in their villages. It would be a unique and innovative project and we intended to start it as pilot project in District Khandwa before rolling out this practice on larger scale (Pandey, 2014).

Khandwa district suits to such a pilot initiative because IGNOU's study centre at Khandwa has been specially activated for nutrition related programmes and this district is most disadvantageously placed as far as nutritional status of community is concerned. One of the tribal blocks of the district has been highly affected by the malnutrition and therefore the nutrition related programmes are specifically relevant for these areas. As the support of district administration would be vital for the success of such initiatives, a meeting was also organized with District Magistrate of District Khandwa who positively responded to these initiatives (Gargava, 2013).

Enrolment of Students

Extensive sensitization exercises were undertaken in the villages. During these exercises Panchayat members were motivated at various places and through them community members were sensitized. The Panchayat members were assured that IGNOU will be organizing counseling services in the villages in case enrolment at any access point crosses minimum strength of 50. This rapport building exercises were primarily informally organized meetings during which Panchayat office bearers were taken into confidence. To start with, three villages were identified, and efforts were confined to these identified villages.

The results of our confidence building measures were especially encouraging from one village where all the applicants for our programmes were females. More than 150 villagers and candidates enquired for the IGNOU programmes. With special interest of the Village Panchayat and IGNOU Coordinator, 53 students of Singot village cluster took admission in the CFN programme. The details can be seen in table 1 given below. Hence the first exercise which was done is to find out suitable clusters which are connected by the transport networks and which is accessible to at least 50 students. Though the students come from deep rural interiors, it was observed that only few specific locations are accessible to them from the point of view of transport. Hence only Singot could be identified as the only accessible point for most of them. For the purpose of holding counseling services the Village Singot was selected as counseling centre. The *Gram Sabha* of the Village Singot passed a resolution that they will provide all possible facilities to IGNOU's officials in the village.

Role of stakeholders of the village

IGNOU Officials met other stakeholder of the village like School Teachers, Higher secondary school Teacher, Women SHG groups, Health workers, Anganwadi worker and Gram Panchayet Sachiv, Sarpanch, Panch. The general perception of each person was very positive towards the IGNOU programme, but some teachers were afraid about the higher level of education of IGNOU Programme, and they were afraid that rural youth may not be competent enough to complete the programme of IGNOU. Although they were ready to provide support to IGNOU in their own capacities and efficiencies, but most of them suggested approaching the Village Panchayat for IGNOU activities.

Other students were attached to main node of the Study Centre at District Khandwa. The cluster formation exercise is shown in the table 1.

Role of Panchayats as an information center

Gram Panchayat Singot was ready to work as nodal point for helping the students. Later during the meetings with the IGNOU officials, the Sarpanch of the gram Panchayat was ready to make the Panchayet office as information dissemination center for all IGNOU related programmes and they also provided building and sitting arrangements for Academic Counseling in the village itself.

Table 1. Cluster formation exercise of Rural and Urban students - of District Khandwa Registered for DNHE and CFN programmes of IGNOU RC Bhopal

July 2013 cycle admissions				
Village Name	Number of students	Distance from Khandwa (kms)	Cluster Name	Distance form Cluster (kms only accessible focal point is taken as cluster)
SINGOT	44	20	Singot	0
BADAGAON	8	8	Badgaon	0
JASWADI	8	9	Singot	9
SIRSOD	7	25	Khandwa	25
TIRANDAJPUR	4	4	Khandwa	4
AMALPUR	3	16	Khandwa	16
JAMLA	3	22	Khandwa	22
SATWARA	3	6	Khandwa	6
BAMANGAON	2	3	Badgaon	8
SEVKHEDA	2	15	Khandwa	15
BHAGWANPUR	1	30	Singot	10
BHAMGADH	1	16	Khandwa	16
Other rural student	17	0	Khandwa	NA
Urban Students	100	0	Khandwa	NA
Grand Total	203			
Identified clusters				
Sl. No.	Identified clusters	number of students	Cluster -Type of place	
A	Singot	53	Rural	
B	Khandwa	140	Urban	
C	Badgaon	10	Rural	
Total students		203		

Self Learning Material (SLM) distribution

The Study Material was distributed in the Village Panchayat, by the IGNOU officials. Most of the CFN students were present at Panchayat. They were sensitized about how they could make the best use of Self Instructional Materials and Academic Counseling Sessions (Photographs Attached).The Students

were keen to know about various aspects of Open and Distance Learning and their queries were responded by the IGNOU officials.

The grand Induction meeting

This was the very first time when such innovative approach was introduced in the village. Therefore all the stakeholders decided in a meeting to organize a grand opening for the Mobile Study Center. A huge village level event was organized in the village Singot, in which Former Cabinet Minister of Madhya Pradesh was present to inaugurate the first Mobile Study Center of Regional center Bhopal. The Sarpanch (Village Panchayet head) made possible spade work for the induction meeting in a very large scale which was attended by all the villagers of Singot village. The panchayat members of other villages were also invited in the Induction Meeting and a separate meeting was organized with them to sensitize and motivate them to join hands with IGNOU.

Apart from the Students and Academic counselors, Many Govt. officials, Panchayet representatives, Media persons and villagers were available at the moment (Photographs attached). The Minister of School Education lauded the efforts of IGNOU Regional Centre and called upon IGNOU's officials to hold such mobile services in the villages of adjoining districts also.

The counseling services were organized in the village Singot itself and specially a lady counselor was identified for the purpose. The attendance in the counseling sessions was encouraging with 80-90% students attending the counseling sessions. The students enthusiastically prepared for the examinations and all of them filled up examination forms. However due to personal reasons only 40 appeared in the examinations and 32 passed in first attempt.

Feedback from the Pass-outs

Feedback was taken from the students of Singot Village after the completion of the academic Session. A meeting was arranged in the Panchayat building in which about 20 students, village panchayat functionaries and Regional Director participated. The feedback was taken from the students through group discussions. The discussions were focused on the following points

- Whether they are satisfied with the F2F (Face to Face) Counselling Services given to them in the village during July –Nov 2013.
- Whether they appeared in the Term End Exams Dec 2013.
- Whether the Self Learning Materials were easily comprehensible
- Whether their level of awareness on Food and Nutrition has enhanced after completion of the programmes
- Whether they took benefit of Teleconference, A/V CDs, Gyan Vani (IGNOU Radio) and Gyan Darshan (IGNOU Television channel) programmes
- Whether they would like to take the admission in other programmes of the University
- Whether they would recommend IGNOU's academic programmes to others in their village.

The feedback of the students was encouraging and satisfactory. It was observed that the all the 50 students of the village had applied for the TEE Dec 2013 and 40 students appeared in the examinations. The students said that about 80 % of them regularly appeared in the counselling services. They said that their level of awareness about Food and Nutrition has significantly enhanced after completion of this programme.

However, it was noticed that they never used the Teleconference facility or radio counselling facilities. They also could not avail the A/V CDs as the same were not available at the study centre. However, the students did not show any dissatisfaction about non availability of such facilities. They said that the F2F services given by the ACs and the Self Instructional Materials were good enough for the studies.

They also showed enthusiasm about the other programmes of the University if offered to them in the village.

The Sarpanch of the village showed a lot of enthusiasm about the further activities of the IGNOU in the village. He generously offered the separate room of the Panchayat Building for creation of an Information and Guidance Centre. Sarpanch also offered his services for creating awareness about the IGNOU's academic programmes in the surrounding villages. He assured that he can accompany IGNOU's officials to all the adjoining villages of Khandwa to sensitise the general public. He said that officials of IGNOU can attend the Gram Sabha (formal community meeting) of the Singot and talk to the people on such matters.

Such an enthusiastic response from the Panchayat is very encouraging and it could be proposed as "Information cum Guidance Centre", which can take up the responsibility to provide our application form and give basic guidance about IGNOU's academic programmes. The centre can be run by Panchayat members. Regional Centre can intensively build their capacities to give guidance to prospective learners.

Table 2. The Impact of our Collaborative Activities with Village Panchayats in Singot village of District-Khandwa

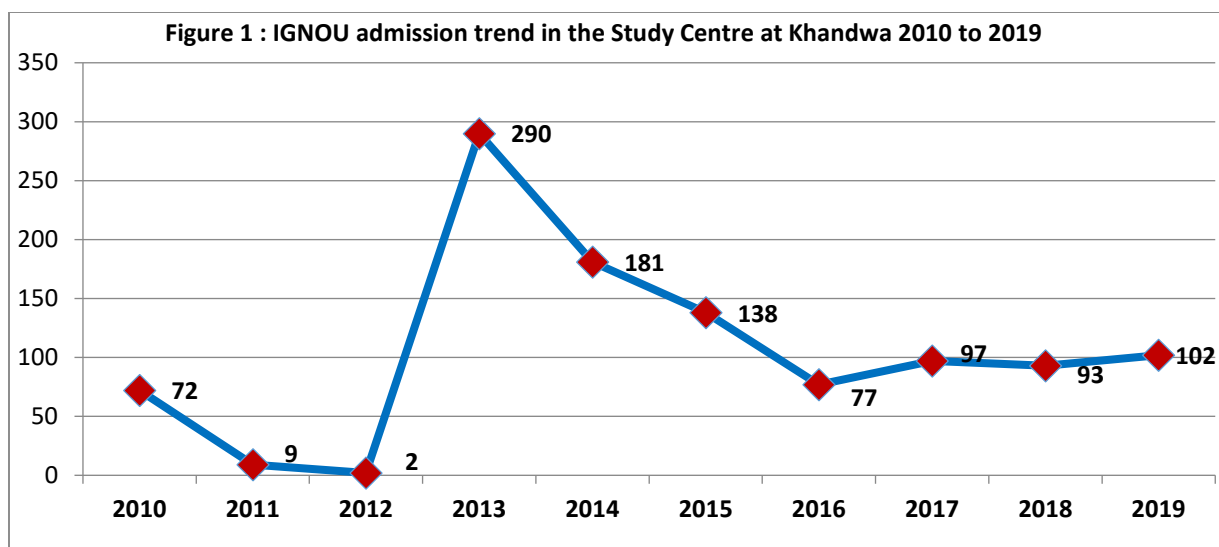
S.No.	Particulars	Students of CFN Programme at Khandwa Study Center (15158 D) i.e. at Khandwa District HQs which were not covered under Mobile Study Centre	Students covered under Mobile Study Center (Singot Cluster)
01	Number of Students	122(Total)	53(Total)
02	Number of students submitted full assignments and filled exam forms	59 (48%)	53 (100%)
03	Number of Students appeared in TEE	42 (34%)	42 (79%)
04	Number of Students who successfully completed the programme	30 (24%)	32 (60%)

Findings and Discussions

Our experience primarily made us feel that representative organizations of rural communities have a very powerful influence on their decision-making systems. The conventional approach of dealing directly with the communities cannot evoke similar response from rural communities. The panchayat's involvement prompted many females to come forward for enrolment. It indicates that rural communities have greater trust on their community leaders than any outside agency trying to persuade them. The females feel confident taking decisions if their community leaders are involved. Reasons are quite understandable as their community leaders meet them on day to day basis, speak the same language and are drawn from same community settings. Further our experiment also shows that a proactive approach can lead to better results. Rural communities on their own will not come to urban settings to seek information, take decisions on their own and incur extra cost to pursue educational programme. We cannot expect results as long as their community based organizations are involved in their decision making processes. It gives them a feeling of being secure about choices made by them. We therefore need to involve a layer of people drawn from same community who are specially sensitized and motivated to act as conduit between higher education institutions and community. Village Panchayat functionaries, teachers and parents are ideally positioned to act as

such conduit of people. Hence it requires a major shift in our approach of community sensitization in rural areas.

Further we felt that giving services in the villages with the support of panchayats also helped to build confidence of people. The females who took admissions in our programmes would not have come to urban settings to take counseling services and would have dropped out. However, these females showed extraordinary enthusiasm to attend the counseling services, completed their assignments well in time and appeared for the examinations. They felt motivated to participate in our F2F services being organized in their community setting. It was observed that the attendance in counseling sessions got significantly enhanced in the villages. All the 53 students of Singot cluster filled up examinations and out of them 32 students passed examinations in first attempt. The all of the students of Singot were female students who otherwise would not have availed our counseling services at district HQs at Khandwa. The University's presence in the form of F2F counseling services in the villages obviously triggers a deal of excitement in the villages. It develops the trust in their minds as they find the academic counselors visiting them regularly as the University's representative. It helps to build an atmosphere of trust in the villages in favour of IGNOU ((Pandey, Gargava & Patel,2015). The observed trend of admission in the Study center is given in the chart no 1.



The initiatives taken by us in Khandwa, have proved that community engagement through representative organizations of rural communities are much more viable than conventional sensitization programmes. It has unfolded new paradigms for universities engagement in rural areas. Our approach resulted in encouraging response even for relatively lesser known academic programme like "Awareness programme on food and nutrition". Furthermore, this participation emerged from mostly female students in awareness level programmes. Such students showed better participation in counseling services and success rates than their urban counterparts. Some of the important paradigms which emerge out of such initiatives are as follow (Pandey, 2017; Pandey & Kumar, 2019b).

- a) The local community based organisations should be taken into confidence and need to be involved in the sensitisation operations. Trusted members of the community should be identified, and such people should be sensitised first.
- b) We need to develop a layer of locals, well versed with local dialects who can act as conduit between local population and the outside organisation.
- c) Local population should act as the co-designer of any products and services through which we intend to serve the community. It will develop a sense of belonging of the community.

These findings have striking similarities with the results of an online discussion initiated by UN Solution Exchange in a different context (UN Solution Exchange, 2012). This experiment has unfolded a new paradigm for the role of village Panchayats in the Support Services operations through Mobile Study Center scheme. The outcomes of the interventions have been encouraging with potential for their replication elsewhere:

- a) This was a huge success from gender point of view as most of the students were females, and this section is always facing problems in continuing their study.
- b) The participation in counseling sessions got significantly enhanced
- c) The success rate of the female students got significantly enhanced

The initial outcomes led to the expectations that neighboring Village Panchayats will also get sensitized to involve in IGNOU's sensitization drive. However, the initial enthusiasm slightly faded away in subsequent cycles of admissions though stabilized in the course of time. The enrolment in IGNOU's programmes was an outcome of a general level of sensitization which initial activities could generate. The study centre did not undertake similar sanitization drive for subsequent cycles of admissions. The people's response declined a bit. It gives an indication that representative organizations did not feel incentivized in the process.

Need to incentivize Panchayats

The experiment in district Khandwa has led to interesting learning experiences. We experienced that people's engagement can be meaningfully brought about through their community-based organizations. The initial involvement of Panchayat members prompted the community members to come forward for taking admissions in IGNOU's activities. However, the subsequent cycles of admissions did not evoke much of the response. Moreover, the response from the community was generated only in those places where situational leadership from village Panchayat was favorable. Therefore, we need to put in place a well incentive based delivery system. Our experience while interaction with Panchayat members made us feel that if properly incentivized the Village Panchayats can stay motivated for their engagement with IGNOU's activities.

Financial incentives to Panchayat functionaries could be a justified solution. The conventional publicity operations of IGNOU are largely been urban oriented. The newspaper advertisements remain confined to urban areas. They have poor penetration in rural interiors. Hence the budget earmarked by the University remains devoted for urban areas. Therefore, there is a need to devote the funds for other strategic interventions in rural areas. A community-based sensitization model for rural areas would be the right choice.

Conclusion and Suggestions

There are many challenges on the way towards skill development and higher education. Programme delivery in conventional manner is almost impossible in rural India. Indian rural areas are diverse and heterogeneous. Number of the persons to be trained / educated is huge. It is very difficult to displace the learners for training and education as their livelihoods pursuits come first in their priorities. Due to such situation and economic limitations, the prospected learner is not motivated towards training and education. Moreover the academic expertise and infrastructure is mostly urban centric. Therefore community participatory approach is fruitful to "reach the unreached" in rural areas and other deprived communities with support of community institutions like Panchayats with incentive based Model.

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