

Meeting the Needs of the Twenty First Century Learners: Some Policy Prescriptions for the ODL Institutions

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Abstract

The current generation has been named as *Generation Alpha*. Various thinkers have pointed out some of the distinctive features of this current generation. It has been argued, riding on the advancement in the field of information and communication technologies, their requirements significantly differ from the preceding generation. Consequently, the traditional chalk and board system of education is no more suitable. Considerable discussions has been made on how the field of education should evolve itself to meet the learning requirements of this current generation. This paper is an attempt to address the issues the education sector faces, particularly with reference to the open and distance learning. The paper is based on survey of existing literature. Certain policy measures for an open and distance learning (ODL) institution have been suggested based on the provisions laid down the University Grants Commission (India) Open and Distant Learning Regulations, 2017 and the Draft New Educational Policy, 2019.

Key words: *Generation Alpha, Generation Z, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Open and Distance Learning.*

1.0 Introduction: The Context of the 21st century Learners

The learners of the Twenty first century basically belong to two generations: viz., *Generation Z* (born between 1995 and 2009) and *Generation Alpha* (born since 2010). The *Generation Z* was characterised as: most do not remember life without the internet, and have had technology like smartphones, iPads, smartboards and other devices available throughout most of their schooling. On the other hand, *Generation Alpha* is characterised as: younger than smartphones, the iPad, 3D television, Instagram, and music streaming apps like Spotify. This is the first generation (*Generation Alpha*) likely to see the next century.

Such a level of technology as a daily necessity also put them in a situation where they have a completely unprecedented amount of information at their fingertips. Today's kids are never having to wait more than a few seconds to get the answers to their questions; with everything only just a quick search away. Today's kids are able to teach themselves about any topic they are interested in without even leaving their bedroom.

The current cohort of students come from Generation Z and Generation Alpha. These two generations have grown up with advanced technologies as a given in their homes and classrooms. They are digital natives, as comfortable using apps and code as their grandparents were flipping pages.

Riding on the advancement in information and communication technologies, these two generations of Z and Alpha are also the most internationally connected ever. They can instantly meet people online from all over the globe, and can easily make friends or have a chat without even having to leave their home. Schools

and parents are also increasingly motivating their children and young people the opportunity to travel, creating a truly borderless experience of learning. This has made today's learners more intelligent, independent and extremely capable. They are skilled with technology and comfortable with global and intercultural communication. (<https://www.aispp.edu.kh/en/about-aispp/our-school/>).

2.0 The Essential Skills for a 21st Century Learner

Applied Educational Systems (n.d.) listed 12 educational skills for a 21st century learner. These skills have been categorised into three major heads, viz., *Learning Skills*, *Literacy Skills* and *Life Skills*. The *learning skills* teaches students about the mental processes required to adapt and improve upon in a modern work environment. The *literacy skills* focuses on how students can discern facts, publishing outlets, and the technology behind them. There's a strong focus on determining trustworthy sources and factual information to separate it from the misinformation that floods the Internet. Finally, the *life skills* take a look at intangible elements of a student's everyday life. These intangibles focus on both personal and professional qualities. Built around the digital environment of the 21st century learners, these 12 skills are particularly important for a 21st century learner. Let us discuss these three broad categories of skills in brief.

2.1 Learning Skills

Learning Skills are consist of 4 Cs, viz., Critical thinking, Creativity, Collaboration and Communication.

- **Critical thinking:** Finding solutions to problems. It's what helps students figure out different alternative solutions for themselves when they don't have a teacher at their disposal.
- **Creativity:** Thinking outside the box. This skill empowers students to see concepts in a different light, which leads to innovation. In any field, innovation is key to the adaptability and overall success.
- **Collaboration:** Working with others. This also means getting students to work together, achieve compromises, and get the best possible results from solving a problem.
- **Communication:** Talking to others. It's crucial for students to learn how to effectively convey ideas among different personality types. Without understanding proper communication, students in the 21st Century will lack a pivotal skill to progress their careers.

2.2 Literacy Skills

Literacy skills are also referred to as called IMT skills, and they're each concerned with a different element in digital comprehension. IMT stands for Information literacy, Media literacy and Technology literacy.

- **Information literacy:** Information literacy is the foundational skill. It helps students understand facts, especially data points that they'll encounter online. More importantly, it teaches them how to separate fact from fiction. In an age of chronic misinformation, finding truth online has become a job all on its own. It's crucial that students can identify honesty on their own. Otherwise, they can fall prey to myths, misconceptions, and outright lies.
- **Media literacy:** Media literacy is the practice of identifying publishing methods, outlets, and sources while distinguishing between the ones that are credible and the ones that aren't. Just like the previous skill, media literacy is helpful for finding truth in a world that's saturated with information. This is how students find trustworthy sources of information in their lives. Without it, anything that looks credible becomes credible.
- **Technology literacy:** Technology literacy goes another step further to teach students about the machines involved in the Information Age. Technology literacy gives students the basic information they need to understand what gadgets perform what tasks and why.

2.3 Life Skills

Life skills are also referred to as FLIPS, these skills all pertain to someone's personal life, but they also bleed into professional settings. FLIPS stands for Flexibility, Leadership, Initiative, Productivity and Social skills.

- **Flexibility:** Flexibility means someone's ability to adapt to the changing situations. This is one of the most challenging qualities to inherit for students because it's based on two uncomfortable realities. First, the student has to accept that the way he/she is dealing with in a given situation isn't always the best way. There is in fact, room for improvement everywhere. Second, one has to admit when he/she is wrong. For many students, acceptance of one's own mistakes is a real struggle, particularly in today's given age when one can know any bit of information at the drop of a hat.
- **Leadership:** Leadership means motivating a team to accomplish a goal. Leadership is also someone's penchant for setting goals, walking a team through the steps required, and achieving those goals in a collaborative manner.
- **Initiative:** It means coming up with one's own idea to start projects, strategies, and plans. Only a handful of people can think of taking an initiative. As a result, students need to learn it to fully succeed in every sphere of their lives.
- **Productivity:** It means maintaining efficiency in an age of distractions. It signifies the ability to complete a given work on time.
- **Social skills:** The most rewarding feature of the current advancement in ICT is meeting and networking with others for mutual benefit. On account of the advancements in ITC, today's students possess a wide range of social skills. Studies have shown that some are more socially adapt than others. Some are far behind their peers. And some lucky few may be far ahead, as socialising comes naturally to them. But most students need a crash course in social skills at least. Etiquette, manners, politeness, and small talk still play major roles in today's world. That means some students need to learn them in an educational setting instead of a social setting.

3.0 Relevance for the Education Sector

To accommodate the changing context of the 21st century learners, the field of higher education needs to adapt their current practices. Saavedra and Opfer (2012) have come up with an agenda note for the practitioners of higher education. Their agenda items include: (1) Curriculum has to be relevant, (2) Students should be taught through the disciplines with practical knowledge as far as possible, (3) Thinking skills should be developed, (4) Transfer of learning should be encouraged, (5) Students should be trained to learn themselves, (6) Misunderstanding and misconceptions should be addressed directly, (7) Teamwork should be encouraged, (8) Proper use of technology should be encouraged to support their learning and (9) Creativity should be fostered.

The recently published Draft New Educational Policy, 2019 published by the Ministry of Human Resources, Government of India has duly emphasised on the use of technology in the field of education. The draft policy has outlined teachers' central role in the use of technology in the teaching-learning process. Further, use of technology in school education as well as in the different phase of education have also been outlined. (Draft New Education Policy, 2019). It seems that the thrust on technologies as outlined by the Draft New Educational Policy, 2019, would move a great extent towards fulfilling the needs of the 21st century learners.

4.0 An Agenda Note for the Open and Distance Learning Institutions

Unlike the traditional mode of education, the open and distance learning institutions, particularly the open universities widely uses technologies to reach the unreached learners. It has been a tradition for the Open Universities in India (and also elsewhere) to prominently use a multimedia approach to delivering the course contents to the learners. The basic idea is to fill the gap of a regular teacher, and at the same time, also to facilitate learning (by) Anyone, (at) Anytime, and (from) Anywhere.

The Draft New Educational Policy, 2019 has outlined the need for the use of advanced technologies in the delivery of ODL programmes. The policy has particularly emphasised the use of Massive Open Online

Courses (MOOCs) and Digital Repositories to deliver quality education through ODL. In fact, it has prescribed among other things, the use of best technology available throughout the globe. To quote:

[All ODL programmes (and their components) leading to any diploma or degree will be of a standard and quality equivalent to the highest quality programmes run by the HEIs on their campus. To ensure that truly high quality ODLs are developed and delivered, HEIs will use their best faculty, and will invest in adequate facilities and support staff. HEIs will also use the best possible materials, resources, and web-based platforms available throughout the world through technology and not remain limited to their own resources.] (Draft Educational Policy, 2019, p. 10)

The University Grants Commission (UGC) Open and Distant Learning Regulations, 2017 also has prominently prescribed the use of technologies in the delivery of ODL programmes in the country. The regulation has prescribed the use of Audio-visual materials, ICT services, MOOCs, open educational resources (OER), computer based materials etc. The collaborative use of technologies has been highly recommended. The regulation also has allowed up to twenty percent of credit requirements in a semester of a programme through online courses like MOOCs. In fact, use of technologies has been suggested in every activities of an ODL institution. To quote:

A Higher Educational Institution offering programme(s) in Open and Distance Learning mode shall take such measures as are necessary to blend Information Communication Technologies (ICT) including those developed by national mission on education through Information and Communication Technology, for enhancing effectiveness of teaching – learning process, and administrative functioning and for maintenance of updated information at all times in respect of status of admissions, registration, for managing teaching-learning activities through on-line support for interactive learning with learner feedback, to facilitate the use of Open Educational Resources (OER), Massive Open Online Courses and for continuous as well as comprehensive evaluation, certification, and other aspects of student support.

Based on the above discussion, the following policy prescriptions has been made for an ODL institutions, which in a way, would also meet the needs of the Twenty first century learners.

- (1) **Extensive Use of ICT:** Use of ICT is a must in education, particularly in ODL. An ODL institution must adopt ICT in every sphere of its activities.
- (2) **Training to Learners:** Use of technologies should be as per the individual needs of the learners. All the learners may be equally efficient in handling all the technologies. Therefore, they should be provided with options with regard to selection of technologies. Again, the learner should be properly trained to handle the technologies. (Asian Association of Open Universities, n.d.).
- (3) **Capacity Building of the Teachers:** Teachers also need continuous training and development for capacity building so as to cope up with the emerging technologies.
- (4) **Collaboration among institutions:** Collaborative efforts among institutions can help both the partners, while at the same time, the learners are also greatly benefitted.
- (5) **Internationalisation of Education:** In the current age of globalisation, each educational institute must be ready to face stiff competition from the global players. To meet the challenges, educational institutions must be ready to offer the best in the world type of education to its learners. It must aim at fulfilling all the requirements to emerge as a global player in the field of education.
- (6) **Become Creative:** Educational institutions must act creatively to introduce innovative curriculum and use of technologies. The curriculum offered must be relevant to the present learning needs of the learners.

5.0 Conclusion

The real challenge for open and distance learning today is to devise the effective tools to meet the above goals and policy prescriptions. They have to be more creative than ever. As has been rightly put by Sir Ken Robinson in his 2011 revised edition of *Out of Our Minds*: ‘The more complex the world becomes, the more creative we need to be to meet its challenges’.

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