

# Open University

Syed Zillur Rahman

ALTHOUGH belated, plans to start an "Open University" have now been finalised by the Ministry of Education, Government of Bangladesh. Initially this university will be administered through the NIEMI i.e. National Institute of Educational Media, as the off-campus Institute of Rajshahi University. The university will enroll four thousand in-service secondary school teachers in B.Ed courses from July 1975.

The distinctive feature of open university education is that there is little scope for class room teaching and explaining to the learners face to face. In this system instructional materials are delivered to the learners in packages. It is a package deal not free from constraints from both sides—planners and learners. It requires a constant flow from one side and serious continuity of study on the other. To facilitate the smooth operation of the correspondence course interviewing personnel is also needed. They may be called helping teachers or counsellors. This to bridge the gap between the learners and the learning process including the learning materials.

The modern history of correspondence instruction began in 1840, with Isaac Pitman's Shorthand course for distant students through the penny post. And with the onset of the current century, a number of correspondence instruction schools were set up throughout Europe. In the USSR, correspondence study became the main form of the university education. In Australia and New Zealand correspondence instruction came to be used in the compulsory school system to teach children who had never been to a class room. But the most spectacular of all was the establishment of Open University in England. And now we find this experiment has invaded the Third World countries viz India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka Thailand Malaysia and also some African countries like Zambia and Nigeria.

The concept of this unique experiment was first mooted by Mr. Harold Wilson, while he

was the leader of opposition in the British Parliament. Later in his election manifesto he offered a synthesis of his pragmatic ideas wherein he suggested immediate establishment of a consortium of the representatives of the various universities, association of teachers, publishers, broadcasting authorities to be financed by the State. This created a furor in the country and the British press termed his ideas as "blithering nonsense and sheer magnitude of Harold Wilson's pipe dream".

Even Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, Britain's Prime Minister who had obtained her law degrees without attending conventional classes was very critical about the whole concept, which she thought was unrealistic and impracticable. She was then a leader of the Conservative Party in the British Parliament. However, the edge of Mrs. Thatcher's earlier criticism had been blunted later, when she joined the cabinet as Education Minister. She then lent full support to the establishment of an Open University.

Fortunately, Mr. Harold Wilson became Britain's Prime Minister in 1964 and immediately appointed in his cabinet a dynamic politician of imperious will Miss Jennie-Lee, as State Minister for Education and Science. After assuming the high office, she prepared a master plan based on the salient points of the Prime Minister's concept of the Open University. Further, she drew up a crash programme in collaboration with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Independent Television Authority in London. A white paper was published in this connection immediately afterwards.

Thereafter, the decision to create an Open University in Britain was made by a Royal Charter in 1969. And the University was launched as an independent and autonomous institution, authorised to confer degrees. Simultaneously, Sir Walter Perry was appointed the first Vice-Chancellor of the Open University in Great Britain. Meantime a magnificent house

in the Belgrade Square had been acquired to implement the ambitious project. But soon it was shifted to a more convenient place at Milton Keynes. The Open University started functioning in full swing two years later from 1971 with thousands of students enrolled. Thus the dream of Harold Wilson had been fully transformed in to reality and a university with a difference came up, to fulfil the hopes and aspirations particularly of those who had been deprived of the opportunities of upgrading their educational standards. Now they also can have education coming face to face with the teachers and through correspondence.

The Open University campus at Milton Keynes is situated midway between London and Birmingham. The Open University is approachable both by train and road. It hardly takes one and a half hours' journey to reach the University township from London.

During the course of my visit to London in 1981 to attend the Commonwealth Arts Conference, I had a chance to have a glimpse of this fabulous university. On arrival, what immediately arrested my attention was that the campus wore a desolate look. It was empty and there was no sign of any student anywhere. Naturally they were also not supposed to come there but wait for their lessons at home through Television and Radio and by correspondence courses.

We learnt from the authorities that every year the University despatched millions of packages weighing thousands of tonnes. The University had already enrolled over 85,000 students and awarded 60,000 degrees.

The distant learners would be required to write an assignment in each subject area during each semester. The assignment forms part of the tutorial work for the purpose of evaluation. There will be also face to face contact session (Viva-Voce) after each semester. At the end of each semester, examinations are held in the campus.

The degree is given on the basis of the answers given by the students on the basis of

the studies by correspondence course and of the evaluated results stored in the computer.

The university offered I was told programmes of study both undergraduate and postgraduate. The correspondence text was the most important component of the course. Broadly each text "unit" represented a week's course. A full length course lasting 32 weeks consisted of 32 texts bound in 10 to 15 volumes sent to the students at regular intervals throughout the year.

For students of science and technology "experiment kits" were sent home.

The home experiment kits of science foundation course for instance includes chemicals glass wares and a microscope specially designed for the university. Under-graduates are given a chance of 120 courses produced by six faculties of Arts, Science Mathematics Social Science Technological Studies and Educational Studies.

Further in addition to the University Headquarters at Walton Hall, there are 13 regional offices in Britain and one each at Northern Ireland Scotland and Wales.

Open University students are all adults studying in their own time and at home. They are taught by correspondence texts through broadcasts produced in partnership with the BBC. It also integrates a number of media in its spectrum such as records cassettes film strips telephones personal contact programmes and evaluation of students' response sheets etc.

## LEARN AND EARN

And above all the teaching in Open University is cheaper than at conventional universities because of a very large number of students involved. Also students do not have to leave their jobs or business. Most of the students are in full time occupation and bringing up their families while they study. Thus they are contributing to the national economy even while studying. And to cap all the multimedia approach has made Open University education a more effective system and given it an edge over the formal system which is confined just to the class room teaching.