Role of KKHSOU in Ensuring Sustainable Pathways of Learning: A Case Study

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1. Introduction:

The concept of sustainable development has emerged as an organizing principle for global developments that broadly support the well-being of both the people and the planet. Since its emergence as a concept, sustainability has been expanded to bridge the gaps among environmental, economic and social concerns, with a view to integrating environmental protection and ecological integrity, economic viability, and social and human development. Therefore, intergenerational equity and balancing the needs of the present and future generations are the key components of the concept of sustainable development. However, as stated in the Global Education Monitoring Report, the concept was advanced in the 1960s and 1970s as it tried to link observed interactions between humans and the environment, as documented in works such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Paul R Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), and *The Limits to Growth* by Donella H Meadows et al. (1972). In 1972, the United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm marked the beginning of a global conversation on sustainable governance. Two years later in Mexico, experts convened a global symposium and signed the 1974 Cocoyoc Declaration, which advocated harmonizing environment and development strategies through 'eco-development.' In the 1980 World Conservation Strategy, which confirmed that conservation of living resources was essential to sustainable development, the first use of the term sustainable development in a major public document was to be found. The concept was further carried forward at the 1986 Conference on Conservation and Development in Ottawa.

Two other important events that marked 1997 as an important year for education were the independent Earth Charter Commission and the Thessaloniki Declaration. Following the failure of the 1992 Rio Summit to reach an agreement on how governments should protect the earth, the Commission undertook the task of drafting the Earth Charter, calling governments across the world to commit themselves to the welfare of future generations, and they stated: 'Humanity is part of a vast evolving

universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life…It is imperative that we, the people of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.' The significance of the Earth Charter rests on its bold use of a universal language that claims to embrace all, especially the marginalized and the poor, emancipation of the oppressed class such as women, slaves, and workers. The Thessaloniki Declaration, on the other hand, was presented at the 'International Conference on Environment and Society: Education and Public Awareness for Sustainability', organized by UNESCO and the Government of Greece in December 1997. The Declaration placed Universalist language into the service of an educational imperative with demanding ethical aims. It is not governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or civil society that will be at the forefront of an alternative conceptualization of our relationship to modernity and the environment; only through 'collective learning process[es]' and 'equal participation' can we expect to instil among learners '[a] change in behaviours and lifestyles'. Such proclamations were important while linking Sustainable developments with education. (Nikolopoulou, A. et al., 2010 p-xii-xiv).

In 2005, the UN further declared the beginning of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD 2005–14). Subsequently, the UNESCO emphasized the integrative character of DESD by stating: "The overall goal of the DESD is to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. This educational effort will encourage changes in behaviour that will create a more sustainable future in terms of environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society for present and future generations." Such implications for education for sustainable development, as mentioned above, necessitate a careful reconsideration as to how sustainable education can fulfil educational promises against the forces of globalisation, following which education has come to signify just a desperate means to find a job in a competitive market. However, ecological development underlie developments in terms of economic growth, social and political balance etc. through the means of viable education. Therefore, education is the only means to provide a sense of the growing ecological imbalance in the society. For example, Vienna has been named world's top city for quality of life, because Vienna remains at the top because of social and economic conditions, health, education, housing, and the environment.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore in what way an open university like KKHSOU has undertaken a noble initiative to provide the scope of lifelong learning irrespective of age, sex, caste, geographical occupation etc. thereby contributing to a sustainable pathway of learning through the ODL mode.

2. Objectives:

The general objective of this paper has been to make a study of how ODL is related to sustainable development in the context of an Indian state like Assam. While the specific objectives of the paper are:

- To find out to what extent the graduate learners of KKHSOU have received sustainable education.

- To make an assessment of the problems and prospects of the ODL mode of education in providing sustainable education to the learners of an Indian state like Assam in the North Eastern part of India.

3. Methodology:

This paper is based on primary and secondary data. This study has been conducted with the help of a tracer study done among the passed out graduate learners of KKHSOU, which was used to measure their exit behaviour. For the trend of enrolment, percentage of passed out learners etc., information and data have been collected from secondary sources like the university records. For collecting primary information, a questionnaire was developed on different aspects of the learners, and communication was made to them through postal mail. For the study, we randomly selected 100 passed out graduate learners (50 from urban areas and 50 from rural areas) from the year 2011, 2012 and 2013, and sent the questionnaires to them by post after collecting their addresses from university records. Out of the 100 respondents who enrolled in different study centres spread across the state of Assam, we received 88 replies, and for the present study 40 learners belonging to study centres at urban areas and 40 at rural areas have been taken. The statistical analysis has been done with the help of percentage, average etc.

Delimitation:

This paper is limited to a discussion of the passed out graduate learners of a open university like Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University only.

4. Linking ODL with Sustainable Development:

Higher education has to play a significant role in bringing multifaceted human resource development in a society. Therefore, for making higher education easily accessible, different educational avenues have been created to meet the needs of the increasing number of students in present times. Although GER is still a big challenge for a country like India, India has the advantage of having the second largest population in the world, and a great potential for its demographic dividend considered an asset. This demographic dividend can help India emerge as one of the most powerful countries in the world in the development sector. In India, nearly 54% of the total population is below 25 years, and 65% is below 35 years. (Census of India, 2011) This is the most productive age group, and hence considered an asset for the country. Therefore, for leading this young population in the right direction by developing their knowledge, attitude and skills, higher education is an absolute necessity. Besides, it has been observed that eradication of poverty, guiding the youth in the right direction etc. can be ensured only through developing proper manpower planning and enhancing employability with the help of the acquisition of useful knowledge based on life-long learning.

It has been broadly discussed that the current education system, with its emphasis on scientific and technological advances, is at the centre of our inability to grasp the real implications of education. Sustainable Development therefore is no longer only an attractive project to the developing world; it is now a necessity for the whole of humanity. The holistic and inclusive nature of sustainable development encompasses a wide range of issues as interconnected parts of a whole and addresses the entire population of the globe. (Baker, S. et al. 1997). Seen from a more social perspective, Sustainable Development through education, therefore, can be related to the philosophy of life-long learning. In the SDG4, life-long education for sustainable development has been focussed. Another focus of SDG4 has been 'lifelong learning opportunities for all'. Lifelong learning comprises all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies, within personal, civic, social and employment-related perspectives. (UIL, 2015). Lifelong learning has often been more narrowly associated with adult education, especially training to help adults compensate for poor quality schooling (UNESCO, 2000).

It was also stated in the Thessaloniki Declaration that education is an indispensable means to give to all women and men the capacity to

own their own lives, to exercise personal choice and responsibility, to learn throughout life without frontiers, be they geographical, political, cultural, religious, linguistic, or gender. The Declaration summoned all educational forces, formal and non-formal, to put a stop to humanitarian crises: "The reorientation of education as a whole towards sustainability involves all levels of formal, non-formal, and informal education in all countries. The concept of sustainability encompasses not only environment but also poverty, health, food security, democracy, human rights, and peace. Sustainability is, in the final analysis, a moral and ethical imperative in which cultural diversity and traditional knowledge need to be respected." By placing the notion of sustainable development in the context of environmental education and a broader Universalist discourse, the Thessaloniki Declaration succeeded, without detaching the definition from its previous economic connotation, in expanding sustainability's Universalist, historical, and ethical dimensions. The Declaration proposed, in a sense, a new definition for sustainable development by linking it directly with education. (Nikolopoulou, A. et al., 2010 p-xii-xiv).

Against this background, it is important to conduct a survey of the educational avenues in a country like India. Providing access, equity, and quality education to a vast majority of people in a society forms the very basic objectives of an educational institution be it face-to-face or ODL. As the main goals of higher education are to disseminate knowledge, use information networks and mass media technologies, help in the improvement of productivity, which can be defined as a way of ensuring the prospect of employability, a higher educational institute, must take cognizance of Sustainable Development as the key to its success in transforming our society. Over the last two decades, the policy makers in Indian higher education have offered a wide spectrum of opportunities of higher education through the ODL mode by providing a vast majority of learners with a variety of need-based education and tools, and enabling them to develop their employability skills, heighten their awareness regarding these skills, and improve their ability to articulate them. Even the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the Government of India has been putting more and more stress on developing necessary skills among the learners through the ODL mode of education, as they need to be polished throughout their working life. These skills are necessary not only for searching a job or obtaining one, but also for ensuring personal development in various ways.

Along with MHRD, the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) has also attributed a pivotal role to ODL to build up the knowledge society in the 21st. Century. In its Report, NKC categorically stated: "Open and distance education (ODE), enabled and delivered through information and communication technology (ICT) holds the promise to address the questions of access and provide new, alternative forms of capacity building" (NKC, 2009, p 4). Considering the wide scope of the ODL system to provide flexible access to higher education–general, professional and vocational, the governments, both at the centre and the states, are giving due emphasis, since 1980s, on the expansion of quality education through the ODL mode. This has resulted in the establishment of one National Open University (IGNOU), 14 State Open Universities, and more than 200 Directorates of Distance Education attached to conventional Universities spread across India. In fact, ODL accounts for about 12% of the total enrolment in the segment of higher education, and has contributed substantially towards the rise of the GER of India, which is 23.6%. (AISHE, 2014-15).

Therefore, when there is a need to address the needs of the people in a positive direction and enable them as human capitals with skills, the ODL mode has been adopted for starting a new frontier for socio-economic development in a country like India. With the autonomy of launching various general, professional and vocational programmes, the ODL system has not only provided educational opportunities to those who are deprived of good education due to various constraints, but has also encouraged thousands of fresh learners towards the philosophy of life-long learning. The NKC in 2006 rightly stated that the appropriate application of knowledge in Agriculture can play a major role in boosting the agrarian economy and giving the Indian farming a competitive edge in the global market, and ODL institutes can play the pioneering role in that. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has also demonstrated that by using ICT and flexible and blended learning approaches, access to quality technical and vocational skill development can be increased. This can further help to overcome the urban-rural and gender divides that exclude learners from the required education and training that would in reality create a skilled workforce of life-long learners for the growth of informal and formal economies. Thus, the ODL mode of education, because of its flexibility, has the potential to create the knowledge-movement in every aspects of human life in society in general, which can lead to sustainable pathways for learning for the concerned stakeholders.

5. ODL in the Educational Landscape of Assam:

The ODL system was introduced in the state of Assam in 1986, when IGNOU established its first study centre in Gauhati University campus. Currently, it is operating through the Regional Centres set up at nearly all state capitals of the North Eastern Region besides having its study centres in a number of colleges and educational institutions of the region. Along with IGNOU, KKHSOU is the only State Open University (established in 2005 by an Act of Assam State Government and located at Guwahati, Assam) and there are five Directorates of Distance Education attached to five conventional universities, which are currently offering higher education through the ODL mode. Recently, private universities too are also doing well in NER and have introduced programmes through the distance mode. Of these, mention may be made of Sikkim Manipal University, Gangtok (Sikkim), ICFAI University, Agartala (Tripura), and ICFAI University, Aizwal (Mizoram).

In the context of higher education in Assam, the exemplary role KKHSOU has played in its 11 years of existence, has confirmed that take bigger responsibilities in a technology-aided educational environment to educate people for sustainable development. KKHSOU has played a leading role by enrolling around 1,50,000 learners in different disciplines since its establishment in 2006. The main aim of this University has been to develop and provide easily accessible modes of higher education and training with the use of the latest technologies. Because of the inherent flexibility, KKHSOU has been successful in providing equal opportunities of higher education to all, bringing into its ambit the deprived and denied sections of the people such as the dropped out learners, women getting married early, those working in offices and industries without completing degrees, professions requiring diplomas; house wives; as well as fresh and new learners. Besides, the ODL system has enabled the in-service persons or professionals to enhance their skills, qualifications and training while on the job. Thus, with a view to making higher education more and more accessible, KKHSOU has been preparing its diverse academic programmes to suit the potential learners through about more than 350 access points (Study Centres) across the state of Assam.

As a open university, KKHSOU is not only trying to identify the needs of various stakeholders, but is also trying to ensure sustainable living by taking so many altruistic initiatives besides offering many need-based programmes through a variety of collaborative activities like producing

audio-visual contents on areas like agriculture, small scale industries and so on. The university has also been producing important OERs to meet local requirements. A number of educational audio-visual programmes are uploaded in YouTube. In addition to the traditional graduate and post graduate degree programmes, KKHSOU has been offering various need-based certificate and vocational training programmes on areas like Computer application, Two/three wheeler repairing, Electrical house wiring, Apiculture, Garment Designing, Scientific Tea Cultivation, Commercial Poultry Framing and so on. Besides, with the help of the different polytechnic institutes, situated at different parts of the state, this university has been successfully offering vocational training courses on areas like Welding, Plumbing, Electrical House Wiring, Repairing of Electrical Home Appliances, Cutting and Tailoring and so on, and encouraging the youths to develop self-entrepreneurship or to take up various private jobs. Through its Community Radio Service "Jnan Taranga", KKHSOU has been regularly airing educational programmes for the benefit of the learners as well as the common masses.

6. Use of a Tracer Study to Measure Sustainability among the Graduate Learners of KKHSOU:

Tracer Studies have been instrumental in collecting important information and feedback on what the graduates are now doing in the world out there, finding out whether the programmes in which they enrolled met their individual needs, if not, what needs to be done as part of future course of action by the University. Besides, from the range of inputs received from the respondent learners in course of the study, may assist policymaking in KKHSOU at the highest level. As the core mission of KKHSOU continues to be imparting—"education beyond barriers", along with need- based and skill-based education, the creation of an open space of higher and useful learning within a life-long perspective, has been equally important for equity and access, and this will surely provide opportunities for sustainable developments to the individuals enabling them to integrate better into the global knowledge society through the learning they would receive from their programme of enrolment.

It is seen that from 5,516 learners enrolled in 2008, the number of learners enrolled in Bachelor's Degree Programmes in 2016, has increased upto 19,828. The trend of enrolment in Bachelor's Degree Programmes of KKHSOU is given in the **Table 1**. However, with a steady

increase in enrolment, employment opportunities have become very competitive in the current job market. The Tracer Study conducted on the passed out graduate learners of KKHSOU provided important and useful information as to what they feel about KKHSOU, and what is happening to them when they join the world of work after leaving their Alma Matter. It was equally important to have found out how adequate had been the education they received in their overall performance in life and career, the extent to which the knowledge, communication and other skills had been developed in the learners and so on.

Table 1: Numbers of Enrolment in Bachelor's Degree Programmes from 2008-09 to 2016-7

Category	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	Cumulative total
Bachelor of Arts	4,250	8,080	13,671	18,893	19,531	19,580	19,391	15110	19086	1,37,592
Bachelor of Mass Communication	305	317	263	107	130	113	103	93	71	1,502
Bachelor of Commerce	210	381	497	553	427	477	485	446	479	3,955
Bachelor of Business Administration	281	252	189	120	83	73	62	66	40	1,166
Bachelor of Computer Application	470	465	441	321	235	238	147	131	152	2,600
All Degree Programmes	5,516	9,495	15,061	19,994	20,406	20,481	20,188	15,846	19,828	1,46,815

The trend of enrolment in the five Bachelor's Programmes is graphically represented below in **Fig 1,** where it is found that the trend of enrolment in the Bachelor of Arts Degree is higher in comparison to other professional and vocational programmes.
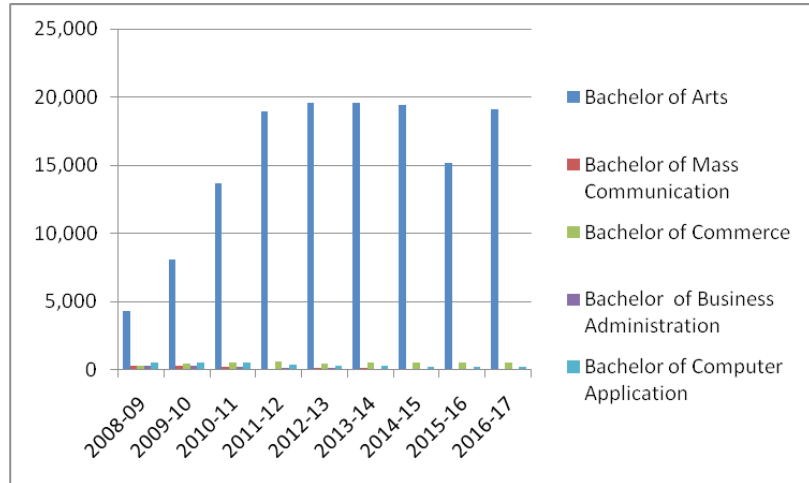
Fig 1: Graphical Representation of the trend of enrolment in various degree programmes of KKHSOU

7. Major Findings of the Tracer Study:

The study has provided important results from which measurement of sustainability among the learners is sought to be made. Besides the questions of acceptability and sustainability, the present study also sought to find answers to the following important research questions:

a. Personal details of the graduates in terms of gender, civil status, field of study, educational attainment etc.

b. The status of employment—whether employed, self-employed, looking for employment.

c. Whether pursuing further education in KKHSOU or elsewhere

d. Relevance of the acquired skills and competencies in real life situations that helps them to have a quality and sustainable living.

e. Any improvement in their standard of living.

From the study, it is found that sustainable development includes all the developmental perspectives like having a quality of life, ensuring long term benefits in personal and social life, familiarising oneself with

the present situation of the environment, keeping the learners abreast of the present know-how techniques and life skills, and most importantly, enabling them to understand that sustainable education should develop the capacity to think critically and constructively in the learners besides also helping them to identify the oppressive forces in the society, and making them capable to act for their own empowerment. However, the following are some of the important findings of the study, which show the relevance of the responsibility that KKHSOU has shouldered for educating the people of the NE Region.

1. Out of the total respondents (total 80), it has been found that the percentage of learners belonging to the age group 20-35 is more from rural areas, which is 50%, whereas in urban areas it is only 30%. However, interestingly, the percentage of learners belonging to the age group 35-45 is more in urban areas, which is 45%, whereas in rural areas it is only 25%. This means that due to poor background of the learners or for not getting a scope in the conventional education, more and more young learners in the rural areas are enrolling in KKHSOU for a higher degree, but the case is different in urban areas. This also means that learners in the urban areas are more conscious about education they like to take further study compared to the people of rural areas.

2. Comparatively, the number degree holders in general Bachelor's Degree Programme is bigger than in professional and vocational courses. Out of the total respondents, 92% enrolled in general BA Programmes, which means that most of the learners were trying to fulfil their dream of being graduates or satisfy their traditional mindset to become educated or degree holders.

3. Nearly 99% of the total respondents feel self-confident after getting the degree from KKHSOU, and they have revealed that their social status has improved after receiving the degree from the University. This also means that they are now recognised in their society.

4. In both rural and urban areas, almost 68% respondents reported to be employed. Out of them, only 4% from rural and 6% from urban are having Government job, while the rest are engaged in a temporary job in the unorganised sector and private enterprises. This shows that although KKHSOU is providing educational opportunities, due to their enrolment in general and traditional courses, they are perhaps not getting an opportunity of modest employment in the organised and private sectors. In terms of employability, the graduates of KKHSOU are not finding adequate employability

despite having a graduate degree. Thus, the Government as well as the private enterprises should create more employment avenues so that even the learners having a degree in traditional subject too get employment facilities.

5. Out of the respondents (total 80 as a whole) both from rural and urban areas, 58% are female and 42 % are male. Even in the general enrolment trend of KKHSOU, the percentage of women learners is higher. This is mainly because most of the women are housewives, and they have revealed that the degree they have obtained from KKHSOU has helped them to get educated not only for getting a job but also for maintaining a dignified life in family as well as in society.

The study conducted has helped to understand that even the general courses at the undergraduate level launched by KKHSOU, provides an opportunity to access education in the true sense and to realise that the learners can lead a meaningful life following educational attainments. One of the most significant benefits of the education received is the emergence of distributive justice in terms of providing equity in education, gender justice, and education for the unprivileged sections. Besides, KKHSOU has been successful in developing the life skills of the learners on whom the study was conducted. For example, the female learners now are able to take care of their family more efficiently than before, can rationalise on the education of their children for the long term benefits and so on. The study has also enabled us to discuss the need to reduce the different sorts of disparities, such as—rural-urban disparity in terms of access to education (as most of the study centres of KKHSOU are located in the remote and rural areas); gender disparity (as in study centres like Cotton College, Hiteshwar Saikia College, Dispur College located in the Guwahati city, women learners are more than the male learners, while in case Rangia Teachers Training College, located in a rural area, the number of women learners are almost 50%) and so on. Even the present Syllabus of the Bachelor's Degree Programmes, which have important components like Spoken English and Environmental Studies, have helped the learners to cope with the present competitive and ecological issues more engagingly.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations:

To keep pace with 21st century developments, the learners enrolled in KKHSOU as well as the common people who have access to most of the University resources, need to acquire skills which are productive and which can help them generate further resources. Here, education

becomes the most important mechanism for the empowerment as well as sustainability of the people in terms of their socio-political as well as economic development. The credibility and success of the ODL mode depends on a number of factors as has been found out through the Tracer Study. UNESCO has categorically stated that a growing recognition that community-based learning not only makes a major contribution to educating both young and elderly people, it also helps in strengthening the bonds of trust necessary for building a sustainable society. Thus, to ensure sustainable development, the open learning provided by KKHSOU must enable its learners to lead a meaningful and dignified life, besides providing new avenues of employment or entrepreneurship. However, the mission of KKHSOU should be to develop stronger partnerships to enhance community-based education for Sustainable Development (ESD). It is mainly because; such partnerships contribute to the advancement of ESD at the community level through non-formal and informal learning opportunities. In this regards, the Community Radio of the University 'Jnan Taranaga' and the OER materials being produced may play a prominent role.

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