



## Adopting a Marketing Approach for Distance Education in Iran

Hadi GHAFARI  
Payame Noor University, Iran  
[hghaffari2000@yahoo.com](mailto:hghaffari2000@yahoo.com)

### ABSTRACT :

The new economic reforms programme of the Government of Iran has created far reaching impact on the working of all the sectors of Iranian economy. Education is no exception to this. Educational and training institutions in private sector and those in collaboration with their counterparts in foreign countries have responded quickly and in the right manner to this trend in Iranian educational environment. This paper attempts to provide an approach to the answer by suggesting a marketing framework for DEPs.

### 1. The Context :

The new economic reforms programme of the Government of Iran has created far reaching impact on the working of all the sectors of Iranian economy. Education is no exception to this. Educational and training institutions in private sector and those in collaboration with their counterparts in foreign countries have responded quickly and in the right manner to this trend in Iranian educational environment. Educational programmes and modes of their delivery are fast changing. University system and other systems of formal education at different levels appear to be little slow and directionless in this respect. In the midst of this environment emerges the government policy of encouraging Distance Education Programmes (DEPs).

The fact remains that there is a tremendous scope for DEPs and at the same time the concept of DEP and the specific programmes are not catching up with the demand. Why this paradox? How has it emerged? What can be done? This paper attempts to provide an approach to the answer by suggesting a marketing framework for DEPs.

### 2. Objectives and Scope

This paper aims at presenting DEPs in the conceptual framework of marketing and attempts to highlight its implications, particularly for the institutions offering such programmes.

So far as scope of the paper is concerned, we can examine the marketing aspect of education in general and DE in particular from either of the two angles – marketing of the concept of DE itself or marketing of DEPs. The first is the domain of the policy makers in the Management of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and agencies working under or associated with it. The second falls within the domain of the educational institutions established for the specific purpose of developing clearly targeted, specific programmes. They are expected to offer DEPs through various chosen channels and to deliver them to focused group for their perceived needs and benefits. For the purpose of this paper, we will largely keep the former out of our discussion.

Beginning with a review of the DEP environment, the paper moves on to relating various marketing concepts to DEPs design,

execution and monitoring. In the end, some of the implications are highlighted which will be found useful by educational institutions engaged in DEP design and delivery.

### 3. Elements of DEP Environment

The entire system of DEP has to function within its external as well as internal environment. The external environment refers to the new learners (from neo-literates to multi-skill requirements), HRD orientation (calling for life-long learning for pro-active initiatives), national priorities (for growth, stability, cross-cultural response), funds allocated to education (by the centre and states — as a % of GDP), ways of attracting faculty, avenues for technology, professional bodies, industries, etc.

The internal environment (internal to DE institutions) refers to the performance and efficiency of the organisational management systems, financial condition of a DE institution, the skills and profile of the faculty and support staff, the physical facilities and resources; and orientation of media to the efforts and output of the programmes offered by an institution.

### 4. DEPs in a Marketing Framework

#### 1. Education Market and its Peculiarity

It appears as if the field of education is fast becoming a market where various institutions like formal schools and colleges, private institutions, foreign-based institutions etc are the players and students and potential students are the customers. This trend underlines the need for marketing approach in planning and execution of educational programmes.

Marketing is difficult in a service industry, more so in education, because the needs to be served are hard to be perceived and articulated, distribution is difficult, the targets are imprecise and, evaluation and feedback are difficult.

Further, the economic and social dimensions of the programmes offered are no less vital than the apparent academic inputs and channels which may be more visible.

#### 2. Objectives of Education and DE

As in case of all business products and services, DE objectives are derived from objectives of education itself for which policy guidelines are laid down at the highest level along with the priorities of HRD Management. This is supported by a network of institutions to carry the objectives through, and the budgetary provisions thereof. These observations underline the need for a comprehensive and crystal clear statement on role, objectives and policy on education in the country.

#### 3. DE Products

For the purpose of HRD Management, the concept of DE itself is a product to be marketed before various institutions engaged in offering educational programmes (e.g. universities); and the potential learners in the country. These institutions conceive various DEPs as the "products" and deliver them to meet full needs of the target groups.

#### 4. Market Segmentation

Marketing is a critical dimension of adopting the offerings of DE institutions to various segments i.e. the target groups so that the right programmes are offered to the right groups in an efficient and effective manner, and the design to delivery aspects are constantly monitored by HRD Management through its agencies so as to achieve the goals of education, particularly those of DEPs.

Proper segmentation is important because marketing strategy has to be based on the segments to be served. This will include disadvantaged groups and those who have had the benefit of formal education and now want to enrich their own exposure.

The segmentation exercise will also depend on whether we want to promote cognitive knowledge, usable skills, positive attitudes or durable values.

### 5. Product Design

Having identified the groups — say, men and women indifferent geographical areas and living in a variety of social settings, we have to study their perceived needs and priorities and develop alternative way of satisfying them, considering their cultural ethos, their limitations of time, language, physical environment and group learning norms. Thereafter the contents of the programme, development of study material, physical facilities, sequence of academic calendar, admission evaluation requirements have to be beefed up. This is what we call the "product design". It will help the beneficiaries to compare the services and the output, facilitate self learning for their own goals, through their investment of time, efforts and money.

### 6. Regional Setup and Distribution Points

Large institutions like national level universities execute and monitor their DEP systems through regional centres. These centres develop detailed plans for DEPs and engage themselves in close monitoring and guiding the execution and delivery process which takes place at the study centres (distribution points).

As the learners are removed in time and place from the sources of academic input, ways will have to be devised to setup and activate study centres or distribution points which could be used by the potential learners for queries, access to services, complaints, suggestions and face-to face feedback. One has also to consider ways of adding flexibility to the use of resources by offering technological options.

### 7. Pricing of DEPs

Pricing is also a crucial point. As the fixed costs are heavy and the variable costs also cannot be fully recovered for every

programme, a DE institution will have to attempt to add perceived value to the offerings ("Packaging" of a DEP!) and see that the subsidies, if any, are worthwhile to the learner and affordable to the institutions. There is some scope for price discrimination also.

A serious consideration of pricing of DEPs will also bring to surface the need for efficient financial accounting systems, cost control/reduction measures and government policy on financial assistance to DEP institutions.

### 8. Promotion

In traditional education system, promotional effort in marketing of education programmes is not given formal recognition. It appears that promotional measures will become increasingly important in marketing of DEPs in future; thanks to increased competition among educational institutions and increasing awareness about needs among the potential "customers".

Promotion of DEPs will call for motivations by government agencies for DE institutions, motivation and incentives for learner groups; and formal allocation of financial resources for promotional effort. Attracting and retaining good faculty, encouraging study centres for efficient delivery of DEPs and motivating learners to take their studies seriously — will also call for promotional effort specifically directed to a particular DEP. In macro sense, the promotional effort for DEP would aim at attracting physical, financial and manpower resources of the community and its agencies for the long term benefits of the society. Communication firms can help government agencies and DE institutions to a great extent in design and execution of promotional effort.

### 9. Marketing Organisation and Control Systems

Alongwith the above pillars of marketing mix, attention also needs to be paid to marketing organisation and marketing control systems. A marketing organisation cannot be set up overnight.

But a beginning can be made by seeking help from marketing firms until the top management is fully convinced about the role of marketing inputs.

Later, better employee hiring practices, rewarding market oriented employees and training programmes for functionaries and small projects, say, on features of designated market segments or on DE fund raising, can be initiated.

Marketing control systems cover the whole gamut of various functions and departments of DE systems as responsibility centres, annual plans and budgets, operational control, accounting, reporting and performance evaluation. Design and implementation of these control system would also imply ensuring clear lines of authority and responsibility. At the strategic level, marketing audit of DEPs by HRD Management and DE institutions will have to be utilised in future as a powerful tool. The process of review and evaluation of DE concept and DEPs will draw heavily from the findings of market research conducted on different aspects of DE System, DEPs, their execution and monitoring.

What is stated above has (a) established a link between educational environment and DEPs, and (b) provided a conceptual framework for marketing of DEPs in Iran. This paper will be incomplete if we do not translate the proposed framework into a set of implications for all the institutions, agencies and individuals operating in the education market.

## 5. Implications

The external and internal environment of DEP, and the present setup are likely to create both problems and opportunities for the DE system in many ways. Let us pinpoint some of them:

### 1. Marketing Objectives

#### i) Government and non-government

agencies engaged in planning and execution of the concepts of DE and DEPs must bring more clarity of purpose. Lack of such a clarity will result in lack of direction, wastage of resources and ineffectiveness of DEPs. Such a clarity will help in defining the role and expectations from the Marketing effort.

### 2. Marketing Strategy

i) Institutions engaged in offering DEPs will have to come out with "products" which will be responsive to changing environment;

ii) For providing better services to "customers" computer and communication technology applications will be necessary even in marketing and administering a DEP;

iii) Research-based programmes will have to be identified to cater to the needs of deprived communities and other weak segments. This could be focused on regional needs also;

iv) For ongoing product improvement, research will be needed on continued basis;

v) Efficient, marketing communication will have to be established and strengthened. In this process, computer application and various communication media will have a crucial role to play;

vi) Positioning of a DEP in DEP market will become a crucial aspect of DEP marketing;

vii) For bringing uniqueness in a DEP, educational technology and communication media will have to be built into the product design;

viii) Formal use of advertising and promotional effort for DEPs will become a common practice. Allocation of resources for this purpose will also increase;

ix) Marketing of DEP will become critical from point of view of investment recovery due to high investment in high-tech equipments and problems of increasing fees for the programmes.

### 3. Product Features and Learning Process

- i) Learning will be more multimodel and interactive rather than uni-directional. Access points and access hours/days will be enlarged and extended.
- ii) New programmes, both academic and skill-based will be demanded and the product life cycle of existing programmes will be shortened.
- iii) Programme structure and learning process will become more flexible.
- iv) Resources will be shared among DE institutions.
- v) Credit transfer will be more widespread.
- vi) Faculty with skill and orientation will be drawn from a variety of sources.
- vii) In a learning society, DE will require more of research inputs to identify viable need-based programmes for more and more upwardly mobile groups (women and deprived communities in particular). The increased need will be felt to tailor, modify, combine and even give up the programmes which would have outlived their earlier functional role.
- viii) Language will be a major hurdle because of growing mobility across different ethnic groups & increasing emphasis on team work in occupations.
- ix) The entire setup of examinations is likely to be revamped to achieve credibility, objectivity and level certification needed for economic and administrative purposes.
- x) Technology promises to play a major role facilitating transparency, convenience and economy of effort for learners.

### 4. Marketing Organisations and Systems

- i) The DE system will be expected to encourage innovations in design and marketing of DEPs.
- ii) Significance of marketing will have to be recognised in the organisational setup and control system for a DEP.
- iii) Establishing marketing communication with heterogeneous, geographically scattered groups of people will be a challenge for communication system.
- iv) Marketing orientation will increase and it will be reflected in development of special promotion programmes, advertising effort, financial provisions and control systems for DEPs.

### 6. Conclusion

Market of DEPs is becoming more and more competitive. Potential beneficiaries of DEPs are also increasing in number and they are becoming more aware of their needs. This implies that our policy formulators and planners as well as the institutions engaged in offering DEPs will have to bring in a greater degree of marketing orientation in their planning and control systems and organisational setups. Only this will give the society better DEP ideas, designs and their efficient execution.

Educationists will have to ponder over major system-wide and product related issues of more relevant DE products, networking, faculty development, level of fees and remission and constant updating of programmes. Open communication among learners, potential learners, faculty, DE institutions and administrative wings on the one hand and funding agencies, employees, mass media and government on the other will be the critical factor that will facilitate the success of DEPs in Iran.

Hadi GHAFFARI is an Assistant Professor at Payame Noor University, Arak, Iran.  
E-mail: [hghaffari2000@yahoo.com](mailto:hghaffari2000@yahoo.com) Phone: 09188614429, Fax: 0861-36755796780.

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