

# **How the open and distance education support the disadvantaged**

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## **[Abstract]**

The philosophy of distance learning lies in the open access to all social members via offering affluent learning programs so that social productivity can be increased and national competitiveness can be enhanced. Open and distance education in China has effectively supported different kinds of learners in both urban and rural areas, especially those who cannot enter into the campus-based educational institutions for one reason or another.

This article will examine how the Radio & TV universities in China have designed and developed various kinds of learning programs to support the disadvantaged groups of students and help them to be successful. It offers the readers with a picture of how the CRTVUs addressed different groups of students in developing relevant learning contents, designing interactive learning management system and focusing on student-centered strategy in the process of teaching and learning. It will reveal how the practitioners have constantly adjusted their plans, methodology and contents so that effective teaching and learning can be guaranteed and open and distance education provision can really demonstrate its benefit. The authors mean to indicate in their paper that when the CRTVUs can really meet the social demands of the diversified groups of learners, they can show to the public their considerable commitments to establishing the harmonious society.

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## **Introduction**

Most distance education institutions roots their foundation in the masses, which can be seen from the very initial stage when they first enroll their students. Owing to its distinguished characteristics, open and distance education can provide opportunities to the disadvantaged in each country and help them to be successful citizens. There is a case study coming from China Central Radio & TV University, which indicates that open and distance education is an effective way to support the disadvantaged in the less developed areas. By describing the situation and through data analysis, the authors mean to provide the readers with their conception thoughts and convincible practices to demonstrate the strength and advantages of distance learning in one of the developing countries.

### ***Why CRTVUs mean to support the disadvantaged?***

When talking about social fairness, people used to think about the income distribution of physical substances and neglect the equality of educational provision. With the development of human society, people have been fully aware that educational equity is actually an important component of human rights. This is not only because education is to be seen as facilitators of social development, but also because education is gradually to be regarded as an important procedure to accelerate social fairness and of vital significance to change the uneven social hierarchy existed in many parts of the world. China means to establish a harmonious society, which immediately poses to the general public the question of massification for higher education. On the one hand, the appeal and demand for receiving quality higher education is increasing. On the other hand, there seems an arduous task to change the heavy burden of its population into useful human resources, which implies that the responsibility of providing quality education historically befalls the shoulder of higher learning institutions. Owing to limited number and capacity of the traditional universities, distance education institutions have been evolved largely in the urban and rural areas in the past thirty years. According to the statistics from the CCRTVU press yearly book (2006), nearly 6million tertiary-level adult learners have graduated from China Radio & TV Universities (Hereafter CRTVUs) and there are more than 18 million person/times for in-service training, certificate education and continuing education programs including large-scaled and socialized training as well as reemployment training, etc.. Through data analysis, we can find out that the most benefited people are those disadvantaged in the less developed areas. More than 94.5 % of our students are working adults dispersed in different walks of trade, and more than 78% are coming from grass-root units below the prefectural level. Around 25.4% of our students are located in the less-developed areas of China's western part. These

kinds of students are benefited from distance education mode as they could not find their place in the traditional based campus owing to time restriction, family boundary, and financial affordability, etc. The establishment of CRTVUs is identical with the philosophy of open access to all social members as their educational provisions can fit in with the particular conditions of the learning adults. In the course of implementing distance and open learning CRTVUs have really realized social fairness and educational democracy. Just like Prof. Ge Daokai, our new President said, “Distance education is to be seen as the ladder for the general public to make progress; it is to be regarded as a weight to demonstrate equal educational opportunities; and it is also can be taken as a supply point for students to gain enrichment and motivation.”

### *Practice from the CRTVUs*

The CRTVUs are actually in the systematical structure of distance education field. The nation-wide distance education providers reflect unique features in offering wider ranges of learning programs to the vast number of people no matter where they are and what cultural background they possess. CRTVUs provide both degree and non-degree programs, which have drawn large numbers of adult learners from all parts of China. With China’s economic transform and social development, CRTVUs kept on making constant studies of their target students, trying to understand the needs and expectations from different potential learning groups so that they can constantly adjust their teaching strategy and seek for innovation to meet the changeable demands from the learning society. To achieve the objective of running satisfactory education for the masses, CRTVUs have adopted series measures and actions in the past few years.

In 1999, CCRTVU launched an open education project to feel about new ways in fostering qualified professional talents. The project is very successful as more than 2 million graduates have already been produced. Through the implementation, CRTVUs have changed in many respects as in educational concept, pedagogy, resources, teaching management, and research. Now the pilot project has become common practice within the CRTVUs’ system.

While fixing our eyes on the majority learning adults for normal degree education, the CRTVUs have not neglected those who are easily ignored and give up somehow small-scaled learning programs for the special groups.

In 2004 we started to implement the project of “One student in one village” to increase the overall education standards in the rural areas via distance learning. By offering courses of planting, breeding and management, we have a lot of rural students to register the programs, which have indeed helped the local peasants to be better off. The learning package sent to the hands of those students has not only contained the printed materials, learning guidebook, but also VCD and some formative assessment brochures. Now more than 80 thousand students have registered

for relevant courses. We have now offered 74 specialties in the ten fields of studies and those specialties are closely with the students' job performance and helped them in improving their current work. Also, to support the less-developed counties, CCRTVU has launched a scheme of supporting 100 counties, which materialized installation of computer-labs and infrastructure in the local centers.

In 2002, aware of the needs from the physically handicapped, we started an Education College for the Disabled People. Owing to physical deformity or psychological obstacles, it is hard for disabled people to conduct normal learning via traditional methodologies. Therefore, distance learning with their prominent feature has brought about benefits to most of the disabled people. Making approach on the special groups of those people and their needs, the CCRTVU, together with some of the local RTVUs, has forged very effective ways to support disabled people with limb handicap and the deaf and dumb. One of the features needs to be mentioned here is the independent learning resource package, which emphasized teaching design and careful selection of the multiple media to meet the demands of the disabled people. Addressing to the deaf and dumb, we add sign language to the general content explanation for the courseware and dealing with people with limb deformity, we make full use of the web-based learning environment in case of their inconvenient attendance to the face-to-face tutorials. We have set up multi-media distant tutorials instead of face-to-face lectures to the disabled from far away and have one-to-one guidance in their hand-on experiments. We encourage e-communication, e-discussion and other collaborative learning activities so that students can maintain their motivation and keep on learning. Now we have 23 teaching points throughout the country and all of them are working smoothly.

Facing ethnic groups of the nation, the CRTVUs have developed close relationship with the local government and institutions and tried all means to flourish the local economy prosperity through providing relevant distance education programs. In some areas where Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang Uyghurs and Korean inhabited, the local RTVUs have developed bilingual language programs for ethnic minority groups to keep their language and culture. In 2002, the CRTVUs have set up Tibetan College in Tibet University, where more than 1 thousand and 3 hundred students have already graduated. The programs designed and developed have really beneficial for the local people. Meanwhile, the CRTVUs have helped other ethnic group crowded areas to design IT training programs and subject-oriented training programs via the CRTVUs' distance education system.

### ***Implication of the programs in CRTVUs***

Through we have made practical progress while providing the above-mentioned projects, we are still considering what implication for the future when meeting with many new challenges from both economy and society. In our views, the successful implementation of the above mentioned projects is based on our institution's careful

design and management, which can be seen from several respects:

1. Establish an effective learning platform for our students

By assembling both universities and social resources, the CRTVUs have carefully designed and constructed an effective learning platform, where diversified adult learners from both urban and rural areas can retrieve necessary information and useful course materials, which really attained the objective of sharing quality resources. However, with the great appeal for more applicable courses and more individualized support from the CRTVUs, we need to enlarge a wider spectrum of learning programs, upload those courses into the learning platform, and make it available for easy composition for certificate and diploma.

2. Provide multi-media learning resources

In meeting the specified needs from diversified groups of our learners, multi-media learning resources have been developed, where students can select what most suitable for their learning style and learning environments. For certain programs, we have set up regulations and ask our instructors to prepare one course with three kinds of media so that students can take up their study according to their own particular circumstances, which enabled flexibility to be realized in our distance and open learning programs.

3. Offer considerate support

To enable learning to be successful, a guided-learning mode is comprehensive among teachers and students. Before, during and after the course learning, teachers will play a proactive role in guiding their students along the effective learning road. First of all, the clarified learning objective is to be induced when freshmen have been enrolled. The effective management of learning process has to be conducted, where interaction between students and teachers is stressed and quality control is carried out. With the combination of autonomous learning and instructor-guided learning mode, knowledge can be disseminated, reflective thinking can be developed, and capability to improve learning outcome can be formed.

4. Develop quality assurance strategies and criteria

We have been fully aware that what the students expected from their own interest is quality education. Therefore, management of every stage of learning is of vital importance. Quality is assured not only by setting up rules, regulations, standards and criteria, but also effective supervision, direction and coordination. Quality assurance can be realized not only by evaluating students' periodical learning outcome, but also by evaluating performance of the instructors and other management, which calls upon us to have clarified criteria and effective procedures for implementation so as to reach

the objectives. We have developed technology strategy to make easy access to our clients, and have defined administrative strategies to offer convenient and flexible services. We pay special attention to the function of interaction and constantly improve our teaching strategy in accordance with the students' expectations and feedbacks. Furthermore, we also ask our instructors, technicians, and administrative staff to be responsible, proactive, and to be fully exerting their initiatives, try to respond our students' enquiries timely and quickly, offer appropriate informative documents and constructive suggestions, adopt adaptive methods and satisfy every reasonable demand so that quality can be really assured.

### ***Conclusion***

In the course of providing relevant programs, distance education can really alleviate the pressure from regular higher educational institutions (HEIs). To some extent, we can see that ODL has in fact filled the gaps of education provision between developed and less developed areas in our country, it has balanced educational distribution and made possible to enable everyone to enjoy quality education. We think that ODL can really reflect education equity and social justice. It is our mission to adhere to the principle of distance education and open learning and try every way to meet challenges from the society. It is a long-term strategy to bring ODL into full play while establishing the life-long learning system in China. We are sure that by our efforts, we can facilitate formation of a harmonious society and make contribution for the development of the world distance education and open learning.

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