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Mapping the Presence of Indira Gandhi National Open University in the Northeast Region of India

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Abstract: The North East Region of the country is unique due to its socio-cultural features, geopolitical factors, and abundant untapped natural resources. However, despite being endowed with such uniqueness, the region remains underdeveloped, backward and alienated from the mainland. Since its inception, Indira Gandhi National Open University registered its presence in the North East Region with the establishment of a Regional Centre in Shillong (Meghalaya) in 1988, Ever since, IGNOU strives to foster educational development of the region through its academic offerings. As on date nine Regional Centres have been established in the eight states of the NER, catering to the educational needs and aspirations of the deprived segments of the population. Learner support is provided through a network of around 200 active learner support centers under the nine Regional Centres. The paper presents an overview of IGNOU's interventions to extend its outreach in the NER, beginning with the North-East Project to the current activities through the dedicated unit, Educational Development of North East Region Unit, under Regional Services Division of the University. The paper also discusses the policy measures adopted and implemented to further strengthen the efforts for expansion of higher education as per mandate of IGNOU and Government of India. The prospects, possibilities through the use ICTs and digitalization initiatives for enhancing outreach in the region are also discussed.

Key words: Outreach, Open and Distance Learning, Educational Development

Introduction

The North-East Region (NER) of India, comprising of eight states, has some key features that impart uniqueness to the region as compared with the rest of the country. The region is home to the largest indigenous tribal communities, has a sensitive geographical location sharing its borders with five countries and has a rich biodiversity. It is recognized as the eastern gateway for India's "Look East Policy", owing to its huge untapped potential of natural resources. However, despite the unique features the region has remained isolated from the mainland and faces tremendous challenges of growth and development. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) strives to foster educational development of the region through its academic offerings and provides support through a network of around 200 active learner support centers (LSCs) under the nine RCs.

The paper presents an overview of IGNOU's interventions to extend its outreach in the NER, beginning with the North-East Project to the current activities through the dedicated unit, Educational Development of North East Region Unit, under Regional Services Division of the University. The paper also discusses the policy measures adopted and implemented to further strengthen the efforts for expansion of higher education as per mandate of IGNOU and Government of India. The prospects,

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possibilities through the use ICTs and digitalization initiatives for enhancing outreach in the region are also discussed.

North East Region: General Information

The NER is mostly a rugged hilly terrain comprising of eight states, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The region is strategically located sharing international boundaries with China in the North, Bangladesh in the South West, Bhutan in the North West and Myanmar in the East. A narrow corridor in North Bengal called “Siliguri neck” or “Chicken’s neck” connects the NER with the mainland of the country. Endowed with diverse flora and fauna, the region is flanked by plains on both sides of the river Brahmaputra and the Himalayan ranges surrounding it.

The other details pertaining to the NER are provided in Table1:

Table 1. General Information of NER

Indicators	Details
Area covered	2,62,185 sq km
Rainfall	Rainy season from March to October Highest 1080 cm in Cherapunji
Major plantation	Tea
Major crop	Rice
Major Minerals	Coal, Petroleum and Natural gas

Source: North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd. (NEDFi), 2017.

Agriculture is the predominant contributor to the economy of the NER. With a forest cover of nearly 66.1 % as against the national average of 21.1%, the region holds great promise and potential being one of the most biodiverse regions in the world. The NER accounts for 3.73% of the total population of the country with a Net Domestic Product of 2.6%. (CARD, 2017). The greatest wealth of the region is its human resource which has remained backward and alienated from the mainland and deprived of the requisite educational opportunities which are crucial for human development and for the growth of society.

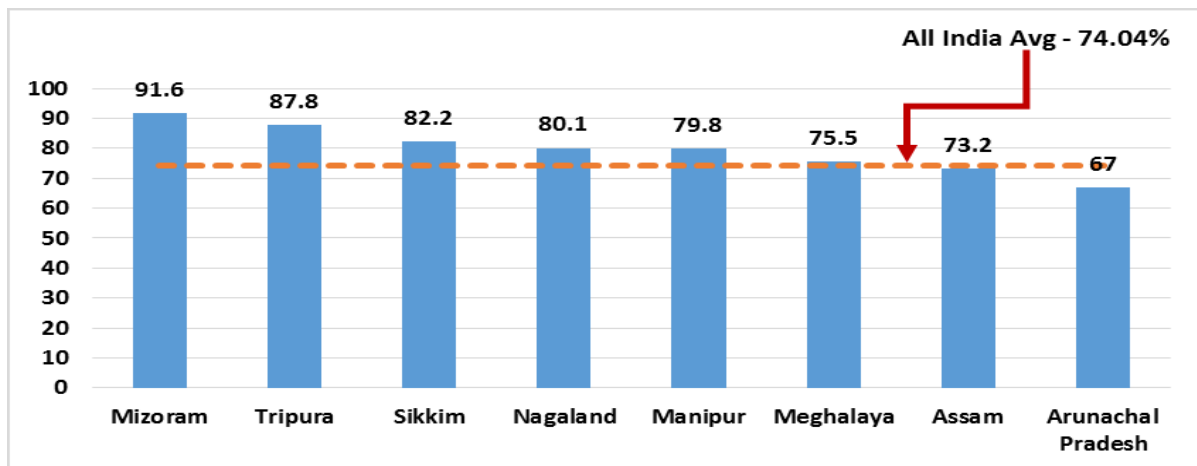
Keeping in view the challenges faced by the region the government has put in place mechanisms to facilitate educational development which has lagged in comparison with the rest of the country. In 1971, the North-East Council (NEC) was created and the Department of North East Region (DONER) was expanded to a full-fledged Ministry of DONER in 2004, for monitoring all plans and their implementation for development of NER. For state specific development of infrastructure, the Ministry of DONER has provisioned the Non-Lapsable Central Pool of Resources (NLCPR) and is also supported by the NEC for some key infrastructure projects. (MDONER, Annual Report 2015-16). The North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd. (NEDFi) established in 1995, functions for economic development of the region in line with its motto: “Championing the entrepreneurial spirit of the North East” (NEDFi, 2017). A demographic profile of the NER is provided in Table 2:

Table 2. Demographic Profile of the North East Region

States	Capital	No. of Districts	Date of Establishment of State	Area (Sq Km)	Population (2011 Census)	Density of Population Per Sqm	Literacy Rate (%)	Official Language
Arunachal Pradesh	Itanagar	20	20/02/1987	87743	1382611	16.5	66.95	English
Assam	Dispur	33	15/08/1947	78550	31169272	396.8	76.3	Assamese, Bodo, Bengali
Manipur	Imphal	16	21/01/1972	22347	2721756	121.8	79.85	Meiteilon
Meghalaya	Shillong	11	21/01/1972	22720	2964007	130.5	72.1	English, Garo, Hindi, Khasi, Pnar
Mizoram	Aizawl	8	20/02/1987	21081	1091014	51.8	89.9	English Mizo
Nagaland	Kohima	11	01/12/1963	16579	1980602	119	63.7	English
Sikkim	Gangtok	4	16/10/1975	7096	606688	85.6	76.6	Bhutia, Gurung, Lepcha, Limbu, Mangar, Nepali, Newari, Rai, Sherpa, Sunwar, Tamang
Tripura	Agartala	8	21/01/1972	1049169	3671032	349.9	87.75	Bengali, Kokborok

Source: Maps of India, 2011

The region is marked by a predominance of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes populations, which is 3030129 and 9752260, respectively as compared with 20,13,78,086 Scheduled Castes and 10,42,81,034 Scheduled Tribes in the country (Census India, 2011). The educational and vocational requirements of the large tribal and rural populace need to be addressed. The literacy rate is high and in some states such as Mizoram and Tripura, it is way higher than the national average literacy rate. This is reflected in Figure 1:



Source: Spectrum Planning (I) Ltd. (2016).

Figure 1. Literacy Level in North East Region

The demographic advantages need to be maximized by focusing the educational opportunities leading to educational, vocational and skill development of the region. (Pricewaterhouse Coopers Private Limited India. (2013).

Higher Education through Distance Mode in the NER

The NER faces tremendous challenges in providing equitable access to quality education at all levels, in general and higher education in particular owing to lack of institutions of higher education (Sharma, 1998). The expansion of higher education in the NER in independent India, began with the establishment of the University of Guwahati in 1948 and the number of higher education institutions have increased ever since in the region. As per UGC Annual Report 2016-2017, there are 10 Central universities, 13 State universities, 31 Private universities, 1 Deemed university and 924 Colleges in NER. (Boruah, 2018). However, the GER of the region remains low as compared with the national average, particularly in the states of Assam, Nagaland and Tripura.

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India is 25.8%, which is calculated for 18-23 years of age group. The distance mode of education contributes significantly for extending outreach of higher education and its contribution towards the GER of the country is about 11.0% of the total enrolment in higher education, of which 41.9% are female students. (AISHE 2017-18). Table 3 presents the GER in higher education of the NER in the last five years (2012 to 2017).

Table 3. Gross Enrolment Ratio in the North East Region in the last 5 years

Year	Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Manipur	Meghalaya	Mizoram	Nagaland	Tripura
2012-13	19	13.8	29.9	19.2	22.2	14.7	14.1
2013-14	26.1	15.8	37.7	19.3	23.2	15.4	15.4
2014-15	28.3	14.8	35.9	20.5	23.3	15.6	16.8
2015-16	28.7	15.4	34.2	20.8	24.1	14.9	16.9
2016-17	28.9	17.2	35	23.5	24.5	16.6	19.1

Source: Konwar, 2018

The Open and Distance learning systems through the National Open University IGNOU, one state open University and dual mode institutions, i.e., Gauhati University, Dibrugarh University, Tripura University, Rajib Gandhi University, Tezpur University and North Eastern Hill University through the respective Institutes and Directorates of Distance Education, have also accelerated the expansion of higher education in the region. The first State Open University in NER was the Krishna

KantaHandique State Open University (KKHSOU) at Guwahati, Assam in 2006. It was the 14th Open University in India. Table 4 presents the state wise contribution in higher education in the NER through the distance mode at various levels.

Table 4. State wise Enrolment in Higher Education in Distance Mode at various levels in NER (2017-18)

S. No.	State	Post Graduate	Under Graduate	PG Diploma	Diploma	Certificate	Total
1.	Arunachal	4511	10151	63	29	--	14754
2.	Assam	60202	40624	1943	6240	6	109015
3.	Manipur	3929	2578	45	31	--	6583
4.	Meghalaya	3968	4222	185	63	176	8614
5.	Mizoram	1707	3285	32	20	--	5044
6.	Nagaland	3679	2039	56	773	--	6547
7.	Sikkim	5245	2975	34	20	--	8274
8.	Tripura	8259	8984	131	5204	--	22578
Total in NER		91500	74858	2489	12380	182	181409

Source: (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2018).

The total enrolment through the distance mode in NER is 181409 as compared with the all India total of 4031594, for the year 2017-18. The enrolment data in higher education through distance mode is compiled from 1 Central Open University, 14 State Open Universities and 110 Dual Mode Universities. The contribution through distance mode in higher education in the NER is 4.5 percent of the total enrolment through distance mode in higher education in the country. (MHRD,2018) The conventional universities with the limited intake of students cannot attain the goals of educational development. Hence, the potential of the Open and Distance Learning institutions at the national and state levels have to be optimally and judiciously harnessed for the educational, economic and societal development of the region.

Genesis of IGNOU in the NER

IGNOU is a Central University established in 1985 by an Act of Parliament with the objective of democratizing higher education in a cost effective and equitable manner. Beginning in 1985 with two programmes and four thousand learners, IGNOU has attained the status of a mega university catering to the educational needs and aspirations of over three million learners across the country and overseas. IGNOU as the provider of higher education to the deprived and disadvantaged populace, through two hundred forty-one programmes at various levels has a key role to play in the educational development and in fostering socio-economic growth of the NER.

In keeping with the vision and mission of the government and its own mandate, IGNOU's initiative in the NER, began with the establishment of a Regional Centre (RC) in Shillong in 1988, followed by another RC in Guwahati in 1996. To further strengthen its efforts in mainstreaming the NER with greater focus, the North-East Project (NEP) was set up in IGNOU in the year 2000. The NEP was funded by the Ministry of Human Resource Development from its non-lapsable pool of funds and was renamed as Educational Development in the North-East Region Unit (EDNERU) in 2007. EDNERU was envisaged with the main objective of extending the outreach of IGNOU programmes to the remote and inaccessible parts of NER and equalize educational opportunities through different need based academic, skill based, vocational and entrepreneurial programmes.

EDNERU was restructured in the year 2013 by the University, keeping in view the background of the North East project fund and objectives vis-à-vis the emerging role and challenges of the RSD. As on date EDNERU functions as a distinct unit under the overall supervision of the RSD. The specific objectives of EDNERU are to:

- Establish a network of learner support centres across the NER.
- Undertake ICT based interventions to bridge physical and geographical barriers.
- Implement vocational, need based, entrepreneurial programmes to increase opportunities for employment and empowerment of the youth.
- Harness the potential of Open, Distance and Digital learning mechanisms to overcome the challenges of physical and social disadvantage encountered by aspiring learners of the region. (IGNOU 2011-12)

Progress of EDNERU

IGNOU operations through EDNERU are supported through a network of nine RCs at the following locations: Shillong(Meghalaya), Guwahati(Assam), Jorhat(Assam), Imphal(Manipur), Itanagar(Arunachal Pradesh), Kohima(Nagaland), Aizawl(Mizoram), Agartala(Tripura) and Gangtok(Sikkim). Since inception, the North-East RCs have shown a steady increase in student enrolment. There is need to examine and assess the progressive enrolment trends in all the nine RCs and review IGNOU's presence through various initiatives undertaken for educational and vocational development in the NER.

IGNOU programmes have shown a favorable response in the NER which is reflected in the enrolment trends of the past few years. The total enrolment of the NER for the year 2018 is **69965**. The year wise cumulative enrolment in the NER from 2013-2018 is depicted in Table 5 and Figure 1, below:

8

Table 5. Year Wise Enrollment (Fresh & Re Registration - Jan & July) in the NER 2013 to 2018

S.No.	Year of Establishment	Regional Centre	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
1	2001	Agartala	4917	7778	5898	5827	10983	7278	42681
2	2000	Aizwal	7623	8348	5881	6200	5323	8493	41868
3	2000	Gangtok	5372	5555	5731	5272	4463	4655	31048
4	1996	Guwahati	9418	8446	9740	10216	11984	13726	63530
5	2000	Imphal	5381	8463	8949	6966	7121	6366	43246
6	2000	Itanagar	9127	6499	8142	10371	10520	10446	55105
7	2013	Jorhat	2504	4067	5871	6171	6834	6808	32255
8	2000	Kohima	3498	4323	4624	3926	3559	3868	23798
9	1988	Shillong	8260	8450	9576	9074	8778	8325	52463
		Total	56100	61929	64412	64023	69565	69965	385994

Source: Database of Student Registration Division, IGNOU, New Delhi, 2018-19

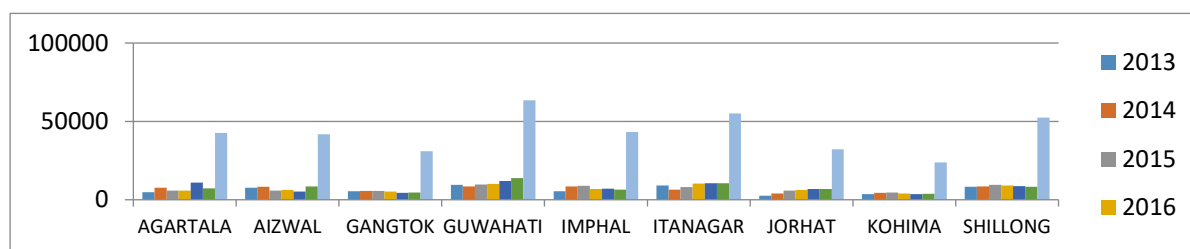


Figure 2. Year Wise Enrollment (Fresh & Re Registration - Jan & July) in the NER 2013 to 2018

IGNOU strives to provide seamless access for education, training and skill upgradation through its academic offerings at various levels ranging from Certificate to Post graduate degree and Ph.D. levels. The programmes are offered in the self-instructional format adopting multiple media based on open and distance learning pedagogy. Human interface is provided to the learners at the learner support centres numbering nearly 200 in the NER. Learners support services are provided under the overall coordination and supervision of the respective RCs. NER has witnessed a steady growth in the LSCs in all the nine RCs in the last five years.

To provide support services to the learners the nine RCs operate through a network of **193** functional Learner Support Centres as depicted in Table 6 below:

Table 6. Number of Functional LSCs in the NE RCs

S. No.	Name of RC	Year of establishment of RC	Number of LSC
1.	Agartala	2001	17
2.	Aizawal	2000	40
3.	Gangtok	2000	8
4.	Guwahati	1996	24
5.	Imphal	2000	18
6.	Itanagar	2000	8
7.	Jorhat	2013	23
8.	Kohima	2000	22
9.	Shillong	1988	33
		Total	193

Source: Database of Regional Services Division, IGNOU, New Delhi, 2018-19

Several types of programmes are activated at the LSCs depending on the need and requirement of the target population in the region. It is also pertinent to examine the presence of IGNOU LSCs in each district of the operational area of the RC, as mandated by IGNOU. The outreach of IGNOU through its LSCs district wise is provide in Table 7 below:

Table 7. District wise presence of IGNOU in each RC

S.No.	Name of RC	Total No. of Districts	Number of Districts Covered	Number of Districts Uncovered
1.	Agartala	8	8	NIL
2.	Aizawal	8	8	NIL
3.	Gangtok	4	4	NIL
4.	Guwahati	19	14	5
5.	Imphal	16	12	4
6.	Itanagar	20	13	7
7.	Jorhat	13	13	NIL
8.	Kohima	11	11	NIL
9.	Shillong	11	10	1
	Total No. of Districts	110	93	17

Source: Database of Regional Services Division, IGNOU, New Delhi, 2018-19

Most of the RCs in the NER have established LSCs in each district under the jurisdiction. Efforts are underway by those RCs wherein IGNOU needs to extend its outreach through academic programmes and/or other interventions based on GOI schemes and its own mandate.

Recent IGNOU Interventions in the NER

Some of the focused measures adopted by the University in the NER through its RC and LSC are delineated as follows:

➤ **North East Council for IGNOU Regional Centres**

In a recent initiative, the university took a considered decision to adopt a holistic approach for the development of NER, considering the commonality of social, political and cultural aspects. The approach would “facilitate mapping of educational resources available in the region, preserving and promoting indigenous knowledge, assess skill development needs and meet specific educational requirements of different sectors”. (IGNOU, 2017) This led to the creation of a North-East Council for IGNOU Regional Centres (NECIRC) in November 2016, founded on the principle of a “Cooperative of Regional Centres” to accelerate the pace of educational development of the region. The Secretariat was established in Shillong, and Regional Directors would be conveners of the Council on rotation basis. The overarching goal of the NECIRC is to promote social harmony and foster inclusive growth and development of the NER emphasizing human development and capacity building. In addition to the fund outlay for activities under the EDNERU, a budgetary provision has been made exclusively under the head of NECIRC to boost developmental activities as per its vision, mission and mandate. (IGNOU, 2018-19).

➤ **Village Adoption Initiatives in NER under Unnat Bharat Abhiyan Scheme of Government of India**

The MHRD, Government of India (GOI) launched the Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA) in 2014 for upliftment of the rural population through its Village Adoption Scheme by involving the higher education institutions of the country. The programme aims to connect the professional organizations and higher education institutions with the villages through interventions by the Higher Education Institutions. IGNOU has taken this opportunity for rural upliftment by adopting villages through its network of Regional Centres. Some of the activities undertaken by Regional Centres in the NER in general include the following:

- ❖ Skill and competency enhancement programmes such as COF (Certificate in Organic Farming), APDF (Awareness Programme in Dairy Farming), CIB (Certificate in Bee Keeping), CPF (Certificate in Poultry Farming), CLP (Computer Literacy Programme) have been activated in consultation with village community.
- ❖ Meetings and discussions held with members of PRI, teachers, villagers, members of the Gram Sabha and NGO activists for identification of issues in education and skills enhancement to enable focused interventions.
- ❖ Wide publicity to the fee exemption scheme for SC /ST candidates, for admission to raise the number of beneficiaries under the scheme, especially from remote rural areas.
- ❖ On spot admission campaigns to integrate the rural population with the mainstream, through education.
- ❖ Awareness building measures through Information leaflets and pamphlets with details of programmes on offer, study centres in the region etc, have been distributed free of cost in the villages.
- ❖ Health education and sanitation camps organized for women and children.
- ❖ Promotion of distance learning among the weaver community and tribal populations. (IGNOU, 2017)

➤ **Extending Outreach and Lifelong Learning Opportunity to Jail Inmates**

IGNOU in its special drive provides free education to the Jail inmates housed in the Special Study Centres established in Central and District Jails across the country. IGNOU started its Centres in Jails way back in 1994 with one Centre in Tihar Jail with a nominal enrolment. As in July 2019, 177 IGNOU special study centres exist in Jails across India. The RCs undertake

the responsibility of facilitate learning in Jail centres. IGNOU's drive for promoting inclusive education can be strengthened by providing educational opportunities to jail inmates in the district and central jails located across the NER. IGNOU Special SCs in Jails are located only in four states as follows:

1. District Jail, Kamrup Metro, Guwahati (Assam)
2. District Jail, Imphal East District (Manipur)
3. Central Jail, Aizawl District (Mizoram)
4. District Jail, East Khasi Hills (Meghalaya)

Central and District Jails located in the NER in different states can be a potential catchment area for IGNOU interventions for providing opportunities to jail inmates for leading better lives. The Computer Literacy Programme and other relevant programmes like, Certificate in Human Rights, Food and Nutrition programmes can be offered to the prisoners. Educational empowerment of the jail inmates facilitates improvement in their life quality and rehabilitation in society after release from the jail.

Future Prospects through IGNOU in the NER

The NER is grappling with major obstacles for overall development such as insurgencies, ethnic clashes, political turmoil which according to World Bank, has led to poverty, non- development, civil conflict and lack of faith in political leadership. Some of the major challenges encountered for educational development of the populace and thus in mainstreaming them are:

- Difficult geographical terrain
- Ethnic clashes, civil conflict and political unrest
- Insurgencies in Nagaland and other areas
- Shortage of skilled workforce in spite of high literacy rate
- Lesser number of Science/Technical Institutes
- Poor quality Higher education
- Poor telephone & Internet/Broad band Connectivity especially BSNL

A report on the Status and Prospects of IT/ITeS Sector in NER reveals that quality of higher education is major concern. The number of Science and Technical Institutes is comparatively lesser and major IT companies are reluctant for "mass scale" recruitment in NER due to poor response. The positives cited in the report state that literacy levels are higher in the region than the national average and the younger workforce is English speaking which has resulted in their placement in BPO(Voice) jobs. (Spectrum Planning(I) Ltd. 2016). A study (Price Waterhouse Cooper 2013) has reported a wide gap in the demand and supply of workforce in the NER. The report estimated that between 2011-21, the NER will have 2.6 million jobs as against a supply of 17 million people by that period. This implies an excess of 14 million job seekers in the region alone.

The way forward is through all round development in all sectors including educational, vocational and skill development. There is a need to harness the high literacy potential in the region through regular training and skill upgradation of the target groups. Progressive increase in contribution to the GER, point to the fact that ODL systems can meet the twin objectives of access and equity by providing quality higher education to the masses. Daniel, J. (as cited in Kumar, Chaudhary and Shankar, 2008) posits that economies of scale have achieved qualities of scale.

A mega university with national and international recognition, IGNOU functions to synergize education, culture, language and training for human resource development and is committed for providing equitable access to quality higher education in the country. Initiatives through IGNOU are needed to strengthen efforts of the University for educational development of the NER as per the mandate of Government of India and IGNOU. The prospective areas of enhancing outreach through continuing, extension and lifelong learning programmes and academic interventions of IGNOU are suggested as follows:

1. **Training and Competency Development of Youth and their Certification:** There is need to empower and enhance the entrepreneurial and employability potential of the youth in the region. The University can propose to tie up with software majors, such as IITs, NITs, NSIC and provide training in IT and soft skills thus rendering them employable (Sharma, 2010).
2. **Developing Short term need based programmes:** The workforce engaged in the farming of locally grown products such as bamboo, mushroom, cane, and involved in local occupations such as bee keeping, dairy farming, organic farming, need to be trained and upskilled. IGNOU can develop short term need based academic programmes for such a target group. This can be promoted through collaborations with reputed organizations like National Institute of Fashion Design, Nagaland Bamboo Development agency, Dimapur, Patanjali Food Processing Unit, Balipara, Industrial Training Institutes in all States, DRDP Tezpur, Public Health Departments (IGNOU 2017).
3. **Translation of IGNOU course material into local languages:** Many programmes of IGNOU such as Certificate in Food and Nutrition, Certificate in Poultry Farming, Certificate in Beekeeping, Certificate in Tourism Studies, Diploma in Tourism Studies, and several other vocation oriented programmes which are relevant to local needs and requirements can be proposed for translation into regional languages such as Khasi, Assamese, Mizo and others.
4. **Digital Initiatives:**
 - a) **Digital Resource Centres:** IGNOU can establish its Regional Centres as Digital Resource Centres (DRC). DRCs can be equipped with free to air satellite services using Gyan Darshan and Gyan Vani channels, i.e., the dedicated educational radio and television channels of IGNOU. There is need to revive and revitalize IGNOU GyanVani station in each RC. In locations where there are no GV Stations, GV can be launched through All India Radio. The supplemental academic interventions through educational radio and television have significantly impacted the teaching learning systems in the NER (Bordoloi and Das, 2012)
 - b) **Improved Infrastructure and ICT facilities at the RC and LSC:** The quantum and scale of learner support operations in IGNOU is vast. IGNOU must provide internet and broadband facilities at all LSCs and leased line facility for the RC for improved connectivity with learners, LSC and RC. This will also ensure timely and effective communication at all levels of IGNOU operations. The delivery of academic programmes and student support services can be further strengthened if the RC is fully equipped with the provisioned manpower.
 - c) **Community Radio:** Outreach of IGNOU programmes can be further enhanced by setting up community radio stations. It will benefit learners from rural tribal areas. KKHSOU, Guwahati pioneered the first community radio of the North East, "Gnan Taranga". The second community radio in the region, "Radio Luit", was under the IDOL, Guwahati University (Bordoloi and Das, 2012).
5. **Extending Outreach by opening LSC in the Uncovered Districts:** The RC having districts uncovered by IGNOU should expeditiously explore and open LSC in such districts.
6. **Creation of Research/Project Cell at each RC:** IGNOU RCs are academic resource centres in the region. The academics in the RC should be engaged in research projects based on themes relevant to the educational, vocational and entrepreneurial development of the region. A dedicated Research/Project Cell can be created with budgetary provision under "Research"

head, allocated under Plan funds to facilitate research and development activities for overall inclusive and holistic development of the region.

7. **Utilization of NECIRC Forum:** Activities through the platform of NECIRC can be strengthened and used to provide access to quality education through the Open Distance Learning system to people living in every nook and corner of the NER. Quarterly meetings of the NECIRC as per its mandate need to be convened to chalk out strategies and plans for capacity building of the workforce and human resource development. Generating awareness at the grass root level about ICT and promoting its acceptance among the rural and tribal masses can be taken up by the Council on priority.
8. **Modularizing Certificate/Awareness Programmes of IGNOU:** The Certificate/Awareness level programmes of IGNOU can be encapsulated into short duration training programmes and contextualized as per local needs. RCs can propose to modularize/encapsulate IGNOU programmes in the areas of agriculture and food processing, organic farming, horticulture, dairy farming, poultry, fisheries, meat technology, bee keeping, sericulture, tourism and hospitality sector, health care waste management, IT/business skills, textiles, garments, handicrafts, rural development, social work, food and nutrition etc. The RC can coordinate with the respective School of Study in IGNOU for operational procedures and certification.
9. **Continuous Training of In-service Professionals:** Specific education and training opportunities can be provided to in-service professionals through academic interventions by IGNOU. Capacity building programmes for in-service school and college teachers-can be organized.
10. **Unnat Bharat Abhiyan Interventions in the rural areas** may be further strengthened with support of LSCs in the region and other academic interventions through IGNOU activities and programmes. Some areas suggested for skill development under the UBA scheme are, developing programmes for villages on local trade e.g., piggery among Ahom community, encourage direct sale of handloom and handicraft keeping middlemen at bay, promote local produce such as special honey, , bamboo, pickle etc., documentation of traditional knowledge regarding medicinal herbs found in abundance in the NER (IGNOU, 2017).

Conclusion

IGNOU has a key role and responsibility in attaining educational development of the NER as per its mandate, vision and mission. The nine RCs in the eight states through their nearly two hundred learner support centres constantly strive to provide learning support and facilitate inclusive growth. The recent initiatives through EDNERU, NECIRC as described above hold great promise and potential in overcoming the challenges of growth and development being faced by the aspiring learners of NER. The university through its focused and concerted efforts aims to further enhance its outreach, foster holistic development and thus contribute significantly for integration of the region with the mainland.

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- The Paper is an improved version of the presentation by the author in the National Conference, "Vision 2025: Connecting North East India through Open and Distance Learning", held in Jorhat on 8th and 9th July, 2017.
- Database and Records of Regional Services Division and Student Registration Division of IGNOU accessed by the author and referred to in the paper are as follows:
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