

# Defence Education Consortium : Requirement of a Paradigm Shift

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## Introduction

One of the most contemporary requirements of our system of higher education is to increase access and to ensure equity so that our young minds are ignited and motivated extensively to accept emerging challenges for the development and welfare of our country.”<sup>1</sup> This in nutshell redefines the nature of the systemic frame desired to deliver higher education, to make it more relevant for a developed society. Today’s distance education movement has grown by leaps and bounds and has created a mammoth educational structure to provide off-campus learning opportunities for millions of adults.

Much of the modern distance education experience over the years has originated from early experiences of the American Wisconsin University and ideas from Oxford and Cambridge Universities’ concept of extension classes, and later the British Open University experiments. Till recent times the concept and delivery services of distance education remained more or less the same world over. The advent of advanced technologies in the fields of IT and Communications in the last few decades and their penetration to every field of human existence has of late, revolutionised much of the modalities of distance education. The Distance Education Council and Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has contributed immensely towards the growth of distance education in India. Further, if the National Knowledge Commission recommendations are accepted by the Government, it would revolutionise the concept of distance learning and will bring education within reach of every citizen as never thought of before. This off campus education concept has helped many social groups to access higher education, which was not possible a few years ago. These benefits have helped organisations to reschedule their training mechanisms and cut down on expenditures. This has also helped the employees acquire professional/higher education to enhance career opportunities in the same system. Moreover it has given hope to those working classes who has to look for a second career after a limited period of enlistment like the military services. The privatisation of education has also resulted in creation of world class educational facilities everywhere, offering contemporary subjects and bringing such facilities closer home.

The Armed Forces have not remained immune to this revolution and have tried to use many of its facets for enhancement of education of its men. For a mobile working force like ours distance learning has opened up many possibilities. Synergy between the education bodies and the Armed Forces can create perfect conditions where service personnel can fulfill their aspirations of attaining academic growth while serving at distant places. To start with, the Services Headquarters have got into agreements with various Universities/autonomous institutions to take the benefit of Distance Education programmes. This has been helping some officers and men to acquire higher education. There is an unmistakable link between social attitude and military discipline and motivation. In a larger sense the soldier’s attitude reflects the social paradigm.<sup>2</sup> A larger number of officers and men in Services would try to integrate with the society in a much more honourable way, through higher education and using the skills acquired during their service. However, there are basic underlying difficulties which are causing a bottleneck in the flow towards higher education. These are:

- (a) Lack of sensitivity in academic community / educational institutions towards cohesive, cost effective and quality academic platform for the Services people.
- (b) Non availability of national institutions to provision degree/courses in the language of choice of the student.
- (c) Lack of cohesion in assessing the high quality service training / qualification and experience of personnel and equating it with suitable credit wavers for a desired degree.
- (d) Lack of focus by UGC/Universities in the basic educational modalities required for personnel in Defence & Paramilitary Forces.

## Defence Education Consortium (DEC)

India has a 1.5 : 1000, soldier : citizen ratio which makes a significant presence of military trained manpower in an educationally impoverished nation.<sup>3</sup> It is in this context that we take recourse to look at the impact of education boom in this country vis a vis the desire of personnel of Defence and Para Military Forces. Despite changes in social values and numerous occupational alternatives available, a certain type of youth will continue to be attracted to military life. This type is the mainstay of this voluntary force. The Armed Forces should be so managed externally and internally that he is not deterred from joining; and having joined, he should find the ethos, values, culture, challenges and rewards that he sought in the military life.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore inherent that this volunteer force is protected and groomed to find a footing post military engagement. This will not only motivate the personnel and also create a disciplined educated work force (post retirement) for the Nation. The human resources planning of Indian Armed forces over the years has catered for systemic guidelines on the human resource issues and integration of civil and military organisation to address it so as to enable attracting best people towards service career.<sup>5</sup> The National defence policy does maintain the kind of significant role that civil organisations can play in the strategic human resources planning.

The United States of America has through various legislations (GI Act etc..) created a conducive educational environment for its enlisted men and women. A large number of personnel have benefited from various such measures. One of the most popular projects run by the defence authorities is the United States Armed Forces

Service Members Opportunity Colleges. It is in this context one can probably think of such a provision in our country too. Looking at the future engagement scenario of our Armed Forces, it would be a useful and meaningful step. A DEC model for the Services would bring in all educational bodies to one platform and find a long term solution to the educational need of the Services personnel. The model proposed here envisages an educational grid, where all willing Universities/Deemed Universities can be brought together to make it possible for the Armed Forces and Para Military personnel and to begin a degree with one of them and complete it as they get transferred to different places during their service careers. This provides flexibility in the following:

- (a)** Selection of mode / language of study.
- (b)** Choose place of university (home state), which can help him getting the final result and follow up with higher academic pursuits post retirement in his native place. A home station university is preferred because of language (medium) preference and opportunities available in the particular state.
- (c)** Select a programme/course of his choice.
- (d)** Use credit for the training and experience he has acquired in service.
- (e)** Resources of local universities in terms of counsellors & educational facilities such as study centres, libraries and laboratories etc can be easily shared.
- (f)** Easier monitoring of student records, and personnel can easily approach the functionaries whenever on leave.
- (g)** Easier administration of academics and direct advice / assistance.

Under the DEC concept an inter university organisation supervised by a body like UGC/ with the participation of representatives from Ministry of Defence (MOD) and member universities will have to be formed where willing Universities/Deemed Universities will join to facilitate education to Defence and Para Military personnel. This body can create an equitable plan of credits for variety of courses taking into consideration their military service and training and offer courses at lower fees to the personnel recommended by MOD. All Universities who join DEC will have the freedom to examine each other's courses and provisions to accept them. The DEC handbook should list all the courses for which transfer is guaranteed through study centres run by members. Syllabi/credit of popular courses are required to be redrawn to enable different programmes to have part credit acquisition through trade/specialisation qualification acquired in service. A 'Credit Evaluation Body'(CEB) would function under DEC and will evaluate military experiences and training and will draw a 'Course Card' amplifying the nature of credits required for the course offered and the credits waived for the Course on account of military service and courses undergone. In addition, one gets DEC credit by taking various tests designed for this purpose. Validation of Service Credit can be done through one of the following methods:

- (a)** Successful completion of a comprehensive examination or a nationally standardised examination that is approved by the DEC.
- (b)** Successful completion of a higher-level course in the same subject in the respective service schools in the areas as approved by the DEC.
- (c)** Students who have completed certain years of field service in the armed forces may also be given academic credit of certain semester hours of Science/Arts.

A "My Home University" opted by a person would provide him admission to a particular course and language (medium) of his choice, and the student would get the final degree certificate from this University only (Refer to Figure). All universities will strive to design courses so as to meet one 'Degree' requirement. A guaranteed transfer of credits from one to another will ensure that personnel can move within the Study Centres of affiliated Universities (DEC) during the course of their service career. All credits earned by the student will be transferred back to 'My University', which will grant him degree on successful completion of the programme. The affiliated University Study Centres will help the student in his academic activities in liaison with local defence/paramilitary units. This will include provision of counsellors, evaluation of assignments, provision of library, provision of practical/laboratory session etc. This should be worked out in consultation with local defence authorities to provide local University (if DEC member) centres closest to the unit for easy access. All courses, which do not have residency, can be easily offered through correspondence/ online. Similarly, courses where practical attendance is required for fulfillment of the degree, provision be created to acquire it in the DEC Study Centres.

The combination of credits earned in service alongwith the actual courses one takes at DEC, eventually will provide the student the stock of credits as defined under the charter for a University degree.



### Figure

The MOD is required to create provisions under the Services' Headquarters to ensure that a part of the entire exercise is coordinated by the users. This would require provisioning of space for Liaison Office to be manned by service personnel (from the education cadre) to guide students to nearest DEC centres and courses offered. Study Centres at far flung units to be manned and run by the DEC/Local University in the manner Kendriya Vidyalayas are managed in defence sector, otherwise all study centres to be run at University affiliated colleges closest to the service units. The University enrolled in the DEC grid will be required to administer the entire programme/course with the help of the University staff at the Services designated location. The administration of the entire project will have to be undertaken by the DEC's / Universities under the guidance of the administrator appointed by the University. This DEC administrator will advise the University to create DEC centres in the University locations to handle issues related to service personnel. All financial transactions, related to admission/re-registration payment to counselling, assignment evaluation and counselling programme co-ordination in the area, are to be handled by the DEC centres regulated by the Universities.

All personnel volunteering for the courses will commence their educational journey at the Service (Army/Navy/Air Force/Paramilitary) Liaison Centres (LC) where they would be advised to select an appropriate programme and will be allotted the DEC Centre. As the personnel keep moving to new duty stations, they will be allotted their new DEC centres under same/new university by the new unit Liaison Office. The 'Student's Course Card', containing details of credits waived and credits required to be studied, will be presented to the new DEC Centre who will help the student select the credits/courses he needs to follow for completion of his Programme in the New University. Each personnel under the scheme has to ensure the following:-

- (a) Take admission at a DEC University of their choice ('My University'). They will be required to submit all the necessary documents on service qualifications, military experience and any other educational qualification to the DEC centre for waiver of credits etc.
- (b) On transfer to a new duty station the liaison office would allot him a local university study centre. The credits gained at the new place have to be sent back to "My University" for updation of his dossier.
- (c) Ensure that from time to time additional military training and occupational experience are sent to DEC for waiver of credits.
- (d) After completion of the credits and clearing the relevant examinations as required under the programme the student would request "My University" for the final Degree Certificate.

### Modalities of Distance Education

A majority of the youth joining the Services are keen to undertake higher studies. However, the basic structure of distance education pattern has kept many of them away from these courses. Many who do join a course, get disillusioned because of the inadequate support they get from their service institutions. In addition to these problems following realities would always stay with the man in uniform:-

- (a) Military training and deployment of trained personnel for the defence of the country is the primary role of the soldiers in uniform. All are required to meet that responsibility first. Rest all follows, only as a welfare measure.
- (b) Difficulty in Services HQS to create and administer parallel college/educational structure for officers and men for the sole purpose of higher education, is likely to effect the overall efficacy of the armed forces.
- (c) Non availability of quality time, to indulge in prolonged educational studies while in uniform.
- (d) Non availability of University pattern educational facility, counselling ambience and resources close to their service units.
- (e) Difficulty in attending classes and examinations as prescribed by the Universities.

Advances in technology have thrown open many possibilities to fight multifarious issues related to educational benefits to the society. Many institutions and universities are employing these techniques. The modalities discussed here are not new, however through this paper, an effort has been made to draw specific attention to methods which could be more appropriate to meet the requirement of students in service. One such endeavour would be creation of an online DEC learning platform. This can also be used to provision link to the DEC university web resources for e-learning modules. The eligibility condition for enrollment to such institutions can be determined by the DEC and listed in the web site. Students will have options to choose course and university for their degrees. The service institutions shall facilitate Internet facility for such exercises in cohesion with the DEC. Personnel will be able to earn bachelors, and master's degrees, as well as professional certificates, from the member Universities. This complete model with internet platform and a multi-university educational grid would be able address a few issues hitherto ignored or not available in conventional scenario, some of them are discussed in succeeding paragraphs.

It is a lot easier for non uniformed men to programme their study as per the university schedules. However for the service personnel to stick to a fixed schedule of class and examination is a difficult proposition because of the service compulsions. Units, which have access to DEC online, can facilitate 'anytime examination' by downloading the exam papers in advance through post. These exams can be conducted at any day/time within a particular 'exam window' provisioned every quarter. Mobile Examination Team appointed by DEC may conduct the examinations at centres which do not have online access at a Centre chosen by the nearest service formation on stipulated dates and collect the papers and send them for evaluation. This will solve the problem of the student travelling to distant places for the examination. Each candidate may be allowed the time frame for programme and attempt terms for examinations as per DEC stipulations.

Central counselling and direct role by Universities/DEC. The failing standard of educational institutions is a matter of concern for all. Action research approach towards quality education is a very innovative idea and needs to be worked upon to fine-tune the system. Lack of availability of quality counsellors to conduct counselling and attend to assignments at remote areas would be one of the difficult areas. The local Universities are to create a mobile panel of counsellors who as per a programme would visit places and deal with the subjects. Universities themselves have to exercise their quality assessment powers to scrutinise them personally. Lack of good counsellors lead to a disinterested student. Same would apply to the practical assessment also. The mobile panel would be responsible for all academic activities including assignment evaluation etc. The student should have access to these counsellors through telephone/mobile/radio.

Most of the central Universities/institutions have fixed medium of study thus forcing students to learn in a language other than their preferred Indian languages. Through the DEC concept these issues can be addressed by taking support of My-University for study material and question papers in the preferred language and provisioning academic support through resources in the local affiliated DEC University/institutions.

The corporate sector could be involved in this exercise so as to generate second career opportunities under the DEC platform through sponsoring of certain programmes. As courses imparted will be monitored by Universities they will have credible bearing. Courses can be structured in such a manner that residency can be conducted towards the retirement part of the career. Personnel qualifying in such sponsored courses can be suitably placed for post retirement employment with proper university degrees.

## Conclusion

Ex-Servicemen (ESM) need to be rehabilitated in civil life after their release, on account of their truncated career in the Armed Forces. About 55,000 service personnel either retire or released each year and a majority of them prefer to settle down near their hometown. Accordingly, resettlement and welfare of ESM has been accepted as a joint responsibility of the Centre and State governments. Both have introduced a number of schemes for welfare of ESM, and to provide them rehabilitation through provision of re-employment in the organised sector or through self-employment schemes. The benefits and concessions provided by the State governments to ESM and their dependants vary from state to state.

The prime time of life spent by our soldiers, on duty in service of the Nation, is a sacrifice for the real cause of providing security of the society. This high stressed group should be rehabilitated in most befitting manner. The universities can play a key role in rendering educational assistance and preparing them for their second career in civil society in a better way. A suitable education scheme can bridge the gap. Analyses reveals that an ESM has very few things going for him, though he is probably the only true Indian<sup>8</sup>. All leading educational bodies in the Country need to accept the fact that the men in uniform are required to be given a helping hand and to see that the service personnel enrolled for a course and degree are not seen as a commercial entity. They are trained, disciplined and law abiding citizens and have spent the best years of their lives at the frontline. They can be better used to further the cause of the society by educating them honourably and allowing them a positive role - of their choice. In this way, they will help in creating a large pool of contented and useful citizens who will add to the strength of the Nation.

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