

RETHINKING LEARNER SUPPORT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Abstract

In this paper an attempt has been made to study the status of student support system and highlight the problems faced by the distance learners and some suggestions to address their problems. This paper is the outcome of interaction with distance learners during the PCP of ICDEOL, H. P. University at MLSM College, Sundernagar. Further in this paper a case has been made to rethink and re-plan about the planning and development of human and material resources required in distance education by the end of the 11th five-year plan and beginning of 12th five year plan. The system is all poised for a big leap, and it is at this stage decision makers need to discuss about the strategies to cope with the problems and develop the distance education system in a more relevant and sustainable way. It is established fact that recognizing the qualified human resource is key to sustainable development of any system would result in a system that provides better qualitative outputs and outcomes at a time when the resilience of the system is subjected to test. Not giving thoughts to the needs of the system in terms of the human resources will bring the system more criticisms in implementation than laurels that the theoretical principles of distance education will boast of. As such there is every danger in "Great Plans with little Planning". In other words every people always try to add value to their competence in their bid to advance their carrier further. Distance Education is also very cheaper to compare with regular mode of education. Distance education has greatly reduced the wall of distance between education and a normal student beyond the long distance of home or work place to university.

Key Words: *Human and Material Resources, Correspondence Education, DEC and Open Learning.*



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Introduction

The term distance education is known by a variety of names, viz. home study, independent study, external study, correspondence education, off campus study, open learning and open education etc. Correspondence education means that where education is provided to the students sitting at their places through study material, supported by audio visual technology keeping in view their needs and level of understanding. With the advancement of technology and developing of electronic media, correspondence institutes supplement the study material with Radio, TV, Videotapes and Teleconferencing. Due to these new developments the name correspondence education has changed to Distance Education which has wider and effective implications and in the year 1982 International Copyright © 2017, Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies

Council for Correspondence Education changed its name to International Council for Distance Education. This type of system of education enables the all nations of the world to provide equality of opportunities for education for the larger segment of population remained uncovered by traditional system of education. Distance education is neither a supplement nor a mere alternative to the conventional system, but a new stage in the evolution of education which recognises the fact that in many situations, it is easier to transport knowledge to people than transport people to the place of knowledge. According to Report prepared by Simon Fraser University and Tele Education NB, (1998) distance education in all countries of the world, has evolved through broadly three phases: First: 1889-1960s - Correspondence Education Phase; Second: 1970-1980 - Open and Distance Education Phase and Third: 1990s – onwards - Online education phase. Distance Education has played an important role in imparting education for millions of Indian people for many decades. The first statement was cleared in (1964-66) by Education Commission and then pilot projects on correspondence education was introduced in Delhi University in 1962 and introduced distance education programmes in the form of correspondence courses. The development of distance education in India can be traced back in three stages. In India too DE has passed through the same three stages, only the timings were different.

1. Pre-take-off Stage (1962-1970): This stage is referred as the germination stage. Ministry of Education, Govt. of India appointed an expert committee for alternative education with an objective to work out a relevant scheme of correspondence education for our countrymen. The expert committee suggested that University of Delhi to undertake a pilot project of correspondence education. Shortly after the report of the expert committee on education, Delhi University made a modest beginning by establishing Department of Correspondence Course in 1968 which was followed by the Meerut and Mysore Universities, in establishing Department of Correspondence Education 1969.

2. Take-off Stage (1971-80): During 1971-80, more universities started distance teaching units viz. Punjab University Chandigarh (1971), Andhra and Sri Venkateshwara (1972), CIEFL Hyderabad (1973), Patna University (1074), Bhopal Utkal and Bombay (1975), Maduraj-Kamraj, Jammu, Kashmir, Rajasthan (1976), Osmania and Kerala (1977), Allahabad and SNDT (Women's) Bombay (1978), Annamalai and Udaipur Universities. The movement of distance education started which slowly and gradually gathered momentum so that it could enter the take-off stage. During take-off stage in the history of development of distance education many universities established correspondence courses institutes which provided a

major thrust to distance education. Besides, a number of institutes also started postgraduate courses and some diploma/certificate courses.

3. Drive for Maturity Stage (1981- onwards): Distance education in the country got a big push during the seventies, when more and more universities took distance education as an alternative mode of education. The State Open Universities came into existence in response to social needs for designing innovative educational structures, which could overcome the limitations of the conventional system of education. The Govt. of Andhra Pradesh made the momentous decision to establish Andhra Pradesh Open University in 1982, presently Known as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University at Hyderabad. Latter, a strong demand was made in various quarters about the need of establishment of an Apex Open University, which could coordinate the work of all Directorates in the country. As a result, in September 1985, the Government of India decided to set up the Indira Gandhi National Open University at New Delhi. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was established. The University (IGNOU) presently has many Study Centers spread all over the country. In practical sense, the subjects like science, engineering, management courses, computers, health and nutrition, the students are expected to undergo a compulsory course of practical. Very few Directorates/Institutes have developed Science Programmes through distance education e.g. Annamalai has developed its own laboratories of regular colleges/University Departments for this purpose. During eighties a Joint Committee of University Grant Commission (UGC) and Distance Education Council (DEC) appointed in organizing planned transformation of the Correspondence Course Institutions (CCLs). Unfortunately, the plight of distance education institutions in the country could not emerge as an independent sub system within the system of conventional system of education because of the problems like promotion policies, appointment of staff and inadequate training and research programmes in distance education. National Knowledge Commission Report 2005 reveals that 'distance education is provided by open universities and correspondence courses offered by Distance Education Institutions (DEIs) of conventional universities. Almost one fifth students enrolled in higher education in India are receiving education through the distance mode, i.e. through the open universities or through the correspondence courses of traditional universities. Given the rapid expansion required in higher education in India, open and distance education can play an extremely significant role in meeting the increased demand for higher education. Moreover, there is an unprecedented opportunity with regard to technology especially in the form of open courseware. However, problems relating to quality as well as brand equity of distance

education persist. In India there are 14 Open Universities: 13 State Open Universities and one National Open University – Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). The quality and delivery mechanisms of distance education provided by correspondence courses are relatively poor. Most correspondence courses are instituted as a mode of resource generation in view of the unmet demand for higher education. Further, the resources thus earned are not used for the improvement of the correspondence programs. Therefore, quality concerns become secondary to those of numbers and income. Due to inadequate mechanisms of quality control and regulation, students graduating from both regular courses and correspondence courses get the same degree, despite sharp differences in quality of pedagogical process and achievement.’

Now at this point it is important to define; what is meaning of distance education? Distance education implies education being imparted to students by the teacher despite physical distance. Distance Education Council (DEC) an apex body for distance education in the country established in 1991 under section 5(2) of Indira Gandhi National Open University Act (1985) affirms that the Distance Education System augments opportunities for education; it ensures access to higher education, it is cost effective, it promotes a relevant, flexible and innovative system of education. The major characteristics of the Distance Education System are its high productivity, greater flexibility and above all its capacity to respond to varying demands. Analysis of cost incurred by the Distance Education System show that it can offer education programmes of an acceptable quality at a cost which is somewhere between one-fourth and one-third of the cost incurred by the conventional education system. It is in this context that promotion and coordinated development of distance education system in India assumes significance. Kaw Secretary, MHRD, Government of India highlighted the need and relevance of distance education as; “ Education is not something that is finished when a student leaves the portals of a University; it has to be continuing, lifelong education so that our system has to provide for a mix of formal and non-formal, open and distance modes of teaching, and we have to harmonise all the technological devices that science has evolved to take education to the drawing room of the students, so that he can learn when he has time, at a place of his choice, at his own pace, with a bit of teaching and a lot of self-learning with the audio tape, the computer and the internet, the TV and the VCR”.

In other words distance education system is a device to provide education to distant students as well as reduce communication gap between the student and the teacher. The distance education system and students are intimately related to each other as the existence of one

without the other is not possible. Since students of distance education are handicapped and do not have easy access to educational facilities, therefore, they need extra support, extra help to make them feel secure and stable. The harmonious relationship depends upon the sincerity and cooperation between the two. The good relations between distance education system and the students is a matter which does not only depend on the administrative conduct of distance education institute alone. It equally depends on the interest and attitudes of students and their eagerness to learn. The learner's of this category entirely depends upon the facilities provided by the distance education system. Therefore there is a great need to pay attention to their problems, demands, needs, etc. to ensure maximum benefits of the distance education system to them. From the above paragraph we can conclude that distance education is aimed teaching, reaching, guiding and supporting the students in all locations through well designed study materials, supported by tutors, personal contact programmes, response sheet assignments and electronic media.

Main Components of Distance Education

Distance education courses are delivered through the use of multimedia including print materials (e.g. manual, collection of readings, textbook), web based, CD/video programs and in limited courses, teleconference sessions. Any distance education system must have following component in the process of teaching, reaching and learning.

- Study Material (Lecture Scripts);
- Personal Contact Programmes;
- Electronic Media (e.g. Radio, Video, Teleconferencing, Video Tapes, Computer Access, Tele-Learning and EduSat)
- Library and Learning Resources
- Students Assignment (Response Sheets);
- Study Centres and
- Personal Guidance.

Concept of Student Support Services

The main aim of distance education (DE) is to promote self study or independent study among distance learners in the absence of regular face-to-face (F2F) teaching. To achieve this, every DLI extends support to its learners, which comprises of a cluster of facilities and activities that are intended to make the teaching - learning process easier and more interesting for the learners. All these activities beyond the production and delivery of course material assist in the progress of students in terms of learning, interacting and effective

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communication (Simpson, 2000) and, therefore, the support system may range from study centre counselling/tutorial support to administrative problem solving (Rumble, 1992). Student Support services have now become an integral part of most of the good distance education institutes. These support services for interactive and effective communication in distance education is very essential. The most important characteristics of distance education, as suggested by Keegan (1986) are student support services. Bajaj (1997) has rightly observed that “ There is no doubt that the academic course to sustain it but the quality, comprehensiveness level, context, applicability and outreach of the printed material are now a matter of greater concern to our distance education management effort. While the distance education institutions have been thriving on the unidirectional supply and flow of information to students through printed lessons because of the small reach of technology in India yet in the time to come the demands and requirements of students will necessitate a complete conceptual and practical overhaul in its delivery system and call for a more articulate and systematic, contextually relevant students focused support system to supplement the quality and context of such courses”. The major responsibilities that are being accomplished under SSS include:

- to create an environment conducive to Distance learning;
- to facilitate the Distance Learning Method;
- to motivate students to continue their education;
- to encourage socialization and to promote team work and team spirit and
- to improve the educational standards of students.

Components for a Student Support System

The services provided to the students include access to information about the programmes, the enrolment procedure, where to collect the learning material, whom to contact for the tutorial sessions, from where to get the audio/video programmes and so on. The basic objective of these services is to help students choose the right kind of courses and learn better once the courses are properly chosen. Thus, mainly Student Support Services comprise the following components:

- Dissemination of information, Providing clear information as to what was expected from students; Publicizing a procedure for dealing with students complaints;
- Enrolment information;
- Delivery of Course Material; Guaranteeing that the mode of delivery would not affect the award or credit; Guarantees provision of library services where these are necessary;

- Personal Contact Programmes, and
- Counselling
- Guaranteeing timely and effective feedback and commentary on assignments;
- Provision of academic pre-study counselling before selection of courses;
- Access to tutor on a regular basis;
- The publication of clear information regarding administrative regulations;
- The right to complete a programme of study within agreed time scales and

Need for Student Support Services

Consider some of the remarks and queries of the distance learners received by us from time to time:

- Some parts of the units/syllabus are not clear. I need more clarifications. Who will help me?
- It is difficult to answer all the assignments from the study materials given to me by course teacher or course coordinator.
- The schedules for personal contact programmes are not suitable to me at all. How can I complete my course?
- I am totally in dark with regard to my skill in teaching work. Who can help me?
- Is it necessary to consult reference books to answer the assignment questions and to prepare for the term-end examinations?
- The schedules for practical/final teaching practice do not suit me. How can I complete my teaching practice in school?
- I am not satisfied with my grades in assignment. Whom can I approach?
- The study materials do not cover the whole syllabus.

These problems of distance learners are natural. Distance learners are dispersed and physically separated from the institution as well as their peer groups. They may not get immediate clarifications for their doubts that come up during their studies. It is a fact that the learning packages (print materials, audio cassettes, video cassettes etc.) used by open and distance learning institutes are not enough for the distance learners. I have met hundreds of distance learners who have expressed their helplessness and inability to continue their studies without human support. This reminds us of the saying of Sewart (1987) "... the standard teaching package cannot provide a wholly satisfactory individualised learning system for students and also that such package suffers from a tendency towards tight curriculum control.

It is only the introduction of the human element, capable of adapting to the great variety of student needs, which can counteract this sort of bias”.

Stages of Support Needed by the Distance Learners

The distance learners may need help before, during and after the learning programme.

Pre-entry Stage: At this stage the learners need information, advice and counselling. The learners need information about programmes, courses, entry requirements, application procedures, structure, functions, rules and regulations of the institute, recognition of the institute, market value of the programme and so on. They may need advice for selecting a particular programme or course for their career advancement and the best way of achieving their goals and objectives without disturbing their daily routine activities.

During the Learning Programme: At the beginning of the programme, when the learners have already received their packages (study materials, programme guides, assignments, experimental kits, etc.), they may need some guidance. Many learners might have returned to their studies after a long gap, so they may need constructive help at this stage. As the learners are unfamiliar with the self-learning materials, assignments etc. they may ask for some guidance on study skills, the process of dealing with the assignments, and so on. During the middle stage of the programme, the learners may want to discuss about their progress, assignments grades, study visits, projects, seminars, practical, improving study skills, learning from media, overcoming personal and technical problems. At the final stage, the learners may need some guidance for incomplete tasks /assignments, difficult units, revision work, preparation for term-end examinations, and so on. Besides all these, from time to time, they need help and guidance to perform some formalities according to rules and regulations of the institute e.g., payment of fees, submission of application form for term-end examination etc.

After the Learning Programme: After completion of a particular programme the learners may want to do some advanced programmes on which they would like advice. They may also require information on new programmes.

Thus summing up, the distance learners need academic, administrative, and informative support before, during and after their learning programme.

Innovative Student Support Services of Open and Distance Learning

Technology has dominated all spheres of life. The distance education is also one of the fields where we can see the impact of information technology. Over several years the education process has seen drastic changes in imparting knowledge. During the last few years it has

been seen, an almost exponential development and growth of the digitalization, automation and the internet, with little sign of a slow down. No longer is internet access restricted to a few select education establishments it is now available to anyone in their place of work, local libraries, the internet cafes and even in the home. It is the information that has become the key to the success in different walks of life. E- Education is electronic education, but the ‘e’ in E-education has a number of other implications as mentioned below:

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| Exploration | E- Learners see the web as an exploratory tool to access a plethora of information and resources. |
| Experience | The web offers e-learners a total learning experience, from synchronous learning to threaded discussions to self-paced study. |
| Engagement | The web captivates learners by enabling creative approaches to learning that foster collaboration and a sense of community. |
| Ease of use | Not only is the web easy to use for learner who are already familiar with the navigation capabilities of the medium, but to learning providers as well, as they can easily make content immediately available to learner across all technical platforms (Windows, N4AC, Unix, etc.) |
| Empowerment | The web puts learners in the driver’s seat with a set of tools that enables personalization of content and allows learner to choose the way in which they best learn. |

The term e-education means electronic education and it is basically the online delivery of information communication, training and learning, e-education seems to have a multiplicity of definitions to each of its users and the term seems to mean something different. A very comprehensive definition has been given by the Cisco system, which defines e-education as Internet-enabled learning, components can include content delivery in multiple format E-education provides faster learning at reduced costs, increased access to learning and clear accountability for all participants in the learning process in today’s fast-paced culture, organizations that implement E-education provide their work force with the ability to turn change into an advantage. The advantages of e-education are: Learning is self-paced and gives students a chance to speed up or slow down as necessary; Learning is self-directed, allowing students to choose content and tools appropriate to their differing interests, needs and skill levels; Geographical barriers are eliminated, opening up broader education options; 24/7 accessibility makes scheduling easy and allows a greater number of people to attend classes on demand access means learning can happen precisely when needed travel –time is reduced or eliminated; Overall student costs are comparatively less (tuition, residence, food) and Fosters greater student/instructor contact. E-education offers us potentially less expensive, more convenient, and richer ways of becoming educated, and of coming into

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contact with more diverse groups of fellow learners than ever before. The instruments of E-education are E-mail, Real time conferencing and Desktop. The E-education tools are digital library, virtual library, e-book, CDROM. Various modes of E-learning courses are online mode and E-correspondence mode.

Suggestions

- To encourage increased access of person from the disadvantaged groups the Distance Education Institute should-
 - a. Increase the number of study centres in rural and tribal areas.
 - b. Design programmes that would suit the needs of learners from the disadvantaged groups and preferably offer programmes in the regional language.
 - c. Undertake promotional programmes to create greater awareness about distance learning programmes and offerings.
- Open Universities and Distance Education Institutes need to come together to evolve strategies for effective social interventions.
- To usher in e-revolution in delivery of education successfully, alliance and partnership amongst open universities and with the conventional universities and institution is necessary. It will provide newer option to greater percentage of people from marginalized and disadvantaged groups.
- The learning material needs to be relevant to the background of the rural or disadvantaged learners containing situations and examples with which he/she can relate. Material for the urban and rural learners varies in some respect.
- In academic internal assignments submission, concession should be given.
- A major responsibility should be the creation of an environment that which will discourage discrimination and promotes equality.
- Skill-based Education: - With the passage of time India will face higher demand for Skill based education hence to include the deprived group below 25 years old, skill based programmes should be developed which will promote access in distance mode.
- To remove the severe disciplinary distortion :- Within the disciplines of technical education in Distance Education mode there is a sharp skew in favor of few branches, such as IT, Electronics and so on which are considered as offering better job prospects, and promotions. The major cause of distortion among disciplines is the absence of organized counseling and guidance programme and intelligent mentoring of the learners.

The open universities and distance education institutes can offer organized counseling for mentoring the learners.

- Equating degrees from conventional full time system and from open distance learning system. In this context there is a standing UGC notification that degrees of both these modes are accorded equal status for all practical purposes. Practical oriented professional programmes in Open Distance Learning system have to take efforts to arrange additional inputs equivalent to regular mode, such practical inputs can be given through tie-ups with available private or Government organizations. This will help in producing quality professionals, and will be treated equally with the professionals passed out from regular mode.
- Use of ICT- ICT stands for Information Communication Technologies and it is defined as a diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, create, disseminate, store and manage information. These technologies include computers, the internet, broadcasting technologies viz radio and television and telephony.

Conclusions

Support services are probably the weakest component of DE system in India. Over 50% of the DSI do not have any student support service network. There are a large number of Universities and Colleges and hundreds of professional and non-professional institutions with vast infrastructures who have invested huge outlays over a period of time which could be utilized by DE institutions on holidays and weekends. Even though there is so much of overlapping in the courses being offering, no steps have been initiated for pooling and sharing existing support service networks. It is rightly felt by Gandhiji that economic growth without specifically attuned to human needs and human realization is not worth very much. Once more you hear everywhere people speaking about nuclear energy, oil energy, wind energy, and everybody seems to be overlooking the fact that without human energy, there would be no kind of progress either socially or economically. Education is the basic tool for the development of consciousness and reconstitution of society. Keeping in view the importance of education and constitutional binding education to all we need to open more open schools and universities in every states of the country. Hence we need the growth of distance education to such an extent to reach out to every part of this country and meet its diverse needs.

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