

Emergence of Distance Education Professionals in India: A Profile of the First Cohort M.A.'s in Distance Education

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One of the major problems faced by the distance education systems in the developing countries, including that of India is the paucity of human resources. Where the academic traditions are still strongly in favour of conventional approach to teaching-learning, unconventional educational strategies such as distance teaching and open learning are viewed with skepticism and unconscious cultural bias. In order to gain credibility and acceptance, new educational strategies must take firm roots in their own native soil and environment. The first and foremost requirement in this direction is to develop suitable human resources in adequate measure. We present here the profile of potential distance education experts who have completed the Masters Programme in Distance Education offered by the Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE), IGNOU with a view to disseminating information about the available expertise in the areas concerned. We hope this note will inspire confidence in those who are ordained to carryout the responsibility of developing fullfledged distance education systems under difficult circumstances.

Introduction

One of the major objectives of the Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE) is to generate human resources in the emerging discipline of Distance Education. The method adopted to achieve this objective is two-fold. On the one hand, STRIDE offers regular programmes of study in Distance Education. Modular in nature, the courses of the Postgraduate Diploma in Distance Education (PGDDE) and the M.A. in Distance Education (MADE) Programmes feed into one another. On the other hand STRIDE arranges customised training programmes for various types of clientele — the nature, duration and content of these programmes vary according to the specific needs. However, despite all the efforts, the country's requirements for trained Distance Education (DE) professionals are not met.

In December 1993, 67 students of MADE completed the programme successfully and took their degrees. An idea to utilise the knowledge-base and skills of these students as an active resource was born.

Here is an attempt to outline the effort — the first of its kind in IGNOU — to engage a group of former students in gainful academic association with their department of study. The first step of this effort has been to collect and classify data relating to their professional background and interest in the discipline of distance education. So we begin here.

Extent and nature of knowledge

The group of students (DE professionals hereafter) who

completed MADE in 1993 have taken the following courses:

- (i) Growth and Philosophy of Distance Education
- (ii) Distance Teaching
- (iii) Self Instructional Materials
- (iv) Student Support Services
- (v) Management of Distance Education
- (vi) Research in Distance Education
- (vii) Curriculum Development for Distance Education
- (viii) Distance Education : Economic perspectives
- (x) Communication technology for Distance Education

The courses feed into one another and attempt to cover a wide canvas of issues pertaining to the theory and practice of DE. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that the individuals who have completed these courses will certainly have acquired a good base in the subject matter, and thus can be called professionals in the area.

Possible areas of utility in STRIDE

The size and operational modalities of the open/distance teaching system demand that in addition to full-time teachers in the faculty a number of professionals should also be engaged in part-time slots. IGNOU has already taken a few steps in this direction—the large number of coordinators of various study centres and the counsellors (part of the Regional Services Division) can be cited as a case in point.

Yet another step in this direction would be to utilise the human resources available (in the form of former students) for other activities such as revision of courses, evaluation, training programmes and so on. Some of the

significant areas where their participation would be welcome may be listed as follows:

- (i) Course revision (the materials of programmes in DE—for example, PGDDE, MADE etc.)
- (ii) Planning and development of new courses.
- (iii) Evaluation (both continuous and term-end)
- (iv) Research projects in DE
- (v) Training programmes in DE

It is necessary at this point to study the possibilities in greater detail.

In other words, having said that the involvement of these professionals in the academic pursuits of STRIDE would be a significant step towards the greater productivity, we need to analyse how and to what extent they can be involved. STRIDE took up the task of consolidating the preliminary data related to the professional placement, academic background, and levels of motivation and competence of a select group in this connection.

The rest of this article deals with the findings of this study.

The Select Group

The total number of MADE students who had passed out in December 1993 were ranked according to their grade points.

The first 42 persons who had obtained A or B grade were sent a questionnaire. (See Annexure.) The questionnaire sought personal details such as age, professional background, present placement, commitments (both personal and professional), and motivation to participate in IGNOU programmes. Out of 42 persons, 41 persons responded to the questionnaire. An analysis of their responses is presented under various headings.

Employment: The respondents have been distributed in areas such as academic management, teaching, (both college

etc. and school levels) and other professions. The details are as follows.

	Number
i) Principal/Professor/H.D	6
ii) Lecturer/Reader	25
iii) Teacher in school	5
iv) Sub editor/Library Assistants/Marketing Executive/architect/Judicial Magistrate	5

One person included in category 1 mentioned above is a retired MG Fellow, another is a Lt. Colonel concerned with training in Army and yet another is a Director of Polytechnic Institute. One person included in category 2 is a Deputy Director, of a State Open University and another is MBBS, MD teaching in a medical institute.

Age: The age-group varies from 26 to 63 years. The details follow:

Age Group	Number
1. Less than 30	1
2. 30-39	11
3. 40-49	17
4. 50-59	11
5. 60 and above	1

The youngest person is 26 years old, and employed as marketing executive in a private company. The oldest is 63 years old who is a retired Fellow IMG and is now working as a coordinator as well as counsellor in a IGNOU Study Centre. Interestingly enough, most of these respondents had joined MADE with qualifications much higher than the prescribed entry level. Further, there is a wide range in terms of their subject specialisation. Table 1 depicts in detail the nature and level of these qualifications.

Table 1 : Subject wise Qualiifications of the select group of M.A's in Distance Education

Subject Area	Number	Total Subject Area wise
I Sciences		
M.Sc (Maths)	1	
M.Sc (Biology/Zoology/Maths) + M.Ed/M.Phil	4	8
M.Sc (Zoology/Botany/Maths) + Ph.D	3	
II Social Sciences		
M.A. (Eco/Pol. Sc./Com/Edn)	5	
M.A. (Eco/Geography) + M.Ed/M.Phil	4	
M.A. (Eco/Com) + Ph.D	3	14
M.A. (Sociology) M.Com (M.Phil DE)	1	
III Humanities		
M.A. (Kanada/Sanskrit)	2	
M.A. (English/Hindi) + M.Ed/M.Phil	6	
M.A. (English/Hindi) + Ph.D	2	13
M.A. (English/Kanada) + M.Ed/M.Phil + Ph.D	2	
M.A. (English) + PG DTE (CIEFL) + Ph.D	1	
IV Professional Areas		
MBA	1	
MBBS MD	1	
MA (Arts & Architecture) M.Ed. D. Phil	1	6
L.L.B., M.Com, Ph.D. Dip. Mgt. Mkt.	1	
M.A. (Law), (M.A. (Bengali), M.A. History	1	
BLI (Sc), A.D. (Sc), A.D. (Sc), Ph.D. (Lib. Sc.), M.A. (Eco)	1	

Among those who have specialised in the sciences, there is a gap in two subject areas, namely Physics and Chemistry. However, areas namely Botany, Zoology and Mathematics have been adequately covered.

The various subject areas in the Social Sciences (14 respondents) have been covered quite well. About 6 respondents are in a position to work in areas like Management, Medicine, Architecture, Law and Library Science.

Experience

The questionnaire sought information about the experiences of the respondents in teaching, distance education, and research. Their responses under various headings are discussed below.

Experience in teaching: 37 out of 41 respondents have responded to the questionnaire in this respect. The range of experience is between 2 years and 35 years. The number of persons who have teaching experience above 25 years, between 15 and 25 years, 5 and 15 years and below 5 years is as follows:

Range of Experience (in years)	Number of Respondents
Above 25 years	10
15- 25 years	11
5-15 years	9
Below 5 years	7

As regards the level of education to which their teaching experience pertains, 34 persons have teaching experience at college, university and training institutes and 3 persons have experience of school level teaching.

Experience in distance education: 24 respondents have mentioned that they have experience in distance education. The nature of their experiences may be grouped as follows:

- Studied through Correspondence and Distance Education System
- Working as Counsellor/Course writer of IGNOU and other DE institutions
- Associating with correspondence institutions in their course work etc.
- Working as external faculty at CIEFL and other institutions.

Research experience: 17 respondents have stated that they have some sort of research experience. They can be grouped under the following categories in so far as their research experience is concerned.

Nature of experience	Number
i) Supervision of Ph.D and M.Phil students	2
ii) Research in Distance Education	3
iii) Research in respective disciplines/general areas/projects	11
iv) Media Research	1

Present Duties of the Respondents

Out of 41 respondents only 3 are not working in any area and one of them is a retired person. Remaining 39 respondents are working in various institutions and their duties can be categorised into the following groups.

Name of Duty	Number
i) Teaching, Administration and evaluation etc.	29
ii) Distance Education and Media related duties	3
iii) One each working in the areas of Finance; Marketing, Management, Editing, Librarianship and Judiciary	6

The above analysis indicates that majority of them have duties of teaching, educational administration, student evaluation etc. It may well be that these would help them handle their roles in the activities at IGNOU better. Questions 7, 8, 9, and 10 (of the questionnaire) attempt to explore the nature and levels of motivation among the respondents.

The responses to these questions are discussed below.

Motivating Factors: In response to the question as to what motivated him/her to complete MADE programme, a wide variety of responses came as motivating factors. Due to wide variations it has been difficult to put these responses into fixed categories. We have attempted a broader classification in terms of areas.

Motivating Factors	Number
i) Interest in DE; potential of DE; and to gain more knowledge and skills in DE;	20
ii) To get employment in Distance Education Institutes/Open Universities and improve career prospects;	9
iii) To do research in DE;	5
iv) No faith in conventional system; and belief in DE in solving problems in education ;	4
v) Studied through DE mode; know the potential;	3
vi) IGNOU material created interest;	1
vi) To introduce DE mode in his area of work;	1
viii) Interest in academic line	1

The above analysis indicates that majority of them have completed MADE out of personal interest in DE and to gain more knowledge and skills in DE.

Utilization of DE Know-how

In response to the question as to how the knowledge gained through MADE programme is going to be utilized by them and their plans in this regard, a variety of responses were received. These responses have been boxed as follows:

Area of Interest	Number
i) To serve as counsellor at IGNOU Study Centre, to evaluate assignments answer sheets etc.	10
ii) To do research in DE	10
iii) To join IGNOU or other DE Institution on full-time job	6
iv) To participate in course development/revision and related works	4
v) To use the knowledge in their present area of work	4
vi) To train personnel in DE	3
vii) To contribute to DE	2
viii) To write books in DE in Hindi medium	1
ix) To start new DE Institution	1

The above analysis indicates that a significant number of them want to do research in DE and equal number want to act as counsellors at IGNOU Study Centres. Some of them are already working as counsellors at IGNOU or other DE Institutions.

Preferences for DE Activities: Respondents were asked to

give their preference for the eight DE activities listed in the questionnaire, to contribute, if an opportunity is given to them. The analysis of their preferences to the eight DE activities is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 indicates that 27 persons have shown keenness to do research work in distance education, 23 have shown interest to be involved in training in distance education, 21 persons have shown interest to do work in student support services, continuous and end term evaluation of DDE, PGDDE, MADE programmes, 17 have shown interest in writing courses and 13 persons have shown interest in improving the existing courses/programmes. The table also indicates that 13 respondents have given first preference for doing research in distance education, 6 respondents have given first preference to providing student support services, 4 respondents in each area of course writing, evaluation in DDE/PGDDE and assignment-responses have given first preference and 3 have given first preference for training in distance education.

An estimate of available time (from the respondents): In response to the question as to how much time can be spared for the various activities mentioned above, majority of the respondents indicated that they can work in the evenings after office hours and full day on Saturdays and Sundays. This response indicates the enthusiasm and their commitment towards Distance Education, in addition to the income they expect by associating themselves with these activities.

Sustaining Interest in Distance Education: Respondents were then asked to suggest the ways by which IGNOU may help to sustain their interest in Distance Education.

Table 2 : Preference of Respondents about Activities in Distance Education

Sl. No.	Activity	Preferences								Total
		I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	
1.	Course Writing	4	2	5	1	1	2	2	—	17
2.	Improving of materials of PGDDE/MADE & others programmes	—	5	2	3	—	1	—	2	13
3.	Providing S S services for PGDDE, MADE etc.	6	4	3	3	4	—	1	—	21
4.	Evaluating PGDDE/MADE assignment responses	4	4	3	7	—	2	—	1	21
5.	Evaluating term-end examination answers scripts	—	4	4	3	8	—	2	—	21
6.	Preparing questions/items for question banks in Distance Education	—	—	5	2	3	4	—	2	16
7.	Research in DE	13	4	4	4	1	—	1	—	27
8.	Training in DE	3	7	4	3	2	1	2	1	23

Responses to this item were analysed and their suggestions are summarised below :

Ways of sustaining the interest	No. of respondents
i) Provide support and opportunity to do Research in Distance Education	8
ii) IGNOU should provide opportunities to utilize know-how and invite them to seminars/workshops etc.	10
iii) IGNOU should utilize their services in study centre activities	7
iv) IGNOU should send journals, magazine and other materials from time to time	6
v) IGNOU may provide full time jobs	6
vi) Opportunity to enroll for Ph.D in DE	3
vii) Opportunity to train DE personnel	1

The above analysis indicates that the majority of the respondents want IGNOU to provide opportunity for

research activity in Distance Education, which would sustain their interest in the discipline.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, this attempt outlines only the first step in what we perceive to be a sustained and rather complex effort in the generation and utilisation of human resources. The findings of this small study indicate promising trends. On the positive side, (i) there is a wide range of specialisations covering a number of subject areas and disciplines (ii) the respondents possess good academic and professional records (iii) they have a good knowledge base in the modalities of the conventional and distance education systems, and (iv) they seem to be highly motivated.

This picture indicates that further attempts to invite their participation in various activities of the STRIDE will have a good success rate. With this prognosis, we end this article. But the prognosis, with its promise for the future, may well be the beginning of a series of efforts in this direction.

ANNEXURE

**QUESTIONNAIRE ON THE AVAILABILITY OF ACADEMIC SERVICES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION
FROM THOSE WHO HAVE SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED THE MADE PROGRAMME
WITH GOOD GRADES**

1. Name :
& MADE Enrolment No.
2. Date of Birth :
3. Official Address:
4. Qualifications:
(Start with the first university degree (i.e. B.A. etc. and give subjects of specialisation also)
5. Experience in:
 - (a) Teaching (Subject) :
 - (b) Distance Education :
 - (c) Research
6. Present duties (Outline the nature of your present job)
7. What were the motivating factors for you to take up and complete the MADE programme?
8. Having obtained MADE, how do you plan to utilise your know how in distance education?
9. If given an opportunity, which of the following activities would you like to contribute to? (Please tick mark (√) the relevant activities).
 - a) Course writing
 - b) Improving materials of PGDDE, MADE and other programmes
 - c) Providing Student Support Services for PGDDE, MADE etc.
 - d) Evaluating PGDDE/MADE assignment-responses.
 - e) Evaluating term-end examination answer-scripts.
 - f) Preparing questions/items for Question Banks in Distance Education.
 - g) Research in Distance Education
 - h) Training in Distance EducationGive your preference and state how many days in a week you can spare to work on these activities.
10. Suggest ways in which IGNOU may help you to sustain your interest in distance education.
11. IGNOU may plan a Seminar for two days to discuss issues raised in this questionnaire. Will you participate?
YES/NO

N.B: If necessary, please attach an extra sheet to the complete responses to various questions in this questionnaire.