

Support Services For Distance Learners : A Case Study

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Overview of Distance Education

Distance Education (DE) and Open Learning (OL) concept is of recent origin. Substantial research has been carried out to understand distance education. Today DE needs to determine its relevance and growing popularity over the traditional mode of learning. Distance education is being encouraged as an alternative system of learning in 40 developing countries, viz, Latin America, Tanzania, Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives and USSR.

Distance education in wider term indicates the tangible distance between the learner and the teacher, where the process of teaching and learning is not confined within the four walls of the classroom any more. Distance education with its potential of horizontal mobility, transcends the barriers of time, space, sex, creed, community and religion. Thus, it has broken the myth of elitism in conventional and formal higher education. DE in recent times has emerged as an alternative mode for higher education all over the world, especially in developing countries like India. Today in our country we have 76 distance learning institutions (DLIS) including 10 State Open Universities. The popularity of DE is mainly attributed to its ability to accommodate a vast segment of aspirants, who otherwise would have remained deprived of the same, besides being flexible and cost effective, thereby leading to democratisation of higher education. National Policy of Education (NPE, 1986) also realised the need to strengthen the DE system in the country for two purposes : (i) to serve varied target groups and clientele and; (ii) to bring down the existing pressure on the formal system of higher education.

The common impression has been that DE is very much content driven. Sir John Daniel has noted, "much of the commercial type and hope about distance learning is based on a very mono-directional conception of instruction, where teaching is merely presentation and learning is merely absorption." In principle, it is possible for DE to meet Diane Laurillard's criteria for good teaching :

- 1) *Discursive (by allowing students and teachers to communicate ideas to one another and to receive feedback) ;*
- 2) *Interactive (by encouraging students to take actions to demonstrate learning and to receive feedback on them) ;*

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- 3) *Adaptive (by building on learning experiences to determine future suitable learning experiences); and*
- 4) *Reflective (by encouraging students to reflect on and benefit from the feedback they receive).*

Student Support Services

Student support services (SSS) comprises of a cluster of facilities and activities that are intended to make the learning process easier and more interesting for the learner. Student Support Services in distance education serve as the interface between the institution and the learner. The organisation and functioning of student support services is related to the activities/products of different sub-systems of distance education and focusing learning process towards curricula development, course materials preparation and delivery mechanisms. In this regard Sewart (1993) points out that the structure and activities of student support services is dependent upon:

- i) *The infinite needs of the clients.*
- ii) *The educational ethos of the region and of the institution.*
- iii) *Dispersal of the student body, availability of resources, curriculum and product of the course-production sub-system, and*
- iv) *Generic differences (extent of heterogeneity) of the target group.*

Lusunzi (1998) believes that a student support system should be evolved in proper perspective before the distance learning programmes are operationalised. There is also a need to counsel the students regarding the effective use of the system and to monitor their progress. In the Indian context the role and activities of student support services have been discussed in detail by Venkaiah (1994), Despande (1995), Chaudhary (1995), Subba Rao (1995), Kishore (1998) emphasising that student support services be developed on a 3-tire mechanism i.e, at headquarters, at regional centres and at study centres. Student Support Services at each level therefore, have its own specific duties and functions to facilitate a networking which help and strengthens the delivery system of distance education courses at different levels.

Student Support Services at Headquarters

Studies suggest that student support services operated at headquarters such as :

- i) *Planning, execution and monitoring of Student Support Services.*
- ii) *Provision of adequate and appropriate physical, financial and human resources.*
- iii) *Staff development/training/orientation activities for regional and study centre staff.*
- iv) *Exploration of new strategies and diversified delivery systems.*

- v) *Coordination of activities of regional and study centres.*
- vi) *Liaison with concerned schools and divisions at headquarters for smooth functioning of the system of support services.*
- vii) *Dissemination of information and redressal of student grievances.*

At Regional Centres

The studies reveal that student support services are required at regional centres are of the following nature :

- i) *Co-ordination and monitoring of activities of study centres (also work centres and web centres).*
- ii) *Providing linkage between headquarters and study centres.*
- iii) *Acting as nodal agency at State /Regional level, and maintaining liaison with state governments.*
- iv) *Undertaking academic activities relating to student admission, counselling recruitment and orientation of counsellors, conduct of examinations, maintenance of student records, and monitoring of assignments.*
- v) *Carrying out research on programme implementation and evaluation.*
- vi) *Undertaking administrative activities relating to purchase and maintenance of equipment/infrastructure, financial disbursement and management, recruitment of staff, maintenance of service records, and maintenance of library facilities.*
- vii) *Undertaking public relation and promotional activities through press and broadcast.*

Student Support Services at Study Centres

The studies suggest's that the following student support services are to be provided at the study centres :

- i) *Organisation of counselling, and of audio-video counselling and practical sessions.*
- ii) *Identification of counsellors.*
- iii) *Disbursal of remuneration to all part-time resource persons involved in study centre activities.*
- iv) *Management and maintenance of study centre.*
- v) *Liaison with academic institutions and experts/scholars.*
- vi) *Evaluation of assignments and their despatch to students; forwarding of grades to headquarters.*

vii) *Conduct examinations.*

viii) *Dissemination of information to students, prospective students, and the public.*

ix) *Provide grassroots feedback to headquarters and regional centre.*

Student Support Services in Jammu Division

Support services are probably the weakest component of Indian distance education because of inadequate priority allocated by the distance education institutions. Limited number of open universities and few CCIs have established study centres to provide support services to distance learners. Theoretically, open universities are providing both academic and administrative support services to learners through study centres and regional centres. It has been observed that attendance of the distance learners at counselling sessions is thin. Distance learner being new in the system fall into a 'Culturaltrap' and expect tutors and counsellors to deliver formal lectures and conduct courses in a traditional class-room fashion. The counsellors unfortunately prefer to deliver lectures in the way they are used to. The accessors are not able to provide meaningful distance tuition by commenting on the learner's assignments. Use of audio-video materials to back-up counselling, is not still happening because the tutors/study centre staff do not realise their significance student support services. Sometimes study centres become over crowded making it difficult for a small group of part-time faculty to interact meaningfully with the distance learner. The part-time resource persons staff at the study centres do not have commitment but are rather indifferent to student queries and requirements. Their weaknesses results in many dropouts (Koul 1994). The present paper is an attempt to critically examine and evaluate issues and challenges for augmented support services for distant learners in Jammu Division of J&K State. The paper as such expects to facilitate identification of appropriate strategies so as to benefit distance learners of Jammu Division in best possible manner. Besides, the paper will identify policy guidelines for strengthening support services for further improvement of IGNOU functioning in Jammu Division on the bases of first hand informations obtained through questionnaire.

In this regard a questionnaire was administered to the respondents enrolled with IGNOU programmes to understand important issues and to seek suggestions related to augmentation of support services in Jammu Division. Universe of sample comprised of 50 students pursuing IGNOU programmes. They were chosen from the study centres located in Jammu University. Based on stratified random sample of male as well as female students studying at post-graduate level with the mean age of 22 to 23 years. Analysis of data was made with the help of simple statistical method based

on percentages, calculated on the basis of responses of respondents.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the data of present research study can be presented into two tables :

1. Issues Related to Student Support Services.
2. Suggestions Related to Student Support Services.

Table 1 : Issues Related to Support Services

S. No.	Responses	N=50	Percentage
1.	IGNOU is equivalent to other formal Universities	37	74
2.	Distribution of study material is in time.	21	42
3.	Self instructional study material is ready self instructional.	23	46
4.	Exams held properly and in time.	45	90
5.	Sufficient furniture and space at study centre.	13	26
6.	Satisfaction with evaluation procedure.	28	56
7.	Satisfied with fees in terms of benefits achieved.	25	50
8.	Exploration of new strategies and diversified systems at IGNOU.	38	76
9.	Adequate network of support services.	38	76
10.	Adequate mechanisms of co-ordination and monitoring of the network.	31	62
11.	Timely dissemination of information and circular in the network.	32	64
12.	Right planning, execution and monitoring of support services.	31	62
13.	Is IGNOUS approach of Audio/Video and print is good.	40	80
14.	Watching of IGNOU programmes on T.V.	38	76
15.	Information of schedules of telecast/teleconferencing in time.	32	64
16.	Interaction with counsellor on T.V./Radio regarding any topic.	24	48
17.	Conducts Audio/Video sessions in time.	27	54
18.	Availability of study material/Audio-Vedio material at study centre.	20	40
19.	Satisfied with the kind of support services.	34	68

Table 1 shows that 74 percent respondents agree that IGNOU is equivalent to other formal Universities. 42 percent respondents feel that the distribution of study material is none in time, meaning thereby that 58 percent received material late. This may be attributed to the delay in dispatch from MPPD as well due to delayed postal delivery. 46 percent respondents feel that self instructional study material is really self instructional. Those who do not agree to it could be due of their comprehension and understanding of material contents which appears to be too modest, primarily their being from rural, far-flung and educationally backward areas.

Above 90 percent respondents felt that exams are held properly and in time whereas, 26 percent agree that sufficient furniture and space is available at study centre, 56 percent respondents are satisfied with evaluation procedures and 50 percent are satisfied with fees in terms of benefits achieved. 76 percent of them have exploration of new strategies and diversified systems at IGNOU and 76 percent also agree to the fact that they have adequate network of support services. 62 percent felt that there is adequate mechanism of co-ordination and monitoring of the network where as, 64 percent felt that timely dissemination of information and circulars in the network is taken care off. Further, 62 percent of respondents felt that right planning, execution and monitoring of support services is done.

About 80 percent of them agree that IGNOU's approach of Audio/Video and print is good. 76 percent of them watch IGNOU programmes on T.V and 64 percent of them receive information of schedules of telecasts/teleconferencing in time. Above 48 percent respondents have said that they interacted with counsellors on T.V./radio regarding any topic. 54 percent said that the Audio/Video sessions are conducted in time. 40 percent felt that study material/audio-video material at study centre is available where as 68 percent are satisfied with the kind of support services.

The findings of the present study are also in conformity with various studies carried out by different researchers viz; Tyagi (1990), Singh (1993), Rana (1994) and Das and Das (1995) who report that study materials were comprehensive and of high standard.

Besides Studies by Rana (1993), Harris (1994), Raghunath (1994) and Das and Das (1995) revealed that students found it difficult to submit assignments in time because study materials are received by them late. It was also reported by Sahoo and Tyagi (1992), Singh (1993), and Raghunath (1994) that many of the study centres do not have adequate instructional facilities and infrastructure. It can therefore be observed that the MPPD at headquarters of IGNOU, must have record look on the study material production with strong communication base. Dedicated and up to date infrastructure at study centres and all the study centres need to keep audio/video

systems in working order at study centres.

Table 2. Suggestions for Augmentation of Support Services

S. No.	Responses	N=50	Percentage
1.	Common admission form for all programmes of IGNOU.	22	44
2.	Making notes by IGNOU's faculty to assist learners for an assignments by the counsellors.	35	70
3.	Offer IGNOU programmes in local languages.	42	84
4.	Involvement of NGO's in support services.	31	62
5.	Necessity of T.V. Programmes	34	68
6.	Using cable T.V. as a support services.	16	32
7.	Provision of telephone counselling.	40	80
8.	Having mobile study centres.	32	64
9.	Extension of broadcasts to SAARC countries.	42	84
10.	Printing of results in newspapers or issuing a press release.	34	68

The table 2 shows that 44 percent distant learners agree for common admission form for all programmes. 70 percent of them insist on making of notes by faculty on assignments for counsellors. 84 percent respondents feel that IGNOU programmes be offered in local languages whereas, 62 percent of them want involvement of NGO's in support services. Above 68 percent felt that there is a necessity of T.V. programmes where as, only 32 percent agree on using cable T.V. as a support service. Similarly, about 80 percent suggest telephone counselling and 64 percent want mobile study centres. More than 84 percent favour extension of broadcasts to SAARC countries and 68 percent of them agree to printing of results in newspapers or issuing a press release. Similar studies conducted by Renu (1992), Reghunath (1994), Singh (1993) and Rathore (1994) report that IGNOU counsellors do not come prepare for counselling and even for assignment counselling.

Implications of the Study

The present study shows that we need to strengthen student support services. The study is in consonance with various other studies of similar nature to visualise a policy framework for IGNOU so as to ensure that distant learners are benefited adequately in making distant mode of learning the most effective mean of learning. Support services learning in distance from education emerged learner's discovery and participation, not from technology, alone. Mere reliance on technology can not ensure

desired results. Failure may occur due to student specific reasons: such as lack of time, lack of seriousness and feeling of isolation despite technology backup, Institutional apathy, poor support system and delayed despatch of study materials result in student's disillusionment and frustration. (Prof. Parag Diman.)

To strengthen the distance education system in Jammu Division, proper student support services should be provided to all the distance learners. It can be said that the more involvement of the governments, both state and central, level will promote distance education, to increase access to higher education and to contribute for the development of knowledge and skills to a larger segments of the population. In view of the above observations we can derive some generalizations to strengthen the student support services in remote hilly division of Jammu :

1. *Correspondence tuition, face-to-face teaching, telephone-teaching, e-mail student support services can be used to facilitate the distance learners in Jammu division.*
2. *Cost of DE needs to be based on the economics of scale principle so that it becomes affordable to common masses.*
3. *The costs of delivering face-to-face tuition may initially involve the costs of building or hiring and equipping local centres.*
4. *If it is important to keep costs within operative control, as such audio-and video-conferencing be used only on courses basis, which have low student numbers.*
5. *Any system that provides latest equipment for student use (for example, computers and home experiment kits) will experience increase in capture costs. Computer-conferencing and e-mail system must ultimately rely on student-owned-equipment.*
6. *High costs and low marginal costs are characteristic of any DE system, bringing about economies of scale and cost-efficiency.*
7. *A wide choice of media under different technologies is now available to support DE. The effectiveness of media depends on accessibility by its users, convenience of use, academic control and the level of human touch available to the students.*
8. *Despite the rising popularity of hi-tech, IT print remains the most popular medium.*
9. *Government support is marginal and the multimedia production institutions, the AVRCs and EVRCs are busy in producing course related audio cassettes for the students of various disciplines. As the time available on the national TV channel is inadequate for proper telecast and viewing of such academic packages as a support device to the students, a separate channel is required to be set up.*
10. *Most of the distance learners do not have the ability to select and critically evaluate information and therefore, they fail to take the advantage of the resources*

available at public libraries. The process of learning and learning skills play a key factor in learning.

11. *Distance education can provide answer to the contemporary challenge of access, equity, cost and flexibility in higher education only if the quality of student support services is maintained.*
12. *Distance Education is the only viable answer for developing countries with resource constraints even for vocational and professional education.*

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