

Personal Contact Programmes of Correspondence Institutes in India : An Evaluation

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The author randomly selected 14 Correspondence Institutes from all over India and 200 students from each. A questionnaire was mailed to 2800 students and interviews of the staff in them were taken. This study, achieving a response rate of 42.5%, reports on: (i) the aims with which correspondence institutes in India organise Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs); (ii) the purposes served by them in distance education; and (iii) the perceptions of students regarding the suitability and academic value of PCPs. The results also reveal that face-to-face teaching during PCPs is over-emphasized and sufficient opportunity and time is not given to students to discuss their academic problems. An over-all evaluation of the findings suggests that student population in distance education be distinguished as part-time and full-time students and PCPs be planned and organized separately for these two groups of students, taking into account their differing needs and expectations.

Till now, distance teaching institutions in India have been organising PCPs and other forms of face-to-face contact programmes for distance learners in a generalistic way. The reasons for such a generalistic approach could be many but two of them are easily recognisable: lack of significant research on the issue and the daunting task of resolving the logistic problems related to designing and organising need-based PCPs for different groups of distance learners in India. Rathore's paper is an attempt to question the adequacy and the relevance of the existing PCPs organised by the correspondence course institutions. We believe that it is high time the distance teaching institutions of all types in the country took seriously the issues related to the face-to-face component in distance education and addressed the real academic needs of their students. We hope this paper induces further discussion on the issues.

Background of the study

Distance Education (DE) in India, according to Dutt (1989) "is reduced to the supply of reading materials plus the ritual of a few days, say a week of personal contact and a very few institutions were able to break this notion and attempt to provide a modicum of student services with a very poor diet being served to the students during the personal contact programmes." Based on a national level study, Rathore (1993) corroborated Dutt's observation and concluded that "the system of correspondence education in India relies more on face-to-face communication during personal contact programmes (PCPs) than on non-contiguous two-way communication through tutor marked assignments for supporting students' learning." Hence, it is evident that DE programmes of Correspondence Institutes in India rely heavily on face-to-face sessions during PCPs for tutoring students.

Whether or not this reliance on face-to-face teaching is justified in DE? There are two schools of thought on this issue: "One school of thinking finds face-to-face sessions essential, but another finds them unnecessary and even, in some cases, harmful. No conclusive proof has been established either to prove the necessity of face-to-face elements or to reject them as conventional embellishments" (Holmberg: 1985). However, philosophically the organisation of PCPs for students to compulsorily participate in these face-to-face sessions is dilution of the very concept of DE. But this should not be taken to mean that PCPs do not have any place in DE. Scholars like

Holmberg (1985), Keegan (1989) and Wynne (1973) etc. suggest a variety of aims and purposes that PCPs serve in DE.

Hence, the PCPs of Correspondence Institutes in India must have been organized to achieve definite aims in DE and serve specific purposes in the interest of students. In this regard, research studies conducted by Anand (1979), Biswal (1979), Mathur (1979), Khan (1989), Pillai & Mohan (1983), Sahoo (1985), Kumar et. al. (1986), and Balasubramaniam (1986) reveal that during the PCPs usual lecture-cum-question-answer method is adopted to teach (or hush up) important topics and that PCPs have failed to achieve the real purpose of providing tutorial help to students on individualized basis. However, studies by Sahoo (1985), Mathur (1979) and Balasubramaniam (1986) at some places reflect that some students found PCPs useful. In fact, all these studies are micro-level (i.e. study of single institution) researches and sporadic in nature and have not been focused exclusively on the PCPs. Hence, they are inadequate and inconclusive to throw ample light on the specific aims achieved and purposes served by the PCPs of Correspondence Institutes in India. It is in this context that the present study was undertaken to specifically answer the following questions:

1. With what aims are the PCPs organized in the DE system of Correspondence Institutes in India?
2. What purposes do these PCPs serve in terms of the interest of students?
3. Do the students perceive these PCPs to be suitable and valuable for their studies?

Objectives of the study

To get answers to the questions raised above with empirical evidence they were broken down into the following specific objectives that this study proposed to achieve:

1. To study the aims behind organizing Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs).
2. To study the purposes served by the PCPs
3. To study the students' perceptions regarding the :
 - (i) voluntary/compulsory participation in PCPs;
 - (ii) suitability of the PCPs; and
 - (iii) academic value of the PCPs.

Method and procedure

Two variants of the survey method i.e. mail and field survey were adopted to supplicate the study. The field visits to correspondence institutes provided data to achieve the first and the second objective of the study. Through the mail survey, information pertaining to objective three was obtained from the distance students scattered geographically all over India.

Population

The survey population included all the Institutes/Directorates of Correspondence Courses, including those recently renamed as Departments of Distance Education, of the traditional universities in India at present. Accordingly, students enrolled in them constituted the population for getting students' perception data.

Sample

Of the 28 institutions that came in the purview of the definition of population, 14 i.e. 50% were selected randomly; ensuring the selection of at least one institution from the North, the South, the East, the West, and the Central regions of India. From each of the 14 selected institutions, 200 students were selected randomly to be included in the sample. In this way 14 Correspondence Institutes and 2800 (14 x 200) students selected from them constituted the sample for this study.

Tools

Part of the "Management of Distance Education Questionnaire (MDEQ)" and "Students' Feedback Questionnaire (SFQ)" developed by Rathore (1991) served as questionnaires for getting data for achieving the objectives of the study. These questionnaires were designed on the basis of 'Total Design Method' suggested by Dilman (1987). The questions which provided data for this study were standardized to a great extent; but depending upon the nature of information required, free response questions had also been included. Assuming that the same elements may be found in different institutions, nomographic approach was adopted to structure the response categories of the standardized questions.

Data collection and response rate

The MDEQ was administered personally on the staff of the selected institutions and the SFQ was mailed to the 2800 students included in the sample. After a reminder to those students who did not respond to the sent questionnaire for 30 days, a response rate of 42.8% was achieved. For a mailed questionnaire this response rate can be considered quite satisfactory. However, it may be noted that the number of respondents vary from question to question, either due to non-response to the question or the question was not applicable in some cases.

Findings of the study

The tabulation and analysis of the obtained data revealed the following findings, which are reported separately for each objective of the study.

Aims of PCPs

In order to study the aims which the correspondence education institutes had behind organizing PCPs for the students, a list of nine possible aims taken from the literature on distance education were given to the Directors and the Staff of the sampled institutions (See Table 1). They were asked to tick mark if the given aim was applicable in their case, and if applicable then they were further asked to mention the priority (in terms of ranks 1, 2, 3, etc.) given to that aim in their system.

As more than one aim in the given list were applicable in most of the cases — there were not only many multiple responses but also a great overlap in mentioning the priority rank of the given aims in question — it was impossible to use a statistical technique to present this data. However, on the basis of judgement based on the observation and pooling of frequencies and priority ranks, it became possible to rank order the aims behind organizing PCPs as shown in Table 1.

From the results shown in Table 1, it becomes clear that all the correspondence institutes organise the PCPs mainly for formally teaching the course contents to their students — this is the first priority aim behind organizing the PCPs. The second priority is given to the aim of preparing students for the coming final examination by 10 out of 14 institutions. Similar number of institutions use PCPs as platform for removing learners' isolation and this is the third priority aim. It may be quite disheartening to a number of students that during the PCPs sessions to remove their learning difficulties are held only by 9 institutions and they too give only a fourth priority to the issue. Again, a very important aim behind organizing PCPs is to provide individualized tutoring and counselling to the students; but surprisingly it comes as a fifth priority aim and that too only in the case of 5 (i.e. 35.71%) institutions. The other aims too are important to be achieved through PCPs but this study reveals that they are almost neglected in our system of correspondence

education. This is unfortunate, as the full potential of PCPs is not being utilized for some very important purposes. Anyway, these findings confirm the results of earlier studies and substantiate the statement that our system of correspondence education stresses too much on spoon-feeding, but how far this over-dose of lecturing is counter productive, as said by Holmberg (1985), in distance education needs to be researched.

But in the case of other aims a disparity is noted; for example, the second priority aim was to prepare the students during the PCPs for the coming final examination, but this purpose is seen to be served at the seventh place. However, the purposes perceived to be served at the second and the third places are indicative of the staff's concern for the final examination. An important aim of removing learners' isolation through the personal

Table 1 : Aims of PCPs organised by the Correspondence Education Institutes

Q.	The main aim behind organizing PCPs in our institution are :	Frequency of mentioning	Priority rank
1.	To formally teach the course content to students	14	1
2.	To conduct sessions to remove the learning difficulties of students	9	4
3.	To provide individualized tutoring and counselling to students	5	5
4.	To prepare students for the final examination	10	2
5.	To use PCPs as a platform to remove learners' isolation	10	3
6.	To use PCPs as a platform for seminars and group discussions	2	8
7.	To introduce the faculty/staff to the students	3	7
8.	To orient students with distance teaching and learning methods	4	6
9.	To encourage students to use the facilities at the study centres	2	9

Purposes served by PCPs

We will get a better picture of the purposes served by the PCPs later when we examine the perceptions of the students, as they are the real beneficiaries of these personal contact programmes. However, it is worth noting the purpose perceived to be served by the staff of the institutions through their PCPs. It is with this intention, a list of eight possible purposes that could be served during the PCPs was placed before the staff actually involved in the contact programmes. These staff members were asked to put a tick mark against the purposes they perceived to be served during the contact and give ranks 1, 2, 3, etc. to each, according to the extent it was served.

The results of the findings presented in Table 2 indicate that in the case of all the institutions the foremost purpose served during the PCPs is that the learning materials supplied to students are supplemented by teaching. Thus, it is seen that the first aim of PCPs, i.e. to formally teach the content to students (see Table 1), is perceived to be achieved by the staff during the personal contact sessions.

contact programmes is seen to be served in 9 out of 14 institutions and that too at the sixth place. The fourth and the fifth purposes served are quite in tune with the fourth and the fifth aims behind organizing PCPs i.e., to provide individualized tutoring and counselling, and to orient students with distance teaching and learning methods.

Students' Reactions on the PCPs

In order to evaluate the suitability and contribution of PCPs for students' learning in the distance education system, feedback in the form of students' reactions and perceptions about some important aspects of the PCPs was received from students through the Students' Feedback Questionnaire (SFQ). In this section the results of the analysis of the students' responses to the SFQ are presented. It may be noted that not all the 1200 students whose responses were considered usable in this study could be obtained. Hence, the respective number (N) for each question is mentioned while analyzing the responses to the questions posed to the students.

Table 2 : Purposes served by PCPs as Perceived by the Staff

Q.	Which of the following purposes are served by PCPs at your institution ?	Frequency of mentioning	Rank order
1.	Learners' isolation is removed	9	6
2.	Learning materials are supplemented by teaching	14	1
3.	Students' academic problems are removed	13	2
4.	Students' preparation for the final examinations is ensured	8	7
5.	Students' are encouraged to discuss their academic and personal problems	10	4
6.	Rapport with faculty and distance teaching system is established	9	5
7.	Students' are encouraged to make better and effective use of the facilities at the study centres	3	8
8.	Students' learning and academic achievement is increased	13	3

Compulsory/voluntary participation in PCPs

The issue whether participation in PCPs be compulsory or voluntary in distance education is still unresolved. Hence, it was thought appropriate to know from the students the present condition laid down by their institutions for participation in PCPs. Further, an attempt was made to study their desires if they would like the participation in PCPs to be made compulsory or voluntary.

The results in Table 3 indicate that at present participation in PCPs is compulsory for 33.89% students and is voluntary for 66.10% students. More important than this, is the finding that 66.15% students want participation in PCPs to be made compulsory. This in itself is an indicator of the fact that PCPs are viewed very positively by a majority of our students. Hence, the general notion that distance students, being adults and mostly employed, want independence and autonomy in learning and therefore do not prefer control (say in the form of compulsion to participate in PCPs) does not apply to Indian students of distance education. The probable reason for this is that perhaps most of the students studying through distance mode in India are those school leavers who failed to get admission to the conventional university teaching system due to the problem of 'Numerous Clauses'. Thus, it appears that only 33.84% students who want the participation in PCPs to be made voluntary, as they are probably employed or adult students — including the house wives. Whatever may be the reasons, this is an important area for research, as it has important implications for deciding whether participation in PCPs should be voluntary or compulsory. Preferably it could be compulsory, as a good majority of students want that.

Table 3 : Compulsory v/s Voluntary Participation in PCPs

Questions	Compulsory		Voluntary	
	f	%	f	%
Q1: Is the participation in PCPs compulsory or voluntary in your institution? (N=1189)	403	33.89	786	66.10
Q2: In your opinion, should the participation in PCPs be compulsory or voluntary? (N=1170)	774	66.15	396	33.84

Suitability of the PCPs

The suitability of PCPs in this study implies the suitability of the venue, the time and the activities that are organized. Correspondingly three questions were put to the students. The responses to these questions are analyzed and presented in Table 4.

From the results shown in Table 4, it is clear that the venue of the PCPs suits 65.51% of the students and it does not suit 34.48% of the students. Similarly in the case of 59.21% the PCPs are organized during the time when they really need them, but this is not the case for 40.78% of the students. As regards the suitability of the activities during the PCPs 65.68% of the students are satisfied with the quality of the organized activities and only 34.31% are not satisfied with them. Thus, in general, it appears that the organisation of PCPs suits a good majority of students. Nonetheless, it does not suit every third

student. Who are these students? Do they belong to remote areas? Are they employed? Are they house wives etc? These are a few important questions for further research, as their empirical answers will provide the basis for organizing PCPs that will suit these students.

Table 4 : Suitability of PCPs

Questions :	Responses			
	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
Q1. Are the PCPs organized at places that suit you? (N=1154)	756	65.51	398	34.48
Q2. Are the PCPs organized during the time when you really need them? (N=1140)	675	59.21	465	40.78
Q3. Is the quality of activities during the PCPs satisfactory? (N=1154)	758	65.68	396	34.31

Academic value of PCPs

The Students' Feedback Questionnaire contained four questions which provided ample evidence to judge the academic value of the PCPs. The tabulation of students' responses presented in Table 5 reveals that 82.74% of the students reported that they benefitted in their studies from the teaching done during the PCPs, and barely 17.25% reported that they did not benefit from the formal teaching during the PCPs. Although the PCPs are considered worth the time and money spent to attend them by 61.77% of the students, almost an equal number of students feel that sufficient time during PCPs is not given to enable them to individually consult the teachers to discuss their academic problems. Perhaps this is the reason why every second student feels that PCPs do not serve the purpose of removing their academic problems. However, on the basis of these findings it is clear that on the whole PCPs are beneficial to the students. They can become still more beneficial, if sessions for individual interaction with teachers are arranged and more individualized tutoring is introduced in addition to face-to-face teaching during PCPs. This is an important implication from the point of view of organizing and managing the PCPs. On the basis of this implication it is suggested that during the PCPs around 50% time should be given to face-to-face teaching and 50% time should be marked for individual consultation by the students to get their personal academic problems removed. Seeing the overall results in this section, it is the firm conviction of this investigator that if this is done then the PCPs will prove to be of optimum value to supplement distance study in our context.

Table 5 : Academic Value of PCPs as perceived by Students

Questions :	Responses			
	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
Q1. Do you benefit in your study from the teaching during the PCPs? (N=1153)	954	82.74	199	17.25
Q2. Is sufficient time provided for individually consulting the teachers for academic problems? (N=1152)	432	37.50	720	62.50
Q3. Are the PCPs worth the time and money spent to attend them? (N=1151)	711	61.77	440	38.22
Q4. Do the PCPs serve the purpose of removing your academic problems? (N=1151)	596	51.78	555	48.21

The students, besides expressing their desire to introduce more individualized consultation, gave the following suggestions in response to an open ended question to improve the PCPs:

- Most of the students wanted that the number of days for holding PCPs should be increased; and 3 to 4 PCPs be organized for the course during the years of study.
- The time and place of PCPs should be decided by the students. They should normally be organized at places of easy reach to the students on Sundays or other holidays.
- Subject specialists/experts be deputed to conduct PCPs and they should be asked to give more time for discussion than formal teaching.
- All PCPs should be completed at least two months before the examinations and the students should not be disturbed by asking them to participate in a PCP just before the examination.
- More number of teachers be deputed and students should be divided into small groups according to their needs and depute teachers accordingly, so that individualized tutoring is possible.
- Necessary accommodation for out-station students be arranged, and if possible, at subsidised rates. Although students gave a number of other suggestions too, the above noted should significantly represent them. The above suggestions have been selected because they reflect important management implications pertaining to the selection of venue for PCPs, time and duration of PCPs, and the personnel to be involved for conducting them.

Discussion and suggestions

Having decided to study through distance mode, the students are expected to accept the distance education methodology of teaching and learning. They are expected to depend more on their eyes than on ears where print is the only medium; and when faced with problems they are expected to resort to non-contiguous two-way communication through correspondence or electronic media, and depend least on face-to-face interaction. As mentioned earlier, too much expectation of face-to-face teaching is theoretically a dilution of the very concept of distance education. However, the reality in our context is quite different.

Our study shows that a large majority of our students not only prefer face-to-face interaction and teaching to non-contiguous two-way communication but also want its duration and frequency to be increased. Hence, unlike distance students in the developed western countries who want more autonomy and independence and less of control in the form of obligatory participation in PCPs or submission of assignments, etc., our students are quite opposed to them. If rated on the continuum of autonomy and distance, as envisaged in the theory of distance education propounded by Moore (1972), our students appear to prefer lesser distance i.e., more structure and dialogue.

Why do our students want more structure and dialogue through PCPs? This is an important question which needs an empirical answer to give us a base to decide or choose a theoretical approach to design a distance education programme suitable for students in India. Unfortunately, there is no direct research evidence available to arrive at an acceptable answer to the above question. However, the logical answer appears to lie in a further question: Have our students joined distance study by choice or are they forced to accept it? Because, if they have chosen distance study willingly then they should accept its methods and procedures and should not demand more face-to-face interaction. But if they are forced to join distance study, because the doors of conventional system were not open for them, then, perhaps they are not prepared to accept non-contiguous form of two-way communication. Their traditional habits of getting taught by a teacher in a classroom situation dominate their thinking; and these are reflected in their desire to have more obligatory face-to-face sessions through PCPs, even after becoming distance students.

Though logical, the above speculation is supported to some extent by the available enrollment figures in

distance education in India. Almost 65% enrollment in distance education is in the under-graduate courses. Considering the problem of 'Numerus Clausus' faced in India, it can be safely assumed that at least 90% of these students are school leavers who some how failed to get admission to conventional teaching universities/colleges and were forced to join distance study. These students in their late teens (around 17 to 19 years old) cannot be considered similar to working adults, house-wives and others for educational purposes. Their psychology, needs, aspirations and motivations are quite different from that of the adult population for whom distance education is a more suitable choice, rather a blessing, to further their education.

The major implication of the above discussion is that while designing distance education programmes we should differentiate between those who join distance study by choice and those who are forced to join it. The working people, house wives and other adults looking for a second chance to get higher education join distance education by choice. Their motivations and the time that these people can spare for studies are quite different from those of the school leavers who are forced to join distance education. Distance study for the former group is a part-time enterprise, whereas for the latter group it is a full-time activity. Moreover, as the latter group, just coming out of the school, is traditionally accustomed to face-to-face teaching in the classroom situation it has to be dealt with differently from the adult group. From the results of this study, it should become clear that 66.65% students wanting compulsory participation in more number of PCPs are mostly under-graduate students who view their study as almost a full-time work.

Hence, it is suggested that the present practice of treating the entire population of distance students uniformly or as a homogenous group be discarded. Instead the student population should be differentiated as part-time and full-time students and the PCPs should be organized differently for the groups. In fact, the entire distance education programme, including the support services should be structured and organized differently for these two groups of students according to their needs and expectations. Unless this is done, any uniformly designed programme of distance education will not suit the part-time and full-time students. Both the groups would derive optimum utility from the distance mode of education, if the PCPs are conceived and organised in a manner to meet the actual needs of learners who belong to distinctly different groups as distance learners.

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