

Problems of Women Students in Distance Education in India

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Gender based studies of problems of distance learners find an important place in Distance Education research.

A structured questionnaire, posing 10 problems expected to be faced by women pursuing university degree courses through Distance Education (DE) in India, was mailed by the authors to 1200 women selected randomly from 8 Distance Teaching Institutions scattered all over India. Achieving a response rate of 51.5%, this study revealed that irregular and unsystematic supply of reading materials, untimely tutorial help, poor quality of supplied learning materials and lack of study centres in the neighbourhood are the first four, most severe, problems of women learners in DE. Appearing in all the papers along with regular students, longer turn-around time (TAT) of supplied materials, learning in isolation, accommodation at the venue of the Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs), compulsory participation in PCPs respectively are the next six problems ranked in order of severity which affect the women learners negatively. The authors have suggested here how some of these problems can be taken care of by the DE, and the suggestions merit the consideration of DE institutions in India.

Introduction

Flexibility in terms of enrolment, time and place of study, choice of subjects and, above all, easy accessibility at much lower cost than conventional university education are some of the characteristic features of Distance Education (DE) that have resulted in its phenomenal expansion and growth during the past three decades. Due to these flexible characteristics, DE particularly suits the adult learner groups. The reports of enrolment figures in DE from a number of countries substantiate the above observation. Today DE systems around the world have not only made it possible for large cohorts of employed people to further their higher education but have proved to be a boon in this regard for women hitherto deprived of higher education, either due to their engagement in household activities or due to socio-cultural taboos in various societies.

The enrolment of women in DE in India is 37.56%. This is 5% higher than the enrolment rate of women in the conventional systems of tertiary education (UGC Annual report, 1990-91), which corroborates the above observation.

Motivated by this potential of DE for women's continuing higher education, women participants in the 1982 world conference of the International Council for Distance Education at Melbourne decided to form an international organization named "the Womens International Network (WIN)", to work for the development and popularisation of DE for women around the world. An outcome of this effort is a recent publication titled, *Towards New Horizons For Women in Distance Education* edited by Karlene Faith (1988).

In this volume two studies are reported: one by Bhansali and Trivedi (1988) and the other by Mani (1988). The study by Bhansali and Trivedi highlights the programmes for women in DE at the S.N.D.T. University. The study by Mani reports the experiences of women distance learners of the University of Madras. In this study she has highlighted various problems of women distance learners and feels that the system of DE needs to be improved so that the Indian women can benefit from these education systems and succeed in this otherwise male dominated society.

Since these two are micro-level studies, it is difficult to make any generalization at the national level about women and their problems in DE. It is in this context that the present investigation was undertaken to study at the national level the problems that women face in pursuing university level courses through DE mode. The study was particularly chosen in the light of the concluding observation of Mani regarding the improvement of distance education system. It is the contention of the investigators that the system can be improved to serve the women best, if the identified problems are removed or taken care of in designing the system.

Objectives of the Study

In the light of the above background the study achieved the following specific objectives:

1. To study the problems that women in DE have with the course materials.
2. To study the problems that women in DE have with the assignment system.
3. To study the problems that women in DE have with personal Contact Programmes.
4. To study the problems that women in DE have in getting tutorial help from their institutions.
5. To study the personal problems, if any, the women have in pursuing DE courses.

Method and Procedure

Mailed Survey Method was adopted to supplicate the study.

Population

The survey population included, "all the women students enrolled in undergraduate and post-graduate courses with the Institutes/Directorates of Correspondence Courses/Departments of Distance Education (DDE) of traditional universities, and the Distance Teaching Universities (DTUs) as they existed during the period June to October 1993."

Sample

Out of 28 institutions and 5 DTUs that came in the purview of the definition of population, 8 i.e., 29% were selected randomly, which also included 2 DTUs. While selecting these institutions adequate regional representation was ensured. From each of the 8 selected institutions 150 students were selected randomly to be included in the sample. In this way 1200 (i.e., 8×150) students constituted the sample for this study.

Questionnaire

The question numbers 1 to 13 of part 'A' (Personal Information) and 1 to 10 of section 'D' (Problems) of the Questionnaire developed by Rathore and Singh, (1993) for, "A study of Women As Beneficiaries of Distance Education in India." served as the questionnaire for getting the data for the objectives of this study. The questionnaire was designed on the basis of the 'Total Design Method' suggested by Dillman (1987). The 23 questions which provided data for this study were standardised, as the respondents had to select their responses from those given in the questionnaire. Corresponding to the 10 problem areas set forth in the objectives of this study, 10 problem statements were posed before the respondents. The respondents had to decide if the given problem statement was a Very Big Problem (VBP), Just A Problem (JAP) or Not A Problem (NAP) for her and indicate her response by putting a tick mark in the appropriate response box. Such a response format permitted not only the tabulation of frequencies for each response but also allowed the determination of an intensity score indicating the severity of the stated problem. The score was found by giving a score of 2 for VBP, 1 for JAP and 0 for NAP and adding all the scores for the subjects in the sample. The test-retest reliability of this questionnaire after 6 weeks was reported to be .89 by the authors.

Response Rate

The questionnaire was mailed to the 1200 students selected in the sample, alongwith a request letter and a postage paid envelop for its return. A reminder was sent after one month to all the non-responders. Finally a total of 662 returns were obtained. Of these 618 i.e. 51.5% returns were found usable. Hence the achieved response rate of 51.5% can be considered quite satisfactory for mailed questionnaires.

Findings of the Study

The tabulation and analysis of women students' responses to the questions posed revealed the following findings reported separately for each objective of the study.

Problems with the Course Materials

Distance learners are expected to learn independently with the help of the printed course materials supplied to them. Hence the quality of independent learning in DE depends largely on two factors: (i) the academic quality of the content of the course materials; and (ii) their style of presentation that facilitates self learning. In addition, the regular supply of the course materials with a pacing that suits the students is also an important factor. Keeping this in view, problem statements 1 and 2 were posed to women distance students in order to study if they have problems related to the course materials. The frequencies and percentage of women for whom the given problem statements were a Very Big Problem, (VBP) Just A Problem (JAP) and Not A Problem (NAP), alongwith severity rank are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Severity of problems related to the course materials

Q.N.	Problem Statement	Frequency			Severity	
		VBP	JAP	NAP	Score	Rank
1.	The supplied course materials do not serve as self learning materials and it is difficult to understand each and every concept with their help.	207 (33.49)	234 (37.86)	177 (28.64)	648	3
2.	The supply of reading materials is not regular and systematic. This disturbs the planning done for studies.	250 (40.45)	196 (31.71)	172 (27.83)	696	1

* Percentages are given in the brackets.

The results in Table 1 reveal that irregular and unsystematic supply of reading course materials disturbs the students' plan of studies. This emerged as the most severe problem of the women students in DE. Exactly for 40.45% women this is a Very Big Problem and for 31.71% it is Just A Problem. Taken together it is evident that for almost 72% women students the irregular and unsystematic supply of course materials is a serious disturbing factor in the way of supplicating their studies according to their study plan.

As regards the quality, the supplied course materials are not perceived to be serving as self learning materials and found to be difficult to understand by a majority of women distance students. This is a problem for 71.35% (i.e., 33.49% VBP and 37.86% JAP) women and stands as the third most severe problem for women in distance education.

Problems with the Assignment System

Written correspondence initiated with submission of assignment responses, their evaluation by tutors giving constructive suggestions followed by the queries, if any, by the students forms a two-way non-contiguous communication channel in DE. This non-contiguous two-way communication forms the backbone of efficiency in learning and teaching in DE. However, researches by Båath (1980) and Rathore (1991) have shown longer turn-around time of evaluated assignments to adversely affect students learning at a distance. Yet, in another study Sahoo (1987) has found that compulsory submission of assignments lead to drop-out in DE. Keeping this in mind, problem statements 3 and 4 were posed to women distance students in order to study if they have problems related to the assignment system. The frequencies and percentages of women for whom the given problem statements were a VBP, JAP and NAP alongwith severity rank are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Severity of problems related to the assignment system

Q.N.	Problem Statement	Frequency			Severity	
		VBP	JAP	NAP	Score	Rank
3.	The compulsory submission of assignments is useless unless constructive suggestions come from tutors.	122 (19.74)	253 (40.93)	243 (39.32)	497	9
4.	The time gap between date of submission of assignments and the date when they are received back duly marked and commented is so long that not only the planning done for studies but the entire purpose of assignments is defeated.	150 (24.27)	260 (42.07)	208 (33.65)	560	6

* Percentages are given in the brackets.

The data in Table 2' reveal that 66.34 percent (i.e., 24.27 percent VBP and 42.07 percent JAP) women are of the opinion that the time gap between the date of submission of assignments and the date when they are received back duly marked and commented i.e. Turn-Around Time (TAT) is so long that not only the planning done for studies but also the entire purpose of assignments get defeated. This emerged as the sixth most severe problem for women in DE. Evidently, once again it is proved that irregular and untimely communication is a factor that disturbs the study plan of students and adversely affects studies of women in DE. Besides, it causes hindrance in timely two-way non-contiguous communication for improvement which is the sole purpose of assignments in DE.

As far as a compulsory submission of assignments is concerned, exactly 60.67 percent (i.e., 19.74 percent VBP and 40.93% JAP) women are of the opinion that compulsory submission of assignments is useless, unless constructive suggestions come from tutors. However, 39.32 percent women do not look at it as a problem. It

emerged as the ninth most severe problem for women in distance education. On the basis of these findings it can be safely concluded that a good majority of women in DE consider compulsory submission of assignments useless, unless they are properly evaluated, commented and returned within a shorter duration of turn-around time.

Problems with the Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs)

The very concept of PCPs itself is a dilution of the principle on which DE is based. However, the risk of introducing PCPs has been taken 'for removing difficulties of students' (Mullick, 1987) who have no access or could not clarify their doubts completely by using the 'new technologies'. PCPs have been introduced for the convenience of learners. So, in no way it should prove an obstacle in taking degrees through DE. On the contrary, it has been reported by Sahoo (1987) that compulsory participation at PCPs has been a cause of drop-outs in DE. Thus, in order to find difficulties/problems of distance women students with PCPs two problem statements i.e. 5 and 6 were posed to women distance students. The obtained frequencies and percentages have been given in Table 3.

Table 3 Severity of problems related to the PCPs

Q.N.	Problem Statement	Frequency			Severity	
		VBP	JAP	NAP	Score	Rank
5.	Asking the students to compulsorily participate in Personal Contact Programme is a Waste of time and money.	80 (12.94)	172 (27.83)	366 (59.22)	332	10
6.	Though attending a Personal Contact Programme is beneficial but there are difficulties of accommodation at the venue of the Personal Contact Programme	144 (23.30)	250 (40.45)	224 (36.24)	538	8

* Percentages are given in the brackets.

The results shown in Table 3, reveal that though attending a Personal Contact Programme is beneficial, there are difficulties faced by women students at the venue of the Personal Contact Programme. This emerged as the 8th most severe problem for women in DE. In total 63.75% (i.e., 23.30% VBP and 40.45% JAP) women students agree that PCPs are beneficial, but they have difficulties of varied nature i.e., accommodation, security and the other difficulties that they face at a new place.

Further, the data reveals that exactly 40.77 percent (i.e., 12.94% VBP and 27.83% JAP) women feel that asking the students to compulsorily participate in Personal Contact Programme is a waste of time and money. Thus, it seems to hamper their privilege of 'saving time and finances, which distance education provides to

students' (Sahoo, 1984). However, the remaining 59.22% women students do not consider compulsory participation in PCPs as wastage of time and money. Consequently this problem statement comes at the tenth place in severity rank of problems.

Problems with the Tutorial System

DE, being a flexible mode with respect to time and place, provides tutorial help to students according to their personal choice of time, place and need. Perhaps, owing to this reason "it attracts about 5% more women in distance higher education in comparison to conventional higher education." (Singh 1994). The existing tutorial facilities may not be able to cover the increasing student population from varied geographical and socio-cultural regions. Thus, for any possible improvement, first of all the problems faced by women with the existing tutorial system must be pointed out. Lack of library facilities causing student's drop-out is already an established factor (Sahoo, 1987). To strengthen this and also to find a few more problems faced by women students, problem statements 7 and 8 were posed to them. The frequencies and percentages of women for whom the given problem statements were a VBP, JAP and NAP, alongwith severity rank are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Severity of problems related to tutorials systems

Q.N.	Problem Statement	Frequency			Severity	
		VBP	JAP	NAP	Score	Rank
7.	There is no study centre in my neighbourhood, hence there are difficulties in getting library facilities and tutorial help.	220 (35.59)	175 (28.31)	223 (36.08)	615	4
8.	There is no system of getting tutorial help from my institution when it is really needed.	225 (36.40)	207 (33.49)	186 (30.09)	657	2

* Percentages are given in the brackets.

The results in Table 4 reveal that, there is no system of getting tutorial help from distance teaching institutions when it is really needed by the women students. This emerged as the second most severe problem for women students in DE. Exactly for 36.40% women this is a very big problem and for 33.49% it is just a problem. Taken together, for 69.89% women distance students the existing tutorial system is a failure because it does not serve them when they really need it. This may kill their motivation and consequently may lead to their dropping out.

As regards study centres, non-availability of study centres is a very big problem for 33.59% women students, whereas it is just a problem for 28.31% students. It is found that 61.90% women do not have any study centre in their neighbourhood. Absence of study centres leads to lack of library facilities and tutorial help, as there are difficulties in getting these facilities from study centres situated at longer dis-

tances. In terms of severity rank, it emerged as the fourth most severe problem of women in DE.

Personal problems for women in Distance Education

Due to the prevailing traditional environment and gender discrimination, most of the women are unable to continue their studies through conventional courses in India (Talesra, 1989). Infact women attracted towards DE are either highly burdened housewives, employed individuals or other neglected lot who wish to continue their education (Dutt, 1987; Sahoo, 1987; Talesra, 1989; Shukla, 1991; Singh, 1994).

Hence to attract more women students, DE must also pay attention to the personal problems of women. Keeping this in view, problem statements 9 and 10 were posed to women distance students. The obtained frequencies and percentages alongwith their severity ranks are given in Table 5.

Table 5 Severity of personal problems of women in DE

Q.N.	Problem Statement	Frequency			Severity	
		VBP	JAP	NAP	Score	Rank
9.	Learning in isolation, i.e., a feeling of loneliness is a big difficulty in Distance Education	171 (27.67)	213 (34.46)	234 (37.86)	555	7
10.	Appearing in all the papers alongwith regular students in the final exam. is difficult and expecting too much from distance students.	163 (26.37)	241 (38.99)	214 (34.62)	567	5

* Percentages are given in the brackets.

The results shown in Table 5, reveal that appearing in all the papers alongwith regular students in the final examination is difficult and expecting too much from distance students. Exactly 65.36% (i.e., 26.37% VBP and 38.99% JAP) women students have difficulty in managing to appear in the final examination alongwith regular students. However, for 34.62% women distance students appearing in examination alongwith regular students is not at all a problem. It emerged as the fifth most severe problem for women distance students.

Another important problem of women distance students seems to arise due to natural human tendency of living in a group. 62.13% (i.e., 27.67% VBP and 34.46% JAP) women are of the opinion that learning in isolation, i.e., a feeling of loneliness is a big difficulty in Distance Education. However, 37.86% women students do not suffer from the feeling of learning in isolation. Learning in isolation emerged as the seventh most severe problem in women in DE.

Discussion and Suggestions

The irregular and unsystematic supply of reading materials is perceived by women students in DE to disturb their study plan, and it emerged as their most

severe problem. This finding is corroborated by the findings of Singh (1980), Nagaraju (1982), Koul (1982), Singh (1983), Sahoo (1985), Mouley (1985) and Rathore (1993), who report this to be a serious problem for students in DE, irrespective of their sex. It appears that irregular and unsystematic supply of course material might be interacting with the various socio-personal activities, and obligations of women. Also their household activities might be hindered. Thus, it has been reported as the most severe problem. To cope with this problem in DE, the system of coupling the supply of reading materials with evaluated assignments as suggested by Rathore (1993) appears to be a manageable solution. The use of computers to handle the postal communication as suggested by Rathore (1989) can bring administrative effectiveness and also ensure streamlined and timely supply of learning materials to students in DE.

In the case of women, the findings of this study appear to refute the thinking that in DE the supplied course materials adequately serve the purposes and induce self learning in women students. Women have more personal and social engagements and responsibilities and thus may get less time to devote fully and freely to learning materials, and therefore, have a strong desire for getting tutorial help as and when needed.

Absence of tutorial help from the institutions when it is really needed emerged as the second most severe problem of women in DE. The roots of this problem are visible in the findings of this study pertaining to the quality of course materials.

Specially, as the third most severe problem it has been found that the supplied course materials do not serve as self learning materials and it is difficult to understand each and every concept with their help. Previous studies by Gupta (1976), Biswal (1979), Saraswati (1985), Dutt (1985), Mouley (1986) etc., have also reported similar weaknesses in the quality of supplied reading materials. Obviously, when the course materials fail to serve as self learning materials suitable for independent study, the learners will have academic problems for which they will require tutorial help.

Howsoever effective and pedagogically sound the self learning material may be in its design, it cannot replace the teacher/tutor. The role of tutors at the study centres or elsewhere is well recognized and established in the field of distance education. This implies two things: (1) the course materials should be designed and developed on the basis of sound pedagogy of self-learning and they should also be tried out on the students to judge their suitability for independent learning, before they are actually used as the course material; (2) Adequate arrangements for tutorial help be made and their regular availability and accessibility be ensured. Today when the telephone network has been well built in India, telephone tutoring may prove to be much more economical than establishing a network of study centres with tutors for this purpose.

Lack of library facilities and absence of study centres in the neighbourhood, appearing in all papers alongwith regular students in the final examination and longer turn-around time of evaluated and commented assignments have been found as the fourth, fifth and sixth most severe problems respectively. If examined carefully, these problems reflect the concern of women about their learning and academic achievement through DE. Perhaps due to this concern about their studies and commitment to continue higher education, the women appear to cope with problems of learning in isolation, difficulties of accommodation at the venue of Personal Contact Programmes and are ready to meet the requirement of compulsory submission of assignments and compulsory participation in PCPs, as these are found to be less severe problems and rank at the seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth place.

Though this study reveals that women have problems in distance education, the severity ranking of the perceived problems clearly reflects that women consider only those problems as severe problems which in some way or the other either disturb or affect their studies negatively. The personal problems like learning in isolation, attending compulsory contact sessions traditionally thought to be exclusive problems of women students in DE are really not perceived as serious problems. The women appear to be ready to cope with them provided their learning goes on smoothly and leads to the goal that they have set for themselves. This implies that DE can really act as a boon for all those women who have thirst for furthering their higher education but missed it for a variety of personal, social or cultural factors, provided the quality of course materials is improved, their supply streamlined, and adequate tutorial help is available.

Besides the above, the study has important implications for further research. It would be highly pertinent to study the relationship of perceived problems with women's academic achievement in DE. Further an inquiry about the improvements desired by the women students should also be made. Thereafter, an attempt should be made by incorporating the suggestions of women students to sort out the most severe problems that adversely affect their academic achievement.

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