

Measurement of Price Reasonability in Distance Education : An Empirical Study

Prof. R.D. Sharma*, Mahesh C. Gupta**

I. Background

Distance education in a developing country like India is the most viable system to cope with the rapidly increasing demand for higher education. It has most indispensable and economical resource material for development. Since the vast majority of our population is still beyond the realm of formal education, distance education system has the onerous task of making higher education accessible to the people who can't afford it otherwise. This system has certain edge over the regular system as it is free from classroom rigidities, time-bound programmes, over emphasis on examinations and high investment on campus construction etc. Besides, the fast developing technological and electronic revolution in India has paved the way for more new vistas of distance education. The concept of distance education is one and a half century old and widely known in the World as there are more than 30 independent, autonomous full-fledged distance teaching universities in about twenty two countries of the world.

In India also it is not a new concept. Today, from different regions several lakh students are on the roll of the distance teaching institutions of both conventional and open university systems. Therefore, it is in this context that a need to assess students' reaction to various aspects of distance education being imparted by the four decade old system was felt as no such an evaluative piece of work is yet available. Moreover, many doubts have been made frequently by different people about the functioning of distance teaching institutions. For instance, Prof. G. Ram Reddy, the Ex. Vice-Chancellor of the first two Open Universities of India, once expressed that even competent and qualified teachers feel it infradig to work in these (Correspondence) institutes. Some times unwanted people from the university departments are posted rather dumped to these institutes. As a result, they are ill-motivated to work. Dr. James A. Maraj, President, Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, is of the view that Indian Open Universities have in the short time of their existence facilitated quantity expansion but they have yet to ensure quality. Dr. K. Venkatasubramanian, the first Vice-Chancellor of Central University, Pandicherry, says that the majority of correspondence courses run by the universities are only minting money and lowering

* Professor and Dean, Faculty of Commerce, University of Jammu, Jammu, India.

** Associate Professor, School of Business, University of Louisville, U.S.A.

academic standard. Similarly, many eminent authorities have expressed time and again dissatisfaction with the present conditions of distance education. Though, the foregoing discussion approves of a need of evaluating the overall functioning of distance education institutions in the universities, but price-reasonability has been prominently figuring quite often in the criticism of distance education.

2. Nature and Scope of Present Study

Present paper estimates distance education price reasonability on the basis of original data gathered through a five point scale (5<---->1). Present study is a case study of Directorate of Distance Education of Jammu University which runs both graduate and post-graduate courses. At present more than five thousand students are on the roll for B.A., B.Com., M.Com., LL.B., M.Ed. and B.Ed. courses. Price in distance education means admission fee, cost of study material, examination fee, entrance test fee and time spent and inconvenience experienced by the learners. General speaking Distance education programmes are considered as the money spinning devices. Students are not admitted with due regard to the academic facilities provided to them. In spite of heavy price, there are inordinate delays in the dispatch of study material. Infact, the revenue yield of shabbily organised courses by the distance education institutes is disproportionate to the academic value and returns to the students. It has also been observed that many conventional universities treat their distance education directorates/departments as colonies; their earnings are ploughed into the university's chest. Since no work to investigate empirically the aforesaid allegations against the distance teaching by Indian conventional universities has so far figured, this is an attempt to bridge up the gap by quantifying the price reasonability in distance education covering almost all its aspects (Table-1) within the frame work of student oriented concept of marketing in distance education. A pretested questionnaire was administered to the M.Com., B.Com., B.A. students attending personal contact programmes. Besides, 10 B.Ed. students were also contacted for this purpose. Respondents were asked to write SA, A, N, D or SD respectively for strongly agree, Agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree or strongly disagree against each well prepared statement for each aspect given in the Table-1. Thereafter, the remarks were converted to 5, 4, 3, 2, or 1 respectively for quantifying price reasonability on the basis of arithmetic average. All these copies of the questionnaire were carefully edited and finally 33 copies which were meaningfully filled in were selected. Since education in India gets special concession, each citizen of the country pays for it in the form of taxes irrespective of his/her socioeconomic status. Thus, even those who do not gain directly from these institutions also contribute for the growth and development of the distance education. Therefore, price reasonability has to be examined for working out a strategy for distance education within the parameters or social marketing concept of non-profit organisations including university system and its distance education mode.

3. Measurement of Price Reasonability

As stated earlier price reasonability in distance education has been measured through five point Likert scale. Thus, it may fall in the regions like extremely poor (0-1), Very poor (1-2), poor (2-3), average (3-4) and High Region (4-5) of price reasonability. The price reasonability has been calculated for each aspect given in Table 1, each respondent, each course and also an overall position of price reasonability has been worked out in Table 2. It has been discussed under the following nine broad headings :

3.1 Local M.Com. III Semester : These respondents have been closely associated with the Directorate of Distance Education of Jammu University for more than one and a half year. They have sufficient experience to assess the price reasonability as they know nature of operation of both the systems. They were qualified for entry to the regular classes but could not get any chance due to limited number of seats. There are some housewives also who too could not go to the regular courses due to their family commitments. The overall price reasonability has varied from the minimum of 2.7 with "cost of study material" variable to the maximum of 5 with "Refund of Library Fee" variable. However, the overall respondent-wise position of price reasonability is more uniform in nature as it has ranged between the smallest value of 3.16 and the largest of 4.53 only. the Table No. 2 reveals that majority of variables are securing the average reasonability in the average region i.e. "3 to 4" and the grand average score is 3.32. The issues securing just upto the "cut off point" i.e. 3 need immediate attention for improvement. These variables are given as under along with their individual scores :

- *Cost of Study Material (2.67).*
- *Quality of Study Material and its Price (3).*
- *Other Expenses incurred by the students (3).*
- *Hostel Accommodation during P.C.P. and Examination (3), and*
- *Rent paid for Private Accommodation (3).*

3.2 Non-Local M.Com III Semester : Non-local M.Com. third semester students though have quite close association with the Directorate but they are not as familiar as their local counterpart because these respondents remain quite away and do not make frequent visits. They come to the Directorate only during PCP and examination and for rest of queries and study material they depend upon postal services only. Like their local counterpart, the grand average falls in the average region. yet, it is higher (3.63) than that of the former (3.32). Table 2 provides that the overall statement-wise average values of price reasonability fluctuated from the lowest of 1.83 with regard to hostel accommodation and rent paid by the students for private accommodation to the highest of 4.75 with regard to corruption in the Directorate. Similarly, the overall respondent-wise value has run between the minimum and

maximum of 3.04 and 3.96 signifying the fact that there is not much difference of opinion among respondents regarding various price aspects covered under the study. A detailed analysis of the relevant part of the table under reference envisages that the following price variables need immediate attention as they are much below even "cut of point" of price reasonability :

- *Location of Examination Centre (2.83),*
- *Hostel Accommodation (1.83),*
- *Rent for Private Accommodation (1.83),*
- *Availability of Canteen Facility (2.33),*
- *Library Facility (2.83), and*
- *Competence of the Directorate's Faculty (2.8).*

3.3 Non Local M.Com Ist Semester : These respondents, like their senior counterpart, also do not visit the Directorate frequently and much depend on postal services only. However, their association with the Directorate is little less as compared to the earlier respondents. Thus, their opinion with regard to adequacy of service is bound to be quite different as they have different forms of expectation. The table under reference makes it clear that they are not much happy with the Directorate with regard to various price variables. The overall grand average of price reasonability has arrived at 3.48 which, though, falls in the average region but it is not a significant level. Further, the overall statement-wise average values have fluctuated between the smallest of 1.4 and the largest of 4.17 with regard to hostel accommodation and refund of library fee, difference of examination fee of regular and distance education respectively. The table under reference testifies the aforesaid lower value of price reasonability in terms of uniformity in the opinion of the respondents where the overall respondent-wise average value has ranged between 2.88 and 3.13 only. The variables securing insignificant overall average value i.e. less than 3 are summarised as under alongwith their respective values :

- *Total Fee Paid (2.67),*
- *Cost of Study Material (2.5),*
- *Quality of Study Material (1.83),*
- *Miscellaneous Expenses (2.8),*
- *Location of Examination Centre (2.6),*
- *Hostel Accommodation (1.4),*
- *Rent for Private Accommodation (2),*
- *Availability of Subsidised Food (2),*
- *Economical Correspondence (2.75),*

- *Library Facility (2.75)*,
- *No. of Books in the Library (2.5) ; and*
- *Competence of Directorate's Faculty (2.75)*.

3.4 Local M.Com Ist Semester : Like their senior counterpart, these respondents quite often visit the Directorate for the collection of study material, guidance and counselling etc. Thus, they have been quite familiar with the system. The overall grand average value of price reasonability in this case is nearing (3.33) the score of students of third semester. The relevant part of the table under reference reveals that statementwise overall average values have varied from the minimum of 2 to the maximum of 4.33. The overall small value of price reasonability has been testified by the uniformity in the respondent-wise values of price reasonability. The various price variables drawing the immediate attention of the Directorate are given below alongwith their respective values :

- *Hostel Accommodation (2.33)*,
- *Rent Paid for Private Accommodation, During PCP and Examination (2.33)*,
- *Availability of Subsidised Food (2)*,
- *Economical Correspondence (2.67)*,
- *Economical Admission Process (2.67) ; and*
- *Library Facility (2)*.

3.5 B.Ed Students : These are employed people who can not go to regular programme as they can not leave their employers without pay or on leave. They need vocational training, professional updating and up to date knowledge. Most of the employers make B.Ed. degree compulsory for teaching profession. Thus, these respondents happily pay even high fee but they too have their own way of assessing reasonability of cost incurred and forms of price paid like time spent and inconvenience experienced by them for such a programme. They have quite close association with the Directorate as they are called very frequently and for longer period as compared to other respondents. The overall grand average value of price reasonability (3.55) falls in the "average region". The overall statementwise average values have fluctuated between 1.67 and 4.75 as minimum and maximum limits. This has been approved quite uniformly in the respondent-wise average values which varied form 3 to 3.94. Though, the respondents' reaction with this section is not much bad yet some of the price variables need immediate attention. These variables are depicted below alongwith their respective values :

- *Availability of Subsidised Food (3)*,
- *Facility of Library (1.67)*,

- *Library Fee (3)*,
- *Refund of Library Fee (2,33)*,
- *No. of Books in the Library (1.67)*, and
- *Competence of Directorate's Faculty (3)*.

3.6 B.Com Part-III : This group of respondents includes such people who had to take up jobs at an early age due to economic or other compulsions but they are interested to improve their qualifications. They were also qualified for entry to regular programmes. Thus, their expectations from the Directorate are not much high as they were left only with this alternative. The grand value of overall price reasonability has been estimated as 3.24 which is just falling in the "average region". The Table under reference further reveals that the statement-wise over all average values have been ranged from the lowest of 2 and the highest of 4.5 with regard to hostel accommodation and corruption in the Directorate respectively. Similarly, the respondent-wise values have been estimated between the minimum of 2.68 and the maximum of 4.43. The various price variables which appear to be mismanaged are given below alongwith their respective values :

- *Cost of Study Material (3)*,
- *Quality of Study Material (2.75)*,
- *Migration Fee (2.67)*,
- *Miscellaneous Expenses (3)*,
- *Hostel Accommodation (2)*,
- *Rent paid for Private Accommodation (2.67)*,
- *Availability of Subsidised Food (2.67)*,
- *Distribution of Study Materials (2.25)*,
- *Library Facility (2.5) ; and*
- *Number of Books in the Library (2)*.

3.7 B.Com. Part-II : It is only in this section where overall average price reasonability is failing in "high region" i.e. it has been estimated as 4.06. The statement-wise average values have varied between both the extremes i.e. 1 and 5. However, it may be noted that this part of the study is not much reliable due to its very small representation. The variables, according to the opinion of this group, which appeared to be more sensitive from price point of view are cost of study material, availability of subsidised food and canteen facilities during personal contact classes, nature and time of postal correspondence with the Directorate and corrupt practice in the institute.

3.8 B.Com Part-I : These are new students in the Directorate. They were, though eligible to get seats in the colleges but due to certain economic compulsions, they had

to join jobs. Now they are interested to improve their qualifications. Since they have an association with the Directorate for about one year, their opinion would be quite unbiased. Though, they may have high expectation yet they can positively make better assessment. The value of grand average has arrived at 2.8 which indicates that they are not happy with the Directorate. The overall statement wise average values of price reasonability varied from the minimum of 1.67 and the maximum of 3.33 as against the respondent-wise values of 2.2 and 3.35 respectively. Thus, this part of the table under reference reveals wide spread dissatisfaction with regard to majority of price aspects. However, a few variables are securing the values little higher than “cut off point”. These variables are shown below along with their respective scores :

- *Payment in Instalments (3.33)*,
- *Admission Fee of Regular and Distance System (3.33)*,
- *Admission Fee and Course Value (3.33)*,
- *Location of Examination Centre (3.33)*,
- *Rent Paid for Stay during PCP and Examination (3.33)*,
- *Economical Correspondence (3.33)*; and
- *Refund of Library Fee (3.33)*.

3.9 Over-All Assessment : The table under reference also provides the overall assessment of price reasonability by calculating the grand average values of the statements of all the eight groups taken together. The grand average values (3.45) of price reasonability though is higher than cut of point of 3 yet it is quite disappointing as it makes it clear that students of the Directorate are not happy with the quality of its services and fee charged for it. Further, the table reveals that overall statement-wise average values of price reasonability have ranged from the maximum of 2.29 with regard to hostel accommodation to the maximum of 4.01 with regard to the only variable of “Refund of Library Fee”. The overall price reasonability classified into extremely poor, (0-1), very poor (1-2), poor (2-3), average 3-4 and high (4-5) regions in tables 3 indicates the nature of remedies in the light of present on going state of affairs in distance education services to the students.

Though no variable is falling under first two regions of price reasonability yet the over-all position is not good. Many important aspects are just obtaining the below average or average score. Therefore, these issues be taken care of with-utmost attention and careful planning in an integrated concept of student oriented marketing strategy.

4. Epilogue

Indian Universities imparting education through distance mode appears to be highly mismanaged. They have, no doubt, shown high growth rate in the quantitative expansion

but the quality of services has been ignored. This case study with regard to various aspects of fee/price charged from the students or other expenses incurred by them while learning through distance mode makes it clear that the universities similar to one under review are so casual and indifferent to social objective and student welfare that they are least concerned about inconvenience caused to their students even though they (students) bear huge expenses. In fact, the allegations that the institutes of distance education are minting money, lowering academic standards and are treated as colonies of regular system of the universities need to be taken carefully by local and national level agencies including University Grants Commission and India Council for Distance Education.

Table 1. : Aspects of Price Reasonability in Distance Education.

S. No.	Aspects
1.	Amount of Admission Fee.
2.	Total Price Paid.
3.	Payment in Instalments.
4.	Difference between Admission Fee of Distance Education and Regular Course.
5.	Admission Fee and Course Value.
6.	Cost of Study Material.
7.	Cost of Study Material and its Quality.
8.	Difference Between Examination fee of Distance and Regular Course.
9.	Migration Fee.
10.	Other Expenses.
11.	Nearness of Examination Centre.
12.	Hostel Accommodation during PCP and Examination.
13.	Rent paid During PCP and Examination.
14.	Availability of Subsidised Food during PCP Stay.
15.	Simple Correspondence.
16.	Simple Admission Process.
17.	No Corruption in the Directorate.
18.	Simple Official Procedure.
19.	Study Material Distribution.
20.	Facility of Library.
21.	Library Fee.
22.	Refund of Library Fee.
23.	Books in the Library.
24.	Good Books in the Library.
25.	Competence of Faculty of the Directorate.

Table No 2 Respondent-wise, statement-wise, group-wise and overall satisfaction with regard to Fee Reasonability

Respo- ndent	STATEMENTS AS GIVEN IN TABLE NO.1																											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	Mean		
LOCAL M.COM. III SEMESTER																												
1	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	5	2	3	5	1	1	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	5	4	5	5	5	4.60	
2	1	1	2	2	3	2	4	1	3	3	1	5	5	4	4	4	2	3	1	5	2	4	5	5	5	5	3.10	
3	5	4	5	5	1	1	3	3	5	1	1	1	1	4	3	5	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	4	3.17	
4	4	4	4	4	4	3	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	4.28	
5	4	4	4	5	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	1	1	4	3	4	4	4	2	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	3.77	
6	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4.53	
Mean 3.5	3.3	3.6	3.6	3.4	2.7	3	3.6	3.3	3	3.5	3	3	3.5	4	4	4.3	4.8	4.2	3.8	4.5	4	4.17	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	3.82	
NON-LOCAL M.COM. III SEMESTER																												
7	4	4	4	5	4	4	2	4	3	2	4	2	2	4	4	4	4	4	4	1	4	4	4	4	4	4	3.55	
8	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	3	1	1	1	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	1.888	
9	4	4	4	4	4	2	2	4	4	4	2	2	2	2	2	4	3	4	3	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	3.48
10	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	3	4	4	1	1	1	1	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	5	4	4	4	4	2.04	
11	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	4	3	1	1	2	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3.64	
12	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	2	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	5	4	1	5	5	5	5	3.96	
Mean 4.3	4.3	4.3	4.3	4.2	3.8	3.2	3.5	4.3	3.8	2.8	1.8	1.8	2.2	3.7	3.3	4.8	4	3.6	2.8	3.8	4.7	4.2	4.3	2.8	3.63			
NON-LOCAL M.COM. I SEMESTER STUDENTS																												
13	2	2	4	4	4	2	2	5	2	2	1	1	1	1	4	4	5	4	4	3	4	4	2	4	4	4	3.00	
14	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	4	3	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	4	4	4	4	3	4	3.00	
15	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	4	3	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	4	4	4	4	4	3.13	
16	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	2	4	4	1	1	3	4	4	4	4	4	1	2	4	4	4	4	4	2.92	
17	3	2	3	2	3	2	3	1	5	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3.289	
18	5	4	4	3	4	2	2	3	3	4	2	1	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	2	2	5	1	4	4	3	3.00	
Mean 3.3	2.7	3.5	3.2	3.2	2.5	1.6	4.2	3	2.8	2.6	1.4	2	2	2.8	3.5	3	3	3.4	2.8	3.7	4.2	2.5	3.3	2.8	3.48			
LOCAL M.COM. I SEMESTER STUDENTS																												
19	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	1	1	3	3	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	3.50	
20	4	4	4	2	4	2	2	4	4	3	3	3	3	2	1	1	4	4	4	1	4	4	2	4	4	4	3.04	
21	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	3	2	3	3	3	4	4	5	5	2	4	5	2	4	4	4	4	3.42	
Mean 3.7	3.7	3.7	3.3	3.7	3	3	3.5	4	3.5	3.3	2.3	2.3	2	2.7	2.7	3	4.4	4.3	2.3	4	4	4.3	4	4	4	4	3.7	

Cont

Respo- ndent	STATEMENT																									25	Mean
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24			
B.E.d. STUDENTS																											
22	5	5	5	5	2	2	2	5	1	4	5	-	-	-	4	4	4	4	1	1	4	1	1	4	3	350	
23	1	1	1	5	3	5	4	5	3	5	5	4	3	2	3	2	3	4	1	2	3	1	3	1	3	300	
24	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	-	-	4	4	4	4	4	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	394	
25	4	4	4	5	-	4	3	5	4	3	5	2	4	2	5	3	5	4	5	3	3	3	3	3	4	375	
Mean	3.5	3.5	3.5	4.8	4.3	3.8	3.3	4.8	3.7	4	4.8	3.5	4	3	3.5	3.5	3.8	3.8	3.3	1.7	3	2.3	1.7	3.3	3	355	
B.COM. PART-III STUDENTS																											
26	1	2	3	4	5	5	4	3	2	1	1	-	2	3	4	5	4	3	2	1	1	2	3	5	296		
27	3	3	3	3	3	1	1	4	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	4	4	1	3	4	4	2	4	3	288		
28	5	5	5	5	5	-	5	5	-	5	5	-	-	-	4	5	5	4	3	3	3	3	3	5	443		
29	4	4	3	3	2	1	1	4	3	3	4	1	3	2	3	3	4	2	1	2	3	5	2	2	1	288	
Mean	3.3	3.5	3.5	3.8	3.8	3	2.8	4	2.7	3	3.3	2	2.7	2.7	3.3	3.8	4.8	3.8	2.3	2.5	2.8	3.3	2.3	3.3	3.5	324	
B.COM. PART-III STUDENTS																											
30	5	5	5	5	5	2	5	5	5	-	-	-	1	1	1	-	1	5	5	-	5	5	-	-	5	406	
B.COM. PART-I																											
31	3	4	4	3	5	4	2	1	2	5	3	4	4	3	4	2	2	-	-	3	4	3	4	4	4	335	
32	2	2	4	2	2	2	2	4	2	4	4	1	3	1	3	3	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	284	
33	1	2	4	3	3	1	1	4	3	2	3	1	3	3	3	1	2	2	1	3	4	1	4	1	1	220	
Mean	2.7	3.3	3.3	3.3	3.3	2.3	1.7	5	2.3	3	3.3	2	3.3	2.3	3.3	2.7	2.3	3	3	2.3	3	3.3	3.7	2.3	2.7	280	
Grand																											
Mean	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.9	3.6	3.3	2.6	3.9	3.5	3.5	3.4	2.3	2.9	2.7	3	3.4	3.3	3.9	3.5	2.6	3.7	4	2.9	3.6	3.5	345	

Table 3. Region-wise and Aspect-wise Extent of Price Reasonability.

Extremely Poor (0-1)	Very Poor (1-2)	Poor (2-3)	Average (3-4)	High (4-5)
NIL.	NIL.	1. Cost and Quality of Study Material	1. Admission Fee	1. Refund of Library Fee.
		2. Hostel Accommodation	2. Total Fee	
			3. Payment Time	
			4. Difference between Ad. Fee & Course value of both the Systems.	
		3. Rent paid for stay during PCP and Exams	5. Cost of Study Materials.	
		4. Subsidised Food	6. Difference between Fee of Exam of both the systems.	
		5. Library Facility.	7. Migration Fee	
			8. Miscellaneous expenses	
			9. Location of Examination Centre.	
			10. Economical Postal Correspondence.	
			11. Admission Process	
			12. Absence of Corruption	
			13. Official Procedure	
			14. Distribution of Study Materials.	
			15. No. of Books in the Library	
			16. Library Fee	
			17. Nearness of examination centre.	
			18. Exceptional Books in the Library.	
			19. Competence of the Faculty.	