A Study of the Problems Faced by IGNOU Students

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In any transition from one system of education to another, students are found to face not only cultural shocks but also operational difficulties. While cultural change spans a long period during which attitudinal changes occur gradually, operational difficulties faced by the large open universities can be solved in a short time, provided the appropriate managerial strategies based on research are evolved. The operational difficulties faced by IGNOU at the moment are challenges not only to students but also the University Management. Studies of this kind would help the management to take informed decisions in some key areas of the Universities' operations.

Introduction

Distance education is a learner centered education. It is so because, if education is to function as a means of social upliftment and democratization, it cannot but be learner centered. Distance education can be more learner centered if distance educators are aware of the problems, needs, attitudes and characteristics of their learners. The present study intends to assess the different types of problems that learners come across in the course of their interaction with the distance education institution they are attached to.

Students who enroll in distance education institutions may have their unique needs to fulfil before they enroll. These students are relatively independent and they have various roles in society. They might be working as teachers or parent at different times and participate in many other activities as well. Thus, the students of open learning are more goal oriented and highly motivated on the one hand and on the other, they face certain problems in their choice of being a student, of the open learning institution. The problems they face may generally emanate from the weak student support services of the institutions, and also from the learners commitments and responsibilities towards his home, office and society. As a result, the distance learners may become dissatisfied, frustrated, confused which would lead to dropping out from the system. The distance students have no direct contact between the teacher and the taught as in the conventional universities. Teacher and learner are physically away from the institution as well as their peer groups. They donot get immediate clarification for the doubts that come up during their studies. If the students happen to live in economically and technologically backward areas, they may

not be able to make use of the audio-video programmes or the educational broadcasts. All these problems have definite implications on their studies. Distance educators, therefore, have to be well informed about these problems, if distance education has to be socially relevant and pedagogically effective.

Objectives

The main objectives of this study are:

(1)   to study the problems learners face on account of their own situations and environments;

(2)   to study the problems created from the provisions and practices of the distance education institutions;

(3)   to study the need to strengthen the student support services and make them adapt to the students' need; and

(4)   to study the need to stimulate students to integrate learning.

Methodology

This study concentrates on the students of IGNOU Regional Centre, Jaipur. Primary data was collected on the basis of a questionnaire. Tabulation, classification, and percentage calculation were used for data analysis.

The sample size included 100 distance learners, covering generally all IGNOU programmes. Secondary data was used from the published literature, as available from the IGNOU, and from various other libraries.

A questionnaire was served to 100 distance learners of IGNOU Regional Centre, Jaipur of the various programmes like Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, Diplomas and Certificate programmes. The age group of these learners varied from 18 to 45 years. A full 80 per cent of the participants were employed, and the remaining 20 per cent were of the unemployed category which included those who were simultaneously pursuing some academic programme, along with IGNOU programme such as, unmarried girls pursuing graduation, housewives and so on.

Findings

The learners had different objectives in mind while enrolling themselves for the study programmes. As shown in Table 1, 60 per cent of the learners took admission in the various programmes, from the viewpoint of job advancement. 15 per cent enrolled with the aim of getting a job. The students of this category were either those who were unemployed, or those who were to retire from military service but, were interested to join some civilian establishments.

Table 1: Aims of IGNOU Students, Jaipur Regional Centre.

(N = 100)

Category	No. of learners
Job Advancement	60
Getting a Job	15
Pursuing Academic Interest	5
Any other reason	20

The 5 per cent learners were those who pursued some academic programmes, for furthering their academic interest. This included persons generally serving the high echelons of government or private sector as secretaries, managing directors etc. The remaining 20 per cent of the learners gave different reasons. The housewives felt they had enough time so they sought to utilize their leisure time in studying; some students felt that attaining knowledge will help them in starting some enterprises like opening a creche or preschool; yet others felt that knowledge about nutrition, health, child care, etc, would help them to manage things at home front in a better fashion.

On being asked about the problems related to admission, 65 per cent of the students replied in the negative, indicating no problems faced by them related to admission. However, as evident from Table 2, the remaining 35 per cent faced certain problems. They underwent certain tensions related to the course choices available, procedures of the university, eligibility conditions, admission process, fee payment and so on. There were problems related to the complexity of the admission forms. As the students are tuned to the conventional system, the terms such as programme codes, and course codes were confusing to them. They wanted the pre-entry guidance to be more informative. They even felt that there is great gap between the admission time and in the commencement of the academic session. This needs to be bridged. The management students felt that the qualification of supervisory/managerial/professional work experience has to be defined in more clear terms.

Table 2: Problems related to Admission

(N = 100)

Category	Response
Yes	35
No	65

After taking admission, the students also face certain educational problems, especially related to the receipt of the study material. As indicated in table 3, only 15 per cent of the learners received the course material on time in January. These learners were of the DRD and BLISc programmes. The other 15 per cent got the course material in February. 35 per cent of the learners got the course material in March and the remaining got the course material in April or by the first week of May. A

common problem faced by most of the learners was that the course material was incomplete, as they found some blocks missing. Sometimes the assignments were not sent along with the booklets and no information about when they will be sent is made known to the learners. In such matters, when the students wrote to the Material Distribution Division, their letters were seldom answered. The students felt that the study material should reach by January itself. The students of Management Programme for example, could hardly prepare for the semester examinations as they received the study material only in March/April. Similar is the problem with students of Certificate Programmes. The students of the Certificate in Computing 1996 programme received the course material in April, only two months before their final examinations.

Table 3: Arrival of the study material.

(N = 100)

Category	Response
January	15
February	15
March	35
April	35

Counselling is considered to be an essential, and vital part of the student support services. But many of the learners are not keen to attend it and they do not even know about its importance. This is evident from Table 4, where the number of students attending counselling is depicted.

Table 4: Attendance at the counselling sessions.

(N = 100)

Category	Response
Regularly	10
Sometimes	10
Rarely	35
Never	45

10 per cent of the students attended counselling regularly. These students opted for the programmes which had the practical component e.g., library science and computer and also the students from management programme. 10 per cent responded that they attend the counselling only sometimes. 35 per cent attended the counselling sessions only rarely and 45 per cent never attended counselling. A notable fact was that even those who we are not going for job did not attend counselling.

They go to the study centre, only when there are problems with the grade card or with the assignments etc. Those who are employed say that they do not find time to

attend counselling. Some of them remarked that their office timings are over by late evening, so they can hardly visit the study centre except on Sundays. Some of the students of Library Science say that libraries close by 8 O'clock in the evening, making it difficult for them to attend counselling sessions. Besides, there are problems of conveyance, especially for those who are coming from far off places. Those attending practicals, find it expensive staying in some lodges and boarding houses.

On being asked whether they got help in doing assignments, those who attended counselling regularly or occasionally admitted that they got help in doing assignments. However, their level of satisfaction with the help they got in doing the assignments varied. The students of Management Programme felt that they should get more help in their project work. Likewise, students of DNHE, ACC, AHE also wanted the counsellors' help in selecting the topic, theme and also in doing their project work. They also complained that sometimes the answers for questions in the assignments were found in very short or precise form in the course material. Sometimes, the assignments were incomplete. Some questions were found missing in the printed assignments.

The display of audio and video cassettes was also found to be irregular at the study centres. The students who attended counselling found that audio and video cassettes were not shown on a regular basis. The basic reason was that audio and video cassettes were not available for all courses. The counsellors, sometimes, were found lacking the initiative to make the counselling session more interesting.

More so, as the counselling was basically held on Saturdays and Sundays, for most of the programmes, it was not possible for all the students to view the videos. No time was, however, left for the display of cassettes in the 2 1/2 hours counselling session.

Matters related to examination were also discussed with the students. Their responses are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Problems regarding examination.

(N = 100)

Category	Response
Yes	30
No	70

30 per cent of those interviewed faced problems related to examination. Some of them did not receive the intimation slip for the examination and their names were not found in the examinees list. They wanted that some provision should be there which will enable such students to take the term end examinations. They remarked that one should be allowed to sit for the examination when one has enough evidence

of submission of the examination form in time. It was found that students were not aware as to when they had to fill the examination form. Those who received intimation slips also had problems. The examination centre shown in the slip was other than the one they opted. The courses opted were also found missing. The date sheets reached the student just 15-20 days before the commencement of examinations, which gave very little time to prepare for the courses accordingly.

Table 6 denotes the level of responsiveness of the student support services as existing at the three levels viz., headquarters, regional centre and study centres. The students were asked to indicate the regularity of response they got from the University for their queries.

Table 6: The University's response to students' letters.

(N=100)

Category	Hqrs.	Regional Centre	Study Centre
Regularly	-	35	-
Sometimes	5	45	25
Rarely	25	15	30
Never	70	5	45

The students said that the study centres and headquarters do not reply to their queries regularly. 35 per cent answered that their queries were answered regularly by the Regional Centre. They felt that if their queries are answered in time, they would be greatly helped by such support. Those who stay at places far off from the Regional Centres and study centres and could not come to these centres every time for any problems they faced, felt that it would be great help, if their problems are solved immediately by way of correspondence. However, the majority of the students were not satisfied with this aspect of student support, as their letters were either answered irregularly or not at all.

The students of open learning institutions are generally those who are employed. They have to attend to their responsibilities at home and office along with their studies. In performing these dual responsibilities, they face certain difficulties. As seen in Table 7, 45 per cent face much difficulty, whereas another 45 per cent felt little difficulty in performing the twin responsibilities. The students felt that it is difficult to devote time out of their office and household work for studies. They return from the office sometimes very late in the evening. They have to take leave in order to prepare for the examinations. Even doing assignments is very difficult due to lack of time. They hardly find time to attend counselling or even visit the study centre.

Table 7: Difficulty in coping up with the twin responsibilities of office/household job and studies.

(N = 100)

Category	Response
Too much difficulty	—
Much difficulty	45
Not so much difficulty	45
No difficulty at all	10

Besides the above, the students also faced certain other problems. They said that they were not able to understand the grading pattern of the University. They have problems with the non-inclusion of assignment grades in the grade card. They had difficulty in getting the new assignments. Counselling was not found upto the mark by some students. They were also apprehensive about the validity of the degree/diploma obtained from the open university.

Discussion

IGNOU should strengthen its student support services and has to make changes in its policies according to students needs, besides responding to the needs of the institution and the society. At the individual level, IGNOU students might be concerned about the contribution of the programme to their desired goals, the effectiveness of learning strategies, the availability of courses, the matching of programmes in accordance with their needs and skills. The students may also have personal, psychological problems about restarting their education after a long gap.

At the institutional level the University has to be concerned about the availability of resources, the internal efficiency, the improvement of students' educational and professional qualifications and the institutional responsiveness to the external environment.

The present study pinpoints two basic reasons for the students joining the IGNOU Programmes:

(a) **For job advancement**: Students aim at acquiring knowledge or skills to enhance their job prospects and career. These students are concerned not only with their current jobs but also about their future job prospects or career.

(b) **For academic support**: The students opt for higher education because they need to acquire academic knowledge for further studies.

In order to fulfil the above two goals, the student faces two types of problems, viz.; personal and academic.

Personal: As evident from study, the students have personal problems relating to their own situations and environment like office work, household activities, physical and mental health, etc.

Academic: Besides, the students face problems related to the studies, such as:

- lack of proper information about the admissions, examinations, assignments, etc.;
- late receipt of the study material and inadequate time to study;
- lack of proper study skills to study through the self instructional material;
- the post study problems relating to the procedure for obtaining provisional certificate, duplicate certificate, rechecking form, migration certificate, etc.

Besides these, there are certain problems that emanate from the structure and complexity of the University related to its policy of open entry, the plethora of divisions catering to the various aspects of students problems, lack of uniformity of courses as compared with other academic institutions, etc.

Therefore, certain degree of concentrated action is required to make the system more effective and responsive to the needs and problems of the learners. The following may be considered in this regard:

- Student support services must be more informal and should have more facilities. Viewpoints of students should be taken into consideration for developing effectiveness in support services. There must be more consultation hours so that students may discuss their individual difficulties.

- An efficient administrative structure should be developed and standardized. There should be permanent coordinators and counsellors at the study centres.

- Study centres must be equipped with technological facilities like dish- antennaes, photocopier machines, telephones, FAX, etc.

- Counselling should be made emphatic. Academic counsellors must not only be experts in their subjects, but also be familiar with distance education methodology. Counselling should be more student centered. There is a need for the counsellors to have necessary human attributes such as patience, and sympathetic attitude towards students.

- Most of the students do not visit the study centres. The students do not go through the course material before coming to attend counselling at the study centre. Sometimes, there is lack of proper seating arrangement at the study centres. Thus in order to fulfil the basic purpose of providing a study centre, efforts are required to make these centres more effective and viable centres of counselling. Proper seating arrangements with provision of toilet and drinking water should be made available for the students.

- The University incurs big expenses for the production of audio and video cassettes which are being seldom used or displayed. The counselling session is wholly utilized for discussions. There should be some time provided for the display of audio and video cassettes in the counselling session.

- Staff development is of utmost importance. Since most of the faculty and staff including the counsellors are drawn from the conventional system, they are not familiar with open learning system, which requires a proper understanding of its concepts, various aspects and characteristics typical of the system, as also the operational mechanism. Without proper training, a majority of the staff are inclined to resist flexibility, openness and innovations with regard to the development of curriculum, course material etc. Therefore, a comprehensive and goal oriented training is needed not only for the staff at headquarters and regional centres but also for the coordinators and academic counsellors of the study centres. This task can be performed to a greater extent by the academics at the regional centres and headquarters, if they get trained first.

- There is need to create an atmosphere in which each student may seek self identification. They suffer from an inferiority complex in comparison to the students coming from the conventional system. There is need to develop a consciousness of their potentiality and encourage students to develop their self image positively.

- Students who come to seek admission undergo certain tensions related to the course choices available, procedures of the University, eligibility conditions, admission process, fee payment etc. This has to be streamlined. Besides, there are too many prospectuses which result in handling problems. There is need of only one prospectus for the university programmes. Special information cells should be constituted to disseminate information during admissions. Immediate information should reach the student about the confirmation of their admission accompanied by the fee receipt.

- With the commencement of session, the despatch of the study material should commence immediately. The study material, in practice, is received very late by the students. Sometimes the blocks are found missing, sometimes assignments are not sent along with the study material. A system of checks should be introduced to verify the appropriateness of the contents in each packet of the course material being sent. A brief information about the commencement of the second despatch should be sent along with the first study material to the students. It is also suggested that the camera copy of the course material should be made available to the Regional Centres and they should be authorized to printing of the course material as per their requirements. Decentralization of the printing of study materials and assignments is therefore recessary.

- The greatest plight of the IGNOUstudents was that even if results were declared after four months of the examinations, the results were found incomplete. The grades of the assignments were generally found missing. Sometimes the grades of the courses not opted by them were also found in the grade card. The entire system of examination should be streamlined. A

proper checking of the intimation slip should be done before issuing it to the student. This will help remove the problems relating to wrong courses being shown, wrong examination centres being shown etc. The examinees lists do not include some of the names of the students who have filled the examination form in time. The examination system therefore appears to be quite faulty. There are students who do not submit the examination form but they manage to get the admit cards. The results should be declared within four months after the exams, and should be complete in all respects. This will prevent the students from getting demoralized with the incomplete grade cards.

- The books in the library at the study centre and the regional centre should be made available to the students, not only for purposes of reference but they should also be issued to them. Lending facilities should be there. Photocopying facility should also be made available and some nominal charges can be collected from the students for this facility.

- The regional centres and study centres should be adequately staffed. Besides, the appointment of coordinators and counsellors, the location of these centres should be done in the best interests of the students.

- There is also a need to stimulate the students to integrate learning. The contact-cum-counselling sessions should guide the students in the methodology of learning. An educational climate should be created which will encourage relationships among teachers, administrative staff and students, which will also bridge the communication gap.

- The regional centres should have an effective monitoring system to check the student support services rendered by the study centres.

- A feedback system should be evolved to obtain feedback from the students about their ideas and problems related to the course material, facilities at study centre, examination, etc.

All the above will reduce the problems of distance learners, and will make the student support services effective in meeting the needs of the distance learners of IGNOU.