

Student Support Services : A Perspective from the National Open School

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'Support Services' as a term in the discourse patterns of distance/open learning points to a variety of connotations. As an area of study, it is enriched by bodies of theory as well as years of practice. The case from the National Open School (NOS), India constitutes yet another addition to the above — it is an account of the specific functions and operational methods of the study centres or Accredited Institutions (AIs) which are an essential part of the 'support service' mechanism of the National Open School (NOS).

The article briefly touches upon the strands of theory pertaining to the subject and then goes on to present details of a specific project initiated by the National Open School to improve its 'support service mechanism'.

Introduction

Quite a lot has been said about the 'industrial' nature of the distance education mode. As is the case with every other facet of life, the open/distance learning system has a number of positive features as well as certain negative aspects. Under the former we can list factors such as the democratization of education, open access and flexible study patterns as a case in point. By the same coin, the system has to cope with 'the lack of face to face contact between the teacher and the learners, the resultant disadvantage of inadequate monitoring and support. The theory on open/distance learning across the world has been placing increased emphasis on the role of effective support services in the overall success of the distance learning system. Here is an attempt at outlining a recent effort of the National Open School, New Delhi, to streamline its support service system.

Support services: Need and rationale

Having said that the support service system in the context of distance education (DE) is at a premium, we face the question why the reasons given below form the base for the efforts of open learning institutions in general and NOS in particular.

- i) The concept of DE is still relatively new to most of us and therefore a certain vagueness or lack of knowledge regarding the operational aspects is inevitable.
- ii) For the developing countries like India with their limited technological resources, media support (in the multimedia packages) is still difficult to achieve.
- iii) The sheer size of the system — geographical area and the massive number of students — makes streamlining and coordination difficult. Therefore, effective support services should be ensured as soon as possible if the DE system is to gain credibility.

The open learning system uses the regional and study centres with full time and part time staff to offer support to its students.

The NOS uses accredited schools as its study centres. There are about 400 accredited vocational institutions all over the country functioning as the study centres of the NOS.

Some operational aspects

National Open School delivers education through a flexible multi channel learning system comprising (a) printed self instructional material, (b) audio-video programmes in a small scale, (c) personal contact classes (PCCs) in study centres referred to as accredited institutions (AIs), (d) tutor marked assessment (TMA) and through interactive tutorial in the form of a magazine (bi-monthly)—*Open Learning*. In the process, students learn on their own with the help of study materials. Because of the limited resources in our country, media technology is not playing its due role. And over and above, none of the media in distance teaching is wholly satisfactory by itself. It does not fulfil the individual's requirements. The learner is isolated and finds himself 'in a sentence to solitary confinement' (Smith and Small 1982, 137-9). All over the world, educationists are working towards evolving a system to understand this phenomenon better. Educational philosophy operating behind the 'Student Support Services' is one of individual support to a student i.e. teaching based on human relations approach. A learner is developed in such a way that she contributes towards a better society. Support through continuous education especially for the children and youth from the socially disadvantaged section of the society, handicapped, ex-servicemen, dropouts from the campus-based system is the need of the hour. The issue becomes complex because of the variety of these backgrounds and the wide range of age-groups. The Open School students range from 18 to 60 in terms of age.

Next comes the question of relevant feedback. Since the inception (1989) the NOS has not developed a systematised approach to find out certain crucial aspects related to the objectives and offer of programmes. These may be summarised as follows:

- i) Are the programmes (intended for the deprived sections of the society) reaching the target group?
- ii) Are the students motivated? If not what can be done to improve their motivation level?
- iii) Do the programmes help the students better their socio-economic position?

Predictably, the point of rapid expansion (in terms of number of programmes) has taken precedence over the need for consolidation.

At present, 19% of the total enrolment belongs to the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST). About 42.71% of the learners between ages 17-19 belongs to dropouts from the conventional system. These sections are obviously looking for a means to improve their socio-economic status in society.

'Support Services' — A Project at National Level

Recently, the NOS has initiated a project to study the operational features of its support services at national level. It is to be initially planned and organised at the national level and later on will be carried out locally. For this, there is a need to identify problems and have sufficient knowledge on the availability of services at the Study Centres. Already there are norms laid down on the condition a study-centre is accredited by the National Open School. On the other hand, the Study Centres are aware of the facilities, financial benefits and services expected from NOS. But with the growing number of Study Centres, tutors and students and territorial areas evolved, it is difficult to interact and provide feedback to their satisfaction. With the passage of time a feeling of isolation has generated deficiencies. Serious complaints like sale of prospectus, study-materials in higher prices, PCP not being conducted or conducted in a very conventional manner etc. are coming from some of the Study Centres. To check this and protect the quality and standard of the programmes introduced by the NOS, 'Student Support Services' has to be strengthened at the national level. This is possible only through continuous exchange and interaction between the sub-systems in terms of inputs, outputs and feedback.

Objectives of the Project

- i) To develop a plan to organise "Student Support Services" at the national, regional and fields levels.
- ii) To provide management inputs at each level.
- iii) To coordinate the activities of study centres and facilitators.
- iv) To provide timely feedback to the study centres.

- v) To provide professional support to the study centres.
- vi) To assess the developmental needs of NOS functionaries including coordinators, Assistant coordinators, tutors and students.
- vii) To develop student support network by establishing new study centres wherever it is required.
- viii) To develop a mechanism for responding to students needs and grievances
- ix) To develop data-base at the national level for the storage, retrieval and timely feedback.
- x) To involve State Govts. educational and non-government organisations (NGOs).
- xi) To initiate research on the subject.

Organisational set-up

It is perceived that effective decentralisation may be the key to ensure effective function of the regional and study centres. Therefore, a three tier system is recommended with support at the national, regional and is local levels.

So far, a plan is developed and proposed to set up six regional centres one each for Delhi, for Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western and North-eastern States with their regional offices at Delhi (2) Gauhati, Calcutta, Hyderabad and Poona. They will be in charge of the Study Centres in their jurisdiction and will be in a better position to understand their problems and give timely feedback to them. These centres will be working in close collaboration with different departments and units of NOS and also the state governments and other educational institutions especially, non-governmental organisations. As it is evident from the graph, the number of Study Centres per Regional Centre varies from 110 to 19. Again within a regional centre, there is disparity among states, districts and students enrolled. These Regional Centres will be in a better position to assess the need for establishing such centres wherever required. The need for teacher's orientation and modification in the instructional materials according to the learner's requirements need attention. A specific vocational course may or may not be suitable, depending on the availability of resources and employment needs of that State. Precisely for this reason, survey and researches should be an important aspect of 'Student Support Services'. With the passage of time and the increased number of students, the demand for more centres is increasing.

To supplement the functioning of Regional Centres, local support is required. For this, Academic Facilitators are proposed to supervise and provide their professional support to a cluster of 3 to 4 study centres. The facilitators will be drawn from that particular area who are engaged in academic pursuits with administrative experience. They are expected to visit the study centres allocated to them at least once in a quarter or four times in an academic year and review their working. They would in particular, be expected to look into the supply of

study materials to the students, conduct of personal contact programmes, students assignment and their evaluation, academic infrastructure and other relevant aspects of the working of the study centres to ensure quality education and their proper functioning. However, it will be prohibitive to establish a vast full-fledged field level organisation on the full time basis. It is, therefore, proposed that these field level Academic Facilitators may be appointed on honorary basis and will be paid a suitable honorarium for their visit. While identifying facilitators, it is important to ensure that they have complete faith in the distance mode of teaching. Support provided at a distance through post, tele-phones and other modes such as pamphlets and students

magazines, may answer most of their queries. General information may be kept ready for dispatch. Addresses and phone numbers of Regional Centres and academic facilitators may be displayed on the notice board of the Study Centres so that students may contact them directly.

To ensure better communication, two way interaction can be developed at each level:

A student may contact central or regional centre directly and on the same line different centres may provide their feedback directly. A copy of the feedback provided may be sent to Regional Centres/Study Centres. This will guard against duplication of an support provided.

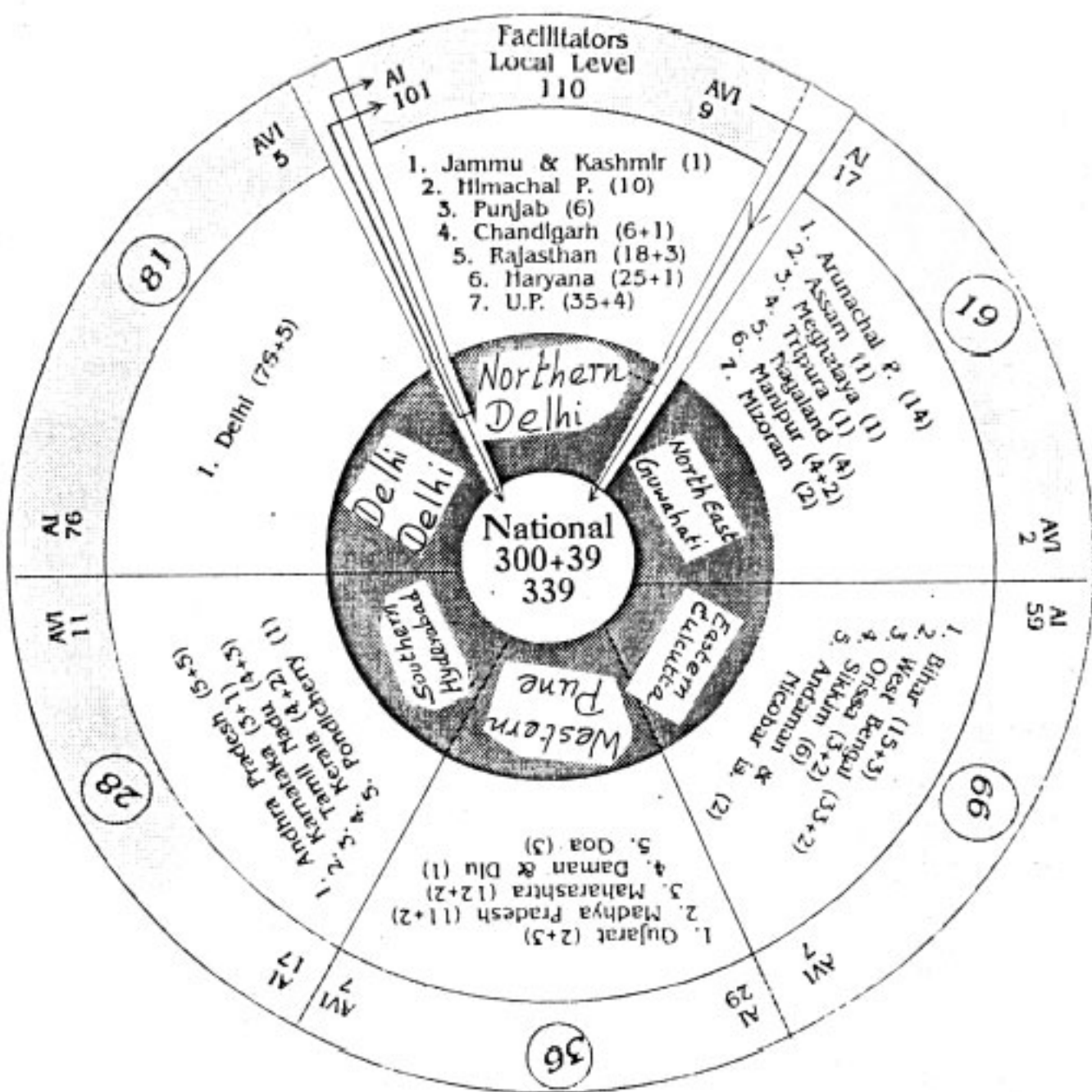


Fig. 1 : Operational Mechanism of NOS

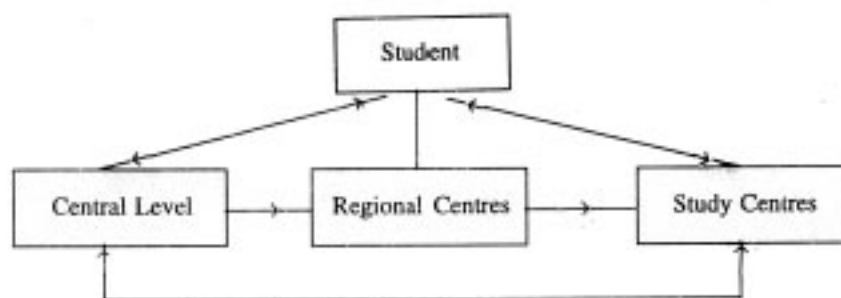


Fig. 2 : Two-way Communication at NOS

On the basis of their reports a data base may be developed for relevant and systematic collection of information, easy retrieval and timely feedback at each level. This provides insight into the prevalent position and thus assessment of the requirements is made easier.

(i) Academic Support

- a) Facilitators, Councillors and Coordinators may organise a talk on the purpose of the programme and courses available for different categories and other facilities available for a candidate in the Study Centres. This may also be organised at the other educational and non-govt. organisations (NGOs).
- b) Facilitators may observe a few Personal Contact Programmes organised at a study centre and later on arrange a meeting of all the tutors and councillors to guide them on how to conduct Personal Contact Programme for different groups of students.
- c) Facilitators may demonstrate a few cases.
- d) Problematic students may be given separate interviews.
- e) One or two bright students may be selected to guide the weaker group of students.
- f) Facilitators, councillors and tutors may be oriented on how to conduct Personal Contact Programme and Councelling.
- g) NGOs may be requested to take up the work of councelling at the Study Centres.
- h) Radio and television programmes may be discussed with the students.
- i) The identity card of the open school students should gain them access to other schools and public libraries.
- j) The facilitators for various study centres should be chosen from the neighbourhood.

ii) Non-academic Support

- a) Co-curricular activities may be arranged at the study centres for better interaction among the students and between students and tutors.
- b) Changing needs of the society throw a number of problems which may be related to a student. A student's personal problem may reflect on his

learning. Facilitators/Councillors may talk it out to the student at the personal level.

- c) Facilitators must see that the facilities like science lab, library, etc. are made available to the students.

In case of a high number of complaints from students of a particular study-centre, a team of personnel from National Open School may visit the centre to verify and take action accordingly.

A student who is a core factor for all the programmes taken, will be looked after and a healthy rapport will be established to promote their learning.

Establishment of a National Unit, six regional centres and field level facilitators are a modest beginning to decentralize the support services at the local levels. In course of time this will improve the quality of education for the educationally and socio-economically backward sections of the society.

Conclusion

Areas of study become richer through the shared knowledge of different academic pursuits. Independent or individual research thus feeds into a complex body a theory. Given this premise, research in pioneering areas is even more interesting because of the added element of novelty. This attempt to prevent certain key features of the National Open School's endeavour to provide better, more streamlined support services will have achieved its purpose if it kindles the interest of the DE professionals in the specific area. The learner is central to any teaching learning transaction and this is even more so in the DE system as it is proclaimed to be a learner-centred mode. In this situation, effective support is indeed crucial to sustain learner-motivation and to attain optimum results. The project of the NOS has found that a three tier structure of support at both the academic and administrative level, would indeed be effective. The links in this pattern summarise the roles of the head/central institution, the regional and study centres.

The issue that we, as DE professionals may do well to remember, is that the size and operational complexities of the DE system demand that a single point contact (i.e. teacher and learner) would be ineffective. Multipoint contacts—at regional and local levels—are crucial to the success of the system and effective decentralisation is the key to achieve this end.