

# COMMUNICATION

## Continuation and Completion Patterns of Management Distance Learners: A Case Study

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**Abstract :** *Distance Education (DE) provides its learners the flexibility in their studies. They can study the prescribed courses at their own pace, place and convenience. This makes one of the subtle difference between DE and Conventional Education. Thus the criteria for assessing success of Distance Learners be different from those of conventional students. Present study is an attempt in this direction.*

### Introduction

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) offers coursewise re-registration in the semesters, for its MBA students. The records of students admitted during 1993 to 1995 under the Bhopal Regional Centre were taken. Their re-registration for further courses and successful completion of these courses during this period was considered. It is observed that students who are active in their First semester of study were found to be predominant among those continuing in successive semesters.

Successful completion of the courses registered by Distance Learners (D.Ls) is a measure of success of Distance Learning Institutes (DLIs). Further registration for the courses prescribed for obtaining a Diploma / Degree is also a measure of it. Keeping in view of the special requirements of D.Ls, for whom studies are only part of their plethora of responsibilities, D.L.I.s offer them more chances to clear the exams. All these acts are aimed at encouraging the isolated Distance Learners to pursue and successfully complete the studies. Such continuation and completion is the back bone of sustenance of DLIs. Present study is an attempt in studying these aspects critically.

### IGNOU and its Management Programme

IGNOU is established by an act of Indian Parliament in 1985, with whole country under its jurisdiction. IGNOU caters to its students through a network of 21 Regional Centres and 376 Study Centres.

Management Programme (MP) is one of the earliest programmes offered by IGNOU. Under this stream IGNOU is offering 6 Diploma Programmes besides Masters in Business Administration (MBA), as follows :

- 1) Diploma in Management (DIM)
- 2) PG Diploma in Management (PGDIM)
- 3) PG Diploma in Finance Management (PGDFM)
- 4) PG Diploma in Marketing Management (PGDMM)
- 5) PG Diploma in Human Resource Management (PGDHRM)
- 6) PG Diploma in Operations Management (PGDOM)
- 7) Masters in Business Management (MBA)

In true spirit of Open University (OU) system, a menu of 42 courses is offered to the learner in this M.P. comprising basic courses, specialised courses, integrated module and project work.

Students are offered all the 42 courses and it is their choice to select minimum one and maximum 04 courses. Calendar year is the academic year and it is divided into two semesters (i.e.) I semester in January to June and II Semester - July to December. All the registered students are sent reregistration forms for each semester. They can reregister for maximum 04 courses or can have a break and restart afterwards. In this way one can register for all the 21 courses required for MBA in a minimum period of 05 semesters, i.e. 2½ years. (Project work being treated as equivalent to two courses). There is no maximum period limit.

Evaluation system consists of two parts viz: Continuous Evaluation (CE) and Term End Examination (TEE). In computing final result, 30% weightage is given to continuous evaluation and 70% for TEE. In CE, there are 03 assignments in each course. Of these, two are descriptive/short answer nature, named tutor marked assignments (TMAs). Third is multiple choice, objective type known as computer marked assignment (CMA). Students have to answer the TMAs and submit the responses at study centres. They will be evaluated by the experienced evaluators and graded in a 05 letter grade system. The evaluators write tutor comments on the Assignment Response (AR). Then these ARs are returned to the students. The CMA responses have to be sent to the Student Registration and Evaluation Division (SRED) for compilation. Of these 03 assignments, best of the two are considered for calculating the 30% weightage in the final result.

TEE are conducted in every June and December. A student gets chance to appear in the examination at the end of the semester in which he/she registered for those courses. In the next three semester end exams also he/she can appear without any extra fees. One can submit the assignment responses also during this period. His/her registration period of a particular course is valid for 04 semesters. That means he/she will be given 03 more extra semesters than the registered semester to complete the courses. The prerequisite for appearing in TEE in a course is that he / she has to submit the corresponding assignments as per schedule before appearing on the TEE. The TEE

papers are also evaluated in a 05 letter grade system. For successful completion of a course, one has to obtain minimum D grade individually in CE and TEE and 'C' grade when both put together in 30 and 70 ratio.

A DL has plethora of responsibilities. DLs join a DEI out of their own motivation. While studying they get different types of doubts both in their subjects and procedures and methods followed in the DEI. So the DEI has to help the DLs in solving their problems. In other words to keep up their motivation or to provide the continuity of concern. IGNOU has established a huge network to provide the student support services (SSS) consisting of Regional Services Division (RSD) at Head Quarters (HQ), 21 Regional Centres and 376 study centres, programme study centres and Partner Institutions.

### **Indicators of Success of DE System**

From the above details following points have specific significance :

1. Coursewise registration is allowed in semester.
2. Break in studies is allowed.
3. Four semesters are given to complete a registered course.

These are the relaxed facilities given to the distance learner in view of his/her specific requirements. Due to the limited time available to a Distance Learner for his / her studies, amongst his/her occupation with family, official and social affairs, he/she may so pace up studies by using the above relaxations.

Thus if one is convinced on this aspect, it leads to the conclusion that success of a programme can be truly represented by the successful completion of the registered courses than number of pass outs of MBA degree.

### **Sample**

Bhopal Regional Centre is one of the 23 Regional Centres of IGNOU. It caters to Madhya Pradesh, geographically the biggest state in the country. The students joined fresh in 1993, 1994 and 1995 years, their re-registration during these years is used. Comprehensive grade lists sent by SRED after term end examinations during these years forms basis for the evaluation data. For homogeneity, the students admitted initially in this region are only considered. The data of students transferred from other Regional Centres is excluded.

A Learner can re-register for 1 to 4 courses in each successive semester. For every batch of learners say 1993, their continuation is calculated in a particular semester re-registration as the number of students, their total courses and average of the courses taken by a student. These are used to study the relative trends in the continuation patterns. The completion patterns were analysed from the comprehensive results available at the end of each semester.

## Continuation Patterns

The registration and re-registration data during 1993, 94 and 95 is presented in Table 1. As the learner can register from 1 to 4 courses, there is varying number of courses and varying average courses taken by a learner. From Table 1, it can be observed that there is a continuous decrease in total number of students and courses in reference to a particular batch of students in successive semesters.

**Table 1 : Re-registration data in terms of total students, total courses and the average courses**

Year of Initial Registration	Semesters							
	I '93	II '93	I '94	II '94	I '95	II '95	I '96	II '96
Number of Students								
Total	—	338	233	490	355	658	503	1012
1993	*304	206	109	91	90	75	60	45
1994	—	—	*417	282	153	133	138	117
1995	—	—	—	—	*467	358	193	153
Number of Courses								
1993	*1112	653	346	283	299	177	171	103
1994	—	—	*1536	946	483	414	451	297
1995	—	—	—	—	*1718	1244	687	519
Average courses by a student								
1993	*3.65	3.12	3.17	3.11	3.32	2.36	2.85	2.26
1994	—	—	*3.68	3.35	3.15	3.11	3.27	2.50
1995	—	—	—	—	*3.68	3.47	3.45	3.39

Exclusively for students registered initially at Bhopal

\* Indicates the first registration of the fresh students.

**Note:** There will be students admitted prior to 1993 also in re-registration. For clarity, only students admitted in 1993, 94 and 95 are specified.

Fig 1 shows plot of total courses versus semesters. It gives an interesting observation that there is a rapid decrease in the first three semesters.

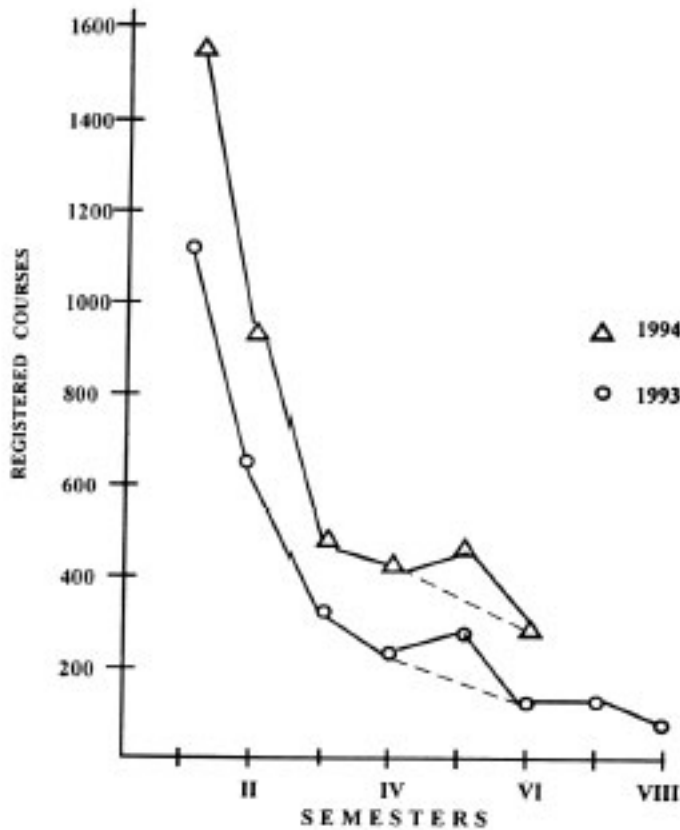


Fig. 1 : Plot of registered courses in successive semesters

If we consider the average courses registered by students, it is observed from Table 1 that the average is  $>3.0$  till the fifth semester and then it dropped below three, thus indicating a break in continuity patterns. This is observed for 1993 and 1994 students. It is interesting if viewed from the angle that 5 semesters is the minimum time required for a learner to complete an MBA.

### Completion Patterns

A registered student can appear in examination within 4 semesters, without any re-registration for the courses. To appear in Term End Examination, submission of assignments is compulsory pre-requisite.

Now there arises three cases in reference to the completion status of a course. They are as follows :

- a) One might have successfully completed a course by obtaining atleast 'D' grade each in TEE and CE and also 'C' grade atleast, when both put together in 70 and 30 ratio respectively. That course is represented in result sheet as 'SC' (Successfully Completed).
- b) A course is declared as NC (Not Completed) under following conditions :
  - i) If either assignments or TEE is not attempted
  - ii) Even attempted, minimum 'D' grade not obtained in either of assignments or TEE or both.
  - iii) Even if minimum 'D' grade obtained individually, overall, 'C' grade could not have achieved.

- c) For courses, in which neither assignments nor TEE were attempted, they may be treated as 'Inactive' (IA) and are not reflected in result sheet.

In the result sheet of SRED, SC and NC are only reflected. IA can be obtained from the difference between total registered courses and the sum of SC and NC.

Thus, total registered courses = SC + NC + IA

Sum of SC and NC may be treated as 'Active' courses, as some activity is there for those courses.

SRED sends cumulative result register of the students after TEE. Thus a separate register is maintained to record each student's data, namely courses registered, SC, NC and their cumulative data. Thus we calculate the percentage of SC and NC courses from the cumulative registered courses. Table 2 gives this data pertaining to 1993 and 1994 batch students till December 1995 TEE, for which comprehensive result was received.

From the Table 2, it is evident that the SC percentage is increasing and that of NC decreasing. Their total is also an increasing trend.

**Table 2 : Completion data**

Cumulative Data	Term End Examination				
	June '93	June '94	Dec'94	June '95	Dec '95
<b>1993</b>					
Courses Registered	1112	2111	2394	2693	2870
SC %	29.7 (53.8)	37.9(64.5)	43.7(66.2)	47.0(68.4)	49.4(71.8)
NC %	25.3(46.2)	20.8(35.5)	22.3(33.8)	21.7(31.6)	19.4(28.2)
Total of SC & NC%	55.0	58.5	64.8	68.8	68.8
<b>1994</b>					
Courses Registered	—	1536	2482	2965	3379
SC %	—	29.1(46.4)	33.3(54.6)	38.9(59.0)	41.9(62.0)
NC %	—	33.7(53.6)	27.7(43.4)	27.0(41.0)	25.6(38.0)
Total of SC & NC%	—	62.8	61.0	65.9	67.5

*Figures within brackets represent SC & NC for 100%*

To observe the trends more clearly, the data is plotted in Fig-2 in terms of number of courses. Figure clearly demonstrates that there is an increasing parallel trend in total courses registered and SC. Whereas for NC and IA courses, the increasing trend has subdued with consequent semesters. This may suggest that those who are successfully completing courses are further proceeding in their studies by re-registering themselves. This confirms the observation of the author in a previous work (Sivaswaroop, 1996).

Here comes the concept of criteria for assessing the viability of DE Institutes as a measure of turn out of degrees.

Open University system is marked by its flexibility contrary to the rigidity of the conventional system. Especially in the present study, a learner can register from 1 to 4 courses in a semester. He can have break in studies and continue afterwards. Also IGNOU provides 4 semesters for a particular registered course to be completed.

Thus theoretically speaking a learner can complete his MBA minimum in five semesters. For a student in conventional University, the passouts at the end of five semesters will

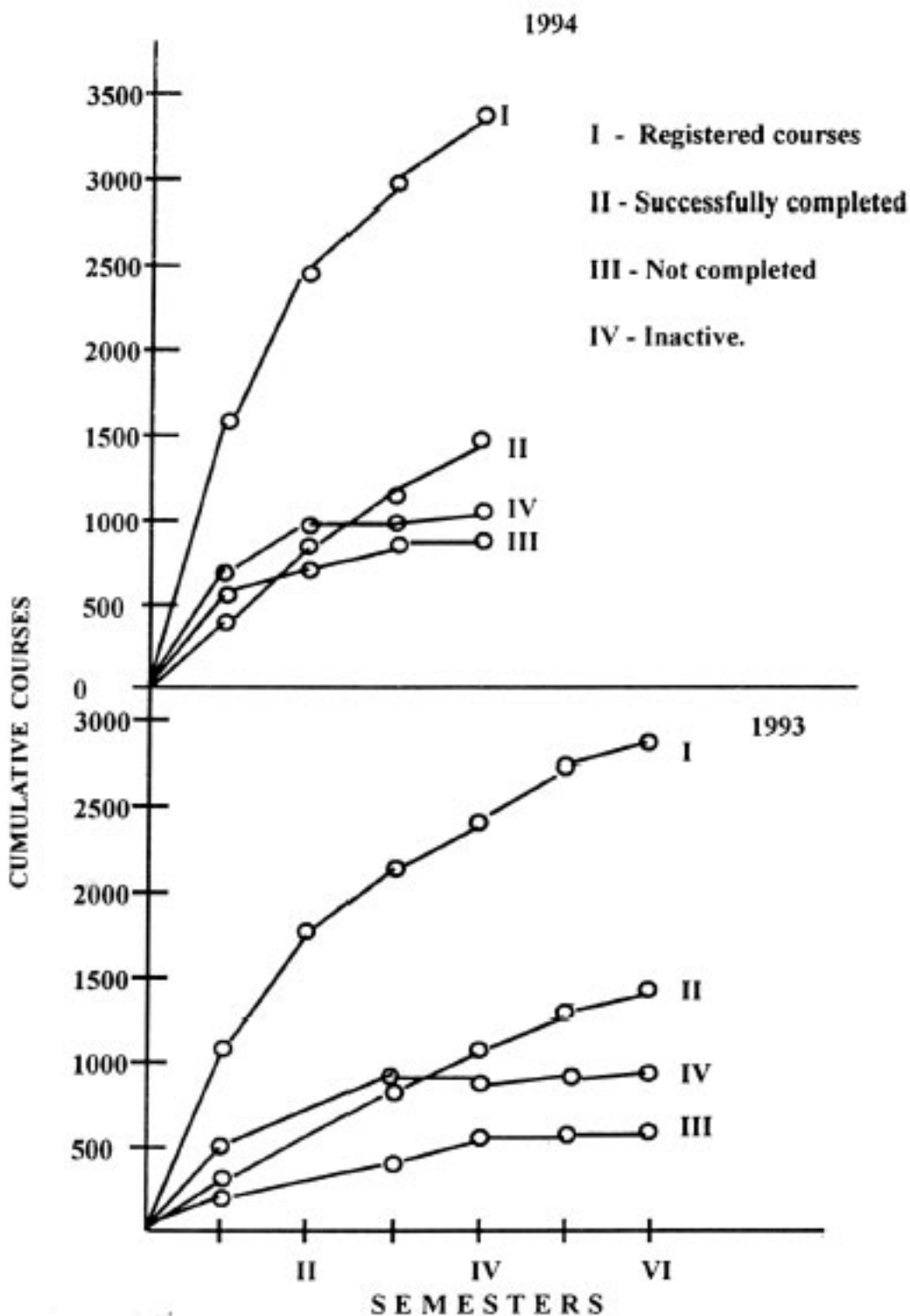


Fig. 2 : Plot of cumulative courses in successive semesters

be counted as its efficiency. Whereas in a Open University (O.U.) system it may not represent true situation due to the relaxations mentioned above.

Thus the SC percentage be taken into consideration. From the Table 2, it is observed that it is approaching 50% for 1993 students. If we see the learners who have completed all the 21 courses by the end of 5th semester, it is around 6% only, whereas SC is 47%.

Moreover, upgradation of knowledge is also an objective of O.U. system rather than essentially awarding certificate to the learners.

### Semester Validity and its Utilisation

It will be further interesting to know what is the impact of the semesters period validity given by IGNOU to its learners to complete a course. For this the individual courses registered by 1993 and 1994 batch of students in their first semester are recorded. Then the courses SC and NC among these are noted at the end of I and IV semester examinations.

The data in terms of number of courses is given in Table 3. Their relative percentages are given in brackets. It is clearly observed that there is around 35% increase (115 for 336 and 167 for 447) in SC courses from I to IV semester. This is the advantage used by students in utilising the relaxed chance given by IGNOU.

**Table 3 : Effect of semester validity on course completion**

	1993		1994	
	I	IV	I	IV
SC	331(49)	446(66)	447(44)	614(60)
NC	282(42)	191(28)	493(48)	347(34)
IA	63(9)	39(6)	81(8)	60(6)

SC – Successfully completed

NC – Not completed

IA – In active

Figures within brackets indicate %, SC + NC + IA = 100%.

### Factors Contributing to Non-completion of Courses

Another curious aspect will be to further analyse the various reasons for NC of learners, as it will give an insight into how it can be used to help students in successfully completing their courses.

As mentioned earlier, there are various reasons for a course to be NC. To analyse these reasons, TEE result of December 94 is taken for both 1993 and 1994 batch students. For more clarity various factors are expressed as percentage of NC courses only. That means the NC courses of 1993 students in December 94 is taken as 100%. The results are given in Table 4.



**Table 4 : Breakup of not completed courses in December '94 TEE**

Factor	1993	1994
Total NC Courses	531 (100%)	660 (100%)
Assignments & TEE passed, but overall fail	6.4%	
TEE passed, but Assignment fail	~ 0	~ 0
Assignment passed, but TEE fail	7.5%	6.6%
Assignments only submitted, but TEE not attempted	85.4%	86.2%

From the Table, it is predominantly clear that an overwhelming majority of students (85%) have submitted their assignments but could not attempt the TEE. This has an inherent reason like a learner can answer the assignment at his own place and convenience, whereas for a TEE one has to attend exam centre at a particular time.

Moreover, most of the adult learners may be restarting their studies after a long break and may have a sort of exam phobia in them. Adult learners having reached a certain stage in their personal and social life, are more worried for a failure in TEE. So, fear of failure may also prevent them from attempting examinations. This nature is indicated in Table 4, in which the 'assignment pass, but TEE fail' factor is only 6-7%. It may hint that unless learner is confident of his / her preparedness for exams, he / she may not attempt the exams at all.

This hypothesis may be validated by an earlier report of the author (Sivaswaroop 1996). Wherein it was observed that learners who are active in First Semester of their studies are predominantly continuing their studies. Especially for those who have successfully completed the registered courses in their First semester exams are more predominant. It shows that a learner may get more confidence in studies after testing his / her ability in his / her First Semester.

From Table 3, it is observed that in the 4 semesters chance given by the University, the NC and IA have reduced by approximately one third only. It shows that by having a nominal exam fees even after these 04 semesters, may help the students to successfully complete their courses.

It may also be inferred that to increase successful completion of courses, a learner may be provided more attention by the Institute in his/her First Semester of studies. This is the period when DL is uncertain of his/her capabilities. Once he crosses the *Lakshman Rekha* of his/her first semester exam, he / she may feel more confident and convenient of his / her studies. This concept is represented in the illustration.

A similar observation was made earlier by two different authors. Otto Peters (1992) in an article on dropouts, stated that many DLs encounter difficulties as early as the first semester. Because of some stress in family and work place, they get into arrears. Then they feel need for assistance from University to cross over these. If they could not find it, then they become dropouts. Roberts (1984) also emphasised the need for support in first year of study.

### **Conclusion**

In this study it is observed that the first semester of study is more crucial for DL and the DLI also has to provide more support to them during this period. This observation is supported by the continuation and completion patterns of the D.Ls in the present case. Analysing more data on wider basis may give more insight into this hypothesis.

### **References**

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