

# A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF CURRENT STATE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION RESEARCH IN INDIA

WEI YUAN ZHANG & V. VENKAIAH

The Open University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China  
Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, India  
wyzhang@ouhk.edu.hk, braouap@hd1.vsnl.net.in

## Abstract

In India, higher education through the distance mode was first offered by the School of Correspondence and Continuing Education, the University of Delhi, in 1962. At present there are 10 open universities and 62 conventional universities offering correspondence courses. However, little literature is available on the current state of distance education research in India. This study surveys 29 experts in 14 distance education institutions in India and examines their foci in tertiary distance education research. The data for each expert include gender, administrative positions, electronic mail address and homepage, research areas, recent research projects, and proposed future studies. Based on literature review and this survey, this paper reports on the current state of distance education research in India. It is hoped that it will give a better understanding of the current state and problems of distance education research in India. Some suggestions are made about what areas needed to be strengthened in India's distance education research.

## Kajian Awal Kedudukan Terkini Penyelidikan Pendidikan Jarak Jauh di India

Wei Yuan Zhang & V. Venkaiah

*Malaysian Journal of Distance Education*, 2 (1), pp.1-14

Di India, pendidikan tinggi melalui kaedah jarak jauh mula di tawarkan oleh *School of Correspondence and Continuing Education, University of Delhi* pada tahun 1962. Masakini, terdapat 10 buah universiti terbuka dan 62 buah universiti yang menawarkan kursus-kursus korespondens. Bagaimanapun, hasil penulisan tentang kedudukan terkini penyelidikan pendidikan jarak jauh di India terhad. Kajian ini meninjau 29 orang pakar dari 14 institusi pendidikan jarak jauh di India dan mengkaji fokus mereka dalam penyelidikan pendidikan jarak jauh di peringkat pendidikan tinggi. Data yang diperolehi daripada para pakar termasuk jantina, kedudukan pentadbiran, alamat *e-mail* dan *homepage*, bidang penyelidikan, projek-projek penyelidikan terkini dan perancangan kajian untuk masa depan. Berdasarkan tinjauan hasil penulisan dan kajian ini, kertas kerja ini melaporkan kedudukan terkini penyelidikan pendidikan jarak jauh di India. Cadangan untuk mengukuhkan beberapa bidang penyelidikan pendidikan jarak jauh di India diutarakan.

## INTRODUCTION

The development of open and distance education in India has been phenomenal since the University of Delhi set up its School of Correspondence and Continuing Education in 1962. To cater for the increasing demand for post-secondary education, the first single-mode open university, Andhra Pradesh Open University (now renamed as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University), was founded in 1982 and modelled on the Open University of the United Kingdom. This was followed by the establishment of Indira Gandhi National Open University in 1985. Nowadays, in India, there are 10 open universities and 62 correspondence institutes in conventional universities catering for the educational needs of about one million new students every year. The accelerated development of open and distance education in India has significant and far-reaching effects on general educational standards in particular and national development in general. As pointed out by Indira Gandhi, the rapid development of open distance education in India can be considered a liberating and democratising force. It cuts across the barriers of caste and class, smooth out inequalities (<http://www.ignou.org>).

Despite the important role played by open and distance education enterprise, its research has been a relatively recent endeavour. In Western countries, research on distance education has not started until the end of the Second World War and published research monographs are a phenomenon of 1960s (Holmberg, 1987). In 1960, the first monograph (Holmberg, 1960) and the first bibliography (Childs, 1960) of distance education came into existence. As noted by Holmberg, "Like most educational research, studies of distance education were from the beginning based on inquisitiveness generally and on practical requirements implying, among other things, a desire to know as a result of feelings of social and educational responsibility among practitioners. During the 1970s and 1980s, when distance education research seems to have come of age, it is from the distance teaching organisations that most research studies emanate..." (Holmberg, 1990, p.18).

In India, the practice of correspondence education can be dated back to 1962, but the first research study on the subject was not yet taken until 1972. It is an independent study and was submitted as a M. Ed. dissertation. According to our literature review, six reviews of research studies can be located (Panda, 1988; Sahoo, 1988, reproduced in 1991 and 1992; Sujatha, 1988; Panda, 1995; Mishra, 1997). More updated research on the current state of distance education research is very much needed. Using the research methods of document study and questionnaire survey, this paper attempts to provide a preliminary description of the current state of distance education research in India.

## METHODS

### *Document study*

The database of ERIC was used to search literatures in open distance education research in India. The relevant articles in two Indian journals, Indian Journal of Open Learning and Staff Educational Development International, were reviewed. All relevant papers in the proceedings of the Annual Conferences of Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) in 1996, 1997 and 1998 were also consulted.

### *Questionnaire survey*

A questionnaire was designed for collecting data of experts and their foci in distance education research in India. The content of questionnaire includes gender, administrative positions, electronic mail address and homepage, research areas, recent research projects, and proposed future studies.

The sample was selected from the Indian participants in the Annual Conferences of Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) in 1996, 1997 and 1998, and Shanghai International Open and Distance Education Symposium in 1998. There are two reasons why the writers selected sample from the Annual Conferences of AAOU in 1996, 1997 and 1998. Firstly, AAOU, founded in 1987, is the only association of higher distance education institutions in Asia. It has also been a major international forum for open and distance educators in the Asian region. The annual conference of AAOU is a golden opportunity for Asian open educators to have academic exchange with colleagues from other Asian countries. Secondly, in most of the higher education institutions in India, active distance education researchers could normally receive financial support from their universities to attend distance education conference once every three years. These researchers, usually principal investigators, present papers on the large-scale projects they are conducting. So the scholars attending AAOU conferences are a representative sample of the population of distance education researchers in India.

The questionnaires were posted to 41 attendees in the AAOU conferences who worked in India's open and distance higher education institutions and 29 completed questionnaires were returned. The returned percentage was 70.7%. These 29 distance education experts were from four open universities, including Indira Gandhi National Open University, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, Kota Open University and Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, and 10 distance education institutes of conventional universities.

## RESULTS

The major outcomes of this study can be classified into the following five parts:

- gender distributions of the experts;
- affiliated institutions (open university or conventional university) and the administrative positions of experts;
- utilisation of electronic communication technologies by experts;
- research areas, research projects undertaken since 1995, and proposed future research plans;
- proposed links with other Asian distance education institutions.

\*\*\* The gender distributions of the experts

Table 1 below shows that the gender distribution of distance education experts in India is unbalanced. In the sample we have collected, males make up 65.5% of the total sample while the percentage for females is only 34.5%. The concern is raised over the lack of gender equality in the access to senior management positions of education in the workplace.

**Table 1 The gender distribution of distance education experts in India**

Sex	Number of respondents	Percentage
Male	19	65.5%
Female	10	34.5%
Total	29	100.0%

\*\*\* The affiliated institutions of the experts and their administrative positions

Table 2 provides a list of the affiliated institutions of the distance education experts.

**Table 2 The distribution of affiliated institutions of distance education experts**

Institutions	Number of respondents	Percentage
Open universities	18	62.1%
Conventional universities	11	37.9%
Total	29	100.0%

Amongst the 29 distance education experts, 62.1% of them are from open universities, and 37.9% come from conventional universities. In other words, distance education research is not confined to distance learning institutions. Conventional universities also play a significant role in distance education research. Therefore, the collaborations of research between open and conventional universities are issues which demand closer scrutiny.

**Table 3 The distribution of administrative positions held by the experts**

Administrative position	Number of respondents	Percentage
Prisident/Vice President	1	3.4%
Dean/Deputy Dean/ Department Head/ Deputy Department Head/Centre Director/Deputy Centre Director	16	55.2%
General academic staff	12	41.4%
Total	29	100.0%

From Table 3, it can be seen that 58.6% of the total number of distance education experts command high level administrative positions in their institutions. This might be explained by the fact that the role of scholar-manager is becoming popular in India's higher education institutions.

### (3) The utilisation of computer network

The rapid development of information and communications technology has made a great impact on various aspects of distance education, including research and development. Is the full impact of these changes felt by the experts in distance education research in India? Table 4 provides an answer to this question. It indicates that 27.6% of the experts do not have email accounts of their own. Homepages, an efficient medium for exchange and communication, cannot be found in 75.9% of the experts' affiliated institutions. A higher percentage (93.1%) of these experts does not have personal homepages. These data may provide some insights to the fact that the full impact of information technology has not yet been felt in India.

**Table 4** Percentage of computer network utilisation

Types of computer network	Yes (Percentage)	No (Percentage)
Personal email account	21 (72.4%)	8 (27.6%)
Institution homepage	7 (24.1%)	22 (75.9%)
Personal homepage	2 (6.9%)	27 (93.1%)

#### (4) The research areas, research projects undertaken since 1995 and proposed future research plan

Experts were asked to provide information on their research areas, the research projects they have been in charge of or participated in since 1995, and their proposed future research plans. The information submitted has been classified into various research areas as listed in Table 5.

From table 5, we can see that there are only 16 major research projects undertaken since 1995 and 22 research projects have been proposed among the 29 distance education researchers. Although the full picture of distance education research may not be accurately inferred from the data collected, it could be suggested that even more comprehensive and in-depth research could and should be carried out among distance education researchers in India.

Table 5 shows that two research areas, technology and media, and student support service are the most popular. The application of technology and media has attracted the most attention among distance education researchers in India. This phenomenon can also be observed in other parts of the world. Student support service is one of the most important elements in distance education and its research has a significant contribution to distance education practice.

However, there are many areas in which more research is definitely needed. The areas many scholars have neglected include: management and planning, professional development of distance education, culture and tradition, economics of distance education, theory and philosophy, research methodology and comparative education.

**Table 5 The Major research projects undertaken since 1995 and proposed future research plan**

Research areas	Major research areas	Major research project since 1995	Proposed future research plan
Management and planning	5(17.2%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Evaluation and quality assurance	12(41.4%)	2(6.9%)	2(6.9%)
Course design and development	16(55.2%)	0(0%)	1(3.4%)
Distance teaching and learning	6(20.7%)	2(6.8%)	2(6.8%)
Adult education	11(37.9%)	1(3.4%)	2(6.9%)
History and development	3(10.3%)	1(3.4%)	3(10.3%)
Technology and media	9(31.0%)	5(17.2%)	7(24.1%)
Student support services	14(48.3%)	3(10.3%)	2(6.9%)
Equity and access	3(10.3%)	2(6.9%)	0(0%)
Learner characteristics	9(31.0%)	0(0%)	3(10.3%)
Professional development of distance educators	9(31.0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Culture and tradition	2(6.9%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Economics of education	4(13.8%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Theory and philosophy	5(17.2%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Comparative Education	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)

**(5) The proposed links with other Asian distance education institutions**

The experts have suggested various ways to encourage academic exchange and collaboration amongst universities in Asia, the responses are summarised in Table 6.



**Table 6 Proposed links with other Asian distance education institutions**

Proposed links	Number of respondents	Percentage
Information exchange	21	72.4%
Academic visits	27	93.1%
Collaborative research	21	72.4%
Exchange of study materials	17	58.6%
Joint course development	15	51.7%
Koint training	22	75.9%

The findings show that the experts are eager to establish various forms of links with other distance education institutions in Asia. Almost all of them want to visit academic institutions in other Asian countries while more than 70% want more information exchange in the region, collaborative research activities and joint training. More than half want to exchange study materials and develop courses together.

## Discussion

Based on the document study and the findings from this survey, we are able to have the following analysis and discussion:

### (1) The gender inequality in distance education research

It can be seen from this survey that the female accounts for only about one-third of the total number of distance education researchers. Gandhe (1998, p. 129) showed that women are often denied opportunity of receiving education on account of social, cultural and to some extent religious factors in India. Women were never conceived to be a breadwinner. Distinct preference is for the education of boys who are viewed not only as breadwinner but also as supporters for their old parents. It is against the societal culture for the married women to venture out of the house unchaperoned even if it is for a good reason. There are some religious taboos too against female education. It is a well-known fact that human capital development is the key to national economic and social development. If women do not have equal opportunity with men regarding education and career advancement, it is quite obvious that many talents will be untapped. This gender inequality in education has hampered the development of human resources in India.



## 2) **Insufficient application of modern information and communications technology**

Communications technology plays a predominant role in the distance education system. The value of teaching through the use of technology is its ability to reach learners not well served by conventional education institutions, to meet better the newly emerging educational needs of an information society, and to improve the quality of learning (Bates, 1995, p. 18). Some educators (Kirkwood, 1997) have predicted that in the following decades, information and communications technology is going to play an increasingly important role. The technology will become an economical means for sustainable educational development. The challenges facing educational policy makers will include for example how to utilise network technology to better serve students. The acquisition and application of information and communications technology are going to have a tremendous impact on distance learning.

The distance education institutions in India have realised and are preparing for the challenges and opportunities which information and communications technology is bringing about. For example, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has promoted the use of technologies in the distance teaching and learning process in the country. It includes human resource networking; structural networking through regional and study centres, and partner institutions; technological networking through teleconferencing centres; and distance institutional networking through its statutory body of Distance Education Council (Garg & Panda, 1999, p. 334). In addition, two online courses have been developed in IGNOU.

However, it appears from this survey that the information and communications technology resources have not been fully utilised by distance education experts in India. Many experts in distance education research still have not put existing information and communications technology into its fullest use. In the modern society, it is important for distance education experts to try their best to keep abreast of the state-of-the-art advances in modern information and communications technology. In this way, the distance learning institutions in India can maintain its competitive edge against traditional higher education institutions.

## (3) **Resources sharing among distance education institutions**

One of the many strengths of distance education is its resource sharing capacity. As mentioned before there are 10 open universities in India. However, these open universities set up their course and programmes

individually and very few joint programmes have been planned. Moreover, amongst the 29 experts in our survey, 62.1% of them work in open universities and 37.9% are from conventional universities. The issues concerning the competition among open universities or between open universities and conventional universities remain controversial. We think that many conventional universities are fully aware of the prospects of distance education and this is without doubt beneficial to the long-term development of distance education. The mission of distance learning institutions is to provide every member of the society with the opportunities for life-long education. And the demand for distance education is indeed very great in India. Therefore more collaboration, exchange and synergy should be considered and carried out among open universities and between open universities and conventional universities. These collaborations should include all aspects of distance education, such as joint programmes, joint tutor training, and joint research projects.

**(4) Research in distance education needs to be strengthened**

It appears from this survey that distance education research leaves a lot to be desired in India. Only 16 research projects during last five years were mentioned among 29 experts. This situation might be explained by the limited funding for distance education research in India and the tight schedule of distance educators. As Perraton (1997, p. 13) described that while most open and distance learning institutions were too busy running programmes to have time for research, many faculties of education are too busy researching conventional education (as well as doing their basic job of training educators) to be able to undertake research on open and distance education.

However, research and development is extremely important for distance education institutions in improving teaching quality and enhancing university reputation. According to Koul (1993), 'The single most important reason which calls for this emphasis (the emphasis on research and development) is that the distance education institutions look up to conventional universities as standards for acceptable norms, credibility and role models. If conventional universities have all along been without systematic research and development activities, why is it obligatory for distance education institutions? Having come from conventional institutions, the staff of distance education institutions, academic, non-academic and technical, remain predisposed not to raise this question... It needs to be emphasised that the question has to be raised, and answered too' (Koul, 1993, p. 8).

Besides, Evans (1999) also pointed out, 'performances are adjudged or measured by the quantity and quality of their teaching, research and research training. Open universities need to take the issue of research seriously if they wish to be at the forefront of higher education nationally and internationally, and if they wish to be seen as universities' (p.16). Therefore, it is an urgent task for distance education institutions in India to establish and develop research culture at present.

#### **(5) Research areas needed to be further scrutinised**

The area of theory and philosophy in distance education are neglected by all 29 Indian open and distance education experts in our survey. In fact, theory and philosophy is the cornerstone of any well-established academic disciplines. As Panda (1995, p217) pointed out, there is a 'lack of a proper theoretical base to back them (the research studies) up'. Besides, although a lot of theories and propositions of distance education have evolved around the world, many of them merely give a Western perspective of the total picture. Although we have much to learn from these Western theories, they may not cater for the indigenous needs. For example, after examining major existing theories in distance education, it has been found that no single western theory could be adapted in China because of China's distinctive politics, economy, culture, tradition and language (Zhang et al., 1999). The same can be said of India. India has her distinctive culture and needs, the Western perspective is far from adequate for analysing India's distinctive problems. Experts in India should strengthen their research on the theoretical and philosophical aspects of distance education in order to develop distinct distance education theories and philosophies with indigenous characteristics.

Moreover, the rapid development of modern information and communications technology has made the dream of globalised education a reality. In examining the relation between globalisation and localisation, the comparative research on culture and tradition should play a significant role. According to Carr (quoted in Zhang, 1999, p.30), 'the development of global education is made possible by the advances in modern information technology, however, this may result in a cultural imperialism in which education programmes on the communications highways are out of place in the cultural and linguistic contexts to which they are explored'. Carr also pointed out that global knowledge should be absorbed with the consideration of indigenous needs. Under this situation, comparative education is becoming a more important area in distance learning.

In addition, researchers have not paid due attention to the area of the professional development of distance educators. The pedagogical methods in distance education and conventional education have a very sharp distinction. However, most of the tutors in distance institutions previously worked in conventional universities. The training they received on how to facilitate the learning activities of distance learners is usually quite limited. Most of the time they resort to conventional teaching methods to teach the distance learners, which are often not very appropriate and effective. Although the tutors work on a part-time basis, most of them are dedicated and responsible teachers. However there are also a small number of them who do not demonstrate such qualities. Some of them may also find it hard to transfer from teaching young students in a conventional way at weekdays to teaching adult students in tutorials at weekends. To ensure the quality of open distance education, we need to devise a sound system of recruiting, training, supervising and evaluating tutors.

Lastly, although technology and media is the most attractive field amongst the experts in distance education research in India, the economics of distance education is neglected by researchers. India is a large and developing country. How to establish lifelong education system in a learning society in a populous developing country is of utmost importance. Research on cost effectiveness could provide a perspective for analysing open distance and adult education policy on national, local and institutional levels.

**(6) Exchange and collaboration among open distance and adult educators within Asia**

The distance education experts in India are eager to strengthen the linkages with other institutions by promoting greater academic exchange and collaboration as shown in the results of this study. There are a lot of requests from the experts for information exchange, academic visiting, exchanging study materials, joint course development and joint training.

Internet has played an important role in facilitating exchange and collaboration. However, we have found that only around 24.1% of the universities have internet facilities. In addition, 27.6% experts do not have e-mail accounts. This greatly hampers the exchange of information among universities in different Asian countries. Therefore, in order to have more and better exchange in the field of educational research, the utilisation of information and communications technology is an important task for distance education researchers in India.

## LIMITATION

As we have shown earlier, review studies on distance education research in India are relatively few. This study can be regarded as a preliminary study of the current state of distance education research in the country but there are many areas in this study that need to be improved and enriched. Although the returned percentage was above 70%, there are still some important data missing from the other 30% conference participants. Because of this limitation, our information and data might not be able to include all open distance and adult education researchers in India. There are hence limitations to the conclusions we have made, which are based on these data. More study should be supplemented with our current study to present a better picture of the distance education research enterprise in India.

## REFERENCES

- Bates, T (1995). *Technology, Open Learning and Distance Education*, London: Routledge.
- Childs, G. B. (1960). *An Annotated Bibliography of Correspondence Study 1897-1960*, New York: National University Extension Association.
- Evans, T. (1999). The Strategic Importance Of Institutional Research In Open Universities. *Indian Journal Of Open Learning*, 9 (1), pp. 1-12.
- Gandhe, S. K. (1998). Access And Equity: The Needs Of The Disadvantaged. 12th Annual Conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities, Hong Kong, 4-6 November, pp. 125-132.
- Garg, S. & Panda, S. (1999). Mainstream and Open Distance Education: Partnership, Collaboration and Convergence. 13th Annual Conference of AAOU, Beijing, 14-17 October 1999, pp. 327-343.
- Holmberg, B. (1960). *On the Methods of Teaching by Correspondence*, Lunds universitets arsskrift, N.F.Avd 1, Bd. 54 Nr. 2, Gleerup, Lund.
- Holmberg, B. (1987). The Development Of Distance Education Research, *American Journal of Distance Education*, 1 (3), pp. 16-23.
- Holmberg, B. (1990). *Perspectives of Research on Distance Education* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), Hagen: Zentrales institut fur Fernstudienforschung (ZIFF).
- Kirkwood, A. (1997). New Media Mania: Can Information And Communication Technologies Enhance The Quality Of Open And Distance Learning. *Proceedings Of 11th Annual Conference Of The Asian Association Of Open Universities*, Institut Teknologi Mara, Malaysia, Vol. 3, pp. 11-18.
- Koul, B. N. (1993). A Case For Collaborative Research And Development. In *Distance Education. Media And Technology For Human Resource Development*, 6 (1), pp. 7-13.

- Mishra, S. (1997). A Critical Analysis Of Periodical Literature In Distance Education. *Indian Journal Of Open Learning*, 6 (1&2), pp. 39-54.
- Panda, S. K. (1988). Distance Education In India: Status And Research Perspectives. In Agarwal, Y. P. (Ed.). *Research In Emerging Fields Of Education*, New Delhi: Sterling, pp. 36-55.
- Panda, S. K. (1995). *Research And Development In Open And Distance Education*. In Singh, B. (Eds.). *New Horizons In Distance Education*, New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House.
- Perraton, H. (1997). *International Research In Open And Distance Learning: Report Of A Feasibility Study*, Cambridge: International Research Foundation For Open Learning.
- Sahoo, P. K. (1988). Researches In Distance Education At University Level In India. *Media And Technology For Human Resource Development*, 2 (1), pp. 16-32.
- Sahoo, P. K. (1991). Research In Distance Education At University Level In India. *Perspectives In Education*, 7 (2), pp. 71-78.
- Sahoo, P. K. (1992). Research In Distance Education At University Level In India: Trends And Perspectives. *Kakatiya Journal Of Distance Education*, 1 (1), pp. 45-70.
- Sujatha, K. (1988). Research On Distance Education In India. *Indian Journal Of Distance Education*, 2.
- Zhang, W. Y. (1999). Scholars Of Distance Education At The Open University Of Hong Kong. *Journal Of China Rtv University Education*, 3, pp. 28-30 (In Chinese).
- Zhang, W. Y., Jegede, O., Ng, F., Kwok, L. & Tsui, C. (1999). A Comparative Study Of The Administrative Style, Educational Processes, And Outcomes Of Selected Asian Open Universities. *13<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Of AAOU*, Beijing, 14-17 October 1999, pp. 233-242.