

FACTORS AFFECTING DISTANCE LEARNING: THE PRESENT SCENARIO IN WEST BENGAL

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Abstract

As Michael Moore (1999: XV) states, "Distance education is all arrangements for providing instruction through print or electronic communication media to persons engaged in planned learning in a place or time different from that of the instructor or instructors." Distance Education is the latest mode of education and has been quite successfully implemented in the Western world. The Developing Countries have adopted this mode to a great extent. Yet, there are quite a few lacunae and loopholes in its implementation. A small scale survey was conducted in 6 institutes in West Bengal offering Distance Education through Indira Gandhi National Open University, Rabindra – Bharati University and Netaji Subhas Open University. Therefore, through this study an attempt has been made to understand the problems and identify plausible solutions.

Keywords:

Developing Countries;

Distance Education;

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1. Introduction

“The term distance education covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under continuous immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organization.” Borji Holmberg (1989:9)

Distance education which is meant to be an alternative method to serve a large number of persons essentially involves a two – way interaction and communication between the learner and the source of instruction. It caters to those persons with required aptitude to acquire further knowledge. It is the best and most feasible option for those learners who

- a) have no provision of any educational institution in their locality.
- b) are gainfully employed and thus are unable to attend regular classes of a particular class.
- c) had to discontinue their formal education.
- d) look upon education as a life – long process and may either like to refresh their knowledge in an existing discipline or to acquire knowledge in a new area.

Distance education plays a major role in inculcating among students fruitful habits like self – study, independent problem – solving ability and time and resource management. With the innovation of e – learning and virtual classroom system, it provides valuable opportunities for the students to get acquainted with and well versed in the use and application of the advanced technologies, for collecting, storage and disseminating needed information and knowledge for self study and progress.

Distance Education is the latest mode of education and has been quite successfully implemented in the Western world. The Developing Countries have adopted this mode to a great extent. Yet, there are quite a few lacunae and loopholes in its implementation. Therefore, through this study an attempt has been made to understand the problems and identify plausible solutions. It is important to analyse the problems faced in imparting education through the distance mode from the point of view of both the students and the providers.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Stella, A. and Gnanam, A. (2004) in their study *Quality Assurance in Distance Education: The Challenges to be Addressed* commented that integration of technology in all forms of education has narrowed down the gap between the on- and off-campus students and has resulted in the use of the more broad-based term 'distributed learning'. Consequently, distance learning is seen as a subset of distributed learning, focusing on students who may be separated in time and space from their peers and the instructor. The new forms and meanings it is acquiring, its convergence with traditional learning and its global impact pose several challenges. It has caused a serious concern to the governments and the quality assurance agencies all over the world about the safety of the national systems, legitimacy of the providers, protecting the public from fake providers, quality of the offerings etc. the common element being 'concern for quality'. Many quality assurance agencies have responded to this need and there is considerable dialogue about ensuring quality in distance education. Some think that quality assurance practices for distance education are essentially the same as those used for traditional education. Others argue that distance education tests conventional assumptions and hence the present mechanisms of quality assurance are not adequate to ensure the quality of distance education. Through their study they highlighted the aspects of distance education that deviate so markedly from what has been practiced for hundreds of years and argued that quality assurance of distance education has to be approached differently.

Lynn N. Tabata and Linda K. Johnsrud (2008) in their paper *The Impact of Faculty Attitudes toward Technology, Distance Education, and Innovation* found that Distance Education plays an important role in broadening educational access and increasing higher educational opportunities. The success, however, for any distance education initiative relies on a critical and core resource, namely having participating faculty who provide quality instruction. This study used survey design and diffusion of innovation theory to examine faculty participation in relation to their technology use, their attitudes toward technology and distance education, and their adoption of innovations at a public postsecondary 10-campus system. Ordinal regression analysis identified 20 significant variables (16 predictors representing the four latent dimensions of the conceptual model and four demographic characteristics) that explained faculty participation in distance education. The findings identified a number of core issues underlying faculty participation and

non-participation in distance education which posed implications for policy and practice relevant to technology use and skills, training and development, course design and technical support, quality issues, and workload and compensation.

Tharindu Rekha Liyanagunawardena, Andrew A. Adams, Naz Rassool and Shirley A. Williams (2014) through their research on *Developing Government Policies for Distance Education: Lessons learnt from two Sri Lankan Case Studies* concluded that education, especially higher education, is considered vital for maintaining national and individual competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. Following the introduction of its "Free Education Policy" as early as 1947, Sri Lanka is now the best performer in basic education in the South Asian region, with a remarkable record in terms of high literacy rates and the achievement of universal primary education. However, access to tertiary education is a bottleneck, due to an acute shortage of university places. In an attempt to address this problem, the government of Sri Lanka has invested heavily in information and communications technologies (ICTs) for distance education. Although this has resulted in some improvement, yet there are several barriers which are still impeding successful participation for the majority of Sri Lankans wanting to study at tertiary level. These impediments include the lack of infrastructure/resources, low English language proficiency, weak digital literacy, poor quality of materials and insufficient provision of student support. In the hope that future implementations of ICT-enabled education programmes can avoid repeating the mistakes identified by their research in this Sri Lankan case, the authors have recommended a list of suggested policy options.

Education through the distance mode is indeed quite relevant if the goals of universalisation of education and making education available to all are to be realised. With the increasing population and ensuing competition Distance education is the only viable option which can bring education within the reach of every individual. Therefore, it is important to understand the problems that are being faced while implementing education through the distance mode and look for solution to those problems.

3. METHODOLOGY

Sampling and Data Collection

A small scale survey was conducted in 6 institutes in West Bengal offering Distance Education through Indira Gandhi National Open University, Rabindra – Bharati University and Netaji Subhas Open University. The institutes were chosen using random sampling technique. Data was collected from Officers – in – Charge of the Centres, students enrolled in those 6 Centres by using open ended questionnaires. The researcher also used the method of participant observation.

The objective of the study was:

- (i) to understand the problems faced in the process of implementation of Distance Education;
- (ii) to identify possible solutions to deal with the problems.

Analysis of the Data

Data collected in the form of responses to pen ended questions were analysed qualitatively only.

4. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

DISTANCE EDUCATION: CHANGES & DEVELOPMENTS

Distance education has undergone a radical change over the past few years with the advent of new information and technology. In today's world, distance education largely depends on technology. In place of traditional teacher – learner communication, a virtual platform has been created. Communication relies more either on print or electronic media. Access to distance education has been augmented with the advancement in technology. Internet serves as a powerful means of distribution mechanism for distance learning. For each student enormous range of resources is just a click away.

One major problem is this 'distance' aspect which takes away much of social interaction that is characteristic of a traditional classroom. Students are more used to face – to – face interaction with the teacher. Students undertaking distance education courses often feel isolated. They miss out on collaboration of larger school/college community. This feeling of isolation is often

responsible for the lack of motivation in students and an increase in a drop out rate. This lack of motivation is a major barrier to distance education.

Distance education in most cases is imparted by allocating Study Centres in different regions. Teachers and staff are appointed on a part – time / contractual basis. Decisions are generally made by officials without consulting the teachers and the non – academic staff. Therefore, the problems and difficulties remain unattended. Another problem is the lack of independent faculty empowered to frame syllabus, prescribe criteria of eligibility for entry into different courses and devise a system of evaluation suitable to the needs of distance education. Distance education is often promoted by universities with the belief that it can be a good source of generating surplus which can be used for their infrastructural and other development. As a result there is a tendency to consider these study centres as subsidiary units of an organization. The main objective of running these centres is to gain some financial help for the parent institute. For eg. Rabindra Bharati University in West Bengal assures a share of 15% of the fees collected from students opting for the Distance Education course to the Study Centres. This percentage of money received is supposed to be utilized to run the Study Centre but in most cases it is used for the development of the parent organization.

Therefore, the incentive to run a Distance Education Study Centre is primarily for monetary benefit and not for the cause of educating masses. The primary goal of imparting distance education remains neglected.

REGULAR & DISTANCE MODE: PRESENT SITUATION

It is often seen that Universities offering both regular courses and distance education courses employ both administrative officers and faculties in Distance Education Departments on a contractual basis with a meagre remuneration. Even those staff who are recruited on a permanent basis is not sufficient in number. Administrative officers which include Academic Councils and Executive Council are also seen working on a honorarium basis. This majorly affects the quality of education imparted and the decisions taken. Very little time and effort is devoted by the Universities to promote this technique of education. Insufficient staff affects the quality of service. For eg. In the University of North Bengal, West Bengal which offers both Regular

Courses and Distance Education, the Director of Distance Education is appointed from among staff of the Regular Departments without any remuneration. This naturally affects the level of motivation in most of the cases.

The Course material remains unrevised for ages. There is often a shortfall in study materials provided to the learners. By the time students receive their Study Material it is almost the end of the session and time for them to appear for examinations. The recent case in this regard has that been of Indira Gandhi National Open University. Students have to submit their assignments by the 31st of March every year. But even till 15th of March 2018 only 50% of the students of some of the Study Centres had not received their Study Materials. It is, therefore important to have sufficient infrastructural facilities so that learning materials can be provided to learners more efficiently and systematically.

Distance Education is dependant on technology which is not limited to printed matter only. But, in a country like India use of technology is a distant dream especially in the rural areas. In the present age when the entire world is talking about 4G, there are quite a few places within India where getting proper network is also a challenge. Use of computers, telephones and mobiles are considered basic, yet there are places where using these is considered a luxury. Even electricity is a distant dream. Lack of 24 hours electricity supply, Hi – speed Internet, shortage of audio – visual aids are some of the problems which hamper the goal of Distance Education. Setting up of virtual classrooms has received a lot of attention lately. However, these classrooms exist only as a formality. Most institutes do not have necessary infrastructure and the know how for operating a virtual classroom. Therefore, the potential of these classrooms to act as a major tool for imparting distance education is being completely ignored.

5. THE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

It is important to view Distance education at par with formal education. The mindset of the students and society at large needs to be changed. It is important to sensitize students to the benefits and advantages of distance education. The general perception that Distance Education is inferior to traditional courses affects motivation of both teachers and students. The Universities

have to play a major role in ensuring that quality and content of distance education is at par with the regular classroom learning.

Distance education should not be restricted to formal/traditional courses only. It can also include a vocational basis. Not all students want to pursue higher education. This should be kept in mind. Teachers have to be trained in providing vocational education to students. Facilities should be provided to impart hands on training in vocation oriented courses.

Revenue earned through imparting education in distance mode should be utilized for improvement of facilities needed for distance education. It is important to recruit more trained teachers. Provisions should be made to ensure library facility to the students enrolled in Distance Education mode. The remuneration of the teachers, staff and administrative officers should be given due importance. The role of teacher in distance mode of education is not restricted to only chalk and talk method. The teacher does not remain only a source of knowledge. Rather they are considered facilitators of the learning process. It is also imperative to ensure appointment of independent faculty empowered to frame syllabus, prescribe criteria of eligibility for entry into different courses and devise a system of evaluation suitable to the needs of distance education. Course material should be revised on a regular basis. Learning objectives and outcomes should be clearly specified. There should also be provision for feedback from the students. Students should be given the opportunity to provide authorities with their feedback regarding teachers, course material and also the infrastructural facilities provided by the Study Centres.

Efforts should be made to make education through distance mode accessible by the masses. It should not remain dependent only on printed matter. The optical fibre used for the widespread Railways network can be utilized for offering Hi – speed Internet in rural areas. Self operated kiosk facility should be provided in each and every Study Centre. Students should be trained in using these kiosks to download study material for self study. There should not be any restriction regarding using these kiosks. Teachers have to be trained themselves before they can help the students. Students also have to be trained in using their mobiles usefully and purposefully.

There should be atleast one dedicated Study Centre in each Block. This Study Centre should be well equipped with a Virtual Classroom and a well stocked library with a trained librarian. Classes in this Study Centre can take place only on weekends and holidays. But this study centre should remain accessible to the learners on other days of the week for self study. Teachers should be made technically competent so that they can clarify doubts of the students and provide them guidance whenever required.

Virtual Classroom should not exist just for a namesake. It should provide students a platform for interaction with teachers and students at far off place. The factor of distance and time should be removed in reality. It is therefore also important to recruit people trained in using a Virtual Classroom.

In some Asian countries there has been an increase in the demand for higher education. Fulfilling this demand in the regular mode is indeed a problem. This has led to overcrowding of classrooms and a mad rush for admission. Restriction in the intake capacity and lack of seats in Colleges and Universities are major issues in countries like India. Distance education can address this issue in a befitting manner.

Distance Education should not be limited to higher education only. With proper and efficient execution Distance education can help to e great extent in achieving the goal of education for all. Distance education can work as a good helping hand to the people and government of developing countries for achieving their target of compulsory education to all future citizens.

6. CONCLUSION

The motto of distance education should be to bridge the gap created for the factor 'distance'. In this fast developing age of technological advancement, 'distance' should not be an impediment for the learners. The facilitators with the use of modern technology can motivate them in this regard. Higher Education institutes have to play a vital role in this regard by forming suitable policies to promote distance education properly. Recently, the University Grants Commission which is the apex body that regulates and maintains standard of higher education in India issued certain guidelines to ensure quality of distance education. Some of those guidelines are i)

availability and usability of books in the library, ii) Availability of Internet facility in the libraries of the study centres, iii) Updating of syllabus and study materials on the basis of recent developments and innovations, to name a few.

Therefore, it can be expected that with regular monitoring the cause of Distance Education will be rightly acknowledged and every effort would be made to make this mode of imparting education successful.

7. References

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