

**ISSUES AND PROBLEMS OF LEARNING IN DISTANCE
EDUCATION IN ASSAM**

BORNALI DEKA*

ABSTRACT

Assam is the most developed state in terms of higher education infrastructure, but, there is still incapacity of conventional system to provide access to all. In this context distance education could serve as a viable alternative to fulfill the demands of society as well as the state and nation. Though distance education opens new frontiers of learning with lots of opportunities but the learners of distance education in an economically backward state like Assam are still facing a lot of problems. In the present study an attempt has been made to find out the problems of learners of distance education in Assam.

Key Words: Distance Education, Problems of Learners, Assam

* Assistant Professor, Deptt. Of Education, Rangapara College, Sonitpur (Assam)

Introduction

North-East India comprises of eight states i.e. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Of all states that constitute N.E. region, Assam is the gate way of the states, is the most developed state in terms of higher education infrastructure, but, there is still incapacity of conventional system to provide access to all to provide quality education. In this context distance education could serve as a viable alternative to fulfill the demands of society as well as the state and nation. Distance education entered in Assam with the establishment of IGNOU regional centre at Shillong in 1987 (Kumar, 2006). With due course of time IGNOU's Guwahati regional centre was established in the year 1996. In Assam correspondence education is also given by the two formal universities Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University. Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL) of Gauhati university provides different post-graduate degree programs only and the Directorate of Distance Education (DDE) of Dibrugarh university also conducts different post graduate programs along with the different management programs ,and very recently the Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University (KKHSOU) first of its kind in the entire North-East and fourteen amongst the open universities in India was established by the Assam Legislative Assembly by an act (xxxvii of 2005) in 1995. The university formally started functioning from 11 December 2006. As a force contributing to social and economic development, open and distance learning is fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of the mainstream of educational system in both developed and developing countries (Sarma & Choudhury, 2008) and in our state also the demand for distance education is growing day by day and it become a popular mode of education among all the masses of the state. Though distance education opens new frontiers of learning with lots of opportunities but the learners of distance education in an economically backward state like Assam are still facing a lot of problems. With these problems, there is a danger of the system becoming stereotyped leading to inertia. Until and unless this inertia is curbed, the system of distance education shall continue to deteriorate (Goel & Goel, 1997). Though various studies have been conducted to study the problems of learners of distance education at national level but hardly any study has been conducted to study the problems of learners of distance education in Assam. In this context the present paper aims to study the problems of learners in distance education at the state level.

Objectives of the study

The main objective of the paper is to examine and analyze institute wise various problems of learners of distance education in getting education.

Methodology**Design of the Study**

The present study was both qualitative and quantitative type of research. It was also a survey type of research. Present study was a qualitative type of research because here an in-depth analysis of the problems faced by the learners of distance education was made. It was a quantitative type of research in the sense that in this study data regarding the problems of learners of distance education were collected from large number of clients. It was a survey type of research because here the researcher made a survey in order to know the problems of learners of distance education.

Setting of the study

Present study was conducted on the learners who were getting their education through distance mode. The sampling area of the present study was covered by all the major types of distance learning institutions and centres found in Assam. Four distance learning institutes of the state were covered in this study. Out of the four institutes one National Level Distance University, one State Level Distance University and two Correspondence Courses of Formal Universities i.e. Regional Centre of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), Guwahati; Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University (KKHSOU), Guwahati; Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL), Gauhati University and Directorate of Distance Education (DDE), Dibrugarh University were taken respectively for this study.

Participants

In this study four major types of distance learning institutes were taken. These institutes were Regional Centre of IGNOU Guwahati, KKHSOU Guwahati, IDOL, Gauhati University and DDE, Dibrugarh University. The participants of the study were learners from these institutes. Total 80 learners participated in the study. Out of these 80 learners, 20 learners from each institute were taken.

Tools Used

For the collection of data the researcher used - an Interview Schedule for Finding the Problems Faced by the Learners of Distance Education. This tool was meant for studying the problems

faced by the learners of distance education. In case of developing this interview schedule a lot of care has taken by the researcher. At the beginning of the construction of the tool, twenty five items were developed for the tool. To establish the validity of the items of the tool experts were consulted and finally eleven items were finalized for the tool. Here items included the learners reaction areas of the problems like admission procedure, getting study materials and assignments, curriculum and courses of study, counseling session, examination, assignments submission and evaluation, certification and grading, library related matters, use of multimedia, maintenance of different records, participation of seminars, workshops, conferences, special activities etc. This interview schedule was administered on a group of learners at a time to get the data. This tool was developed to achieve the objective of the study.

Procedure of collection of data

The researcher personally visited all the sample institutes relating to the present study for collection of data. In order to know the problems faced by the learners of distance education in Assam.

Results of the Study

The results of the present study were analyzed on the basis of the objective of the study as the following:

Examining and analyzing various problems of learners of distance education in getting their education:

(a)Problems of learners of IGNOU Regional Centre, Guwahati in getting their education

In order to study the problems of learners Regional centre of IGNOU the researcher conducted a group interview among the learners from this institute. Regarding admission procedure, courses of study, examination, evaluation multimedia, and maintenance of different records, they told that they don't find any problem. But, in case of getting study materials, they mentioned that they don't get the study materials timely and study materials are not enough to their courses. In case of certification and grading they mentioned that certificates were not issued on time and grades were not satisfactory. Regarding library facilities they were of the view that books are not sufficient /enough and up to date.

(b) *Problems of learners of KKHSOU, Guwahati in getting their education*

On the other hand the researcher conducted a group interview among the learners of KKHSOU to examine and analyze various problems they face in getting education in the institute. Regarding the admission procedure, assignments, multimedia and maintenance of different records, they find no problem. But, in case of study materials they mentioned that study materials were not enough and the quality of these materials were very low and they do not get the study materials in time. Regarding courses of study, they mentioned that the curriculum has no relation with practical life situation and not at all interesting to motivate them. In case of counseling session, they were of the view that counseling session are very less as compared to the courses of study, and regarding examination they mentioned that examination schedule is very lengthy and time consuming. Regarding certification and grading, they said that certificates are not issued just after completion of courses and grades provided by the institute are not satisfactory to them. Regarding library, they are of the view that books related to the course are not available in the library, and in case of participation of seminars, workshop, conferences and special activities the learners are of the view that very few opportunities are there in the institute for the learners.

(c) *Problems of learners of IDOL, Gauhati University in getting their education*

Regarding examination, assignment submission and evaluation, multimedia and maintenance of different records, learners of IDOL do not find any problem. Regarding study materials and assignments, they mentioned that course materials are not up to the mark and do not include the entire topic and in case of assignments they mentioned that without having classes and lectures, answering the assignment questions are very tough. In case of counseling session, the learners mentioned that counselors are being hired from outside they do not give adequate time and as a result they try to finish the courses contents in a very specific time period without doing the right job. For this reasons, the students are deprived of getting a clear-cut knowledge of the course contents. Regarding certification and grading, they are of the view that it takes a lot of time to issue a certificate. In case of library facilities, they mentioned that books are not enough, up to date and very few books are there relating to their courses of study. Regarding participation of seminars, workshop, conferences and special activities they mentioned that the institute does not advertise about these things at proper time and no encouragement from the institute to participate in these special activities.

(d) *Problems of learners of DDE, Dibrugarh University in getting their education*

In DDE also, the researcher conducted a group interview among the learners. Regarding admission procedure, assignment, examination, assignment submission and evaluation multimedia, maintenance of different records students reported that they did not find any problem. But in case of getting study materials they are of the view that they don't get the study materials timely, the quality of the materials are very low and not enough for writing assignments. Regarding counseling sessions they mentioned that counseling sessions are very less and counselors have not much time to spend with the learners and to solve their queries. In case of certification and grading, the learners mentioned that certificates are not issued just after the completion of the course. Regarding library they mentioned that books are not enough and no reference books are there in the library. Regarding participation in seminars, workshops and conferences, special activities they mentioned that no seminars, workshops and conferences are held by the institute.

Implications of the study

The research findings of this kind provide a gate way to many challenging research questions in the area of issues and problems of learners of distance education in the field of education in the following way:

- The study will help to enhance the quality of distance education.
- It will help the authority to know the defects/ problems of learners of distance education.
- The study will help to know the causes of drop out, and the dropout rate can be reduced by solving the problems of learners.
- The study will help to know the weakness of distance learning system.
- The problems faced by students should be positively looked into and on the basis of the assessment necessary steps should be taken to provide help to the learners.
- The study will help to enhance the quality of student support services.
- The study will help to encourage timely supply of the study materials and assignments.
- The quality of study materials need to be raised.
- Contact classes need to be organized for longer period and quality of such classes must be enhanced.
- The study will help to create more awareness amongst the authorities and stake holders regarding the problems of the learners.

- The study suggest for giving training to the counselors for the evaluation of the assignments responses and writing suggestive comments for remedial purposes.

Suggestions for Improvement

The following factors have to be taken into consideration in bringing about improvements in the standards of distance education programme

- There may be adequate preparation prior to the introduction of distance education courses in relation to the syllabus and its units, methodology and preparation of instructional materials. Syllabus and study materials should be prepared according to the need and psychology of the learner.
- There should be coordination among the different departments/institutes of distance and open education institutions/universities in such areas as preparation of instructional materials, radio and T.V. broadcasting, conduct of contact programmes and establishment of study centres.
- Measure may be adopted for the effective utilization of financial resources.
- Sufficient funds should be provided to the distance education institutions so that it can function effectively.
- The postal services and communication may be made reliable.
- Printing of courses material may be ensured.
- Library facilities may be provided to all the model study centres throughout the country/world. These libraries may be provided the latest technologies e.g. internet, e-books and others.
- Counseling classes need to be organized for longer period and quality of such classes must be enhanced.

Conclusion:

Increasing enrolment alone cannot be an indicator of success of an institution. Providing quality support services to distance learners is a matter of great concern in order to encourage retention. Large number of dropouts in distance learning is an accepted fact, but we cannot afford to be complacent. Learners tend to drop out and feel that they are incapable of completing the programme when they face problems and difficulties (Trivedi & Kalpana, 2010). Therefore diagnosis of the problems of learners in distance education is very important.

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