

ROLE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN MEETING THE NEEDS OF LEARNERS

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Abstract

Learners prefer Distance Education as it supplement the efforts of the traditional system, provide equality of opportunity, expand geographical access to education, expand the capacity and capability for education in new areas, provide education in natural environment, impart specific education speedily at a lower cost, provide flexibility to education system, provide high potentiality for in-service education etc. This system can fulfil the educational needs of all categories of society like school dropout, housewives, employed, physically challenged individuals, people who want to learn while earning some livelihood, people living in remote and far-flung areas etc. Effective support services in the form of study materials, personal contact programmes, counselling sessions, multimedia instructions and different communication technologies etc. are the commonly used medium for these academic programmes. Distance education uses all forms of technology from print to computer, this range includes radio, television, audio-video conferencing, computer aided instruction, e-learning or on-line learning through internet etc which make it popular and beneficial among the learners. The present paper is an attempt to study the significance of Distance education system in meeting the need of learners of 21st century.

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Introduction

Development of any nation depends on its educational system. Education is considered as a powerful tool for human resource development and social change. So it should be for each and everyone to see and understand the world. But if we look back in to the history of India, education was never in reach of its entire people. Unequal access to education has been rampant in India. Over the generations one section of the society were enjoyed the fruits of education and remaining majority of Indian communities particularly marginalized sections like Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), Religious Minorities, Women and Physically Challenged were denied the opportunity (Hemalatha,1992). The low percentage of adult population in higher education in India indicates the need for doubling the efforts to bring the people in to higher education fold. To meet the growing demand of higher education and for educating the masses the distance education system have been emerged as most popular method of teaching by taking education to the doorsteps of the learners. Education through distance mode indicates universalization and democratization of higher education with an aim to provide cost- effective and relevant education to large sections of our population including those living in remote and far-flung areas.

What is Distance Education and Who are Distance Education Learners?

Distance education or distance learning is a field of education that focuses on teaching methods and technology with the aim of delivering teaching, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional educational setting such as a classroom. It has been described as "a process to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both. (Honeyman, & Miller, 1993). It is that type of learning in which the student and the instructor are separated by physical distance (Washlstrom, Williams & Shea, 2003). In the open and distance learning system there is a distance between the learners and the education provider. NCERT (2007) has mentioned "Distance Education and Open learning is a new system in the revolution of education with a potential to bring about a major revolution in instruction and training using multimedia technology so as to take educational opportunities to places and people hitherto unreached, surpassing social, economic and geographical barriers for attaining the objectives of relevance, equity and excellence". Keegan (1986) has attempted to synthesize most of the

definitions and draws the following important characteristics of open and distance education-

- the quasi permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process; this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education.
- the influence of an educational organization both in planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services; this distinguishes it from private study and teach-yourself programmes.
- the use of technical media-print, audio, video or computer unites teacher and learner and carries the content of the course.
- the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate a dialogue; this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education.
- the quasi-permanent absence of a leaning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes.

Keegan (1986) stated that distance education institutes have two distinct characteristics academic and industrial. The 'academic' represents the development and preparation of course materials whereas 'industrial' refers to production and distribution of these materials.

The above definitions clarify that the concept of distance education is basically a democratic concept. Distance education implies the provision of educational opportunity for the learners from a distance through the use of multiple media such as self-learning materials, audio-video programmes and short-term personal contact programmes (Khan, 2005). The system of distance e education has the potential to fulfill the enormous responsibility of universalization and democratization of education as it holds the promise of checking the falling standards at reasonable costs, making the optimum use of media and technology and providing education relevant to the needs of the country.

Effective support services in the form of study materials, personal contact programmes, counseling sessions, multimedia instructions and different communication technologies etc. are the commonly used medium/media for the academic programmes. Now a days the different Open Universities and Correspondence Course Institutes have adopted multimedia approach to instruction, utilizing media such as **self-instructional print materials, distance tuition through assignments, occasional personal contact programmes, video and audio programmes, teleconference sessions, limited face-to-face counseling sessions, television and radio programmes, video programmes through cable network, and library facilities** etc. The ODL system runs with the following facilities which are called as the **Pillars of distance education**. They are - **study centres, study materials popularly known as lecture scripts, students assignments, i.e. response sheets, personal guidance: casual visits by the students to meet the faculty, personal contact programmes, audio-visual aids.**

Who are Distance Education Learners

Distance Education learners are those who are pursuing their education through the distance modes like Open Universities, Centre for Correspondence/ Distance Education of Conventional Universities and Open Schools. They have to depend more on his own initiative and motivation than anything else as distance education is a self learning method. Classroom teaching is absent in the system. The learner has to make progress according to his own capacity and everything has to be achieved by own self. Distance Learners are categorized into manifold. They may be younger ones, middle aged and older ones. They might be belonging to literate, semiliterate, skilled, semi skilled and unskilled categories. They also may be employed, physically challenged etc. All the groups of learners would like to continue their higher education by using advanced technological tools. Distance learning worldwide has been established as an effective and innovative alternative system of education meeting the ever growing higher educational demands in India. This system can fulfill the educational needs of different categories of society, schools dropout, house wives, employed , people who want to learn while earning some livelihood, people from rural areas and all these were denied access and opportunity for formal education due to geographical distances, socio-economic and cultural

barriers (Pandit, 2008). The growing population of a country demands a system of education which brings the education to the doorsteps of the needy learners, (Selvam, 1999). Distance education system is the only system which made it possible by including all groups of people particularly the disadvantage groups. Therefore, distance mode of education is increasing popular among the new generation learners.

Advantages of Distance Education to Learners:

Distance Education is considered very effective for a country like India, where literacy and education levels are low. India tried its level best to provide free and compulsory education to all its citizens but it could not achieve its target till today. It becomes a tough job to provide higher education with its limited resources. In this context distance education has emerged as an alternative model to the conventional education system. . Thus Distance Education system came in to existence with a popular slogan “Education at your door step” literally brought higher education closer to the people.

The first and basic advantage of open education system is the flexibility. The flexibility in terms of time, pace, place, age, occupation certainly gives a new hope and fresh life to thousands of learners who were the sufferers of the traditional education system. Since the distance education is a learner-centred system, it provides education to diverse groups of students in a flexible manner. Most of the learners who couldn't continue their formal education, because of socio-economic and cultural reasons have the advantage of it.

Second important factor for the success of distance learning system in India is its Cost effectiveness. Education in the Open University is cost effective not only to the students but also to the institution. A student can gain while he is earning and learn according to his convenience and interest.

Access in terms of reach, particularly geographical distance is another advantage of distance education system. Providing education to all in a country like India in conventional methods is proved as a difficult task. In such a situation distance education made the access of higher education simple to the learners through study centres covering all the geographical areas. Thus the flexibility in terms of study, greater access compared to conventional education systems and the multimedia teaching learning package and the cost effectiveness attracted millions of people. It resulted in the equity, diversity and inclusiveness within the society.

Students who work well independently and who are strongly motivated to succeed in their goals will benefit the most from taking a distance learning program. As students are not in a classroom and will not be closely monitored by the instructor, reading, projects and other assignments must be completed in a timely fashion. Those who are able to set deadlines and avoid the temptations of frequent procrastination will benefit the most from these types of settings. Therefore, distance mode of education is increasingly popular among the learners of the 21st century. The learners prefer Distance Education as it-

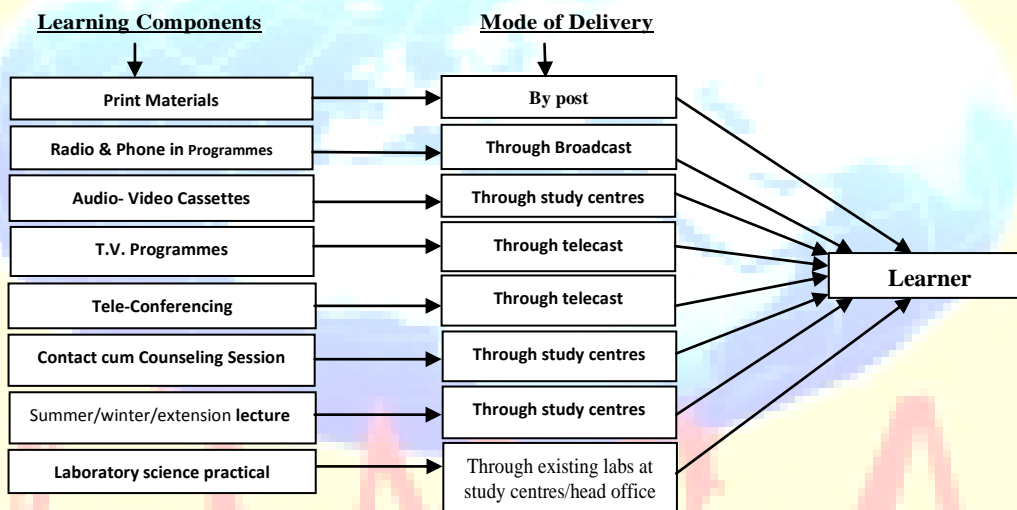
- (a) Supplement the efforts of the traditional system.
- (b) Provide equality of opportunity.
- (c) Expand geographical access to education.
- (d) Expand the capacity and capability for education in new areas.
- (e) Provide education in natural environment.
- (f) Impart specific education speedily at a lower cost.
- (g) Provide flexibility to education system.
- (h) Provide high potentiality for in-service education.

Distance Education uses all forms of technology like radio, television, audio-video conferencing, computer aided instruction, e-learning or on-line learning through internet etc. Online courses, e-learning and the use of computers, teleconferencing via satellite mode have revolutionized the concept of distance education. The use of advanced technology in distance education has been seen as a step towards democratization of education. This rapid expansion has necessitated several steps involving decentralization and enhancing the available technology at the regional and study centres. Steps are being taken to provide broadband connectivity to all the study centres. In India IGNOU has led the path for for other universities by integrating multimedia technology with distance education. In collaboration with ISRO, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India IGNOU has launched the educational satellite called EDUSAT. Gyan Darshan is an educational TV accessed all over the world. The educational programmes are reaching over 8 million homes through the Gyan Darshan Channels, via the DTH (Direct-To-Home) platform and webcasting. An effective combination of the media and the printed materials aim to provide the students what a good classroom teacher could do for them if they were students of a conventional university.

The technologies used in Open and Distance Learning system are broadly divided into two groups: **synchronous** and **asynchronous**. Synchronous technology is used in distance education lessons in which learning is occurring in different places but at the same time and asynchronous technology is used in lessons on which learning is occurring in different places but also at different times.

Synchronous technologies are – **Asynchronous technologies are –**

- | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| a) Telephone | a) Audio & Video cassettes |
| b) Video conferencing | b) E-mail |
| c) Web conferencing etc. | c) Message Board Forums |
| | d) Print materials |
| | e) Voice mail/Fax etc. |



Learning Process of Distance Education System

Source: IGNOU Study Materials for PGDDE Course

CONCLUSION

Higher Education is a very powerful tool for development. If the higher education system is not improved according to the needs of the present day, the primary promise of justice- social, economic and political, equality of status and of opportunity, liberty of thought, faith and worship will ever remain unfulfilled. Higher education should aim at universalization and democratization in true sense of the word. It is clearly evident that distance education in India is

playing a vital role in catering the higher education to the needs of diversified groups of students including socially disadvantaged sections also. Thus it is contributing a lot to the national development through a mission-mode approach. Therefore, we can say that distance education is the latest and most remarkable initiative used in our educative process for the maximum development of the learners as well as the masses of our nation.

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