



DISTANCE EDUCATION IN INDIA: A BOON OR BANE ?

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ABSTRACT

Ever since our country became independent in 1947, education has been given primary focus by our leaders, as a result of which education has progressed with leaps and bounds. Higher education in the 21st century can no more be kept confined within the boundaries of the institutions. The inadequacies of the conventional education system to cater to the rising expectations of aspirants of higher education are a well-known fact. Most studies indicate that those taking asynchronous or the fully online classes are within 30 minutes of the campus offering the class online. Swami Vivekananda had said – “If a student can’t go to school, the school must come to the student”. This saying reflects into what is today known as “Distance Education”.

Key Words: Higher Education, Online Education, Mobile Learning, E – Learning

INTRODUCTION

Ever since our country became independent in 1947, education has been given primary focus by our leaders, as a result of which education has progressed with leaps and bounds. A huge amount of money has been invested in this sector by the government as well as private business owners. Tremendous amount of research and development has been carried out in this field with the prime intent of advancing it in every possible way. A plethora of modes and channels of education have since been devised with huge success in achieving the chief objectives, namely, the expansion and spread of education.

Higher education in the 21st century can no more be kept confined within the boundaries of the institutions. To meet the growing challenges of the knowledge era, the journey has already started towards virtualization, the most recent advanced global concept of open and distance learning. The dynamism of education, the offshoot of the changing needs of the society has created two prominent challenges - universalization of education and continuing and life-long learning which consequentially have been more demanding with the forces of globalization necessitating the integration education and the world of work.



PRESENT STATUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE NEED FOR ODL

The inadequacies of the conventional education system to cater to the rising expectations of aspirants of higher education are a well-known fact. In India, the ambitious goal of increasing the gross enrollment ratio to 15% by 2012 and 30% by 2030 does not seem to be an easy proposition going by the present status of GER which stands at a mere 12.5% against 23% in China, 39.45% in Korea, 71.6 % in UK, 83% in US, 77% in Australia, 78% in New Zealand, and 40.1% in Japan (UNESCO Institute for Statistics and Public Reports Education Statistics 2009). Even though India's higher education has progressed remarkably with 532 universities, still we are lagging far behind than the set targets. The expansion plan will also involve lots of financial involvement for infra-structure both qualitatively and quantitatively. Besides, with the disparities existing currently between rural and urban; male and female; rich and poor; easily accessible and remote inhabitants and the need to fulfill the objectives of equality, equity and access and relevance, the open universities have come to play a catalytic role in the higher educating system and the Open Distance Learning Education System (ODL) has become an indispensable mode of deliverance of education.

The ODL Education system is gaining popularity in a steady pace due to increase in access to learning and training, opportunities for updating, retraining and personal enrichment, cost-effectiveness, flexible, customized and easy to deliver approach in facilitating millions of potential learners. Rapid advancements in ICT has further added to its quality and enhanced the possibility to provide distance education through multimedia, creating a virtual environment of a classroom for the learners at their doorsteps as per their convenience. Thus "reaching the unreached" and "serving the unsaved", the main underlying objectives of distance education are being realized. Besides, the ODL education system's flexible framework gives good opportunities for professional development of working people which has become a requisite in a knowledge driven society. In the ODL education system, it is possible to offer courses in almost all disciplines in the form of short term capsules.

With the emergence of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), education, particularly, higher education is expanding its horizons cutting across all barriers to promote trade in education across the globe, Cross Border Supply is the first mode among the four modes of trans-nationalising higher education as per GATS framework in which education can be offered through distance education, internet, tele-education or virtual universities etc.

Though India has 14 Open Universities, One national and 13 State open universities, in addition to 185 dual mode universities and 50 dual mode institutions offering courses through distance mode, to keep pace with other countries, it is in the process of developing a more network of Distance education.

Advantages

1) Saves Time and energy

You do not have to regularly attend all classes and be bound to roll-calls. You can study whenever you are free and get guidance from the tutors. Through online module, you also save so much paper as all the study material is available online and you do not need space to store books and notebooks. It is especially very beneficial if you stay at a very remote place and cannot afford daily commuting to college.

2) Good for working people

If you are earning and you cannot afford to leave your job, you can consider this option. Even if you are at a good position in your service, an extra qualification always helps.

3) Easily accessible for all ages.

For those who missed education at their young age, can continue again with such distance bridge courses and come into the mainstream of education. Those who could not continue their education beyond, say, primary or middle or high school can attain graduation.

4) Study the subject of your choice

Distance education offers a wide variety of subjects. Many of them are job-oriented too. You can choose from a large variety ranging from history and politics to home science, gardening and programming. If you just want to be a graduate as a basic qualification, you can opt for subjects of your choice.

Some other advantages are,

- Provides for an increase in Access to education for those who otherwise have no other opportunities due to work, family or physical limitations.
- Provides for a modality of instruction better suited for certain learners.
- Greater flexibility for scheduling learning-Students can determine time and place of "class time".
- Greater flexibility in location for study-Students can engage course at home or work or on campus or at a library.
- Distance Education is Learner Centered -DE places responsibility for learning with the learner who must be more active and self-directed.
- Facilitates greater learner-instructor interaction.
- Increased interaction with classmates.



- Facilitates Pedagogic Development-Individual Instructor Development.
- Produces a carryover effect into the regular classroom of improved pedagogic techniques.
- Opportunity to develop technology competencies for instructors and learners.
- Access to global resources and experts via internet communication and Internet resources.
- Allows for the internationalization of learning opportunities.
- Centralized resources can produce higher quality materials for distribution.
- Has the potential to equalize access to education.

Most studies indicate that those taking asynchronous or the fully online classes are within 30 minutes of the campus offering the class online. The reason for their choice of this mode of instruction has more to do with the inability to make a commitment to a fixed time and place. These classes are accessible from anywhere and at any time, but, for most enrolled, it is the convenience of the temporal availability that has them select the fully online classes. These students are older (over 26 years) and most will work during traditional classroom hours. They require flexible learning schedules. They demand professional development opportunities and classes to help them keep up with today's ever-changing work environment.

Students come to college for various reasons. They could be interested in changing careers, or they might simply want to expand their knowledge base for work or personal reasons. They might want to expand their cultural background, learn a new language, or start a degree program that was postponed due to family or career needs. Their main reason for choosing distance education as a delivery method is that they want to learn at their own pace or at a time and location that is convenient to them.

A majority of distance learning students are female and many are single parents who want to stay close to home for various reasons. They might not be able to afford child care or must care for a confined relative at home. Other students are physically disabled and cannot easily travel to campus.

Some do not have the time, money, or educational background to come to campus. Distance education can capture an audience that has been uninvolved with formal higher education.

In many ways Distance Education makes education accessible and available for many people. In this manner it is particularly well suited to the mission of community colleges.

DISADVANTAGES

Though there are so many merits associated with distance learning, it has its own demerits too:

1) No direct contact with the Faculty

Because you are at your own, you cannot always go and ask your instructor your doubts. Even the online courses are timed and you have to be available for few hours per week to complete the course. For self-paced courses, the instructors are not available 24*7.

2) Hidden costs

Many a times, people look for alternative sources like private tutor to give exams. So you actually end up paying more. You have to pay for study material and for online medium; you have to pay for your internet access.

3) Limited subjects

Because professional courses like engineering, medical, and subjects like chemistry, geography can't be conducted online because of their very nature. So only those courses which do not have practical aspect can be studied through this mode.

4) Needs more efforts and can overstress you

If you are a working person, working and studying can get difficult. You have to put extra efforts of your own to strike a balance. Because you are on your own, you have to work hard and bring discipline in your life.

5) Recognition

Not all employers recognize the distance education mode no matter what your marks are. They sometimes mention "*regular*" course takers as eligible. Some other disadvantages are:

1. Time and frustration involved learning how to get on-line for novices.
2. Lag time between student input and feedback -Time lapse between need for learner support and resolution.
3. Occasional internet provider downtime.
4. Student must be more active and self-directed in learning environment -Depends on individual motivation and initiative.
5. Occasional feelings of isolation- Potentially less group support for learners leading to isolation and possible non-completion of program.

6. Instructional design for group activities and group interaction more demanding on the instructor.
7. Demands large effort and cost to develop appropriate materials.
8. Demands large effort to create and maintain the technological infrastructure.
9. Distance Education is not for everyone- It is neither for undisciplined learners nor inflexible instructors.

One of the forerunners in the domain of spreading education is the Distance Learning, or Distance Education. By “Distance Learning”, it is meant that learning is provided in a manner so as not to let the factor of distance hinder the course of action and process of learning. This mode of spreading and promoting education serves the interests of the learners across the barriers of time and space. The concept of Distance Education started in the USA in late nineteenth century but today it has flourished in every nook and corner of the world. A student sitting in India can get an online degree from a college/university in UK or USA. Such is the reach of distance education.

Swami Vivekananda had said – *“If a student can’t go to school, the school must come to the student”*. This saying reflects into what is today known as *“Distance Education”*. Today its span has expanded and it is known by different names such as correspondence course, e-learning, online learning, external education, open schooling, Open University, etc. Students always have this query of value of distance education over regular.

CONCLUSION

Despite its demerits, distance education gives access to education and it depends upon the student how he or she makes the maximum out of it. It is rapidly gaining popularity and except few streams, it will make its imprints on the education system all over the world. After all,

“The purpose of learning is growth, and our minds, unlike our bodies, can continue growing as long as we live.”–

Mortimer Adler (philosopher and educationist)

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