OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING EDUCATION: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to highlight the benefits and challenges of open and distance education in developing countries. The results indicate that distance education is very vital for developing countries. Due to lack of resources and limitations of the formal system of education, policy makers attracted towards nonconventional modes of education for providing non-residential studies like correspondence courses. There is flexibility in all aspects of distance education from admission to examination. This system of education is suitable for the persons who wanted to enhance their qualifications but were not in a position to attend classes on a regular basis. Such distance courses proved a boon for the service persons as well as others desirous of pursuing higher education. Distance Learning program could be offered in three different modes, viz. Conventional mode, Thinking/ Collaboration mode, and Virtual mode. The distance education students in general come across various challenges which include (i) Dearth of awareness about the courses and relevance of it; (ii) Deficiency of knowledge of accreditation and recognition at par with traditional campus based study; (iii) Scarcity of continuous interaction and professional guidance; (iv) Limited or no contact classes; and (v) Procrastination of assignments. Thus the paper suggests that Government should modify or implements policies for expansion and future development of open and distance education.

Keywords: distance education, learning, open education, technology & teaching

INTRODUCTION

The process of imparting education has gone through a sea change if we look at the picture 10-20 years before now. Technology has taken over almost every field of our lives and the onset of online courses came as a path-breaker (Lone, 2017). Distance learning and its relationship to emerging computer technologies have together offered many promises to the field of education (Pant, 2014).Distance learning degree, began to be offered in the world by the University of London in the year 1858 (Kundu, 2014). Colleges and universities have a crucial role to play in national, state-wide and regional economic development efforts. Higher education and economic development are inter-linked to each another (Kour, 2013). Considering the growing importance of online learning programs, it becomes critical to understand the benefits and limitations as perceived by the learners'

and further act upon the improvement areas for a successful implementation of online learning. Online learning has the potential to offer many advantages to all the stakeholders such as learners, instructors, management, service providers etc. while these advantages attract student enrolment, there are associated limitations as well (Thanji & Vasantha, 2018).

Maxwell (1995) regards open learning and distance education as two non-traditional learning approaches that might provide an option for reaching non-traditional students. He further argues that "distance education and open learning should be recognized as two distinct concepts. Distance education refers to a mode of delivery with certain characteristics that distinguish it from the campus-based mode of learning. Open learning refers to a philosophy of education providing students with as much choice and control as possible over content and learning strategies. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations initiatives in open and distance learning are based on its overall priority to ensure the right to education for all (Ghosh et. al., 2012).

Teaching and learning is a continuous process which starts from day one till the death of a person. The level of learning and its impact on our life varies from stage to stage and time to time (Singh, 2013). In this new millennium modern technology plays inevitable role in our lives. The technological revolution poses tremendous challenges to the educators to rethink their basic tenets, to apply technology in creative way to redesign education (Behera, 2013). E-learning or Online education helps people get access to a world-class learning experience when traditional higher education may not be possible due to financial, personal or any other constraints. In countries like India there is a huge requirement of e-learning to take its form completely (Vivekananda & Ruvn, 2017). E- Learning has become a vital method of teaching for more than a decade (Bhoyar et. al., 2016).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objective of this study is to understand the benefits and challenges of open and distance education in developing countries. The specific objectives of this paper are:

1. To study the objectives of the Open and Distance Learning Education in developing country like India.
2. To study the needs and significance of the Open and Distance Learning Education.
3. To identify the advantages of the Open and Distance Learning Education.
4. To study the challenges before the Open and Distance Learning Education, and
5. To study the trend and progress of Open and Distance Learning Education in India.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

- **Design and approach:** The present study is based on the secondary data. The data have been collected from the reports of the Higher education, Government of India and the Council of distance education, Government of India. Various journals and books have also been referred to the present study.

- **Method of analysis:** To reveal the Open and Distance Learning Education in general and with respect to India in particular, different method of qualitative analysis comprising of tabulation, and text analysis have been performed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The term is used to refer to the education of those who, for one reason or another, choose not to attend conventional schools, colleges, or universities but study at home. Distance education is

the general term that includes the range of teaching and learning strategies used by Correspondence colleges, Open universities, Distance education departments of conventional universities and Distance education training units of private sector organizations (Pant, 2014). More (1990) defines distance education, or distance learning as 'all deliberate and planned learning that is directed or facilitated in a structure manner by an instructor, separated in space and/or time from the learner.'

Kulandai swami (1992) refers to distance education as the third stage in the evaluation of education; the first stage being represented by the Gurukul system of ancient India, and the second stage by the conventional classroom system (Roy, 2015). Borjholmberg defines distance education as "Distance study is indicating dialogic learning opportunity in which physical distance between the learner and the helping organisation is reached by an artificial carrier"

The important features of Open and Distance Education are as follows: (a) Learner centeredness rather than teacher centeredness, (b) Easy to access, © Flexibility/open entry, (d) Use of modern information and communication technologies/multimedia approach to education, (e) Resource sharing, (f) Socially relevant education, (g) Education for a learning society, (h) Course prepared by team of experts and academics, (i) Spatial separation of the teacher from learner, (j) Heterogeneous learner group, and (k) Diversity in the nature of programmers offered (Roy, 2015).

(1) Objectives of Open and Distance Learning Education

The CABE Committee's report (1994) has listed the major objectives of distance education as:

(a) To provide an alternate, cost-effective, non-formal channel for tertiary education.

(b) To supplement the conventional university system and to reduce the pressure on it.

(c) To provide 'second chance' education to those who have had to discontinue their formal education or could not join regular colleges or universities owing to social, economic and other consideration.

(d) To democratize higher education by providing access to large segments of the population, in particular the disadvantaged groups such as those living in remote and rural areas, including working people like women and other adults, who wish to acquire and upgrade their knowledge and/ or skills.

(e) To strengthen and diversity the degree, certificate and diploma courses related to employment, and necessary for building the economy, on the basis of its natural and human resources.

(f) To provide continuing and life-long education to enrich the lives of the people (Roy, 2015).

(2) Need and Significance of the Open and Distance Learning Education

Formal education system has very limited recourses to educate this large population. A growing realization of the urgency by the nation to make its population literate, higher educated and sensitize the existing illiterate and semi-literate millions about the progress and change led to the successive governments to launch various education programme. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is an opportunity to those who are deprived of acquiring knowledge and qualification of through conventional system of teaching, learning activities of educational institutions (Rahila & Babe, 2016). With the wide distribution and accessibility of computers, distance learning has become faster and more prevalent (Kumar, 2016). The distance education programme plays a major role in facilitating alternative, flexible opportunities to pursue the education for every age group (Sudalai, 2016).

As the result, the terms like distance education, correspondence education, open education have been added to the terms–formal, non-formal, and informal education. Distance education usually involves a situation where learners are separated at a distance from their teachers, involves the provision of systems to establish and maintain communication between teachers and learners, and employs a form of pedagogic interchange between the teacher and the learner to promote learning, assessment and support (Neethu & Sia, 2016).

Table 1: Select Open Universities of the World and their year of establishment

University	Year of Established
Athabasca University (AU), Canada	1970
Allama Iqbal Open University(AIOU), Pakistan	1974
Asia International Open University, Macau	1981
Anadulu University (Ana U), Turkey .	1982
Korea National University (KNOU), Korea	1972
Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)	1985
National Open University (NOU), Taiwan	1986
Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), Sri Lanka	1990
Open University of Malaysia (OUM), Malaysia	2000
Open University ofIsrael (OUI), Israel	1973
SukhothaiThammatirat Open University (STOU), Thailand	1978
The Hellenic Open University (HOU), Greece	1997
The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK), China	1989
The Open University of Japan (OUJ), Japan	1983
The Open University (UKOU), United Kingdom	1969
Universitas Terbuka (UT), Indonesia	1984
UniversidadeAberta (UA), Portugal	1988
Universidad Nacional Abierta (UNA), Venezuella	1977
Wawasan Open University (WOU), Malaysia	2006

Source: Evolution of open and distance education, IGNOU, pp.19-20.

The economic progress of a country is strongly linked to education and education is the back bone of Indian economy. Every one of us may not get opportunity to study at school and colleges. Distance education helps a person who failed to complete degree due to financial and family problem, dropouts and employed persons to pursue higher education. Distance education is flexible to learn and fee of the course is affordable. Technology bridges the gap between regular classes and distance

education and the quality of distance education is improving day by day. It is the easiest mode to learn and change our life style by improving knowledge and acquiring skills (Reddy, 2016).

In the past, distance education was based on the production and the asynchronous exchange of materials. The learner was sent written learning materials plus written instructions, and returned his homework in a written form. Today, the use of synchronous forms of communication, like chat, voice-over-IP or the life-broadcasting of lectures and presentations, increasingly gain importance in distance education, which can lead to a transfer of new didactical arrangements (Begum & Nizamuddin, 2016).

Table 2: State Open Universities and the year of their establishment in India

University	Year of Established
Dr.B.R.Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad	1982
Dr.BabasahebAmbedkar Open University, Abrnedabad, Gujarat	1994
Karnataka State Open University, Mys?re, Karnataka	1996
KrishanakantHandique State Open University, Guwahati, Assam	2005
M.P.Bhoj (Open) University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh	1991
Nalanda Open University, Patna, Bihar	1987
Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata, West Bengal	1997
Pt. Sunderlal Sharma (Open) University, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh	2005
Tamil Nadu Open University, Chennai, Tamil Nadu	2002
Uttarakhand Open University, Haldwani, Uttarakhand	2005
VardhamanMahaveer Open University, Kota, Rajasthan	1987
YashwantraoChax an Maharshtra Open University, Nashik	1989

Source: Evolution of open and distance education, IGNOU, pp.21-22.

Distance education can able to teach students their own pace and interest and provide flexibilities in terms of age, curriculum, time and others. This is an attempt to analyze the problem underlying the awareness about distance education. It focuses on the attitude of graduate students towards distance education because there are some barriers to adopt distance education as a source of learning. It will break down negative attitude of graduate level students towards distance education and removing the barriers towards adopting distance education as a source of learning (Ahamad & Aqil, 2015).

With the help of modern technologies (online), distance Education eliminates distance, time and cost on education. Computer-based technologies make easier interaction between teacher (tutor) and student in the process of learning. In distance education, teachers have to play multi personalities like tutors, instructors, programme (curricula) designer, consulters, advisor, supervisor (project guidance), evaluator and motivator. There are plenty of studies that reflect the importance of the

distance education and provide alternative implementations, reflections on the roles of the students and teachers (Umasri, 2016).

In addition, the other benefits include –

(a) Disabilities, Handicaps, or sicknesses: There are many students that are unable to go to a traditional school setting because they cannot get around easily or a low immune system and get sick from other students. Distance education can help in these cases because the students will not have to leave their home or be around other people. It makes it possible for these students to still learn and to be able to get a good education.

(b) Equal Opportunity to Education regardless of Socioeconomic Status: Students have the opportunity to receive equal education regardless of income status, area of residence, gender, race, age, or cost per student (Subrahmanyam & Ravichandran, 2013).

The draft Education Policy 2016 recognizes the strength of ODL is and accepts it as an important mode for achieving enhanced access for massive delivery of:

(a) Skill development Programmes,

(b) Capacity building Programmes,

(c) Training Programmes,

(d) Programmes with Employability potential, and

(e) Life-long learning Programmes.

In India the objectives were enunciated in the guidelines by the University Grants Commission in 1974. Major ones are:

(a) To provide an alternative method of education to enable a large number of persons with necessary aptitude to acquire further knowledge and improve their professional competence.

(b) To cater for students who had to discontinue their formal education owing to adverse pecuniary and other circumstances.

(c) To cater for students who cannot find a seat or do not wish to join a regular college or university department although they have the necessary qualifications to peruse higher education (Sahoo, 2016).

(3) Advantages of Open and Distance Learning Education

The various advantages of distance education are:

(a) It saves a lot of time, money and energy by cutting down on travel. The time saved can be judiciously used for personal and professional life.

(b) People can work at their own convenience: since all the classes are asynchronous. Learner have the liberty to review own assignments or do own homework during off-hours or at home.

(c) Learner can do correspondence course from anywhere in the world. this provides a lot of flexibility to professionals, especially if they have a travelling job.

(d) It's easily accessible to all through online classes, online resources, virtual classrooms, video conferencing with the particular subject lecturer, study materials provided at the right time and so on.

(e) The increased use of the internet has facilitated distance education in more than one way (Panchabakesan, 2011).

(4)   Challenges of Open and Distance Learning Education

Like regular mode of education, distance education also has challenges on the part of students, teachers and institutions. Visser (2012) opined that distance education approach does not work for all students, as some of them will require close in-person contact with the instructors, and some students may not be able to take up responsibility for their own learning. Wright et al., (2009) considered language of instruction as one of the very difficult problem faced in distance education. The instructors had the unique task of creating content and material accessible to learners speaking various languages. In addition, lack of infrastructure, limited funds and non-availability of ITC equipment's in remote villages have been indicated as some of the hurdles developing nations face in regard to delivery of distance education (Veeraraghavan, 2016).

One challenge is to update curricula time to time. Distance education mode has a major challenge to convey students that it is not just a formality to complete the stipulated time period of any particular course. But the challenge lays with conveying students the quality it has maintained so that students get enrolled in them without much fear about their career. In distance education, big challenge is to compare the knowledge standard of students with regular mode students. As a result, distance mode of education is always misunderstood as just obtaining grades and certificates. Another challenge faced by distance education is how to infuse quality learning instead of just providing quality study materials to the enrolled students (Rohini, 2016). In summary, some of the challenges are:

- Lack of the presence of a teacher
- Low status of distance education institutes
- Rigidity imposed by university regulations
- Misconception about the role of distance education departments
- Discrimination with the product of the distance education departments
- Lack of support by the faculty
- Lack of student training
- Lack of social interaction
- Lack of support and services
- Lack of feedback or contact with the teacher
- Insecurities about learning
- Lack of multi-media instruction
- Nature of study material

(5)   Trend and Progress of Open and Distance Learning Education in India

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has been now for more than five decades in India. From offering conventional courses through correspondence for the needy students to offering job oriented, skill oriented, and professional courses for every constituent of the society, ODL has also travelled from Distance to Flexible learning now (Bhanushe, 2016).Historically, Distance Education was limited to part time classes offered for working people after working hours. Later, these "Night

Colleges" took a more structured shape named Open Universities where teacher and student had no face to face meeting point (Mishra, 2016). The School of Open Learning, formerly known as the Directorate of Correspondence Courses, established under the University of Delhi in 1962, is a pioneer institution in the field of distance education in India. The Country witnessed the beginning of an alternate mode of education when the School started with a modest admission of 900 students in 1962 (Biswal, 2016).

The advent of ODL in India has been there for almost five decades. During these five decades there has been a technological revolution. The six generations of technology right from the correspondence mode to the connectives mode is helping students to attain higher education in India. The purpose is to cater to the need of the disadvantaged students by offering job oriented, skill oriented, and professional courses across Nation. This transition of ODL from Distance to Flexible learning has led to the increase in the number of State Open Universities and Distance Education Institutes (DEI) in India. There is a change from the apex body Distance Education Council (DEC) set up under IGNOU to the present Distance Education Bureau (DEB) (an extended arm of the UGC). But the norms and policies laid out are vague, for both the Open Universities and DEI. Currently in India there are one National and 14 State Open Universities; and 116 Dual mode Universities. The concerns pertaining to dual mode universities are different to those of Open Universities (Bhanushe et.al., 2016).

Distance education is popular and authorized distance learning centres are launching courses in India as required by UGC, DEB and other related regulatory bodies. It has 36 years of long rich experience in offering distance education programmes with the social outlook and upliftment of human resources in all possible ways (Perumal & Stanly, 2016). Despite being expansion worldwide, distance education system of study for students in Indian subcontinent is still facing the turbulent times. The ordinary school/college dropout students are often confused in selecting the course. Apart from getting guidance on registration, the fees and the availability of the study material, they are in vacuity on the clarity on the selection of course or option of subjects and the future after pursuing it (Khan, 2016).

Distance education has grown in different dimensions to become the chosen route for higher education. The larger section of the student community in India, aspiring for higher studies, seeks distance learning for its convenience, flexibility, affordability and accessibility. The eligibility aspect of distance learning attracts even the adult segment to purse higher education. As per the 2011 statistics, during the last decade distance education has grown from 20 percent to 26 percent of the student populace in India. This growth is further catalyzed by the increasing demand for better competencies for a particular job. Add to that, the technology boom has bolstered the distance education space, through better reach, promising to deliver a bright future. Distance learning institutes in India have witnessed a remarkable rise in student enrolment crossing the 10 million mark (Babu & Umair, 2016).

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have recently received a great deal of public attention. The New Education Policy Draft Documents released by the Ministry of Human Resource Development with a view to meet the changing dynamics of the requirement in the school and higher educational institutions in terms of quality education, innovation and research, aiming to make India a knowledge superpower by equipping its students with the necessary skill and knowledge and to eliminate the shortage of manpower in science, technology, academic and industry. The MHRD already started the consultation process by inviting the views of citizens through online to enrich its document. The Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy 2016, headed by TSR

Subramanian submitted its reports to MHRD on 30 April 2016 (Arul, 2016).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Distance Education is an excellent way of learning for the adult learners because of its instructor's and student's flexible learning approach in terms of time and location. This is a rare opportunity for those who missed the regular education due to various reasons, and wish to pursue further studies. All over the world, distance education is gaining a momentum and becoming more popular than conventional education. Distance learning is an excellent method of reaching the adult learner in any place. Distance education has proved to be a boon to millions who do not have the opportunity, time or the money to pursue regular education in a college or university.

The structure of distance learning gives adults the greatest possible control over time, place and pace of education. The most important one faced by the distance education students is that they are not legible for high level posts. There is also the challenge of dropout. The reason for majority of dropouts in distance education is the examination pattern and the delayed publication of results. There is more stress on sending printing materials. There is dearth of facilities of multimedia instruction. The variety in the learning materials is definite to improve the quality of leaning.

Distance Education programme is very beneficial to rural India. The course curriculum should be dynamic in character to cater to the changing needs of the various sectors of the economy. Care should be taken to overcome the challenges. Regular feedback on the performance of the learners who work in various organizations should be taken from the employers. The course curricula should keep pace with the changing time and environment. Both the delivery and receiving ends should be more responsive (Sahoo, 2016).

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