

IMPORTANCE OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING IN 21ST CENTURY INDIA

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Abstract

The philosophy of Open Learning which is practiced through distance mode is enabling millions of individuals across the world, and especially in India, to realize their aspirations of learning, removing the barriers of space and time. This paper will discuss the features and advantages of *Open and Distance Learning* (ODL) and throw light on specific benefits of it in the Indian educational system. With the ever growing population of India there is high competition in terms of opportunities to pursue higher education. Besides stiff competition and limited seats in institutions, there is also a steep rise in the course fees of most educational institutions thus making education inaccessible to many. With the advent of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) we welcome the arrival of much needed openness in the Indian Education system. Besides flexibility, easy access, and cost effectiveness, ODL ushers in a much needed democratisation of the system which allows individuals from various sections of the population to realize to the fullest educational opportunities, which was previously limited to the dominant few and rarely reached the farthest sections of society. This paper is a tribute to ODL, discussing its features, advantages and contributions to the system of education in 21st century India.

Key Words: *Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE), Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU).*

Importance of Open Distance Learning in 21st Century India

The Department of Higher Education under the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, defines *Open and Distance Learning* (ODL) as an arrangement of education where the presence of educators and learners in the same place

and time is not required, where the teaching and learning system becomes more accommodative with regards to the time constraints, admission constraints and where the system focuses on quality learning without the restraints which accompany full time learning programs.¹

The philosophy of Open Learning which is practiced through Distance mode is enabling millions of individuals across the world to realize their aspirations of learning, removing the barriers of space and time. This holistic understanding of ODL sheds light on the apparent advantages of following such a system of education, as opposed to the conventional system of education. The characteristics "Open" and "Distance" enhances the flexibility in the learning paradigm, while adhering to a broad structure of quality education and student pliant learning. In contrast to the traditional mode of education, which primarily comprised of classroom lectures, ODL features a more student friendly and learner centric approach, which makes it a desirable choice for thousands of learners, both old and young.

Apart from open accessibility and advantages of Distance education, ODL is more beneficial and attractive because of a number of reasons. Van den Boom and Schlusmans characterizes ODL according to the outlook and needs of society²-

- 1) Making education less expensive
- 2) Enabling more people take part in cultural life
- 3) Relieving the overcrowded traditional universities
- 4) Enabling more people to study while working
- 5) Encouraging lifelong learning
- 6) Making people gain more qualifications to enable them survive in today's employment world
- 7) Opening up access to university for students without formal entrance qualifications³

There is no doubt that the features of ODL, as given by Van den Boom and Schlusmans, are extremely relevant and it is a major factor for more learners getting enrolled in this system of learning. However in the context of 21st century India, ODL has a special position in the heart of the Education system. It is evident that the world's largest University (by student population) is in India- *Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)*.⁴

As opposed to the conventional education system, ODL removes the major barriers to the pursuit of knowledge. Its advantages are manifold, some of those are as follows-

- It does not require learning to be a full-time activity. Individual learners may very well pursue their educational aspirations alongside their professional, household or other daily activities and obligations.
- It removes the age barrier which is usually present in conventional education system, which requires learners to be young. It opens the doors of learning to the young and old alike. Thus, individual learners who could not pursue their academic dreams when they were young are given an opportunity to learn, without the restriction of age-limits, which are followed by most conventional learning institutions.
- It provides a variety of learning materials to the students, both conventional and modern. Apart from self-learning materials like books and other hard copy study materials, it also provides a rich variety of multimedia learning materials like audio cassettes, video cassettes, computer based courseware including computer managed learning and Computer assisted learning and interactive video, which makes learning a more dynamic process.
- It provides flexibility with regards to time of study. The learners need not study for fixed hours, set in a specific time of the day, which is usually the case in conventional learning institutions. This makes learning a more open and

personalized process as individual learners can devote time to study, as per their convenience, at any time of the day.

- It removes the barrier of travelling to a particular place for the purpose of gaining knowledge. Very often it happens that travelling daily to an educational institution becomes a cumbersome process, especially for those who live in the suburbs or distant rural areas. The barrier of place is removed as learners can actively be involved in the learning process from the comfort of their home, by using the resources and learning materials made available to him/her.
- Usually in conventional educational system, there is a strict timeline vis-à-vis the pace of study. When a particular topic is completed, it is seldom repeated, irrespective of the learner's needs. This makes the student adopt a forced pace of study. However with open and distance learning, the learner can go back to the same lecture series or topics again and again by using the multimedia and other study material provided to him/her, allowing the person to proceed with a pace of study that is more student-friendly, personalized, and suited for the holistic understanding of subjects.
- It makes education more affordable and therefore more accessible, as its tuition fees, is more often than not, less expensive than conventional educational institutions. A larger and diverse sections of the population, gets access to cost-effective educational solutions, thus making education more accessible, especially for the middle and lower classes.
- It plays a prominent role in making the education system truly inclusive. All the above mentioned advantages, brings in more learners from diverse sections of the population, a vast section of which was earlier deprived of academic opportunities, thus shaping a more democratic, open and inclusive education system.

With the ever growing population of India, there is high competition in terms of opportunities to pursue higher education.

Besides stiff competition and limited seats in institutions, there is also a steep rise in the course fees of most educational institutions thus making education inaccessible to many. With the advent of ODL we welcome the arrival of much needed openness in the Indian education system. Besides flexibility, easy access, and cost effectiveness, ODL ushers in a much needed democratization of the system which allows individuals from various sections of the population to realize to the fullest, their educational opportunities, which was previously limited to the dominant few and rarely reached the farthest sections of the Indian society.

The initial initiative in the form of *School of Correspondence Course and Continuing Education*, under University of Delhi, 1962, to the establishment of *Distance Education Council*, under *Indira Gandhi National Open University Act*, 1985⁵ and most significantly the establishment of the largest University in the world⁶, IGNOU in 1985, by the *Indira Gandhi National Open University Act*, 1985⁷, we have come a long way towards the goal of providing higher education, via ODL, to millions of Indians who have had limited such opportunities in the past. Needless to say, ODL has been a major revolutionary change in the relatively narrow conventional Indian education system.

Let us therefore mentioned some of the important impacts of ODL in 21st century India-

Firstly, the impact of ODL can be deeply felt by the fact that distance enrolment constitutes 12.5% of the total enrolment in higher education, of which 39.9% are female students.⁸ The enrollment of a high percentage of women in higher education in India, has been possible because of openness and easy accessibility that this system of learning provides, which is enabling especially for women as well as elderly sections of the population.

Secondly, ODL becomes the more suitable option for millions of Indians who are looking for affordable educational

solutions. The National Sample Survey Office reported that between 2008 and 2014, the average annual private expenditure for general education (primary level to post graduation and above) has shot up by a staggering 175%.⁹ This trend is likely to continue, making education in India, a costlier affair. Therefore ODL triumphs as the only hope for hundreds of Indians who are passionate about learning but cannot afford such steep rise in tuition fees.

Thirdly, it is an open secret that the standard of India's education system, is not up to the mark, especially in the rural areas. The Annual Status of Education Report, 2014, assessed government schools in the country, nearly 20% of students surveyed from Class 2 didn't recognize the numbers between one and nine, and only 25% of students in Class 3 could do subtraction.¹⁰ A prominent reason for the poor quality of education, is the varying degrees of teaching quality, more alarming in the suburbs and rural belts. ODL, introduces a standard set of course materials, which maintains the integrity and quality of course content, and the multimedia learning tools also maintain an uniform teaching quality by distributing the same lecture (provided by a reputed expert) across many centers, by means of CD's, Audio cassettes, Online videos, Radio programmes etc. This ensures that quality of teaching does not vary from region to region, and students in the farthest corners get access to the same materials, as those in the metropolitan urban areas.

Fourthly, training programmes are organized for faculty and supporting staff, thus making them more sensitive towards the needs of learners. *Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE)*¹¹ setup in 1993, under IGNOU, is a classic example of such a programme. This ensures that the quality of teaching is maintained and that the subject experts are also sensitized about the needs, abilities and expectations of the students, thus making ODL the more attractive choice for learners. This also makes the best use of limited number of subject experts and teachers, while catering to the needs of

thousands enrolled under distance education institutions in India.

Finally, the biggest and perhaps the most important contribution of ODL in India, is to overcome the socio-cultural, religious and political considerations that hinder the spread of quality education across the nation. Numerous socio-political cleavages limit the influx of a diverse variety of students in educational institutions. However, with the spread of ODL in India, this barrier is effectively reduced, if not removed completely, where people from diverse social, religious, economic and political backgrounds are enrolling themselves for ODL programme, which marks the true democratization of the Indian education system. Overcoming the aforementioned barriers, the centers of learning becomes inclusive, democratic, and 'Open', thus ushering in a welcome change in the system of education in India.

A critical evaluation of ODL in India may point out certain lacunas like possibility of encouragement of rote learning, lack of learner-teacher interaction, non-uniformity in student support services and self instructional materials across various ODL institutions, etc. However in the ultimate analysis, it must be acknowledged that the advantages and contributions of ODL outweigh the shortfalls of the system, which is still undergoing a stage of growth and development in India. In the foreseeable future, it would be observed that ODL will affirmatively change the entire landscape of the education system in India, resulting in the empowerment of millions of learners across the nation.

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STUDENTS' SUPPORT SERVICES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: OVERALL SCENARIO

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Abstract

Student Support Services (SSS) are considered as the backbone of distance education. Self Instructional Study Material, different instructional strategy, *Personal Contact Programme* (PCP), *Students' Assignment Response Sheets* (SARS), Audio –Visual Materials and Library facilities to guide and facilitate the educational transaction are considered as SSS. The present research focused mainly on the study of SSS in distance education and to compare it among different Universities. Information were gathered from prospectus, website and office records of the Universities and opinion were taken through opinionnaires from the 163 students and 43 academic counselor of four Universities namely The *Rabindra Bharati University* (RBU), *Vidyasagar University* (VU), *Netaji Subhas Open University* (NSOU) and *Indira Gandhi National Open University* (IGNOU). The opinionnaire of students and academic counselor consisted of 44 items and 67 items accordingly. Each opinionnaire consisted of at least one open ended item so that unstructured, free and spontaneous opinion of each of the teacher and students could be recorded and a qualitative analysis was done in this regard. In this paper, it is suggested that the quality of study materials can be improved (except IGNOU) because the other study material is not sufficient enough and those are neither error free nor timely delivered to the students. Regarding PCP majority of the students opined that more number of sessions are required and those sessions should be held at regular intervals. SARS was found in every University except VU and it is found to be really very beneficial for the students pursuing studies through distance education. Regarding audio –visual material and use of modern techniques like slide, video, etc it was found that only IGNOU and NSOU had the provision of providing such facilities but that too theoretically as according to the students, in reality no one uses any audio-visual aids in the PCP sessions and there was also no provision for any on –line instruction facilities for them. It was also found that the condition of library was very poor and its improvement is urgently needed for the betterment of the distance education.

Key Words: *Distance education, student support service, uni-mode, dual-mode*

Introduction:

Distance education in its organized form, is one of the path breaking innovations in the field of education of the twentieth century. The main aim of Distance Education Institutions (DEIs) is to promote self study or independent study among distance learners in the absence of regular face-to-face (F2F) teaching. To achieve this, every DEIs extends support to its learners, which comprises of a cluster of facilities and activities that are intended to make the teaching-learning process easier and more interesting for the learners. SSS are considered as the backbone of distance education. It is an important issue associated with the planning and delivery of distance education programs. All these activities beyond the production and delivery of course material assist in the progress of students in terms of learning, interacting and effective communication and therefore, the support system may range from study centre, counseling/tutorial support to administrative problem solving. The scope of SSS is vast and different authors have presented different definitions and models of students support services. Rashid (1998) described the term SSS as the way and means that provide additional help to distance learner. Garrison (1989) observes that in distance education 'support is concerned with a range of human and non-human resources to guide and facilitate the educational transaction. He observed that these resources may be library facilities, various media and software programs, community leaders, or they could be various socio- economic variables such as students' financial, self- sufficiency and capacity to cope with their roles and responsibilities in the family and community. Also he determined that the most important form of support in an educational transaction is the teachers, who through guidance and direction can assist the students to achieve their goals and develop control of the educational process. These services is a major component of the distance education system (Alias, 2005), as Zhang, and Venkaiah (2000) in their study of twenty nine distance education experts in India, reported 48.3% of the subjects carried out researching the area

of student support services from 1995 to 2000. Ukpo (2006) believed that SSS mainly focus on providing learners with the assistance they need to achieve their desired outcomes in a distance education environment. The major responsibilities that are being accomplished under SSS include:

- to create an environment conducive to Distance learning;
- to facilitate the Distance Learning Method;
- to motivate students to continue their education;
- to encourage socialization and to promote team work and team spirit and
- to improve the educational standards of students.

Undoubtedly, the SSS play major role in imparting quality education to distance learners but probably the most difficult task is to manage it. The success of distance education system largely depends on the effectiveness of its student support services. The present paper focused mainly on the study of SSS in distance education and to compare it among different Universities.

Methodologies

Sample

A purposive random sampling technique was adopted for the study. (a) The Rabindra Bharati University (RBU) and Vidyasagar University (VU) and (b) Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) and Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) were selected as dual-mode and single-mode universities respectively. 163 students, 43 teachers 4 directors and 4 course coordinators of distance education were chosen for the study.

Tools of the Study

The following four tools were used by the researcher for the present study:

1. *Opinionnaire of the teachers (academic counselors) about distance education*

Sixty-nine (69) items were prepared to collect information from the teachers/academic counselors

2. *Opinionnaire of the students about distance education*

Forty-four (44) items were prepared to collect information from students

3. *Opinionnaire of the directors and administrators/ course coordinators about distance education*

Twelve (12) items were prepared to collect information from directors and administrators/ course coordinators

All the tools were prepared by the investigators and Likert's scale was used to prepare the Opinionnaire. The opinionnaires were finalized by using Delphi technique. Each opinionnaire consisted of at least one open ended item so that unstructured, free and spontaneous opinion of each of the teacher and students could be recorded and a qualitative analysis was done in this regard. In this present paper analysis has been done on the basis of only two open ended items (item no.69 from teacher's opinionnaire and item no. 44 from student's opinionnaire) as it paper is a small part of the research work.

The two items are:

69. What measure should be taken for the development of distance education, explain your opinion briefly. (Teacher's opinionnaire)

44. On the basis of experience acquired by attending distance education, for development of this distance education what measure should be adopted according to you. Write in five sentences. (Student's opinionnaire)

Collections of Data

The researcher visited all the four selected universities as well as their different study centers and personally met with 163 students pursuing their studies through distance mode in the

following subjects: Education, History and Political Science. She also met 43 above mentioned subject teachers of Distance education and collected data through the opinionnaires for the teachers (academic counselors) and the students. The researcher also met with four directors and course coordinators. She also collected secondary data from the office, prospectus and university website of the four universities regarding different relevant information about the course.

Findings and interpretation

According to the prospectus of all the universities, there was some common student support service i.e. every university prepared self instructional written material or module (the printed study material written in self instructional style). Each university had their own personal contact program (PCP) for their students. Self assessment exercise and assignments were also given to the students regularly. There were also library facilities in every university.

Self Instructional Study Material

It was clearly stated in the prospectus of IGNOU that they prepared their printed study material for both theory and practical components of the program which were supplied to the learners in batches of blocks for every course in the form of a booklet usually comprising of 3 to 5 units. This learning material was specially prepared by teams of experts drawn from different universities and specialized institutions in the area spread throughout the country as well as in-house faculty. The materials were scrutinized by the content experts, supervised by the instructors/unit designers and edited by the language experts at IGNOU before these were finally sent for printing.

NSOU distributed Self Instructional Study Material (SIM) to the students in installment through the study centers where they had been admitted. Besides, a list of reference books for suggested reading are available in the SIM. Efforts were made to make library services available at University campuses.

As stated in the prospectus, Rabindra Bharati University provided study materials according to the syllabus to the candidates at intervals or at a time by post or by courier or by hand in the module form. The modules did not provide full study material but those provide the outline and suggested study strategies.

Vidyasagar University stated in their prospectus that they provided study material to the students in full or in part in the form of modules, prepared paper-wise on the topics of prescribed in the syllabus on admission or during Personal Contact Program (PCP). Modules were independent to each other and self-contained. They might be sent in any order, not necessarily serially. Student should study each of the modules as soon as he/she receives the same and makes good use of the reading list given at the end of each lesson. [Prospectus of IGNOU, NSOU, RBU and VU, 2013].

From the above discussion it was observed that, all the four universities provided study materials to their students. The nature and mode of distribution of study materials were different in different universities. IGNOU was more systematic about the study materials. The programmes were supplied to the learners in batches of blocks for every course of 3 to 5 units. NSOU's study materials were distributed to the learners through the study centers where they had been admitted. The study materials were divided into different modules according to the paper and each module had more or less ten units. Rabindra Bharati University (RBU) provided study materials according to the syllabus to the candidates. The study materials were divided into different papers and modules. The modules did not provided full study material but provide an outline and suggested the study strategies. Vidyasagar University provided study material in the form of modules, prepared paper-wise on the topics of prescribed syllabus of the course. The study material was divided into different papers and units.

Personal Contact Programme (PCP)

IGNOU's counseling sessions (PCP) were held as per schedule drawn by the study centre. These were mostly held outside the regular working hours of the host institutions where the study centres were located.

NSOU's instruction was imparted through Personal contact program (PCP) for a short period held at intervals. PCP was held at only some designated Study Centre in different regions of West Bengal announced at the relevant time and not at all study centers. Normally these were held on Saturday, Sunday and holidays. Student attending PCP had to make their own arrangements of boarding and lodging.

Rabindra Bharati University (RBU) organized PCP to provide the students an opportunity for interaction with leading experts in the subject who will give counseling and advice instead of traditional classroom lectures. These programs were scheduled after a substantial part of the syllabus has been covered through modules by the students. Each candidate required to attend 60% of the total numbers of PCP held at the concerned centers where admission was taken.

In Vidyasagar University (VU), PCPs were also organized to provide the students an opportunity to interact with leading experts in the subject who would give counseling and advice rather than classroom lectures. The PCP in theoretical papers was organized in phases. On each day of PCP 4 sessions were allotted, each consisting of one and half hour and such sessions were normally held in winter recess and summer recess or on the dates which were notified by the *Directorate of Distance Education* (DDE) and Study Centers. Attendance at PCP was compulsory. Each student was expected to attend at least 60% of the PCP. Thus, it may be said that all the four university follows same kind of program. There were no major differences of their Personal Contact Program (PCP). [Prospectus of IGNOU, NSOU, RBU and VU, 2013].

Students' Assignment Response Sheets (SARS)

Both IGNOU and NSOU had their own assignment program for their students. IGNOU provided 30% marks for each paper. NSOU also provided marks for each paper. At Rabindra Bharati University (RBU), each module contained a brief reading list and a set of questions to be answered through the *Student Assignment Response Sheet* (SARS). Candidates were expected to return at least 75% SARS of the total modules supplied to the concerned centers where admission was taken. Moreover, the candidates were required to secure 40% marks or "C" grade in the SARS in order to ensure the eligibility for appearing in the respective examination. SARS were ordinarily send back to them after evaluation along with comment and suggestion where necessary. At Vidyasagar University some SRS were prepared, distributed among the students, collected, evaluated and given back to the students ordinarily at each phase of counseling. But according to student's feedback, there is no such provision of assignment for the students, at least in the three chosen subjects the researcher have taken for her research[Prospectus of IGNOU, NSOU, RBU and VU, 2013]. From the above information it can be concluded that except Vidyasagar University, all other three universities provide assignment for their students.

Audio –Visual Material

The learning package of IGNOU contains audio and video CDs which had been produced by the University for better clarification and effective of understanding of the course material given to the learners. A video program was normally of 25-30 minutes duration. The video cassettes are screened at the study centers during specific sessions which are duly notified for the benefit of the learners. The researcher would like to mention that according to student's feedback, they had no such experience about the use of video program or CDs in their teaching learning program.

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stations were broadcasting curriculum based audio programs. In addition, some selected stations of ALL INDIA RADIO were also broadcasting the audio programs. Learners could confirm the dates for the programs from their study centers. The information was also provided through the university website. Presently GYAN VANI and GYAN DARSHAN program is postponed or withdrawn due to some reason.

Live tele-conferencing sessions were conducted via satellite through interactive GYAN DARSHAN CHANNEL as well as simulcast on 'EDUSAT' channel from the University studies at Electronic Media Production Centre (EMPC), the schedule of which was made available at the study centers. It should be mentioned that the students of selected subjects of this study were silent about EDUSAT channel of the University.

NSOU also introduced audio-materials, audio-visual presentations, tele-conferences and occasional discussion sessions through T.V. network. LIVE Radio-counseling is arranged on every day from Monday to Saturday between presently 2.15 P.M. and 2.45 P.M, through GYAN-VANI F.M.Channel (105.4MHZ) which is also postponed now. The student feedback regarding this facility was also same as IGNOU. They said that they never experienced such facility.

There was no audio-visual facility available at Rabindra Bharatia University (RBU) and Vidyasagar University (VU) distance course.

From the above discussion and logical analysis about instructional strategy and methodology, it was found that there is certain diversities in self instructional study material, PCP, SRS and audio-visual material among the universities.

Library

Library facilities are the weakest part of distance education institutions. The four universities have library facilities for their students to collect their required book from university library. But it was found from the feedback of the students that they

suffer from the non availability of books in the library in almost each of the four universities. Some time the books are there in the library, but it is not available for the students due to many reasons like renovation, rigidity of different rules and regulations, lack of staff in the library or many other related problems. The researcher also faces same problems while she intended to use library of a particular uni-mode university.

The Suggestions of Teachers (Academic Counselors) and Students

The suggestions of teachers (academic counselors) and students regarding different components and related issues were collected from the last open ended questions [item no 69 for teachers (academic counselors) and item no. 44 for the students] of the opinionnaire of teachers (academic counselors) and students made their opinion independently. Each component was not suggested by every teacher (academic counselors) or student. The researcher presented the suggestions made by the teachers (academic counselors) and students on the basis of available opinion about each component. So the number of teachers (academic counselors) and students were not same regarding different suggestions.

Table 2: *Suggestions made by the students and teachers (Academic Counselors) about study materials and syllabus*

Suggestions	No. of opinion of students	% of opinion of students	No. of opinion of teachers	% of opinion of teachers
Improvement of standard	42	25.77	8	18.60
The list of reference book and class note apart from study material	24	14.72	4	9.30
study material in bi-lingual form and in lucid language	13	7.98	-	-

On time completion of syllabus followed by elaborate discussion of study material	11	6.75	-	-
Timely distribution of study material	8	4.91	6	13.95
Inclusion of co-curricular activities and excursion	4	2.45	-	-
Error free study material	3	1.84	4	9.30
Inclusion of practical papers	3	1.84	-	-
Research based education and international comparison of curriculum	3	1.84	-	-
More number of model questions, and availability of answers in study material.	3	1.84	-	-
Evaluation of study material	-		4	9.30
Total	114	69.94	26	60.47

Table 3: *Suggestions made by the students and teachers (Academic Counselors) regarding study centre*

Suggestions	No. of opinion of students	% of opinion of students	No. of opinion of teachers	% of opinion of teachers
To increased the number of study centers	12	7.36	4	9.30
Centrally located study centre which is easily accessible	10	6.13	4	9.30
Fixed time table and more helpful Study centre	4	2.45	-	-
Informative study centre regarding course, class, dates and timing	3	3.34	-	-

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Better infrastructure and adequate provision of student support service	-	-	5	11.62
Total	29		13	30.23

Table 4: *Suggestions made by the students and the teachers (Academic Counselors) about PCP*

Suggestions	No. of opinion of students	% of opinion of students	No. of opinion of teachers	% of opinion of teachers
Increase number of PCP and PCP timing	68	38.65	7	16.28
Classes to be held once in a week / only on Sunday / two days per week / two days per month.	13	7.98	-	-
Decrease PCP timing	2	1.22	-	-
Provision of interaction between student and teacher	-	-	4	9.30
Total	83	50.92	11	25.58

Table 5: *Opinion of the students and the teachers (Academic Counselors) regarding instructional methods*

Suggestions	No. of opinion of students	% of opinion of students	No. of opinion of teachers	% of opinion of teachers
Use of modern techniques like slide, video etc,	15	9.20	6	13.95
Bi-lingual discussion in classroom	9	5.52	4	9.30

Better quality of teaching- learning	6	3.68	-	-
Timely distribution of model question	6	3.68	-	-
Evaluation of teaching	-	-	3	6.98
Total	36	22.08	13	30.23

Table 6: *Suggestions made by the students and teachers (Academic Counselors) about on-line facilities*

Suggestions	No. of opinion by teacher	% of opinion of teacher	No. of opinion by student	% of opinion of student
On-line Teaching –learning, submission of assignment.	7		17	
Video-conferencing opportunity and	5		15	
proper updating of web-site	4		14	
Total	16		46	

Table 7: *Suggestions made by the students and teachers (Academic Counselors) about library*

Suggestions	No. of opinion by teacher	% of opinion of students	No. of opinion by student	% of opinion of teachers
Library facility	20		30	
More good books in library	14		25	
On-line library	12		20	
Total	46		75	

There are different instructional strategies in different universities all over the world. In this particular study the investigator found that there were difference in self instructional study materials, PCPs, SRSs and audio-visual materials among the four selected universities of West Bengal. The nature and mode of distribution of study materials were differing in different universities.

It is found from both the students' and teachers' experiences as well as teacher experience that the standard of study material in different universities is not always good. Some of them suggested that it should be elaborative, more effective, updated, attractive and easy. Some universities do not follow prescribed methods to develop their study materials and some time it is a mere repetition of the syllabus of degree course. The syllabuses are not always developed interestingly also. For that reason some of the students are not interested about their study material. Some of them want the name of reference books and additional materials. Because they found that the information provided by study material are not sufficient to answer all the questions in term-end examination and assignments. Some students advocated for bi-lingual study material. In West Bengal some students are there in different universities who can't follow instruction and write independently in English. While collecting the data, the coordinator of an IGNOU study centre informed the researcher that many students wish to join IGNOU but fail to do so due to language bar. There should be provision for regional language in IGNOU also. Another point is that many students in different universities want English version of study materials, but some time it is not available in concerned study centre. And some time the situation is just reverse. They want Bengali version but receive English one. Another problem is about the language and content of study material. Sometime the language of study material is not easy and appropriate for the student. Sometime it is full of ambiguity and the contents are also not very clearly discussed. It creates confusion among the students and teachers. So it should be narrated very clearly.

Some of the students opine that there should be no error in study material and the proof checking of study material should be done with proper care. It is a general observation of the teachers also. The researcher also found that most of the study material consisted lots of spelling mistakes and printing errors.

Many of them commented on timely delivery of study material and it should be available before PCP. Most of the students in four different universities verbally informed the researcher that they did not get study material in time. Sometimes it was not at all available in study centers also. Sometimes they had to make photocopy from one available study material borrowed from concerned teachers to continue their study though they had already paid for their study material during admission. The researcher has experience of the same at one study center in North Kolkata where she observed a long queue of the students in front of the photocopy room of the study centre where the students are doing photocopy of the study material before attending the PCP. Even the students of IGNOU said that the study material should be available before PCP. Some of the students advised to provide handbook also.

The *Personal Contact Programme* (PCP) was a significant academic input in the open distance education system. In the present study, the researcher also found from the feedback of the teachers (academic counselors) and the students that both of them demanded more sessions in PCP for the completion of syllabus and there existed a constant complaint about the irregularity of PCP sessions in the four universities. The directors of the universities also mentioned about the non-availability of academic counselor in time.

There are Self-assessment exercises within each unit of study in distance education. Continuous evaluation is there but it is mainly through assignments. Also the term-end examinations like conventional system are there. Chakraborty D. and Chakraborty K. S. (2011) under took study on "A Critical Analysis of Assignment Component of Programmes Offered by Tripura

University under Distance Mode” and it was found from the study that the learners realized the significance of assignments, and the majority found that assignments helped them in getting knowledge of the course and thus preparing them for the term-end examinations. However, very few have received focused comments along with the evaluated assignments. In the present study also it was observed that there is assignment system in every university except VU and some students opined that they will be more benefitted if the assignment is more developed. Some students of VU wants assignment for them as they don't have assignment in there course.

Regarding the audio-visual material it was found that only IGNOU and NSOU had the provision of such facilities theoretically but according to student's feedback, they had no such experience. IGNOU had their own radio and TV channel namely GYAN VANI and GYAN DARSHAN. Presently GYAN VANI and GYAN DARSHAN program is postponed or withdrawn for some reasons. So there is no use of Audio-Visual methods in four universities which are considered to be an important part to reach maximum students in short time in the field of distance education. In this connection, it can be mentioned that Sukumar, B. (2001) studied on Interactive Radio Counselling in distance learning at IGNOU. It was already mentioned that Indira Gandhi National Open University introduced the interactive radio counselling to strengthen its students support service. The study revealed that the interactive radio was received well, but needs more attention to make it effective. It was also found from another study conducted by Sesharatnam (1994) on the Multi Media Instructional System of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University that a significant number of students did not listen to the radio programmes of the university and the increasing potential of video cassette technology had not yet been fully realized by the students of the university. In a study entitled Developing Digital Learning Repository: A Case for e-GyanKosh by Kanjilal U. (2007) presented the status of learning object repositories the world over and gave an insight

into the national digital repository being developed by the Indira Gandhi National Open University, and embarks upon further suggestions to expand this strategy.

The use of modern techniques like slide, video, different media and modernized methods etc are lacking in the classroom instruction of every university including IGNOU. Not a single university uses such measure for their classroom instruction in the selected arts subjects. The feed back of the teachers (academic counselors) and students taken as sample confirm the fact.

On-line instructions were also there to serve the purpose of distance education. Many of the students and teachers (academic counselors) commented in this regard. According to the students, there were no such uses of audio-visual in the classroom and on-line instruction for them. The researcher observed that the student wanted on-line teaching-learning and on-line submission of assignment. They also wanted video-conferencing opportunity and proper updating of web-site. It was found from the review of related literature of India and abroad that many works were done about on-line education. Powley (1995) studied the effectiveness of electronic and telecommunications tutoring on distance education, students' completion records' learning outcomes, time to complete, their motivation to participate in future distance education programmes through an experimental design. In the present context of virtual education and learning it is the demand of the age that the DE should be delivered through on-line. But it is very disappointing to find that not a single university of this present study delivers their education through on-line. Assignment is also submitted in a hard copy (not even a soft copy) form. There is no video conferencing opportunity for the students of distance mode in any university. Even the web-site of the universities is not always updated properly. It is a real problem for the students, teachers, researchers and other concerned persons. In this connection, it should be mentioned that Allen and Seaman (2010) and Adkins (2011) found that the online schools did not appear

to perform better than the traditional schools, on the average, their performance is not homogeneous. However, some on-line schools appeared to perform as well as or better than traditional schools. Any way, on-line education cannot be denied for any reason in this modern age. Providing on-line facility is the need of the hour to meet the diverse requirement of the students.

There are suggestions from the part of teachers (academic counselors) and students about library facility and there should be more relevant books in the library. They also added that the On-line library facility should be there. While visiting to the different universities the researcher found that the situation of library was very poor and it is recommended that the improvement of library facility is needed.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion it can be concluded that in the field of distance education, lack of adequate student support services are very evident. Students are at present not fully utilizing the potential of existing support services either due to the lack of awareness or lack of time. The study reveals that a large number of students demanded more PCP sessions to fulfill their various queries related to the syllabus. The concerned universities should take proper step in this regard. It is also recommended that on-line submission of assignment, video-conferencing opportunity and proper updating of web-site should be there to improve the teaching learning process of distance education. The use of modern techniques like slide, video, different media and modernized methods etc are lacking in the classroom instruction of every university including IGNOU. Moreover, the existing services are not sufficient to the learners. All these have significant impact on making distance education quite unsuccessful as an alternative channel for higher education.

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