On Adding Value to Learning Experiences through Support Services: Case Study of IGNOU

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ABSTRACT :

The Open and Distance Learning System is now three decades old in India. A learner in this system is away from her teachers and peers. Thus proper organisation of learner support services is extremely crucial to ensure efficient functioning of the system and enrich her learning experiences. This paper deals with the issue of value addition through support services and also about inculcation of moral and ethical values among all the stakeholders. In order to illustrate the point we have described our experiences at IGNOU, the largest Open University in the world.

INTRODUCTION :

Open learning has now been accepted as a philosophy of learning and distance as a mode of education. This is based on the fact that learning is an individual process and individual learning is possible even without predominant face-to-face contact between the teacher and the taught, particularly when learners are mature and motivated. In India, open and distance learning system had its origin in the recommendations of CABE Committee (1961) to provide opportunities of higher education to large numbers through the correspondence mode. The available infrastructure was not able to cope up with the ever growing demand of higher education. Thus it was felt that rather than bringing the teacher and the taught under the same roof, let the learning materials be made available at the doorstep of the learner. Therefore, it can be said that open learning-teaching has its genesis in the concerns for access to equitable opportunities for Education to All.

The beginning of the open era heralded with the establishment of the Open University, United Kingdom in 1969.

Its success encouraged several countries, particularly in the Commonwealth, to deliberate on the new concept and its potential in making higher education more accessible, flexible, relevant and innovative. India examined the possibility of establishing an open university in the early seventies. Influenced by the recommendations of the Education Commission (1966) and acceptability of UKOU, the University of Mysore and Andhra University adopted open admission policies in the mid-seventies by relaxing formal qualifications for entry to undergraduate and post-graduate courses. This seemingly minor innovation provided impetus to efforts towards greater access to higher education for larger segments of adult population.

In August 1982, the first Open University in India, namely, the Andhra Pradesh Open University (APOU), later renamed Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, was established through an Act of State Legislature.

It marked a watershed in the history of development of open learning in India; *the ivory towers were thrown open*. The success of APOU led to the establishment of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) by an Act of Parliament on September 20, 1985 as a responsive, flexible and innovative institution to democratise and widen access to higher education for large sections of the population. It was mandated to play two major roles: i) as an open university and national resource centre for distance education, and ii) as a body to promote, coordinate, and regulate standards, monitor quality, fund and accredit distance education institutions, courses and systems in the country.

Soon after the establishment of IGNOU, the *National Policy on Education* 1986 was announced. The NPE-1986 provided for a comprehensive policy framework for the development of distance education and the Programme of Action (POA), 1992 stipulated specific responsibilities for IGNOU for organizing, implementing and financing different proposals.

As of today, we have fifteen open universities, including the National University, though no new state open university has been established since 2006. Some recent developments have raised a serious debate about openness of the system (Basu, 2011; Panda, 2011) as well as the coordinating role of IGNOU (Basu & Srivastava, 2012).

It is now well established that the open-distance learning system seeks to substitute the teacher through convergence of multiple instructional strategies using print and e-media. But in IGNOU, print continues to be the master medium, notwithstanding the encouraging developments in the use of information and communication technologies. Dikshit et al (2003) studied the preferences of Indian online learners on the type of technology for various activities in self-learning and have reported that and have reported that a judicious mix of the multiple media yields optimum results. In particular, learners preferred print for the subject knowledge and online learning for activities and discussion. National Knowledge Commission (2006) has also recommended that DE system should be strengthened further to meet the objective of projected (20-25%) influx in tertiary education. Initiatives such as Right to Education Bill (2010) are bound to further constrain the system in coming years and it must reengineer itself for future to take education to the last mile.

Table 1 (a): Profile of IGNOU learners

Year	Fresh Admittance in ODL Programmes
2008	303821
2009	373558
2010	328995
2011	357063
January, 2012	120534
TOTAL	**1483971**

Table 1 (b): Gender-Wise Learner Distribution

Admission Cycle	Total Students (Fresh) Registered	Male	Female	% Male	% Female
January, 2008	90877	51233	34040	60.08%	39.92%
July, 2008	212944	143813	69054	67.56%	32.44%
January, 2009	125400	75381	45481	62.37%	37.63%
uly, 2009	248158	126619	94237	57.33%	42.67%
January, 2010	126560	73426	52222	58.44%	41.56%
July, 2010	202435	111388	85705	56.52%	43.48%
January, 2011	151256	86273	64982	57.04%	42.96%
July, 2011	205807	118491	87314	57.57%	42.43%
January, 2012	120534	67042	53485	55.62%	44.38%

Error means – No data available or field left blank or some other code is used; Percentages worked-out on Error Free data

Average %age Distribution of Gender

2.69%
40.83%
59.17%

■ % Error   ■ % Male   ■ % Female

Average % Distribution in Academic Programmes

10.12%   6.08%
1.13%   18.45%
26.11%
38.11%

■ Certificate
■ Diploma
■ Undergraduate Degrees
■ Postgraduate Degrees
■ Appreciation Programmes
■ Preparatory Programme
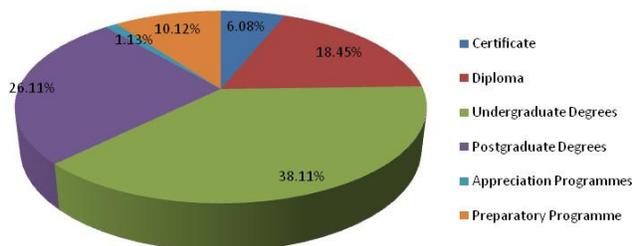
Table 1 (c): Distribution of Students as per Level of Academic Programmes

Level of Academic Programmes	Jan 2008	July 2008	Jan 2009	July 2009	Jan 2010	July 2010	Jan 2011	July 2011	Jan 2012	Average%
Certificate/ Advanced Certificate/PG Certificates (134)	8.60%	19.23%	12.39%	17.53%	16.04%	11.05%	7.37%	2.93%	4.86%	6.08%
Diploma/ Advanced Diploma/PG Diplomas (91)	6.83%	17.10%	6.32%	31.49%	3.32%	14.15%	5.34%	13.29%	2.17%	18.45%
Undergraduate Degrees (21)	5.16%	13.35%	9.32%	12.50%	9.78%	12.87%	12.03%	15.21%	9.79%	38.11%
Postgraduate Degrees (46)	5.37%	12.63%	8.47%	13.04%	8.96%	14.72%	10.90%	15.73%	10.17%	26.11%
Appreciation Programmes (4)	0.18%	0.21%	0.16%	2.23%	12.30%	20.84%	32.66%	18.57%	12.83%	1.13%
Preparatory Programme (1)	9.55%	16.19%	7.59%	16.32%	7.26%	13.59%	9.51%	11.13%	8.86%	10.12%

Table 1(d) : Social Category-Wise % Distribution of Student

YEAR	Total No of Students	General	SC	ST	OBC
January, 2008	90877	54.05%	7.79%	5.07%	14.89%
July, 2008	212944	65.10%	6.76%	9.28%	14.72%
January, 2009	125400	51.25%	8.60%	9.10%	19.35%
July, 2009	248158	46.63%	6.80%	14.01%	14.35%
January, 2010	126560	57.59%	9.39%	6.54%	24.41%
July, 2010	202435	56.79%	8.76%	8.12%	22.90%
January, 2011	151256	54.90%	9.77%	8.17%	25.85%
July, 2011	205807	58.86%	8.30%	10.45%	21.22%
January, 2012	120534	53.96%	9.69%	7.35%	27.31%
Average	**164886**	**55.46%**	**8.43%**	**8.68%**	**20.56%**

Average % Distribution in Academic Programmes
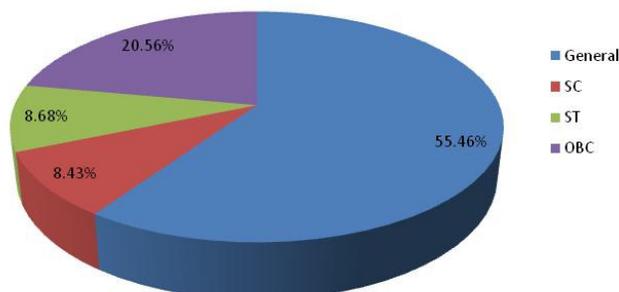
Table 1 (e): Area-wise % Distribution of Student

YEAR	Total Students	Urban	Rural	Tribal
January, 2008	90877	50.74%	46.50%	2.76%
July, 2008	212944	62.40%	37.59%	0.01%
January, 2009	125400	55.94%	40.43%	3.62%
July, 2009	248158	51.72%	43.86%	4.42%
January, 2010	126560	55.77%	40.87%	3.36%
July, 2010	202435	52.58%	43.85%	3.57%
January, 2011	151256	54.41%	42.19%	3.40%
July, 2011	205807	56.42%	39.69%	3.89%
January, 2012	120534	54.21%	42.68%	3.11%

Area-wise % Distribution of Students
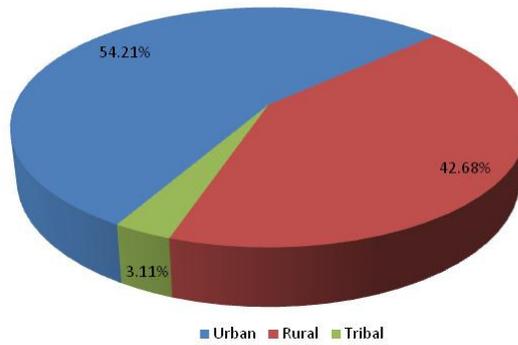
Table 1 (f): Age-wise Distribution of Students

| YEAR	Total Students	Age Range						
		< 20	21 to 25	26 to 30	31 to 35	36 to 40	41 to 50	> 50
January, 2008	90877	0.02%	10.44%	24.36%	22.99%	17.80%	19.48%	4.91%
July, 2008	212944	0.50%	26.75%	31.84%	18.92%	13.40%	6.71%	1.88%
January, 2009	125400	0.23%	21.20%	30.40%	19.89%	13.29%	12.24%	2.74%
July, 2009	248158	2.30%	33.50%	32.23%	15.73%	9.10%	5.91%	1.24%
January, 2010	126569	0.02%	8.29%	1.54%	55.76%	2.02%	23.72%	8.65%
July, 2010	202435	5.30%	34.63%	28.69%	15.21%	9.34%	5.72%	1.11%
January, 2011	151256	4.42%	30.33%	27.37%	16.88%	10.56%	9.13%	1.32%
July, 2011	205807	13.50%	39.36%	23.51%	12.02%	6.58%	4.30%	0.73%
January, 2012	120534	7.84%	31.51%	20.71%	18.32%	7.25%	11.87%	2.50%
Average	**164887**	**4.81%**	**29.62%**	**25.35%**	**19.95%**	**8.99%**	**9.06%**	**2.20%**

Age-wise Distribution of Students

2.20% 4.81%
9.06%
8.99%
29.62%
19.95%
25.35%

■ < 20 ■ 21-25 ■ 26-30 ■ 31-40 ■ 41-50 ■ >50 ■
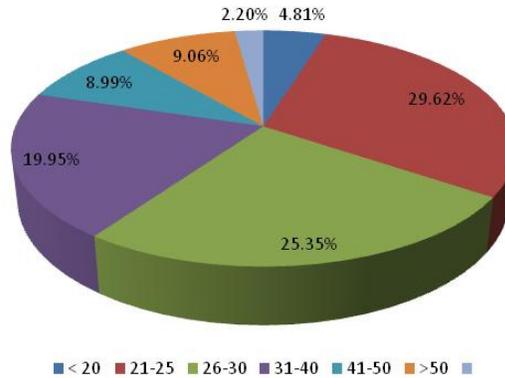
Employement Status : % Distributrion

37.39%
61.17%
1.44%

■ Unemployed ■ IGNOU Staff ■ Employed
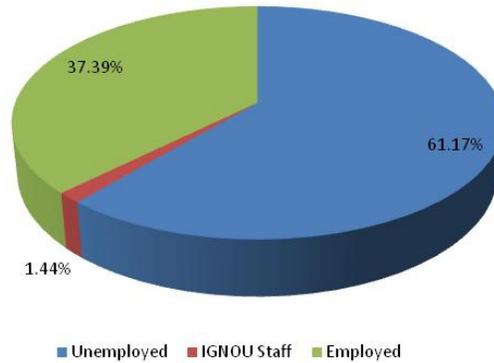
Table 1(g): Employment-Wise % Distribution of Student

YEAR	Total Students	Error Free	Unemployed	IGNOU Staff	Employed
January, 2008	90877	85189	32.91%	0.00%	67.09%
July, 2008	212944	185802	82.15%	0.19%	17.66%
January, 2009	125400	114541	52.11%	6.23%	41.66%
July, 2009	248158	192621	76.67%	2.48%	20.85%
January, 2010	126560	125760	47.60%	1.38%	51.02%
July, 2010	202435	196839	66.63%	0.57%	32.80%
January, 2011	151256	151255	57.27%	0.69%	42.04%
July, 2011	205807	205805	77.88%	0.96%	21.17%
January, 2012	120534	120534	57.33%	0.46%	42.21%

Table 1(h): Marital Status-Wise % Distribution of Student

YEAR	Total Students	Married	Unmarried
January, 2008	90877	49.20%	50.80%
July, 2008	212944	33.74%	66.26%
January, 2009	125400	43.56%	56.44%
July, 2009	248158	38.99%	61.01%
January, 2010	126560	46.10%	53.90%
July, 2010	202435	39.63%	60.37%
January, 2011	151256	44.80%	55.20%
July, 2011	205807	34.33%	65.67%
January, 2012	120534	44.71%	55.29%

Table 1 (i): Zone-Wise % Distribution of Student

| YEAR	Total Students	EAST	North-East	NORTH	SOUTH	WEST
January, 2008	90877	27.24%	5.16%	34.87%	17.38%	14.57%
July, 2008	212944	40.15%	10.49%	32.42%	6.84%	9.23%
January, 2009	125400	28.16%	9.25%	34.68%	13.57%	13.15%
July, 2009	248158	48.31%	9.23%	26.17%	6.61%	9.05%
January, 2010	126560	22.89%	9.18%	37.73%	15.60%	12.67%
July, 2010	202435	34.14%	7.80%	39.61%	8.54%	9.12%
January, 2011	151256	25.09%	6.87%	38.84%	15.57%	12.32%
July, 2011	205807	26.24%	8.60%	48.14%	7.91%	7.94%
January, 2012	120534	28.22%	6.01%	35.02%	17.01%	12.04%

Zone-wise average % Distribution
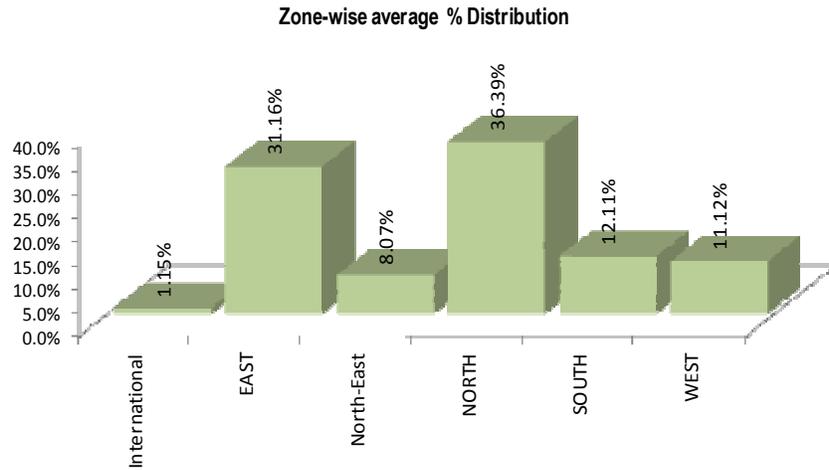
Table 1 (j): Zone-Wise Religion-wise Distribution of Student in % (January, 2008 to January, 2012)

ZONE	Total Students	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Sikh
EAST	489466	85.60%	8.73%	3.94%	0.30%
NORTH EAST	124281	48.28%	3.72%	42.78%	0.14%
NORTH	537125	80.22%	14.24%	1.55%	2.84%
SOUTH	161160	75.55%	8.33%	15.54%	0.11%
WEST	155829	87.39%	5.81%	3.46%	0.73%

Zone-wise Religion-wise % Distribution
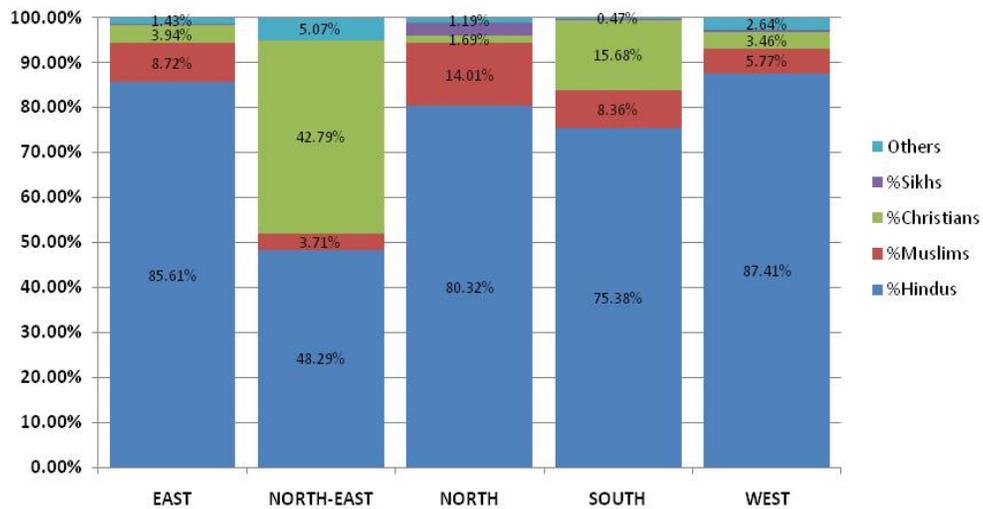
We note that in the period 2008-2012

- The learner population has grown @ 4.4%, which is less than that registered in the Tenth Five Year Plan (2001-2006). It means that the University has to re-look at its priorities and reposition itself.

- The geographical spread of the enrolment shows that maximum learners come from the north (36.4%) followed by the east (31.2%). However, enrolment from the south (12.1%) and the west (11.1%) is comparatively low. This is essentially because of the presence of state open universities, which offer education in regional languages. The enrolment from the North-East (8.7%) is very encouraging considering low population, difficult terrains all over and problems of accessibility in the region.

- Though majority of learners are Hindu in each region, the proportion of Christians is significant (42.8%) in the NE. The University will have to think of special programmes to encourage greater participation of Muslims, the major minority community in the country.

- On an average, 59.2% distance learners are male and 40.8% are female. In fact, the percentage of female learners has steadily increased from about 35 to 44%, which is a good indicator of the acceptability of the programmes of the University by women.

- In respect of social status, the learners predominantly belong to general category (55.5%) and Other Backward Category (20.6%). The enrolment of Scheduled Caste (8.4%) and Scheduled Tribe (8.7%) students is relatively low.

The enrolment of OBCs and SCs are below their national average population level of 27% and 15%. It indicates that the University has either not succeeded in convincing the marginalised populations or creating confidence in its strengths or such students get admission in the conventional system due to positive discrimination policies of GOI; financial resource as a barrier is ruled out because all SC/ST students get fee refund/scholarship from their respective state governments.

A differential analysis of SC and ST students region-wise indicates that most of the ST students come from the North-Eastern region of the country. However, the spread of SC candidates is almost uniform over all regions of the country.

- In the formative years of IGNOU, the University enrolled only mature and employed persons. But diversification in the programme offerings began to attract fresh school pass outs, which were not in employment. For the period under study, we find that majority (61.2%) of learners are not in employment and have joined the University for lack of openings in the conventional system. The percentage of employed learners is 37.4, which means that the University is fulfilling its dual mandate of providing opportunity to higher education to larger cross-sectional of our population and professional development for career mobility to those in full-time employment.

- 83.9% learners are in the age group 21-40 years, indicating that ODL learners are mature and have clear idea about their priorities. In fact, the number of learners in the age-groups 21-25, 26-30, 31-35 and 36-40 decrease steadily from 29.62% to25.4% to20% to 9%, respectively. Only 2.2% learners are above 50 years, whereas 4.8% learners are below 20 years.

- Of all learners, 41.7% are married and have to cater to familial responsibilities.

- The University offers 21 undergraduate programmes and enrols 38.1% learners, whereas 26.1% learners are enrolled in 46 postgraduate programmes. The bachelors' preparatory programme is also very popular and enrolls about 10.1% students. The University offers 91 diploma, advanced diploma and post graduate diploma programmes enrolling 18.5% learners. However, only 6.1% learners are enrolled in 134 certificate, Advanced certificate and postgraduate certificate programmes. (Some of these certificate programmes reportedly have only single digit enrolment.) These seem to be serious drain on the efforts of the academics as also the resources of the University and it would be advisable to review their offerings on case to case basis.

- The learner population used to be predominantly urban in character and metropolitan cities contributed significantly. However, this trend has now witnessed a change; the enrolment from rural and tribal areas is comparable (45%) to the urban enrolment (55%). This is a welcome development but brings in added responsibility on the University as far as value addition to student support is concerned. It is noted that access of learners from non-metropolitan cities has increased significantly, particularly in social science and humanities programmes. But it seems that benefits of open learning are yet to reach educationally disadvantaged rural populations to the desired level in professional areas. This is probably because of non-availability of the required infrastructure or trained human capital in rural or remote areas. This brings to focus the need to adopt alternative strategies for programme delivery.

It is also possible that many prospective learners/employers are either not convinced of the strengths or are not aware of the capabilities of the ODL system.

- Distance is not seen to be a major constraint for enrolment, though it is an obvious disadvantage, particularly for the employed, homemakers and female learners for attending F2F counseling sessions or hands-on practical classes.

In view of the above, we can say that spread of IGNOU learners is diverse and heterogeneous across the length and breadth of the country.

CHARACTERISTICS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS

A distance learner, who is loner and isolated, has to

- cope with the requirements of self-learning;

- change learning style and study habits;

- deal with quasi-permanent spatial and temporal separation from the teacher; and

- take professional, familial, financial and social issues in stride.

For these and such other reasons, the first generation learners, who are new to the system, may expect a little more help from the system, including hand-holding in various activities from registration to successful completion of the programme. Therefore, value addition to learning experiences has to be a continuum of concern. It demands that the systemic inputs are transparent and clear-cut. This is notwithstanding the fact that our studies with learners enrolled in B.Sc and B.Ed programmes of IGNOU (Mishra et al, 2009; Sanghai and Garg, 2009) revealed

that they were enlightened about their goal in life, aware about possible openings for higher studies/employment opportunities, motivated and confident about their own as well as systemic capabilities. We believe that these generic characteristics are also true for learners enrolled in other programmes, including humanities and social sciences.

VALUE ADDITION: WHAT, HOW AND WHY?

By value addition, we mean enriching learning experiences so that learning becomes an enjoyable journey. In simple language, it means that practitioners of open teaching-learning should create a comfortable environment where students can pursue their studies free from all hassles. However, the principle of conservation of effort suggests that to provide value added facilities, the system (the leader, educators/practitioners and support staff) will have to put in correspondingly extra energy, time and intellectual inputs. It means that all activities have to be designed so that they are learner-centric and each one of us in the chain acts ethically and professionally with due concern for the learner.

Form the above discussion, it emerges is that the practitioners of ODL system have to understand the 'value' of a learner. How do we define or explain the meaning of the term 'value'? More often than not, it is realized in monetary terms. For example, we realize the 'value' of electricity when we pay the monthly bill. But let us think of the situation at a remote place where facility of electricity has not reached. For illumination one has to depend on kerosene lamp, its chimney has to be cleaned and the wick has to be trimmed everyday, the oil has to be replenished. Moreover, to get rid of hot and humid conditions, one has to use hand-fan. It shows that a lot of physical effort has to be taken to get only the basic facilities which are made handy through electricity. Thus, this example illustrates a situation where the meaning of 'value' evolves without making reference to monetary aspects.

That is, physical effort helps us to cope with the situation arising out of absence of electricity.

In case of a distance learner, we have to deal with the absence of the teacher as well as her peers. There are umpteen instances where phenomenal change occurred in shaping the career of a student by way of her interaction with her teachers. But these teachers were present in flesh and blood. When such a teacher is absent but we still want the student to get the desired support, it is necessary to make the teacher omnipresent. This teacher will neither be able to pat on the back of the student when she performs nor reprimand the student when she goes astray. Thus the teacher will not be there to lend support to the learner by way of her physical presence but our experience shows that she could still do miracles if she empathized with the student.

It is well known that but for a few professional programmes like B.Ed and MBA, where admission is based on an entrance examination, IGNOU allows admission to all; learners do not have to compete on merit list and even those with ordinary score get opportunity to continue their pursuit for higher learning. At the undergraduate level, IGNOU enrolls more than half of all its students. Most of them are new to the system and may raise multiple questions at every stage of their learning progression. For instance, even before registration, it is quite natural for them to raise questions about the system. Some frequently asked questions (FAQs) could be:

• What is an open university?

• How does it differ from a conventional university?

• If I take admission, shall I be recognised at par with a regular student?

• Where do I go to take admission? Where do I attend classes?

In order to add value to the experiences of our prospective learners, we must build-in answers to such FAQs in a document like

'How to study at a distance?' and make it available free of cost to all as publicity material. Also, the Faculty at the Headquarters as well as IGNOU full-time staff at Regional Centres and part-time functionaries at Study Centres are expected to guide learners and satisfy them by answering their queries as and when they approach them in person.

Before a student seeks admission to a programme, it is quite likely that she is unfamiliar with its requirements as also the systemic vocabulary. Therefore, she needs to know answers to questions such as
•What are credits?
•Which courses are to be selected and in what order?
•What is the role of a study centre? Is it different from that of a regular college?
•Which study centre is to be chosen and why?
•How to pay fee: in cash or through demand draft?
•From where to get a demand draft prepared?

As of now, pre-admission information is made available by the University through Student Handbook and Prospectus (SH&P) in the form of a printed document and on the University website (www.ignou.ac.in) as an electronic document. SH&P is a consolidated document for various Masters and Bachelors degree programmes offered by the University. It provides information about the University (objectives, methodology followed, important features and achievements), detailed programme structures, University rules, fee charged and admission procedures, recognition of degree for further studies and government jobs, and details of student support network (RCs and SCs) activated by the University. No other pre-admission advice is available to facilitate choice of the optional courses or quality of SCs. Research studies (Mishra et al, 2009) show that majority of learners fail to comprehend what is written in SH&P, even for filling the admission form.

From personal experience we can say that it is quite complex and cumbersome to follow. It is therefore suggested that for value addition

•separate SH&P be prepared for Certificate, Diploma, PG Diploma, Bachelors degree and Masters degree programmes;

•a prototype filled-in admission form be included in SH&P;

•guidance on choice of optional courses with justification should be included; and

•language should be simplified.

For the success of a self-learner, it is important to guide her to judiciously learn to choose courses of study and communicate with different Support Divisions to mitigate difficulties that may crop up during the course of study. The University thought of providing each learner a Programme Guide (PG) with the expectation that if they carefully read it and follow the instructions, they should be able to complete the programme in the minimum stipulated time and carve out a definite path to realise their goal. However, our interactions with the learners show that PG is deficient in many ways and we can add value to this document by including

•a section on weekly schedules of study for each course to derive optimal gains;

•course options in a sequential manner for different categories of learners (majoring/non-majoring/employed/interested to pursue careers in a particular subject e.g., higher education and research/interested in other emerging careers); and

•information on career counselling and campus placements.

LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES

The entire gamut of the open teaching-learning is an exercise in learner support services and governs the learning curve of distance learners, who invariably require multi-level support due to their diverse socio-economic conditions, heterogeneous educational backgrounds, varying language competences, different learning styles and study habits. However, sparing time and effort during induction/orientation programmes for explaining what it takes to be a distance learner, what is meant by an autonomous learner responsible for pacing her learning through self-instructional materials, how to succeed while studying at a distance, etc adds considerable value to the exercise. Highlighting the importance of regular self-study, answering assignments, attending counselling sessions, and how to navigate through the programme/self-instructional study materials should go a long way in facilitating her success. She must be told the difference between counselling sessions for distance learners and lectures for conventional classroom students and that she should not expect classroom lectures. She must be advised to jot down difficult concepts/topics while deciphering texts through self-study, know the importance of going prepared to the counselling sessions with difficulties and asking the academic counsellor for solutions. A definite value addition can be made by the faculty if they can be approached through emails/chat box/ web page or in person. It is possible to develop in her the traits of a distance learner if she feels assured that we really intend to help her as a part of duty. A distance learner has the hangover of the conventional system and it takes a lot of effort for her to first unlearn that and then orient toward the ODL system.

A self-learner is a loner and printed course materials are supposed to be all-in-one: *self-motivating*, *self-sustaining*

and *self-learning* with the teacher built in the text. It is widely claimed and generally accepted that IGNOU study materials are of high quality. However, when we analysed B.Sc (Physics) study materials on the quantum and density of contents, language, comprehensibility, sequencing, coherence, style of presentation, use of illustrations / diagrams, activities, explanation of conceptual items, workload, suitability of in-text questions, usefulness of examples, illustrations, tables, over-all learner-friendliness, ability to develop problem solving skills and printing of the courseware etc, surprising facts came to light. Our investigations revealed that level of materials was high; these should be moderated and presented so as to be in tune with learner capabilities, expectations and interests; presentation should be improved by reiterating important definitions/concepts and highlighting these by putting in boxes, say, and incorporating more illustrations/bar charts/tables and solved examples. Moreover, no detail should be skipped, say on mathematical derivations/arguments/ reasoning. These findings should hold with minor variations for other courses/programmes as well. As such, this approach may tend to encourage spoon feeding rather than active and participative learning but may help in improving learner satisfaction/success/retention rates and minimise drop out. Therefore, the University can add value by adopting programme evaluation as an institutional policy and the faculty can support such an initiative by revising the materials based on the learner feedback and per-launch peer review. (This will require doing various activities without undue haste.) To improve success rate of learners, it may be worthwhile to provide copies of question papers of previous years examinations with solutions. This should afford them better opportunity to prepare for their examination and time-budgeting their answers.

Open-distance learning essentially involves independent self-study but individual learners expect some form of human mediation for guided instruction and peer group interaction. These interventions cater to developing reading and study skills, enhancing motivation, widening individual's world-view and perception, and even developing group dynamics and leadership. Therefore, distance teaching institutions provide value addition by arranging academic counselling in reputed institutions F2F; contact with experienced teachers as well as the peer group creates opportunity to clarify doubts/difficulties in comprehension of the subject matter and overcome barriers to progress. In fact, this facility can be used to regulate the pace of learning. Learners may also benefit by the general guidance and advice about the choice of courses and other follow up activities necessary for successful completion of the programme in minimum stipulated time.

Researchers have revealed that academic counselling contributes significantly in increasing retentivity and success rate. While it is important to monitor the arrangements of counselling sessions, we must recognise that a distance learner primarily learns from the teacher in-built in the self-instructional materials and then takes part in a discussion with the counsellor and her peers at the counselling session. She is supposed to seek clarifications from the counsellor and ask questions on the basis of what she has gathered from the study material. But it normally does not happen. The learners seldom ask questions. In fact, they are hesitant to ask questions as they have not been trained to raise good questions. Therefore, to add value to their learning experiences, we must impart skills of asking good questions rather than ending up teaching them answering skills. Then a distance learner will be better placed to interact with the study materials by herself and navigate

through the programme successfully.

As a matter of fact, the students who generally have a hangover of the conventional system need to be sensitized about importance of asking questions. And an academic counsellor can inculcate among the learners the value of asking meaningful questions. It is a known fact that all great scientists used to question the existing knowledge. Albert Einstein used to ask: "Why the magnetic needle would always point in the same direction?" (Clark, 1971) He will also ask, "If I move in a vehicle with the same speed as that of another vehicle on a parallel track, it appears to be stand-still. So, if I go on increasing my speed and at some stage attain the speed of light, will light become standstill?" (Brennan, 1997) His pursuits towards finding answers to such questions ultimately led him to postulate the 'Special Theory of Relativity' which revolutionized our understanding of science.

Sir C V Raman questioned the explanation of – "Why is the Ocean Blue?" (2012). His search for answer to this and several other questions led to the discovery of the Raman Effect, for which he received Nobel Prize in 1930. He had more than 1000 patents in his name, conspicuous among them being gramophone and electric bulb. Isidor Rabi was a famous nuclear physicist who won the Nobel Prize in the year 1944. Whenever he returned home from school, his mother would ask, "Son, have you asked a good question today?" (Keeley et al, 2000)

We have confined to the questions raised by the scientists. Learning by questioning is equally applicable to other areas of knowledge. Social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar questioned the evils like *Sati* (burning the widow on the funeral pyre of her dead husband), child marriage, etc. Mahatma Gandhi used to raise questions from human life and thus he performed his experiments with truth.

It is a common problem with IGNOU learners that they may not receive the learning materials before coming to the counselling session. In such a situation, an academic counsellor should not expect them to raise questions/ask their difficulties. She will have to use her domain expertise to time-budget the session to first discuss difficult concepts in the first few topics and then involve the learners through discussion on some related topics/problems. The point we wish to make is that an academic counsellor can add value to learning experiences of a student by making adjustments according to situation and involving them. This may require a lot of motivation and psycho-emotional support. Many a time learners may raise unintelligent questions and probity on her part demands patience in handling such questions. In fact, an academic counsellor will add a lot of value by making them realise their responsibility for pacing their learning.

After completing a programme successfully, a student may need transcripts of the courses she has undertaken in order to seek admission in a foreign university. It is astonishing that in spite of 25 years of its existence, IGNOU does not print programme-wise syllabi. The University will add value to its efforts by providing such syllabi as a part of after completion service.

USE OF ELECTRONIC MEDIA AS A TEACHING TOOL

The basic factor that distinguishes the distance education system from the conventional as well as correspondence education is the use of e-media in instructional design and delivery. Though it is cost-intensive, front-ended technology -WWW, Computer conferencing, mobile learning - can be used to provide very rich learning experiences. Little media -Audio/ Video - can add value to educate slow learners and adults, particularly in rural and urban slums, and females of 'major minority' to bridge the knowledge gap and promote active learning.

The point we wish to make is that e-media can add value by extending the reach of word of mouth in spatial and temporal dimensions.

Judicious use of electronic media is a crucial part of Distance Education Methodology. But we have to remember that we have to make the teacher omnipresent in the two-way process between herself and the learner. The audio-visual medium can facilitate such omnipresence in a great way. The teachers as well as the learner have to realize the value of the electronic medium, in other words the value of use of technology in education.

Many intricate conceptual issues and hard spots can be brought home very elegantly using the electronic medium. An audio programme prepared by way of recording the conversation between a teacher and a leaner on a topic will be quite useful in explaining the concept. Quizzes, dramatization etc. are also useful audio tools. Rather than writing pages on an experiment, it would be advisable to get it performed in a controlled condition in a laboratory with all facilities and develop a video programme presented by an expert. Both audio and video programmes can be made interactive respectively by making use of radio and satellite. IGNOU has taken tremendous efforts towards creation of multiple number of audio video learning materials but the benefit has not reached the end user. A study shows that there is complete apathy of academic counsellors towards the use of electronic media (2011). It is time that all practitioners and learners of ODL system realize the value of electronic media in education in the right earnest. Indeed, a lot is to be done by IGNOU on this front in spite of the fact that it has necessary wherewithal and capabilities.

CONTINUOUS EVALUATION

In an open university, a learner is expected to write answers to assignments as a part of continuous assessment, which carries 25-30% weightage in the final grade. (Assignments are intended to test understanding of the subject, application of the knowledge and inculcate problem solving skills.) It encourages learning by doing and has many advantages, both for the teacher and the learner. It helps to update the teacher's judgement about their learners and gives them an idea of the progress of their achievements. It enables learners to understand their strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, it motivates learners to apply themselves to their studies throughout the course of study and results in better long-term retention of knowledge. If resorted to meticulously, continuous evaluation is very significant in pacing learning and providing feedback, which can come from the counsellor/tutor/instructor/learning materials. As such, assignments must have questions with graded levels of difficulty since these are equivalent of open book tests. Also, the quality of feedback given to the distance learners is of critical importance to their learning experiences.

Continuous Assessment (CA) can add value to learning experiences and ensure success, only if academic counsellors write (positive) teaching comments, use it as a vehicle for two-way communication, develop empathy, pace their learning and encourage learners to do better. Experience shows that assignment is treated as a blunt evaluation tool rather than teaching tool. Invariably, no specific comments are written on assignments. The University will add a lot of value by organizing orientation programmes for academic counsellors and emphasizing on them the importance of writing detailed comments. (To make the task convenient for them, model answers to the questions could be provided with

detailed marking scheme. It is unfortunate that the faculty has by and large resisted this suggestion on one pretext or the other.) Moreover, a rigorous monitoring is needed to make sure that positive comments are written on the assignments. There are instances where only writing encouraging global comments helped a learner to complete her programme of study. Words can do magic and change the course of events!

While continuous evaluation through assignments is a step towards making the process of evaluation scientific, the efficacy of related operations depends on the integrity of learners. They are supposed to write their assignments sitting at home. It is well known that quite a few learners do not conform to expectations. Instead, they use readily available assignment responses or projects in the market. The learners must realize the value of integrity and the University needs to take some positive steps towards inculcating ethical and moral values among the learners.

MONITORING THE SERVICES RENDERED BY A STUDY CENTRE

IGNOU has created Study Centres in reputed higher education institutions for learner support in the form of counselling. And the domain expertise of conventional peers from these institutions contributes significantly for the success of the ODL system. As institutional core value, the University resists the pressure brought by sub-standard institutions/individuals on the pretexts such as location for extending reach, community/religious status and connections. Moreover, the University periodically reviews the progress of its SCs and ticks off non-performing/non-conforming institutions. Though it is a difficult path to tread, we ought to continue in the interest of our learners. Also, networking such a decentralized system can improve efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity, which ultimately add value to operations.

Notwithstanding all that has been stated above, one has to realize that the organization of learner support service at an open university is very constrained because of the fact that the University has to depend on the host institution. In a big city or town, there can be more than one institution of higher learning. If one of them is an IGNOU Study Centre and it is not functioning to the satisfaction of the University, it is possible to shift it to another institution. But it can not happen in a city where the number of institutions of higher learning is limited. Such a situation presents a dilemma for the University. Though norms have been developed by the University, these seldom help. However, orienting the functionaries sometimes does help redeem the situation.

IGNOU provides infrastructural facilities - furniture, television, DVD player and in some cases the Disc Receiving System for satellite reception - to its Study Centres. Though a lot of effort, energy and funds of the University go in creation of such facilities, experience shows that due value addition is not provided to learners by proper utilization of this infrastructure.

LET US NOT UNDERESTIMATE A DISTANCE LEARNER

A distance learner should not be underestimated; her opinion should be valued. To illustrate the point, we narrate an actual incident: The learners of Post Basic B.Sc Nursing of IGNOU have to undertake a large number of practical courses. One of these is in the area of Applies Sciences and Physics is one discipline therein. Among the experiments in Physics, there is one with the objective *Verification of the Parallelogram Law of Forces*. The experimental set-up consists of three pulleys using which three weights are hung. One of the study centres activated for the programme and students were attached did not have the required set-up.

As an easy option, the academic counsellor opined that the experiment cannot be performed. However, one of us (CKG), who happened to be present, took up the challenge to set up the experiment with the help of throw-away pieces of lids, a few weights from the laboratory weight-box and a piece of string. When he succeeded and was sharing his sense of satisfaction for his accomplishment, he heard the learners whispering at his back that this arrangement was used for giving traction to orthopedic patients. He knew the theory and set-up of the experiment but our learners knew the application! We have to work innovatively to bring the best out of them; they will then be able to organize their learning and putting them on that road will be true value addition.

DIGITIZATION OF SUPPORT SERVICES

Another component of learner support comprises student registration, material preparation and despatch, conduct of examinations, declaration of result and despatch of grade cards. Other important tasks include change of address, change of subject, etc. It goes without saying that in a learner-friendly institution, these tasks will be completed in a strict time frame. That is learners will be free from hassles arising out of non-receipt of registration card or study materials, change of subject or non-declaration of results. Appreciating its significance, IGNOU created support divisions to cater to each of these aspects and operations were controlled centrally. However, change of course, particularly by new students, who get little pre-admission counselling, is a nightmare. Similarly, in spite of its best efforts, material despatch and declaration of results by IGNOU in a particular time frame posed a serious problem due to large numbers, apart from deficiencies in associated ancillaries. The digitization

of registration data, preparation of database of examiners, and decentralization of these activities to RCs has also not helped much. Streamlining these operations is bound to save learners a lot of time and amount to value addition to their learning experiences.

To illustrate the important role of IGNOU functionaries, we narrate an episode. A member of secretarial staff at IGNOU had to type the word 'satellite'. He had taken dictation and typed 'settle light' (sic). His knowledge of English is poor, but that is not the matter of prime concern. He has been working at IGNOU for more than fifteen years and on making further enquiry, it was discovered that he had never come across the word 'Satellite'. One of the major initiatives taken by IGNOU towards making teaching-learning transactions interactive is its scheme of Satellite-based education. So, he was briefed about the satellite communication technology and was told that every Indian must take pride in the fact that India is only country in the world to have launched a satellite dedicated solely to the purpose of education, called EDUSAT and that IGNOU is a prolific user of the same. On learning about satellite and EDUSAT, he just gave a smile, perhaps meaning – "How does that matter to me?"

Satellite is one aspect. There are several other things related to the operationalisation of the ODL System which are new to the scenario of education. It is essential that all functionaries in the system, irrespective of the capacity in which they are working, should take pains to realize the values of items, animate and inanimate, intimately related to the operations. It is then only they would have a feel of the value of the learner, but for which the system would not flourish.
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CONCLUSION

A typical distance learner is shaky, hesitant and harbors complex. We can add value if only we can motivate her. We must try to look towards her with a *worm's eye view* and not *a bird's eye view*. With the latter approach our vision becomes blurred and we end up missing out on the details, whereas the former allows us to have a close look and draw our empathy towards her—something which she keeps longing for! To accomplish all these tasks successfully, the University staff must possess academic, administrative, financial and technical expertise and learner sensitivities. Without such considerations, adding value may become difficult.

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