



Student Selection in the Scenario of Democratization of Higher Education Reforms in India

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ABSTRACT:

In the conventional system of education, a student can regularly interact with teachers and peers and effectively and smoothly carry on with the learning process. However, in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system, students have to learn by themselves with the self-instructional materials and with the minimum guidance received from counselors, making the system more demanding. In other words, although opportunities are created in an ODL system for student interaction with faculty and peers, these are less frequent as compared to the conventional system, making effective learning challenging. Besides the facts placed above, this paper is also based on the premise that the admission process in conventional institutions/universities are highly selective where decisions at the entry level is influenced by the academic performance of the students and /or scores at assessment/screening examinations; therefore, the students so selected are relatively academically stronger students capable of better academic performance. Due to its inherent constraints of providing space and infrastructural facilities, conventional higher education is more selective and consequently more merit and excellence based in its approach. At the other end of the spectrum are the institutions of open learning which are primarily addressing the issues of access and equity in education and therefore have more open and flexible admissions. While following basic eligibility criteria and/or standardized test scores, it is seen that students would not have to be outstanding or even necessarily academically strong students to be admitted to the various programmes of study. As a result, a major chunk of the students who enter the ODL system are those who are filtered and are unable to get admission into the traditional and conventional system of education. It becomes very difficult for these students to manage with the demanding ODL system contributing to low pass out rates. On this premise, the paper tries to discuss the possible mechanism/s for student screening for all programmes run in the ODL mode too so that justice is ensured to students. The authors also try to reason that use of ODL would be successful only for those learners who have a certain level of intelligence, competence and capability and are self-motivated to put in more effort. Further, the authors attempt to highlight that

democratization of education is actually being misinterpreted and is targeting mass enrolment. If self-learning is achieved in its true sense, which can be attained just by competent, self-motivated and select students, only then can we say that ODL system is effectively contributing to educational development of the country.

Keywords: mobile learning, blended learning, social learning, collaboration, interactive learning

1. INTRODUCTION

India holds a significant position in the global education sector. As per the current statistics, the country has 1.4 million schools with more than 227

million enrolled students and about 36,000 institutions providing higher education. The country also has a very systematic and robust regulatory framework as systematically depicted in Figure 1 below.

Regulatory Framework Of Higher Education In India

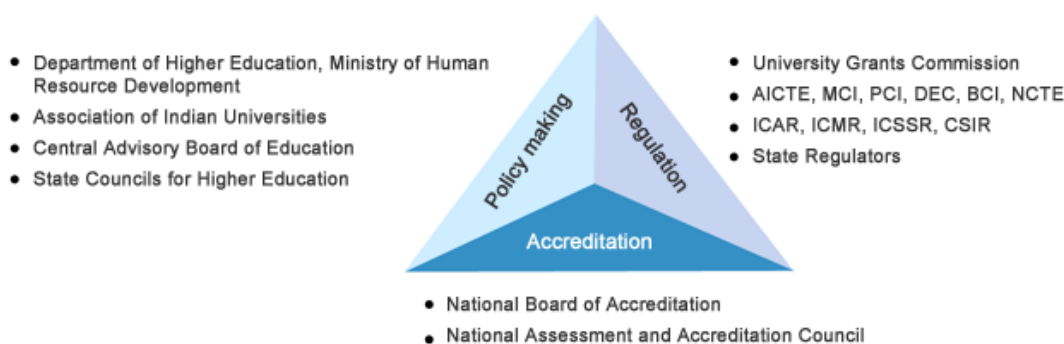


Figure 1: Regulatory Framework of Indian Higher Education Sector

(Source – <http://www.thegreenboardedu.co.in/higher-education-system-study-material-for-ugc-net-paper-1/>)

By 2030, India will be amongst the youngest nations in the world, with nearly 140 million people in the college going age group. India will have the largest population in the world in the higher education age bracket by 2030. Increasing urbanization and income levels will drive demand for higher education. A range of factors including emerging ICTs, liberalization, privatization and globalization have amplified the demand for higher education through Open and Distance learning (ODL).

In developing economies, distance education has been enthusiastically embraced by governments as an affordable solution to historical problems of inequity and access to education at all levels. The aim of the government to raise its current gross enrolment ratio to 30 per cent by 2020 is expected to boost the

growth of the distance education in India. The distance education sector in India is expected to grow at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of around 34 per cent during 2013-14 to 2017-18. This growth of ODL would impact several areas, such as, general education, teacher education, vocational and continuing education, non-formal education and community development sectors of education.

NKC (2005) has pointed out three vocal themes of higher education; expansion, inclusion and excellence. Undoubtedly, the openness and flexibility offered by ODL in terms of access, curriculum and other elements of course structure has contributed substantially in ensuring expansion. ODL has been successful in providing educational opportunities to potential learner populations cutting across age, disadvantaged groups and territorial dispersion ensuring inclusion.

However, more attention still needs to be paid to the third theme of higher education by ensuring excellence through ODL.

2. CONVENTIONAL VS ODL

One of the perceived distinctions of open and distance learning over conventional education is its economy. However, there are doubts of compromise on quality in ODL as compared to the conventional system, as education has been economized. Its second main advantage as well as difference is its flexibility: people who are employed can study at their own pace, place and time. Its third advantage and difference over/from the conventional system of education is that it has a robust mechanism to operate successfully over long distances and caters to the educational needs of widely scattered and diverse target groups.

However, in the conventional system of education, a student can regularly interact with teachers and peers and effectively and smoothly carry on with the learning process. But, in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system, students have to learn by themselves with the Self Instructional Materials (SIMs) and with the minimum guidance received from counselors making the system more demanding. In other words, it is a fact that the conventional system of classroom teaching is more structured where the presence of the teacher and peers are ensured; while in the open and distance learning environment with its emphasis on flexibility in space, time and convenience and where there is no compulsion of attendance in counseling sessions the students tend to rely more on self-learning materials as a medium of instruction. These self-instructional materials may never be able to substitute for full time teachers of the conventional system. Wright, 2013 has voiced similar opinion. An area of concern for the distance learner is the perceived lack of feedback or contact with the teacher. Because there is no regular face to face contact with

teachers as in the conventional system, students may have trouble in self-evaluation. Although opportunities are created in an ODL system with technological intervention for student interaction with faculty and peers, these are less frequent and less effective as compared to the conventional system, making effective learning challenging. While the use of technology holds many promises in the future for ODL, the reality is that the distance learner is still conventional in his approach and rely on printed materials and face to face counseling for support in learning rather than the use of ICT which is still in its nascent stage as far as its utilization is concerned by huge chunk of learners, especially in India. There is still a vast population of ODL learners in the country who are victims of the digital divide due to challenges of sociological, technical and policy perspectives. According to (Wright, 2013), teachers are role models creating trust and inspiring students in a learning environment and technology alone cannot offer these skills. Experience from around the world shows us that, over time, teachers' roles have become more central and not peripheral as a result of the introduction of new technologies (Trucano, 2015).

More so than traditional students, distance learners are more likely to have insecurities about learning (Knapper, 1988). These insecurities often result in higher dropout rates than among conventional students (Sweet, 1986). Barefoot, 2004 also mentions about the comparatively higher dropout rates of ODL learners.

Interestingly, the contribution of ODL to gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education has risen to about 22%. At present, close to 24% of all enrolments are in the ODL system and it is growing fast because of the outreach of this mode and the opportunities it gives to those who are already employed and seek to enhance their qualifications. This shows that distance education is challenging the tyranny of conventional education system of 10+2+3. Thus, despite the need for improvement and ensuring quality, the future of distance learning seems bright.

3. PROFILE OF STUDENTS IN THE ODL SYSTEM:

Distance learners are usually defined and categorized based on distinct characteristics, namely, age, gender, employment status, marital status, number of children/dependents, level of education and social status (Tucker 2003). Distance learning students are usually older compared with typical students engaged in campus based programmes. The age of students who opt for ODL vary mostly from 20-60 and sometimes more. As far as gender is concerned, research shows that 75% of distance learning students are men at the global level. Such findings match those of (Kangai *et al.*, 2010) who noted that the number of male students at Zimbabwe Open University exceeded that of female students. Learners belonging to underprivileged and disadvantaged groups like, women, disabled, economically weaker sections, socially backward classes, school drop outs and jail inmates form a major chunk of the ODL system.

Most distance learners have full time jobs. The reason why these people use ODL as a means of study is because they want to upgrade themselves and advance in their careers while they earn an income. Distance learning students are mature adults who are mostly married and have to combine study with their work and family. These students have little free time to pay attention to the details of course materials and in writing assignments. Therefore, counselors and instructors need to provide them appropriate guidance, clear cut instructions and detailed syllabus.

4. CHALLENGES OF ODL FOR STUDENTS ENTERING THE SYSTEM

Traditional ways of education are gradually being replaced by distance learning and yet, the credibility of this type of a learning system is questionable (Agrawal, 2017). Thus, despite the promises and obvious advantages of distance learning, ODL learners face problems that need to be resolved. Cross

(1981) has identified three distinct categories of challenges facing ODL students: Situational, institutional and dispositional. According to Cross, situational challenges include job and home responsibilities that reduce time for study. Institutional related challenges include poor logistics system or a lack of appropriate advising; dispositional challenges are related to learners' own attitudes and feelings. These categories have also been mentioned by Maxwell *et al.*, (2015) and Jill (1997).

Generally speaking, the main challenge of ODL amongst other challenges is the absence of regular interaction with teachers and peers. Keegan (1986) believes that the separation of student and teacher imposed by distance removes a vital 'link' of communication between these two parties. The link must be restored through overt institutional efforts so that the teaching-learning transaction may be 'reintegrated' (Keegan, 1986, p. 120). Keegan hypothesized that students who do not receive adequate reintegration measures such as electronic or telephone communication, would be less likely to experience complete academic and social integration into institutional life. Consequently, such students would be more likely to drop out (Sheets, 1992).

Technology and other interventions have not had the desired effects and the distance learner is still largely an isolated learner (Kurupparachchi and Karunanayake, 2017). A large part of the responsibility lies with the learner who misinterprets flexibility for a casual approach to learning. The feeling of alienation, isolation, insecurity and the casual approach reported by distance learners makes learning challenging and has an effect on the overall quality of distance learning.

5. DESIRABLE QUALITIES OF STUDENTS OPTING FOR ODL

Besides the employed learners who opt for ODL to upgrade themselves, studies tell us that a major chunk of the students who enter the ODL system are those who are filtered and are unable to get admission into the traditional and conventional system of

education. It becomes very difficult for these students to manage with the demanding ODL system leading to low pass out rates.

Further, as discussed earlier, the distance learner is largely an isolated learner and a large part of the responsibility of learning lies with the learner who misinterprets flexibility for a casual approach to learning. This is perhaps one of the reasons for high dropout rates of such learners. Therefore, ODL presupposes a certain level of commitment, competence and independent thinking on the part of the learner resulting in timely and successful completion of the programme of study. In other words, the authors are of the opinion that the use of ODL would be successful only for those learners who have a certain level of intelligence, critical thinking skills, competence and capability and are self-motivated to put in more effort. In fact these students need to have a higher intellect, commitment, dedication, resilience, determination, more focus, better time management, commitment and self-discipline to achieve success. More mature students are the most likely to find success with distance learning. (Threkeld and Brzoska, 1994) are also of the same opinion who have said that for success in ODL, a student needs to have characteristics such as being tolerant towards ambiguity, being autonomous (in thoughts and decision making) and having an ability to be flexible.

Motivation is an important factor for effective learning and is therefore important for all students whether studying in traditional face to face mode or at a distance (Rovai *et al.* 2007 and Whiting *et al.* 2008). Traditional students are more likely to be extrinsically motivated whereas distance learners tend to be intrinsically (independently) motivated.

For successfully carrying out group activities in ODL, 'Group Cohesion' is vital (Adamson, 2005). To a large extent it is up to the instructor to be aware of this

aspect in the distance learning environment and to encourage collaborative learning and a sense of community among the students. Greenburg (1998) describes this as a virtual learning community.

Those students and scholars who are already somehow familiar with online communities and online cooperation will have more online (distance learning) skills making learning for them in ODL easier. The ODL learner should be an independent learner and should be hard working and should also have the ability to make adaptations to the system for his/her maximum benefit.

In short, a successful distance learner is one who –

- is self-motivated to read the study material, find details about assignments and seek out help when needed, in other words, an independent learner;
- is self-disciplined and able to work on a flexible schedule without falling behind;
- can dedicate enough time to each course as per the credit requirement, that is, is good at time management and time commitment;
- is good at reading and writing and possesses critical thinking skills;
- has convenient dependable access to computer/mobile technology and is knowledgeable enough to use technology.

6. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ODL

According to Perraton, 2000, today, 5 to 12 per cent of university students in developed nations are likely to be studying in the ODL system while in developing countries the figure is often in the range of 10 to 20 per cent. The pace at which this change has happened, and the scale to which it has reached, make this system of higher education worth critical analysis.

Increasing numbers of students enrolling in distance learning classes underscore the need for “comprehensive and thoughtful evolution of distance education if it is to become the educational model of the future” (Harnar, *et al.*, 2000). Critical analysis,

review and evolution of open and distance learning is the need of the hour.

One of the perceived advantages of open and distance learning is its economy. Recent accounts of higher education even in the conventional system, in many countries of the developing world, reveal a sad and thought provoking scenario of imparting education without resources, of libraries without relevant and sufficient reading material, of the desperate pursuit of research without infrastructure and required facilities. Quality has inevitably suffered as education has been impoverished. In such a scenario, where there is huge demand for education and ODL is being seen as a potential tool to meet the demand, there is a dire need to maintain quality in ODL, for which, student screening and counseling for admissions could help. While access to education to marginalized groups is at the core of the philosophy of ODL this should not be misinterpreted as license to being casual in the approach to learning-teaching environment or compromising on quality.

7. QUALITY VS QUANTITY

Close to one-fourth of the country's students are getting educated through the distance mode. In fact, the enrolment in ODL system of education has seen an increase at the rate of a little more than 10% in the last decades. The expansion in the ODL sector of higher education has given rise to the quantity versus quality debate. It has led to considerable dialogue and discussions throughout academia and among different stakeholders about what constitutes quality in distance education. Distance education courses have been criticized on several counts including that of poor quality and not being on par with the regular courses. Whereas early ODL initiatives were motivated by a desire to expand access to education in the public good, an increasing number of emerging providers today are motivated by a desire for profit or at least an expansion of the market share. Success in striking the right optimal balance between equity and

quality education for all is often obscured by the quantitative numbers' game agenda. While supporters of distance education argue about its contribution to improving access and offering wide range of learning opportunities, critics have pointed out the lower standards of students who enroll mainly arising due to the flexibility and openness at the entry point for admission to academic programmes.

While concern for quality assurance in distance education touches various aspects, such as, design and structure of self-learning material, delivery of the academic programmes, student support services, surprisingly it has not touched the issue of the quality of students being enrolled for the various programmes, which may be referred to as the 'student's institutional fit'. If quality of education is ensured while moving ahead on the educational ladder, the prospects of landing into a reasonably good job or vocation increases. If ODL is to be used as a vehicle for development, it is high time that we review and strengthen the existing system as un-thoughtful democratization of higher education through ODL may have far reaching adverse impacts. Though distance learning is becoming more and more acceptable today, yet it is still regarded as a second choice for high school graduates or traditional age students. There is still constant debate regarding its worth and credibility with the conventional academic education set up still being considered as the better and more prestigious option.

8. THE NEED AND POSSIBLE MECHANISMS FOR STUDENT SCREENING IN ODL

As discussed earlier, students taking admission in distance education programmes have a greater responsibility for their own success than students in traditional classrooms. These distance learners have to be active learners, self starters who are not shy or afraid to ask questions when they do not understand. Distance learners themselves must be in control of the learning process and not the instructor/academic counselor. Some students can find this uncomfortable

and not suitable for their learning styles leading to attrition. This is where the need for assessing the 'student's institutional fit' comes in, to admit students who have the right attributes for being a distance learner resulting in lesser attrition and increased retention and programme completion rate. This does not imply that the student is not fit for the institution; it only means that as a result of the screening process, the student will be helped to select the programme which best suits him/her leading to more chances of successful completion of the programme of study.

The admission process in conventional institutions/universities are highly selective where decisions at the entry level is influenced by the academic performance of the students and /or scores at assessment/screening examinations; therefore, the students so selected are relatively academically stronger students capable of better academic performance. Due to its inherent constraints of providing space and infrastructural facilities, conventional higher education is more selective and consequently more merit and excellence based in its approach. At the other end of the spectrum are the institutions of open learning which are primarily addressing the issues of access and equity in education and therefore have more open and flexible admissions. While following basic eligibility criteria and/or standardized test scores, it is seen that students would not have to be outstanding or even necessarily academically strong students to be admitted to the various programmes of study. As a result, a major chunk of the students who enter the ODL system are those who are filtered and are unable to get admission into the traditional and conventional system of education. It becomes very difficult for these students to manage with the demanding ODL system contributing to low pass out rates. Therefore, it is felt that some appropriate mechanism/s for student screening for all programmes run in the ODL mode too needs to be designed so

that justice is ensured to students.

This screening is to ensure that the admitted students have the adequate intellect and aptitude to deal with the challenges and the environment of academic studies in ODL mode. Self-assessment methods may also be made available to the prospective students for assessing academic readiness – personal attributes, learning styles, needs and preferences, technical competencies and knowledge, reading rate and recall, study skills and habits and student's perception about distance learning.

Methods for screening or pre-assessment of students are areas which have not been dealt with in distance education and which are at present very flexible at the entry stage. Research in distance education should add this new dimension to the existing knowledge and fill the existing gaps as the existing body of research does not give a conclusive valid direction in this regard.

9. CONCLUSION

As far as ODL and research in this regard is concerned, there are some unanswered questions. What is the notion of access and how do we define quality of access in distance education? What is the best way to improve access and quality while linking it to learning outcomes? How is good learning experience defined and with reference to whom and what? Is ODL straying from its objective and targeting only mass enrolment?

Today, with democratization of education being misinterpreted and targeting mass enrolment many a times, these questions need to be addressed. Deliberations and research on ways of student screening/selection for all programmes run in the ODL mode may be an answer for ensuring justice to the students who are fit for ODL. If self-learning is achieved in its true sense, which can be attained only by competent, self-motivated and select students who are fit for ODL, only then can we say that ODL system is effectively contributing to educational development of the country. The sooner we realize and are convinced of the fact and initiate necessary steps in this direction, the

better, in the interest of higher education in particular and overall development of the country in general.

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