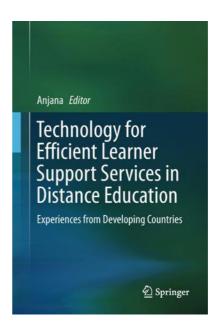# Technology for Efficient Learner Support Services in Distance Education: Experiences from Developing Countries

Book Review by
S K PULIST
Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India
skpulist@ignou.ac.in

ABOUT THE BOOK :

Title	Technology for Efficient Learner Support Services in Distance Education: Experiences from Developing Countries
Editor	Anjana
Publication year	2018
Publisher	Springer Nature, Singapore
Type of product	Book
ISBN	978-981-13-2299-0
Pages	275

The open and distance learning (ODL) system is a well established system now across the globe. The system is innovative and adapts to any technological changes/advancements to augment the pedagogical experiences of its learners. The ODL system has an edge over the conventional education system in that it provides handholding to the learners by offering support services that include administrative and academic support. With the exponential growth and innovations in the field of ICT, the ODL system has been able to enhance its support services with the optimum utilization of the ICT components, though the institutions may vary in extent and level of use of technology.

It is worth taking a note of the use of ICT in strengthening the support services and identified best practices followed by the institutions, and their customisation by others for augmenting the distance education activities. The volume in hand is one such initiative that takes an account of the use of ICT by the ODL institutions in developing countries for augmenting their learner support services. The book is spread over 14 Chapters.

In the opening chapter, Santosh Kumari introduces the activities of student support in open and distance education while tracing its history. She presents a comprehensive view of different phases of distance education starting from the early correspondence courses including the current scenario in developing and developed countries. She highlights the potential benefits of use of technology in student support system in an ODL institution. Manminder Kaur in her chapter highlights the evolution of distance education and brings home the readers with the need of offering inclusive education for overall societal development. She feels that extensive use of ICT can play a crucial role in strengthening the pillars of inclusive education. She provides a host of different components of ICT that enrich the inclusiveness experience. She presents a plethora of ICT tools that could benefit the OLD system in providing effective support services to the learners. Vadnere, while revisiting the concept of developing nations in her chapter, focuses his attention on challenges being faced by the ODL system in these countries, though he considers ODL very essential for democratisation of higher education. He propagates the use of ICT tools like LMS, distributed classroom, network setup, simulations, live lectures, and discussion forum among others for automating the processes of distance education to the extent possible. He feels, the MOOCs could "provide an inexpensive alternative to traditional system".

Ratnayake in his chapter discusses the need for integration of ICT tools for providing enhanced learning support to the learners of ODL system in the developing countries. He cites some of the technologies along with the challenges in their use by the ODL institutions. But he is confident that there is a lot more scope for them in the ODL activities in the near future. Baruah in his chapter evaluates the use of eLearning as a medium for providing support services to the learners in ODL. In order to enable the support services system cater to the needs of the learners, the system should address the issues pertaining to information support, institutional support, learning centres, and feedback. He analytically presents the institutional delivery mechanism adopted by KKSOU, India and discusses the best practices that made the university achieve its mission. The gigantic operations of IGNOU can be fascinating to many in the area of open and distance learning. Subrahmanyam in his chapter presents a case study of IGNOU, India with reference to use of ICT for support services. Being a leader in ODL system, IGNOU has been experimenting with technology in different operations with annotative ways. IGNOU's digital initiatives FlexiLearn, eGyanKosh, virtual campus including the educational channels (Gyan Darshan TV Channel and Gyan Vani, FM Channel) among others have been a grand success among the distance learners.

The chapter by Sharma, though focuses on "technology mediate learning support services" at Wawasan Open University, Malaysia, provides a snapshot of what is happening in South East Asia as far as distance education is concerned where MOOCs are being given much of weightage and being used extensively to meet the higher education aspirations of the people at large. Learning management system, student portal, online assignment section, digital library, tutor portal, and turnitin are some of the features of the support services provide by the university to its learners.

Appavoo, Sukon, Gokhool, and Gooria focus their attention on technology affordance issues at the Open University of Mauritius. The chapter opens with the distance education scenario on African continent and discusses the efforts made in the African countries in strengthening the ODL system. Coming to Mauritius, the author finds that the country is "focusing more on being the knowledge hub in the region". The ODL system in Mauritius has been used substantially for "upgrading the qualifications of the teachers at primary and secondary levels". The university has been making use of various embedded technologies for creating a conducive learning environment for the distance learners.

Gravani in her chapter focuses on use of ICT in Open University of Cyprus for supporting adult distance learners. The university makes use of the eClass eLearning platform based on Moodle following a blended approach. The university is striving to make a paradigm shift from teacher centric services to learner centric services. Hussain claims that distance education "appears as ICT based form of education" while studying the ICT based support services offered by the distance education institutions in Pakistan - the major focus being on the Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU). The AIOU has a substantial contribution in massification of distance education in Pakistan. The support services of the university cover three stages: pre-admission, during the course, and post programme services. Web TV and FM radio are being used extensively for support activities by the University. The author has highlighted a few challenges faced by the university in enhancing the effectiveness of support services with the use of ICT. Anuradha Dubey discusses in her chapter the role of ICT in imparting Science education with reference to Kota Open University, India.

She presents an overview of the ICT based system and processes adopted by the university for offering Science education. The use of mobile services and eLearning components supported by its own eAcharya ePlatform are eye catching.

Kajal De and Goswami present an ICT based scenario at NSOU, India. The establishment of OER repository by the university is a major initiative in paradigm shift in the area of digital education. The use of ICT in support services of the university has motivated the administrative authorities to explore the potential benefits of ICT in other areas also. Suma Parahakaran presents some factors which were revealed on review of some of related studies and have an impact on support services for ODL system as a whole. The author links her discussion with the community services and lifelong learning, and importance of learning communities vis-a-vis research and development among others. Maumita Das and Biswas focus on challenges being faced by the ODL system in developing countries especially in use of ICT for support services. The authors do not lose sight of the strengths of the system while suggesting the road map for the ODL institutions in the context of developing countries. IGNOU becomes the reference point for the authors at the backdrop. The ICT infrastructure, resources in ODL, and national policies among others are the areas that need to be focused, according to the authors, for optimal utilization of ICT tools for support services in ODL system in the developing countries.

The support services for the learners have always been crucial and one of the areas of concern for the ODL institutions especially in the developing countries where scarcity of resources is looming large in most of the areas. Use of ICT in ODL system can be seen as two facets of a coin: while the use of ICT can enhance the effectiveness of the system in terms of pass out rate, it can create newer challenges in its implementation keeping in view the scarcity of resources at different levels.

The book while presenting the status of use of ICT by the ODL system in the developing countries, shares the best practices being followed by them which may of course benefit other institutions in augmenting their services. The Book does not reflect chapter numbers which makes identification of individual chapters difficult.

On the whole, the book highlights the challenges as well as the solutions to tackle the challenges making optimal use of ICT tools in ODL system for enhancement of support services for the learners. I am sure, the book will be useful for the ODL practitioners who are at different phase of implementation of ICT in their student services related operations.

S K PULIST has got his Master's Degree in the disciplines of Sociology, English Literature, Management Studies and Distance Education. He acquired his Ph D Degree in Education Technology from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, INDIA, the topic being "*Pedagogical use of Web Based Technology in Teaching at Secondary and Senior Secondary Level Schools in Delhi: An Exploratory Study*".
He is a Certified Trainer (a member of India Society for Training and Development). He possesses the PG Diploma in eLearning from IGNOU. His areas of interest are eLearning, Open Educational Resources, distance education, student retention, student support services and training & development in ODL. He has completed the Study "*eLearning in Commonwealth Asia 2013*" and "*OER Policy Implementation and Use in Open and Distance Learning*" published by Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (Commonwealth of Learning).
He has co-edited a book entitled "*Education in the Digital World*" and has written over 80 articles/book chapters/research papers/reports etc. published in national and international journals. He was associated as co-editor with *Indian Journal of Open Learning* during the period 2011-2018. He is involved with the ODL activities for the last over 26 years. Currently, he is posted as Deputy Director in Student Registration Division, IGNOU, New Delhi. He can be reached at skpulist@ignou.ac.in