THE CHALLENGES BEFORE THE LEARNERS OF ODL MODE OF EDUCATION: A STUDY IN INDIA

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Abstract: Education plays a vital role in the development of human being as well as civilization which can be acquired in different modes. Open and Distance Learning mode of education refers to such system in which one can study through course material provided without any instructor and without going institution regularly for attending classes like regular system of education. All over the world, researchers engaged with education are discovering and exploring internet, teleconferencing and other related mediums to achieve an extended classroom. In the following endeavour the concept of ODL mode has been explained. The primary objective of the study is to outline the challenges before the learners of ODL mode of education yet it will also provide some of the important measures to overcome these challenges. The study is an explorative study in nature in which qualitative data has been provided. Both primary data as well as secondary data were used in this study collected from interviews and various other sources respectively. Learners of ODL mode have to face various kinds of challenges those are shown under the major headings as challenges relating to teaching learning process, challenges relating to administrative activities and challenges relating to post academic activities. Some of the recommendations have also been given for the improvement of ODL education. In this way the challenges faced or experienced by the learners may be reduced to some extent that may result in the improvement in the education system and development of nation as a whole.

Keywords: Education, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Challenges, Learners, Development.

Introduction

Education plays a vital role in the development of human being as well as civilization. Education can be acquired in different forms or modes. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode is such a mode for acquiring education and

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knowledge. This mode of education has got much popularity all over the world now-a-days because of its unique characteristics and importance. Open and Distance Learning mode of education refers to such system in which one can study through course material provided without any instructor. There is no compulsion to go to institution regularly for attending classes like regular or traditional system of education. Students may or may not go to attend classes if provided by the institution. This mode of education doesn't require students to be present physically in the classroom of college or university. This system, many a times, conducts classes in the form of video lectures though online platform. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a term for the use of telecommunication to provide education. All over the world, researchers engaged with education are discovering and exploring internet, teleconferencing and other related mediums to achieve an extended classroom. Student of one country is earning degrees from a university located in another country. This has become possible due to ODL mode of education.

Open and Distance Learning mode of education has become a very popular mode of education for completing higher studies not only in India but all over the world. In the following endeavour the concept of ODL mode has been explained. Though, the primary objective of the study is to outline the challenges faced by the learners of ODL mode yet it will also provide some of the important measures to overcome these challenges.

Literature Review

Zirnkle (2001) identified some particular challenges faced by ODL students such as programme cost, inadequate equipments and infrastructure, institutional issues and poor technical assistance. Apart from these, this paper also found inadequate feedback and no proper teacher contact and also poor students support services.

Mossberger et al. (2003) observed that technical skills needed to access to ICT is a challenge for the students of distance education. Such technical skills are knowledge to operate hardware and software of ICT, using network system etc.

Kamau (2007) assessed that learners' achievement will be undermined and dropout rates in the institution will rise if there are no effective learners' support services which provide onsite face to face, timely feedback on learners' performance and access to services of library.

Mnyanyi and Mbwette (2009) concluded that modern distance learners have to learn the system of using ICT which is not taught in many places and wherever is taught that is very expensive. Another challenge is to decide how they will deal with the passed out learners in degree subjects but failed in communication skills and ICT skill courses.

Attri (2012) found in his study the problems associated with nature of study materials, lack of multimedia guide, lack of contact with the teacher, lack of students support services, no social

interaction among the students, lack of training of students, low status of distance education institutes, rigid regulations by the university etc and more. The paper also suggested some of the tentative solutions to these problems.

Kundu (2014) ascertained the issues such as lack of knowledge of using technology, lack of proper infrastructure, huge curriculum area, scarcity of counsellors, many hidden costs, and lack of desired courses at nearby study centres and also there is lack of face to face contacts in the ODL mode of education. The paper also provides suggestions to remove these constraints that government should thing and take proper steps in various ways that can help the students of ODL mode.

Musingafi et al. (2015) revealed that students of ZOU faced individual, instructional and institutional related challenges such as insufficient time for study, problems relating to access of ICT, financial obstacles, lack of support from employers, ineffective feedback from students and lack of proper study materials. Students also face inadequate academic support and administrative services at the regional centres. They recommend that ZOU should try to provide balanced teaching learning system that satisfies the desire of the learners.

Vandeyar (2015) analyzed that there were huge gaps in the understanding the policies by intermediaries such as districts and provincial official in South Africa that resulted in the various problems related to the actual implementation of a national online learning policy.

Kentnor (2015) highlighted the causes that resulted in the failure of distance and online education in The United States of America (USA) are lack of understanding of online pedagogy, online learning styles, lack of administrative supports, number of students admitted, qualifications of the faculty, tuition fees and length of the courses etc.

Mahlangu (2018) studied that HEIs all over the world are facing various kinds of challenges relating to successful implementation, maintenance and growth of online programme.

Palvia et al. (2018) pointed out low internet penetration, low public esteem for online education and also lack of online educational repositories in the Arabic language are the major challenges which effect online learning in the Middle East.

Flook et al. (2019) discussed that integration of distance education and e-learning has so many advantages in the education system still some of the HEIs have been facing challenges in the implementation of this system.

Ilonga et al. (2020) produced the evidence that students studying in ODL mode have to face many challenges such as IT related challenges like poor internet connectivity, slow mobile networks etc. lecturer related problems like delayed marking of assignments, late receiving of assignments etc. and institutional related challenges like not getting study materials on time during the session. It is recommended that more staffs should be employed and more centres be opened for the sake of the students.

Objective of the Study

Open and Distance Learning mode of education system has got popularity because this system gives a chance to the learners who want to complete their higher studies without going to college or universities. The objective of the ODL mode is to increase the higher education literacy rate among the learners who are unable to attend classes at colleges and universities due to various barriers particularly due to earning livelihood. Major objectives of the study can be illustrated specifically as follows:-

▪ To discuss the concept of ODL mode of education along with its important characteristics;

▪ To find out the challenges before the learners of ODL mode of education;

▪ To provide some of the necessary recommendation for removing those challenges to some extent.

Research Methodology

The study is explorative in nature in which qualitative data has been provided. Both primary data as well as secondary data were used in this study. Primary data has been collected though interview method from at around 130 respondents consisting of learners, teachers, counsellors and co-ordinators who are connected to various ODL institutions. On the other hand, secondary data have been collected from various books, journals, related websites and other published sources.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL): Meaning and Characteristics

▪ Meaning of Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

Various renowned authors and institutions have defined Open and Distance Learning mode of education in their own terms. Few of them have been quoted below.

The United States Distance Learning Association defined distance education formally as "The acquisition of knowledge and skills though mediated information and instructions, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance."

According to **Coffey (1977)** "An open learning system is one in which the restrictions placed on students are under constant review and removed wherever possible. It incorporates the widest range of teaching strategies, in particular those using independent and individualised learning."

Parraton (1997) defined open learning as an "organised educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimised either in terms of access, or time and place, pace, methods of study or any combination of these."

Jack (1988) defined "Open learning is a state of mind rather than a method with particular characteristics."

Holt & Bonnici (1988) stated "open learning is not just about access alone; it is also about providing people with a fair chance of success."

Thus, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is the system of education which is designed to provide educational opportunities for those needy persons who cannot afford full time residence at educational institute. Students can study as per their suitable time, at place of choice and without face to face contact with the teacher.

Characteristics of Open and Distance Learning

Study Centres: Open universities or institutions generally consists of study centres. Universities provide classes though their study centres in ODL mode of education.

Personal Contact Programs: Teaching learning process is provided generally in the weekends at their respective study centres which is called personal contact program or PCP.

Assignment marks: Besides the PCPs there is also provision of assignment system in ODL mode. Learners collect question papers framed by the university from their respective study centres and solve the complete paper and submit the same to study centre. Generally these assignments carry 20-30 % weightage in final results and balance 80-70% weightage is taken from Term-End Examination.

Cost effective: ODL mode of education is cost effective. For higher education less amount of money is incurred in case of ODL mode when compared to traditional system.

Flexibility: ODL mode provides huge flexibilities in terms of time, place, pace, age, admission criteria etc. to the learners. Learners who are unable to continue their studies in regular or traditional mode of education due to various socio-economic barriers can get a massive opportunity for completing their higher studies in ODL mode.

Open or Equal Access: If we talk about traditional mode we observe there is certain age criteria for particular classes or courses but that is not so in case of ODL mode of education. ODL mode is available openly for all irrespective of socio-economic barriers like caste, creed, sex, religion, age etc.

Challenges Before the Learners of ODL Mode

Different kinds of challenges are faced by the learners of Open and Distance Learning mode of education now-a-days. These challenges can be shown under the three major headings such as:

a) Challenges relating to Teaching Learning Process

b) Challenges relating to Administrative Activities

c) Challenges relating to Post Academic Activities

The above challenges can be again shown under the different sub headings as follows:

a) Challenges Relating to Teaching Learning Process: Under this heading we have discussed the various kinds of challenges which are relating to Teaching Learning Process which a learner has to

face during his/ her course of study under ODL mode of education are as follows:

i) Centralised PCP: This is one of the basic challenges in front of the students or learners of ODL mode of education that universities generally provide centralised Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs) in a particular study centre or regional centre where it is not possible for all the learners to attend these PCPs due to various reasons.

ii) Limited Classes: Unlike traditional system, a large number of classes are not held by the universities offering ODL mode of education. These classes are held in the form of PCPs in few of the study centres which is not enough to cover and complete the entire syllabus or curriculum on time.

iii) Languages Especially in SLMs: There are a large group of learners who prefer to pursue or study the course in their regional language. But Self Learning Materials or SLMs are generally not written in the desired language of learners.

iv) Library Facility: It is very common that no proper library facility is provided to the students or learners of ODL mode. Though, few of the universities have started online library facility by uploading various course materials on their website which is not at par with the physical library of the traditional universities.

v) Industry Exposure/ Internship: This is one of the biggest challenges for the learners of ODL mode where learners are not sent for the internship programme.

This results in the lack of practical knowledge about the industry.

b) Challenges Relating to Administrative Activities: This major heading includes the challenges associated with administrative activities for the learners of ODL mode. Few of the challenges are as follows:

i) Small Window i.e. Saturday / Sunday: This is very common system that Open and Distance Learning institutions operate on weekends i.e. they provide their services generally on Saturdays and Sundays. Therefore, ODL mode learners do not get any support services on weekdays.

ii) Delay in Issuing SLMs: This challenge is faced by almost all the ODL mode universities that their students do not get study materials (SLMs) on time. They have to wait for a long period of time to collect study materials from their respective study centres even after taking admission in the course.

iii) Lack of Interaction with Faculties: Learners of ODL modes of education do not always get chance to interact with faculty members on various matters that are useful for the learners.

iv) Shortage of Faculty Members: In most of the ODL mode universities there is lack of adequate faculty members of their own. They provide classes by inviting faculty members of regular traditional universities and also outsiders' part time faculties.

v) Accommodation Facilities/ Hostels: The learners of ODL modes do not get

chance to avail the hostel or accommodation facilities from the campus for various academic purposes.

c) Challenges Relating to Post Academic Activities: Here few of the challenges which are faced by the passed-out students are shown. Those challenges are shown in the following points:

i) Employment Opportunity: Learners, even after passing out the courses, do not get proper employment opportunity. Employment opportunity in ODL mode of education system is not as good as traditional system of education after passing out the courses.

ii) Low Status of Learners of ODL Mode: As per the University Grant Commission (UGC), degrees, diplomas and certificates issued by the ODL mode universities are at par with the degrees, diplomas and certificates issued by the traditional universities. Yet the learners who have completed their study through ODL mode of education are not treated at par or equivalent with the learners of traditional mode of education. They do not get social recognition properly in the society.

iii) Cultural Exchange (not having alumni): Unlike traditional system of education there is no proper alumni group of passed out learners in ODL mode of education generally. After getting degrees from ODL mode universities, learners become very busy in their life and get no time for the interaction with the co-learners.

Suggestions and Recommendations

There are various kinds of challenges faced by the learners of Open and Distance Learning mode of education while studying their courses. Hence, we have given some of the suggestions and recommendations which universities and institutions may adopt for the benefits of learners. Those suggestions and recommendations are as follows:-

i) Decentralisation of PCPs: The Universities offering ODL mode of education may decentralise PCPs in different study centres. So that a maximum number of learners can reach to attend those PCPs. That may result in the enhancement of knowledge of the learners.

ii) Number of Classes: The Universities generally offer classes in the form of PCPs. But very few classes are given to the learners which is insufficient to cover the whole syllabus on time. It is, therefore, recommended that universities may increase and provide large number of classes for the sake of the learners to make the teaching learning process more effective.

iii) Regional Language of SLMs: It is obvious that higher studies is preferable and studied in English language still SLMs may also be written in the regional language in addition to English language to overcome the language barrier for a large number of learners who prefer to study in their regional language.

iv) Proper Library Facilities: The Management of ODL mode of education may provide the facility of physical library in study centres like traditional mode with appropriate, supported books and study

materials so the learners can enhance their knowledge beyond their SLMs.

v) Industry Exposure/ Internship: The Universities may include, in the curriculum, real life case studies and also they may send learners, during the course, for the internship programmes in the industry. So that they can understand the real life work situation.

vi) Working Days of ODL Mode Universities: The Universities may increase their number of working days in addition to weekends for providing proper support services to the learners.

vii) Timely Issue of SLMs: The Universities may take necessary measures for issuing study materials (SLMs) on time. So that students have to wait for the same and they may start studying from SLMs as early as possible.

viii) Recruitment of Teaching and Non-Teaching Staffs: The Universities may recruit, to fill up the vacant position, their own faculty members with appropriate and minimum qualification criteria and also various non-teaching staffs for the benefits of learners.

ix) Interaction with Faculty Members: If all the vacant positions are filled up in the recruitment process, non-teaching staffs may see administrative tasks and faculty members may get time for the interaction with the learners on various matters.

x) Employment Opportunity: The Learners may be trained with the appropriate industry-based skills that can enhance their employability skills.

Syllabus may be set based on the practical work of the industry to a large extent. Apart from it, universities may be linked with the various industries for providing a good employment opportunity for the skilful learners by creating a placement cell separately.

xi) Awareness Programmes: The Universities may arrange awareness programmes to aware the people of the society about the benefits of ODL mode of education. So that students of ODL mode may not be discriminated in front of the students of traditional mode in the society as well as in the industry.

Concluding Remarks

From the above discussion, it may be concluded that the Open and Distance Learning mode of education plays a vital role in the education system which is responsible for the continuous increase in the literacy rate of the society. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode of education refers to the system of education where learners get freedom to study at home, as per their convenience and suitable time without attending compulsory lectures and classes at colleges and universities. Various authors have given their own definition of Open and Distance Learning mode of education.

Learners of ODL mode have to face various kinds of challenges those are shown in the major headings as challenges relating to teaching learning process, challenges relating to administrative activities and challenges relating to post academic activities. Challenges relating to teaching learning

process are centralised PCPs, limited classes, languages of SLMs, no proper library facilities, lack of internship programmes etc. Challenges which are related to administrative activities include working days only on weekends, delay in issuing SLMs, lack of interaction with faculty members, shortage of own faculty members, lack of accommodation or hostel facilities etc. Lastly, challenges relating to post academic activities are lack of employment opportunity, low status of learners of ODL mode of education in the society, no proper alumni group etc.

Some of the suggestions and recommendations have also been given such as decentralisation of PCPs, increasing of number of classes, regional language of SLMs, need of proper library facilities, requirement of internship programmes, increasing of number of working days, timely issue of SLMs, recruitment of teaching and non-teaching staffs, interaction of learners with faculty members, providing of employment opportunities and conducting awareness programmes on ODL mode. In this way, the challenges faced or experienced by the learners may be reduced to some extent that may result in the improvement in the education system and development of nation as a whole.

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