DISTANCE EDUCATION: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with problems associated with distance education and their tentative solutions. First, it identifies those problems which were faced by distant learners during their course of study. Second, it also identifies the problems associated with the distance education system. Finally, it provides tentative solutions to these problems and some recommendations for the betterment of distance education. For this related content collected from different books, journals and internet was reviewed and then problems associated with distance education were identified. These were associated with nature of study material, lack of multi-media instruction, insecurities about learning, lack of feedback or contact with the teacher, lack of support and services, lack of social interaction among learners, lack of student training, absence of a teacher, low status of distance education institutes, rigidity imposed by university regulations, misconception about the role of distance education departments, discrimination with the product of the distance education departments lack of support by the faculty. Keeping in mind theses problems tentative solutions were suggested such as - If distance learning institutions are serious about providing equity of educational opportunity to all, then careful consideration must be given to the special needs of distance learners. We should use multi-media technologies during PCPs. Proper planning and cooperation on the part of all those are associated with distant learners. If students are undertaking distance learning courses that require knowledge of computers, then the students must be taught, at a minimum, the fundamentals of operating the system of choice of the distance-taught course. Feedback on the part of concern distance educators and authority regarding admission, PCPs, assignments, examination and projects should be provided to the distance learners time to time. Understanding and mitigating technology problems are important, especially with the rapid expansion of technology. Further research into course development techniques will help learning institutions understand which methods work best in the distance learning classroom.

Key Words: Correspondence, Distant-Learner, Flexible Learning, Indirect Interaction, Open Learning

INTRODUCTION:

All over the world, distance mode of education is gaining a momentum and becoming more popular than conventional education. Distance learning is an excellent method of reaching the adult

learner. Because of the competing priorities of work, home, and school, adult learners desire a high degree of flexibility. The structure of distance learning gives adults the greatest possible control over the time, place and pace of education; however, it is not without problems. Loss of student motivation due to the lack of face-to-face contact with teachers and peers, potentially prohibitive startup costs, and lack of faculty support are all hurdles to successful distance learning. Distance education is much more flexible and student centered in approach. By allowing students to learn in more convenient locations, and often at more convenient times, distance education opens educational opportunity to previously un-reached learners. It also enables students to extend the period of their education from a limited number of schooling years to a lifelong learning process. It changes power and authority relationships between teachers and students and often encourages more equal and open communication than occurs in traditional educational settings.

Despite excessive efforts at large, the concept of open and distance learning has yet to reach its height. Open and distance education is a vast term. It has been conceptualized by various educationists in different manners. On the bases of their experiences people define distance education differently. This is nothing unusual if you recall the story of the six blind men who went to view an elephant. One blind man got hold of the tail, and went home convinced that an elephant was like a rope. The other one got hold of the tusk, and exclaimed that the elephant was just like a spear. Upon touching the flank, the third blind man concluded that an elephant was like a wall. The remaining three made their own conclusions, depending on the part they happened to touch. When they all got back home, there such a disagreement that each man was left confirmed in his ignorance. So, what is this elephant called Distance Education? We are fortunate that we are not blind. We are also fortunate that this elephant has been researched into, therefore, there are ideas we can draw upon in the attempt to arrive at a better understanding.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF DISTANCE EDUCATION:

Distance education is the general term that includes the range of teaching and learning strategies used by Correspondence colleges, Open universities, Distance education departments of conventional universities and Distance education training units of private sector organizations.

Thus, the term is used to refer to the education of those who, for one reason or another, choose not to attend conventional schools, colleges, or universities but study at home.

One of the most comprehensive definition is by Keegan (1996) in which six basic defining elements of distance education were suggested. He observed that distance education is characterised by the separation of learner and tutor as opposed to face-to-face teaching, the influence of an educational organisation which distinguishes distance education from private study, the use of technical media, e.g. print, audio, or website to unite tutor and learner, the provision of a two-way communication so that the student may engage in dialogue with the tutor, the possibility of occasional meetings for purposes of interaction and the self-directed nature of the learner's involvement.

An even more concise definition is that distance education is characterized by its focus on open access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners (UNESCO, 2002). Distance education has the some specific characteristics, which separate it from the traditional system of education and provide it with unique feature as parallel to formal education such as there is no direct interaction or face-to-face activity between teacher and students but compensated by contact or counseling sessions (CS) .There is two-way communication between teacher and student, which is facilitated by the organizing 'institutions. The institution develops self-instructional material (SIM) with the help of subject experts and specialists get it printed, send it to learners by post. Here, this communication between teacher and students can be termed as indirect interaction, which takes place generally through mails and can be supplemented by the electronic media also. But the media either print or electronic is necessary for communication. The third characteristic feature of distance education is either contact sessions or counseling sessions aimed to solve the queries of learners generated after studying the SIM. The group of learners, in contact or counseling (CS) may be different since this is not a compulsory activity. The topics to be discussed in CS are neither prescheduled nor pre-declared. Hence, there may be possibility to be repeated the same topic as the small group can be a bent on second day and the new students may have the same queries. In Open University system, the learners contact at their study centers for any information regarding SIM, HA CS and examination etc.

The distance mode of education play an important role in meeting the need of such persons who are in great demand of education but can't complete their education from the formal or regular system of education. They may be- In service persons due to certain reasons could not complete their educational qualifications without disturbing their jobs, inferior from of socio-economic conditions but wants to enhance their education status, such persons who want to learn and earn simultaneously, such persons who are residing far away from the big cities or in remote areas and do not have colleges and universities for higher education, overflow from colleges/universities due to fix number of seats or merit, dropouts due to some personal reasons, now again motivated to study, such persons who always want to add something new in their knowledge or update their knowledge or something training, such women who are housewife but do have their for knowledge, some very active retired persons who still want to know about their changing environment and such students who cannot fulfill the basic qualification for entrance of the university.

NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY:

Open and distance education basically caters to the need of people who really have an inner-quest to grow academically, in spite of various constraints Open and distant learners, can be understood as more sophisticated learners, are, in spite of several challenges, trying to cope with regular learners, as far as academic development is concerned. While regular students have a lot of facilities available and people around concerned with their academic activities and growth continuously, open and distant learners are always struggling hard for the same. For the past few years, it has come to be seen that the distant learners, though they have enrolled for the course willingly, leave the course in the middle. In spite of their utmost urge they, somehow, are forced to drop the course. There are several reasons behind this unwanted result. A major reason for this drop-out may be found in the in-depth study of the students undergoing the distant learning courses. Whatever the reasons be, it is a challenge for the system of open and distance learning. One has to take up all these issues and challenge with concern, if we really want to strengthen the open and distance learning.

Distant-learners face a variety of problems pertaining to the system, as a whole, of open and distance learning. These problems, in turn, compel them to drop the course in the middle. As a

consequence, this becomes a challenge for the open and distance learning system. So it is the need of the hour, that the various problems faced by open and distant-learners should be studied with due concern to overcome the challenge and hence the betterment of the open and distance learning system.

Thus, the need arose for the current study to have an in-depth look at these problems and suggest some solutions for the benefit of the students and hence enabling the open and distance learning system to cope with the challenges and possible threats ahead.

THE STUDY:

This study is based on facts and experiences associated with open and distance learning and its target group. For this some books, journals and e-content related to distance education available on internet were studied.

The present paper aims at discussing concept of distance education, problems faced by distant learners and problem associated with distance education system. The study makes an effort to provide suggestive solutions for the betterment of the distance and open learning system.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

Objectives of the study were:

1. To study the problems faced by distance learners.

2. To find out problems associated with distance education.

3. To suggest solutions for these problems.

REVIEW OF RELATED PRACTICES:

Since the day, the concept of open and distance learning came into materialization, educationists are concerned about it and trying to give and implement various approaches for the field. The theoretical approaches by Sewart (1978, 1980) stress the institution's continuity of concern for the quality of support of the student as the basis of the Open University's claimed success of high completion rates. Here, emphasis has been given to the role of the institution and its concern for the learners. Most of the educationists like, who are concerned with open and distance learning, talk of student support and counseling. Careful systems for student support and counseling have been seen,

as perhaps, one of the most important elements in the distance education system. Knowles (1980) believed that learner behaviour is influenced by a combination of the learner's needs plus the learner's situation and personal characteristics. Rekkedal (1985) studied the role of the teacher for the betterment of the practices and the learner. No single factor appears to cause nonparticipation; however, individual student characteristics and life circumstances appear to have the greatest impact on participation (Kerka, 1986). Garrison (1989) pointed out that with new communication technologies the boundaries between distance education and traditional education will become increasingly blurred. This may give rise to the solutions of various problems, if implied, in Indian context. The frustrations resulting from problems with communication between student and academic institution are factors of which distance education planners should be well aware (Wood, 1996). Distance learners demand and expect a high level of service when it comes to registration, delivery of course material and exams, quick turn-around times for grading exam and assignments and answering questions (Edge & Loegering, 2000). Here, the need of good quality service has been sought for the learners in various aspects of open and distance learning. Teachers with higher aspiration and achievement will make use of modern means to improve their information and quality of teaching, and incorporate modern ideas to become innovative (Vig & Singh, 2004). A paper by Stella and Gnanam (2004) highlights un-satisfaction to the approach being used for the system of open and distance learning. M-Learning also facilitates designs for authentic learning, meaning learning that targets real-world problems and involves projects of relevance and interest to the learner (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler 2007; Traxler, 2007). Various educationists are concerned about the system of open and distance learning. In countries, mostly other than India, they have encountered several problems pertaining to the field and they have made efforts to solve those in their own way. Despite improvements in educational indicators, such as enrolment, significant challenges remain with regard to the delivery of quality education in developing countries, particularly in rural and remote regions. In the attempt to find possible solutions to these challenges, much hope has been placed in new information and communication technologies (ICTs), mobile phones being one example (Valk, Rashid & Elder, 2010). They see the use of ICT as a major solution to the open and distance learning problems. Farajollahi & Moenikia, (2010) found relationship between students support services and its components with academic achievement.

This is a major issue of concern that most of the studies are held in developed countries, and in spite of solutions given by them, people in developing and underdeveloped countries, are still not able to apply those in the field and are continuously facing similar problems. This is the need of the hour that we have to look at the problems in a wider scope and perspective for the betterment of open and distance learners and practices associated with it in India, keeping in mind the international concern pertaining to the field.

PROCEDURE:

Some books, journals and e-contents related to distance education and distant learners were studied to find out the problems associated with distance education and its target group during the available time. Various problems faced by distance learners and associated with distance education were enlisted. Solutions for these problems were suggested.

OUTCOMES:

Content collected from available resources reflects the problems faced by distant learners and problem associated with the existing distance education system and also suggested the tentative solutions to these identified problems. The distance education system is developing very fast but there are many limitations which need analysis and review for putting the distance education system on sound lines.

(A)   PROBLEMS FACED BY DISTANT LEARNERS

These are the problems faced by distant learners, while undergoing open and distance learning.

● Nature of Study Material:

This problem is common with newer distance students. Study materials must take into account the significant proportion of students who enroll with little or no experience of distance study. These students are at risk of dropping out unless they develop study survival skills as rapidly as possible (Wood, 1986). The background of the learner is important in the preparation of the learning materials. It is difficult to prepare lessons according to the individual differences of the learners. Moreover we are providing similar material to rural and urban students having different needs, experiences and learning environment.

✓ Solution

If distance learning institutions are serious about providing equity of educational opportunity to all, then careful consideration must be given to the special needs of students undertaking distance education for the first time. Of particular importance is the design of study materials for distance students. No doubt at particular level we have to attain similar learning experiences so content for all learners should be same but examples, activities and experiences should be included in learning material according to their needs, learning experiences and expectations.

● Lack of Multi-Media Instruction:

There is more stress on sending of printed materials. But there is a death of facilities of multi-media instruction. The variety in the learning materials also improves the quality of learning. The lessons written for the students usually are written by the teachers belonging to the traditional system and therefore these materials normally lack in itself instructions methodology.

✓ Solution:

We should use multi-media technologies during PCPs, otherwise students limited experiences will delimit to lecture method only. Moreover Multisensory instructions are very useful to provide concrete experiences to distance learners and for multisensory instruction we require multi-media approach.

● Insecurities about learning:

More so than traditional students, distance learners are more likely to have insecurities about learning (Knapper, 1988). These insecurities are found in personal and school related issues such as financial costs of study, disruption of family life, perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from employers. These pressures often result in higher dropout rates than among traditional students (Sweet, 1986).

✓ Solution:

Proper planning and cooperation on the part of all those are associated with distant learners.

● Lack of feedback or contact with the teacher

Because there is no daily or weekly face to face contact with teachers, students may have trouble in self-evaluation. 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). Citing Tinto (1975), Keegan hypothesized that students who did 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).

✓ Solution:

This problem can be tackle through technological methods such as e-mail, telecommunication and postal mail by integrating these into the delivery of the course to provide the missing interactivity.

- Lack of support and services

Provision of student services such as advisement, library services, admissions and financial aid is a critical aspect of any distance learning program.The isolation that results from the distance learning process can complicate the learning process for adult students.

✓ Solution:

Support and services such as providing tutors, academic planners and schedulers, and technical assistance for distance learners should not be neglected when planning distance programs. Students need tutors and academic planners to help them complete courses on time and to act as a support system when stress becomes a problem.

- Lack of Social Interaction:

Students of all kinds want to be part of a larger school community, and simply a member of a correspondence course. For many traditional students, this is the part of their social lives. The "distance" aspect of distance learning takes away much of the social interactions that would be present in traditional learning environments. Geographical isolation has been identified as one of the major problems for distance students. In addition to the practical problems of contacting academic and administrative staff, obtaining study materials and borrowing library books, distance students suffer from the disadvantage of being unable to interact with other students and are often denied the perception that they belong to a scholarly community. This may lead to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, and a lack of confidence in their own abilities (Wood, 1996).

✓ Solution:

This problem must be moderated by institutions providing a sense of personal involvement between the student and the institution. One way to solve this problem is through the use of tutors that communicate with students electronically , by phone or personaly at personal contract programme. Students believe that having a good tutor is vitally important in helping them get the most out of a course and to achieve a credit (Meacham & Evans, 1989).

● Lack of student training:

Many adult students are not well versed in the uses of technology such as computers and the Internet. Using electronic medium in distance learning can inadvertently exclude students who lack computer or writing skills. These skills are required if computer technology is used. Students will typically be offered volumes of electronic-based information. Using this information will be a problem for some non-technical students. They must be taught how to manage, not only their study time, but the materials presented as well.

✓ Solution:

If students are undertaking distance learning courses that require knowledge of computers, then the students must be taught, at a minimum, the fundamentals of operating the system of choice of the distance-taught course. If distance learning is to be successful, technical problems must be made a non-issue.

(B)   PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH DISTANCE EDUCATION

● Lack of the presence of a teacher

The first and the foremost critic of the system of distance education is that it lacks the presence of a teacher. It is said that education is a Tripler Process- teacher, students and curriculum, out of which the important pole i.e. the teacher is almost missing or behind the scene.

✓ Solution:

Feedback on the part of concern distance educators and authority regarding admission, PCPs, assignments, examination and projects should be provided to the distance learners time to time.

● Low Status of Distance Education Institutes

Leaving aside the open universities, distance education departments are functioning within the framework of traditional Universities. The authorities of the universities do not provide full

facilities to theses departments. In this way, the potential of the system remains unutilized. If distance education continues to be subservient to the traditional universities, then it will remain a poor relation of traditional system of education with its wings of innovation completely clipped off and it would not grow beyond that.

✓ Solution:

First, extension counter of different universities in the state in the form of shops, who are selling degrees, should be banned or their degree should not be considered for any benefit both for students and employees. Second, these distance education departments should be given autonomy to prepare their own action plan and policies keeping in mind the available resources and needs of the distant-learners into consideration.

● Rigidity Imposed by University Regulations

Distance education departments have to function within the rules and regulations of the universities thus leaving little scope for experimentation, the faculty in regular departments try to put hurdles in the working of these departments. For example, the frequent revisions of syllabus without consulting distance education departments. Both campus- based and distance education have much to gain from fuller integration in terms of expanding the range of courses available to distance education students, economizing on teaching functions and allowing campus –based students greater flexibility in choosing from a range of resources and strategies for learning.

✓ Solution:

While talking about distance learning and conventional learning system, it is to be kept in mind that these two systems are not opponent to each other. The two systems can move together in order to take benefit of each other in serving the noble cause of providing education to all. However, distance education can achieve more so far as widening access to education is concerned.

● Misconception about the Role of Distance Education departments

University authorities and faculties of regular departments think that the main function of distance education departments is to mobilize resources for meeting the deficit of the University. This is fallacious and wrong impression. Distance education can provide services at less cost but cannot be like coaching academies.

✓ Solution:

These departments of distance education must be the centre of higher learning in the same way as regular departments and should contributes to the academic excellence for which the university stands for.

Misconception should be overruled soon.

• Discrimination with the Product of the Distance Education Departments:

It has been that the university and outside that the products of distance education are not equated with the products of traditional system inspite of their better achievement in the same examination.

✓ Solution:

Why is it so? This needs to be examined and discouraged. We may keep in mind that knowledge knows no boundaries and it is not the monopoly of anyone. But authenticity of the product should be checked and criteria for achievement should be accessed.

• Lack of support by the faculty

More than any other participant, faculty roles must change the most in administering distance learning programs. This can be difficult adjustment for some teachers. They must change teaching styles to that of a mentor, tutor, and facilitator. They must meet the needs of distance students without face-to-face contact. Since the majority of distance learners are adults, teachers may need to change their teaching style. Faculty is responsible for changing their course content to accommodate diverse student needs and expectations. So long as college faculty feels there is a burden associated the distance education program currently in place, there will be little support for expanding distance education opportunities. There are a number of reasons for this lack of support. Teachers may lack the basic skills or hardware to fully participate in distance education.

✓ Solution

The introduction of computers, telecommunications, and the World Wide Web provides an extraordinary opportunity for faculty and students to learn in a cooperative environment.

• Student Assessment

Assessing student performance is a problem area in distance learning. It is a commonly held belief that distance students perform more poorly in assessment than do internal students because of the additional pressures and burdens of distance study

✓ Solution

Maintain the same course content, learning objectives, standards, and credits for all sections, regardless of method of delivery. More research into instructional methods and models is needed to identify those that work well in distance learning (Jackman, et, 1994). Participatory and active learning models are preferred by distance learning students. The course content affects student persistence.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The three basic factors - distance, communication and infrastructure - can give solutions to all challenges, if properly dealt with. Perhaps the main problem with the term is that it tends to make the fact that many students in distance systems are metropolitan residents and that it is the distance between the teaching acts and the learning acts that is crucial, not the magnitude of the geographical separation of teacher and learner (Keegan, 1996). Innovations and experiments can give a better solution to all these challenges in Indian context. Although distance learning is not new, it has not received respect in the academic community because of the number and seriousness of problems presented here. The dramatic growth of the adult learner population is making distance learning an increasingly popular choice of learning techniques. Problems and hurdles encountered by the student fall into several distinct categories; costs and motivators, feedback and teacher contact, student support and services, separation and isolation, lack of experience, and training. Faculty experience problems such as lack of staff training in course development and in technology, lack of support for distance learning in general, and inadequate faculty selection for distance learning courses. Sometimes the coursework for traditional and distance students is the same. Often it is not. There can be a lot of up front effort in designing distance learning material. Computers, video equipment, communications software and the like, present challenges and frustrations. Faculty must know how to the use these technologies if they are to teach distance courses. Training students and staff, particularly in troubleshooting problems, is imperative to success in technical distance learning. Further study of student demographics and motivators will help to target the adult learner population and will help institutions to develop course materials and techniques appropriately. Close scrutiny of the intrinsic problems in distance education will help overcome problems

encountered by students and faculty. Understanding and mitigating technology problems are important, especially with the rapid expansion of technology. Further research into course development techniques will help learning institutions understand which methods work best in the distance learning classroom.

CONCLUSION:

  With these problems, there is a danger of the system becoming stereotyped leading to inertia. Until and unless, this inertia is removed, the system of distance education may deteriorate. Thus, distance education requires better planning and implementation as this system has to operate in a challenging and difficult environment of openness. There is need to devise ways and means to improve upon the external and internal environment of distance education system to avoid stagnation and generate dynamism and development to reap the potential of this system. We may say in the words of Fred Jevons, 'distance Education should no longer be written off as second best. It has a different pattern of advantages and disadvantages from campus-based education but it is not intrinsically inferior. Distance education has some advantages which should be recognized more widely. Easier access, independent learning opportunities, a more intimate interface with employment, better quality controls over course materials, the possibilities of cumulative improvement over course materials, the possibilities of cumulative improvement in pedagogic quality, the staff development effect and under certain circumstances, lower cost.' Distance education has the potential to make equity and access to education a reality and, thus, increase opportunities for a population in a vast democracy like ours. It has great potential for meeting the requirements of the varied demands for human resources. In doing so, our programmes should not be so stereotyped in their urban context, that students in rural areas get no benefits from them. We often forget that a majority of our youth lives in rural areas and a substantial number of our colleges are located in district headquarters. They need courses more appropriate to their local context in upgrading their household occupation, agro-industries, and rural enterprises such as cooperatives, rural banks, rural development and panchayati raj institutions, as also the vastly developing rural service sector, especially in the fields of transport, storage and communication. We have a vast potential for reaching out to this sector which has been largely left untouched by our urban-based universities and teachers who develop the

syllabi. We need to have open universities and schools in every states of the country to nurture this vast sector for human resource development leading to a productive India of the future. Hence we need the growth of distance education to reach out to this vast country and its diverse needs, and especially for developing competency for various occupations and careers.

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