

Reaching to Unreached: Distance Education as an Instrument

Author: Dr Rucha Gujar

Abstract

Distance Education has been recognized as a distinct and important channel of education in general. It has helped to widen the education base for all kind of students. It has reached out to people who would otherwise have remained deprived of education. The efficacy of distance education is now well acknowledged. Studies have shown that well-designed and well-managed distance education programs produce fruitful learning outcomes. These outcomes are equal to those of conventional face-to-face education. Previously, distance education was considered as correspondence study. However, recent developments in technology have dramatically changed the concept of Distance Education. Today, besides print, the audio, video and computer technologies have become the delivery modes. Distance education is a phenomenon which is geographically dispersed but educationally and knowledgably amalgamated. This paper elaborates the specific features of distance education as a tool for achieving the access of education for unreached.

Introduction of Distance Education

Distance education is considered to be a modality of instructions that differ from traditional campus-based instructions but is no less legitimate. It has three important features: the use of technical media, the mass education of students at a distance, and industrialization of the teaching process. The Open University system has changed the concept of pedagogy as well. It taxes greater responsibilities on the faculty. The teaching material has to be prepared with great care and with a clear understanding of the process of learning and the psychology of learners. Distance education is considered to be a medium for delivering education to persons whose location is remote. There is rapid growth in educational programs at all levels delivered via radio, television, satellite downlink stations, videos, computer terminals and other means. Many programs are offered for credit and lead to certificates, diplomas and degrees; others are designed for leisure studies, personal enrichment or specific work related education and training. Distance education programs are accredited by recognized associations and the good programs benefit from significant recent advances in designing, implementing and monitoring these learning environments and their support tools.

Features of Distance Education

Flexible and ever-present: The number of both adults and youth on-campus students is growing remarkably. The reasons for this remarkable growth includes efforts to expand access to more students, ease capacity constraints capitalize on emerging market opportunities and serve as a catalyst for institutional transformation. Some other factors, such as growth in continuing education, flexibility in delivery modes, economic changes, changes in job-potential and student-age group have significantly increased the enrolment of women and disadvantaged groups. With the emergence of World Wide Web, education has become borderless. It has emerged as a competitive market and only quality institutions will survive. There is growing demand for academic accountability along with expansion of distance education, and there is a vast creation of new information. In past, information was doubled in every 10 years and it takes only four years for the same now.

Instructional approaches: These are becoming more learner-centred, recursive, non-linear, self-directed and meaningful from the learners' perspective. It is not just 'transmission' or lecture-type approach to teaching. A pedagogical shift is likewise occurring within distance education, moving from the transmission model to constructivist, socio-cultural and meta-cognitive models. These models use computer mediated communication and emphasize upon the students' responsibility for their own learning. One of the most apparent trends affecting distance education is the advancement of technology. As a result, technological devices are becoming more versatile and ubiquitous. Computer, video, audio, duplication and other modalities are merging and becoming available at cheaper prices. Computers are able to translate languages in real-time with the accuracy and speed required for effective communication. Video-conferencing and other technologies have played remarkable role to enrich distance education and provide many benefits of face-to-face instruction. The growth in Internet usage has tremendously increased in the last few years. Internet is becoming dominant among other distance education media. The growth in Internet usage in distance education has shifted the focus dramatically toward network based technologies as well as Internet-based delivery. One of the important reasons for this growth is that digital media are quickly transferable, storable and widely accessible – resulting in flexibility in both access and choice.

For management education and industrial training, this approach facilitates flexible delivery to shift the work patterns and professional needs of adult learners. The interactive

technologies equally empower both, the instructor (faculty) as well as learner. Many countries have now established distance learning provisions in one form or other. Most of the traditional universities in these countries have their own distance education centres and also offer online courses.

Freedom of choice: Though two degrees cannot generally be pursued simultaneously, a student can pursue two programmes simultaneously through the distance mode or combination of distance and regular modes from the same or different universities/institutions in the following various combinations:

- One Degree and one Diploma/PG Diploma/Certificate
- One P G Diploma and one Diploma/Certificate
- One Diploma and one Certificate
- Two PG Diplomas
- Two Diplomas
- Two Certificates

Distributed Learning: Technology has been integrated into almost all forms of education making the distinctions between various forms of education less distinct. With online delivery systems and approaches being employed for both distant and on-campus students, distance education and on-campus instruction are converging. Today, on-campus students can take a part of the program or courses through “online” or “e-learning” routes in the campus or away from the campus. This combination has narrowed down the gap between the on-campus and off-campus students, and has resulted in the use of the more broad-based term “distributed learning” adopted from the usage of the term “distributed” to denote the networked nodal servers with the main one in the IT sector. Very soon the term “distributed learning” may replace “distance education” because distance is too restrictive a concept. Distributed learning can occur either on-campus or off-campus providing students with greater flexibility and eliminating time as a barrier to learning.

In fact, the “anytime, anywhere” nature of distributed learning has its greatest impact on campus instruction in the countries where online courses are in vogue. Some universities advertise that their online courses cost less and encourage the campus students to earn part of their credits through online courses. It is something like universities that run correspondence education; make their distance education course materials available to on-campus students.

This convergence of on-campus and off-campus learning facilitated by the ICT is likely to reduce the pressure on some of the stand-alone open universities and colleges in the future.

Reaching to unreached: Distance education has become an accepted and indispensable part of our educational system. Technological revolution and increasing need for skill up-gradation & retraining are the major reasons behind the unprecedented growth of distance education. As compared to traditional face-to-face classes, open and distance education offers more flexibility, freedom and easy access to students. Moreover, the conventional stream of education cannot accommodate the entire student community making distance education programs more necessary. Moreover, within the student community, number of adult, female, and minority learners is increasing. Distance education brings knowledge to these types of learners who have not been served by traditional class room setting. So open and distance education has a crucial role in the process of sustainable development. By realizing the potential of ODL, more and more traditional universities are transforming themselves to dual mode universities. Rapid developments in the field of ICT have created challenges as well as new opportunities for the design and delivery of education through the distance mode. This paper focuses on the Indian scenario of education and provides an overview of the role ODL in providing education to the under privileged sections of the society.

Recently, a number of traditional universities and deemed-to-be universities have commenced virtual learning provisions on their websites and they are yet to attract any significant number of takers. By and large, the programs of studies offered in the distance learning institutions are on the patterns of traditional qualifications like undergraduate, postgraduate, certificate and diploma, and depend heavily on using text-based lessons distributed through the postal system. Some experiments on e-learning, exploring its potential are under way in both formal and non-formal learning units. As most of the Indian Institutions of higher learning do not use the credit system, course-based online distributed learning provisions are limited. However, there have been successful attempts to have online courses for on-campus students at least in some of the institutions like BITS Pilani, and a number of IITs that follow credit-based semester education. Such options are used well by on-campus students at Pilani to get an additional (double) degree. In the universities like Pondicherry University, regular students can register for any of the short-term management programs offered by its directorate of distance education that are text based as in correspondence education.

Conclusion

Many of the myths about distance education have their roots in the lack of understanding of the basic tenets of the two modes of education – campus learning and distance learning. The two modes have evolved to serve different purposes that might be complementary in nature. The major differences lie in the profile of the clientele of the two modes and the predominant mode of delivery. The impact of technology adds exciting dimensions to all forms of education and distance education or distributed education for a learning society in one form or other has therefore come to stay. Autonomy to the institutions of distance education can help them to come out of the bureaucratic style of functioning and raise work efficiency. They can be groomed as centres for off-loading the universities in imparting quality education in varied disciplines including business administration. Through these centres distance education reaches to the unreached.

References

1. A. Gnanam and Antony Stella (2004). Myths and Realities of Distance Education. *University News*, 42(21), 1-8.
2. Beena Shah (2004). Distance Education vs Flexible Learning : Pressures, Practices and Perspectives. *University News*, 42(9), 1-7.
3. Santosh Dhar and Upinder Dhar (1999). Social Development Through Distance Education. *University News*, 37 (47), 1-5.
4. Upinder Dhar (2006). Reaching the Unreached through Distance Education. *Management Education*, 1(6), June.
5. <https://www.researchgate.net>