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EMERGING AREAS OF RESEARCH IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: A NIOS PERSPECTIVE

In a developing country like India where education is a fundamental right, National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), world's largest open schooling, is serving the educational needs of a large segment of the Indian population. With enrolment of over 27.1 lakhs (2.71 million) learners on its rolls across the country covered through 20 regional centers it has more than 6400 Accredited Institutions (Study Centres) in India and abroad.

Growth of any organization depends mostly on the results and recommendations of constant research, which are being taken up for the upliftment of the organization and as far as open and distance learning is concerned, research is an important component. Since, it decides its future course of action in terms of effectiveness, flexibility and openness. Moreover, at NIOS research allows other stake holders and individuals to do research on the open and distance learning as a whole to identify the loop-holes and challenges to improve the existing open and distance learning system.

Research plays an important role in strengthening any institution. Since last three decades the role of research has been deeply broadened. Now, it is an important component for open and distance learning system. NIOS has now entered in 28 years of its existence and to continue successful operations for future growth, establishing its credibility and monitoring the progress it has to constantly develop, innovate and improve its services and courses through the insights provided by in depth research.

With these objectives, Research and Development Cell of NIOS promotes research that promises to augment past knowledge and craft a vivid future in the field of Open Schooling.

Under its Scheme of Grant-in-Aid for Research Projects in Open Schooling (GRPOS), grant-in-aid are being provided to organizations/institutions which desire to conduct research in the prioritized areas identified by NIOS.

Research in Priority Areas

1. Accessibility of Open Schooling System

There is an urgent need for open schooling to contribute to education for all and development of a learning society in a much larger and expanded operational format so that the challenge of providing education to a large number can be achieved. A large number of dropped out students and persons are mostly left behind under the existing system of open schooling. Thus, NIOS has undertaken various research projects and research surveys in many states of India to reach the unreached learners. Research studies on accessibility of NIOS and the constraints both from learner and institutional point of view, which is preferably on national basis along with studies on critical review of the flexibilities and openness in the Open Schooling System are being taken up for the research study to improve existing accessibility of open schooling for learners.

Findings of the studies conducted have shown reach of NIOS in almost every part of the country and in abroad. It helped NIOS to understand need and requirement of the learners. Factors like heavy curriculum and compulsion of TMA burdened NIOS learners (Mahapatra, 2013), but at the same time learners are satisfied by flexibility and openness of NIOS. They are also satisfied with the system as they could continue their further higher education (Sharma, 2014). More research to find various means to reach unreached is required to educate every individual who could not complete their formal education.

2. Courses of Study

NIOS offers 28 subjects in eight mediums (Hindi, English, Urdu, Marathi, Telugu, Gujarati, Malayalam, Tamil and Odia) for Secondary Examinations and 25 subjects in Hindi, English and Urdu mediums for Senior Secondary Examinations.

It also offers Open Basic Education (OBE) programme at three levels A, B and C for the children upto 14 years. Acknowledging the fact that the young entrepreneurs will be the wealth of the nation, NIOS offers over 100 learner friendly vocational courses in different arenas.

Research studies and surveys on identification of academic and vocational education courses keeping in view the needs of various target groups, including deprived sections of the society. Development of course materials, especially with ICT application, and assessing their efficacy through experimental and follow up studies and also experimentation on making learning package more self instructional with and without practical components. Rational evaluation and empirical evaluation of Self Learning Materials (SLM) with the help of tools for evaluation of Self Learning Materials are being taken up for research to strengthen existing system.

Studies shows Self Learning Materials (SLM) have been well designed and it has been of great help to learners (Gulati,2015). Though, NIOS continuously revise its materials and curriculum as per policy laid down in National Curriculum Framework (NCF), still more research is required in this area. Life skills which has been webbed and incorporated to few courses at secondary level contributed towards various dimensions of life and personal development may be taken further to senior secondary and secondary level.

3. ICT and Media Research

Audio-visual aids have always been of great importance in teaching and learning process. It is more effective when it is being used in open and distant mode where learner can directly have the access without going to formal classroom. One of the major activities of the NIOS is to make use of modern means of communication and Educational Technology in distance Education. Audio and video programmes are significant components of the multi-media packages offered by NIOS for its various courses of study. The audio/video programmes supplement and complement the other modes of learning such as printed self learning materials and personal contact programmes. Beside audio and video programmes Mukta Vidya Vani a web radio programme is also being used as means of communication for learners.

Finding of the studies on delivery system, use of ICT and different modes of providing instruction with multi-media which is being used have shown positive impact on learners (Prasad, 2015). It has helped NIOS to develop learner centered audio and video programmes. But, at same time NIOS has to initiate research in this area to find more new methods to reach its learners.

With passage of time and development of various online courses like Virtual Open Schooling (VOS) and Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) have further strengthen open and distance learning. Now it is more flexible and as per the need and requirement of the learners. With these latest development, it has opened more doors and avenues for further research in utility, effectiveness and popularity of these online courses.

4. Teaching and Learning Strategies

In open and distance mode teaching and learning strategies plays a pivotal role. Learner has to learn through Self Learning Material (SLM) only. Learner has to understand and comprehend from the provided material. Studies on instructional methods suitable for Open and Distance Learning (ODL), support systems needed to enhance learning and procedures of continuous evaluation to be adopted for monitoring the progress of learners and also for helping them in learning more effectively have also been conducted in the NIOS.

Findings show gaps in certain vocational courses (Sodhi, 2014) and also inability to get materials and assignments on time by learners (Rai & Punia, 2013). Further, more research is being initiated to improve teaching and learning process for the learners.

5. Student Support Services

Problems of learners have always been a concern in open and distance education. Though, little research work has been done in this area Augmentation and strengthening of student support services, improvements in the delivery system, decentralization of administration and extensive use of communication systems are being studied using the experimental and the case study approaches.

Findings of studies helped NIOS to develop online portal for student grievances and extended facilities through mobile. Further, NIOS has to take up more initiatives and research to equip learners for best student support services.

6. Evaluation of Learners

Evaluation of any programme is important. Evaluative studies pertaining to organization, methods, procedures and results in terms of the learning outcomes of distance learners, and the impact of distance/open education on the socio-economic development of various target groups deserve special attention for planning and policymaking need to be studied.

Studies based on analysis of examinations data to assess the quality of questions and to analyze the performance of examinees on different competencies tested by the questions, studies on socio-economic background of learners and analysis of the examination results of different socio-economic groups, caste groups and other disadvantaged groups need to be studied.

Effectiveness of computer based marking to reduce error pertaining to evaluation may be studied.

7. Cost Effectiveness of ODL System

Financial growth and stability is required for any institution to sustain. Being autonomous organization NIOS survives on its own resources, generated through fees collected from students (Gaba, 1999). Though, few researches have been done in this area. Research studies on per student cost and cost-effectiveness of the ODL system for different types of courses may be taken up for the study.

NIOS is trying hard to give best from its available resources and initiating more research on better financial management. NIOS is looking ahead to do more research in cost effectiveness and financial management.

8. Tracer Studies and Other Studies

Tracer and other follow up studies to find out how the pass outs are employed and, in general, what they are doing and what their views are about the courses completed by them, may be taken up for the study to know passed out learners.

Though, finding on above studies have shown that learners who passed out from NIOS are doing well and feel proud of their education which they got from NIOS (Sahoo, 2015). More such tracer studies, especially in remote areas will help NIOS to know about their learners and their where about. It will also help NIOS to trace and project them for their budding and future learners.

Challenges

Many studies for research have been taken up in last three decades. Still, many priorities areas like cost effectiveness, financial management, organizational structure, policy, planning and management, human resource development and inclusive education are being left wide open for research to strengthen existing system of NIOS. To move with the pace of technology, it is a challenge for NIOS to do more prolific research in media and ICT which is now backbone of open and distance education (Kumar, 2014). Since, technology is changing everyday and platforms like MOOCs and Virtual Open Schooling (VOS) are evolving, doing research on such evolving technology will help NIOS to understand need and demands of their learners.

Conclusion

At NIOS, research has been encouraged since its inception and numerous research studies have been undertaken and the research findings have been constructively used to re-engineer the processes. It is now time to increase the scale on which research activities are planned and to be carried out. NIOS needs to collaborate with future young research scholars who are going to be enrolled at different universities, institutions and organization who can develop and execute research on open schooling which can help open schooling in reaching the unreached in the country. Moreover, it will also help to determine strategies to impart vocational training to the youth to develop a skilled workforce.

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