Current Status of Employability of Online Higher Education in India

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Abstract

India is emerging as one of the largest source of work force in coming decade which has a potential to supply the efficient work force to entire world. But there is gap between Human resource developments in developing counties like India due to political, social and economic aspects. There are disparities in terms of quality and standard of higher level of education, as well as the level of the educational attainment of different segments of the population. Education has important role in the process of national human resource development. Distance education is considered as an important option which can bring the necessary revolution in fulfilling objective of human resource development if rightly implemented. It will help to reach the unreached and unprivileged section of the society.

This paper highlights mainly the employability element of online distance education and thereby suggest necessary changes to improve the employability quotient of online and distance education by making it at par with industry standards.

Key Words: *Online Distance Education, Employability, Industry Standards, Human Resource Development, Skill Development*

Introduction

In last 10 years the face and structure of distance education universities have changed drastically by making their offerings interactive, flexible and participative. The distance education universities in India have realised the importance of employability element and trying their best to face the challenges of employability by introducing the practical skill development and overall personality development.

Due to the changing organisational requirements, the role of education is changing. The organisations are looking for graduates who have different attitude towards their career management. The organisations want industry ready work force which need minimum instructions to get started. The human resource development of any country depends upon quality of labour force. Education system has a big role in improvement of work efficiency and productivity of work force and thereby contribute to economic growth. These types of activities would include on-the-job training, upgrading courses, and awareness courses, which are possible more through distance education than any other means. Further, this system can raise employment opportunities in many ways, as it helps develop the necessary skills, attitude and motivation to match opportunities to fresh job seekers as well as for self-employment. Recently, there has been increase in demand for skilled labour as a result of globalization and changes in technology and the reorganisation of work structure.

Formal training institutes in India do not have enough capacity to train all the aspiring youths of the country. Therefore the informal sector like online and distance education system is more important in the process of skill development. Also very few number of aspiring youths can afford the formal education. Therefore use of online and distance education for human resource development becomes important.

Distance Education and Human Resource Development

Since independence, there has been significant progress in human resource development in India. But human resource development in India is experiencing a good deal of imbalance at all kinds in terms of region, gender and levels of education. For reducing these imbalances, education system is required to use of modern communication

technology. Distance education has adopted a variety of means and methods including video conferencing and computer based learning. Through distance education we can create the possibility and the potential to provide large-scale multi-media education for the development of human resources.

At present, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), 13 State Open Universities (SOUs) and 106 dual-mode University correspondence course institutions (CCIs) offer programmes through open and distance education mode in the country. All these institutions put together enrol about 2.8 million students (i.e. about 32% of the total higher education students), and IGNOU alone shares half of this, i.e. about 1.6 million students on roll, scattered over 32 countries. For such a huge system of education, it is important to ascertain how the students perceive their programme and its employability. Therefore this research is a small attempt towards assessing the employability of these informal education system.

As means of education and training at micro level, universities should formulate new educational and training models which can increase employability and improve the candidates' skill and work performance. But the main challenge before universities is to identify and nurture the skills that truly prepare the graduates to enter the labour market efficiently.

Literature Review
A few years before the Bologna Process was implemented, the UK had already rethought the purpose of higher education taking into account training and employment goals. Previously, areas of knowledge (more or less theoretical and/or more or less technical) in the study programmes were considered to be less important than extracurricular attributes. According to Harvey, higher education must be able to

i) establish close links with employers, assisting them in identifying and adopting strategies suited to overcoming any lack of qualifications; ii) contribute with solutions for education and training in high-skilled

areas with a low number of workers; iii) prepare graduates with effective working skills, ensuring that the employability requirements are explicit in the study programmes (Harvey, 1999, p. 5). The author further stresses how important it is for modern organizations to rely on employees that can cope with change, hence their choice to recruit graduates who add value to the organization and, at a higher level, have "transformative potential" for the evolution of the organization itself. To this end, he proposes three types of profiles: adaptive, adaptable, and transformative.
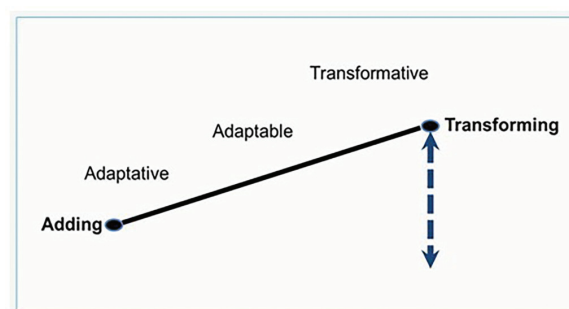

Figure 1. Enhancement continuum (Harvey, 1999, p. 16).

The adaptive profile reflects a competent performance, in which the workers take small risks and avoid questioning the company's procedures; they adapt to the culture of the organization (Harvey, 1999, p. 16). The adaptable profile refers to individuals who are willing and able to learn; they are willing to acquire new knowledge and skills, and they show initiative, ability, and confidence to use their full potential to change and improve the organization. This profile is also guided by the ability to motivate teams, which involves the ability to communicate at several different levels. Finally, the more sophisticated profile is the transformative. It includes the use of higher skills: analysing, criticizing, and synthesizing. This profile also reflects the capacity for leadership rather than the strict control of management tasks (i.e., getting the best out of workers, maximizing their potential and ideas).

It can be concluded that three types of profiles are needed for two reasons: i) not every area within an organization requires the more sophisticated profile; and ii) organizations are different and, therefore, have different needs and require different skills profiles. On

this matter, in 1991 and 2002, Robert Reich identified the need for two types of advanced profiles in advanced economies: the first focuses on the discovery and the second focuses on the exploitation of the discovery made by others, through knowledge and application of available interpersonal skills in a given medium and context (Yorke, 2006, p. 5).

With respect to online students, the literature notes that autonomy and flexibility are two basic dimensions of adult and online learners (Knowles, 1970; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Conrad, 2009). It is for this reason that our study is focused on examining these profiles in students in India from an empirical perspective.

Employability of Online Education
Employability is the set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. Similarly, Lourtie (2009) argues that employability should be a goal of any training in any cycle, be it first, second, third, or even short cycle. The aim is to increase the graduate's chances of obtaining employment and being successful in his/her occupation.

To define the concept of employability, Yorke emphasizes that employability depends on several factors, making it difficult to accurately define the interference of each of these factors in the final result - the job you get. Knight (2003, p. 5) highlights the following determinants: 1) Employability is probabilistic because it is related to the uncertainty of external factors, socioeconomic variables such as the state of the national, regional, or local laws of supply/demand for employability skills; 2) Getting a job and succeeding at work are different situations; some specific aspects of the world of work may not be legitimately addressed in higher education; 3) For many graduates, the first job does not reflect the occupation they are looking for and which would encourage their skills development; in situations of shortage of employment, graduates accept the jobs available under the circumstances.

For the research conducted, employability is considered both in its theoretical and practical dimensions. At the theoretical level, employability is the students' potential to adapt and make their knowledge, skills, and attitudes flexible towards the labour market, promoting their social inclusion and ensuring their quality of life. At a practical level, employability is the potential students bring into practice through their skills to become employed.

Universities can improve the employability of students by focusing on the development of their metacognitive abilities, that is, by helping them to learn how to learn and by promoting their self-confidence.

In the context of lifelong learning, a personal development plan (PDP) is fundamental for individuals to explore and capitalize on all learning acquired (formal, nonformal, and informal), making a better connection between their expectations and actual work, guaranteeing not only their growth and development, but also their social integration. To this end, employability skills have to be embedded in the curriculum and learning strategies and assessments should be available upon their application. The university's strategies may be supplemented by work internships, short-term and nonmandatory, during the years of study with the aim of preparing students for the world of work (Zulauf, 2006, p. 136).

Reddy (2002) found that post-graduate and certificate programmes had relatively higher pass rate than the bachelor or diploma programmes in IGNOU. Majority of the programmes (17 of the 40 programmes) had the pass percentage of less than 5 and the grand average pass rate (GAPR) is 8.85 only. In the case of 26 programmes, the average pass rate was less than the GAPR of 8.85 and only 14 programmes had it above GAPR. Evidences from the Certificate in Computing (CIC) and the Post Graduate Diploma in Computer Applications seem to support the perception that more professional programmes are likely to attract more motivated students, resulting in higher pass rates. The data on professional courses at the bachelor's and master's level indicates

otherwise _ both the MBA and MCA, as also BCA and Bachelor of Commerce (B.Com), had very low pass rate.

Similarly, only a few studies have been conducted by scholars on learners' perception towards benefits and employability of distance education. Mullick and Mullick (1995) found that high proportion of students perceived the programme 'most useful' for 'knowledge enrichment' followed by 'professional competencies' and pursuing 'higher studies'. However, it was 'somewhat useful' for changeover to a better job and/or an organization. As regards the various aspects of the instructional system, the study material and design (syllabus/curriculum) had been opined to be 'excellent'.

Raza (2004) reported on the difficulties encountered in measuring outcomes in open and distance learning, and highlighted that the existing studies therefore give rather crude measures in terms of completion, graduation and examination results. Woodley and Parlett (1983), in another study, based on wastage rates i.e. students who withdrew and failed in undergraduate courses in a given year in the university, suggested that outcomes were better in lower level courses, and courses in the social sciences. Woodley (n.d.) found that completing UKOU courses led to a salary increment; 17% stated that the UKOU course had led to a new occupation. The study suggested a significant shift out of existing occupations, particularly for those employed in manual employment and at the lower-end of non-manual strata. A subsequent study by Woodley and Simpson (1999) on rates of return also suggested that while graduation from the University was likely to be associated with increased earnings, the increase was greater for women than for men.

Gaba (1999) examined the experiences of IGNOU graduates in the job market and found that out of the 13.52% of the total graduates whose main reason for joining the course was to get a job, 24% of them had been successful. Of those who desired promotion (10.32%), 28% achieved their goal. Most of the UK studies reported that other types of skills, more than specialised knowledge were being valued by the employers. In their study of survey of employers of university graduates in Sri Lanka, Gunawardena (1997) found that communication skills emerged at the top with almost 37% of employers specifying these skills, followed by the next highest ranked four characteristics as appearance, grooming, manners (31%), interpersonal skills/ability to work in a team/concern for others (29%) and leadership (27%).

Objectives of the Study

In the light of scope of enhancing employability through online distance education the objectives of the present research were:

1. To study learning objectives of students to pursue the education through distance mode.
2. To study their opinion regarding value of distance education degree.
3. To study the employability aspects of distance education program.
4. To study if the constraints in completing the program through distance mode.

Research Methodology

Survey method has been used to collect the primary data. Business Management and education degrees are selected as a sample program considering the equal employment scope and opportunities. A questionnaire developed by the researchers was administered among a randomly selected 200 graduates - BBA (N=120) and B. Ed. (N=80). The 10-item questionnaire covered various aspects relating to learners profile, goals to pursue the programme completion, constraints in completion of their programme, learners' perception of the value of distance education degree, factors responsible for completion of their respective programme, and perception of employability of their respective distance education programme. The profiles of the learners are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondents' Socio Economic Profile

| Demographic Element	Subgroups and their %		
Gender	Male	Female	
	53	47	
Location	Urban	Rural	
	68	32	
Age	Less than 25 years	26-40 years	41 years and above
	24	64	12
Marital Status	Married	Unmarried	Divorcee
	21	76	3
Occupations	Student	Service	Self-employed
	37	34	29

Findings

Three main areas are focused in the survey:
1. Possible employment options through distance education
2. Learning objectives to pursue the programme
3. Motivations and constraints in completing the program through Distance mode.

Following are the findings of the survey:

Perception about the Programme

**Chart I- Chart Showing the Reasons to Pursue
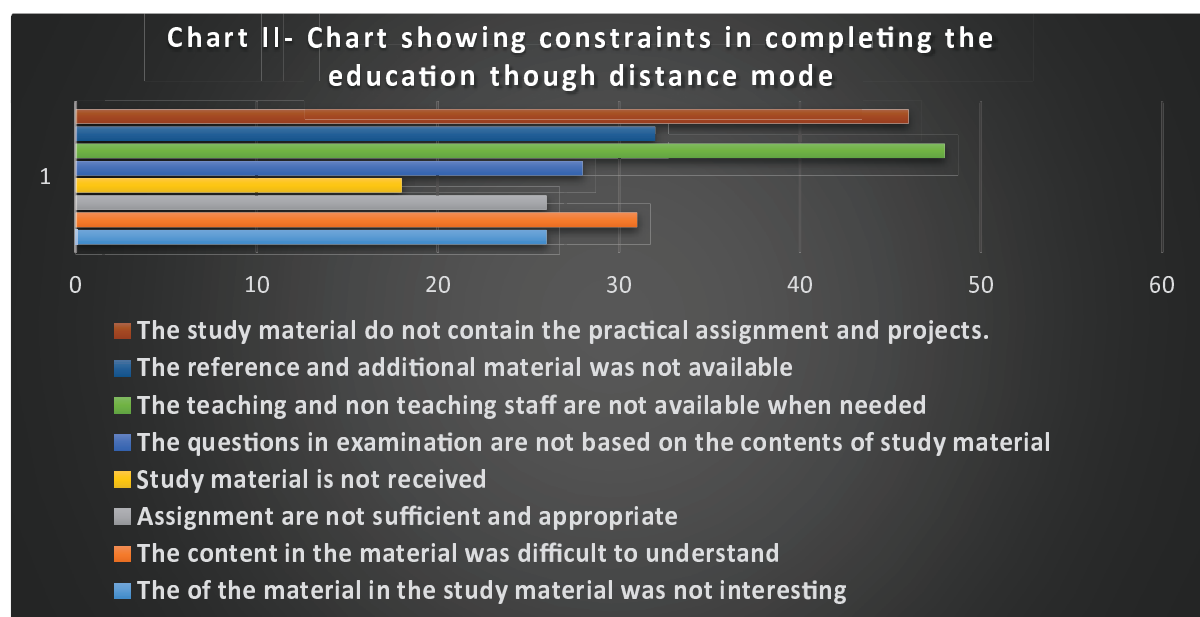Education in Distance Mode**
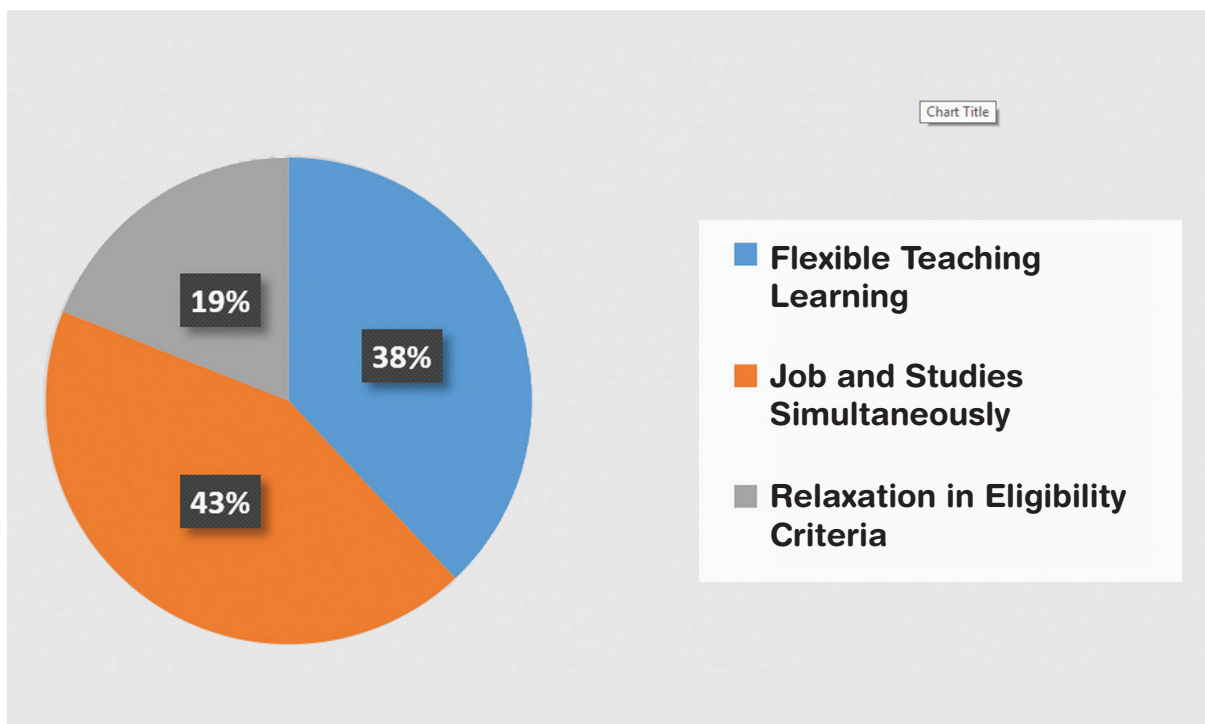
The specific goals when investigated it is found that most of the respondents' i.e. 56% respondents 'goal was to get a job; 31% said to continue their education; and 13% were to get promotion (career advancement).

Motivation and Constraints in the Successful Programme Completion

The motivations to complete the education through distance education are also investigated, it is found that 58% of the respondents narrated that their determination helped them to complete their respective programmes. However, a few respondents i.e. 14% informed that the course exactly met their personal needs, which motivated them to complete the programme. Rest of the respondents expressed that other factors like their professional compulsion, support at home, and support from the institute helped and motivated them to complete their course through distance education.

The following chart II shows constraints faced by the students in completing the education through distance mode. Students were allowed to give multiple responses for this question.

Chart II- Chart showing constraints in completing the education though distance mode

- The study material do not contain the practical assignment and projects.
- The reference and additional material was not available
- The teaching and non teaching staff are not available when needed
- The questions in examination are not based on the contents of study material
- Study material is not received
- Assignment are not sufficient and appropriate
- The content in the material was difficult to understand
- The of the material in the study material was not interesting

Perception towards Employability

Students' perception about employability through distance education was found to be unclear. The respondents are found very confused about their opinion regarding employability of their degree. 41% students feel that they may not have good employment opportunity after completing the course they are doing at present. According to them they were not counselled properly and that resulted in selection of unsuitable and outdated course. As against this 45% are very much sure about the good employment opportunities after finishing their course and remaining are still confused therefore neutral about employment opportunities after finishing their education through distance mode. Therefore education institutes dealing in distance education should take necessary steps to remove this dilemma and assure the students about the possible employment opportunities along with their technical loopholes.

Conclusion

From the above analysis it is found that most of the respondents joined distance education option to enhance employment opportunities yet by adopting flexible learning option. They perceive the option of distance education as good option to continue their education comparatively at lesser cost by simultaneously perusing their career. Few candidates found unsatisfied as their objective is not fulfilled due to inadequate counselling. No evidence is found proving the ability of distance education in enhancing the employability. It is also identified that typical distance education will no longer useful in higher education. Universities need to identify and incorporate the necessary changes in the distance education model to enhance its employability.

One has to be careful in using distance education strategies for skill development, because there has to be greater physical participation and involvement of the target groups of the

population in skill generation. These types of skills are available in industries, and they can be demonstrated to different target groups of learners through suitable ICT interventions. Using ICT in ODL will help update the existing skills of learners and also generate new skills among them. Further education can raise the employment opportunities in many ways, as it helps develop the necessary skills, attitude and motivation to match opportunities-wage-employment as well as self-employment. In our study, most of the students perceived that they will utilise their degree in pursuing higher education, and will also eventually get a job.

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