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Sustaining and Enhancing the Quality of ODL

Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning (SCDL), Pune, is one of the largest autonomous distance learning educational institution in India. In this day and age, distance learning looks beyond traditional reference books and course-end assessments. Online and Distance Learning (ODL) is the need of the hour in a young country such as India, as it makes higher education available to aspiring youth as well as adult learners, and reaches out to the unreached in the remotest corners of this vast nation. It is one of the best modes of increasing the GER in higher education at almost one fifth the cost. ODL institutions are in a sense great contributors to the national cause of making available higher education to the physically, socially, financially and locationally challenged youth of our country. Technology is a game-changer as it has brought about a paradigm shift in the teaching-learning and evaluation pedagogies and facilitated this process.

Although distance education is considered one of the most relevant options available to us, to improve the status of higher education, there are some critical quality-related issues which need to be addressed. Therefore, the central theme of the inaugural issue of the peer-reviewed, refereed, international, interdisciplinary, bi-annual research journal of Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning is 'Sustaining and Enhancing the Quality of ODL'.

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Revamping Distance Learning in India: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

The article reviews the contemporary relevance of Distance Learning and attempts to unravel the challenges that it confronts in the present scenario. Identifying the huge potential that Distance Learning offers, the article considers several practical problems such as commercialization, absence of interpersonal communication, the lukewarm attitude of the authorities, corruption and the inability to use technology in modernizing and popularizing education through the distance mode. Distance Learning has the potential to become the major provider of higher education in India if it succeeds in assuring quality.

Key Words: Distance Learning, Quality, ICT, Women Empowerment

Introduction

Distance Learning is one of the most popular and rapidly growing fields of education today. In an era of lifelong learning, Distance Education becomes a natural choice for millions who desire to upgrade their knowledge from time to time to cope with the drastic and revolutionary changes happening in every field of study. Technological advancements have altered beyond recognition the educational scenario during the past few decades. Strongly linked with developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), it has the potential to generate new patterns of teaching and learning. These types of innovations in mainstream education may even have effects beyond the realm of education itself. In this era of globalization, institutional and inter governmental cooperation is increasing and the concept of 'global class room' has been realized. Mass education is accepted as the motto of the democratic governments. In this context, distance education has a crucial role in the global knowledge-based society. In a country like India Distance Learning attains added significance as the mainstream educational institutions with limited number of seats most often fail to cater to the increasing demand for higher education. In this context, the present paper attempts to examine the major issues and challenges in revamping Distance Learning in India.

Methodology

The paper is a kind of a survey of the condition of Distance Learning in India focusing on the issues and challenges that it confronts in the contemporary situation. For identifying the issues and to suggest remedies, we have used secondary materials on distance learning from various sources cited in the References section. The study is descriptive and not empirical in nature.

Origin and Growth of Distance Education in India

In India, Open and Distance Education has its beginning in the form of correspondence education. The first school of correspondence courses was started by University of Delhi in 1962. The Education Commission (1964-66) also recommended the expansion of correspondence education in India. Consequently UGC formulated guidelines for introducing correspondence courses in Indian Universities. The success of Delhi University's endeavour in distance education motivated other universities also to introduce distance education courses. Some Open Universities such as Andhra Pradesh Open University (Dr. B R Ambedkar Open University), Maharashtra Open University, Karnataka State Open University etc. were established. In 1985 the Government of India decided to set up Indira Gandhi Open University (IGNOU) as an apex

Open University to coordinate and monitor Open Universities and distance education institutions. The establishment of IGNOU was an important mile stone in the history of higher education in India. The National Education Policy of 1986 and the revised National Policy on Education formulated in 1992 emphasized that flexibility and innovativeness of ODL is particularly suitable to the diverse requirements of citizens in our country. At present, distance education accounts for nearly 20% of total enrolment in the Indian higher education system. There are 10 open universities and 90 dual mode institutes offering higher education (Knowledge Commission, 2009). All these institutions are providing access to higher education to large segments of population, particularly to the disadvantaged groups living in remote areas.

Faced with new training demands and new competitive challenges, more and more traditional universities are rapidly transforming themselves from single mode to dual mode universities. They have recognized the importance of distance education in providing students with the best and most up to date educational resources available in addition to the traditional methods of teaching. While overcoming the deficiencies of conventional system such as inadequacy of facilities, lack of access to deprived groups and areas, and high costs of education, distance education has the potential to create knowledge revolution and universalize higher education. By widening the base of human capital formation, distance education accelerates the pace of economic development also.

The report of UNESCO International Commission on Education for the 21st Century suggested that each university should become an open university offering possibilities for distance learning and learning at various points of time. In India, a number of factors including advancements in technology, liberalization, privatization and globalization have amplified the demand for open and distance learning. To have a greater understanding of the potential of distance learning, it is essential to examine the opportunities offered by it more realistically.

Opportunities

The emergence of new forms of distance learning, based on recent developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), has significant pedagogical, economic and organizational implications. Distance learning focuses on freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offers flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. The rationale of open and distance learning, right from the very beginning itself, has been to open opportunity for learners to study regardless of geographic, socio-economic or other constraints. Distance learning programmes allow for increased access to learning and encourage life-long learning. In this educational process, most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print. Technology is the principal means of communication in distance learning while teachers in conventional class rooms use technology as a supplement to their teaching.

Potential

The opportunities associated with distance education have exploded along with increased use of internet. Initially distance education institutions used printed materials, but majority of current programmes use online software and programs to replicate a classroom setting. Advances in Research and Development (R&D) in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) resulted in the emergence of new methods of teaching and learning in the field of distance education. Now, students have access to experts and tremendous volume of online databases. Instead of searching for hours through card catalogs and library stacks, students can utilize online search engines to find countless articles and research databases within seconds. More and more internet users are uploading and sharing audio-visual data on the social networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs, etc. Internet is the largest library with large access to information, knowledge, case studies and resources. ICT tools like e-mail, e-conferencing, e-journals, e-books, e-newsletters, online discussion forums, virtual class rooms etc. have enhanced the scope of distance learning and have proved to be more powerful than

previous technologies. The Universities across the globe are coming up with e-resources with video footage of lectures, talks, discussions, etc. With the evolution of e-mail and internet chat rooms, instructor-student contact has been strengthened. This fosters a better educational experience for the distance learner.

Flexibility

One of the primary advantages of distance education is the flexibility it provides to students. It meets the needs of students who are unable to attend regular courses due to distance or time constraints. As most of the distance learning classes are asynchronous, students need not attend a lecture at a particular time and place. Many online educational programmes allow the learner to work at his own pace and schedule. Since distance learning enables self-paced learning, it is of great advantage to slow learners. But access to technology can be an impediment in countries like India where the rural folk are still not exposed to the Internet technology. Efforts shall be made to provide free internet facility and spread E literacy.

Cost

Most often distance education is considerably cheaper than conventional education. The student can learn from the comfort of his own home and need not pay for accommodation and transportation. Many estimates suggest that, in comparison with traditional courses, special tuition for distance education programmes is typically three to four times lower. However the commercialization is rampant in this field as well challenging the claim for 'openness.' Strong intervention from the part of the Government is essential to rescue distance learning from the hands of the 'business groups.'

Interaction

Lack of interaction between students and teachers has been considered as one of the main disadvantages of distance education. Many distance education institutions have developed online forums or chat rooms for students to share ideas and communicate among themselves and with their teachers. These interactions definitely enable them to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Social Benefits

Distance learning has several social benefits also. While pursuing distance learning, the learner need not leave his surroundings and can maintain his personal, cultural, and social lifestyle. The learner's circle of comfort is maintained with out any additional stress. Distance education offers opportunities for those with family responsibilities (eg. parents with young children at home). Online classes also address physical accessibility issues that some people with restricted mobility (eg. handicapped, injured, elderly) encounter while attending traditional classes. The distance learner can transfer the computer and internet skills that he acquires during the process of distance learning experience to other facets of life also.

Women Empowerment

The need for empowerment arises from the inability of an individual or a group of people to actualize their dreams and reach their greatest potentials due to barriers created by individuals and other groups within the society. As compared with their male counterparts, women lack power. Education is one of the most important means of empowering women. Through open and distance education, benefits of education can be effectively transmitted to women who were previously denied access due to social and cultural considerations. Distance mode of learning is particularly suitable for women.

Major Challenges

Along with the unprecedented expansion of open and distance learning, some critical issues are also emerging in this field. Poor quality of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes is a major source of concern for policy makers, practitioners, and stakeholders engaged in distance education. While large enrolment is considered as the goal of ODL, the question of quality is not given as much attention as it deserves. There is a prevailing misconception that there exists an inverse relation between access and quality. Many consider that increased access leads to quality degeneration. Often, resource mobilization rather than quality improvement is given first priority. In many universities revenue generated from distance education is not used for progress of distance

education institutions, but instead used for improving the conventional education wing of the institutions (Knowledge Commission, 2009). Often, ODL is looked down upon and is treated as second class education. Moreover, ODL institutions offer the same courses offered by the formal system and, therefore, they have the same rigidities with regard to admissions and examinations. Lack of co-ordination among various distance education institutions is another important problem. Often, this results in duplication of effort and wastage of resources.

Loss of student motivation due lack of face-to-face contact with instructors and other learners is another serious problem (Sheeja, 2011). This often results in high dropout rates unless there are regular learner support activities by the ODL institution. The issue of assessment students–i.e. knowing whether the learners have achieved the learning objectives–is a difficult task in distance education as the teachers do not get enough opportunity to interact with the students. There are some problems related to technology also. Developments in ICT offer both opportunities as well as challenges for distance education. Instructors of ODL need to be trained to incorporate technology in the instructional methods. Technicians also have a great role in the instructional process. Equipment & hardware malfunctions can pose a great serious threat to the effectiveness of distance learning. Frequent occurrence of such problems interrupts the entire learning environment. Distance learning requires sufficient infrastructural facilities to ensure that training material reaches the learner. Adequate telecommunication and internet facilities are required for the effective functioning of the distance education system. Even today most of the distance learning institutions use only the print medium & not multi- media for dissemination of knowledge. Leaning is most effective when it is the learner's full time job. While pursuing a career, it is very difficult to learn thoroughly. Hence, it has been argued that distance learning is not as effective as conventional education. Products of distance education have been considered as inferior to those produced in the conventional system of education.

Limited Inter-personal Relations

In the traditional classroom, a skilled teacher can use her/his understanding of the audience in the process of teaching. Participant's reactions can be monitored through observation of body language, verbal response, eye contact, etc. All these can be efficiently utilized to create an effective learning experience. In a distance learning setting, instructors have little or no knowledge or contact with the audience as they prepare and deliver instructional lessons. Online instructors also experience limited interaction with students whether the class is taught synchronously or asynchronously. Most of the faculty members are trained in 'hand to hand' teaching. They are accustomed to direct engagement with the students and the factor which prompted them to pursue an academic career might be the enjoyment of working with students. Personal interaction with students is one of the most gratifying aspects of teaching. An opportunity to see the spark of understanding beginning to glow in the eyes of a student, who has been struggling with a concept, is the greatest reward for many teachers. Hence, lack of direct interpersonal contact with students is an issue for many teachers engaged in distance education. In the process of tele-courses or internet courses there may not be any direct contact or feedback to help the instructors to gauge the clarity of their communication. Student feedback in distance learning is often delayed and indirect. Even instructors in interactive distance learning situations face limited interpersonal contact, and must readjust the manner in which they assess the response and understanding of students.

In a traditional classroom setting, a student's performance can be immediately assessed through questions and informal testing. Within distance learning, students have to wait for feedback until the instructor has reviewed their work and responded to it. Moreover, distance learning does not give students the opportunity to work on oral communication skills. Students in distance learning courses do not get the practice of verbal interaction with professors and other students. Distance learners may feel isolated or miss the social interaction that comes with attending a traditional classroom. However, advances

and use of communication technologies such as bulletin boards, threaded discussions, chats, e-mail and conferencing can be effectively used to reduce the intensity of this problem to some extent. While some centres of distance learning have made committed efforts to tackle the problem of limited inter personal relations with the incorporation of technological advancements, many others have paid scant attention towards this issue.

Quality

The question of quality is very important as far as distance education is concerned. Concerns have been expressed by both proponents and opponents of distance learning regarding quality. In higher education, quality of instruction is measured in many ways. Quality must include access to resources such as library, labs, and faculty. Quality should also include scope for effective development of personality through interaction with teachers and other students. Both of these quality issues are areas in which distance learning has been vulnerable to criticism. Large enrolment was considered as the goal and an achievement of distance education institutions while the question of quality was not given as much attention as it deserved. This kind of attitude actually deteriorated the quality of many distance education institutions. Hence, one of the major challenges for the distance learning institutions is maintaining high standards of the programmes. There is great difficulty in recommending a universally acceptable quality assurance strategy because the issues surrounding distance education, the background of the students, the extent and level of programmes covered etc. vary from one institution to another. Even a single institution includes a complex community of students with varying levels of capability & background.

The institutions need to carry out periodic audits of their programmes through which they can identify their strengths and weaknesses. Audit should cover areas like teaching effectiveness, assessment of courses and lecturers, quality of learning materials, capacity development etc. In order to assure quality there is a need to look into existing student support services being provided at the pre-entry stage, during the course and after the course. Major problems being faced by distance learners while pursuing their studies relate to 'availability of learning material and its quality', 'library facilities', 'assignment evaluation and feedback', 'conduct and quality of personal contact programmes', 'examination related issues' etc. These services which can be classified as academic and non academic, must be discussed from the learners' perspective and some suggestions must be evolved to strengthen these services rendered by the institution.

The availability of adequate and effective training to faculty is also a requirement to improve the quality of distance education. Proper induction courses must be given to newly appointed teachers. Faculty development workshops are essential to introduce faculty to distance education technology and to the changes in pedagogical approach needed to the effective conduct of distance education classes.

Technological Innovations

Technology has the potential to address many challenges in the field of higher education. Distance Learning institutions need to move up technologically by incorporating the latest developments in ICT. Adoption of latest technological developments in the field of distance education changes the way in which instruction is delivered. This requires new skills for both the instructor and the student. Absorption of innovations shifts the educational experience from 'teacher-centered' to 'learner-centered'. Instructors become more facilitators or intermediaries between the students and the resources they need for their own independent study. However, it is very distressing that most of the institutions offering distance learning courses do not provide any special training to faculty members in technological innovations that can be incorporated in distance learning. While introducing any instructional innovation, distance education institutions must ensure that they do not have a negative impact on the quality of instruction. Innovations should enhance quality. Despite many opportunities being offered by technological innovations, there are inevitable accompanying costs also, e.g. the learner must own a computer with internet connection for online learning.

Motivation

Increase in the number of dropouts is a very serious problem experienced by most of the distance education Centres. Many students complain that it is difficult to stay motivated without having to attend a class every day. Since most online programmes are self-paced, it can be easy to lose motivation and dropout rates tend to be higher for distance education. According to an estimate, the dropout rate for distance education programmes is 35 percent as compared to only 20 percent for traditional colleges and universities. It has been argued that independent, motivated and goal-oriented individuals are the best fit for distance education.

Reputation

Programmes offered by some leading distance education institutions are just as well-recognized as courses of traditional colleges. However, some employers are not impressed by degrees obtained through distance education. Learners must always try to choose distance learning centres with good reputation. Students should be careful to avoid institutions that are not accredited or claim to offer degrees with in only a few months.

Job Market Requirements and Orientation to Students

Designing teaching and learning strategies which caters to the needs of all aspirants is a laborious task. Distance education institutions must foresee the varied and exacting demands of the future workplaces. They must try to introduce new job - oriented courses. Switching over to the distance method does not mean that the learners have acquired those skills needed for success in distance learning. Inability to grasp the basic difference between the traditional and novel methods causes confusion in their minds and influences their academic performance. A short term orientation course is required to train the students the skills and attitudes needed for effective distance learning.

Corruption

Just as in other fields of social life the emergence of corruption is an impediment to the effective delivery of education and a great threat to our higher education system. Typical corrupt behavior, to list a few includes absenteeism, acceptance of bribes and utilization of public property for private purposes, excessive political interference, favoritism, lack of professional integrity etc. Dramatic increase in the number of private education providers and commercialization of many aspects of higher education resulted in a variety of corrupt practices. Corruption distorts both the quality and availability of education services. As our nation's competitiveness in the global economy depends on the quality of education provided by our higher education institutions, costs of corruption in academics become enormous. Complete elimination of corrupt practices is essential for the very survival of institutions working under traditional and non traditional streams of education. While there is consensus among the academicians regarding the incidence of corruption in education system, documentation relating to the measures designed to combat corruption is still relatively little.

Findings

Distance mode of education is most suitable for a country like India with a vast area and huge population. But the educational agencies who actively engage in this field often fail to keep up with the declared aims and objectives of distance learning. It is true that Distance Education Institutions are often used for raising financial resources by the Universities especially in the context of financial crunch faced by the Universities. One of the major weaknesses of distance learning in India today is the absence of strict control and proper guidelines to keep away the commercialization of distance education to the extent possible.

Conclusion

Distance Learning, one of the most flexible methods of learning, has the potential to become the most popular mode of education in the near future. It is true that the immense opportunities offered by this mode of study remain dormant even now and the agencies involved in the dissemination of knowledge are often blind to its use in the popularization of higher education in India. On the other hand commercialization and corruption rule this domain making it extremely fragile

and prone to divergent forms of corruption. The need of the hour is the enhancement of quality in distance learning and curbing corruption and commercialization. It is indeed a welcome sign that the government has initiated steps in this direction by appointing Dr. Madhava Menon Committee to suggest measures to regulate the standard of education being imparted through distance mode. However, proper implementation of the guidelines suggested by the Committee and continuous monitoring of the functioning of the distance education institutions become essential to ensure quality and social justice in this field.

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Utilization of Ideas Discovered in Academic Conference as a Key to Good Governance in Open and Distance Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

Open and distance education has become a veritable tool for provision of quality education and equity in educational opportunities aimed at meeting the needs of its participants. The instructors of open and distance education ensures that success is achieved through shared responsibility and close participation. Recognition of the value of open and distance education as a key growth driver for socio-economic development has increased the need for good governance. Addressing governance is critical to achieving the millennium Development Goals. It is fundamental to all poverty reduction efforts so that it can yield a powerful development dividend, enhance people's rights - the right to security, to a decent life, to basic services such as education, health and clean water, the right to vote, to organize and freely express opinions, and the right to be treated with respect, to seek redress and to due process in law (Irish Aid, 2010). Thousand of conferences are organized each day all over the world to build capacity for good governance. Millions of academic conferences are organized each year to identify emerging issues that may hinder good governance, but national organizations often fail to utilize the ideas discovered in these Academic conferences. This has continued to be counterproductive in promoting sustainable development in programmes, especially in Open and Distance education where its mode and learners are unique. After analysis of data collected through questionnaire and in-depth interview from three tertiary institutions, the result indicate that little attention is paid to these ideas discovered and it is hardly utilized. The author therefore argued that utilization of ideas discovered and how it is being implemented or utilized by the society (0keen, 1998) is a key to good governance in open and distance education.

Key Words: *Open Learning, Distance Education, Academic Conference, Governance, Socio-Economic and Development.*

Introduction

For several decades, there has been an increasing use of conferences to bring academicians and intellectuals in a field to discourse theory, concepts, definitions, prepositions, and observations of facts organized in such a way as to describe the interrelationships among variables for the purpose of explaining and predicting the outcome of such relationships (Ndagi, 1999). Conferences are usually organized either by a scientific society or by a group of researchers with a common interest. Larger meetings may be handled on behalf of the scientific society by professional Conferences organizers (Aronowitz, 2010). Conferences are usually filled with various presentations. They tend to be short and concise, with time span of about 10 to 30minutes; they are usually followed by a discussion. The work may be bundled in written form as academic paper and published as conference proceedings. Usually a conference will include keynotes speakers (often, scholar of some standing, but sometimes individuals from outside academia) (4). Conferences may or may not always be academics.

Academic conferences are for researches to present and discuss their work together, it provides an important channel for exchange of information between researchers (web definitions, 2010). Academic conferences fall into three categories: the themed conference, small conferences organized around a particular topic; the general conference, a conference with a wider focus, with sessions

on a wide variety of topics. These conferences are often organized by regional, national, or international learned societies and held annually or on some other regular basis. The theme and sub-theme may be organized around identified challenges to find solutions or to enable sharing the success stories of other countries practices that worked. In academic conferences, position papers and research findings from scientific method of inquiry involving a systematic and intensive process of verifying knowledge that will help to achieve educational goal are presented. The findings of many research helps mankind to understanding the universe, improve practice and promote policy (Creswell, 2012).

Academic conferences are therefore for researchers whose paper presentations are to discourse the both (qualitative and quantitative) systematic and intensive process utilized in carrying out their researches (Ehiametalor & Nwadiani, 2002), directed toward discovery and development of an organized body of knowledge (Bryman, 2012) and conditions under which a phenomenon can or cannot exist or occur (Ehiametalor & Nwadiani, 2002). Academic conferences also present "activities of solving problems which leads to new knowledge using methods of inquiry which are currently accepted as adequate by scholars in the field (Hemstadters, 1970) solving these problems may result to definitive control of the events causing the problems (Johnson, 1997). It may therefore be right to postulate that academic conferences exposes participants to various ideas that can help in improving teaching-learning processes, instructional material and its proper administration.

Consequently, academic conference helps in the generation of solutions to educational problem and research in education enables discovery of generalizations relating to the various aspects of education. These generalizations enable us to make decisions on what to do, how it should be done and what to avoid in the process… (Ehiametalor & Nwandiani, 2002). Such tested knowledge further contributes to solving the problems of what should be done in education (Ehiametalor

& Nwandiani, 2002). Such was the outcome of the World conference on education held in 1990 in Jometien, Thailand, where the movement called Education For All (EFA) was launched. In 1993, a group of nine high population countries, namely Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, and Pakistan gathered in New Delhi, India, under the sponsorship of UNESCO, UNICEF and United Nation's Population Fund (UNFPA). These nine countries accounted for a large percentage of the population of the world, more than 70% of the World's illiterates and more than 50% of its out-of-school children. Leaders of these countries reaffirmed their commitment to pursuing the goals set in 1990 by the World conference on Education. Through this way, conferences not only expose new problems but also generate tested knowledge and new knowledge that is vital for human existence and development (Kerlinger, 1966). In fact, it sheds light to challenges limiting educational development.

It is also very essential for ensuring a meaningful, analysis of local needs and assets, capturing local knowledge, gathering and analyzing lessons learned by other countries, understanding the complex interplay of local and international factors pinning a society in poverty and generating knowledge and solutions tailored to a country's reality (UPCD, 2007). So, the research findings enables nations to adapt modify and domesticate truth and insights for local use. These have made it possible for most countries to tap the ideas and improve their expertise, build capacity to generate and adapt knowledge to development and education challenges. Universities worldwide are key agents in building strong economics and societies through knowledge and expertise derived from academic research (Morris, 2007). Most governments have recognized that a highly educated workforce and investments in research helps in generating innovative ideas for economic growth, implying that research in higher education is essential for building vibrant economics and good governance in developing countries (Morris, 2007). Recognition of the value of education in promoting literacy and reducing

poverty has led to the development of open and distance education and developing governance capacity, all helps build the foundation for prosperity.

Like conventional school, open and distance education offer skills and knowledge to develop all sectors of society and manage development effectively (UPCD, 2007). It is the training ground for future political and business leaders, policy makers and professional, and continuing professional development. It fosters the intellectual leadership and good governance skills necessary to drive development (UPCD, 2007). Through this mode, there has been an increase in socio-economic and cultural power of people who can work either part-time or full-time and still attend school. Open and distance learning has transformed the use of technology (from e-learning to m-learning and gradually to u-learning), thereby increasing the socio-economic assess of its learners. Open and distance education in many countries have recorded massive results and this has led to its diversification to many other areas, thereby creating more need for struggle to meet up with competitive environment. But, to some institutions progress is hampered by lack of good governance to coordinate the constant changes in the world.

For a society to be able to survive and prosper, it must be able to adapt to continuing changes in its environment. The global environment is changing dramatically; yet, the societal ability to adapt to societal changes is varies from one to another. In societies where there is effective government (governments that govern) within a democratic system, the government is better equipped in adapting to new situations. However, others may be less prepared. Basically, what is required by societies at present time is: effective government (good governance), meaningful public participation (democratic system) and, adherence to sustainable development principles (World Bank and UNDP, 2002). Some societies have the capability and means to assist others because of their experience, working knowledge, as well as available resources. Therefore, a proactive effort to

achieve such conditions should become prime vehicle for global cooperation (World Bank and UNDP, 2002). As developed countries move towards increased trade liberalization and knowledge-based economies, developing countries must be ready with their own advocates in international trade liberalization. To develop such knowledge-based economies has made open and distance education an important channel through which nations can achieve their objectives.

The success of open and distance education has been the concern of many organization, for several decades now, especially those that perceive education as a key to achieving socio-economic development in a sustainable way. COL and its international partners (COL's partners include other Commonwealth agencies, members of the UN System (UNESCO, UNICEF, UNIFEM, UNDP and the World Bank), national and regional distance education associations and industry), are helping in advancing Open and Distance Learning into the mainstream of education and training throughout the Commonwealth. COL is helping developing nations increase their capacity to meet growing demand for access to quality education and training; in the learning community, COL has heightened awareness to, and increased acceptance of, alternative methods of educational delivery and ICT use. COL has worked to optimize the efficient transfer of information, ideas, innovations and resources supporting Open and Distance Learning (COL, 2008). Since COL began operations in 1989, it has: helped introduce, or enhance, hundreds of teaching/training programmes in more than 40 countries; influenced the conception and development of open schools and universities; conducted training, seminars and studies on specific educational needs; established an extensive network of education and technology specialists around the world; and facilitated systemic changes in the delivery of education and influenced government policy (COL, 2008). COL is also supporting and funding conferences, seminars, and workshops, of which Nigeria as a nation has benefited a lot from COL's initiatives and good governance.

Despite all these, according to official records, Nigeria remains the only E-9 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) facing serious challenges of turning around the illiteracy rate among its youths and adults by the 2050 timeline set to achieve education for all (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The link between literacy rate and the level of economic development in any society has long been established. While societies with high literacy rate are likely to boast of developed economies, countries with poor literacy rate as found in Sub Saharan Africa are likely to be among the least developed economies. Therefore, the need to fast track economic development appears to be behind efforts made to raise the literacy rate in the country. According to experts, once illiteracy is successfully eradicated, other development challenges including poverty, disease and ignorance would be easily addressed (Udonquak, 2010). Realising that it is likely to be a difficult task to achieve 100 percent enrolment in the formal education sector and at the same time tackling the challenge of making over 70 million adult illiterates to be literate.

In the search for solution, Rufai, the minister for education in Nigeria, asserts "If we plan to get our people out of poverty, to join the global information super highway and hope to be counted among countries with developed systems in science and technology and a force to be reckoned with in the world's socio economic and political arena, we must empower our people through acquisition of literacy and numeracy" (Abubakar, 2010). Recognition of these ought to make Nigerian government to radically improve open and distance education but instead its problems are relegated to the background. There are recommendations and suggestions from various conferences in regional, national and international level but there is little or no implementation yet. Presently, there is a growing debate that Nigeria's poor progress is due to lack of good governance. Governance is a continuous and dynamic process, expanding and contracting as people, groups of people, or nations, are expanding and contracting their areas of common interests and objectives, activities, and interactions (UNDP, 2010). Governance can also be seen as both processes and arrangements that ensure orderliness, acceptable standard of allocation of resources (both human and material) and a legal framework within which national behaviours are shaped and controlled.

Good governance on its own refers to "broad reform strategy and a particular set of initiatives to strengthen the institutions of civil society with the objective of making government more accountable, more open and transparent and more democratic" (Minogue, 1997).Governance becomes good when it responds to the basic needs, wishes and aspirations of the people, when it is based on sounds efficient organizational and operational, principles, when the entire process is transparent and accountable, whose consequences are understood and predictable, leadership, competence, political will, integrity and capacity are critical to the promotion of good governance(UNDESA,2010). Bad governance occurs when accountability and transparency are lacking, appropriate organizational and operational principles are not applied, and the leaders are greedy, rapacious, corrupt, incompetent, and insensitive to the needs, wishes and aspirations of the people (UNDESA, 2010).

Good governance deals with competency, efficiency and effective application of both human and material resource to achieve organizational goals. Competency entails the capacity to formulate policies and strategies; to make timely and strategic decisions with regard to the immediate issues and the long-term policy options that are likely to emerge to implement policy decisions including the management of the delivery of services competence entails the overall analytical capacity to identify the salient issues and formulate the appropriate policies, and to manage the governance processes in response to the needs, wishes, and aspirations of the people in a world that is rapidly changing (UNDESA, 2010). Efficiency entails, continuous upgrade of the various aspects of its institutional capacity making sure that they are effective and adaptable to change and new demands. This calls for continuous training and exposure to the demands of domestic changes and

needs as well as the global challenges and opportunity (UNDESA, 2010). Effectiveness will depend partly on individual capabilities, education, training, skills and experiences and partly on their legitimacy to produce an intended result through good leadership.

Conferences has been used to search for solutions to bad governance, this was practicalized in Liberia. The country utilized conferences, seminars and workshop as a means of achieving good governance. Liberia conducted a study emerging from all the readings of the reports of the symposia, conferences and workshops conducted since the inauguration of the new government shows that Liberia has experienced bad governance for a long time (UNDP, 1999). The findings has helped them to plan a new way for good governance. Good governance is obviously a very desirable thing, in-fact, it essential for the promotion of sustainable human development, peace, security, stability and prosperity. Good governance will have to be struggled for; and very hard at that, sincerely, consistently and for a very long time (UNDESA, 2010). Borrowing from four conditions put in place for good governance in Liberia, the Nigerian context in open and distance education may be as follows:

A. There has to be a thorough understanding of governance in ODL.

B. A sound and objective comprehension of the problems and causes that led to the occurrence of bad governance,

C. Assessment should be made to determine what is realistically needed to create condition for governance to take place.

D. The establishment of a clear understanding of the kind of leadership need and the political will to bring about good governance. Appropriate and extensive information to help found the solution and make decision to the achievement of the above can be gathered from conferences.

Although, successful governance is influenced by several factors which include socio-economic and political commitment; quality of leadership, character and form of government enlightenment and engaged civil society and government's administrative capacity (Adesida, 2001). Knowledge has now emerged as the crucial link for development. In an era of dwindling resources,… there is need to strategically utilize knowledge as a tool for development (CHEA, undated). On this basis academic conferences generate new knowledge and the utilization these ideas discovered will enhance decision-making process. This is because these ideas, when arranged ensure orderliness, acceptable standard of allocation of resource (human and material), management of a country's economic and social resources for development (Minoque, 1997, Cheema Maquire, 2004). Since good governance promotes sustainability, efficiency, effectiveness, participation in decision-making, the paper therefore argue that the utilization of ideas discovered in academic conferences to improve open and distance education in Nigeria, is key to good governance.

Rationale for the Study

The success of open and distance education depends on good governance. Good governance will involve a comprehensive coordination of well-designed delivery strategies to increase response to changes and programme implementation. This in turn is linked to how individuals in the organization are able to harness information available in decision-making process. Academic conference provides varieties of relevant information to enable rational decision-making process. This information is produced through utilizing quantitative and qualitative data collection process. Institutions, learners and communities must recognize the importance of academic conferences and utilize the ideas discovered as key to good governance. Open and distance education are confronted with lots of issues and challenges. These have hindered its development. Improving access, delivery and quality is critical to eliminate its perception as a second alternative. Furthermore, building its esteem is essential to increase management results to unsupportive environment. Academic conferences can be used to generate new knowledge and ideas to improve governance.

Problem of the Study

There are millions of academic conferences organized each year all over the world (Aronowitz, 2010), in these conferences, marketable ideas, creative innovations that ought to promote good governance and sustainable economic development stops at the laboratory doors of the researchers, consequently the recommendations and report findings dies without proper implementation (Okeen, 1998). Good governance is a product of knowledge, information, education, training, culture, traditions, experiences, natural endowments, motivations and commitment to goals (UNDESA, 2010). Academic conferences leads to the production of educative information, it trains participants directly or indirectly on how to adapt the acquired knowledge, skills and attitude to fit the socio-cultural environment bearing in mind the traditions and experiences of the people that may limit the success of its implementation. The utilization of these ideas enables placing the right people at the right position, which increases their motivation and commitment to the achievement of the set goals. When these are achieved, administrative governance which is concerned with the implementation of the decision, the institutional framework, knowledge, skills and experience of the personnel involved and the resources needed to ensure efficient and effective implementation of public policies, the supply of public services and the manner in which they are delivered becomes easily achievable (UNDESA, 2010). But these ideas are not always utilized; the implication is too slow pace of progress in open and distance learning, making sustainable development in socio-economic life of the people difficult to achieve.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to find out if the ideas discovered in academic conference are utilized in the institutions as a key to good governance. The objectives of the study therefore include the following:
• To determine the impact of academic conferences to good governance.
• To increase application of ideas discovered in these academic conference so as to improve Open and distance learning.
• To explore the reason for poor implementation of ideas discovered in academic conferences.
• To determine the inhibiting factors towards the implementation of these ideas.

Methodology

This was a Descriptive study carried out in Benin City between the month of September and November 2010. The study population was 180, made up of lecturers and administrative staffs selected from three universities in south-south, Nigeria. Letters A, B and C represents the three Universities. The simple random sampling technique was used to select 160 participants from the population. The Descriptive survey research design used to obtain data for the study, is a useful means for fact finding and as an acknowledged means of obtaining social facts and opinions and will help collection of accurate information on a short period of time (Borg & Gall, 1996). The main instrument for data collection was through the use of in-depth interview and a 10 items questionnaire. The in-depth interview was used to match their responses and check the reliability of the responses provides in the questionnaire. Out of the 160 questionnaires, participants completed only 120. Data was analyzed using simple frequency distribution.

Findings

Letters A, B and C represents the three Universities.

Values in the table below are in Percentage.

|		A Total 100		B Total 100		C Total 100	
	Questionnaire	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
1	Conference Attendance; National	87.5	12.5	95.0	5.0	35	65
2	Conference Attendance International.	25.0	75.0	42.5	57.5	30	70
3	Discovering ideas	97.5	2.5	100	0	94	6
4	Utilization of ideas	17.5	82.5	32.5	67.5	47.5	52.5
5	Application to governance	7.5	92.5	22.5	77.5	21.0	79
6	Consulting with others to implement ideas discovered	2.7	97.3	2.0	98.0	28.0	72.0
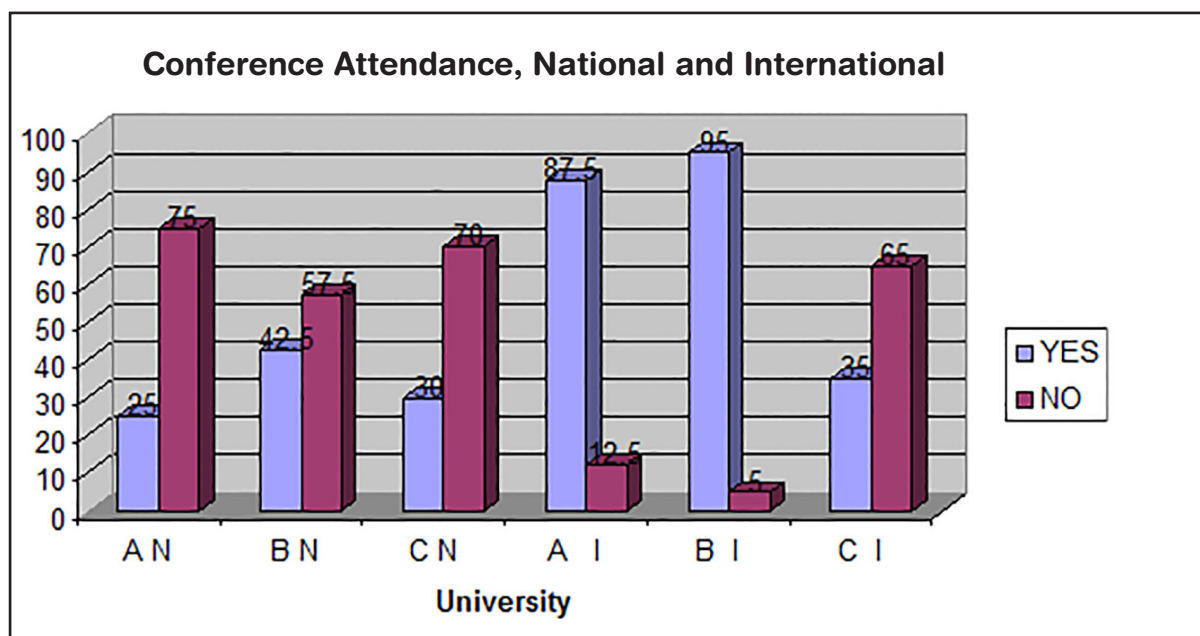
Figure 1

There is a low attendance of national conference by the three universities 25% Ua, 42.5% UB, AND 30% UC respectively compared with high attendance of international conferences 87.5% UA, 95% UB and 35%UC. This is clearly shown by universities A and B. (25%N, 87.5% I); University A (42.5%% N, 95.1% I); University B. The figure showed generally that majority of the respondents prefers to attend international conference than national conferences.
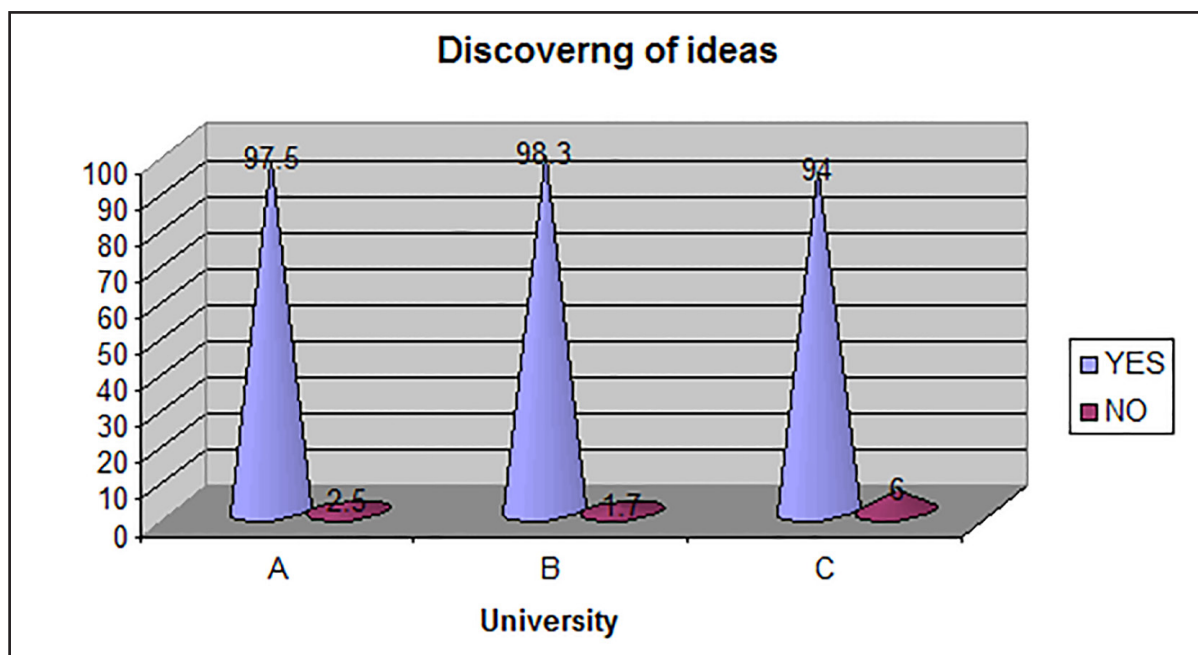
Figure 2

Figure 2 above clearly showed that there is high discovering of ideas by the respondents in all the three universities A, B, C. Majority of them discovered ideas in academic conferences UA (97.5%); UB (98.3%); UC (94%) respectively.
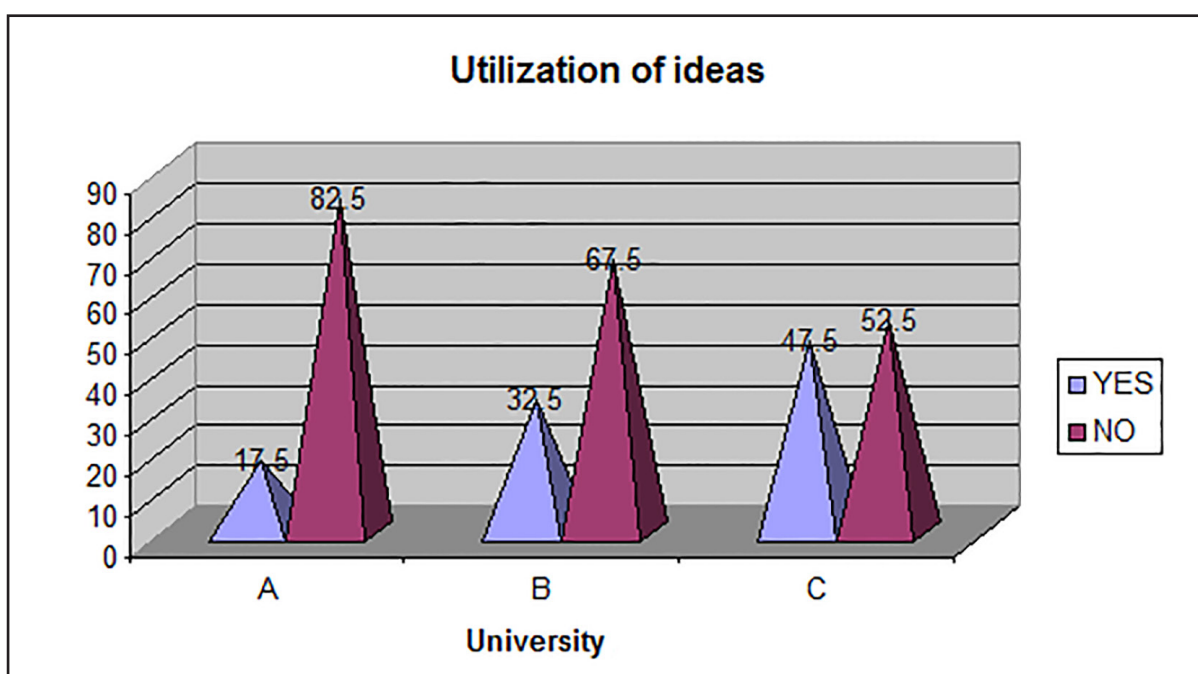

Figure 3

Figure 3 above shows poor utilization of ideas discovered during academic conferences by respondents in the three universities, especially universities A and B. 17.5%, University A; 33.5% university B and 47.5 % University C.
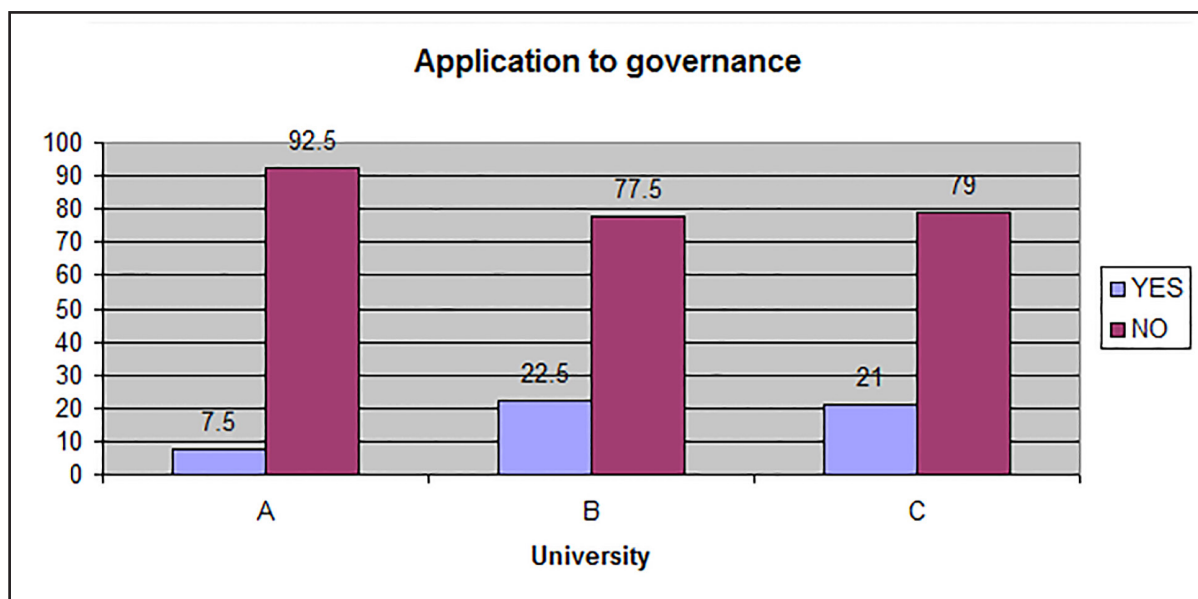
Figure 4

Figure 4 showed that there is very poor application of ideas discovered during academic conferences to governance by the entire respondents.7.5% UA, 22.5% UB, and 21% UC.
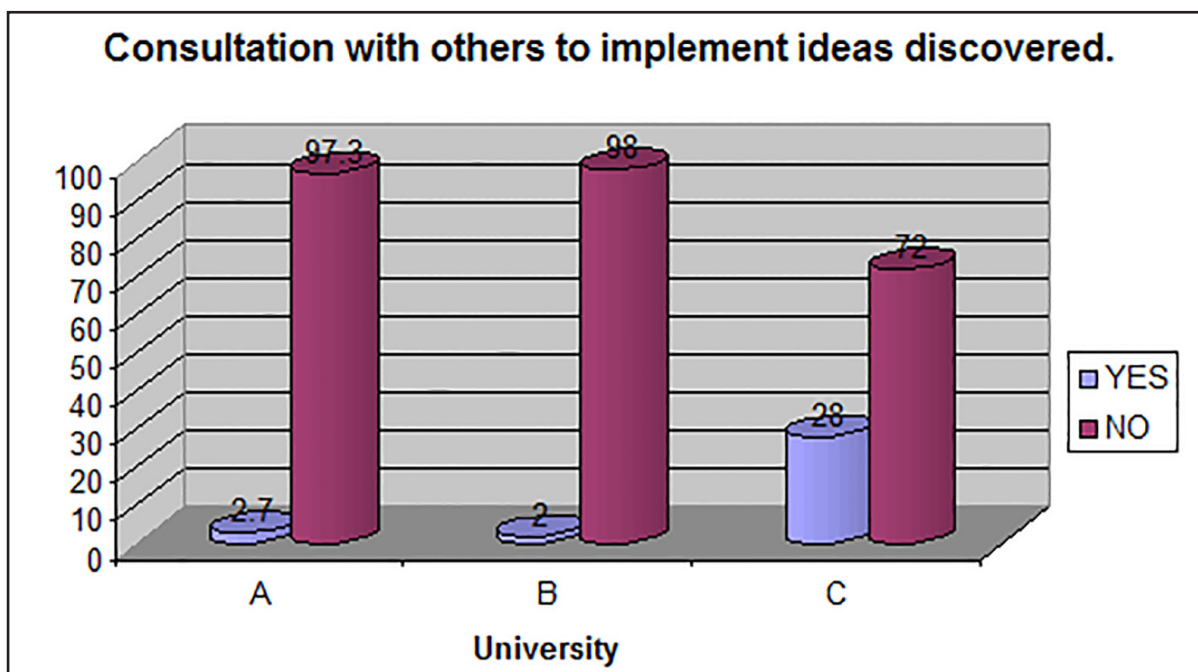

Figure 5

Figure 5 showed poor consultation with others to increase implantation of ideas discovered during academic conferences for UA (2.7%), 2% UB, 28% UC respectively.

Discussion

The findings from the study as shown in figure I, 2, 3, 4, and 5 revealed that the respondents in the three universities attended both national and international academic conferences, a high percentage of new ideas and knowledge are discovered but little attention is paid to implementation of these ideas. It is also evident that consultation with others to promote the implementation of the ideas is very low in three universities. This could be the reason behind poor application of ideas to promote good governance in open and distance education in Nigeria. These seems to agree with Okeen, (1998), assertion, who argued that a major weakness of the conferences by academics is that they end up with mere presentation of papers for which the academics would pat themselves at the back for a 'wonderful' paper, full stop. There are no follow through to know what has become of the ideas discovered and how it is being implemented or utilized by the society. The respondents also agreed that ideas are discovered in academic conferences, although it was poorly utilized, which make it insignificant. This is in line with the views of Minoque, 1997, Cheema Maquire, 2004, these ideas, when arranged ensure orderliness, acceptable standard of allocation of resource (human and material), management of a country's economic and social resources for development. Moreover, It is also possible that the motive for conference attendance could play an important role in its implementation (For instance, if the motive is to cause a change in the social and educational life of the people) implementation can be achieved, but if the motive is for publication of papers for professional upgrading and growth, then implementation will be very low. This in turn will underscore the benefits of academic conferences which are to enhance universities objectives which is teaching, research and community outreach.

Recommendation

The researcher therefore, intends to explore extensively the reasons behind poor utilization of ideas discovered in academic conference as a key to good governance across several universities in the countries and among conferences participants from others countries. Furthermore, an additional research is needed to explore delegate's intentions towards academic conferences, purposes and objectives, attitudes of delegates towards non- utilizations of ideas and recommendations by significant others. This will help in refocusing the objectives of conferences, on how the ideas and new knowledge discovered can be implemented to help develop the socio-economic life of the institutions and the people who were used as guinea pig for the research.

Conclusion

The study discovered that many academicians from these institutions attend conferences, discover new ideas but hardly implement it to achieve good governance. The promotion of socio-economic and sustainable development cannot be achieved without good governance. Good governance is a product of good leadership and good decision-making process. Conferences generate new ideas through its extensive exposure to information based on research findings and position papers; this is expected to aid decision making process, leadership style and governance. Good governance encourages member commitment to the decision and improvement of the quality of atmospheres; such creates conducive atmosphere, which ensures sustainable socio-economic development of the people and institutions. The author therefore argued that utilization of ideas discovered and how it is being implemented or utilized by the society (0keen, 1998) is a key to good governance in open and distance education.

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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.
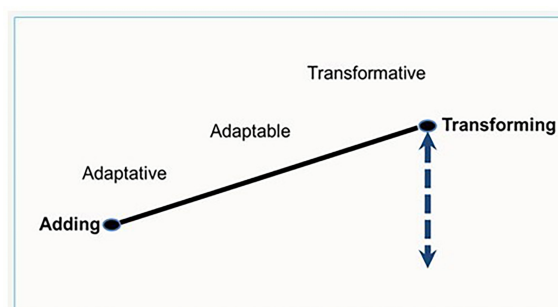

Figure 1. Enhancement continuum (Harvey, 1999, p. 16).

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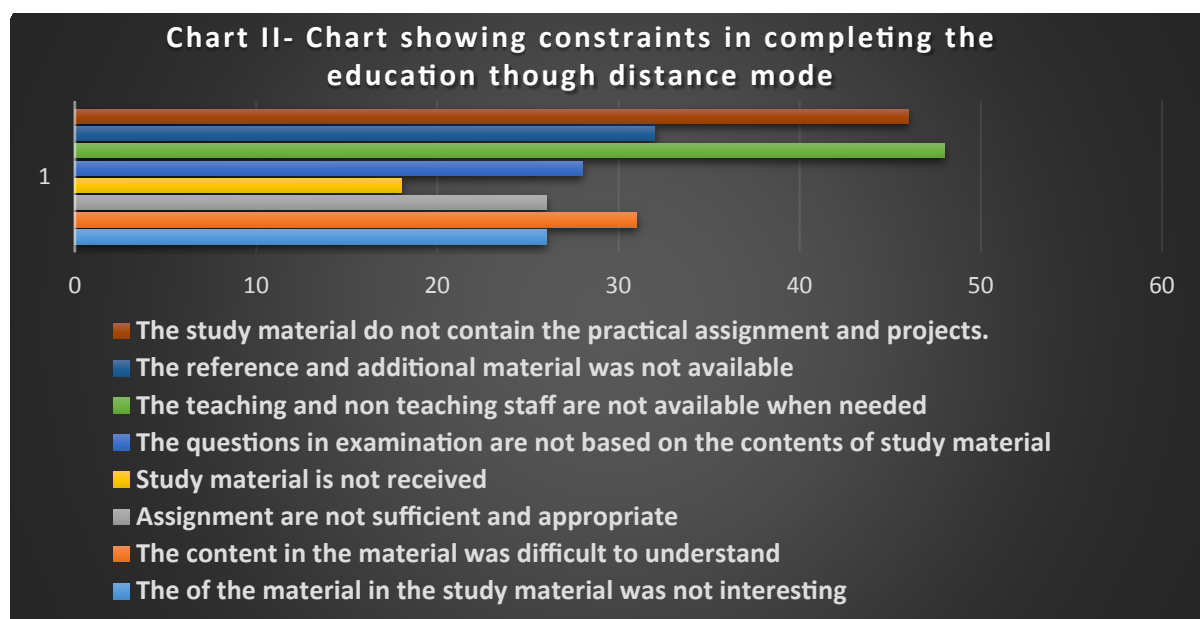Education in Distance Mode**
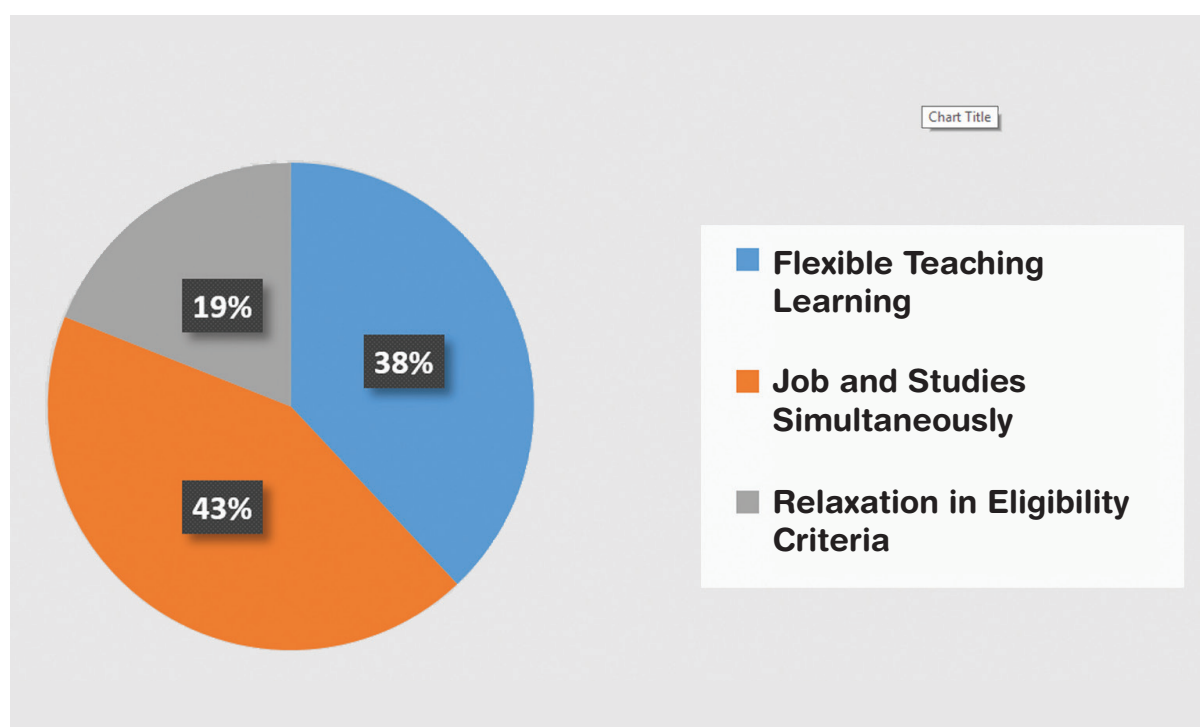
The specific goals when investigated it is found that most of the respondents' i.e. 56% respondents 'goal was to get a job; 31% said to continue their education; and 13% were to get promotion (career advancement).

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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Enhancing Quality in Distance Education

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Abstract

Distance Education is the mode of learning, where source of information and the students are separated by time and distance or both. The students mostly interact with teachers through online or through contact sessions. This type of education is the need of the day as major knowledge transformation is done through contact sessions, online sources; video conferencing and other methods also the students need not to leave their current assignments or job. Through the new techniques the students get more exposure to the current world and they enjoy the learning process. This paper throws a light on the four pillars of Distance Education and ways to enhance qualities in Distance Education.

Key Words: *Distance Education, Four Pillars, Quality Improvement, Online Education*

Introduction

Distance education is a mode of delivering education to the students, who may be guided through contact sessions or by the use of information technology. Many times students enrolled in distance education are not compulsorily had to be physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom. Distance education provides the access to learning where the source of information and the students (learners) are separated by time and distance or both. The recent developments in distance education include massive open online courses and open access via the web or other network technologies. Massive Open Online courses include large-scale interactive participation and open access via the web or other network technologies. Distributed Learning, e-learning, online learning are the other terms which are used synonymously with distance education. Distance education is the broadest term and has largest collection of research articles. The learner (student), through distance education enjoys a high degree of autonomy in deciding what, how and when to learn. The regular distance education activities includes admission to various programmes through online or physically submission of admission forms, conduction of contact sessions online or by traditional method, submission of Assignments online or physically submitting them to the study centre, Distribution of study material physically to various centers, Examination online or by traditional method.

Faculty appointed for various subjects plays an important role in sharing their knowledge to students. They may conduct online sessions (through video conferencing) or by traditional classroom teaching method. Coordinator appointed for distance education activities plays vital role in coordinating various activities to the faculty members and students. To function the distance education activities smoothly, the distance education study centre should have adequate infrastructure facilities. Infrastructure facilities include classrooms, Library and self learning material storage, computer labs etc.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this paper is to know the concept of Distance Education. Through this paper, an attempt has been made to know the ways for enhancing quality in distance education. The main purpose of this paper is to suggest Four Pillars Model of Distance Education.

Methodology

The present paper is an outcome of an in-

depth study of secondary data sources such as Books, Journals and Internet.

Literature Review

An article written by Merisotis and Phipps, What's the difference, in the year 1999 gives a summary of the current state of research on distance education up to 1999. No Significant Difference Phenomenon, an article written by Russell in the year 1999 is a compilation of more than 355 sources. This suggest that the learning outcomes of students in distance education courses are similar to those involved in traditional classrooms. Merisotis and Phipps reviewed research and policy papers from 1990 to 1999. Merisotis and Phipps have classified these having three broad measures of the effectiveness of distance education.

a) Student outcomes
b) Student attitudes
c) Student satisfaction

Experimental studies concluded that, distance education courses are as good as, almost equivalent with regular classroom-based instruction. Students from distance education receives similar grades or test scores. These students have similar attitudes towards the course.

Merisotis and Phipps have identified four quality issues with respect to research in distance education.

a) Failure to control for entrance out variables.
b) Lack of random selection of students.
c) Poor or no reliability and validity for the instruments.
d) Failure to control for attitudes and beliefs of students.

They observed that art of teaching is most important. Inman and Kerwin in 1999 focused on the changing role of the instructor in distance education. As per his view, the student - teacher interactions are conducted without the visual cues available through direct eye contact. In 2001, Sullivan have observed that the students join distance education courses for their convenience and flexibility, individualized instruction and measure of anonymity.

Kubala (2000), Sullivan (2001) and Weems (2002) found that students join distance education courses as they want flexibility in scheduling and convenience of place.

Four Pillars of Distance Education

Four pillars of Distance Education includes University, Institution (Study Centre), Faculty and Students. The Director Distance Education and Coordinators of various study centers plays an important role for smooth functioning of Distance Education activities.

Four Pillars Model of Distance Education
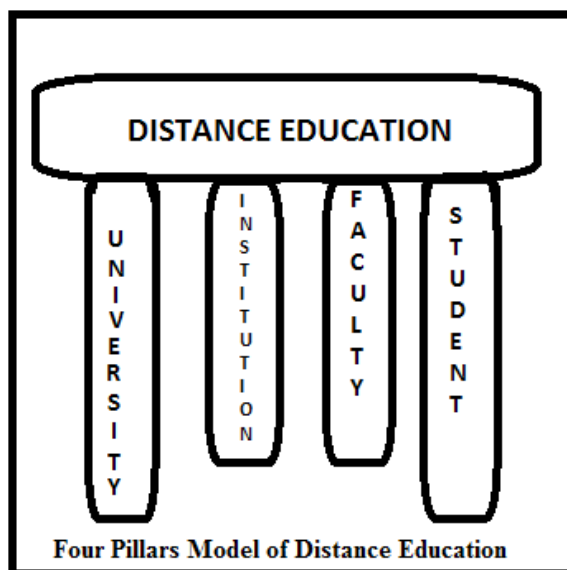
a) **University** All major policy decisions are taken place at the University. These includes design of course structure and curriculum, in relation with new trends in industry, decision related to introduce new programmes under different faculties, development of rules and regulations related various programmes, study centers related decisions etc. University provides funds to carry out various activities at study centres. These funds are utilized for development of good infrastructure facilities for students like library. Committees working in Universities designs bride courses, gives decisions related to conduct of conferences, seminars on distance education, design strategies related to faculty exchange programmes, faculty reward system, gives special grants to the faculty who are dedicated and also pioneers. University authorities also assure cost-competitiveness. They also provide full support to study centres in all aspects.

b) **Institution (Study Centre):** All decisions taken by University authorities are practically implemented at all study centres. Conduction of classes of various subjects, providing different activities for students, counseling, all academic activities are performed at study centre. These activities include increase the alumni network; invite alumni for guest lectures, viva, placement activity etc. Facility at the study centre includes library equipped with e-book, CD, DVD, wi-fi internet, reading room etc.

c) **Faculty:** Faculty members are appointed for various subjects and these may help in preparation of study material. Faculty members may use case study method for regular teaching in contact sessions, solve online difficulties of students, use video conferencing method and use e-learning method, helps students from counseling to convocation. To utilize the services from faculty members effectively, they should be properly motivated.

d) **Student:** Student is always the central part of any University. Coordinator of specific study centre should ensure the following details which helps students in better coordination with the study centre

i. Online submission of examination forms.
ii. Online submission of assignments.
iii. Project guidance time to time.
iv. Online payment gateway.
v. Online submission of convocation forms.
vi. Online transfer and migration certificate.

The website of the University/study centre should be properly developed/updated regularly & should contain following details:

i. Syllabus
ii. Examination time-table
iii. Previous years question papers
iv. Notices
v. Project submission guidelines
vi. Assignment submission guidelines
vii. Query solution
viii. Online self learning material.

Students of distance education are the important asset of the University and study centres. As majority of the students are working in organizations, the guidance to these students should be given by applying new technology with the use of information technology. The goal of any organization / institution should be to reach up to maximum students.

Ways to Enhance Qualities in Distance Education
Following points should be considered for enhancing quality in distance education –

1. As the faculty in distance education plays an important role, there should be professional development of the faculty engaged in distance education. In distance education the role of faculty is different as compared to the regular class room teaching. The distance education students are comfortable with less direct interaction; therefore the faculty in distance education needs professional development to help them to change their role in teaching. As majority of the students are working in organizations they prefer online mode of teaching and communication.

2. There should be frequent formative course assessment. This will help the faculty to adapt to students needs.

3. Coordinator should ensure that there is collaborative work, debate, dialogue and conversational learning.

4. There should be weekly quizzes.

5. One of the ways to improve the quality in distance education to provide online feedback.

6. Faculty should strictly follow a syllabus.

7. There should be a course forum for questions on course and concerns.

8. Faculty should assign students to write research papers using digital library and internet research.

9. Coordinator and faculty should provide global course plan before course starts.

10. Avoid synchrony interaction including chat room.

The following points will help students to get more knowledge and exposure to outside world

a) Encourage students to research projects online. For this purpose virtual library essential.

b) Arranging dialogue with online guest experts.

To get maximum support from students of distance education, faculty should remember the following points

a) Assignments should be returned within a week.
b) Faculty should ensure that various distance education courses have self-directs learning and self initiative.
c) Faculty should give more emphasis on explaining purpose and importance of activities in the learning process.

The library of study centre should have web cams with high speed internet support for video conferencing.
Distance education institutions should have a virtual campus with links to accreditations, orientation, degree plans etc.
High dropouts in distance education can be minimized through better student recruitment; University may think of evaluation of educational effectiveness of course and adapt it as needed.

Conclusion
Distance education is different from regular classroom teaching wherein students interact with the faculty members through contact sessions or by means of online communication. Therefore there is need to understand various new approaches to the education such as use of information technology in distance education. Through proper management and administration of various activities, distance education institution may ensure smooth functioning of programmes and in effective manner.

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Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Empowering Value Addition in the Field of Distance Education

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Abstract

The modern developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) a window of communication with the outside world, both the literature and practice of Distance Education has been remarkably grown up. The use of ICT based modes of communication in Distance Education, however, appears to be expanding at a faster and smarter than research in the field. The significant growth in the use of ICT-based modes in Distance Education has also raised concerns about the need for research to provide a concrete framework for evaluation of the effectiveness of programmes implementing these technologies and to provide guidance on future developments. The Sikkim Manipal University – DE have been a national figure in Distance Education make use of technology in a bigger way. The major tools of technology used by the University is ExuNxt for providing 24x7 support to its learners which gives flexibility and privilege to access from anywhere anytime. The present study attempts to evaluate the impact of Technology Enabled Learning taking into account of the integrated medium.

Key Words: *ICT Enabled Technology, Distance Education, Online Education, E-learning, Multi Model Approach, Teaching Learning Methods, Flexible Learning, Teaching Technology, Higher Education, Modern Education System and SMUDE EduNxt.*

Introduction

Education is one of the most significant factor to economic and human development that leads to changes in the comprehensive transformation in the skills, capabilities and attitudes of the people. This requires a shift in the delivery and pedagogy used in the current education system. Today, education system is going through a transformation phase in which information occupies a vital role. The future education will be Information and Communication Technology (ICT) enabled learning. The lives of people of the country have already been touched and transformed in a significant way through the various initiatives of the Distance Education Universities, in future as well, with the support of ICT driven educational technologies, thus the dual mode University will play the most powerful and effective role in ensuring access and equity for all in matters of higher education through Distance Education.

So, people wants education at his doorstep, as the motto of Distance Education is also education at your door step and education for all, which is only possible best through ICT enabled educational technologies, which shall be beneficial for both academic institutions and the learners. The institution has chances to expand itself to any place; the learner also takes the advantage of learning at anytime, anywhere depending upon their own pace and convenience. The use of ICT has proved as good as the conventional teaching as it is interesting, motivating, facilitates instant feedback. Discussion method can be employed and personal attention can be given very well through the technology that overcomes few gaps of the Distance Education. As India has already entered into new millennium, it is necessary to sustain such type of efforts by continuously tuning into the fast changing requirement and updating the technology that goes in to the making on these sophisticated system. The challenges continue to grow, but that is what attract and sustains the interests of personnel working

in the distance education. The use of ICT is also made available to the economically and socially backward students. However, if we are aware of the limitations, we can always avoid falling prey to the overuse of this technology. What matters after all is creating conducive learning environment for the students and we firmly believe that there is no perfect substitution for a good teacher, but there are many substitutions for teaching techniques. 'Information' is the most vital resource for any kind of activity. Today, the education system is transforming through a phase in which information occupies a vital role. It has become one of the basic elements to determine the quality of life, the other three features are "Men, Material and Money'. Hence, the purpose of this study is to encourage effective integration of ICT in Distance Education for imparting easy accessible, affordable and quality higher education leading to the economic upliftment of educational system.

Distance Education

Distance Education is a unique concept in the modern education system. The ongoing education system or conventional education system in the present context has faced some critical questions. Hence, people require an alternative line of education. This has led to the emergence of Distance Education system. From the present perspective, Distance Education is the easiest mode of learning irrespective of age, educational background and geographical boundaries. The importance of Higher Education cannot be overstated enough. Government has made 'Basic Education' free and compulsory for all. The establishment of Distance Learning is for universal higher education. Constant efforts are being made to improve the conditions of the institutions of higher education by providing basic infrastructural facilities. The problem of providing all the required facilities for Open and Distance Learning is a significant part of the larger problem of development of higher education. As the problem concerns the needy, the disadvantaged and the deprived section of the society, there is a distinct need for linking educational development with the learner's socio-economic status. Distance Education acquires a larger purpose than merely providing higher education. A properly organized system of education can also become the social and cultural life of the people and an ODL where all developmental agencies could come together for an integrated process right at the grass root level would make voluminous progress.

The need of the hour is to pool such innovative experience and disseminate the same effectively. The exchange of experience within and outside the country would surely help to promote and transfer knowledge to the masses and benefit the society in the long run. Distance Education can be improved upon by integrating various other methods which are successfully followed in other countries such as:-

• Radio/FM/Audio - Video CD/Telephone/ Teleconferencing/Voice Conferencing/ Video based technologies/Computer, Internet & Satellite/E-mail communication/ Virtual campus/Television/recorded video lecture/Live satellite-based teleconferencing lectures supported through VSAT/Practical laboratories/ Online library/Online interactive chat and Mobile be used as ancient tools for this purpose.

Significance of Educational Technology

The choice of technology is essential for effective delivery and interaction in distance education. Technology by itself is neither good nor bad; success depends on the way it is used, and the environment in which it is used. As such, it is necessary to assess the strengths and weaknesses of technology and understand the "appropriate circumstances for technology applications using technology for effective teaching and learning". Early evaluative studies in educational technology mostly involved comparative studies, where ICT-based and face-to-face learning and teaching were compared in terms of student performance. More recent studies have focused on the nature of ICT-based education, which considered attributes such as Tele-presence, flexibility, interaction, active learning and collaboration. The focus of this study is on the more recent studies dealing with the nature of ICT-based education and / or its learning environment. While studies in

educational technology have been expanding, the literature suggests that the use of ICT in distance education has outgrown theoretical research and development in the field. The use of ICT-based modes in education began in early 1980s, but attempts to provide appropriate theoretical frameworks in the field only started in late 1980s. The use of ICT in education initially increased rapidly; in some cases it outpaced the research in the field of Distance Education. As such, in some cases ICT-based educational projects have been developed and delivered without theory-based design. Such practices have led to both project successes and failures. Thus, the increasing use of ICT in education and particularly in Distance Education has highlighted the lack of a theoretical framework and research in the field to guide distance education into new era of ICT. This indicates that there is a lack of knowledge about the effectiveness of these technologies in distance education.

About Sikkim Manipal University - Distance Education (SMUDE)

Sikkim Manipal University (SMU) is the result of a unique partnership between the Government of Sikkim and Manipal Education. Established in 1995, it is the first government-private initiative in the region. SMU is a part of the Manipal Education Group, which is renowned for quality education. The University Mission is "Global Leadership in Human Development and Excellence in Education. SMU-DE delivers quality education through more than 6800 committed and qualified mentors. It attracts the best students in India who are looking for distance education. SMU-DE is ISO 9001: 2008 certified and its processes are trusted by over 4, 00,000 students across the globe. EduNxt is the next generation learning system that fully takes advantage of modern teaching learning techniques to create a virtual classroom where students comes together to learn from distinguished faculty and each other in form of peer group.

Multi Model Approach to Learning of SMUDE

SMUDE has a combination of first, second, third and fourth generations for distance education. Use of multi-delivery modes and numerous supplementary modes to assist teaching and learning at SMU - DE is now termed as multi-model approach. The findings clearly reveal that the use of ICT-based modes of communication, which is a part of multi-model approach, at SMUDE effectively, serves its mission of reaching out to the regional community. The use of video broadcast to deliver traditional on-campus courses to regional students is an important step towards decentralization and equal access to higher education in India. In addition to the flexibility in terms of location provided by the use of video broadcast, the use of other supplementary modes of communication also enriches the flexible learning environment at SMUDE. The use of various modes of communication provides SMUDE with the potential to overcome one of its major challenges, that of geographic distance, diverse languages and cultural difference. A flexible learning environment designed on the basis of principles of learning theory, learning styles and adult learning poses huge potential for culturally appropriate pedagogical design. It provides the foundation for a design more receptive to cultural and individual differences in learners. The shift from a dual to a multi-model university and from the use of the first and second to the first, second, third and fourth generations of distance education modes of communication in itself reflect significant changes at SMUDE.

ICT and EduNxt

The use of ICT in Distance Education has grown rapidly in the last decade. Traditional print based modes of communication are either, complemented, supplemented or replaced by ICT based modes of communication in distance education. Distance educators are increasingly adopting both synchronous and asynchronous ICT-based modes of communication to enhance distance learning environment. With the use of ICT-based modes, distance learners are now able to participate in class in real time; interact with their instructor and peers; and access resources at their own convenient time, place and pace, with the use of ICT-based modes of communication at the University, it can be viewed as providing 'anywhere', 'anytime' and 'anyone' education, which is a

major achievement for SMU-DE.

The EduNxt platform is an easy to use delivery system. It enables a collaborative and interactive environment for learning and includes small group mentoring, virtual classrooms, simulation, self-study content, recorded presentations and shared browsing. EduNxt functions on the principle of 3As + 4Cs. The 3As of Affordability, Accessibility and Appropriateness are the guideline to scale up EduNxt across distributed learning. The 4Cs of Content, Collaboration, Communication and Computing are the basis of developing EduNxt into a means of disseminating education among the not-so-privileged or the infrastructure challenged. It enables a collaborative and interactive environment for learning and includes small group mentoring, virtual classrooms, simulation, self-study content, recorded presentations and shared browsing. EduNxt is a new technology – infused learning system that has transformed distributed learning across India.

The EduNxt delivery system is a boon to distance learners of SMUDE, where a large number of students do not have access to a conventional campus programme for reasons of infrastructure, finances or availability or quality faculty. EduNxt enables Distance Education students to have access to varied learning resources, assistance from designated faculty mentors and collaboration on study and projects with fellow students. EduNxt makes it very easy for a student to self-learn, since self-motivation has always been a Distance Learning issue. Learners of the same course can, for example, chat with each other and faculty members in real time to clarify subject matter or read faculty blogs and comment on them. The concept of mentoring means faculty members will be available as guides to mentor students in case of doubt. EduNxt combines academic rigorous and a personalized learning environment along with SMU-DE's hybrid learning delivery system with its flexibility, convenience and accessibility to offer a "first of its kind" learning environment in India. Unique features of EduNxt are mentioned in Fig. 1.
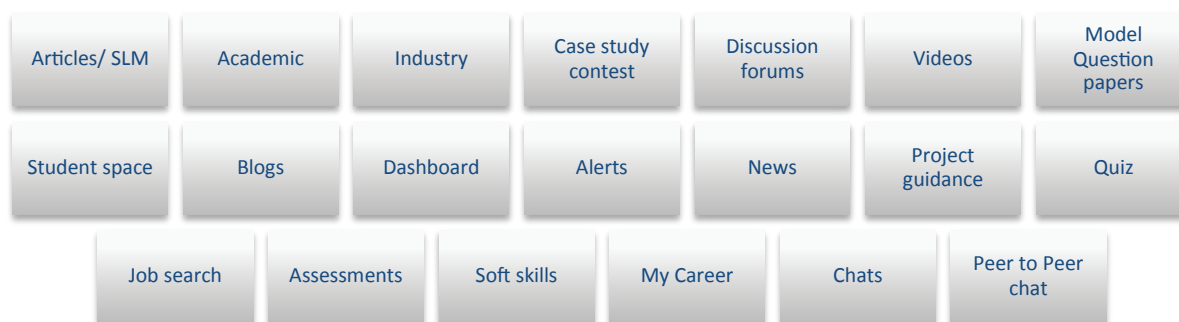
Articles/ SLM	Academic	Industry	Case study contest	Discussion forums	Videos	Model Question papers
Student space	Blogs	Dashboard	Alerts	News	Project guidance	Quiz
Job search	Assessments	Soft skills	My Career	Chats	Peer to Peer chat	

Figure. 1: Unique Features of EduNxt

Interactive Web Chat Session

The data acquired through the survey questionnaire and personal interview suggests that the use of EduNxt discussion boards enhances interaction. While distance students across all courses use EduNxt discussion boards, the extent of their use differ, based on the availability of computers with internet and the course design. The Management course, for example, has marks allocated for online discussion and participation, which is reflected in a high percentage of students participating in discussions.

Peer to Peer Chat

Breakthroughs in technology each year has revolutionized the way the world has been moving forward. But when it came to higher education the same has been found to be lacking. With millions still being illiterate not just in India but across the world, a path breaking initiative was needed to incorporate technology and education in a way that would make education more accessible, breaking down the barriers of time and space. Supporting a high level of interactivity, EduNxt is an Internet based

learning platform. Through EduNxt, one can access virtual classrooms, chat with faculty, counselling, placements, peer to peer interaction, personalized guidance from faculty and industry experts, model question papers and log in to over 1 million books and journals. EduNxt has not just made the quality of Distance Education better but has also led to a higher acceptance amongst employers.

Mentors Chat

EduNxt enables a collaborative and interactive environment for learning and includes small group mentoring, creates virtual classroom environment, simulation and other interactive content, self-study content, recorded presentations and shared browsing. Industry mentor chats - get a chance to interact with the best business minds and experts in various areas. The industry mentor chat is held every week where industry experts come and mentor our students. Academic mentor chats – a student can chat with the university faculty to clear doubts on various topics

Conclusion

The increased use of ICT to deliver and enhance aspects of educational provision is now an emerging practice for all learner belonging to rural and geographically remote and mainly monolingual areas, thus having advantages in overcoming geographical barriers. Even though it is clear that ICT applications in higher education will continue to grow due to many reasons, there will be many issues/concerns which will need to be studied such as the specific role of ICT in increasing access, equity, the affordability factor for the learner, the viability factor for the provider, its role in enhancing and enriching the learning process through improving the content, and above all the cultural acceptability of the different media by the Indian learners. There is a need to strike a balance between the slow changing human aspects along with the fast changing technology aspects and in order to make them compatible for acceptance. ICTs are most likely to be cost-effective when used

to reach very large numbers of students (a common problem in developing countries); when used for research; and when used by administrators. In most other situations, they are unlikely to save money. While it is clear from the past that in India, whenever the private enterprise got an opportunity, it adopted whatever technology was in vogue globally at the time-be it satellite, television or information technology and gradually developed it to an extent that its reach extended within the country as well as globally. The Distance Education system providers also need not unduly worry about the conventional system adopting ICT based techniques, as it is more to do with the mindset of compartmentalization that we have become accustomed to in our academia. If the conventional system adopts distance techniques of delivery, the ODL system has begun to adopt face-to face techniques. When technology is integrated into formal education and used as the "distributed education" for both on-and off-campus students, the distinction between the two types of learning may get blurred.

Clearly, education system is now entering in a unique and exciting era of online teaching and learning. And perhaps the perfect e-storm is becoming less cloudy and ominous. It is suggested that the integration of ICT-based a synchronous modes of communication and the principles of constructivist learning theory will provide a learning environment which promotes deep effective learning based on the students understanding of the content of the course.

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A Critical Investigation of Scope, Opportunities and Challenges in Online Distance Learning Education System in Indian Perspective: A Futuristic Outlook for Scaling Quality Education

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Abstract

The imperative role of ODL in today's learning environment confronted with career complexities and matched with technological advancement with respect to ICT, web tools have made it a highly re-inventive approach that can serve multiple benefits to larger masses. The major area that requires attention in this regard is that the quality, accessibility and the infrastructural support matched with the level of education and knowledge outcome that are associated with the courses offered by the varied institutions in today's scenario. Thus, understanding the evident role of ODL in rising and emerging new face of India with ever increasing courses and specialization been offered in varied fields and making it significant for the masses is important. The present paper aims at understanding the scope, application and varied tools that support ODL and certain gaps that need special attention and intervention so as so scale up the level of education and contribution of ODL in shining India as a new face of growing economies.

Key Words: *Online Distance Learning, Web Based Tools, Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning, IT Infrastructure*

Introduction to ODL in Indian Context

It is a well-known fact and also as found by different researchers that distance education evolved incrementally over years realizing the importance of creating multiple platform for course seekers that is otherwise difficult since not many seats are available and this creates an opportunity for scaling up the quality education (Spector, Merrill, Merrienboer, & Driscoll, 2008). Thus, the need of expansion in distance education accompanied with technological support opened new vistas for future development.

Thus, open learning matched with digital environmental support, online learning tools and various methods of assessment and interaction, accessibility strengthened the position and demand of online learning in distance mode. The only big challenge that remains is ensuring the quality and consistency of these features been offered by different institutions and similarity in them which needs to be regulated by government at large which indicates that the same concept of total quality management needs to be implemented in quality education

also whether it is with respect to customer awareness with relevance to the user/learner, Internet also made the mechanics of online learning much easier to implement. Students are able to see their grades instantly. Instructors were able to make global changes to lectures and reading lists as and when needed. Students could take tests and quizzes online, and in some cases, receive grades right away.

While distance learning may seem like a relatively new phenomenon, given its increased popularity in the online format, in reality people have been taking courses offered by non-local instructors for hundreds of years. Some of the earliest distance learning on record dates back to 1728 and offered to teach students how to write in short hand through lessons sent to their home weekly. These simple, practical lessons were commonly taught through the mail throughout the 1700's and 1800's and allowed anyone to gain valuable job skills even if they lived well-away from major centers of education and commerce. The refinement and expansion of postal systems

in the U.S. and abroad brought about the true beginnings of distance learning as we know about it today. Students and instructors could communicate with one another fairly rapidly and send materials back and forth with little difficulty.

One of the first universities to offer a distance learning degree was the University of London which established an External Programme in 1858.

By the 1960's, distance learning had grown tremendously and distance learning universities were comparable in size to traditional universities. In the United States, the forerunner in distance education was the University of Wisconsin-Madison which was funded by the Carnegie Foundation and it brought together a variety of communications technologies to help provide learning to students who were off-campus. These ideas were later emulated by schools around the world and provided a much more rapid and modern way to share information and education with students who could not attend traditional courses. Today, distance education is offered through a variety of formats. Radio, television, telecommunications and especially the Internet have come to play an integral role in expanding the minds of students around the world. With the wide distribution and accessibility to computers, distance learning has become faster and more prevalent. Some solely online universities such as Phoenix University have hundreds of thousands of students and numerous institutions both small and large have sprung up in the past decade.

One such form, online learning, is known to have a history of access beginning in the 1980's whereas another term, referred to as e-Learning, does not have its origins fully disclosed Harasim, 2000). As researchers and designers utilized these emerging technologies, we find that a relaxed use of the terminology makes it difficult to design and specific characteristics (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). The design of different types of learning environments can depend on the learning objective, target audience, access (physical, virtual and/or both), and type of content. It is important to know how the learning environment is used, and the influences of the tools and techniques that distinguish the differences in learning outcomes as the technology evolves.

The objective of present paper is to understand the scope, opportunities and different technological support in form of various tools and techniques available to support and promote growth of ODL and thus up scaling the distance education mode supported by online education and how it can help in making this medium equivalent to regular course thus helping directly to increased enrolments and up gradation of skilled and educated workforce.

Rationale for Research in Distance Education in India

There were many logical reasons of initiating open and distance education system in India. It was in 1962 that correspondence education was introduced by Delhi University as giving admission and seats in its constituent colleges was not possible for DU. Thus the only alternate solution was correspondence course which not only helped the students seeking admission here but also gave an motivation tom others who had either left their studies or were working and thus could not attend full time classes thus benefitting larger masses.

Thus this method proved to be much more useful and thus was adopted by other universities as well since it proved to be a more economical factor than formal education and thus gradually attracted others. This is one larger benefit of open education system where a larger mass irrespective of social or economic background can be catered by this system. The only gap that existed earlier with respect to distance education courses and the learners was that there was no connect and expectations of the learners were not catered by the university or the institution but in today's environment with all technological expansion the expectations, gaps, selective fulfilment of individual needs with respect to content, expert interaction, solution to all queries, proactive information availability

and accessibility for everything like fee structure, course detail, content right from books, PowerPoint presentation, quizzes, earlier exam papers, choice to select exam dates based on schedule, result availability and any such query to make user/learner comfortable and stress free but still it is not a common feature with all such institutions running/offering such courses and thus needs a check so that learners needs can be met.

A very important factor with respect to understanding users/learners needs is so because they are from different background, status, social group, geography thus in order to enable to make it more useful for learners study of different environmental factors that affect the effectiveness of these programs is important.

Such study will also be important as they will help in creating a suitable academic environment, understanding social, academic & labour market expectations and availability and matching it with the knowledge delivery been provided by these courses.

The scope and rationale behind the online and distance Education system is promptly progressing in Indian context but the only limitation is that research in this mode of education is limited. There is need for conducting research on distance education since it provides the empirical data which can be used for the development of the system. Though many studies have been carried out on Indian Open and Distance Education since seventies. Most of the studies lacked comprehensiveness, methodological rigour, and compatibility with the system and its practices. It was only in India when, for the first time in 1962 at higher education stage, there was much doubt and caution, for this mode was commonly perceived as a second channel for the leftovers of the campus-based colleges and universities whereas the real logic was to equalize educational opportunity and hence making education democratic.

Literature Review

Based on one of the paper by Susan Garden ,on "Use of multimedia in online distance learning" it is found that currently, there are over 10 million students online globally (Jalobeanu, 2003) and there are common observation regarding the challenges and the opportunities in ODL namely need of new sources for training and education, need of good instructional design, more engagement in smart and active learning more asynchronous learning , equity in acceptance and standard of distance education supported by online mode and regular course and a quality check needed for effective design , delivery and usage.

Mishra (1991) revealed that majority of the distance education institutes in the universities had no autonomy, innovativeness and decision making power.

Bhattacharya (1991) studied how and to what extent Open University can mould itself to fulfil the requirements of rural India. It was revealed by UGC (1986) that the institutes of correspondence courses were treated as separate units of the universities for all practical purposes. However, they were governed by the rules which are usually framed for regular courses and thus, inappropriate for Distance Education.

A comparative study (Biswal, 1979) on academic motivation of distance and conventional students revealed that correspondence students had lower level of academic motivation than that of their regular counterparts. At the university level, learners joined correspondence courses in preference to regular conventional courses because of several personal and socio-economic reasons. The reasons as identified by Koul (1982) and Sahoo (1985), are: non-availability of time, mental maturity of learners, non-existence of colleges in one's locality and heavy expenses to be met in formal college education. Several background factors like age, employment, paucity of time, poor financial condition and performance in the last qualifying examination have also impacted upon their decision (Khan, 1982 and Sahoo, 1985). At the secondary stage, Singh (1980; 1983) found that learners preferred correspondence courses to regular schooling because of

their being employed, their involvement in household activities, non-availability of school facility, and failure in regular courses. Multimedia is a concept that emerged in the 1950s and commonly referred to a method that combined at least two media formats such as text and video or audio at one time to derive a more complete, not necessarily educational, effect (Heinich, Molenda, Russel and Smaldino, 1996). Another definition is: "Media providing multisensory experiences, such as sound, visuals, animation and interaction with the media" (Porter, 2004, p. 311). Multimedia use in online distance education may include any additional materials utilized within a course and includes linked text documents, simulations, linked video, games, and music (Porter, 2004). Multimedia interactivity usually refers to a particular kind of technology and not group behaviors such as emails between students (Dempsey, & Van Eck, 2002).

Multimedia use in online learning can contribute to creating a student centered learning environment (Hooper, et al., 2002). Computer oriented learning was based on the concept of drill and practice in the 1960s and 1970s. A trend away from behaviorist to more constructivist learning theories puts more emphasis on student experience and on learning environments where students have the resources to reach their learning goals. This includes interactive multimedia resources and documents. The multimedia format provides an opportunity for students to become more active in the learning process (Richards, Dooley, & Lindner, 2004).

From the above description it is clear that online distance education is the need of the day understanding various emerging complexities at macro and micro level but what is most important is to understand that online distance education and regular course should have common level of acceptance and quality and more importantly to understand the areas where ODL lacks whether it is technical factor or academic issue or any other factor. Another important area of attention is monitoring the consistency in the performance of the courses offered by these

bodies so that the learner and the teacher are connected and the acceptability, knowledge transfer, authenticity and the capability or learning outcomes are in line with that of regular stream to strengthen its popularity.

Thus, based on the above understanding the following objectives are been set for the descriptive study.

Objectives of the Study

a) To assess the scope of online distance education in India through available literature

b) To identify the gaps in ODL and their repercussions on educational development front

c) To identify different technological developments in ODL contributing to its success and widespread usage

d) To identify different strategies adopted for effective wide usage of ODL

Based on first objective which aimed at assessing the scope of online distance education in India through available literature Understanding the relevance of ODL and its wider scope with relevance to its popularity, demand and major share of students enrolled under different universities clubbed with various technological developments and advancement whether it is open source or varied tools available to make it more user friendly certain areas need attention which are indicative of developments and prospects in ODL are as follows-

a) Role of ODL in areas of developing concerns or upcoming infrastructure can be of great use if planned effectively which will increase both access, equity and availability of these resources with the help of ICT or OER (Open Education resources) in terms of access to education.

b) Another important area is focussing and meeting the Global standards of education along with adhering and making it useful for cross-cultural aspects, this will make teaching and learning in mediated global environments and the implications for wider professional development.

c) Focus is also required in terms of

developing a well-defined distance education delivery systems, the role / of institutional partnerships in developing transnational programmes, and the impact of ICT on the convergence of conventional education and distance education institutions.

d) Involvement of different professional associations in improving practices, conducting researches and improving knowledge transfer and thus overall practices should also be focussed.

e) Equal focus on improvising the copyright, IPR and legal issues should also be ascertained effectively. This requires monitoring with respect to organization, management and administration of different institutional policies and their improvement.

f) There should be deliberation on improving the cost and benefit analysis to make ODL more effective so that with immense usage of digital tools effective access digitally can be made for high access.

g) Focus should be on emerging trends in educational technology like Web 2.0 applications or mobile learning and the benefits and challenges of using OERs, media selection (e.g., synchronous vs. asynchronments media), technical infrastructure and equipment for online learning environments, and their opportunities for teaching and learning should be emphasized.

h) More emphasis to be given on innovation with respect to educational technology and other administrative aspects like staff incentive, workload distribution, promotion etc. can bring effective positive change. Also some emphasis should be on assessing competencies of teacher and matching it with education to be imparted on line for user's benefit.

i) Another avenue for development is improvising learner support services and related infrastructure for organisation of learner support systems should be developed so that enough information regarding counselling, e-resources, technical support, method to interact with experts, etc. can be widely used.

j) Avery important factor that can widen the scope of distance education is acceptance and trustworthiness with respect to quality and accreditation of the university or body and the convenience it provides to the users.

k) Special emphasis is also required in pedagogical approaches for tutoring online (scaffolding), the design of (culturally appropriate) study material, opportunities provided by new developments in educational technology for teaching and learning

l) A very important factor that will decide the success of such ODL is instructional/ design considerations is course design that fosters (online) articulation, interaction, reflection, and collaboration throughout the learning and teaching process. Special areas include the development of online communities, gender differences, and cross-cultural aspects in online communication.

m) There is also a need to make the learning easy with respect to certain factors like how adult learners are different from other learners, the socio-economic background of distance education students, learning styles, critical thinking dispositions, and special needs. Thus, understanding these factors define immense scope for improvement and areas for development and wider application of ODL as a futuristic support system in Indian context.

The second objective aimed at identifying the gaps in ODL and their repercussions on educational development front. As it is a known fact from literature that Indian research in education began in 1943 that is more than fifteen years before the distance education program in the form of correspondence education began in 1962. During the last

48 years of its existence, it has expanded to cover more than 37,36,744 students attending more than hundred Dual Mode Universities and thirteen State Open Universities and one National Open University. Despite this wide development it is surprising to note that major researches in Distance Education are still few.

There are only a few superficial areas where researches in ODL have been conducted. The crucial areas that are very significant to everyone like changes required in andragogy and pedagogy. In distance education needs huge attention in research so that effective means can be developed to make it more effectual. Though it is quite evident that ODL has adopted a multi-channel learning format that includes print material, PCP, audio, radio, television, interactive television and Internet places ICT etc. Also it is surprising to note that there has been no study on the effect of multi-channel learning on distance education. Within the instructional process there are very few studies on electronic media.

An important area that has remained untouched with respect to research in ODL includes how to assess the learning outcomes through ODL because of which its effectiveness and impact cannot be measured. Also another important gap is there is no defined parameter for assessing the quality & benchmarks on setting excellence in ODL.

Also our Indian ODL mode lacks to a large extent on how to manage and organize with respect to organization structure of such institutions compared to open universities and dual mode universities as the status and type of all of them are different some of them being autonomous and others constituent colleges or departmental status. They are all different with respect to their financial viability, independence, flexibility, structure, decision making, governance etc.

There is another area that needs immediate attention is staff development and their effectiveness in distance education. Although STRIDE in IGNOU as well as some of the directorates of distance education have been conducting staff development programmes, research on the programmes is almost missing. According to one of the study conducted by Ramanujam (1999) on "STRIDE Training Programmes: Their Impact on the DOL systems in South Asia". Majority respondents found certain gaps like more focus is needed in terms of leadership, understanding, and strategic planning and equal focus should be development of both teaching and non-teaching staff, homogenous development of content and related technology to be utilized to make it more user friendly.

The third objective aimed at identifying different technological developments in ODL contributing to its success and widespread usage. From different studies conducted in distance education and online distance learning in different areas and offered by different open universities the major issue is in terms of quality of study material been prepared and lack of online tools been sued to make it more user-friendly. It was found through various studies that study material prepared and offered by IGNOU is highly been appreciated by teachers and practitioners as they focus highly on quality of study material and utilize the expertise of best experts in preparing the same. They also utilize ICT, multimedia, teleconferencing in providing instruction and counseling to distance learners and also provide training to course writers through seminar and workshops.

Also there is a need to create a balance with respect to cost benefit analysis of correspondence courses whose financial dependence is fully on the student fee compared to the regular streams though the areas of expenditure is similar in certain grounds and above all distance education as more economical in comparison to regular stream.

The fourth objective aimed at identifying different strategies adopted for effective wide usage of ODL, NIEPA, which is an Indian national institution on planning and management of education, has developed

a list of priority research areas in planning and management of distance education collectively with the directors of distance education departments of dual mode universities (Mukhopadhyay and Sujatha, 1991) which states the priorities as under. To begin with research should be undertaken to assess how far distance education has actually made education accessible. In India, about 10% of total enrolment in higher education is through distance education. This 10% is of the 6% of the age group 18-23 who join higher education. Further this 6% enrollment in higher education is actually 60% of those who are eligible to join higher education. Causes need to be explored. Similarly, on the equity dimension, research on learner's background indicate unequal gender ratio, rural urban ratio, employed-unemployed ratio economically viable-weaker section ratio, etc. Researchers are needed to assess causes of inequity and remedial measures.

In today's environment of technology online distance learning is amongst a preferred choice because of easily accessible, simple and highly effective tools whether it is m-learning, e-learning, audio, video, asynchronous or synchronous learning tools, web conferencing, e-learning 2.0, classroom 2.0, satellite method, webcam, whiteboard screen casting, virtual learning, e-classroom, LMS (Learning management system, Learning content management system, (LCMS), Electronic performance support system (EPSS) supported by computer aided system.

It is well understood that online learning can either be synchronous or asynchronous with the difference that synchronous method is of use when all the participants are available at one time which at times is a benefit wherein all the learners can interact and discuss thus making it more convenient and interactive whereas in case of asynchronous learning is self-paced and allows to involve in exchange of information thus independently involving in learning example of Synchronous learning are face to face discussion, online real time live teacher instruction and feedback,

conversation through skype, chat rooms, virtual classroom. Thus, this type of synchronized learning help in collaborative learning and help in creating open mind as students help in creating peer interaction and enhances online awareness.

Example of asynchronous learning such as email, blogs, wikis, discussion boards and web supported books, hypertexts, virtual operating rooms etc. Thus, these methods make ODL a preferred choice and easy option for learners.

Another method supporting ODL is Computer-based training (CBT) that enhances self-paced learning activities supported by computer or any tablet or smart phone. It is as easier as studying an online book or a manual. Computer-based training is also similar to web based training which is been delivered with internet or any web browser.

Method promoting and supporting e-learning is Computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) that uses instructional methods that helps in learning and working collaboratively by the students. CSCL uses blogs, wikis, and cloud-based document portals (such as Google Docs and Drop box). With the help of these method teachers, students can work collaboratively and can discuss ideas and can promote information.

Another well-developed tool is classroom 2.0 which refers to online multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs) that connect schools across geographical frontiers it is also called as "e-Twinning" or computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) that allows learners to communicate across geographical boundaries.

Another supportive tool enhancing usage of online learning is E-learning 2.0 which is a type of computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) system that developed along with web 2.0. This method is more useful as it focuses more on social learning with the usage of social software like such as blogs, wikis, and podcasts. Also are supportive many media tools nowadays like digital cameras, video cameras, interactive

whiteboard tools, document cameras, include blogs, collaborative software, e Portfolios, and virtual classrooms.

Also media is used widely by ODL modes like usage of YouTube, Teacher Tube, Skype, Adobe Connect, and webcams. Telecommuting can connect with speakers and other experts. The role of mobile devices such as clickers and smart phones can be used for interactive audience feedback.

Another very important tool is Electronic performance support system (EPSS) which is an integrated electronic environment that is available to and easily accessible by each employee and is structured to provide immediate, individualized online access to the full range of information, software, guidance, advice and assistance.

Similarly, Computer aided assessment also helps in assessing the learner's performance based on the content, course thus enabling learners to absorb content & develop concept and thus make basic understanding of subject. Another important tool in making ODL effective is LCMS which helps in editing content using the usable or reusable content and helping in hosting the content itself.

Similarly LMS is software that helps in delivering, tracking and managing training and education. For example, to track attendance, time on task, and student progress. Educators can post announcements, grade assignments, check on course activity, and participate in class discussions and also the learners can take quizzes, assignment on the same. E-learning authoring tools are software that are also very useful in enabling users to create courses, simulations, or other educational experiences and many such supporting tools like webcams, virtual classrooms, screen casting that enables users to share their screen from their browser and make the video available online thus other viewers can also stream it directly. Similarly whiteboards that helps in quick interaction where viewers can write or touch the screen these methods supported by software like in virtual classrooms like Go To Training, WebEx Training or Adobe Connect help in

providing feeling of real time connect thus making communication between instructor and the student very easy.

Findings and Outcomes of Study

From the above discussion the following observations can be made.

a) It is clear that relevance of ODL and its wider scope with relevance to its popularity, demand and major share of students enrolled under different universities clubbed with various technological developments and advancement whether it is open source or varied tools access, equity and availability of these resources with the help of ICT or OER (Open Education Resources) in terms of access to education.

b) IT is important for ODL for meeting the Global standards of education along with adhering and making it useful for cross-cultural aspects.

c) Focus is also required in terms of developing a well-defined distance education delivery systems, the role / of institutional partnerships in developing transnational programs.

d) A well planned strategy for effectual development and expert involvement to make ODL quality centered is of prime importance.

e) Improving learner support service is of great importance.

f) Right pedagogical approach and selection of support tools for effective learning with well-developed IT infrastructure is of great relevance.

g) Understanding the background and specific requirement of the learner through effective servicing is very important as due to geographical constraint supporting technically and enhancing the accessibility is very important.

h) Lot of research is required on factors

affecting the learning of students through ODL and role of technical support system in it.

i) The selection and application of right tool is of great importance right from webcam to online tutorial class, web conferencing or EPSS, LMS, LCMS etc.

j) The role of staff development in ODL mode also needs attention. More and more support for collaborative learning is a must, thus learning through classroom 2.0 is a must.

k) Use of different software and tools right from tutoring to assessment is of great importance.

l) Overall, it is important to say that ODL serves multi-purposes specially for all those prospects who due to various reasons cannot enroll for regular courses and if these course quality are monitored and is managed overall as in TQM it is quite imperative that it will benefit a large mass of society across boundaries thus enhancing education and professionalism and also help in improving quality and widespread availability of education across physical barriers.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be said that by witnessing the rapid diversification in distance education or open university system country wide it is the time when researchers, policy makers, thinkers, should explore, compare with global standards and level and chalk out strategies to improvise with effective policy formulation and implementation for effectual development of ODL.

Today a majority chunk of students seek education at a distance and major issue before everyone is to ensure that appropriate measure are taken with respect to allocation of staff time, resources and academic freedom to undertake both systemic and discipline-based research and also ensure that growth of ODL is a discipline in itself and the career prospects will be same as in physical classroom environment .The scope learning through distance mode has vast potentiality to expand, influence and sustain, but it depends on how and to what extent this is understood and taken care by different policy makers, educationalist and other concerned authorities.

Thus based on the above discussion if these measures are been taken and new insights are developed on the basis of identified gaps then it will be easier to open vistas for ODL and its acceptance not only in perception of common man but also in practice thus giving it the same cadre as other mode of education occupies. Research in distance education would not only establish and enhance the theory of distance education, but also significantly contribute to its practices

Implications of Study

From the above study, it is quite clear that online distance education is the trend and need of the of the day and it is thus very important to understand and improvise the factor that can help in strengthening the role ODL can play in improvising the level of education. It is important to develop different tutorial tools and IT infrastructure in order to make ODL an educational supportive tool for growth and development. It is important that a proper monitoring mechanism is important to assess and improve the quality, accessibility and the infrastructural support so that in real terms the effectiveness of ODL can be structured as per need. The present study has focussed on different tools that can help in making ODL a re-inventive approach towards scaling up quality of education.

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Implications of Blended Learning in Distance Education with Special Reference to Virtual Learning Environment: A Case Study of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University

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Abstract

Universities, the world over, backed by a thriving communication and information technology industry and an invigorated field of research in instructional design and technology, have at their disposal a number of ICT based tools. Such technology based instructional delivery mechanism combined with conventional methods of teaching like face-to-face instruction brings about a revolutionary change in the teaching-learning process. The concept of blended learning especially in the field of open and distance learning has gained prominence because of its ability to provide both online and offline course material and teaching to the learners. This paper aims to look into the implications of blended learning in distance education by focusing on Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, which is one of the premier open universities in India. An analysis of the instructional delivery system of this University will bring to light the effectiveness of blended learning. The integration of digital technologies with personal contact programmes has resulted in a richer and more interactive class environment.

Key Words: *Blended Learning, Virtual Learning, Personal Contact Programmes, Information and Communication Technology, Distance Education*

Introduction

Blended learning is that form of learning which makes use of face-to-face education and online learning in order to make teaching-learning system interesting and enjoyable. The implications of blended learning in the field of distance education are immense. The Open and distance Learning system has grown by leaps and bounds ever since the first Open university in the world was established in UK – The UK open University way back in 1969. Distance education helps students overcome such barriers as full-time work commitment, geographic inaccessibility, the difficulty of obtaining child or elder care, and physical disabilities. There is also the advantage of convenience and flexibility. The reach and access of technology enabled distance courses is bound to grow on a wide scale. Educational technology is looming as a pre-eminent force in open learning system. The development of interactive multimedia learning environments along with face-to-face instructional teaching has made learning more interactive and informative. It has fostered the advancement of active-learning pedagogies in teaching.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the paper are –

i. To assess the use of blended learning in Open and Distance educational system
ii. To analyse the problems and prospects of using e-learning in ODL
iii. To study the implications of blended learning along with virtual learning in ODL
iv. To make an assessment of the present instructional learning tools used by Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open university

Methodology of the Study

The present study is basically a qualitative analysis of the emerging field of learning-blended learning in ODL system and its future prospects. The study is based on observation method. Document analysis of secondary sources has been done to substantiate the fact that blended learning help in delivering learning to the distance learners under open and distance learning system. Data has also been analysed from secondary sources like websites, newsletters, journals, magazines, books etc. In order to analyse the importance

and the future prospects of blended learning with special focus on digital learning environment, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) has been taken as a case study. The main reason for selecting KKHSOU as a case study is the fact that it is the first and the only state open university of North East India making use of both traditional and IT based teaching-learning methods.

Concept of Blended Learning

Blended learning refers to a mixing of different learning environments. This particular phrase has many specific meanings based upon the context in which it is used. Blended learning gives learners and teachers a potential environment to learn and teach more effectively. In fact, it increases the options for greater quality and quantity of human interaction in a learning environment. In countries like USA, Canada, Australia, K-12 blended learning is prevalent on a wide scale. K-12 generally is a short form for the publicly-supported school grades prior to college. These grades are kindergarten (K) and the 1st through the 12th grade (1-12). Six models of blended learning are used under K-12 blended learning – Face-to-Face Driver, Rotation, Flex, Online Lab, Self-Blend and Online Driver.

Thus, we have seen that blended learning is used on a wide scale in the conventional system. However, the popularity of blended learning is gaining grounds in the field of distance education too. The practice of distance education has been catching up very fast in all countries- developed, developing or underdeveloped, socialist or capitalist, western or non-western. Blended learning in the field of distance education makes use of personal contact programmes along with the online mode of instructional delivery system supported by ICT. E-learning and online learning makes use of internet, intranet/extranet, audio or video tape, satellite TV and CD-ROM. It can be self-paced or instructor-led and includes media in the form of text, image, animation, streaming video and audio. Implications of Blended Learning in Distance Education with special reference to Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU).

Most of the open universities and distance educational Institutes make use of blended learning in delivering instructional materials and learners' support services to the learners. In fact, personal contact programmes and learning by the use of ICT tools are used interchangeably. Personal contact programmes (PCP) are an integral part of any distance educational institutions or university. PCP denotes the collection of distance learners and representative teachers of the supporting institution at a pre-decided place for a specific period with the intention of supplementing distance learning and teaching. Usually during such programmes, there is face-to-face encounter between the teacher and the taught which parallels the classroom teaching of the conventional system. The only difference is that in the conventional mode, the teacher tried to unfold the similar course content in one academic year whereas in distance educational system, the instructor tries to unfold it within a period of two or three weeks.

Blended learning increases the options for greater quality and quantity of human interaction in a learning environment. It offers the learners to be 'both together and apart'. A community of learners can interact at any time and at any place because of the use of computer mediated educational tools. It provides a good mix of technologies and interactions, resulting in a socially supported and constructive learning experience. There are different generations of distance education technologies with each generation having its own features. In the present context, both the fourth and the fifth generation distance education technologies are in vogue. The fourth generation is known as the Flexible Learning Model and the fifth generation is known as the Intelligent Flexible Learning Model. Both these two models lay special emphasis on automated and dynamic student access and response/advice systems through "multiple types of media outputs from a single source document".

Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) is one such Open University which has been delivering instructional material through the use of Information and Communication Technology

along with face-to-face counselling. KKHSOU, which was established under the provision of the Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Act 2005 enacted by the government of Assam is the first and the only State Open University in the entire north eastern region of India. The university uses blended learning for imparting knowledge to the learners. For the purpose of disseminating knowledge to the learners, the University uses personal contact programmes which are commonly known as counselling classes at the different study centres located in different parts of state. The blended learning system under KKHSOU can be indicated in the figure 1: as given below.
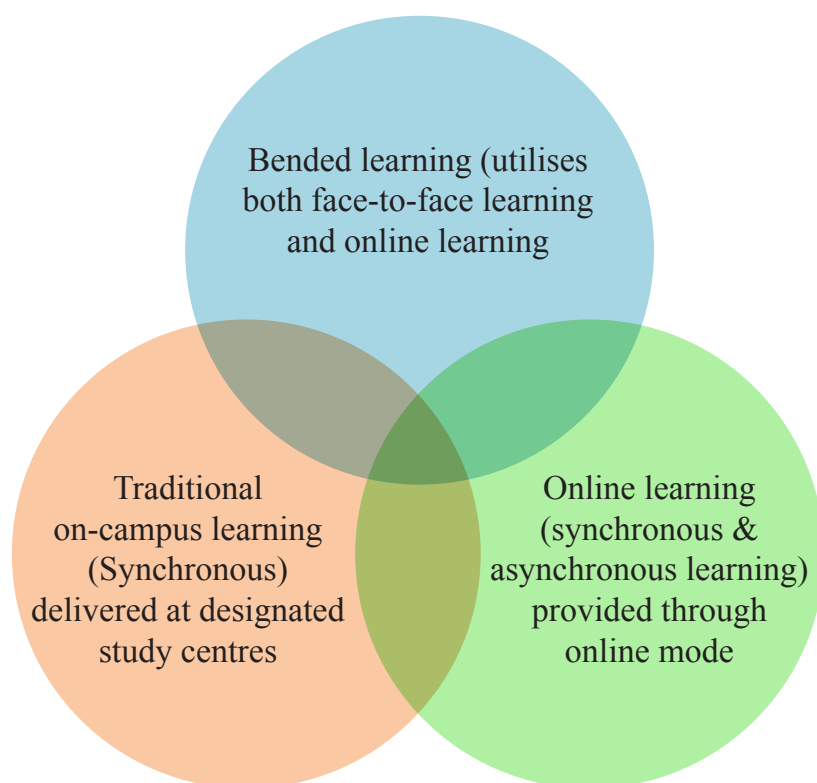

Figure 1: Blended Learning System Under Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University

At is evident from the above figure, blended learning is the combination of traditional on-campus learning which is usually synchronous in nature and online learning. On-campus face-to-face learning is commonly known as personal contact programmes which is supplemented by the self-learning materials. Under KKHSOU face-to-face learning are known as counselling classes. These classes are held every Sunday at some of the study centres designated by the University in different colleges. Several Degree, Diploma, Post Graduate Diploma, Certificate Master Degree courses/programmes are taught in such centres. During these classes, the learner is not only able to get a good understanding of the learning materials, but is also able to dispel any doubts or queries about the course structure. That is why such contact classes are known as couselling classes. The learners are given an overview of what the course structure will be like and the future prospects of the courses. Online learning is seen as the successor of distance education, the natural outgrowth of the field, fuelled by the internet and by increasingly pervasive, available and cost-effective information and communication technologies. It is worth mentioning here that ICT based tools are used in delivering courses to the learners as indicated in the figure 2.
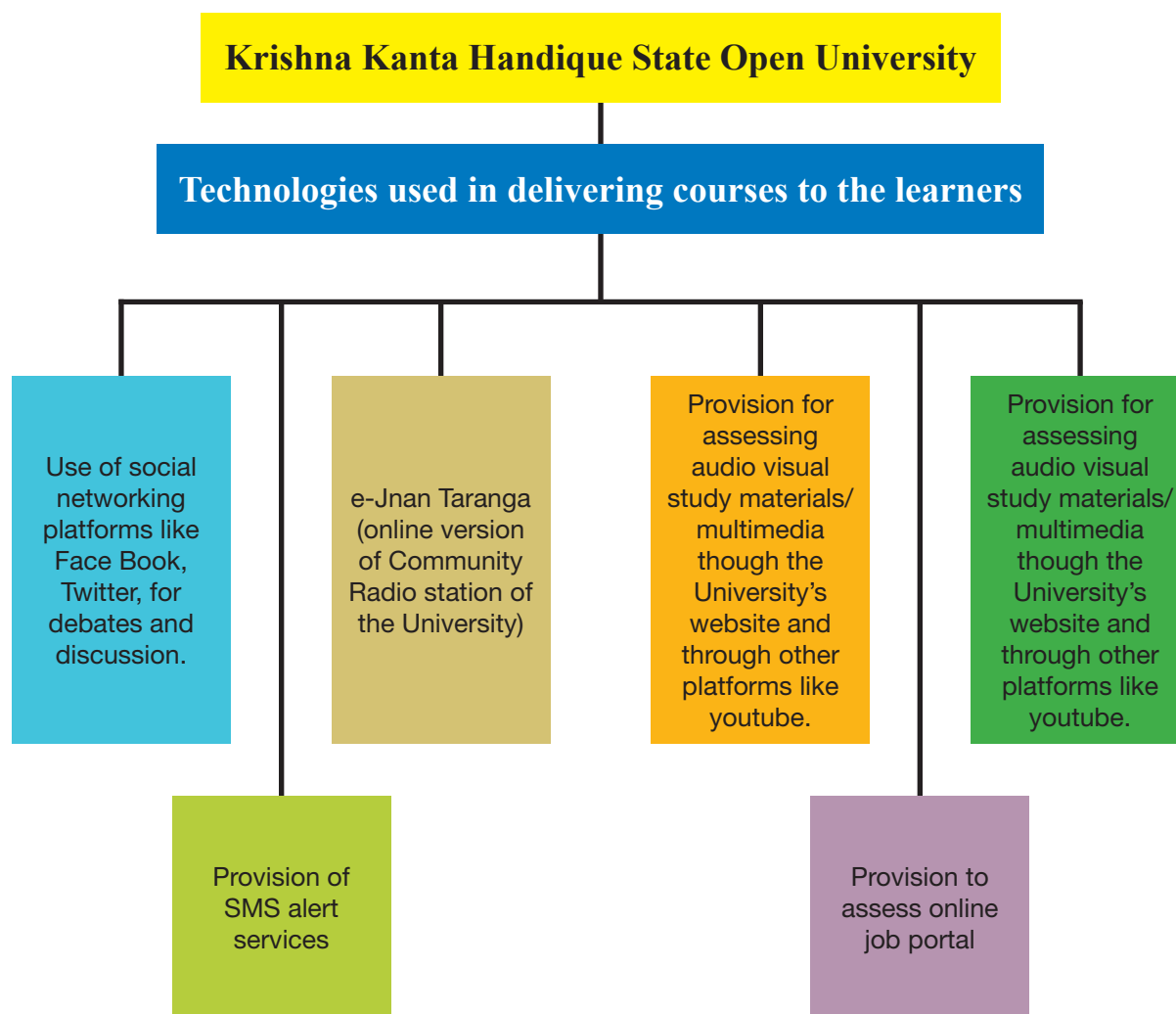
Figure 2: Technologies Used in Delivering Courses to the Learners

The University has gone a step ahead in uploading its learning materials in the university's website for the benefit of the learners. Provision of such e-learning resources known as e-Bidya and search engines like OAJSE (Open Access Journals Search Engines) have opened up its doors towards virtual learning environment. Audio-visual materials can also be easily assessed via online platforms like youtube. Other social networking sites like facebook and twitter serves as a discussion forum for the learners and academicians.

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is a system for delivering learning materials to students via the web. These systems include assessment, student tracking, collaboration and communication tools. Such form of environment allow participants to be organized in different groups, present resources, activities and interactions within a course structure, provide for the different stages of assessment, report on participation and have some level of integration with other institutional systems.

VLE under KKHSOU looks to be promising with the introduction of online courses from February, 2015 onwards. Online programmes are offered in the field of Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Computer Application (MCA), Master of Science in Information Technology (MSc-IT), Post Graduate Diploma in Business Management (PGDBM), Post Graduate Diploma in Computer Application (PGDCA) and Post Graduate Diploma in Human Resource Management (PGDHRM). The popularity of these courses is evident from the fact that so far 171 learners have taken admission in the above mentioned different programmes. The following are the important features of the online programme:

Figure 3: KKHSOU Online Programme Structure

The University provides access to a large course content in the form of video lectures to its learners through online programmes. These lectures cover a wide array of topics which have been made tailored to the needs of the learners. Learners of online programmes also have an option to view the video lectures in the off-line mode (without internet connection) by getting them loaded onto the memory cards of their android enabled devices. The University's online programme is supported by a dedicated panel of subject experts identified by the University. The University conducts webinars, virtual classroom sessions from time to time basis for the benefit of the learners. The University's Learning Management System has tremendous amount of analytics running on it and provides a window to the learners to analyse their learning, progress and to motivate themselves for their better performance.

Learners have the benefit of accessing the contents of the programme both in online and offline mode as mentioned below-

- **Online:** Students are given individual LMS (Learning Management System) ID where they can access the University textual notes in soft copy and the relevant video lectures. Under each chapter the students can check their preparation by taking online quiz sessions. Moreover, the students have the option of joining a LIVE VIRTUAL CLASS as and when conducted.
- **Offline:** University printed study materials are given to the learners. Moreover the learners have the choice of opting for a SD (secure digital) Card by paying a nominal fee of Rs.300. The SD card contains all the video lectures of that particular semester. The learner just needs an Android/windows phone where they can access all the videos without net connectivity.

Provision of TAB: Students of MBA & MCA are provided with mobile tabs (free of cost) where the all the textual notes & videos are preloaded. However this tab is given only when the learner takes admission in 2nd Semester.

As far as the examination system is concerned, it is conducted in the offline mode whereby the learners have to appear for examination at some specific study centres as chosen by the University.
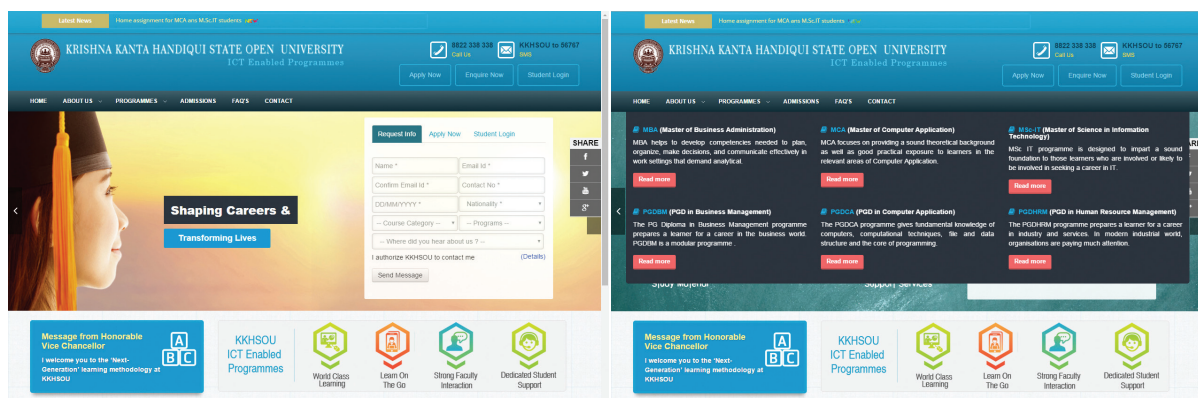
Figure 4: Online programmes of KKHSOU as viewed on the website of KKHSOU
(http://ict.kkhsou.in/)

Benefits of Blended Learning

(i) Widens learner's Network: Blended learning courses can alleviate 'bottleneck' courses- those required for graduation where enrolment demand exceeds available seats. With distance courses, an institution's market can also expand to cover the world, as well as to serve students with special needs or those who may not be able to attend on-campus classes.

(ii) Networked Community: Networking is a means of building community and a strong sense of community is often the key to building viable network-linked educational programs and resources and sustaining them over the long term. Blended learning creates network environments that are conducive to interdisciplinary and collaborative activities and to research projects that explore an ever-expanding scope of resources.

(iii) Benefits to the Instructors: Recorded lectures and learning modules can save a huge amount of time for the instructors who can concentrate on other aspects of the teaching learning process, like interacting with the learners through online learning programmes, conducting webinars etc. The instructor can combine two or more methods of teaching and impart learning to the learners. For instance, a combination of technology-based materials and face-to-face sessions would generate an interactive learning environment. A blended learning platform enables teachers and trainers to direct trainees into a continuous loop of activities, feedback, interaction using course materials and activities in ways that otherwise may not be possible in a purely face-to-face learning environment.

(iv) Benefits to the Learners: Under blended system of learning, the learner's interest and retention level also increases due to the use of both online and offline mode. Blended learning platform provides a window to the learners to connect with other fellow learners/peers, to share and have access to their expertise and knowledge among themselves. Such form of networking opens up more opportunities of learning to its participants.

Thus, it has been seen that KKHSOU uses online learning tools along with the conventional mode of instructional delivery in the form of study materials. E-learning tools like E-Bidya, social media platforms like twitter and Facebook indeed reach to a wide audience. Library services, mobile learning services, radio counseling, community radio and interactive voice response system provide a wide array of resources where the learners can access within the shortest possible at the shortest possible time. Along with these ICT based tools, online programmes have strengthened the learners' base of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University.

Conclusion
The ideal instructional technology for a distance learning programme depends on the particular needs of the organization, as well

as its financial means. Of course, the learners do face their share of problems like power shortage, low internet connectivity, feeling of isolation and lack of instructors to provide guidance to them. Almost all communication and technological tools require steady supply of power to function effectively which unfortunately is not available in some remote areas. The problem of dearth of instructors crops up because most of the time the learners are on their own and they don't attend regular classroom like those in the conventional system of education. In spite of the problems, blended learning system have been widely accepted as one of the important means of instructional delivery system under ODL. In order to deliver an effective learner centric curriculum, the online tools can be integrated with other conventional methods like face to face counseling, self-learning materials, laboratory and library facility etc.

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