

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.

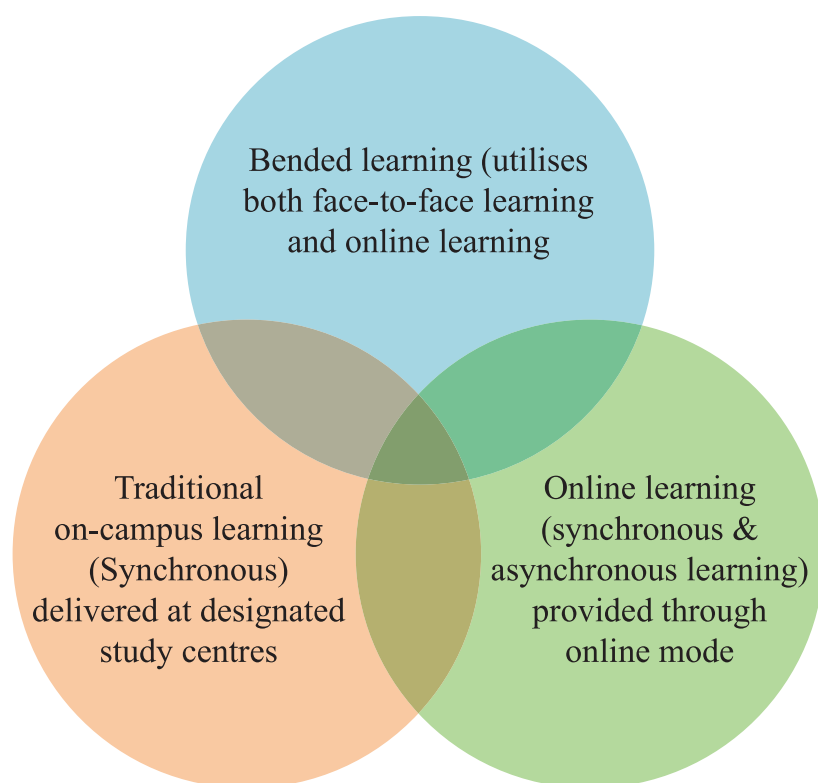


Figure 1: Blended Learning System Under Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University

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 counselling 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.

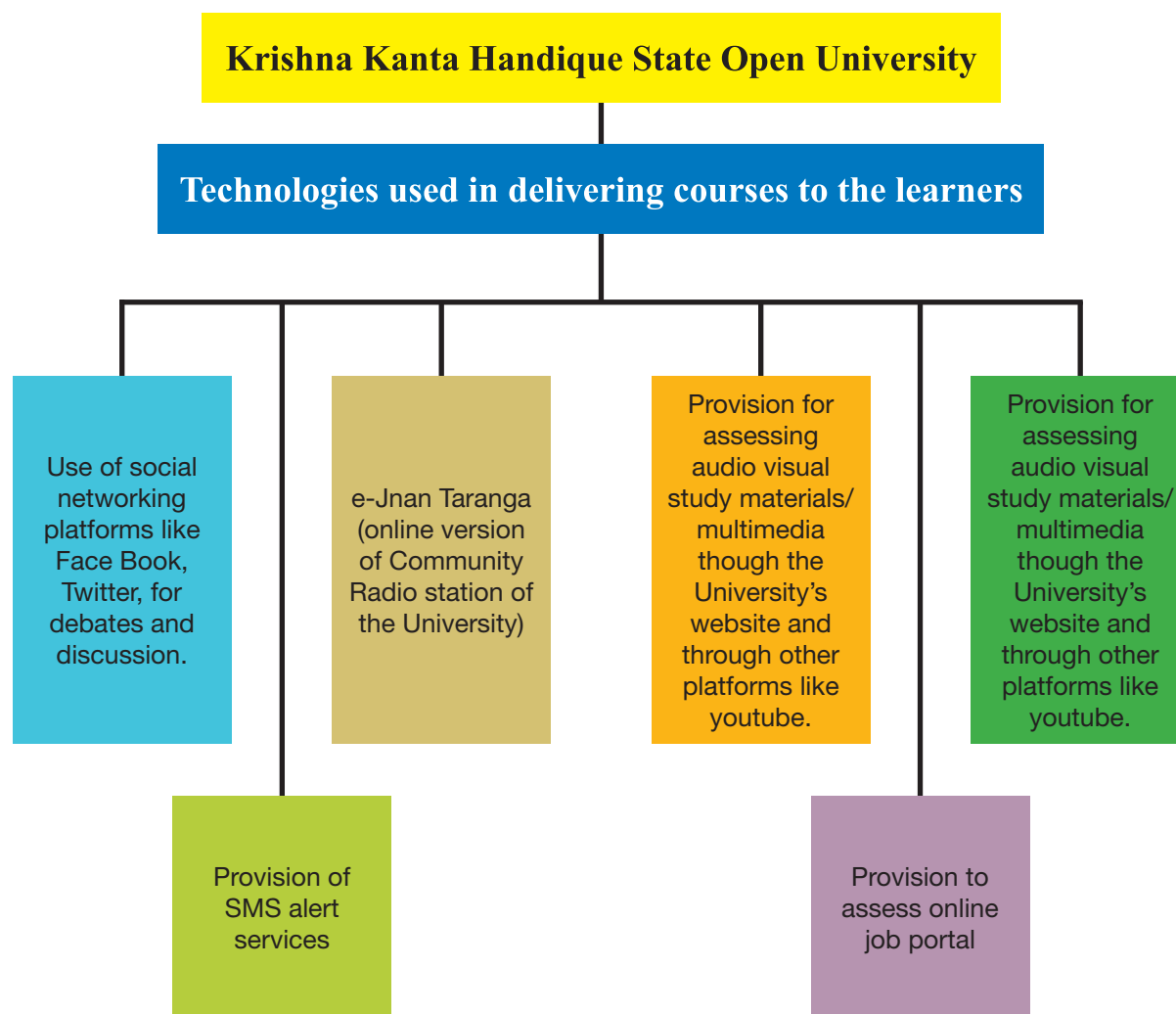


Figure 2: Technologies Used in Delivering Courses to the Learners

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:

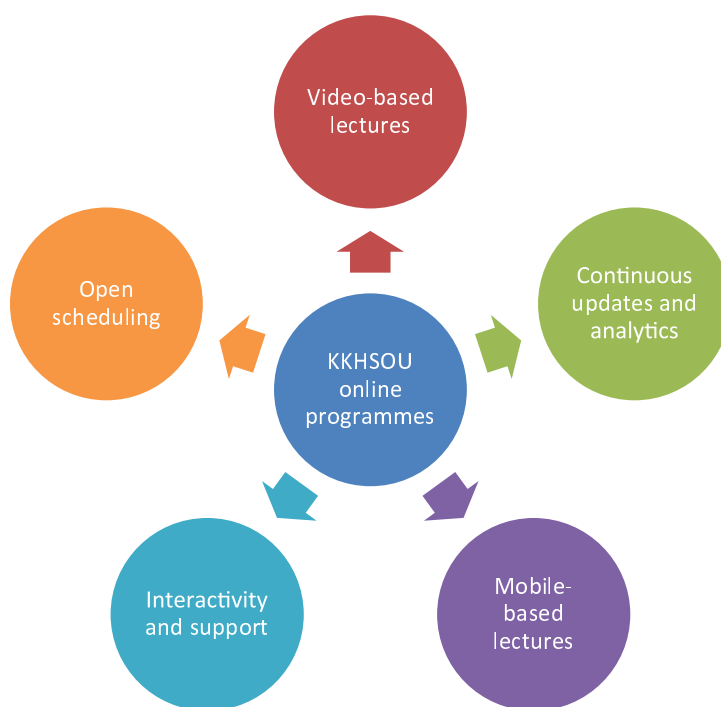


Figure 3: KKHSOU Online Programme Structure

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.

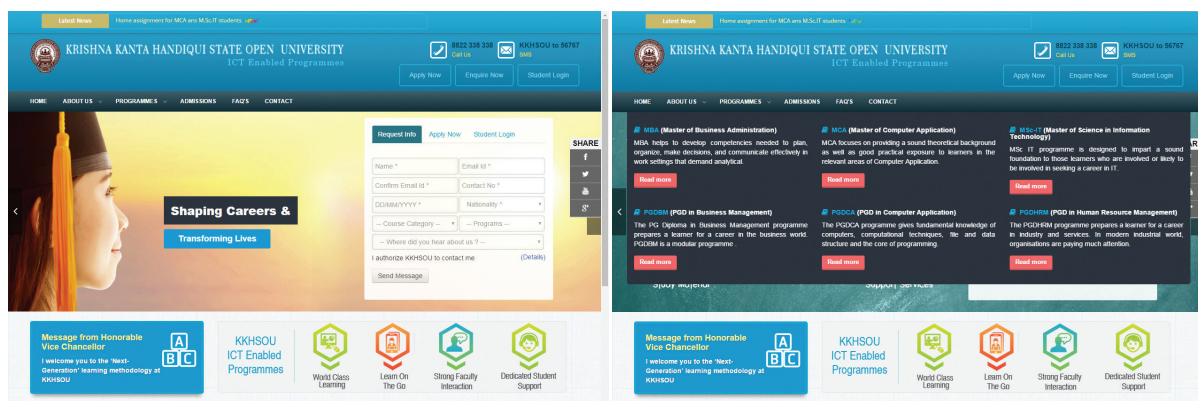


Figure 4: Online programmes of KKHSOU as viewed on the website of KKHSOU
(<http://ict.kkhsou.in/>)

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