

Distance Learning: Catering to the Needs of the People?

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ABSTRACT

In India, competition is increasing day by day. The people who do not catch up with the recent trend are bound to lurk behind. Indians have recently changed their mindset towards education and have realized the importance of being educated. The need of the people, including the deprived lot, in gaining access to education is fulfilled through distance learning programmes. The programmes offered in distance mode are also cheaper than the conventional courses. Although in academia, the degrees of open institutes are considered inferior to the degrees gained through regular mode, but in other sectors it turns out to be a boon for the employees who cannot devote full time to studies as they are engaged in fulfilling their other responsibilities. The open universities are governed by the Distance Education Council that keeps a check on the quality of education, leading to the maintenance of standard of the programmes running in distance mode.

INTRODUCTION

The development of any nation largely depends upon the quality of education it imparts to its citizens, and the number of people who get access to it. In the past, India's education system was inaccessible for its population and there was hardly any awareness amongst the people in this regard. Certain sections of the society like Schedule Castes (SC) and Schedule Tribes (ST) were out rightly denied the pleasure of being educated because of having been born in a 'supposedly' lower strata of society. Another major reason that held them back from being educated was that they had to be intensively involved in earning bread for their families and making both their ends meet.

The joint family systems too were responsible for providing comparatively lesser opportunities of education to the people. This system burdened the eldest male member of the family to be the bread earner on whose income all the family members relied which left no room for spending time and money on education,

either for him or for any other member of the family. There wasn't just the discrimination of the castes that was prevalent in the society leading to the less percentage of people falling under the category of being learned. The Indian education system even felt the pangs of the discrimination among the sexes that was prevalent in nearly all the sections of society. Women were married off at a fairly early age because of which they were left with no other choice but to tend to their family all their life. Irrespective of the age in which the girls got married, it was even the mindset of the people that deprived females of their right to education as their sole task was believed to be the nurturer of the family.

CHANGES IN THE MINDSET AND ATTITUDE OF INDIANS TOWARDS EDUCATION

With the passage of time these systems and the mindset of the people altered bringing in more opportunities of earning and learning for the deprived. An important role in bringing awareness amongst the people was played by the educational movements and campaigns run from time to time by the enlightened people and the government alike.

Cutting back to the present, the scenario of Indian societies have changed immensely. Education is now considered a tool that is used to empower the individuals in strengthening their social and economic status in the society. It has become a key to progress for an individual, ultimately leading to the progress of the whole nation.

There still are issues and problems pertaining to the people getting enrolled in full-fledged regular courses. The Distance Learning programmes provide a chance for such people to meet the challenges; and the ever increasing demand of the society for educated and qualified individuals gets fulfilled.

In context with the fulfillment of educational demands and qualification of the people employed in various sectors, the need of distance learning courses have arisen manifold in the recent past. The Open Universities not only provide an opportunity to the aspirants but they also provide ease of access to the students; giving them a platform to learn. The people can easily increase their qualification along with carrying out their responsibilities towards their near and dear ones, irrespective of their age. The flexibility of the distance learning programmes play a vital role in catering to the needs of working people.

QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN ODL (OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING)

The quality of education system prevalent in distance learning mode is governed by the curriculum designed, the material provided to the students, the contact programmes held and the assessment of the performance of the students. In certain courses, the contact programme is of utmost importance and the institute does not provide the degree unless one fulfills this criterion. An example can be cited of the PGCTE (Post Graduate Certificate in Teaching English) and PGDTE (Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching English) courses of EFLU (The English and Foreign Language University).

To maintain the standard of open learning, Distance Education Council (DEC) has been established. It keeps check on the standard of teaching, evaluation and research conducted in open universities. Because of the DEC it is less likely that the quality of education deteriorates in distance learning courses, leading to the maintenance of good standard. At times, the universities get some of their programmes approved by DEC and then illegally run other programmes too giving the impression that their courses are legal. In June 2011, a show cause notice was issued to The Karnataka State Open University (KSOU), Mysore, Karnataka for running courses like B.E/ B.Tech which are not allowed to be run through the distance mode by MHRD. Similarly, the University was running M.Phil. and Ph.D. courses too in distance mode which according to the

gazette notification issued by the UGC was banned to be offered by the dual mode universities of South India since 2008. Despite the DEC directing the universities not to run such courses in distance mode, certain open universities had been doing the same without informing the governing body. In cases where people land up enrolling themselves in illegal courses like these, their time, money and degree go wasted. Although the DEC has been ever active in this regard but it also depends upon the awareness generated among the masses in this context that would help them in landing on the safe plane.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN OPEN & REGULAR COURSES

The question that arises in learning through open universities is that do these universities stand anywhere near to the same courses offered in regular mode? Whether the people pursuing courses from such medium get equal qualification and pay as compared to those pursuing through the regular mode? What criteria make such learning different and/or inferior to that of the other? If we analyze the realistic situations prevalent in the society at present, we get to see the true picture.

In academia, the degrees gained through the medium of distance learning are not given much importance whereas on the other hand, diploma and the certificate courses are taken into consideration. The scene is different in government institutes as compared to the private ones. It is likely that the private institutes give some weightage to such degrees, but the government institutes completely eschew hiring people who wish to get job in academia on the basis of their degree through the distance mode. In other sectors, these degrees and certificates are given due importance. At present, the corporate sector demands skilled people along with having good qualification. Unlike the past, when the hiring committees used to hire people based upon just the technical experience of a person.

If we look at the 21st century India, we find that the awareness of education has wide-spread among the people. Now individuals from every field and sector are willing to gain the higher degree, something that was rare in the past. Even the ones who are into a job wish to study more for the sake of availing more perks and for getting promotions.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY OF OPEN LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

Along with providing ease of access to education, distance learning is even cost effective. It costs about one fourth of what one pays in the conventional system resulting in meeting the demands and needs of a broader section of society that cannot afford spending recklessly on education. According to M.M. Ansari, Director of Distance Education Council, IGNOU, New Delhi, “the financial health of ODL institutions thus reflects a low level of financial dependence on Government support due to efficient management of the system, effective revenue generation and economies of scale in ODL activities. They are therefore capable of contributing to human resource development through distance education.” DEC has identified priority areas of research and “funding support is provided to the individuals and institutions for undertaking research projects, which aim at improving planning and management of the system, quality of programmes and its delivery mechanisms.”

CONCLUSION

The distance learning programmes help people from all walks of life and from all age groups to vouch for higher education. This keenness towards education has increased tremendously in the recent past in India leading to the establishment of huge number of open universities in the country. The things that are to be taken into consideration by the aspirants are that they should check the legality of the institute and the courses on offer and then invest their time and money over it. As per the scenario prevalent in the Indian educational institutes,

Published in *Academic Society Research Journal: A Bilingual Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume XVI, No. 1, 164-166. April 2012. ISSN 2249-0671.

the aspirants who plan to get into higher education through distance mode should go through the directives of UGC and check whether in practical the course holds significant value and will be useful or not. The extent to which the distance learning courses are in vogue at present is that with each passing day the number of students getting enrolled and the number of programmes on offer are increasing, pointing towards the fact that the distance learning programmes are a huge success among the masses, irrespective of their gender, age, caste or financial status.

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