**INTERNATIONAL  MULTIDISCIPLINARY**
**R E S E A R C H   J O U R N A L**

# Student support services in open universities in India: a comparative analysis

**Manzoor Babu.V**

College Librarian**,** TKM College of Engineering Kollam-5, Kerala, India

**Abstract**
Distance education is an effective tool for the provision of education to a heterogeneous group of learners as well as an alternative channel to democratize education all over the world. In such a stream the importance of student support services are unquestionnable. The present study examines the existing scenario of student support services provided in the country, and learners perception regarding the same. The study is conducted on students of three selected Open Universities in the country, viz, Indira Gandhi Open University, BR Ambedkar Open University and Karnataka State Open University. Study reveals the pathetic situation of student support services provided by the Open Universities in the country. It also throws light about the perception of learners about various student support services provided in Open Universities in the country.

**Keywords:** Open University, Student support services, Open University libraries, Personal contact programs, Assignments, learners perception.

## INTRODUCTION

Student Support Services (SSS) are considered as backbone of distance education. That is why it is considered as crucial in the accreditation process of distance education courses and the decision of National and International bodies to award University degrees, college diplomas and training certification for studies done at distance. Various student support services are provided by the Open Universities and distance education institutes all over India for imparting education and for improving the performance of learners. The importance of libraries as the most important student support system in the field of distance education is undisputable. In the absence of adequate student support services the students will be unavoidably driven to cheap publications and activities. Even at present when the main thrust is on formal education the consequences of under utilization of student support services are evident. Therefore when distance education facilities are widened and number of students increase with little opportunity for personal contact programs,   the tide decline in the standard of education is bound to assume serious proportions unless proper steps are taken in advance in the form of developing adequate student support services and encouraging the students to make their self study based on these services.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

For the development of a country like India, the massive educational means should be popularised with the help of modern computer and communication infrastructure. Importance of student support services in education is undisputable. It is the most

essential entity in the field of distance education, because in distance education the study is more self centred. Especially in a situation where traditional Universities and higher education centers fail to fulfill their objectives and Virtual Universities and Tele-teaching methods are going to handle the place of higher education systems. Open Universities and number of distance learners are increasing day by day. In order to provide a strong infrastructure for the successful operation and implementation of distance education programs, student support systems are essential. It is also essential to know how the learners feel about the existing student support services. Therefore the   present study is highly relevant in the emerging socio technological context.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study about the student support services available in Open Universities in India.

2. To study about the learners perception about student support services provided in Open Universities in India.

## METHODOLOGY

The basic research methodology applied to carry out the present study is a survey with a structured questionnaire from the students of selected Open Universities in India. Among the various Open Universities in the country, three Open Universities are selected representing three categories such as large, medium and small. Indira gandhi Open University (IGNOU) represent large category, BR Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU) represent medium category and Karnataka State Open University (KSOU) represents small category. The size was determined on the basis of student enrolment for different courses of study in an academic year. Among the number of questionnaires distributed in headquarters/ study centres, 250 questionnaires were selected from each sample University, thus a total of 750 questionnaires were selected for the final analysis.

**ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

The detailed analysis of the data collected from the respondents and its interpretations are presented as follows:

**Student support services**

Student Support Services (SSS) are very important in the field of distance education. The important SSS offered by the Open Universities and distance education centres are ; provision of study materials, in written, magnetic as well as digital forms, personal contact programs/counseling sessions, assignments, study centres and library services. Some of the key SSS of the Open Universities in India are discussed below.

**Study materials**

The printed and the electronic-based study materials are widely used in many Open Universities and distance education centres. The learners consider these materials highly valuable. It is an instrument by means of which a teacher imparts instruction to his/her students. In distance education, since the teacher is away from the student, the only way for the student is the frequent contact with the study materials. It hardly needs to be emphasized that quality of the study materials is the touchstone of the success or failure of distance education. The distance education institutes in India provide only printed study materials as a strong student support device. It is the heterogeneity of the learners that complicates the problem of quality of study materials in distance education. They have to cater to a wide range of learners' needs from basic awareness in the subject to the excellence in the area of study. Keeping in view of the mixed nature of the students in distance education, such as the experienced and the novices, the knowledge-seekers and the college drop-outs, the adults and the non-adults, the study materials should have some qualities.

**Personal Contact Program / Counseling Sessions**

One of the important SSS of any distance education program is the personal contact programs (PCP). The reliance on study materials cannot be absolute. Contact session is believed to afford personal interaction among participants, contribute towards course completion, and reduce the load on student support services. Face-to-face contact sessions with distance learners are accepted as a necessary strategy to overcome their social as well as academic alienation. Those who are against the provision of PCPs hold the view that distance education, unlike its conventional counterpart, is an independent self-study. 'Independent self-study' consists of various forms of teaching-learning arrangements in which teachers and learners carry out their essential tasks and responsibilities apart from one another. This apartness from one another is the feature that has received the attention of theorists and policy makers. In the Indian situation, a distance education student has to complete the given course in a specified period of time and has to take examination along with the regular University student; the need for the face-to-face contact sessions therefore is justified. This fact has been categorically emphasized by the UGC guidelines (1974) in the following words: "the provision of contact programs should be an essential feature of correspondence education in order that the mind of the student is exposed to the mind of the teacher lectures, tutorials,

seminars and other forms of discussions." UGC recommends that a "a contact program of at least two weeks duration should be organized in different places, wherever there is a cluster of 200 or more students."

With the advent of efficient communication technologies, the mode of personal contact programs in the distance education system has vastly changed. Along with the face- to face contact in the counseling sessions, the same may occur through such technologies. In the Open Universities of India, the PCPs have become an integral part of their Student Support Services. So here an attempt has been made by the investigator to analyze various activities at contact classes. Responses of learners are expressed in Table 1.

Table 1. Activities at contact classes- (In percentage)

| Activities | IGNOU | BRAOU | KSOU | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lecture | 85.2 | 58.7 | 65 | 69.63 |
| Lecture cum discussion | 14.8 | 40.7 | 34 | 29.83 |
| Audio-Video Presentation | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Only Discussion | 0.0 | 0.0 | 1.0 | 0.3 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100 |

In actual practice PCP has degenerated into a series of lecture sessions in which teachers dominate, while, students listen to them passively. In the present study also, in most of the Open Universities, the lecture method dominates. The provision of audio-video presentation is practically non-existent. Thus, the covering of the whole syllabus of a course as in the conventional classes, in a short series of lectures in distance education, dilutes the very purpose of PCP.

**Study centres**

In an Open University, the Students Support Services are built with the help of local centres. One kind of local center is known as a Study Centre. A Study Centre is established to offer students various communication channels to enable them to interact with academic counselors and fellow students as also to provide access to modern technological services through the use of audio-visual aids. Functions and activities of Study Centres are manifold and ever increasing with the increase in the activities of the University. In general, the study centres perform functions like academic-counseling, conduct of orientation program for counselors and other staff, providing library and information services, handling assignments and conducting examinations. In the context of distance education, a Study Centre is, thus, a miniature extension of the supporting distance organization into a locality where there is concentration of students. Among the three Open Universities studied, it is seen that only IGNOU maintains Study Centres. The other Open Universities in India do not give proper attention and planning for study center activities. In this context, any meaningful discussion and comparison is not possible on student support services in these institutions through Study Centres.

**Assignments**

Submission of assignments/response sheets is an integral part of the distance education programs. It forms a part of the evaluation system in many institutions. The treatment given to assignments varies from institution to institution. In IGNOU, the assignments carry a weight of 25 to 30 percent in the term-end examinations. Through the assignments, interaction between the

tutor and learner becomes possible. In the present study all the sample Universities insists on submission of assignments.

## Other support systems

The success of the distance education program depends on many other support systems as well. Some of these supports are pre-enrolment guidance, induction programs, library services, and enquiry services. As far as the institutions studied are concerned, most of these services are found to be weak. Although IGNOU provides, pre-entry guidance and induction programs, it is revealed that its library and enquiry services are not satisfactory. The learners are not issued any books from the Study Centres. As most of the learners are employed, they do not find time to make all the references required sitting in the library. Similarly, the study centres are not well equipped to give proper direction to the doubts raised by the learners. A number of learners expressed their concern over these issues.

## Learners' perceptions about Student Support Services (SSS)

Learners are the central focus of any educational system. All activities within a system are geared towards producing persons who would be useful to the society. There is no doubt that distance education is expanding in our country. This expansion could be noted in terms of students' enrolment, number of institutions, number of programs/courses etc. However, the system is plagued by a number of problems, among which lack of facilities is an important one. The Open Universities provide certain services, which are geared towards making students comfortable within the University set-up. The important services are provision of study materials, PCPs, library services, enquiry services, and multi-media. These provisions make distance education distinct from education through private registration. An attempt is made here to analyze the perception of learners about these services. To indicate the level of the services, the responses were classified into adequate, rich, inadequate, and not available at all. Table 2 provides the details on the learners' perception about study materials.

Table 2. Perception of Learners about the Study materials

| Response/ Category | IGNOU | | BRAOU | | KSOU | | TOTAL | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Adequate | 148 | 59.2 | 20 | 8.00 | 16 | 16.25 | 174 | 23.2 |
| Rich | 78 | 31.2 | 125 | 50.00 | 82 | 32.8 | 247 | 32.93 |
| Inadequate | 24 | 9.6 | 87 | 34.8 | 143 | 57.2 | 292 | 38.93 |
| Not available | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 27 | 10.8 | 27 | 3.6 |
| Total | 250 | 100.0 | 250 | 100.0 | 250 | 100.0 | 750 | 100.0 |

(No= Number, %= Percentage)

The majority of the learners of Karnataka State Open University find the study materials inadequate, where as in BRAOU, study materials are found to be fairly adequate by the majority of learners. In IGNOU, the majority finds the study materials adequate. The sample as a whole, only 23.2 percent consider the study materials adequate. About 33 percent consider them rich. However, more than 38 percent perceive them inadequate.

It is well known that Personal Contact Programs (PCP)s are an integral part of the distance education programs of most of the Universities. It is through the PCP that the learners make close contact with their tutors. In this context, it is interesting to know how the learners of the different distance education Institutes respond to the PCPs. Perception of learners about contact sessions are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Perception of Learners about Personal Contact Programs

| Response/ Category | IGNOU | | BRAOU | | KSOU | | TOTAL | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Adequate | 5 | 2.00 | 19 | 7.6 | 22 | 8.8 | 46 | 6.13 |
| Rich | 131 | 52.4 | 146 | 58.4 | 30 | 12 | 229 | 30.53 |
| Inadequate | 114 | 45.6 | 85 | 34 | 198 | 79.2 | 475 | 63.34 |
| Not available | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Total | 250 | 100 | 250 | 100 | 250 | 100 | 750 | 100.00 |

(No= Number, %= Percentage)

Table 3 shows that as in the case of study materials, more than two-third of the learners of the Karnataka State Open University find the PCPs 'inadequate'. In IGNOU and BR. Ambedkar Open Universities, the majority perceives the PCPs rich. Generally, the learners feel that the counseling/contact classes are inadequate to meet their requirements.

## Libraries in distance education

The need for providing a strong infrastructure for the successful operation and implementation of distance education

programs cannot be over emphasized. The main prop of distance education should be provided much more than in the case of formal education. In their absence the students will unavoidably be driven to cheap publications in the form of guides, which are nothing but capsulated information. They give the students just minimum information often erroneously and shabbily presented, for passing examinations. The students would get no access to serious books and periodicals in different disciplines and imbibe knowledge of their subject in depth. Even at present when the main thrust is on formal education the consequences of under utilization of library resources are evident. Therefore, when distance education facilities are

widened and the number of students increase with little opportunity for personal contact programs, the tide decline in the standard of education is bound to assume serious proportions unless proper steps are taken in advance in the form of developing library facilities and encouraging the students to make their self study library centered. (Isaac, 1979).

Libraries are the symbols of cultural maturity of the society.

Here an attempt has been made to analyze which type of library the distance learners are using, i.e., whether they are using the libraries of their institution or other libraries. This is to get an overview picture about the importance of libraries in the distance education system in the country. Their responses about the type of library they used are given in Table 4.

Table 4. Type of library used by distance learners

| University | No use | Attached to OU | Conventional University | Special | Public | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| IGNOU | 119 (47.6) | 9 (3.6) | 49 (19.6) | 21 (8.4) | 52 (20.8) | 250 (100) |
| BRAOU | 180 (72) | 4 (1.6) | 14 (5.6) | 12 (4.8) | 40 (16) | 250 (100) |
| KSOU | 179 (71.6) | 6 (2.4) | 11 (4.4) | 7 (2.8) | 47 (18.8) | 250 (100) |
| Total | 478 (63.73) | 19 (2.53) | 74 (9.87) | 40 (5.33) | 139 (18.53) | 750 (100) |
| Pearson Chi-square: 200.585, df=10, p=0.00000 | | | | | | |

(Figures in brackets indicate percentage)

Table 4 reveals that the majority (63.73) of the respondents are not in the habit of using the library. Among those who use the library (18.53) percentage are using the public libraries. It indicates that public libraries can act as a greater promoter of life long learners' education, which is one of the major goals of public libraries. Only 2.53 percent of the respondents are using the libraries attached

to the Open Universities.

There exists significant difference among the distance learners of various Open Universities in the country in their use of library resources. Figure 1 also gives a clear picture about the types of library used by the distance learners.
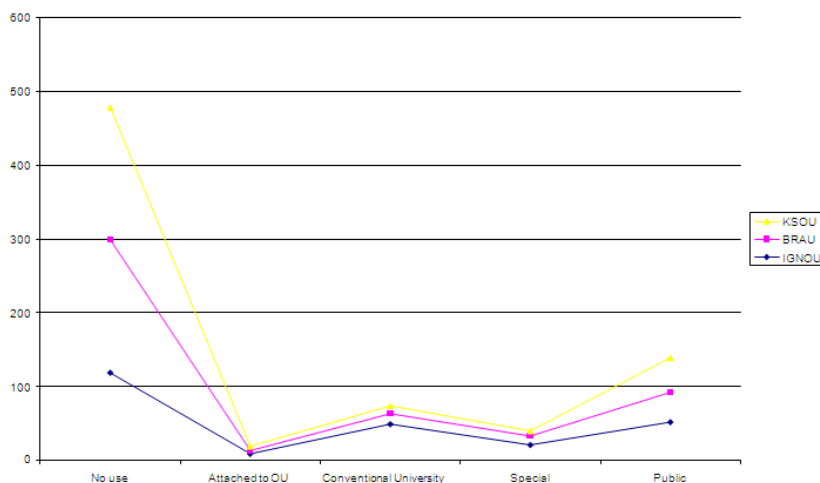


Fig 1.Type of library used by distance learners

## CONCLUSION

From the study it has become clear that in the field of distance education lack of adequate student support services are very evident. Students are at present not fully utilising the potential of existing support services either due to the lack of awareness or lack of time. Most of them are satisfied with the study materials provided by the Universities and with limited personal contact sessions. It not only decreases the standard of students, but it also creates awareness among the society that distance education is a liberal and flexible way of getting a diploma or a degree. The learners of all the Distance Education Institutes frequently make use of the study materials and contact classes. However, the utilization of library and multi-media services is scanty. Even at IGNOU, only a very small percent of the learners frequently use student support services. More over the

existing   services are not sufficient to the learners. In other Open Universities, the situation is a bit worse. All these have significant impact on making distance education quite unsuccessful as an alternative channel for higher education.

## REFERENCES

[1] Bansal, Kiron, and Choudhary, Sohanvir S. 1999. Interactive radio for supporting distance education: an evaluative study. *Indian Journal of Open Learning*, 8(1), 61 – 71.

[2] Brown, K. M. 1996. The role of internal and external factors in the discontinuation of off-campus students. *Distance Education*, 17(1): 44-71.

[3] Caron, S.1982. *Student support at Cross Roads* In *Learning at a*

*Distance: A World Perspective* (Ed.) Daniel.J.S, *et al.* Athabasca: Athabasca University.

[4] Chander, Jose. N. 1996. Towards a better student support system in Distance Education. *Paper presented in the IV Annual Conference of IDEA, Hyderabad*, 22-24 November.

[5] Datt, Ruddar. 1991. Growth of Distance Education in India. *Indian Journal of Distance Education,* IV (1), 21-27.

[6] Dillon, C and Gunavardana. 2003. Learners support – the critical link in distance education. *New frontiers in education* 32 (2), 131-134.

[7] Egan, M.Winston *et al*. 1992. Learners' Perceptions of Instructional Delivery Systems: Conventional and Television. *The American Journal of Distance Education,* 6(2), 28-32.

[8] Evans, C and Sabry, K. 2003. Evaluation of interactivity in web based learning systems: principles and processes. *Innovations in education and teaching international* 40 (1), 89-99.

[9] Jeevan, VK. 1999. IT enabled library services for distance learning: threats and opportunities. *The Journal of Electronic Publishing*, 5 (1),19-25.

[10] Kishore, S. 1998). Management of Student Support Services and its Cost in IGNOU. *Indian Journal of Distance Education,*.6 (2),54-56.

[11] Krishnan, C. 2001. Learners Perception and Utilization of ODL services – A Case Study. *Paper presented in the VIII Annual Conference of IDEA*, SDLCE, Kakatiya University, Andhra Pradesh, 22-24 March.

[12] Suzanne,St.Pierre and Larry. K.Olsen.1991.Student perspectives on the Effectiveness of Correspondence Instruction. *The American Journal of Distance Education,* 5(3), 45-54.