

Distance Education: How Much Distance? The History, Opportunities, Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

Distance learning has become a permeating and growing phenomenon. The increased demand for education showed that there is a greater need among working adults to continue their education. However, most adult workers are not able to continue their studies using the conventional means due to their work and family commitments. Distance education provides the flexibility for them to continue their studies. Moreover, the distance education is mainly intended for the people who can't be able continue their education due to the geographical distance, economical status, cultural and traditional reasons, still there exist a large DISTANCE between the these people and the distance learning institutes in making aware of the programs, courses and in bringing effective outcomes. This paper attempts to screen out the distance between people and the distance learning institutes. Also evolution, statistics and various programs of distance learning education (DLE) have been critically reviewed. Finally, the history, opportunities, issues and challenges of DLE have been analyzed and some recommendations have been proposed in order to make the program effective. This paper brings out the positive suggestion to enhance the pass out ratio by implementing the proposed model.

Keywords: Counsellors, Distance Education, E-Learning, Open Learning

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1. Introduction

Due to the increased demand of educational needs, the different educational systems have arisen, such as formal education system and open education system. Formal educational systems provide education to the people in confined time period and in confined area. It has institutional infrastructure, where teacher and student interact each other in knowledge transformation process. But in open education system, educational opportunities are provided to the learners at any time, any phase and at any distance. Distance education and open education are the terms used inter changeably. Open learning system involves his/her choice of place and time for making availability of learning. While distance education refers to the process of learning in which there is spatial and usually temporal distance between the teacher and learner. In the distance education mode learners can enroll in any programme and will be provided all the educational requirements so that they can study or learn at their own phase. In this open education system learners are self-centric, self-motivated and departed away from the teacher. Distance learning brings an access when the learners and source of information are

separated by distance and time. It has two main elements, i.e., distance teaching and distance learning. In distance teaching all the educational institutions has to deliver and design lectures to the registered students so that learning may occur.

2. History of Distance Education

On the globe, the first university offered distance learning degree is University of London in the year 1858 as a course under external program. Now this program is popular known as University of London International Programs which includes PG, UG and diploma degrees created by colleges such as the London School of Economics, Royal Holloway and Goldsmiths. University of Chicago's first president implemented the concept of extended education and in 1892 he further fostered the idea of correspondence school courses to promote education. In Australia, the University of Queensland established its Department of Correspondence Studies in 1911. In India, University of Delhi introduced the first correspondence courses in B.A degree in the year 1962. Later in 1968, the Punjab University and University

of Rajasthan launched correspondence courses by opening institute of correspondence and continuing education. During 1970's the Osmania University, Hyderabad was having a programme of BA external examination. This programme was having very high demand from all over India. Later this programme has been scrapped. Then it has got a new name of education system i.e., "Correspondence Education". In this mode learners used to provide the study material in the form of photo copies or Xerox copies of subject related study materials. This type of education system has got very good success in Technical Education as well as non-technical education system. Diploma/Degree programme in engineering for employed persons have been conducted successfully for decades along by JNTU, Hyderabad and School of Engineering and Technology(SOET), IGNOU, New Delhi. Still such type of programmes AMIE's section A and section B are successfully conducting and has got equivalence of engineering diploma and degree.

Similarly Indian Institute of Industrial Engineering (IIIE) Mumbai conducts its graduate ship programmes since long decades ago which has equivalence with B.E. in Industrial Engineering of regular university degree. At this computer era, most of the formal educational universities and institutes, distance education universities are offering online learning programmes. A few universities have designed community colleges and convergent programmes, according to the need of the particular society. But still there exists a gap between the learners and distance education institutes.

The major objectives of DE system are:

- Enhancement of higher education to large sections of the people, particularly to the disadvantaged grouped people living in remote and rural areas, working people, women and adult learners etc
- To provide an opportunity for up-gradation of skills and qualifications for employed people; and
- To develop education as a lifelong activity to enable persons to update their knowledge or acquire knowledge in new areas

3. Literature Review

Framis Glasgow (2011)⁴, suggested that technical and vocational courses are very much essential for community development. He further emphasized that more respondents are looking for basic qualifications such as 10th, 12th and graduation level academic programmes to improve their academic qualifications. Sushmita Mitra (2010)¹⁵ discussed about model of partnership in education and its impact on the open schooling performance in India. She viewed that educational institutional partnerships will have numerous advantages, such as sharing of workloads,

avoiding duplication and cost savings, nears to the learners etc; and suggested that partnerships in education should be encouraged and strictly implemented. A Mishra et al (2010)¹ observed that the particular programme student enrolment status is good but the passing percentages are very low. Based on the feedback of the students, it is evident that, the services provided by the open university is good and excellent but more F2F interaction of counsellors, regional centre staff and study centre staff with students should be increased to enhance the pass percentage for a particular programme. Murugan Krishan Pillai (2011)⁹ identified and compared quality indicators in campus education with ODL education. The author suggested that ODL institutions should identify their quality indicators and work up on them to improve the quality of support services, which will enhance the student's satisfaction level and will enhance the quality standards of ODL institutions. Moumita Das and Chinmoy Kumar Ghosh (2011)⁸ explained the importance of capacity building of counselors of the ODL universities. They also felt that the effective role of academic counselors is very much important for counseling the learners in ODL institutes. The authors expressed their view that there is a need of developing five capacities to the counselors, such as inquiry, creativity and Innovation, Technological capabilities, Entrepreneurial skills and Moral leadership. The counselors who acquire the above capabilities will perform better in counseling learners in DE institutes. Ashok K. Gaba and S.S. Sethy (2010)² conducted research on learning perception on ICT's in Open University education system. In this paper authors clearly explained which are the ICT's and how these ICT's are useful to the Open University students. They also found that the effectiveness of use of ICT's in Open University education system. This research was conducted by designing a questionnaire methodology to get the case information about the knowledge the open university students having on ICT's and their effective use in open university education system starting from taking admission in a programme to till completion of the programme. This study was focused on Open University learner's perception on advantages and disadvantages of ICT's. Won Kim, Timothy K. Shih, (2003) argued that network infrastructure and computer facilities must be combined for the successful functioning of distance education. They also stated the need of social challenges in distance education. They pointed out that, motivation is the key factor for the success of distance learning. Manishankar Roy (2015)^{5,16} in a paper "some perspective of open and distance education in India" examined the need, growth and development of Distance and Open Education in India. Manzoor Babu.V (2012) from a study concluded that, distance education is lagging in providing adequate student support services. He also argued that the unitization of existing support services by the students is poor due to the lack of awareness or time. But the utilization of study materials and contact classes are good where usage of library

and multimedia services by students are worse. Sadhasivam Panchabakesan (2011)¹² has made a point that the entire distance education students should be brought on one platform. He suggested that for in the effective teaching to improve the interaction between instructors and students advance technologies and multimedia should be used. Further, he suggested that all the distance education institutions should have to strengthen their distance-learning strategic plans by identifying and understanding distance-education trends for student enrollments, faculty support, and larger academic, technological and economic issues.

4. Evolution of Distance Education System in India

The references of distance education can be seen during the Mahabarat period (Dwapara yuga), where Ekalvy and Karna learned Dhanur Vidya (Archery). Since then, the history has witnessed several such situations but has gone unrecorded. However, through the last five decades, with the increased demand and need for higher education with the changing base of knowledge

levels, most of the people started opting for both earning and learning through distance education. Recognizing this need, The University Grants Commission (UGC) proposed in its report for the year 1956-1960 that planning for part-time colleges, correspondence courses and conduct of external degrees should be included. The technocrats suggested that the institution offering corresponding courses should offer greater flexibility, economic viability and innovative methods of imparting education. The committee so formed for the purpose by the government of India has suggested that correspondence courses in India should be administered by the universities only and in the first instance, by one University, viz., the University of Delhi as a pilot project. The following is the array of birth and growth of distance education as shown in Figure 1.

- Distance education was born at university of Delhi's school of correspondence courses and continuing education in the year 1962.
- During 1970s there was rapid growth and widespread of the correspondence education system in India, through more number of universities under the title of corresponding course.

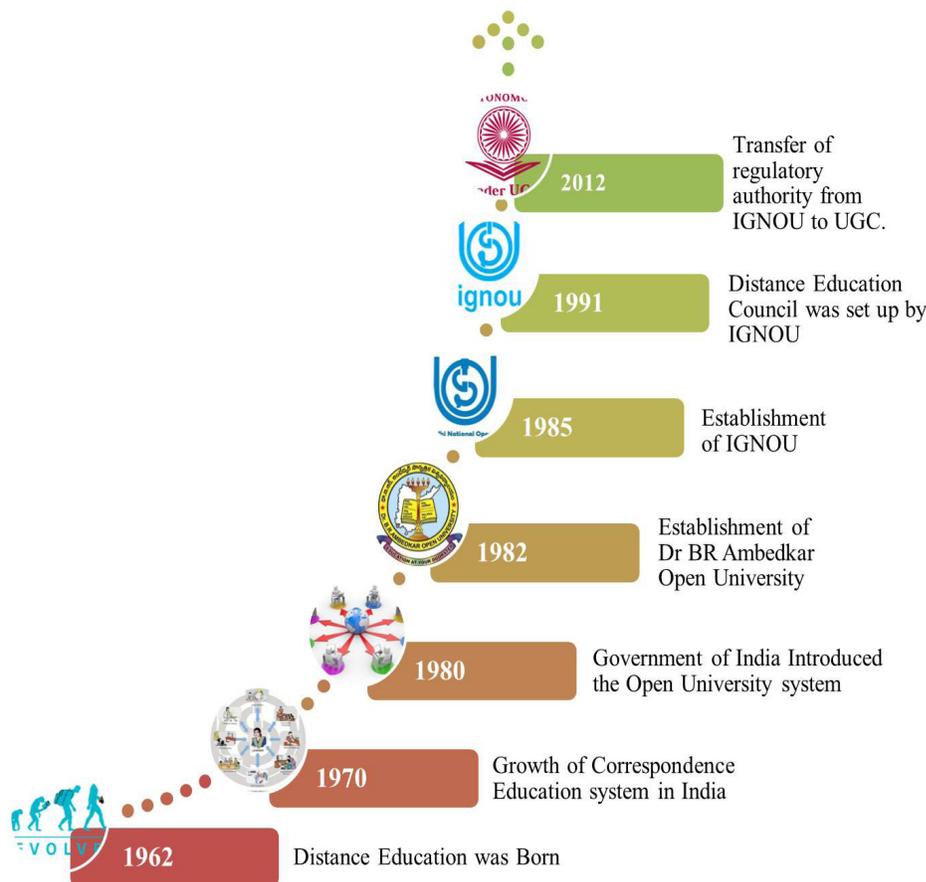


Figure 1. Evolution of Distance Education System.

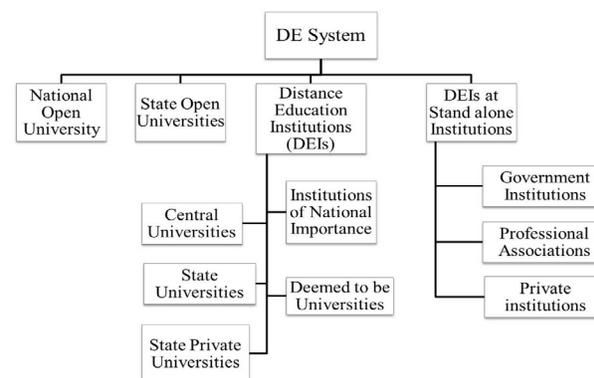
Table 1. Course wise enrolment for distance education all over India

Level	2011-12		2012-13		2013-14	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Post Graduate	772328	531536	557691	534556	638918	638703
Under Graduate	1213524	785429	2212071	940575	1335710	1018988
P.G. Diploma	44661	18003	57672	22556	40299	21789
Diploma	70580	45595	80136	46730	81278	48957
Certificate	37231	38671	45773	51684	50009	55380
Integrated	1523	478	297	92	43	20
Total	2139847	1419712	2013065	1596193	2146257	1783837
Overall Total	3559559	3609258	3930094			

- It a short period, the distance education system gained its popularity due to affordability, convenience and access.
- Nevertheless DE system was not recognized to its expectations owing to the merits of conventional education system.
- After a good number of suggestions and alternatives, the government of India introduced the Open University system in the 1980s, with a motive to enhance the opportunities to Indian's in higher education particularly for whom the access was difficult or impossible such as those living in remote and rural areas, working people, women and other adults who wish to acquire and upgrade their knowledge and skills through studies in various fields.
- Thence, the ministry of human resource development gave prominence to an Open University system in its national policy on education (NPE) 1986.
- The establishment of Dr. BR Ambedkar Open University Hyderabad, opened a new chapter in the distance education system in 1982, followed by the establishment of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) at the national level by the Act of Parliament of India in 1985.
- The concept of open education system was well accepted by many states of the country which led to opening of two more open universities namely Nalanda Open University (NOU) Patna, Bihar in 1987 and Vardhman Mahaveer Open University (VMOU), Kota, Rajasthan.
- Subsequently, Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU), Nashik, Maharashtra has emerged in 1989.
- The Distance Education Council (DEC), so formed by government of India took several initiatives for promotion, coordination and maintenance of standards of open and distance education system in the country. DEC has developed guidelines for regulating the establishment and operation of ODL institutions in the country.
- India has one of the largest DE systems in the world, second only to China. The categorization of DE system is shown in the Figure 2.

5. Statistics of Distance Education

The Universe for Open and Distance Learning Institutes (ODLIs) in India comprises 249 institutes, out of which 176 institutes are currently offering Distance Education Programmes. Distance enrolment constitutes 12.5 % of the total enrolment in higher education of which 39.9% are female students as per statistics in all India survey on higher education (2011-12). In order to analyze the enrolments of distance education for various programmes, All India survey report for higher education for the year 2012, 2013 and 2014 was taken into consideration. Also category wise intake was taken for the same years from planning division reports of IGNOU the Peoples University are shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

**Figure 2.** Classification of DE system in India.

From the above statistics, it is evident that the demand for distance education is increasing day by day of which male students play a major role. There is more demand for the programs which come under UG level and PG level. Whereas courses like diploma, PG diploma and Certificate course have found to be moderate in enrollment. However an integrated course through distance education has showing a down fall in the count of enrollment as seen from year to year. The statistics was also shown for the enrollment through category wise. Male category

students are found to be increasing year by year as compare to the female category students. When coming to the rural and urban background students, the enrollments of urban category students following an increasing trend than the rural category students. When the analysis of enrollments made between employed and unemployed, unemployed students are contributing a major in the overall distance education enrollments and also increasing positively.

Table 2. Category wise enrolment for distance education in IGNOU

Enrolment	Enrolment Year Wise		
	2013	2014	2015
Male	205980	219667	227117
Female	171482	178683	191165
Urban	206854	213864	232740
Rural	153113	162677	169961
Employed	98260	99370	113428
Unemployed	279254	299091	304998

6. The Opportunities, Issues and Challenges of DE system

6.1 Opportunities of DE system

Open and distance education institutes have the potential to enhance the employability skill and subject by providing quality education. Most of the students pursuing their studies through distance education mode are unemployed. Majority of the students concern after the completion of degree is employment opportunities. Every student will invest money, time and energy in pursuing a course, so he definitely expects a job opportunity after the completion of his/her graduation.

As far as placements are concerned, statistics and surveys shows that students undergoing their studies through distance education mode has very good opportunities in placements with a good salary package. During a study, it was understood that one of the top most IIMs in india IIM Kozhikode students average salary package offered to MBA graduates varied between 11 lakh to 19 lakh. Job opportunities in distance education mode from an open university like IGNOU also offer good packages as IIM graduates. Considering the financial expenses, distance learning programmes offered by open universities like IGNOU or Dr B.R. Ambedkar Open University, then the placements offered by them are actually good returns on the investment. The opportunities of DE systems may vary for freshers and professionals. For professionals Distance learning may lead to better careers and promotions through acquired skill-sets. Whereas for fresher's

Placement cells of distance learning universities may help with job opportunities.

7. Issues of DE system

Drastic change has taken place in the last decades in the field of education sector. The use of multimedia and technology have increased tremendously in the education field where a teacher can adopt various means of these for the effective delivery of his/her lecture. Distance education in India has started in the past 1960's with an aim of providing education those who can't continue their studies due to financial or family commitments. Today the scenario has changed where students from different background whether it may be employed or unemployed, married or unmarried, male or female, rural or urban, rich or poor are opting distance education. According to **Manjulika S and V Venugopal Reddy (1996)**⁶, the compound growth rate of enrolment in distance education programmes was 15.7 per cent per annum during the period 1982-83 to 1991-92 as compared to 4.1 per cent in the formal education system. The reasons may be various viz., improving the qualification, distance constraint, family restriction, need of degree for employment etc., no matter the reason is, the distance education institutes must fulfill student goals and objectives. As per the statistics of DE, there was an enormous progress per year by year in the enrolments for various courses, but as the numbers of enrolments are increasing, there are more issues associated by distance education universities and institutes that lag with conventional (regular) education institutes. In order to notify these issues, a general survey has been conducted by inquiring the students who have been registered their courses in various distance learning institutes and also a study was made by collecting the literature available in journal and web are shown in Table 3. Based on these, some major issues faced by the distance education universities and institutes today have been listed. Also a grid has been developed, to indicate the issues as per the percent wise based on the survey made by inquiry. Most prominent issues are listed below.

- One of the major issues faced by the distance education institutes are tremendous downfall of pass percent.
- Another fortunate thing found is in recognition of distance education degree certificates. Nonetheless, most of the private and government sectors are not considering the degrees issued by distance education universities on par with degrees
- The dropouts being more due to many reasons like lack of student support, face to face interaction etc., which may detriment the fame and name of the institution and causes to reduce the student enrolments.
- Distance education institutes lag in designing the study materials for the easy understanding of students.

- The level of understanding and subject knowledge of students enrolling in distance education is very poor.
- Unavailability of faculty to the students in required time.
- Absence of Laboratory and practical work in the curriculum.

Table 3. Percentage of Issues according to the survey results

Sl. No	Issue	
	Improper service and support by DE institutes to students	12%
	Facilitating easy provision of degree by private regular institutions	6%
	Assessment of student's performance	5%
	Dearth of awareness on multimedia	2%
	Lack of enhancement of technical skills in students	1%
	Improper design of study material	8%
	No face to face interaction with teacher	24%
	Lack of Teacher's concern on student	19%
	Confusion of rules and regulations of universities	1%
	Dearth of teacher's support	22%

8. Challenges of DE System

In the field of distance education, student services and support are vital. Today, DE system lags in providing adequate student support and services. Moreover due to the lack of awareness or matching time, students are not fully utilizing the existing support and services. All these have significant impact on making distance education quite unsuccessful as an alternative channel for higher education. As the enrolments in distance education are increasing year by year, there are more challenges faced by the DE system. The foremost challenge is in minimizing the gap between the universities, administration staff and students. This can improve the level of confidence in the students for acquiring and getting the support, service and subject, which can also reduce the dropouts and can increase the pass percent to some extent. Another challenge is in bringing down the subject experts and senior faculty to reach out the students, so that students can have face to face interaction with the experts and can clarify their doubts. For this, all DE universities and institutes should engage some senior faculty from various universities.

The major difference between the conventional education system and DE system hide in providing the laboratory and conducting the practical work. Most of the distance educa-

tion institutes prioritize and focus theory part and no practical works are included in their curriculum. This will substantially reduce the potential of the students, which can also bring a negative remark on DE institutes. Further, this may lead to make a considerable difference between conventional education system student and DE system student. The arrival of technology has also made many challenges to the distance education system. All the distance education institutes should make the optimum use of multimedia for the effective transformation of subject and to improve the interaction between the student and teacher. Also use of technology and e-learning based lessons can enhance student learning level. It should also bring a platform to provide student to student interaction

9. Modified Open & Distance E-Learning (MODEL)

After going through the various literatures, it was observed that, registration to a particular program was found reasonably well, but the outcome (results) of that program is not up to the mark. For analyzing various reasons for this cause, a survey has been conducted. After a thorough analysis, it was found that, a large gap has been dwelled between the students and study centers. Also the foremost issue faced by distance education institutes today is face to face interaction between the teacher and student. Counselling the students in making aware of the program and the subject is another problem faced by the distance education institutes. So focus has been made to overcome this problem. In this paper, a model has been developed to fill these gap and to ensure effective distance learning program. This paper brings out the positive suggestion to enhance the pass out ratio by implementing the proposed model.

Initially the interested counsellors (lectures) working in private and govt. institutions need to be registered with the distance education institutes along with the details like subject they dealt, experience, their free hours and education profile. After the process of compilation of these data, sorting will be done based on the specialization, subject and medium. It will be seen that at least three counsellor per each subject will be arranged. A separated portal has to be maintained by distance education institutes for this process. All the collected data will be linked up with this portal. During the time of admission process, each student will be provided an opportunity to choose the support of counsellors. If the students are willing to avail the facility of counsellors, they will be charged some liable amount and a login id with password will be provide upon which a student may login, if they need any support.

If a student needs any support, first they need to login in the institute portal with their user name and password given by the

institutes or study centers. After logging in, students can see all the registered counsellors along with their subjects dealt, free hours and profile. According to the requirement, of the student, each student can choose a counsellor and an appointment should be registered for that particular counsellor. When an appointment is registered by the student, immediate message will be sent to the counsellor's mobile regarding the appointment of the student. As per the free hours given by the counsellor, students can approach the counsellor during the specified hours for which each counsellor will be given remuneration. A model of proposed system is shown in Figure 3.

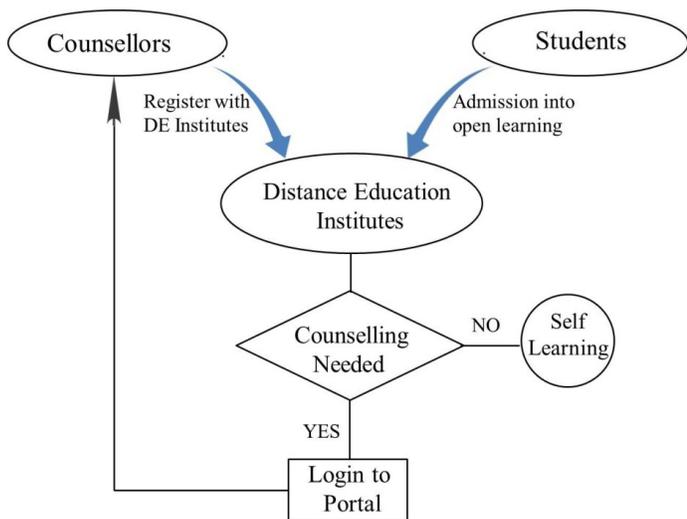


Figure 3. Block diagram of proposed MODEL.

10. Conclusion

Due to the advancement in the technology, students can attain their further qualifications and degrees by adopting various means of education, based on the constraints they have. By incorporating the technologies, the environment of distance education can be made wider in reaching the common people. This study brings out the ideology of distance education, its opportunities, issues and challenges. Initially the opportunities of distance education have been discussed followed by the issues and challenges of DE system. In order to list out these, various journals and literature have been reviewed. To make this study more reliable, survey was done by inquiring the students undergoing education through DE system. From this study it has become clear that distance education institutes lag in providing support to students in terms of subject and program. Distance education institutes should be able to use advanced real-time technologies to enhance the teaching effectiveness and to improve the interaction between counsellors (teachers) and students. In this paper a model of "Modified Open Distance E-Learning (MODEL)" has

been suggested for making the distance education program more effective. Further, institutions will have to strengthen their distance-learning strategic plans by identifying and understanding distance-education trends for student enrollments, faculty support, and larger academic, technological and economic issues.

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