

A Study of Public Perception about Open and Distance Learning (ODL)



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Abstract

Over the years, distance learning has become an important mechanism for bringing education at the doorsteps of hitherto unreached people. The limitation of conventional mode of education in catering to the ever increasing demand for higher education and skill enhancement has made distance learning as an important tool of educational planning and growth. With its unique characteristics of flexible learning opportunities, freedom from the constraints of time and space, cost-effectiveness and use of modern information and communication technology, distance learning has also become an essential tool for socio-economic change. However, the success of distance learning mechanism much depends upon its rightful perception among all the stakeholders. And increase in enrolment in distance learning is intrinsically linked with its acceptability and the perception of the people in general and learners in particular.

The present paper is an attempt to study the perception of general public, including those who have interface with Open and Distance Learning (ODL), and employers towards distance learning. The study would be based on the primary data collected from 200 general public/distance learners, irrespective of age, gender and income, and 20 industries (employers) in Himachal Pradesh in order to ascertain their perceptions about the key issues underlying ODL. The responses were taken in the form of a questionnaire and analyzed in accordance with the objectives of the study. It is found that there has been a greater degree of awareness about ODL, which augurs well for its further spread in the State.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning, perception; attitude; flexibility; conventional system; learners

Introduction

The crucial role of education in accelerating the pace of socio-economic development through the development of human resources of the requisite caliber and skill has been a recognized fact. The dynamics of economic development, and more recently, the liberalization and globalization, coupled with the advancement in the information technology has resulted in radical changes in the educational needs of individuals and society at large as well as reflected in the emerging needs for additional specializations in learning. Thus, the new approaches to the dissemination of education and training are to be evolved, and educational institutions are required to imbue in their students the functional lifelong learning skills which they need to survive and meet the challenges of modern economic world. Experiences have shown that conventional education is extremely hard pressed to meet the demands of today's socio-educational milieu, especially in developing countries like India. In India, there exists a wide gulf between those who aspire for spots in the educational system at the tertiary level and those who actually find the places. The solution lies in evolving a system where mass higher education could be imparted with affordable costs and resources.

The lack of capacity of the traditional system of education to meet the ever-increasing demand for higher education has brought to fore the efficacy of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as an innovative and cost effective approach to the educative process. To bridge the gap between the demand and the supply in the instructional process, ODL offers structured learning in which the teachers and the learners are separated by time and space, making use of varied instructional materials such as print materials, audio and video cassettes, CD ROMs, television and radio broadcasts, as well as multimedia components such as computers and satellites transmission¹. The term 'Distance Education' refers to an educational approach in which there is a quasi separation of the learner

and the teacher in time and space², and where the instructor and the instructional methods are subsumed into the learning material that have been designed as a self-directed learning guide for the students. The term 'Open Learning,' on the other hand, has been conceptualized as the philosophical prototype that seeks to remove barriers and constraints that may prevent learners from accessing the quality, lifelong education. ODL as an educational method and a philosophic construct has been identified as the most potent instrument for combating the educational problems, particularly those of cost and academic manpower engulfing a developing nation like India.

Despite the rapid growth in the popularity of distance learning, the quality of higher learning via distance education has been called to question, though empirical evidences suggest that there is no significant difference between learning outcomes that can be attained through traditional institutions and those accomplished through institutions of distance learning³. However, in many respects, ODL remains an alien system of imparting knowledge to the learners, who are more accustomed to the conventional mode of learning, so much so that even those who are actually involved with the ODL are still to grasp the freshness, innovation and opportunities inherent in the system.

The Study of the Perceptions of Open and Distance Learning

Different people perceive various things differently. So is the case with Open and Distance Learning system. The perceptions of the learners and the community towards Open and Distance Learning are the crucial factors that determine its efficacy, effectiveness and success. Attitudes and perceptions of the society at large or different stakeholders are the driving force behind making the system more responsive to the changing needs of the society.

Despite the multiple increase of higher education institutions as well as the enrolment growth in Open and Distance Learning, there is still a sort of indifference, maybe at the mindset or perception level, attached to distance education vis-à-vis conventional mode of education. The job market is more comfortable in recruiting students educated in the conventional colleges/institutes. This is a real challenge to the administrators and academia of ODL system. There is, however, no denying the fact that ODL has been able to transcend the barriers of mind and circumstances and it is steadily becoming an order of the day so much so that the growth of higher education in the country cannot be visualized without the growth of Open and Distance Learning.

As such, there is an imperative need to study the mindsets of the people with regard to the ODL. The attitude and perceptions of the society will determine the future trend and growth of the ODL system. In case societal perception is not in consonance with the desired goals of the ODL, the perceptions need to be corrected and properly oriented. Besides, the targeted areas of the ODL may also need to be revised appropriately on the basis of perceptions of the people. The existing mismatch

between the goals of ODL and the perceptions of people has to be understood properly for its smooth growth and acceptability by the people at large as well as to meet the industrial expectations of varied nature. The study of perceptions about ODL is also necessary because many of us make the mistake by equating distance education with correspondence courses, whereas there is a lot of difference between conventional correspondence courses and open universities or institutes of distance learning. This restricts the desired outcome of ODL. The removal of misconception about the similarity of ODL with correspondence course from the minds of the people, will encourage them to accept the ODL.

More often than not, the perceptions of the distance learning system in the instructional process are influenced by an individual's beliefs about the advantages and disadvantages of distance education, as a unit of the society (who observes various developments taking place in the field of education), a student (who is in pursuit of a distance learning course for his career advancement), as an employer (whose employees are also distant learning students), or as an educational planner (desirous of providing potent solutions to educational problems). Opinions are built, decisions are influenced, and actions are taken on the basis of such perceptions.

Unless the users of a system are able to understand its various inherent nuances, they will neither be able to obtain optimum benefits of that system nor will the system be able to realize its goals in entirety. However, in case the perceptions of the users are not in consonance with the objectives of the system, the gap could be reduced by making suitable interventions.

This study on the attitude and perception about the Open and Distance Learning System would provide an insight into the functioning of ODL system, the quantum of inroad it has made into the mindset of different stakeholders, and necessary plan of action that would be desirable to make it more effective and acceptable in future. Thus, it would provide useful and practical information to distance education providers.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study are as under:-

1. To study the perceptions about Open and Distance Learning with regard to its different parameters;
2. to study the awareness of Open and Distance Learning in general public including those having interface with it; and
3. to find out the perceptions of industry towards Open and Distance Learning;

Methodology

The study is based on the primary data collected from the learners and the industry. The samples for the study comprised 200 distant learning students (100 males and 100 females) of IGNOU in the State of Himachal Pradesh selected from those (hereinafter referred to as learners) who visited the IGNOU Regional Centre located at Shimla (HP), regardless of whether they are registered with IGNOU or any other open learning system or not.

Since the employability of learners of ODL system, or for that matter any other educational and training programme mechanism, constitutes an important driving force behind the success of that particular system, the study also elicited the responses of 20 industrial employers about their perception with regard to the ODL system.

Tools

A 'Questionnaire was developed to gather the required information from general public, including learners, with a view to measure their attitudes and perceptions towards ODL. The questionnaire seeks to obtain information under four headings, viz., personal profile, general awareness about ODL as well as the perceived effectiveness, advantage and limitations of ODL.

Besides, In order to elicit the attitudes and perceptions of industry, another 'Questionnaire for Employers' was designed. The study about responses of industry was conducted from the industrial area in Poanta Sahib and Baddi. 20 industrial employers were randomly selected for this purpose. The responses received have been tabulated in percentage for the purpose of analysis.

Results and Findings

The findings of the study have been discussed in two parts as per the questionnaires developed for learners and industry. The first part discusses the attitudes and perceptions of the learners whereas the second part deliberates upon the attitudes and perceptions of industry.

The results and findings of the study are discussed below.

Study of Attitudes and Perceptions of Learners

Table : 1 (a)

**Awareness about Open and Distance Learning
Figures in percentages**

Issues	Yes (%)		No (%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Have you heard about ODL	79	61	21	39
Whether studied under ODL/ Correspondence	55	46	45	54
ODL is better than face to face mode of learning	52	55	48	42
Is there any distinction between ODL and correspondence education	52	46	48	54
Degrees/Diplomas awarded by Open Universities have the same recognition as those awarded by Conventional Universities	69	76	31	24

Table : 1 (b)

Awareness about Open and Distance Learning

Issues	Yes (%)		No (%)	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Have you heard about ODL	68	57	32	43
Whether studied under ODL/ Correspondence	62	52	38	48
ODL is better than face to face mode of learning	56	52	44	48
Is there any distinction between ODL and correspondence education	52	46	48	54
Degrees/Diplomas awarded by Open Universities have the same recognition as those awarded by Conventional Universities	64	68	36	32

The Table -1 (a) attempts to measure the awareness of respondents about ODL based on their gender and Table – 1(b) assesses the urban-rural dimensions of such awareness.

The feedback on the general awareness about the ODL system reveals that male respondents are more aware about the ODL than female respondents. 79% of male respondents have heard about the ODL, whereas 61% females had heard about it. Still 1/5th of the males and 2/5th of females have not heard about the ODL. However, a slightly more percentage of females consider ODL better than the face to face mode of learning. The most underlying fact is that 48% of male respondents and 54% of female respondents failed to make any distinction between ODL and correspondence education. This implies that about one-half of the respondents, regardless of their gender, are precisely not able to recognize various advantages/unique features, such as flexibility, elimination of many constraints of learning, etc, underlying the ODL system, which has a great bearing on increasing the reach of the ODL system. As regard the recognition of degrees etc. awarded by ODL system, most of the respondents responded positively.

The urban-rural divide in the general awareness about ODL may be witnessed from Table-1(b), with only 46% of rural respondents being able to distinguish between correspondence education and ODL as against 52% urban respondents. 56% urban respondents and 52% rural respondents perceive ODL better than conventional system. Nevertheless, quite a large percentage of people (rural-urban) still considered conventional mode more convenient than the ODL.

It also appears that quite a good number of respondents, irrespective of their gender and location, perceives ODL and correspondence education as the same thing and tend to use the terms interchangeably. However, in order to have a deep insight into the perception about the similarity of

conventional system of education and ODL system, the issue was further examined in Table 2.

Table : 2

Perception about ODL and Conventional Systems

Profile	Both are same (%)	Slightly different (%)	Entirely different (%)
Male	22	42	36
Female	24	53	39
Urban	17	43	40
Rural	31	49	20

The perceptions of respondents on three parameters, viz., similarity, slight difference and complete difference between ODL and Conventional System (CS), give somewhat clear picture about perceived distinction between the two.

A little more than one-fifth of male respondents and about one-fourth of female respondents consider ODL and CS as similar systems. Urban respondents are more aware of the dissimilarity between ODL and CS than their rural counterparts. However, a majority of respondents perceive at least some difference between both the systems, with female respondents taking the lead in this regard. The urban-rural gulf in the perception about the similarity about ODL and CS is obvious, as this may be due to the more exposure of urban populace to the varied information mechanisms peculiar to the urban areas.

Table : 3 (a)

Effectiveness of Open and Distance Learning System

Figures in percentages

Issues	Yes		No	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
ODL system is more effective than conventional system	68	62	32	38
Given an opportunity, will you prefer ODL to face to face mode of learning	65	60	35	40
Experience with ODL was satisfactory (those who have studied in ODL system)	74	76	26	24

Table : 3 (b)
Effectiveness of Open and Distance Learning system

Figures in percentages

Issues	Yes		No	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
ODL system is more effective than conventional system	62	68	38	32
Given an opportunity, will you prefer ODL or face to face mode of learning	63	59	37	41
Experience with ODL was satisfactory	72	67	28	33

The perception about the effectiveness of ODL system has been analyzed with gender [Table – 2(a)] as well as urban-rural [Table – 2(b)] perspectives. The responses have clearly brought out the positive perception about the effectiveness of ODL system vis a vis CS. Those who have already been the part of ODL system found their experiences with it satisfactory. Further, a majority, albeit with varying degree, would like to prefer ODL to face-to-face mode of learning, if such opportunity comes their way. \

Table : 4

Perception about Suitability of ODL

Figures in percentages

Issues	Male	Female	Urban	Rural
Conventional Courses	72	63	43	54
Professional /technical courses	64	55	76	61
Short-time courses	46	52	54	44
On the job training/skill development	68	42	78	58

The above table delineates the perceptions about the suitability of ODL to various categories of courses. A majority of respondents regards ODL suitable for conventional courses. As regard perception about suitability of ODL to professional/technical courses, female respondents perceive it lower than perceived by the male respondents. Similar is the response of female respondents to the suitability of ODL to the on-the-job training/skill development. This may be, partly, due to relatively low employment status of female respondents, which dissuaded them to appreciate the effectiveness of ODL for organizing on-the-job training and skill development programmes. This is borne out by the fact that the urban respondents perceive ODL more appropriate for professional/technical courses as well on-the-job training and skill development programmes than the rural respondents.

Table : 5
Perceptions about advantages of Open and Distance Learning

Figures in percentage

Issues	Yes		No	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Provides easy entry to the desired programme of learning	86	82	14	18
Saves time	66	68	34	32
Helps learner to decide about time and place of learning	68	63	32	37
Provides more opportunity to complete the programme	78	65	22	35

Most of the respondents having exposure to the distance learning system visualize hassle-free entry to the desired programmes of study and relatively more chances of successfully completing the programme as the cardinal advantages of ODL system. This augers well for the ODL as it indicates positivity in the minds of the respondents about the relative merits of ODL system.

Table : 6
Perception about Delivery Mechanism

Figures in percentages

Issues	Yes		No	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Self-instructional material provided in time	67	69	33	31
Self-instructional material easily understandable for a remote learner	62	58	38	42
Counselling sessions attended	48	41	52	59
Counselling is qualitatively effective	65	68	35	32
Is flow of information/communication effective	58	54	42	46
Study Centres located at distant place	42	53	58	47
Assignments evaluation was satisfactory	68	72	32	28

The issues relating to the delivery mechanism of ODL system have been examined in Table – 4. The responses have brought out a mixed picture. Only 48% of male respondents and 41% of female respondents have attended the counseling sessions, which reflect the little interest of the respondents for the counselling. Similarly the location of study centres at a distant place from the places of residence of the respondents has also been resented by them. This may be due to the difficult terrain of the hilly region of Himachal Pradesh.

A little above one-half of the respondents found the flow of information and communication effective. This is a cause of concern and brings out the imperative need to make the flow of information more smooth and speedy. IGNOU’s recent SMS alert mechanism may alleviate some of the inherent deficiencies of the communication process. The overall perception about the delivery mechanism could best be termed as above average.

Table : 7
Perception about the limitations of ODL

Figures in percentages

Issues	Yes		No	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Whether ICT facilities are available	48	36	52	64
Isolation from peer group affect pursuance of course	33	35	67	65
Adequacy of information	62	58	38	48
Sufficiency of Counselling sessions	58	47	42	53

The perceptions about the limitations of ODL have been tabulated in Table – 5. These limitations restrain the spread of ODL in the desired directions and unwittingly confine its outreach. The access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) facilities are one of the most important cog in the wheel of the delivery system of ODL. As has been brought out by the study, most of the respondents do not have such facilities. In some of the cases, where the respondents are able to access ICT facilities, they are not able to put it to the desired use due to restraints of cost and place of access, such as cyber café, office etc.

Most of the respondents are found to be not bothered by the isolation from peer group and quite surprisingly, find it not as one of the major limitations of ODL. However, quite a good number of respondents (42% male and 53% female) found counselling sessions as insufficient. This may be due to little awareness amongst the respondents about the basic aim and the purpose of counsellings in ODL. Besides, female respondents are more desirous of counseling session than the male respondents.

Study of Attitudes and Perceptions of Industry

This section studies the perceptions of industry about the Open and Distance Learning and seeks to examine their perspective of the system.

Table : 8 Perceptions about Suitability of ODL

Figures in percentages

Issues	Yes	No
Conventional Courses	86	14
Profession/technical courses	58	42
Short-term courses	52	48
On the job training/skill development	68	32
Specific need-based programmes	71	29

The industry groups, like the learners, perceive ODL more suitable for conducting

conventional courses. The low responsiveness of the industry to the suitability of ODL to the profession/technical courses as well as short-term course, in some manner, indicates inherent hidden bias, rooted in their historical proclivity towards conventional system, against the ODL learners in the employment market, particularly in the private sector. However, significantly, they prefer ODL intervention for on-the-job training/skill development as well as specific need-based programmes. This response from the industry is borne out by the fact that liberalization and globalization have made different professions extremely competitive and there is a need to upgrade the skill continuously to meet the challenge of time and circumstance. Open and distance education provides the opportunities of doing a job and learning simultaneously, thereby bridging the gap between demand and supply of skilled manpower.

Table : 9
Perception about the Delivery of ODL
Figures in percentages

Issues	Yes	No
Extant delivery at point of university is appropriate	52	48
University-Industry collaboration for specific programmes	79	21

The industry (79%) prefers university-industry collaboration rather than the delivery of courses only at the level of university (59%). This underlines the fact that the education system cannot prosper and deliver in isolation. There are both, forward and backward, linkages between education and industrial requirements.

Since, the basic purpose of education process is to ensure the employability of the participants, it would be appropriate if a synergy is established amongst all the stakeholders so as to get optimum results therefrom. Besides, University-Industry collaboration would help develop more innovative educational and training programmes, suitable to the requirements of modern industry, with wide-ranging implications for socio-economic development. It would also give impetus to the research and development activities.

Conclusion

Education has a crucial role to play in the socio-economic development of developing countries like India. The potential of ODL in realising these educational goals has, however, been viewed ambivalently, in our efforts to meet the new and changing demands for education and training. The ODL as an approach to meet the new and changing demands for education and training is complementary and in certain circumstances an

appropriate substitute to the conventional mode of learning. In the modern age of continuously changing technological development, people in jobs are feeling a constant need to upgrade their skills, which brings to the fore the role of distance education to address such needs. As such, distance education has an enormous future, enormous potential for growth. What is needed is to re-affirm the policy directions and programme of action to address the emergent demands and challenges of new socio-economic order. The spread of message of inherent merits of the learning through open and distance mechanism is necessary to reach out to the masses on one hand and to enable them to use it to the maximum possible extent. The schism (though is on the wane) between conventional and open distance learning mode of learning, albeit in our mindset, should be bridged appropriately and urgently by developing convergence between both the systems and enforcing quality in the ODL so much so that it should not become a vehicle to amass degrees and certificates alone, but rather a tool to strengthen the professional competence of the populace.

The support of Panchayati Raj Institutions could also be enlisted to penetrate deep into the grass-root level in order to cover the hitherto unreached areas/groups/persons. Further, since the distance learners have to function in a relatively isolated environment, it is imperative that the seamless to and fro flow of information is required to be ensured by the use of modern communication channels so that the educational process is not hindered due to non-availability of information. Besides, the establishment of knowledge repositories at block levels may also be thought of. Education is empowering, no doubt. Open and Distance Learning with its ability to reach the masses regardless of time and space could usher in new era of socio-cultural-economic empowerment.

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