

# Issues and Challenges for Skill Development of Distance Learners through ODL System

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## ABSTRACT

All over the world open and distance learning (ODL) system is being accepted as an alternative to conventional educational institutions. Alternatives to conventional educational system is the need of the hour because of the fact that demand for education is continuously rising due to increased aspirations for learning, increase in human population, limited availability of infrastructure, seats and reach of classroom face to face teaching-learning institutions. Although the ODL educational institutions are witnessing rapid increase in student enrollment and are becoming popular. Still there is a long way to go to meet the challenges arising due to the changing Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for the open and distance learning institutions. The Open and Distance Learning (ODEL) is gaining popularity due to its flexibility and potential to reach the unreached. The learner support services include many administrative and academic supports being provided to the distance learners starting from pre-admission counselling, during admission and post-admission facilitation including opportunities for job placement or further educational avenues.

Open and Distance learning educational institutions are striving hard to provide opportunities for quality education and skill development to all the learners without any discrimination. Even though distance learners are considered as independent learners, they also need adequate institutional supports for enhancing their skills for better employment. It is very challenging for ODL to provide timely and adequate support services to all the learners who are spread across the globe, belonging to various strata of our society including physically challenged learners. Moreover, distance education institutions are finding it extremely difficult and challenging to develop skills and entrepreneurship among its learners through e-learning. In this paper an attempt has been made to identify and address several issues and challenges being faced by distance learners for acquiring skills, for inclusive education and knowledge in digital age for better employment opportunities.

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of an educational institution is to provide quality education to all the people for overall development of the personality and achieve success in life. Education instills knowledge and necessary skills in the learner to realise their full potential in all aspects of life and prepare individuals to step into the world of career development. Latest information and communication technologies (ICTs) play a very crucial role in transforming education system from conventional face-to-face to technology-based learning. With the improvement of educational technology, modern education in developing countries also provides the opportunities for meaningful employment for graduates, movement towards a knowledge-based economy and rapid national economic growth.

There are many Open and Distance Learning institutions which are offering their programme of studies through distance mode. The recent advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have brought about significant changes in the practice of open and distance education system. The same is evident from the fact that many distance education institutions are shifting their focus from print-based learning materials to online delivery using virtual learning environment and web based technologies. The term 'e-learning' originates from electronically assisted learning or learning with and through the usage of information and communication

technologies (ICTs). Some of the other commonly used terms include online learning, computer assisted learning or ICT in education. The concept of e-Learning incorporates both content (curriculum) and instruction (pedagogy).

After completing their degrees, all the learners may not necessarily get the gainful employment immediately due to lack of employability skills such as soft skills, technical skills or vocational skills. As a result, they sometimes need to put in extra efforts to get proper employment. Open and distance e-learning is emerging as an alternative to traditional education for providing educational opportunities for updation and enhancement of knowledge and skills for better employability of learners. However, there are many issues and challenges before the open and distance learning (ODL) system for skill development of distance learners. Some of the issues and challenges could be finding difficulty in explaining certain concepts, responding to learners in real-time and teaching technical skills through ODL courses.

## 2. Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

Presently living in the digital age enables everyone to easily access the digital form of learning materials anytime and everywhere using technology tools (Fu, 2013) such as laptop, tablet, mobile phone or internet. Distance Education (DE) practitioners in the Philippines Open University have coined the

term 'open and distance e-learning' (ODEL) which refers to the new forms of online or web based distance education, an area characterized by the convergence of an open learning philosophy, DE pedagogies and e-learning technologies (Patricia Arinto, 2016). Thus, specifically open and distance e-learning refers to a "forms of educational provision that uses contemporary technologies to enable varied combinations of synchronous and asynchronous communication among learners and educators who are physically separated from one another for part or all of the educational experience" (Alfonso, 2012). E-learning courses have the potential to provide an enabling platform by virtue of which working professionals can upgrade their knowledge and skills without going for regular courses. For example, professionals working in the area of Health & Nutrition, Paramedics like nurses, dieticians, medical students, students of home science, etc. can get current ideas and knowledge for their benefits through ODL courses.

ODL refers to open and distance learning which includes use of multimedia including online learning methodologies to enable multiple forms of interaction and dialogue that can bridge the gap between teachers and distance learners. However, open and distance e-learning is getting momentum and its demand is continuously increasing. In addition to rising demands for providing educational needs the demand for skill development is also increasing for providing greater opportunities to learners. Open and distance learning has the potential to reach the unreached and provide opportunity for flexible learning. E-Learning provides anywhere, anytime easy access for upgradation of knowledge and skills. It provides a platform wherein an individual learner gets a customized learning package pertaining to key thematic areas, through a self-guided process. There are many educational institutions offering courses through e-learning at different levels. But the real challenge lies in developing skills of the distance learners through academic, vocational, technical, professional, extension and life-long learning programmes. In doing so, the ODeL system can prove to be significant educational mode and medium for fulfilling the skilling, re-skilling and up-skilling needs of unemployed youth and also those individuals who are from organized and unorganized sectors.

The perception on e-learning depends upon the experience, age, gender, accessibility to technology etc. (Mehra & Mital, 2007, Nawaz, 2010) and the lack of educational technology and poor integration towards globalization. It is important to understand that the skills possessed by students during college days including employability skills and the ways and means of fulfilling the gaps by equipping various skills through distance learning. It gives the opportunity to establish a clear pedagogy; to cater to the different learning styles; to the right levels of assessment; to effective monitoring and management (through data) and to support a process of continuous improvement.

### 3. Skills required for employability

Distance learners take admission in various programmes to get degrees for further studies or to get gainful employment. A few are successful to get jobs with the degree they possess. However, there are many students who pass out with good grades but struggle a lot to get job, not only because of their lack of knowledge, but because of lack of personality, soft skills and employability skills. Employability is viewed as 'a set of

achievements-skills, understandings and personal attributes-that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (Yorke, 2004). Employability has been defined as the 'ability to secure and sustain employment' (Berntson, Naswall & Sverke, 2008; Curtis & Mckenzie, 2001; Fugate & Ashforth, 2004). There are various skills which can be considered essential and gives an added advantage to learners in getting gainful employment. Some of the skills required to be successful in life and career have been identified as aptitude skills, soft skills, job skills, technical skills and employability skills (Senthil K Nathan and Rajamancharane, 2016).

**Aptitude skills:** it is the critical, lateral and analytical thinking of an individual.

**Soft skills:** it is the behavioural and interpersonal skills such as delegating skills, listening skills, learning skills, communication skills, etc.

**Technical skills:** it is the subject knowledge and core competency in the area.

**Job skills:** it is the immediate need for an educated student to get placed and to sustain in the company such as group discussion, computer operations, dress code, etc.

**Overall Employability skills:** employability is the acquisition of attributes (knowledge, attitudes and skills) that make a candidate/learner more likely to be successful in their chosen occupations.

In addition to the above mentioned qualities, there is also a need to enhance the following quality and skills of learners such as leadership, creativity, collaboration, problem solving, communication, work and life integration, community, ownership, organizational ability, interpersonal skills, analytical skills, entrepreneurial skills, emotional intelligence, accountability, etc.

### 4. Issues and challenges for skill development of open distance learners

Open and Distance learning education institutions have come into existence, gain popularity and flourished mainly due to the increasing demands for quality education and limitations of the existing conventional educational institutions to fulfill the aspirations of the people seeking educational opportunities. It is a global challenge that graduates after completing education are unable to find jobs, at the same time the number of graduates are increasing per year. The reasons for this employability gap are: the mismatch in skills required by the industry and what they are being trained towards; the lack of clarity of skills needed and dialogue between educators and industry; and the education and training style. Therefore, there is a need for closing the gaps between education and jobs, especially through skill building and appropriate use of technologies. Realizing the need of the hour government of India has also adopted a National Policy for Skills and Entrepreneurship (2015) and launched a programme for 'Skilled India'. Some of the issues and challenges before the distance learning institutions have been highlighted below. Students choosing to get enrolled in open distance and e-learning programmes are more likely to be:

Mature learners, in the sense that they have enrolled for studies on their own and have not come to study directly from school,

They are part-time learners having priority towards work responsibilities or family commitments or both,

They have chosen to study in a system having more flexibility or openness as compared to conventional educational institutions,

Most of the learners getting enrolled in open and distance course are from lower socio-economic background as it is cost-effective,

There are a large number of students who drop-out due to one or another reason.

The developing countries have huge population, so that it takes time for technology and development to reach the entire population. The benefit of the technology does not reach to the people who could not afford huge cost for education (Macleod, 2000).

The challenges are lack of awareness and systematic approaches towards technology, lack of technical support and administration support towards the implementation and attitude towards technology and transforming education system (Nawaz and Qureshi, 2010).

Another challenge is the development of very high quality e-learning/ digital learning materials (texts, audio or video) which can be resource intensive and investment-heavy affair from pedagogy to course development.

Availability of digital learning infrastructures are still very limited. Teachers need to be trained and equipped with changing digital skills and instructional methods.

A shift in the education system is required from passive to active learning; from time spent to outcome based monitoring; from book to research driven activities; from teacher centric to learner centric (teacher as facilitator); from isolated learning to collaborative learning; from rote to holistic learning to include character, soft skills and life skills.

It also faces challenges like lack of financial support from the government, lack of efficient and qualified teacher/trainer to teach the e-learning technology. The challenges also lie in poor availability of software and hardware that supports the e-learning environment and quality or standard of education.

It is a challenge to develop desired skills such as: interdisciplinary, collaboration, information literacy, critical thinking, creativity, inquiry, entrepreneurship, as well as oral and multimedia communication.

The factors affecting the acceptability of e-learning course among students are unawareness, cost involvement to learn computer related technology and low computer literacy level.

The level of pro-activeness and discipline among learners is less in e-learning when compared to traditional learning in developing countries (Schulmeiste, 2008)

One of the important most difficult challenge for inclusive education is to develop the e-learning courses for differently-abled learners (hearing impaired or visually impaired or both) for their skill development.

## 5. Skill Development of Distance Learners

Various learner support services provided by the open and distance learning institutions play a very important and significant role in determining the success of any distance learners. Some of the support services which are important for

student's success are related to pre-admission information, advice, proper guidance; support during pursuing the studies and after finishing/completing the course. Young people with the right skills can build businesses, create jobs for others and boost economic growth of the country. The basic traditional skills are reading, writing and arithmetic whereas digital skills are knowledge discovery (consuming, like reading), knowledge sharing (producing, like writing), and sense making or critical thinking (understanding, like arithmetic if considered as a process to describe problems and find solutions).

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) being one of the largest open university offer various programmes of studies for updation of knowledge and skill development of learners in various discipline. Learners interested to pursue courses in the field of creative writing, science, social sciences, humanities, tourism and hospitality management, journalism and mass communication, nursing and medical discipline, education, law, management, engineering, etc. can enroll with IGNOU as it is offering several courses in above mentioned areas through open and distance mode. For example, IGNOU offers computer programmes (CIT, BCA and MCA) for computers professionals, B.Ed. for knowledge and skills development of in-service and un-trained school teachers. To cater to the needs of nurses it is offering Diploma in Critical Care Nursing (DCCN) and B.Sc.(Nursing) programme for their skill development. Post Graduate Diploma in HIV Medicine (PGDHVM), Post Graduate Diploma in Clinical Cardiology (PGDCC), Post Graduate Diploma in Hospital and Health Management (PGDHHM), Post Graduate Diploma in Maternal and Child Health (PGDMCH), etc. is being offered for medical professionals and are in high demand. IGNOU was also offering courses in engineering for capacity building of in-service engineers. Post Diploma in Journalism and Mass Communication (PGJMC) is being offered to all the learners who wants to make their career in journalism. IGNOU is also offering courses through distance education in Disaster Management, Human Rights, Cyber Law, Information Security and Social Work for updation of knowledge and skills in these areas.

IGNOU has a well equipped Electronic Media and Production Centre (EMPC) with its own radio and television channels for transmission of various audio and video educational programmes for the benefit of distance learners. A large number of educational audio and video programmes have also been produced and are stored with EMPC repository. All the programs are definitely very helpful for updation of knowledge and development of technical and other skills required for getting gainful employment in either government or private sectors or both sectors. Some of the issues and concerns being faced by the ODL system are:

There are certain issues and challenges being faced by ODL system for skill development of open and distance learners such as financial support for development of e-learning courses, lack of experts for development of good quality learning materials, training of teachers and learners for use of latest technologies, keeping learner's motivation level high.

The capacity building of individuals should be seen as a life-long journey through acquisition of skills and knowledge updation.

Capacity building of human resources should rely on a holistic approach to education & training, research and innovation having same requirements in terms of digital skills, infrastructures and services.

Learning materials in the form of texts, audio and video could easily be delivered through open and distance learning (ODL) system however, there are various skills which could be developed only through hands-on training.

There could be issues and challenges in social acceptability of open and distance system for skilling people for using e-learning system.

There could be issues in adopting and delivering e-learning courses for catering to all the learners due to wide gap in age and experience of distance learners.

## 6. Conclusion

Open and distance learning system (ODL) system has proved its worth in providing education to all the needy people. It has given an alternative opportunity for education to all those who are unable pursue studies and go to attend conventional educational institutions. The term 'ODEL' is an expansion of Open and distance e-learning to include the use of e-learning or online and web based learning. Educational programmes

offered through ODL system have been devised to update the knowledge and skills of distance learners. However, skill development of distance learners through ODL is a challenging task. Open and distance learning is capable of providing anywhere, anytime easy access of educational materials for upgradation of knowledge and skills. E-learning supplements and supports the students to gain more awareness and confidence in a specialized field, which enhances the possibilities for gainful employment. Some of the skills required for employability are aptitude skills, soft skills, job skills and technical skills. Among the four major skills, technical skills can be learnt through distance learning. Though soft skills can be taught, it can also be imparted through e-learning as well. IGNOU is also offering educational programmes in various discipline/area such as education, computer science, law, management, medical, science, law, journalism, social work, etc for the knowledge and skills development of distance learners. But the real challenge is to develop and deliver courses which could also be helpful for imparting knowledge and developing skills of persons with disability (visually and hearing impaired learners).

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