

Emerging trend of distance education globally and its underlying challenges

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Abstract

The motive of distance education is to provide flexibility to the learners in terms of access, course curriculum or any other elements of educational framework. It is a force which contributes towards the social and economic development of any nation. Over years, developed as well as developing countries have embraced it as an indispensable part of educational system. Increased globalization of distance learning has enabled countries to attain their educational objectives. The ever growing requirements for continuous skill up-gradation and advances in technology have exploited the interests of people in distance learning. However, distance education mode has got various challenges which need to be addressed by the associated stakeholders in order to make distance programmes successful, effective and contribute towards the educational up-liftment of learners. This paper discusses the trends and problems of distance education and also suggests possible actions to eliminate the inefficiencies of distance education system.

Keywords: Distance education, Higher education, Geographical barriers, Learner-centred, Real-time multimedia technology.

Introduction

Distance education is an education system where learners are located at a distance from their teachers and includes the arrangement of electronic frameworks to set up and maintain correspondence amongst teachers and learners to advance learning, evaluation and support. Distance learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education and its potential effect on the overall education system has been enormously highlighted through the advancement of Internet-based information technologies.

The target of distance education is to provide an alternative method of education to empower people with essential competencies to procure further knowledge and enhance their skills. Thus it is intended to serve the students who needed to cease their education because of financial or other conditions, students located in geographically remote areas, students who needed to suspend training as a result of absence of fitness and inspiration however who may later on decide to take up a course, students who cannot get a seat or don't wish to join a school or college despite the fact that they have vital capabilities to seek after advanced education and those people who view education as a life-time activity and may either like to revive their insight in a current discipline or to gain learning in a new subject.

Distance education eliminates travel and spares a considerable measure of time, cash and energy which can be wisely utilized for individual and professional life. People can work according to their comfort and can study a particular course from any place of the world. This gives a considerable measure of adaptability to professionals. The expanded utilization of the web has encouraged distance education extraordinarily. It is effectively open to all through online classes and resources, virtual classrooms, video conferencing with the specific subject teacher and study materials provided to the learners at right time.

Literature Review

Panchabakesan¹ conducted research on "Problems and Prospectives in Distance Education in India in the 21st Century". This paper attempted to present the issues and prospectives in India's Distance Education System. It emphasized that the elements which are of paramount importance to any successful distance education program are instructional design, technology and support. It also recorded and talked about the issues such as lack of student's co-ordination, monitoring examinations, results publication and other related problems.

Kumi-Yeboah, Blankson and Young² in their paper "Emerging Trends in Distance Education and Teachers' Education in Ghana" stated that there has been huge demand for higher education in Ghana. This pressurised the government to find reasonable solutions to control the rate of denial of admissions to qualified candidates for advanced education because of constrained infrastructural facilities. Distance education has emerged as the best option to give admission to qualified candidates, especially in the field of teacher education. Results showed an increased movement of students in distance teacher education programs in Ghana in the course of last ten years.

Lenar, Artur, Ullubi and Nailya³ in their paper "Problems and Decision in the field of Distance Education" discussed the problems, students and teachers are facing in distance learning. It was shown that efficiency of distance learning is defined by use of pedagogical technologies underlying the design and implementation of remote courses.

Srivastava⁴ in her research paper "A Comparative Study on Current Trends in Distance Education in Canada and India" conducted a comparative analysis of distance education scenario in both the countries. It was discovered that in both Canada and India distance education opportunities at the college level have expanded enormously. Numerous patterns were putting new weights on the regular instruction framework, constraining

numerous institutions to review and alter their current policies and methods.

Sikwibele and Mungoo⁵ conducted research on “Distance Learning and Teacher Education in Botswana: Opportunities and Challenges”. The study tried to understand the challenges faced by teachers and tutors in the Diploma in Primary Education (DPE) program by distance mode. The paper recommended that the Ministry of Education (MOE) should procure full-time tutors, give resources for practical subjects, organize workshops and explore the utilization of alternative instructional technologies to help teachers.

Aderinoye and Ojokheta⁶ in their paper “Open-Distance Education as a Mechanism for Sustainable Development: Reflections on the Nigerian Experience” examined open-distance learning in Nigeria and the role it played in personal, community, and national development. This article briefly viewed upon the linkages between open and distance learning and its impact on development.

Sampong⁷ conducted research on “An Evaluative Study of a Distance Teacher Education Program in a University in Ghana”. The study compared information regarding performance of the program as apparent by students and faculty/administrators against the standards set for the program. Discrepancies were reported between performance and standards. The study concluded that although there were few discrepancies, the program is satisfying its purpose of upgrading the performance of large number of teachers in Ghana on professional as well as academic fronts.

Buselic⁸ conducted research on “Distance Learning – concepts and contributions”. This paper assessed present definitions, opportunities, difficulties, and contributions of distance learning as it is quickly turning into a fundamental piece of instructive frameworks in different countries. With a specific end goal to address the issues of the changing world, future distance learning has to be time adaptable, lacking geographical hindrances and learner centred.

Lerra⁹ in the paper titled “The Dynamics and Challenges of Distance Education at Private Higher Institutions in South Ethiopia” explored the dynamics and challenges of distance education at Private Higher Institutions in South Ethiopia. The findings revealed that, the number of students in a class amid instructional programs was not to the standard, assignments were excessively troublesome for the capacity of students on the courses, modules were not given sufficiently long ahead of time of the actual tutorial sessions in this manner indicating less responsibility of stakeholders to understand the DL program.

Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza and Zebron¹⁰ in their paper titled “Challenges for Open and Distance learning (ODL) Students: Experiences from Students of the Zimbabwe Open University” investigated the challenges facing Open and Distance Learning students at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The results showed that ODL learners were challenged with a range of obstacles like lack of sufficient time for study, difficulties in access and use of ICT, ineffective feedback and lack of study materials.

The outcomes demonstrated that ODL students were tested with a scope of obstructions like absence of adequate time for study, challenges in access and utilization of ICT, ineffective input and absence of study materials. It was prescribed that ZOU should endeavor to accomplish effective and balanced teaching and learning system that fulfills the want of the students to the degree that they would wish to return to the institution for further studies and feel glad to prescribe the institution to other people who are looking for knowledge.

Gaba¹¹ conducted research on “Growth and development of distance education in India and China: a study on policy perspectives”. This paper tried to compare the development of economy and distance education in India and China with reference to policy perspectives, examined the course design, development and delivery of distance education programmes in national open universities of India and China, etc. The paper highlighted the policy strategies of two countries towards quality control mechanism as par with conventional system.

Discussion

Economic and social achievements at the end of the 20th century transitioned the worldwide economy from old into a virtual economy whereby the significance of information has expanded. Education is important to accomplish and supply new information. Because of geographical distance, education often becomes difficult to be accessed by a large proportion of population.

Distance education as a complementary mode of delivery was started as a push to conquer the difficulties of access, value, cost-adequacy, and quality for advanced education. It advances cross-national educational practices and prepares students, faculties and administrators with resources to compete in the global world. In developing countries, distance learning has been eagerly held onto as a reasonable answer for addressing issues of equity and access to education. Distance education has been utilized to give cost-effective education, and it can be utilized to train extensive amount of people within short timeframes. Students have the adaptability to go to classes on weekends and amid vacations, which decreases the burden of working and going to classes at the same time. All the more in this way, distance education can possibly permit individuals who have lesser access to advanced education particularly students in the rural regions and working individuals who desire to secure college degree. Distance education spares travel time and cost, convenience, and empowers to proceed with work and acquire pay while studying.

Viability, innovation and technology, student attributes, teacher attributes, institutional help, supervision, view of guides, coordinators, students, office staff and others etc. are a portion of the key elements for effective distance education delivery.

A 2011 Hanover Research Report described the general trends and potential for distance learning worldwide. The report featured particular findings for country trends in distance learning:

Africa: It had highest demand for extension of worldwide distance learning with around 45 percent of students enrolled in higher education, even though it just had two institutions offering distance education.

India: It had around 25 percent of its students enrolled in distance education among its national, state, and open universities and had fastest growing demands for distance learning mode.

UK: Distance learning universities in UK essentially offered postgraduate courses and degrees mostly which fell under the category of continuing professional development and the overall distance education market revolved around business, training, law, medicine and science.

US: Distance learning universities here primarily offered undergraduate courses and degrees, followed by graduate degrees. State funded universities more probably offered distance education than private universities and the distance learning market offered courses in areas like business, computer, education, engineering, and information sciences.

The Distance Education Enrolment Report 2017 directed by the new Digital Learning Compass organization, revealed that the quantity of advanced education students taking at least one distance education course in 2017 topped six million in USA. The number of students opting for on-campus study has dropped by almost one million (9,31,317) between 2012 and 2015. More than one in four students (29.7 percent) now opt for at least one distance education course (a total of 60,22,105 students).

In 2012, student enrolment increased 15-20% and the study offer developed with 40% in universities in Europe. Today, more than 500 European institutions give online short courses and distance learning degree programmes with persistent achievement.

In 2010, 12% of all students were off-campus learners while 7% were enrolled in blended programmes i.e. partially conveyed on-campus and partially through distance and/or online delivery in Australia.

In India, Distance enrolment constituted around 11.05% of the aggregate enrolment in higher education, of which 46.3% were female students according to All India Survey on Higher Education Report (2015-16).

In Japan, 2,17,236 undergraduate students were looking for degrees at a distance in 44 universities which provided undergraduate distance education programs, representing 7.5% of aggregate higher education enrolees in 2011.

This brings awareness among public, handles general misinterpretations about online and distance education and makes it an undeniably appreciating choice.

Problems and challenges in distance education

Arranging for more tutorial centres, distributing enough time, powerful administration of program, efficient learning modules are largely fundamental pre-requisites for propelling any distance education program. From a teacher-dominated formal lecture focus should be driven towards a learner-centred pedagogical approach for any distance education system to be effective.

The problems commonly found in the distance education system are as follows:

1. No timely delivery - Course manuals are not properly altered, modified and disseminated and in some cases students do not get their materials at the right time.
2. Limited number of the tutorial class and delay in result publication.
3. Low commitment of the stakeholders (tutors and centre coordinators) to the proper realization of the distance learning program.
4. Assignments are often found difficult for the ability of students that they are unable to perform it.
5. The services offered by tutors many times are not compatible with the basic standards of a distance education system, feedbacks on the assignments are not prompt and adequate individual support services are not provided.
6. Evaluation and grading of students' performance are not done in an appropriate manner.
7. Lack of awareness among the tutors about the program.
8. Students seeking distance education tend to have less seriousness because of absence of interaction and motivation.
9. Many a time Distance Education students are not considered qualified for high level posts. The reason being degrees granted by Distance Education universities or institutes aren't perceived reliable by some private and government sectors. Questions are raised on the credibility of Distance Education programmes as they perceive that the distance education isn't subjectively at standard with ordinary framework and it is disintegrating quality of education.
10. Major dropouts in distance education happen because of exam pattern and the results. No proper attention is given in monitoring the distance education examination and delay in issue of mark sheets and degree certificates to the students ultimately harms the reputation of institutes and the enrolment of students.
11. Faculties encounter barriers such difficulty in learning the technology and communication media, dissatisfaction with technology malfunctions, time required to prepare learning materials etc.
12. Distance learners likewise experience isolation and stress because of absence of organizational support, which may eventually lead to non-completion of their courses.
13. Other problems include development of uniform standard of storage of information resources, ensuring efficient communication of teachers and students, developing effective plan for educational curriculum, effective representation and quality of study material, ensuring cooperation of students and their access to information resources.

To curb these problems, it is essential to continually accumulate information about students' requirements and preferences, the issues they confront and what they need to be improved. Unless this is done, the objective of distance

education won't be accomplished. Using different sorts of correspondence media to expand the viability of distance education would be a wise option. Conceiving methodology to compel students to do assignments without anyone's help would not only increase the academic performance of students but also guarantee the quality of distance education. Learning modules should be standardized to safeguard the efficiency of distance education system. Likewise, to raise the standard of distance education system well qualified tutors should be designated.

Enrolments of students are increasing to outperform the limit of conventional frameworks. Profiles of students are changing and they are looking for education that addresses their needs. Various trends seen in higher education will impact the fate of distance learning. Distance education is growing abundantly, independent of locations, expanding the requirement for effective frameworks for course-administration and strategic plans for teaching that utilize technology. Because of these trends, student needs which cannot be addressed and financial challenges that cannot be overcome by conventional institutes can be easily addressed by distance education. Distance education institutions will have to strengthen their framework by recognizing students', teachers', technological and financial issues. So as to address the issues of the changing scenario; future distance learning must be flexible enough to overcome geographical barriers, should be learner-centred, consolidating new technologies, medias and computer applications as a major aspect of course work, diversified and versatile to the necessities of global marketplace, utilizing updated material that is pertinent to the circumstances and guarantee the growth of individuals as well as organizations.

Conclusion

Distance learning has become widespread and it isn't just a contemporary pattern which will blur away. It is considered to be a vital approach for settling problems of access, quality and equity in education. Distance learners however outreach geographically should have access to all facilities that the regular program learners have i.e. appropriate guidance, instructional exercises, constant appraisal, library service etc. Modules and materials should be prepared properly and distributed to the students at proper time. To genuinely carry out the program in an efficient way, serious attention should be given in evaluating students and grading of their performance. To enhance the effectiveness of teaching and interaction among teachers and students, advanced multimedia technology should be utilized. The distance education institutions should modify their syllabus according to the students' needs and latest developments and also try to imply innovative teaching methods. If these inconveniences are dispensed with, an extraordinary increment will be seen in the enrolment of students in distance education mode in the upcoming future.

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Conflict of interest

None.

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