

LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES IN IGNOU: A STUDY OF KORAPUT REGION OF ODISHA

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Abstract:

Koraput is basically a Tribal dominated area in Odisha with very thin population depending mostly on agriculture. Education system in the entire Koraput Region is very poor in spite of the fact that Govt of Odisha has started a lot of new initiatives for improvement. IGNOU also joined hands with the Govt. and opened a Regional Centre and quite a few Study Centres. Through these Study Centres a number of vocational, professional and skilled development programmes are being offered through multi modal approach. Various support services are being provided to the learners for mastering Degrees and Diplomas. This study is an attempt to assess the learners satisfaction on the support services provided by Study Centres and Regional Centre Koraput.

Key Words: Open and Distance Education, IGNOU, Study Centre, Counselling, Assignments, Teleconference, SLM

Introduction:

Open and Distance Education has become a legitimized mode of education in the present day world. Both the developing and developed countries of the globe have embraced it as a cost effective model for providing higher education to a large segment of the population. The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has become an integral part of higher education globally. In fact, the universal demand for education, thirst for knowledge and the failure of the mainstream education system in catering to the increasing popular demand for higher education were the major contributory factors behind the emergence of the ODL system. Appearance of knowledge societies where material and physical capital is gradually replaced with knowledge capital and the knowledge workers consisting of technically qualified people dominated the values in all spheres of life revolutionized the concept of learning and remoulded it into one that envisions learning out of the four walls of class rooms and learning during the entire life span. All these have contributed towards the legitimization of distance education and it has proved to be the alternative to the conventional system as it has not only proved cost effective but also has the right potential to reach out to the large segment of the unreachable, marginalized and the needy.

Learner Support services :

Learner support services in distance education plays a very crucial role for the success of the system as well as the progression curve of the learners. Student Support Services (SSS) are a cluster of facilities and activities that are provided to make the learning process easier and more interesting for the learner. In distance education, they serve as the interface between the institution and the learner. The effective provision of the SSS is now widely and increasingly being recognized as an essential component of any open and distance learning system. The importance and necessity of the SSS have been highlighted by many authors, among whom **Prideaux (1989)** observation is universally accepted. He maintained the view that "the quality of both the materials and the support systems are critical to the success of a distance learning system". According to Croft (1991), "the goal of most support services is to help the student realize the instructional objective of the course by minimizing the negative effects of isolation and the lack of regular personal contact". Sewart (1993) is constructive in stating that the SSS should be evolved in the context in which the system works.

Although open distance learning involves self-study, individual learners also expect some form of human intervention to overcome the sense of isolation that can dominate individuals, jeopardizing their learning. Therefore, every institution has to reflect on the available as well as futuristic ways and means of developing two-way communication for effective learner support characterized by a 'continuity of concern', monitor and review practices, restructure mechanisms and re-position priorities (Koul, 1989; Dhanrajan, 2003; Deshmukh, 2006; Takwale, 2003; Gupta et al., 2004; Garg et al., 2006; Jha et al., 2006; Pandey & Parveez, 2006; Srivastava et al., 2006). Therefore, it would be no exaggeration to say that the entire gamut of the ODL system is an exercise in learner support services because learners invariably require multi-level support due to their diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds and learning styles and habits. The providers of open learning arrange for such an interface at designated and preferred locations. In fact, such a support is needed at different stages, starting from registration, and its quality determines the learning curve of a learner.

The basic functions of learner support services are (Gupta & Garg, 2008) to:

- Promote learner autonomy with focus on capacity and capability building of learners;
- Empower learners to make their own choices of courses and decide on their progress as well as pace;
- Identify good institutions as learner centres and reputed teachers as counsellors with due weightage for experience and seniority;
- Develop a reliable database on academic counsellors and an automated information system for monitoring various activities;
- Orient and apprise academic counsellors on the philosophy, methodology and pedagogy of the system as well as programmes so that they help learners to gainfully master learning packages;
- Help reduce the time in finalizing admissions by digitizing various processes;

- Schedule and share information with learners on F2F counseling, tele-conferencing, video-conferencing, interactive radio counseling etc;
- Provide information to learners on the system of assessment and evaluation, re-registration schedule, conduct of examinations, declaration of results and such other important events;
- Arrange pre-admission counseling to enable learners to understand the implications of being a distance learner and induction programmes to apprise how to learn at a distance;
- Develop an effective network for two-way communication to break learner isolation;
- Arrange opportunities for and access to technology mediated and/or face-to-face interaction amongst peers and with counsellors;
- Cater to specific needs of challenged/disadvantaged groups;
- Provide feedback to course developers on the deficiencies/difficulties pointed out by the learners and academic counsellors;
- advise on the need to develop region-specific academic programmes;
- Monitor conduct of counselling sessions, practical session, continuous evaluation and examinations;
- Act as an effective link between the HQ and field functionaries;
- Ensure timely dispatch of learning materials;
- Conduct free and fair term-end-examinations; and
- Declare results in time and dispatch grade cards reflecting the TEE and assignment marks.

IGNOU in brief:

Indira Gandhi National Open University(IGNOU) was established by an Act of Parliament in 1985 with All India jurisdiction. This Central University is unique in the sense that ,It operates in a three tier set up. The first set up is University HQ located in Delhi , the second set up is Regional Centres located mostly in State capitals and the third set up is Learner Support Centres scattered across length and breadth of India . This university operates through 67 Regional centres and 2981 Learner Support Centres. More than 43789 Academic counselors are engaged at different Learner Support Centres for providing academic counseling to the learners.

At University HQ, there are 21 Schools of Studies and 12 operational Divisions. Whereas Schools of Studies are entrusted with the responsibility of developing Academic programmes with the help and support of in house faculties as well as outside experts , Operational Divisions deliver the Programmes through Regional Centres and Learner Centres. In IGNOU, teaching learning takes place in a multimodal approach in which there is extensive use of technology. Gyan Vani , Gyan Dhara Gyan Darshan, Teleconference, Web-Conference, Internet mediated instruction, CD ROM, Online courses, MOOCS etc are suitably interwoven in the instructional system of IGNOU. Due to quality education and wide range of academic programmes , enrolment has reached three millions and the university has conferred by Common Wealth of Learning as “Centre of Excellence”. IGNOU is now the largest open university in the world in terms of enrolment and net work.

Statement of the Problem :

This study is an attempt to investigate the student support services of IGNOU in Koraput Region. There is also an attempt to examines the effectiveness of the Student Support Services (SSS) extended by various learner support centres and offer suggestions for its improvement. Hence the title of the research is as under “LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES IN IGNOU: A STUDY OF KORAPUT REGION OF ODISHA”

Objectives of the Study:

- To investigate various methods employed for providing learner support services at LSCs of IGNOU under Regional Centre, Koraput
- To get feedback from the learners on various aspects of support services like counselling assignment, utilisation of media/ICT, non-academic support services etc.
- To analyse learners perspectives regarding suitability of support model as per their needs and match with those currently being provided through institutional provisions of IGNOU
- To explore alternative system of Learner Support Services enabled information and communication technology and its operational possibilities and limitations

Profile of Regional Centre, Koraput :

Koraput is the District Hq and is an integral part of KBK Region(Koraput, Bolangir and Kalahandi) which is considered as the most backward region in the country by the planning commission of India.

Regional Centre, Koraput was created as a sub-Regional Centre in 2004 out of Bhubaneswar Regional Centre with only 12 Study Centres to cater to the educational needs of some of the most backward districts of the country located in the southern part of Odisha, Northern Part of Andhra Pradesh and Eastern Part of Chhattisgarh. This centre was conceptualised with 9 districts of Odisha, 2 of Chhattisgarh and 2 of Andhra Pradesh. In the year 2005, it was elevated into a Regional centre. Since its inception, the Regional Centre has been functioning in a small government building given on free lease basis by the District Administration, Koraput. The average literacy in this region hovers around 40% and the total number of people living below poverty line is as high as 70%. On the top of it all the 12 districts under its jurisdiction are maoist-infested. Moreover, the number of institutions offering higher educational facilities in the professional and technical programmes is very limited which often becomes a handicap for the Regional Centre to activate the programmes newly launched by the University. After redistribution of the territorial jurisdiction of the Regional Centres, now there are 12 districts (6 from Odisha and 6 from Chhattisgarh) under its jurisdiction. In spite of all these handicaps, it has made great strides over the years. The number of Study Centres has gone up from 12 in 2004 to 57 now. The distribution of the Study Centres is as follows:

Type of Study Centres	Number
Regular Study Centres	9
Special Study Centres	23
Programme Study Centres	7
Total	57

The yearly enrolment of Koraput Regional Centre has gone up from 1771 (in 2004) to 5001 (in 2014). The establishment of Special Programme Study Centres for MBA in Christ College, Jagdalpur, Engineering in Govt. Engineering College, Jagdalpur, Law programmes in Jeypore Law College, Jeypore and BED programmes in DAV College of Teacher Education, Koraput, Kalahandi Training College, Bhawanipatna, Govt. Training College, Bolangir, Bedmata Gayatree College, Jagdalpur have opened new avenues for providing professional and technical education to the disadvantaged students of this region. The opening of Special Study Centres in Central Jail of Jagdalpur and District Jail, Koraput has provided educational opportunities to the jail inmates to facilitate their return to the mainstream life after acquittal. A new Regular Study Centre in the Aeronautics College run by HAL administration has been established to provide the facility of in-service professional development to the thousands of employees working in HAL, Sunabeda and NALCO, Damanjodi and also ensure quality higher education to the drop outs and the left outs from the conventional mode of education.

Delimitation of the Study

This study is delimited to IGNOU Regional Centre Koraput

This study is delimited to 100 learners of IGNOU

This study is delimited to 5 Study centres of Koraput Region.

Review of studies:

The studies conducted on different dimensions of distance education, particularly on student support services in India as well as abroad have been reviewed and presented. In the first instance, four studies conducted in India are reviewed and then three research studies conducted Abroad have been reviewed and presented.

Sandeep Tandon and Vinod Kumar conducted a comparative study of Jammu and Kashmir University on Satisfaction level of Distance Learners on support services in Distance Education. This empirical study is based on the feedback from students of both the universities. The study reveals that the image of the department of distance education is quite impressive and has good impact upon the distance learners. However there was a great need to improve upon the existing criteria of admission system, including fee and the experience. However the basic findings of the study was that there were significant differences in the satisfaction level of students support services in distance education, particularly in admission and study materials. Therefore they have focused on these areas to boost the satisfaction level of the students.

Gaba, A. and Sethy, S.(2010) conducted a case study on IGNOU to know the perception of learners towards information and communication technologies. Here they tried to study the awareness of learners towards online distance programme, accessibility to online programmes, level of skills of learners for study through online and to find out which teaching delivery model is preferred by the learners. They adopted descriptive sample survey method to conduct the study. The findings obtained by them through this study are: majority of students were having basic knowledge of ICT in general and computer skill in particular before registration into distance education programme, more than 90% of IGNOU learners of respondents were having mobile phones followed by 53% have desktops and internet facility. The finding also includes that the web pages of Regional Centres have been continuously providing support services and latest information related to the students programmes. However 60% of learners except BCA and MCA programmes responded that they are not aware about the availability of ICTs services (web pages) of IGNOU. Hence the study demands through suggestion a mechanism to popularise ICTs among the learners. They expect IGNOU to bring out manuals on ICTs to guide them to use ICTs in a better and purposive way.

Mishra and Garg (2010) conducted another study to evaluate the student support services of undergraduate physics programme of IGNOU. In this study they tried to collect feedback from 509 students from across the country alongwith they collected the responses from the academic counsellors and support service functionaries at various levels of the university. The study revealed that a dominant majority of the respondents needed additional help to study them. Many of the learners responded to revise the course materials and to make them student friendly. The learners (80%) felt that the time devoted to counselling sessions was not sufficient. Though 17% of learners knew that multimedia facilities were available at the study centre but 23% responded that they used it vary rarely. Regarding the Term End examination 50.5 % learners respondents found the question papers difficult or very difficult and 49.6% respondents felt that the answer scripts were not graded properly. According to them in order to improve the quality of services provided, the Student Support Division should be strengthened with full time competent human resources in adequate numbers.

Krishnan, C. (2012) conducted a study on Student Support Services in Distance Higher Education in India. The study is primarily based on primary data collected from the learners of the distance education institutions. The study has been confined to Kerala, a State known for its unique development experience. A sample of 650 learners has been drawn from four DEIs functioning in Kerala by a stratified random sampling procedure. The major findings of the study are as follows:

- All the DEIs offer a host of SSS for the distance learners.
- The printed study materials and electronic based study materials are widely used by many DEIs.
- The DEIs in Kerala provide only printed study materials as a strong SSS. But, the evidences suggest that most of the DEIs have miserably failed in meeting both the requirements.

- A close perusal of the experience of the learners revealed that only about 58.8 per cent of the total sample respondents received the study materials in time.
- Another issue of great concern is that sometimes the study materials are not provided in full. The students receive them in two or three instalments.
- Regarding the errors and mistakes appeared in the distance education study materials, about 46.5 per cent of the learners found „many“ errors. While 38 per cent found „a few“ errors, about 13.2 per cent noticed „hardly any error“.

Kirki Perris, Weiyuan and Teresa Poon conducted a study on the preferences of learners towards the online learning in Hong Kong. The purpose of this study was to examine the barriers and preferences of online learning in Open University, Hong Kong. Questionnaires surveys were conducted online. They used a stratified random sampling technique to collect representative sample for the study. The major findings of the study revealed that access to the internet for study purpose was most frequent in Hong Kong. Under the advantages of Online Learning they found that most of the students were keen to interact with others for sharing ideas and information and learning from others' contributions. But at the same time there are also many areas where improvements and adjustments are warranted reported by them. Another area where students found difficulty was its use as a tool to support content in comparison to print-based materials.

Femi A Adeoye, Ibrahim O and Salawu (2010) conducted a study to know the choice and perception of distance learning degree programme of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). They obtained the data from a cross section of NOUN students about different aspects of distance education system. They reported in their study that most of the learners opted for distance learning programme because it is easier to secure admission to the university than in any of the traditional university. The learners also preferred the administrative system as well as course materials of this distance learning system.

Francis Glasgow conducted a study to analyse the needs assessment in Open and Distance Learning at the institute of Continuing Education, University of Guyana. He used survey research method to carry out the study. According to them the respondents felt that ODL providers should continue to offer these basic academic qualifications. They also pointed to the desirability of conducting professional programmes in disciplines namely health, management, community development and leadership and physical education. The respondents also expressed the need for training in the administrative professional area. Management programmes were identified as the most desired for enhancing job performance.

These above studies have great deal of input and help to conclude that distance instruction is a viable form of education with the same quality as its face-to-face counterpart. The support service being the pivot in the entire DE system, ample care and caution is required to be taken in order to improve the quality.

Methodology:

This study intends to explore the views of learners on Learner Support Services of the Learner Centres. This was done through collection of data from the sample students with the help of interview schedule. The first and foremost objective is to obtain views from the learners on methods employed for providing learner support services and also on various aspects of support services like counselling, assignment, utilization of media, non-academic counselling etc. and the second objective is to explore an alternative system of Learner Support Services for the benefit of the students.

Population and Sample:

The population for the study consisted of all the **57 Study Centres** of this region and the sample for the study consisted of only **5 Study Centres** randomly chosen through incidental sampling procedure. Only 100 students of these Study Centres were interviewed and their feed back recorded.

Tools and Techniques used for Data Collection:

The following tools were used for the collection of data from the key informants and/or institutions:

Interview Schedule was used to collect data from the students pursuing different programmes under IGNOU about the various dimensions of learner support services of IGNOU like Admissions, Academic counselling, library, Self Learning Materials, Alternative Media for Learning, Study Centre, Environment, Assessment and Evaluation.

Methods of Data Collection:

Data collection was essentially an important part in the research process which involves sincere approach of the researcher. It is only through authentic data, the hypothesis of generalisation tentatively held may be identified as valid, verified and correct or rejected and untenable.

The data were collected by the Researcher through personal visits to the study centres and personal contact with the respondents with the help of the tools of qualitative research i.e. Semi-structured Interviews Schedule and documentary analysis.

Techniques of Data Analysis:

The data collected through Interview schedule were analysed with the help of percentage analysis and presented in a tabular form. These data, however, were supplemented and substantiated with the help of the data collected through different qualitative tools such as observation, field notes, documentary analysis etc. All the six aspects of support services identified for the present study have been analysed separately and the response of the learners were consolidated in order to arrive at a conclusion as to whether the support services provided by the learner centres were effective.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data:

In the present study percentage analysis of all the six identified area of support services have been made. A total of 32 questions pertaining to the above six areas were put to the respondents and their responses were recorded by the researcher. The response made on Every item was then consolidated and its percentage calculated. If the percentage is more than 50% then the response was considered as significant and less than 50% insignificant. The percentage of students response item wise is given in the table below.

Table-1

Sl. No.	Areas of Support Services	Satisfied	Not Satisfied
1	Admission System in IGNOU	90%	10%
2	Academic Counselling in IGNOU	72%	28%
3	Self Learning Material(SLM)	65%	35%
4	Alternative Media for Learning	25%	75%
5	Library Facilities	30%	70%
6	Study Centre Environment	69%	31%
7	Assessment and Evaluation	68%	32%

1. Admission System in IGNOU: Regarding Admission **90% of the learners** feel that IGNOU has a learner friendly admission system. Counsellors and other functionaries at the study centres provide useful information about admission and other aspects of IGNOU. More over walk-in-admission in IGNOU has been highly beneficial to the learner of Koraput Region.

2. Academic Counseling in IGNOU: Academic counseling which is considered as one of the important activities in the DE system has also been considered very useful to the learners of Koraput Region. **72% learners** feel that Academic counseling in Koraput Region are being held meaningfully. They have expressed that counselors help the learners in solving all sorts of problems be it Academic or Administrative. Sessions are conducted regularly as per schedule and students queries are addressed by the counselors satisfactorily.

3. Self Learning Materials(SLM) : Learning material supplied by IGNOU are considered as the main stay of the system. They are popularly known as SIM (Self Instructional Material). Its novelty has been felt and accepted by many educationists in India and abroad. Perhaps it is due to the self-instructional materials that IGNOU has got the reputation of being the “Centre of excellence” in distance education.

65% of the learners have the view that learning material reach them in time . These materials are well organized and easy to understand. Tables, diagrams, glossaries, self-check-exercises etc are suitably integrated so as to enable the learner to read and master conceptual knowledge.

4. Alternative Media for Learning: In IGNOU system there is extensive use of electronic media which are considered complimentary and supplementary to the main medium i.e. study materials. Alternative media like teleconferencing, Gyan Darshan, Gyan Vani, CD- Rom, Internet and email, mobile telephony etc. are unused at every learner Centre under Koraput region.

Only **25% learners** have opined that various technological devices are optimally utilized. Majority of them feel that either they are not functional or not used due to various reasons. Due to frequent power failure also electronic equipments are not used. In some centres Audio Video CDs are not available for the learners to supplement their learning.

5. Library Facilities: For the benefits of distance learners and tutors a small library is created at every LSC with some reference books and other study materials. Region Centre Koraput has also a reference library for both counselors and learners. But in spite of that usage of the library is not encouraging.

In this study the analysis reveals that only **30% learners** use the library and refer different study materials. Majority of them feel that libraries are not open even in working days of the study Centres and sufficient reference books are not available. Hence it is not useful for them.

6. Study Centre Environment: Good Learning environment is essential for better learning to take place. Therefore, learner centre staffs are trained continuously for creation of conducive learning environment in their respective centre.

The present study reveals that **69% of the learners** have experienced conducive learning environment and friendly behavior of LSC functionaries in their study centre .They are also satisfied with the physical facilities available at the study centre.

7. Assessment and Evaluation: Assessment and evaluation are two integral parts of any education system. In distance education assessment and evaluation of the performance of the students are done in a different manner. Evaluation is nothing but given a value to the performance of the learners. Both formative and summative evaluation are suitable integrated in the distance education system. Continuous evaluation through assignment and self checked exercises have proved to be highly beneficial for the learners. The term end examination which is a part of the evaluation process gives a different flavor in DE system.

Analysis of responses under this parameter shows that **68% learners** feel that Assignments are potential tools for learning as proper teaching comments are given by the tutors. Most of the learners reveal that they properly plan and prepare their assignments and deposit them in time. They feel that tutor comments are very useful and results are declared in time.

Findings and conclusions:

The investigator after carefully analyzing the data and interpreting each one of the items with respect to present scenario in IGNOU found the following major things:

1. The admission procedure of IGNOU in Koraput Region is found to be very much student friendly. Counselling classes are conducted effectively by engaging good and competent counsellors by all the learner centres of this region. Walk-in- admission system at RC Koraput is also found to be student friendly.
2. Counselling sessions organized at Learner centres in Koraput region are mostly effective and regular. The tutors in counselling sessions are also found to be responsive and are able to satisfy the academic needs of the learners. The subject specific queries of the learners are properly dealt with by the tutors as per the finding. It was also found that the learners openly participate and discuss various academic problems with the counsellors.
3. It was also found that the learning materials are not supplied on time as a result students feel uncomfortable in pursuing their study. However they fully agree that the subject matter presented in the Blocks and Units of the SIM are well organized and well explained. Majority of them have opined that the language used is tough and they find it difficult to understand. The Tables, Diagrams, Illustrations given in the study units to explain the concepts and ideas are found to be very useful to the students. The self check exercises are accepted by the students to be very very useful to assess their progress.
4. As regards Media use in programme delivery at different learner centres, it was found that in majority of the centres Audio-Video CDs are not available as a result they are deprived of playing them for their independent learning. Due to unavailability of TV sets and satellite downlinking equipments, majority of the students in the LSCs do not attend the Teleconference sessions and they are deprived of quality inputs given at those Tc sessions from time to time.
5. The library facilities at the learner centres are found to be inadequate as a result they do not fulfill the desired objective with which they are set up. Students seldom visit the SC libraries as sufficient reference books are not there and they do not remain open on all working days the SCs. Majority of the learners have responded that they do not find the library at all useful to them.
6. This study reveals that majority of the LSCs have maintained good study environment which is conducive to learning. LSCs functionaries are found to be very cordial in their approach towards learners. The physical facilities at the LSCs like ventilation, light and sitting arrangement are found to be up to satisfaction by the learners. However the ICT facilities are not adequate to support the learners at LSCs.
7. Another important finding of this study was that, the continuous evaluation through assignments is considered by a good number of learners as useful but they do not serve the purpose as they are not properly evaluated and commented upon. They feel that the kinds of comments given in the assignments do not help them in improving their performance. They fully agree that the assignments and examinations are properly planned and the results are declared in time. Grade cards are also received by the learners in time.

CONCLUSIONS:

Learner Centres occupy a prominent place in IGNOU System. It is like a mini university where every kind of academic activity takes place. It is therefore essential to equip the LSCs with all necessary equipments and learning materials. Necessary steps must also be taken to create adequate infrastructure to extend good support services to each one of the learners admitted. Through this study it is revealed that support services provided at LSCs for admission, Counselling, Supply of Materials, Availability of AV materials, Library facility, creation of a good learning environment, and above all Assessment and Evaluation are to a great extent satisfactory. What is required is, the authority of IGNOU should take immediate step in equipping the centres with modern facility for excellent academic transaction. Libraries are to be strengthened by supplying them with sufficient reference books and learning materials. Every LSCs should be provided with AV aids and Dish Antenna to view Gyan Darshan and Gyan Vani. The feedback mechanism also need to be improved by training and orientation of Academic counselors. The Study Materials which are considered to be the mainstay of the IGNOU System should be revised continuously with simple and lucid language for clear understanding of the learners.

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