



TOPiC: Our Dedication to Learning: (Trends, Opportunities, Practices & Challenges: Open and Distance Learning)

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ABSTRACT

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a transformative force in modern education, reaching diverse learners worldwide. The researcher redefines ODL as "Our Dedication to Learning," highlighting the necessity for dedication to remain active and punctual throughout any program. This redefinition emphasizes the importance of commitment in both online and offline settings, especially when regular face-to-face interactions with instructors and a compulsory attendance rate of at least 75% are not feasible. This exploration into ODL presents its evolving trends, promising opportunities, established practices, and the challenges it faces. The integration of digital technologies, personalized learning approaches, and flexible instructional models characterizes trends in ODL. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted traditional teaching methods and presented challenges. This period saw an improvement in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Educational Technology (ET), previously underutilized areas lacking attention in a landscape where face-to-face teaching predominates. The adoption of ICT and ET and various alternative learning methods beyond traditional approaches has increased. This includes the expansion of ODL and online courses. ODL is defined as a mode of delivering flexible learning opportunities by bridging the gap between teacher and learner through various media, including print, electronic, online, and occasional interactive face-to-face meetings or Learner Support Services. This paper reviews the different challenges and opportunities associated with the ODL mode, exploring both the trends and practices that characterize this evolving educational landscape.

Keywords: *Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Trends, Opportunities, Practices, Challenges.*

INTRODUCTION

When a source of knowledge and learners are physically and geographically separated by time and space, or both, open and distance learning (ODL), often known as distance learning, is used to develop and provide access to learning (Honeyman and Miller, 1993). The phrase "open and distance learning" refers to the combination of the reality, that most or all of the instructions are given by a teacher who is not in the same physical location as the student and the goal of incorporating more openness and flexibility into the curriculum,

access, and other structural components (Ghosh et al. 2012). The typical lecture has several disadvantages, including the requirement that students show up at a set time, the inability to accommodate the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, and the lack of student control over their learning environment and pace. Distance learning can be described as the teaching methodology in which students finish their studies virtually and do not necessarily come to the lecture session physically (Allam et al. 2020). The use of technology-enhanced learning, or e-learning, has been growing in the educational field recently, particularly in ODL (Open and Distance Learning) (Ahmed et al. 2018).

Since Open Distance Learning (ODL) makes use of an amazing and creative media mix and technology application in education, it can facilitate communication and interaction between distance learners (DLs) and distance teachers (DTs) despite geographical, temporal, and physical limitations. Both real-time (synchronous) and delayed-time (asynchronous) interactions are possible. Practices within ODL include innovative pedagogies, learner-centered strategies, and adaptive assessment methods, all aimed at promoting engagement and effectiveness in remote learning environments.

For a significant segment of the populace nationwide, open distance learning offered by institutions serves as a genuine means of access to numerous educational options (Towobola & Raimi 2011). In a location where email was unavailable and post took five to fifteen days, the institution employed mobile phones quite successfully in its paper-based distance education programs for university management, obtaining nearly instantaneous communication through SMS texting (Kothamasu 2010). Dramas on radio and television have been utilized recently to teach people about the ODL system in nations like Nigeria and The Gambia. Undoubtedly, radio and television, in particular, play a significant role in non-formal education. ODL requires built-in flexibility features and educational materials that have been carefully created (Idrus & Lateh, 2000).

In India, the University Grants Commission (UGC) is working hard to set the standards and criteria for ODL mode and the institutes offering ODL courses. UGC notified UGC (Open and Distance Learning Programmes and Online Programmes) Regulations, 2020 on 4th Sep, 2020 in the Gazette of India. Subsequently, its first and second amendments have been notified on 1st July, 2021 and 18th July, 2022. These regulations lay down minimum standards of instruction for grant of degrees at undergraduate and post graduate levels in ODL and / Online mode. UGC has created a website “UGC-DEB (Distance Education Bureau-UGC)” for the requisite information related to ODL institutes.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research paper is to review the trends, opportunities, practices, and challenges for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) since there has been almost no study talking about the trends, opportunities, practices, and challenges related to ODL.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To review the trends, opportunities, practices, and challenges for Open and Distance Learning (ODL).

METHODOLOGY

This study is a descriptive one with secondary data as its foundation. Secondary data was gathered from numerous websites, including those of the Government of India (GoI), journals, and publications, among others. The conclusion results from analysis of the current literature.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL)

The provision of remote education opportunities to reduce or eliminate access barriers—such as those related to money, past learning, age, social media, work or family obligations, disability, incarceration, or other similar obstacles—is known as open and distance learning, or ODL. "Open" describes a dedication to removing any needless obstacles to learning access. Distance education is defined as instruction that is delivered through numerous media, involving two-way communication, and may feature periodic in-person meetings for tutorials and learner-teacher contact. It also refers to teaching and learning that is temporarily separated from the teacher and the student in terms of time and/or location. Although distance learning and open learning are not the same thing, they complement one another, which is why the terms are sometimes used interchangeably (TVETipedia Glossary, n.d.).

ODL, an abbreviation for Open and Distance Learning, is a transformative force that appeared a long time ago and has been undergoing changes since then. With the drastic changes in ICT and ET, ODL has also changed, and that too for the better. Since 1974, many institutions around the world—many bearing the name Open University—have emerged; all open universities use distance education technologies as delivery methodologies, and some have developed into "mega-universities," a term coined to describe institutions with more than 100,000 students (Daniel, 1998). The ODL approach lends itself to the teaching of numerous contemporaries, and complicated issues that require input from a range of disciplines (Ghosh et al. 2012).

Due to environmental obligations, time and distance constraints, or a combination of these, the sources of educational information and identified learners are physically and geographically separated, making open distance learning (ODL) an inevitable phenomenon in the educational landscape of developed and developing nations. Therefore, the idea of open and distance education was developed to offer comfort to students who are too busy to attend regular universities. ODL has emerged as a transformative mode of education, enabling anybody to access knowledge, anytime and anywhere.

TRENDS

Technology Integration

Due to COVID-19 almost every school and higher education institution was forced to move their teaching and learning sessions from physical classrooms to a variety of online platforms. There's a sense in which the shutting of educational institutions forced educators and students to adopt Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as the new standard (Azmi & See May 2021). One reason being the Personalized learning

experiences tailored to individual needs. Students can personalize how they get content according to the time and location at which they choose to watch the broadcast.

As long as the academic assignments and continuous assessments are turned in by the deadline, ODL gives students the exceptional chance and freedom to work on their tasks at their own speed. Since students can access the portals whenever and wherever they choose, open-distance learning does not follow the traditional lecture format. Using online resources and infrastructure, this flexible learning approach reduces stress for students learning over great distances. Written content sent by mail, cable TV, satellite, phone conferences, or even two-way video conferencing are a few of these resources. Since most discussions take place asynchronously, teachers and students don't always need to be online at the same time (Towobola & Raimi 2011).

Lifelong Learning

The ODL has come out to be the biggest proponent of Lifelong learning, as anyone of any age can get enrolled in any ODL course for which they are eligible and allows students to continue learning throughout their lives. The Badges, certifications, and modular programs cater to lifelong learners.

Mobile Learning

The transmission of education to students who do not have a permanent location or who would rather learn through mobile phone technology is known as M-learning (Kothamasu 2010). Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is perfectly complemented by M-learning (Mobile-enabled Learning) technology. It facilitates communication between students and those outside of their customary learning environments. By taking advantage of the relatively inexpensive mobile infrastructure, M-learning technologies provide education at lower costs. Those who suffer from a lack of interaction can benefit from M-learning technologies. M-learning technologies deliver concise course notes, summaries, and assignments, and M-learning technology can supplement traditional classroom instruction by sending brief lesson notes, summaries, homework, and tutorials straight to each student after every lesson or topic has been addressed. M-learning, or mobile-enabled learning, is geared toward individuals who are constantly on the go.

The five basic parameters for the production and development of m-learning are Portability, Social Interactivity, Context Sensitivity, Connectivity, and Customisability (Kothamasu 2010). These parameters are also a part of E-learning (Since, M-learning, which comes from D-learning (distance learning), is the evolution of E-learning.) and hence we can say that they can even act as the parameters of the ODL.

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)

The MOOCs are becoming famous day by day and are a big supplement to the movement of ODL as they tick all the checkboxes of an ideal ODL. Platforms providing MOOCs include the likes of SWAYAM, Coursera, edX, and Udemy. A shift towards hybrid MOOCs combining synchronous and asynchronous sessions is taking place.

Open Educational Resources (OERs)

Free, accessible resources encourage global participation and equity in education which results in the Globalisation and Democratisation of Education. There are Cross-border enrolments and international partnerships fostering diversity in teaching-learning.

OPPORTUNITIES

Skill Development for Future Jobs

We have the National Open University (IGNOU) and the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) to offer effective and efficient ODL courses to offer students with high-quality education, skill development, and vocational training that aligns with the need for upskilling and reskilling in a rapidly changing job market.

Accessibility and Inclusivity:

Online Distance Learning (ODL) brings education to underserved communities, including rural and low-income areas. In the context of ongoing education and training, ODL's ability to support large-scale campaigns—like those pertaining to HIV/AIDS education—is noteworthy. Community development and non-formal education are two other fields where ODL is being utilized more and more. Programs offered remotely, frequently reach a sizable number of women in communities where women do not have equal access to traditional forms of education and training (Ghosh et al. 2012). For worried students, distance learning is not only practical but also beneficial due to their unique needs, particularly for those who are unable to receive standard classroom teaching.

Flexibility

Asynchronous learning allows learners to study at their own pace and schedule. It supports non-traditional learners like working professionals and specially-abled individuals. It is a great way for adult learners to get the higher degree they want. The ODL structure gives Adults the control over the location, schedule, and tempo of their education. Its approach is far more student-centered and flexible. By enabling students to attend classes at more convenient times and locations, it provides educational opportunities to previously unreached learners (Pravat, 2018). When it comes to scheduling and location, open distance learning is convenient for both students and teachers, especially for those who are juggling jobs and school.

Cost-Effectiveness

Although there are initial expenses associated with the establishment of infrastructure, once established they cost much less over a period of time.

Scalability

ODL can accommodate a vast number of learners simultaneously, unlike traditional classrooms. The ODL method has shown to be a viable substitute for the traditional system since it can effectively and economically reach a sizable portion of the unreachable, neglected, and needy population (Jena 2020).

The majority of programs and courses in ODL are designed with adults in mind. One significant area where ODL learning has contributed significantly is teacher training programs. It has been discovered that

remote teacher preparation can reach sizable student populations and significantly influence the advancement of the national education system. When the public education system needs to be expanded or its quality improved, using the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system for teacher education becomes imperative (Ghosh et al. 2012).

PRACTICES

Quality Assurance

Distance education has been widely utilized in the field of teacher education to offer pre-service teacher preparation, academic qualification upgrading, and in-service continuing professional development in specific subjects, content areas, and instructional methodologies. To ensure that these courses are up-to-date and of topmost quality we need to have standardized frameworks for curriculum design, assessment, and accreditation. The benefit of distance education is that it provides access to professional development programs and teacher preparation for indigenous peoples and other people living in remote, rural areas without easy access to higher education institutions, where there is frequently a shortage of qualified educators. It contributes significantly to human development and involves both practical training and experimental work (Ghosh 2012).

Learner-Centered Design

Flexible learning is encouraged by online learning methods, which improve student engagement in the classroom (Kenny, 2010). Undoubtedly, Blended Learning has helped in development of the ODL mode. Mixing various learning contexts is known as blended learning. It blends more contemporary computer-mediated activities with conventional in-person teaching techniques. For both teachers and students, the method fosters a more integrated approach. The relationship between blended learning and differentiated instruction is unquestionably advantageous for educators. In the academic literature, the phrases blended, hybrid, and mixed-mode are frequently used interchangeably to refer to various aspects of open distance learning (Martyn 2003). The main focus of these modes should be to prioritize interactive and engaging content, including multimedia and gamification.

Robust IT Infrastructure

To guarantee that all parties involved in ODL—students, faculty, and university staff—can seek out appropriate assistance from the right parties in times of need, appropriate aid and counseling services are also essential (Azmi & See May 2021).

To promote open and distance learning, international, interregional, and regional cooperation is highly valued. This includes initiatives to increase awareness, confidence, and capacity building; mapping relevant experience, successes, and failures; networking among key players in the field of distance education and educational technology; piloting and adapting educational technologies in various settings; jointly developing learning systems programs and learning materials involving industry-wide joint ventures and inter-country exchanges; evaluating the true costs and effects of alternative delivery systems; and providing support for the creation of system-wide policy and planning regarding new educational technology (Ghosh et al. 2012). We need reliable platforms for content delivery, collaboration, and assessment and thus the policymakers should

increase the financial and technological resources of the institutions (like IGNOU and NIOS) which provide ODL courses.

Community Building

We need to foster peer interaction through forums, group projects, and social learning tools.

CHALLENGES

Quality Control

The main challenge lies in maintaining high educational standards across diverse courses and providers. One of the biggest issues with e-courseware is figuring out how to use technology to support human learning (Mayer 2009). The preparation for such a course is significantly difficult and more labour-intensive than traditional learning in the near term. One expects a sizable short-term investment to pay off in the long run (Ghilay 2017).

Lack of Technical Literacy among Stakeholders

According to Dzakiria, “One of the problems of ODL is about the learning itself”. Lack of student training in technical issues. Many adult students are not well versed in the use of computers and the Internet (Dzakiria, 2003, Murphy, Walker & Webb, 2001). The inadequate availability of the necessary support services, such as academic planners and schedulers, technical help, and tutors in specially designated study centers. ODL is challenging for the majority of students from traditional teacher-centered learning backgrounds since it has been ingrained in their social lives (Dzakiria, 2004). More training sessions ought to be arranged to give teachers and students the skills necessary to carry out ODL (Khairuddin et al. 2020).

Lacking Channel of Communication between Students and Teachers

The elimination of a crucial channel of communication between students and teachers as a result of geographical limitations is another issue with online learning (Keegan, 1986). As the number of students attending ODL institutions rises, so does the demand for more ODL practitioners who can offer the high-quality education that these students either need or want. An ODL practitioner must be fair and ethical in addition to possessing solid topic knowledge (Cant et al. 2013).

Faculty Adaptation

The instructor's effective and intensive involvement in this online distance learning course is a key factor contributing to the success of the ODL program and it's far more focused and efficient than traditional lecture activity because the instructor's efforts are primarily focused on the needs and challenges that the individuals' face and not the class as a whole (Ghilay 2017). There is an urgent need for instructors to develop new skills for designing and delivering the content online.

High dropout rates: Retention Issues

The biggest issues that ODL learners reported having were not having enough time to study, having trouble accessing and using ICT, receiving poor feedback, and not having enough study resources (Musungafi et al. 2015). Although these are genuine problems, we can say that there is a lack of motivation among the learners and the reasons can be many. *This is the reason, the researcher provided a new definition to ODL, as*

Our Dedication to Learning, since a student of any age will be able to use ODL mode effectively and efficiently only if S/He is dedicated and consistent towards the study, otherwise, it would be really difficult for them to finish the course.

Digital Divide, Cultural and Language Barriers

Limited internet access and lack of devices hinder participation, particularly in low-income regions. Creating and implementing an adaptive e-learning model that resonates with the needs of diverse audiences is a challenging task. Several problems exist, such as the storyboard for the learning sequence, the learners' preferences within the constraints of the infrastructure, and the unavailability of specialized resources (Ahmed et al. 2018). Using electronic media in distance learning would thus exclude students who are not digitally literate. The difficulties that students encounter can be divided into three categories: difficulties with management, difficulties with learning, and difficulties with technology (Kara et al. 2019). In order to give the best ODL experience, we need to alleviate these difficulties as soon as we can.

CONCLUSION

The term Open Learning describes learning that tries to have very few barriers and Distance Education refers to the separation of teacher and learner concerning temporal and spatial factors. Both are not the same but complementary to each other, which is why we use the two terms together in the expression Open and Distance Learning or ODL. In order to complete courses provided in ODL mode, one needs to be constantly motivated throughout the course. So, our dedication to learning is a pre-requisite in this case.

The literature, states that, if an online distance learning program offers learning results comparable to those of traditional instruction while maintaining student progress, it is deemed successful (Means et al., 2010). The demands of students pursuing distance education for the first time must be carefully taken into account if distance learning institutions are serious about offering equitable educational opportunities to all. Universities must create and sustain instructional strategies that improve communication between students and administrators as well as between students and tutors (Towobola & Raimi 2011).

It is well-recognised that distance learning has administrative advantages. For all parties concerned, it is evident that online distance learning (ODL) offers distinct organisational advantages over in-person instruction. The advantages of not being dependent on time and location and saving resources (classrooms, time, electricity, transportation, etc.) are shared by both the instructors and the students. All of these benefits are clear, and the total benefit is contingent upon the student's capacity to sustain an academic standard at par with that of conventional instruction, where comes the role of dedication, as pointed out by the researcher. Adopting the new paradigm is worthwhile if the academic outcomes of online distance learning (ODL) are comparable to those of traditional learning. Since, ODL is associated with flexibility, accessibility, affordability, and opportunities for lifelong learning, it is advised that the institution provide students with autonomous and innovative study abilities to make sure they don't fall behind the current worldwide trend (Musigafi et al., 2015).

Today, interest in the ODL system is rapidly expanding. The day will come when the ODL system will have complete control over the whole education and training system. In India, IGNOU in particular is playing

a significant role in the field of ODL mode. IGNOU has been offering qualitative education through ODL mode for more than three decades. The creation of new educational formats is made possible by the swift expansion of the mobile and communication industries (Kothamasu 2010).

ODL holds the potential to revolutionise education by breaking down geographical, financial and cultural barriers. However, addressing its challenges requires collaborative efforts from policymakers, educators, and technology providers. With continuous innovation, ODL can be a cornerstone of equitable and sustainable education in the 21st century. However, nobody should anticipate that educational networks would completely replace lectures.

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