

# DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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**Abstract:** Distance education is widely considered to be one of the most significant innovations in the field of education. In the past two decades, we have witnessed a dramatic shift in how distance education is rapidly moving towards becoming an alternative to the prevailing conventional education system and how it is positioned to become an indispensable part of the mainstream academic arm within several institutions. Being a co-ordinator of the Karnataka State Open University for the past several years, I have personally witnessed the transformative capabilities the distance education offers to everyone regardless of their age or academic background. In this context, this paper attempts to sum up the changes that have been taking place in the education system due to the introduction of distance learning, particularly in developing countries like India, its relevance, increased acceptance and its role in propelling a developing country towards becoming a developed nation. The initial phase of study is dedicated to discussing the very concept of distance education, further exploring its development over the years in the world and in India. Subsequently, its objectives, methodologies, potentials, advantages and disadvantages, including the challenges it faces are then systematically taken into account in detail. Finally, an observation regarding the current trends in the framework of distance education, further steps to be taken in transcending the distance and strengthening the experience of distance learning are discussed, thereby setting up a thorough research in this regard and drawing relevant conclusions.

## Introduction: Concept and importance of distance learning

It is said that, 'Learning is a process that begins in the cradle and ends in the grave'. This statement highlights the fact that a person is entitled to explore the expanse and find new perspectives in the areas of his or her interests throughout his or her lifetime. To this end, to cater to the needs, a formal or an informal system of imparting the necessary education to the concerned target groups is very essential.

Over the years, several ways have been tried and tested with regard to conveying and passing on knowledge in the form of education. There is a conventional set-up where in a student seeking knowledge is generally given the information he or she desires in a classroom environment. And also, an informal system consisting of distance learning and the fairly new system of e-learning.

The purpose of right to education is not only to quench the zest of one's curiosity, but also to empower the underprivileged and the neglected groups of the society. Additionally, to make sure that one can earn a livelihood to take care of self and the immediate family. Education also plays a key role in making the individuals gain hands on experience in their desired fields of interests and in giving them an opportunity to learn and to instigate the quest for knowledge and propensity towards a particular stream of instruction.

To empower a nation, empowering its citizens is crucial. In this regard, in many developing countries, steps are being taken to provide access to basic education for all, which plays a vitally important role in laying a perfect foundation in a societal setup. But when it comes to higher education, it still seems to be a distant dream for many. The established universities or institutions fail to cater to this class and this is where distance education comes into picture.

Distance education has been described as "a process to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both". This implies that there need not be a face to face interaction to impart education in this system and also that an individual has the freedom to select a time and place of his or her choice.

Technology is a crucial element in distance education. This brings us to the concept of e-learning which can be defined as, "a learning system that we can obtain through the internet using an electronic device". The 'e' in e-learning stands for 'electronic'. Hence, the original term 'electronic learning'. Without having to be confined to the four walls of a formal setup, e-learning provides an opportunity for lifelong learning, no matter where or when one wants to study. It is proving to be a boon to people wanting to qualify higher at a reasonable cost. Especially in developing countries with significant population explosion where in the demand for opportunities is phenomenal and higher education is a necessity.

In a distance education setup, the materials produced by the university, college or a learning provider are either sent directly to the student or more usually today accessed via the internet. Tutorial support is provided via a virtual learning environment, telephone, email or other electronic means, with an occasional face-to-face encounter with tutors.

This paper is devoted to give an idea as to what the methodology of distance learning is, its development over the years, worldwide and specifically in developing countries like India, together with discussing the merits, demerits, its challenges and trends in detail.

## Development of Distance Education: From its inception to the modern day

Contrary to the popular belief, distance learning has its roots way beyond the age of internet. In fact, distance education system has humble beginnings, dating back to the 1700s, barring any other historical citations prior to this.

Back then, distance education was practiced in the form of correspondence education in the United States. And then, it subsequently grew without bounds and swept across countries and continents. It is believed to have originated in the form of letters, by mailing the texts and submitting the assignments, back and forth. The introduction of printing and posting played an important role in this regard.

Years later, radio technology was used as a communication medium in schools and colleges. This went on for a brief period of time until the computer and emailing technology came into existence. The advent of distance education in the form of online courses through internet then began. Subsequently, Open universities took shape in multiple countries with the intent of streamlining and strengthening this form of education system in a wide variety of formats, for a wide variety of educational purposes.

### **Open and distance learning in India**

The higher education system in India does not present a great picture in comparison to the systems in developed countries. According to the sources in HRD ministry, only 10-15% of the general population opt for higher education out of which 5-10% graduate successfully with degrees. Therefore, there is a need for a radical overhaul especially with regards to the access, enrolment and the quality of higher education. Otherwise, it is harmful to the economic prospects of the country and the welfare of the society in general. To this end, in order to turn India into a knowledge-based economy and society, steps are being taken by the government by setting up commissions over the years and bringing in necessary reforms. Excellent education systems are to be in place to meet the challenges of a developing country like India with ever growing population and Open and distance learning systems play a crucial role in this context.

ODL (Open and distance learning) system in the country consists of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), State Open Universities (SOUs), Institutions and Universities offering education and includes Correspondence Course Institutes (CCIs) in conventional dual mode universities. This is becoming more and more noteworthy for continuing education, skill development and for quality education to seekers located at educationally disadvantageous locations spread throughout the country.

With the dissolution of the Distance Education Council of the IGNOU, all the existing distance learning courses are now regulated by the University Grants Commission (UGC). Designed to cater to the academic needs of working professionals, they are equally sought after by students living in remote and far-flung areas who lack access to quality higher education facilities. At present, there are 13 State Open Universities set up by the respective state grants, which are further subdivided.

Today's distance learning courses are vast and readily available over the internet - through online lectures, chat rooms and virtual classrooms. With the recent push by the government towards massive digitization, these trends are only expected to rise.

### **Open and distance learning in Karnataka**

The Karnataka State Open University (KSOU) established on 1st June 1996 is considered to be one of the reputed Open Universities amongst the open learning institutions in the country. It is located in Mysore and provides a range of under-graduate, post-graduate and diploma programmes. The degrees acquired through distance education from the KSOU are recognized for the purpose of employment in State/ Central Government, MNCs, Private Sector etc., and for pursuing higher education in other educational institutes.

The Karnataka State Open University came into being to achieve the objectives of democratizing higher education and providing extended access across the state by taking it to the doorsteps of the learners, with relaxed entry regulations and providing opportunities and flexibility in choosing a combination of courses from a wide range of disciplines.

Distance education providing universities in Karnataka further include the Bangalore University in Bangalore, Gulbarga University in Gulbarga, Kannada University in Hampi, Karnataka University in Dharwad, Kuvempu University in Shimoga, Mangalore University in Mangalore, Manipal University in Manipal, National Law School of India University in Bangalore and Visvesvaraya Technological University in Belgaum.

### **Merits, Demerits and the challenges of distance education system**

Like any other system, distance education system has its own set of advantages and disadvantages. These factors must be completely considered, taken into account and understood prior to delving into this system of learning.

Firstly, it provides access to the right of education irrespective of age, gender, location, academic background, quality of education etc., thereby increasingly reducing the inequalities prevailing in the societies and communities. It is a popular trend that, a major chunk of the students opt for distance learning while also pursuing a full-time or a part-time job. So, you get the opportunity to learn while you earn. Moreover, there is a possibility of saving both time and money, since it can be self-paced according to students' requirements and since it can be pursued from the comfort of their homes, thereby being flexible as well as cost effective at the same time. Also, there is an opportunity to study wherever and whenever without having to be stuck at a classroom and without having to attend classes at a fixed period of time of the day. Additionally, e-learning comes with an extra benefit of providing a proof of completion by tracking a learner's progress throughout a particular course.

Distance learning now allows an educational institution to reach their students, specially targeting the specific groups with ease in the form of correspondence or internet. The universities ensure that their distance learning programs and quality are of the same standard as their campus-based programs in the form of either undergraduate or post-graduate or professional level courses with suitable accreditation.

On the other hand, there are chances of fake candidatures and probabilities of deceit. Several cases have emerged and have been emerging in this context. The prospects of certificate racketeering especially by illegal means through corruption and favoritism arise as well. There are possibilities of generating errors and print mistakes during the transmission of documents ending up in spreading misinformation to the students. The quality of educational transmission can be hampered by poor communication networks and a low speed internet connection. Unlike a traditional educational arrangement, distance learning may result in difficulties with respect to staying in contact with the instructors, staying connected all the time and getting immediate feedbacks when needed. Chances of distractions are high as well, since one cannot stay motivated all the time due to there not being face to face interactions, which can

result in losing track of deadlines. Also, unlike a conventional setup, one cannot achieve peripheral benefits, such as a dynamic evolution or a massive transformation resulting from group situations and a team environment.

### **Evolving trends that shape the future of Distance learning**

As distance education continues to evolve and move from the fringe of higher education to the mainstream, there are and there will be new challenges brewing in the field. In the past few years we have witnessed a tectonic shift in how distance education has positioned itself within institutions in many countries.

As the journey of distance learning continues into the 21st century, a Forbes article notes that, "Online learning is moving beyond this primitive, one-to-many broadcast model to become a social, collaborative, personalized and interactive experience that generates two powerful, mutually reinforcing success accelerants: first, the long-term desire to learn, to better one's position in the world; and, secondly - crucially - the moment-by-moment pleasure of participating in a learning experience that's continually exciting, rewarding and creates a valuable sense of social connection".

While the regular undergraduate or graduate programs have one or two deadlines throughout the year, allowing a maximum of two opportunities for the students to enroll for a course in the universities to a certain degree, the online degrees are much more flexible. The applicants can apply on a rolling basis. Whenever ready, the students can apply, without having to worry about the deadlines and subsequently get a faster decision with regard to their admissions.

e-learning provides access to intensive and super-intensive course structures and the students can opt according to their comfort and according to the time that they can devote. With the learning time significantly compressed, a faster track towards graduation is possible. Innovative curriculums with agile and modern methods are being introduced which are not restricted to the text-book based information alone. The courses are being evolved into a more practical version with high standards by continuously improving the learning resources and updating the online platforms. The entry requirements compared to a formal education arrangement are a lot fewer, thereby the open universities are really open in their truest sense. With no screening, no prior academic requirements and no age limits, large number of students are opting this mode of education and obtain their degrees and certificates much faster.

With this exponential growth in demand and popularity for distance and e-learning within institutions, increased scrutiny with the introduction of more regulations is being done over the years. Evolution of state authorization systems and new accreditation standards can be seen.

With regard to e-learning, various new approaches are being tried out with variety of new innovations to make distance learning much more like a real-life experience. Over the next decade, distance education is sure to see some more significant changes stemming from a wide variety of areas.

### **Conclusion**

Distance learning, with its outreach and extension has managed to garner wide form of support and attention by people of all ages, especially the younger lot in the recent years. We can well anticipate that in the coming years online education will continue to increase its presence and influence higher education through a dynamic process of reshaping, refining, and restructuring. It is unlikely, though, to replace the traditional higher education but only pose as a credible alternative. But, owing to its flexibility, accessibility and affordability, online education is gaining in popularity, especially for people who are otherwise unable to obtain education because of physical distance, schedule conflicts, and unaffordable costs. At this rate, it is highly likely to further evolve in the near future.

Also, further evolution of the education models and innovative learning systems can certainly be expected. Institutions will have to constantly try to manage to further cut down or maintain the same cost features while continuing to provide no lesser quality of learning experience. The growing technological advances open great doors for exploration and innovation in the approach and overall structure of the distance and e-learning systems. Ultimately, the focus must stay on expanding and increasing the database and access to the learners.

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