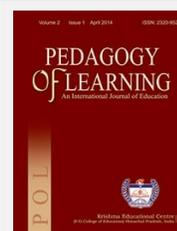


PEDAGOGY OF LEARNING (POL)
International Refereed Journal of Education
E-ISSN: 2395-7344, P-ISSN: 2320-9526
Abstracted and indexed in: Google Scholar, Research
Bib, International Scientific Indexing (ISI), Scientific
Indexing Services (SIS), WorldCat, Cite Factor,
Impact Factor: 0.787(GIF), **UGC (India) Listed Journal**
Journal Homepage: <http://pedagogyoflearning.com>



Student's Barriers to Distance Learning: an Analytic Study

Kuldeep Singh Katoch

Associate Professor in Education, ICDEOL,
Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, India
E-mail: kuldeepkatoch@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Kuldeep Singh Katoch

E-mail: kuldeepkatoch@gmail.com

Article History:

Received 10 November 2016

Received in revised form 19 November 2016

Accepted 04 January 2017

Published online 28 January 2017

Abstract

In this paper an attempt has been made to explore the learning experiences of Master of Arts (Education) students of International Centre for Distance Education and Open Learning (ICDEOL), of Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla. In this study all those distance learners were included who attended their Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs) of 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th semester at main campus i.e. Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla and H.P. University Regional Centre Dharamshala. The purpose of this paper is to identify whether the needs of these distance learners were being met by this academic course. The results revealed that students were, on the whole, satisfied with the all the course materials of MA Education, the choice of courses, assignment feedback, effectiveness of resources, academic inputs given by faculty members & resource persons, teaching style & methodologies and time given to complete and submit the assignments, but few significant problems raised regarding issues of student support system, and access to and less provision of reference materials.

Keywords: Assignments, Study Material, PCP, Distance education and Feedback.

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning is a powerful tool, will play and is playing an increasingly large role in adult, post-collegiate education. For corporate training, where the primary objective is the rapid, efficient acquisition of specific knowledge sets, distance learning will be a popular option if it caters the needs and requirements of learners. Distance Education is a type of education that occurs while time, location or both separate the learners. In this type of education, teacher through use of technology delivers the instruction to students at separate locations. Distance education addresses the needs of the specific target groups. Distance Education is internationally recognized an alternative channel for providing access to education in a cost effective manner; wider and diversified curricula. Distance education is the realization of the concept of the globalization. Distance education has the ability to impart education proficiently and effectively for the masses with the latest technological support. In this type of education there is open access to everyone living/residing in any corner of the world. It is the mode of education having flexibility of time and space. The present study was intended to assess the experiences of distance learners (MA Education 1st, 2nd, 3rd & 4th Semester) and to see if learner's needs were being met by this academic course. The results of the study will be discussed in relation to the aims that support distance education, the strengths & weaknesses of distance education, and the needs of learners as they relate to the key concerns of course materials and learning support. Keegan (1990, p. 44) identifies five main elements of distance education: the separation of teacher and learner; the influence of an educational organization; the use of technical media (usually print) to unite the teacher and learner and to carry educational content; the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue; and the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes. Keegan formulation is a useful one (and one which appears to have been generally accepted by researchers, although one criticised by Garrison, 1990, as being too narrow), and is considered a suitable one for this paper since the distance learning programme under study also includes these five basic elements.

Structure of Programme (Course and Learners)

The Master of Education through distance mode was started by the ICDEOL, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla from the academic session July 2015. This course was designed as an opportunity for the in-service teachers or to any graduate, who wish to study at home for a post-graduate qualification in education. The main features of the course are that it could be completed in maximum five years; it followed semester system examination structure, 80% attendance is compulsory in PCPs. The dissertation work is compulsory in this course. The course materials are developed by faculty members of the Department as per syllabus. The Personnel Contact Programmes (PCPs) are held at two places (University main campus, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla and H.P University Regional Centre Dharmshala) and each student has freedom to opt for their PCP at any one place as per their convenience. In Master of Education course learners are required to attend four PCPs (10 days in each semester) over two academic years. The 80% attendance and five assignments per course of approximately 5,000 words are essential requirement for internal assessment of 30 marks per course. The relevant course materials are provided for each learner. The Course Co-ordinator is the in-charge of course maintains contact with learners and managed other student services. The ICDEOL academic and administrative wing provides the administrative support

(distributing course materials, collecting and sending assignments/dissertations to examiners) to distance learners.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Keeping in view of the importance of review of related research in conducting a research, an attempt was made by the investigator to look at the studies conducted in India and abroad. As the research literature appears to support the view that there is no significant difference between face-to-face instructions, successful distance learning comes from factors related to learners support services, course design, motivation, and need. Distance education, as it is provided by ICDEOL, H. P. University, is meeting the needs of most of the learners. In this context the student support services and problem-solving capabilities of the organising institution are seen to be crucial to satisfying the needs of distance learners. The varying levels of experience with the course may, therefore, influence both the needs and satisfaction of individual students. The term "satisfaction" is an elusive idea because it is a state of mind, and therefore, for which no relative measures between individuals exist. Furthermore, since a person's needs also vary from individual to individual, it is hard to objectively quantify and qualify whether all people's needs are being met. In terms of the level of support as it pertains to meeting learner's needs, for example, a highly motivated and self-confident learner who is comfortable working on their own could quite feasibly require less support than one who is less motivated and self-confident and not particularly comfortable working by himself. The definition of satisfaction was given by Lawler (1973, cited in Poppleton, 1988), which states that satisfaction "is determined by the difference between all those things that a person feels he *should* receive and all the things that he actually *does* receive" (p. 8).

Rationale of the Study

According to the National Knowledge Commission the achievement of target of 15% of GER (General Enrolment ratio) by the end of the 11th five year plan and 20% by the end of the 12th five year plan. To achieve this difficult target Government of India is considering distance education system as alternative model. Distance education system is the only system that can reach the door step of every section of the society irrespective of class, creed, gender, race and geographic location. The distance learning is not the first choice among students. The popular notion today is that distance learning is chosen by those who cannot access conventional colleges. However, this is not completely true. Distance learning is an alternative platform of learning for people who really want to learn. This is especially true in the case of working professionals and armed forces personnel who wish to learn while on their job. The main challenge of distance learning is that direct real-time feedback from the students or teachers is not possible. The focus of open and distance learning is on self-learning. The course material for students is made by experts and hence the quality of material is guaranteed. However, services provided to learners such as delivery of course material, conduct of examinations and publishing of results should be done on a timely manner. In this hilly state distance education has to play an important role, in the enhancement of academic qualifications of the learners who wish to complete their post graduate degrees in different disciplines. By exploring and studying the basic needs and requirements of distance learners, it provides an opportunity to look into problems faced by them and enable the investigator to suggest ways to university authorities for further strengthening the Master of Education course.

Objectives of the Study

The following objectives were achieved in the study:

1. To study how far their individual needs were being met by the course.
2. To study the effectiveness of Master of Education course with respect to;
 - Course material
 - Student support system
 - Faculty
 - Resource person
 - Teaching methodologies
3. To identify some of the key issues in distance education with specific reference to a group of distance learners enrolled on a two-year Master of Education course.

Delimitations of the Study

The proposed study is delimited in terms of:

- Only those distance learners were included in the study who had attended their MA Education 1st, 2nd, 3rd & 4th Semester PCP at Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla and H.P. University Regional Centre Dharamshala.

METHODOLOGY

In the present study survey method under the descriptive method of research was used. All the distance learners, who attended their MA Education 1st, 2nd, 3rd & 4th Semester, PCP at Himachal Pradesh University Shimla and H.P. University Regional Centre Dharamshala constituted the population of the study. Out of total 86 learners, 72 distance learners, who attended their MA Education 1st, 2nd, 3rd & 4th Semester, PCP at Himachal Pradesh University Shimla selected randomly and constituted the sample of the study. Keeping in view the nature of the study the investigator has developed tool, "Distance Learning Questionnaire". This questionnaire contains 11 items (including components/areas like: Course Materials, Choice of Courses, Assignments Feedback, Assignment Completion Time, Student Support and Teaching Styles/Methodologies, and Suggestions for Improving the Course/System). Self-made questionnaire was selected as the most appropriate tool for two reasons: (a) because it is an effective small-scale research tool, and (b) because "the knowledge needed is controlled by the questions, therefore it affords a good deal of precision and clarity" (McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 171). As Cohen and Manion (1994) state, "surveys gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions ... or determining the relationships which exist between specific events" (p. 83). In an effort to maximize the response rate, the questionnaire was designed to be deliberately short (Eleven questions) and to have the majority of questions (questions number: 1 to 10) be of the scaled type (utilizing a five point Likert-like scale). Only one question was open-ended questions (only question number 11). The use of the fixed-alternative format gave the respondents specific and limited alternative responses from which to select the one closest to their own viewpoint. These types of questions are easier for respondents to answer than open-ended types, and the standardization of alternative responses allows for comparability of answers, which in turn facilitates the coding, tabulating and interpreting of data. The

review of literature specified that learner's satisfaction with a distance learning course revolves around issues of course materials and student support system (in terms of feedback, and access to library materials). The survey questions thus focused mainly on these two areas. A pilot study involving eight distance learners showed that the questionnaire contained clear and precise questions. The pilot group was drawn from the Master of Education students on a distance learning course offered by an ICDEOL, H.P. University, and were selected because of their familiarity with issues related to distance learning programmes. In order to counter any potential reservations and to provide a guarantee of confidentiality, respondents were told not to write their name and roll numbers on the response sheet. In processing the questionnaire data, and following Cohen and Manion (1994, p. 101), the returned self-completion questionnaires were checked for completeness, accuracy, and uniformity. It was discovered that each respondent had answered every question and, furthermore, that all questions were answered accurately (in the sense that appropriate answers had been given to the questions). Respondents also interpreted the instructions and questions uniformly. To collect the related data, investigator personally distributed the questionnaire and informed the distance learners about the purpose of study. The information was tabulated in a systematic manner to arrive at certain conclusions for the study.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The data collected with the help of “**Distance Learning Questionnaire**” on the Learners experiences on the Master of Education, Distance Learning Course. The analysis of data is presented under following heads:

Course Materials

Q1. How satisfied are you with the course materials provided on the programme?

Majority of respondents i.e. 94% were satisfied with the course materials, while just 6% were dissatisfied. In a follow-up comment with regard to the course materials, few respondents stated that “material mentioned in the modules is often difficult to obtain and not supplied as reading material.” Others stated that “We think more textbooks should have been given to us” and “reference/resource books in the Regional Centre of the University should be available.”

Choice of Courses

Q2. How satisfied are you with the choice of courses available on the programme?

90% respondents were satisfied with the choice of courses, and only 10% dissatisfied. Comments on the choice of courses ranged from “the topics are directly relevant to me” to “the course we have encountered so far have been thought-provoking and appealing.”

Assignments Feedback

Q3. How satisfied are you with the feedback you have received for your assignments?

Around 66% learners were satisfied, with 34% being dissatisfied. Comments relating to the latter included, “I was unimpressed with the feedback” and by some very negative and unhelpful comments on the same assignments. In distance learning, “feedback plays a crucial role in opening and maintaining a dialogue between tutors and students and also serves an important function in motivating and encouraging students.”

Assignment Completion Time

Q4. How satisfied are you with the length of time you are given to complete your assignments?

The majority of respondents (89%) were satisfied with assignment completion times, while 11% were dissatisfied. Six respondents stated that they would like more flexibility in this respect, although since the programme was not an open learning course, it seems reasonable to have cut-off dates for assignments. Deadlines can also be a motivating factor, and one student stated that “sufficient flexibility has been built into the course by the provision of assignment extensions and the option to defer if necessary.”

Student Support and Teaching Methodologies

Q5. How satisfied are you with the range of support provided on the programme (i.e., in terms of resource persons)?

More than two third of respondents (85%) were satisfied with the range of support provided on the programme in terms of the resource persons, while 15% were dissatisfied.

Q6. How satisfied are you with the range of support provided on the programme (i.e., in terms of internal faculty of university)?

Majority of respondents (89%) were satisfied with the range of support provided on the programme in terms of the internal faculty of university, while 11% were dissatisfied.

Q7. How satisfied are you with the level of support provided on the programme during PCP (i.e. is it enough)?

Majority (91%) of respondents were satisfied with the range of support provided on the programme during PCP in terms of the general guidance related to programme, physical resources and other basic facilities, while 9% were dissatisfied.

Q8. How satisfied are you with the teaching methodologies used by various faculty members during PCP (i.e. is it enough)?

Majority (86%) of respondents were satisfied with the teaching techniques/approaches and teaching methodologies adopted by internal faculty and resource persons during interaction with distance learners while 14% were dissatisfied.

Q9. How satisfied are you with the level of support provided on the programme by ICDEOL (i.e. is it enough)?

76% respondents were satisfied with the level of support provided on the programme by ICDEOL and 24% dissatisfied. The level of support provided by ICDEOL was deemed to be sufficient but not enough.

Q10. What aspects of the support provided on the programme do you like or dislike?

The freedom to contact the university faculty (Co-ordinator of programme and assisting faculty) directly and the willingness of teachers to communicate by e-mail, mobile phone was given by majority of respondents (94%) as an aspect of the course they liked. The way the course is organised and conducted was liked by majority of respondents. Morning Prayer followed by the report of the previous day activities and focuses on self-discipline by the internal faculty members liked by all most all the in-service teachers.

Suggestions for Improving the Course

Q11. What areas, if any, of the programme could be improved?

An analysis of responses to this question highlighted a number of common concerns, with 32% respondents criticising the limited number and type of books and study material provided by the ICDEOL. This factor was clearly a concern for those students who did not have access to a university library or similar resource for reference books, articles and journals. As discussed before, comments relating to the issue of student support were also given in response to this question. The range of support provided on the programme, the issue of the level of student support seems to be one that is failing to meet the needs of many students. Proper accommodation facilities within the vicinity of the campus should be provided to distance learners. The link with examination branch is not satisfactory, as the proper guidance is not provided to distance learners.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The major findings were drawn from the analysis of data:

- Majority of distance learners satisfied with the course material provided to them along with the choice of courses (in optional papers), assignments feedback, assignment completion time, student support and teaching methodologies, examination.
- 32% respondents criticizing the limited number and type of books provided by the ICDEOL. An accommodation facility within the vicinity of the campus is not available to the learners. The link with examination branch is not satisfactory and proper guidance is not provided to distance learners.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the important suggestions and recommendations on the basis of present study are:

- There should be proper administrative co-ordination between distance learners and the concerned university authorities.
- Smart classroom facility should be provided to distance learners. Multimedia and projectors may be used during PCP for effective learning, communication and comprehension.
- The latest modes of communication like e-submission of the assignments and e-assessments by the teachers/tutors should be introduced to improve the feedback to the students.
- There may be effective monitoring system during PCP to improve the quality of education.

REFERENCES

- Cohen, L., & Manion, L. (1994). *Research methods in education* (4thed.). London: Routledge.
- Garrison, G. R. (1990). *Understanding distance education: A framework for the future*. London: Routledge.
- Keegan, D. (1990). *Foundations of distance education* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge

Katoch // Student's Barriers to Distance Learning

- Lawler, E. E. (1973). *Motivation in work organizations*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- McDonough, J., & McDonough, S. (1997). *Research methods for English language teachers*. London: Arnold.
- Poppleton, P. (1988) Teacher professional satisfaction: Its implications for secondary education and teacher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 18, 5-16.
