

Learner Support Services in Open Distance Learning System: Case Study on IGNOU

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Abstract:

Learner support services are the most vital component of any open and distance learning (ODL) system. It includes wide range of academic and other related activities. The support services should not only be responsive to the needs of the distance learners but should also be accessible. Monitoring of the support services has to be a continuous and ongoing exercise, which could bring constant improvement through innovations in the support services. This paper analyzes the aim of learner support services, various categories of learner support services, how far Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has providing interactive support services at the study centres, staff responsibility for providing the services, ICT facilities and equipment at the study centres, mode of service delivery and monitoring mechanism to ensure effective student support services.

Keywords:

Learner support, Open Distance Learning (ODL), EduSat.

1. Introduction:

Learner Support:

Learner support is a mechanism to help the learner to learn. In conventional system, class room transactions, peer team interactions and library facility are components of learning. In ODL system, multimedia, print, audio, video, radio, TV, teleconferencing and videoconferencing – instructional package, face-to-face counselling, continuous assessment and hands-on-experience constitute learner support.

The nature of learner support services is depending on academic needs and problems of the students, arising due to the following factors:

- ◆ Inadequate interaction with counsellors, who can facilitate learning;
- ◆ Limited access to information and services;
- ◆ Financial constraints, physical disability, lack of appropriate environment for study and proper guidance;
- ◆ Problems arising out of time–constraint due to social, family or work obligations;
- ◆ Late receipt of study material;
- ◆ Systematic non-responsiveness and inefficient management services;
- ◆ Lack of personal rapport as well as opportunity due to geographical remoteness;
- ◆ Non-familiarity with self study skills i.e. e-media, e-resource etc.

2. Need for Student Support Service:

According to Aln Tait of the UKOU, who narrated in detail about the learner support services.

“The systems have to be developed which do not hamper the institutional needs by paperwork, meetings and other such activities. They will also diminish the potential for the fulfillment of key quality indicators such as respect for students or timely response to the learners. The development and running of managerial processes to support the delivery of services to learners in ODL, where there is a high degree of invisibility, is not an easy task. The distinctions between single and dual-mode institutions are particularly significant, and the revolution which new technologies bring is difficult to foresee with any precision.

Non-academic support consists of: advising: giving information, exploring problems and suggesting directions, assessment, giving feedback to the individual on non-academic aptitudes and skills; action: practical help to promote study; advocacy: making out a case for funding, writing a reference; agitation: promoting changes within the institution to benefit students; administration : organizing student support.”

The learner support system of any distance education institution varies from institution to institution. In general the support services broadly address the following needs of the learners:

1. Information support:

Learners should be provided all necessary information prior to admission of their course so that they can make appropriate decisions about their studies and also have access to all resources and support services. This includes information about various programmes, admission criteria, eligibility, fees structure, study material, evaluation system and other support services provided by the institution during course of study.

2. Institutional support:

Information about the academic support, who are the academic counsellors, where the counselling sessions both theory and practical would be held, provisions of assignments, provision of practical for practical based programmes, use of audio visual aids, teleconferencing, interactive radio counselling facilities etc.

3. Learning centers:

Where the students will have the access to the library facility, counselling facilities, submission and evaluation of assignment, term end examinations and other general support.

4. Feed back:

Provide feedback to course material developers and to the students on assignment responses.

3. Network of Support Services:

Sewart (IGNOU, 2000) has classified three different models of support systems. The first two models mainly depend on the print media where the learners are sent the printed materials. They send back the assignment responses to the study centers for evaluation. In the second model, additional compulsory seminars, workshop, dissertation also be included. The third category is based on the UK Open University model where in different forms of communication and supports are offered to the learners who choose them as per their requirement. These include mediated or face-to-face or combination of both through a network of Study Centers, Regional Centers or communication networks. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has adopted this model to provide highly integrated learner support services through the network of study centers, regional centers and the headquarters. One of the major objectives of IGNOU has been to provide opportunities of

higher education to a large segment of population and to develop new programme for adult learners for whom formal education system was quite difficult or impossible.

IGNOU has cumulative active student strength of around 2.7 million enrolled in 67 Regional Centers across the country and 87 overseas Partner Institutions in 43 overseas countries. IGNOU offers more than 400 programmes and 3500 courses at 3347 Learners Support Centers (LSCs) in India and beyond.

The student support services at IGNOU are managed through the Regional Services Division (RSD) with the support of Regional Centers (RCs) and Study Centers (SCs). The RCs and SCs provide facilities in terms of general and programme specific information, student enrolment, academic support relating to counselling, assignment evaluation, conducting examinations etc.

Regional centers act as the resource centers of the university in respective regions. Various academic activities undertaken by regional centers are as follows:

- ◆ Student admission and maintenance of their records;
- ◆ Orientation programme for the coordinators, counsellors and other functionaries;
- ◆ Induction programme for the new students;
- ◆ Identification of institutions for setting up of study centres;
- ◆ Appointment of counsellors, staff etc;
- ◆ Development of region specific academic programmes;
- ◆ Conduct of term end examinations;
- ◆ Organizing seminars and workshops, maintenance of support services etc;
- ◆ Monitoring of study centre regarding counselling, assignment evaluation, examination;

Study center's are the main providers of support services in the distance education system which are housed in existing educational institutions of higher learning such as universities and colleges; non-governmental organizations etc. To fulfill the requirements of the learners various types of study center are set up by IGNOU, such as Regular Study Centers, Programme Study Centers, Special Study Centers, Recognized Study Centers, Work Centers and Partner Institutions.

The study centers are headed by a Coordinator or Program In-Charge who is assisted by Assistant Coordinators or Assistant Program In-Charge and other support staff. The major activities performed at the study centers are student guidance and counselling (both theory and practical), use of the audio, video and teleconferencing facilities, library facility, assignment evaluation, liaison with regional centre and headquarters, conducting term end theory and practical examination and entrance examination.

4. Category of the Support Services:

The success of the university is depends on high quality academic programmes, method of programme delivery and support services offered to the students. This requires communication network between the headquarters, regional centers, and study centers. It should provide the necessary information and the feedback for better improvement.

The support services focus mainly on the establishment of centers, registration, study material distribution, library facility, examination and evaluation for the distance learner. The activities under various support services are as follows:

I. Establishment and maintenance of regional/ study centers:

- ◆ Locations should be identified geographically
- ◆ The study centers should be equipped with minimum educational infrastructural facilities.
- ◆ Technological facilities should be provided to the centers.

II. Pre-Admission services:

The prospectus -cum- admission forms for academic programmes should be available both online and offline to the prospective learner.

III. Information services:

- ◆ To provide information about academic programmes, admission procedures and schedules.
- ◆ Encourage prospective learners who desire to pursue their studies through distance mode.

IV. Post –Admission services:

- ◆ Self learning material dispatch.
- ◆ Examination and evaluation services.
- ◆ Library service.
- ◆ Financial support.
- ◆ Technological services.
- ◆ Electronic media services.
- ◆ Additional support services.

Self learning material dispatch:

- ◆ Timely dispatch of study material and the assignments to the newly enrolled students.
- ◆ Proper inventory management to be linked with the current enrolment and future enrolment of students to ensure timely availability of study material.
- ◆ Timely transmission of the admission related data to the Material Production and Distribution Division (MPDD)
- ◆ Printing and availability of study material from the concerned school of study.

Examination and evaluation services:

- ◆ Preparation of guidelines for conducting examination and evaluation of assignments.
- ◆ Arrangements for evaluation of answer scripts, scrutiny of the answer sheets and preparation of award lists.
- ◆ Conducting entrance test for admission to programme.
- ◆ Selection of examination centers, appointment of paper setters, centre superintend, observer.
- ◆ Dispatch the grade/ final result cards to students.

- ◆ Preparation of certificates/ diplomas/ degrees to be awarded to successful students.
- ◆ Continuous assessment of student's performance through assignments.
- ◆ Analysis of examination results.
- ◆ Development of new methods of assessment / evaluation.

Library services:

- ◆ Reference and referral services.
- ◆ Bibliographies and Indexing services.
- ◆ User guidance.
- ◆ Current Awareness Services (CAS)
- ◆ Reprography services.
- ◆ Online databases.

Financial support:

Financial assistant to the needy learners in terms of subsidy in course fee may be provided as per university norms.

Technological services:

- ◆ Set up and maintenance of computer laboratories.
- ◆ Providing ICT resources.
- ◆ Providing networking facilities at centers.

Electronic media services:

- ◆ Encouragement the learners to use audio/video and for participation in teleconferencing under the guidance of the concerned counsellor.
- ◆ Availability and use of audio/video at the study center as per the university guidelines
- ◆ Advance information to the students about the fourth coming interactive radio programmes / teleconferencing sessions.

V. Additional support services:

- ◆ Change of Medium, Elective Course and Programme:

Learners can change their programme, elective course and medium of study during their course of study,

- ◆ Change of address:

In respect of change of study center/regional center the learners profile need to be updated accordingly.

- ◆ Issue of Migration Certificate, Transcript, Provisional Certificate, Course Completion Certificate:

Certificates are issued to the learners who have completed the academic programme from the institution.

- ◆ Issue of enrolment cards:

The enrolment cards are issued to the learners, which can be used for availing library facility, attending classes, appearing for examination and other purposes.

- ◆ Arrangement of Personal Contact Programmes (PCP):

The counselling schedules and teleconferencing schedules are to be prepared and sent to the learners well in advance. Audio/Video and computer facilities are also to be arranged simultaneously during the counselling sessions.

5. Potential use of ICT and Networking to improve Lerner Support Services:

For dissemination of knowledge and providing effective student support service, the university has established 37 FM Gyan Vani Radio Stations and two Gyan Darshan Educational Television Channels. 'E-Gyankosh', an educational web-based portal developed by IGNOU has emerged as largest educational resource repository in the world with e-continent of more than 2200 courses and 2000 video lectures. EduSat is the first Indian satellite built exclusively for serving the educational sector. It is mainly intended to meet the demand for an interactive satellite based distance education system for the country

IGNOU use EduSat networks for providing following services:

- ◆ Satellite communication enabled education
- ◆ Virtual classrooms
- ◆ Video on demand
- ◆ Database access
- ◆ National and State level repositories
- ◆ On-line operations
- ◆ Linking FM radio stations of IGNOU for simultaneous broadcast of programmes.

EduSat is also being utilized by different organizations for their teaching learning method. For example, the IITs for engineering education, UGC for higher education, NCERT for school education and so on.

IGNOU use their website for providing following services:

- ◆ Checking the postal address of the student, study center.
- ◆ Declaration of Term End Result, Grade card status, Entrance Examination Result.
- ◆ Status of course material dispatch.
- ◆ Online submission of examination form.
- ◆ Download various types of forms, formats (Re-admission, Re-registration, Early declaration result, Review form etc.)
- ◆ Assignment of different programmes/ courses and access to question papers of previous examination.

Message Alert Service (MAS):

The message alert service in the distance education is a boom to distance learners. To make use of this service students have to register their cell phone number. Students will receive automated communications in message format on their cell phones such as admission confirmation, dispatch of lessons, PCP schedule, reminders of last date for payment of fees, examinations date, results etc.

6. Monitoring mechanism of the support services:

The monitoring of the support services in the university is mainly undertaken at the headquarters level and at the regional center level. At the headquarters, a task force has been formed which regularly reviews the working of the support system of the university. Besides this, there is a mechanism of monthly monitoring report through which information on various aspects of the support system are obtained from the regional centers.

6.1 Monitoring at Headquarter level:

◆ Task force:

The task force mainly reviews the operations of the student support services and suggests ways to achieve greater efficiency and speed of the different activities, which influence the support services. The major activities by the task force, relate to admission and re-registration of the students, production and dispatch of study material, incorporation of the assignment grades received from the study centers, result declaration of the term end examination.

◆ Monthly monitoring report:

The monthly monitoring reports enable the headquarters to get necessary feedback from the regional centers and study centers and also the clarification and support required from the schools/divisions in resolving different issues to facilitate functioning and also to strengthen the learner support services. The report provides various academic, administrative and financial matters which have bearing on the working of regional centers and study centers, as also its effectiveness in terms of learner support system.

◆ Zonal meeting:

All the regional centers of the university participate in zonal interactive meetings with the Vice-Chancellor and head(s) of the school division. They present their actual status report, various issues are discussed in detail and many pending matters are resolved on the spot.

6.2 Monitoring at Regional Centre level:

◆ Monthly report:

Study centers are also submitted monthly monitoring report to regional center in the specified format, on matters relating to expenditure incurred under different academic and administrative heads, academic counselling schedule, proposed and actual counselling held, assignment received and evaluated, use of audio/ video etc. to improve support service in the region.

◆ Visit to the learner support centers:

Regular inspection and surprise visits of the regional center's staff is one of the major monitoring exercises undertaken by the regional center to ensure proper working of study centers and also effective utilization of the support systems for the learners. These visits gives an opportunity to understand whether the aims and objectives of the support system are being realized or not through efficient and effective usage of the available resources including ICT based facilities. It provides primary information, through the interaction with the students,

counsellors and also the staff of the study center about the prescribed schedules and standards.

7. Conclusion:

With the advancement in information and communication technologies, heterogeneous and diverse learners groups who are geographically scattered and having increasing expectations from all concerned, necessitate effective support services to ensure proper guidance and learning conditions. Learner support service include not only availability of high quality academic programmes, but also ensure that the students receive their study material in time, assignments are assessed and evaluated within the stipulated time frame and provided academic guidance is provided. The use of new technology i.e. teleconferencing, virtual classrooms, video on demand etc. also improve the support service of the university. The problems of the distance learners are unique and require to be handled differently. The efficiency of the delivery system will greatly depend not only on efficient modes of providing services but also on the staff of the university. The Online Support Service System should be developed for the learner community, along with other electronic media services.

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