

Open and Distance Learning and the Expansion of Higher Education in West Bengal: A Thematic Review

Ananya Mukhopadhyay

Assistant Professor, Dept, of Education, Bhatler College, Dantan, W.B, India

***Corresponding author**
Ananya Mukhopadhyay

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Abstract: Higher education plays an important role in individual and national development, but access to higher education in India remains limited, particularly for learners facing geographical, social, economic, cultural and gender-related barriers. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as an alternative mode of education that provides greater flexibility, accessibility and opportunities for learners who cannot participate in conventional higher education. This paper reviews and analyses previous research on ODL with particular focus on its contribution to the expansion of higher education. The literature is organized thematically around major areas such as expansion of higher education, social equity, learner participation and dropout, quality and effectiveness, and institutional, technological and infrastructural challenges. The review indicates that ODL has considerable potential to increase enrolment, widen access, support women and disadvantaged groups, and provide flexible learning opportunities. However, issues such as inadequate academic support, poor-quality learning materials, limited infrastructure, shortage of skilled personnel, financial constraints and weaknesses in institutional management continue to affect its effectiveness. The review also reveals that existing studies have largely focused on specific aspects of ODL, while in-depth research on the expansion of higher education through ODL in West Bengal remains limited. Therefore, the paper highlights the need for a comprehensive study of the role and potential of ODL in expanding higher education opportunities in West Bengal.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning; Higher Education; West Bengal

INTRODUCTION

Higher education holds an important place in the education system of a nation. As the highest level of education, it plays a vital role in shaping individuals, developing knowledge and skills, and contributing to national development. In India, higher education has expanded significantly over the past five decades, with a remarkable growth in the number of colleges and universities. As a result, India has emerged as one of the largest higher education systems in the world. It comprises 506 universities, 33 institutions of national importance, 5 institutions established under State Legislature Act and 31, 324 colleges. In spite of being one of the largest systems of higher education, it has failed to guarantee the students' accessibility to higher education as per the need.

In the recent past, the demand for higher education has increased enormously throughout the country because of massive awareness. But the system of higher education fails to accommodate this ever-increasing demand. In spite of an impressive quantitative expansion, India lags behind developed nations and also some of the developing nations in regard to access to higher education. The enrolment ratio in higher education in developed countries like Canada is about 100%, USA (80%), France (50%) and UK (30%). Even the enrolment rate in developing countries like Egypt is 20%, Thailand 20%, Mexico 16%, Brazil 11% and Turkey 10%, India lags far behind all of them. It is estimated that only 7% (146.25 lakhs) of the age group receive higher education (Yeravdekar & Tiwari, 2014). The picture is quite dismal as the available educational opportunities at the higher education stage are not accessible to many students especially belonging to groups who are disadvantaged because of various geographical, social, cultural, economic, and linguistic or gender limitations. Viewing the increasing demand of higher education and a lot of limitations to face, Indian higher education needs a serious make over.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the demand for universalisation of education, equity in educational opportunities and continuing or lifelong education led to the emergence of open and distance learning (ODL) through

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correspondence programmes, which the conventional classroom system could not meet. This represents the third stage in the evolution of education (Kulandai Sawmy, 1992). ODL is open, flexible, easily accessible, learner-centred, and available over a wide area. It provides quality education, study materials, teaching support, and counselling to learners. It also uses decentralized administration, continuous assessment, and a credit system. ODL provides a viable alternative mode with the objective to take education to the door steps of the learner, enhancing social equity, and creating flexibility for lifelong learning (Koul, 2000). Distance education has a target group of its own and meets such need and challenges which are not catered to by the formal classroom system. Distance education refers to mode of education where the interacting learner and teacher are separated by space or space and time, while the open learning focuses on removal of many restrictions and rigidities in the opening the doors of education for the needy learners. Open learning system signifies certain flexibility in the opportunities of learning in terms of admission criteria, periods of study, duration of programme or courses, choice of subjects by students and scheme of evaluation (Koul, 2000).

After discussing the background and context of ODL, it is important to examine the existing research to understand the major areas that have already been explored. A thematic review of these studies helps to identify the major research trends, understand the contributions and limitations of previous research, and identify the gaps that provide a basis for the present study on the expansion of higher education through ODL in West Bengal.

Thematic Review and Analysis of Previous Research on ODL

The previous research on ODL covers a wide range of issues, including social justice, women's education, student dropout, learners' attitudes and study habits, access and feasibility, instructional materials, teacher education, ICT, assessment, course delivery, self-directed learning and learner autonomy. Since these studies focus on different but interconnected aspects of ODL, presenting them individually may make it difficult to understand the broader trends and patterns in the existing literature. Therefore, the studies have been organized into major themes. This thematic approach helps to bring together studies with similar areas of focus, identify common findings and differences, and understand the major dimensions through which ODL has been examined.

ODL and Expansion of Higher Education

Several studies have examined the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in expanding access to higher education. Bala (1996) investigated the feasibility of distance education programmes offered by the University of Jammu and IGNOU in the Jammu region. The study compared the programmes in terms of enrolment, courses, admission systems, instructional materials, distance teachers and instructional technology. Similarly, Duffy *et al.* (2002) compared distance education with traditional education and found that distance education courses were relevant to learners' needs and that enrolment in distance education grew faster than in conventional education. In Karnataka, distance education enrolment also grew faster than conventional education during 1985–1992. Shachar and Neumann (2010), through a comparative review, further reported that students in distance education performed better than traditionally taught students in many cases. Nyaruwata (2012) also examined strategies for creating greater space in higher education through ODL. The study reported that ODL universities could contribute to expanding higher education opportunities, although several institutional challenges remained.

Overall, these studies indicate that ODL can serve as an important alternative for increasing enrolment and widening access to higher education.

ODL and Social Equity

Social justice and equal educational opportunity have been important areas of research in ODL. Yasmin (2011) conducted a case study among students of the Directorate of Distance Education, University of North Bengal, West Bengal, to examine whether ODL could serve as an instrument of social justice for weaker sections, including women. The study did not find significant differences in students' perceptions based on caste, gender or household income. However, Pandey and Pandey, (2012), argued that distance learning may sometimes benefit already privileged groups and therefore may not sufficiently reduce the educational gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged sections. Align with these concept, Ofoegbu (2009) studied the influence of ODL on female access to basic education and found that ODL had a significant influence on female enrolment and attendance. Pandit (1994) also reported that women learners had a positive perception of distance education and were motivated to pursue higher education through this mode.

These studies show that ODL has considerable potential for promoting social equity and increasing educational opportunities for women and disadvantaged groups, although equal access cannot always be assumed.

Learner Participation, Enrolment and Dropout

Research has also focused on learners' attitudes, participation and continuation in ODL. Kumar (1999) found that distance learners enrolled with IGNOU had a favourable attitude towards distance education irrespective of their background characteristics. Anil Kumar (1996) reported that most learners had average academic self-concept, good study

habits and a positive attitude towards distance education. Academic performance was also found to be related to academic self-concept, study habits and attitude. At the same time, dropout has emerged as an important problem. Fozdar *et al.* (2006) identified several reasons for student dropout from the B.Sc. programme at IGNOU. These included insufficient academic support, study centres being far from learners' residences, time-consuming programmes, difficulty attending laboratory sessions, lack of responsiveness from study centres and inadequate counselling. Apart from, Dadigamuwa and Senanayake (2012) found that students enrolled in an ODL engineering programme mainly because they expected to obtain a recognized degree. However, successful students suggested improvements in course delivery, particularly face-to-face teaching, laboratory classes and assignments.

Thus, learner participation in ODL is influenced not only by accessibility and motivation but also by academic support, counselling, course delivery and other institutional factors.

Quality and Effectiveness of ODL

The quality and effectiveness of ODL have been examined particularly in relation to teacher education, instructional materials and academic performance. Harichandan (2003) found an uneven distribution of institutions offering teacher education through distance mode. The study also highlighted the quality of self-learning materials produced by institutions such as IGNOU and YCMOU. However, Sharma (2000), pointed out that some materials produced by conventional colleges and Directorate of Distance Education institutions did not adequately follow the self-instructional format. Nevertheless, teacher education offered by open universities was found to be comparatively better in quality.

Mhishi *et al.* (2012) reported that students were motivated to participate in a Science Teacher Training Programme through virtual and ODL despite inadequate funding, shortage of reading materials and limited e-learning facilities. The quality of ODL can also be considered in terms of academic outcomes. Shachar and Neumann (2010) found that distance learners outperformed traditionally instructed students in 70% of the cases reviewed.

Therefore, previous research suggests that ODL can provide effective and quality education, but the quality depends substantially on instructional materials, course design, academic support and institutional capacity.

Institutional, Technological and Infrastructural Challenges

The expansion of ODL is also associated with technological, infrastructural and administrative challenges. Kumar *et al.* (2003) reported positive perceptions among academic counsellors regarding the impact of electronic media on the teaching-learning process in distance education. Wikramanayake and Baggaley (2010), studying ODL in Bhutan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, found that students were willing to use ICT-based learning methods, although access to computers varied considerably between countries. Research on assessment has also identified institutional issues. Makamane (2011) found an imbalance in assessment procedures, partly because teacher educators had limited expertise in assessment. In contrast, Puspitasari (2010), found that formative and summative assessment could be implemented through modern technologies. On the other hand, Nyaruwata (2012) identified several challenges to strengthening ODL, including a shortage of skilled ODL practitioners, inadequate internet infrastructure, negative perceptions of ODL degrees and insufficient financial resources.

Thus, technological facilities, infrastructure, financial resources, trained personnel, effective assessment and institutional management are important for the successful expansion of ODL.

Research Trends and Emerging Issues

From the above-mentioned thematic review and analysis, it has been found that, considering the current trends all over the world, the ODL system is going not only to complement the conventional system of higher education but may soon occupy the centre stage also in developing countries where the resources do not measure up to the vastness of the clientele. The studies in open and distance learning dealt with social justice; women education; student drop-out; attitude, academic self-concept and study habit of distance learners; feasibility and drawbacks of ODL; impact of electronic media; self-learning or self-instructional materials; teacher education; evaluation and assessment system; courses of ODL; self-directed learning and learner autonomy covering period of 1994-2012 at national and international level. The review was confined to about twenty-one studies which included eleven Indian studies and ten international studies relevant to some significant issues of open and distance learning systems. Most of the researches are descriptive surveys and quantitative analyses techniques and few of them are case studies. The experimentation for testing the efficacy of various approaches, interventions and models, qualitative data analysis techniques have been neglected in the conduct of studies. Impact and intervention studies for programme development have also been ignored.

Research trend shows that ODL has significant influence on women education. The findings of most of the studies on IGNOU indicated that distance learners, teachers and practitioners have favourable attitude towards it. The findings of the studies in comparative perspective indicated that the instructional material prepared and developed by IGNOU is

greatly appreciated by students, teachers and international organizations. The quality and standard of the course content is maintained by involving professionals and experts from the field. However, course materials prepared by most of the CCIs or DDEs of conventional universities are poor in quality and prints.

Review revealed that distance education courses are relevant to the learners' need and it grows very fast than the conventional mode of education. Students' enrolment in ODL is also rapidly growing. The trend of research also indicates that teacher education through distance mode got special emphasis during this period. Studies revealed that use of ICT has a positive impact on ODL. Two studies have been conducted on assessment system in ODL: one showing imbalance assessment procedures and another on positive view about the assessment system of ODL.

In the management, organization of contact programme strengthening higher education through ODL, a number of problems pertaining to infrastructure, accommodation for resource persons and skilled ODL practitioners; lack of financial resources; unsatisfactory infrastructure etc. have been highlighted.

Conclusion

It is evident from the above review of different studies in the open and distance learning field that though there are a number of studies on ODL, only a few studies carried out on role of ODL in higher education in general and expansion of higher education in particular. One study was found on expansion of higher education in Karnataka state. But the investigator felt that as education system of each country or state or locality of a country, especially like that of India is unique, the research findings of a given country or state or locality have neither identical meaning nor the same implication for the other. Again, one study was found in West Bengal which is on social justice, covering ODL system of one university. So, the result of this study is not applicable for higher education of the state as a whole.

Hence, the researcher felt, not a single in-depth study on the expansion of higher education through open and distance learning has been done either at the state, national or international level. These above conditions prompt the researcher to think about conducting a study on expansion of higher education through ODL in West Bengal.

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