

# Effectiveness of Online Support Services during Covid-19: A case study of IGNOU

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## Abstract

*The pandemic Covid-19 has compelled human society to maintain social distancing and it has not allowed us to continue our education through the traditional face to face mode. It has taught us to opt for platforms with technologies, which have not been used before. In this situation, many students are preferring their education through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) or online learning mode. Most of the educational institutions are also offering online support services to tackle the pandemic Covid-19 situation. In order to understand the effectiveness of online support services an online survey using Google form was conducted among learners, coordinators, and counsellors of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) during the lockdown period for Covid-19. The data collected through questionnaires were put together in the form of tables and a simple percentage method is used for the analysis. Their views are analyzed and found some important factors which are required to enhance the effectiveness of online support services. It is very interesting to note that about 88 percent of learners prefer online mode of admission but only 17 percent of learners prefer a soft copy of the study materials. Maximum learners are agreeing to continue online induction meetings and online counselling classes in future. The majority of the learners, coordinators & counsellors recommended conducting online examinations and online evaluations.*

**Keywords:** Online support services, ODL system, Effectiveness, Covid-19, IGNOU

## Introduction

Education enables human beings to lead them in the right direction. Real education enables one to stand on one's legs and makes them perfect. Perfection indicates the ability of human beings to address various aspects of life encountered in society. The development of an individual and the progress of a nation depend on education. The education sector is a critical determinant of a country's economic future. But, the sudden outbreak of Covid-19 has badly affected the education sector of the whole world. The pandemic Covid-19 has not allowed us to continue our education through the traditional face to face mode. The entire idea of education from the primary level to the highest level realized

a major change and it has taught us to adopt new methods of education with technologies. In this situation, many students are preferring their education through ODL or online learning mode. ODL facilitates open entry and access to learning opportunities enhances the employability skills of the learner and makes them achieve their goals in life. Distance education institutions play a vital role in providing higher education to all irrespective of the limitations imposed by social status or demographic constraints. The ODL system was encouraged in the early eighties and became famous in India after the establishment of IGNOU in 1985. Since then IGNOU has been playing the leading role in India for the ODL system. The support services at IGNOU are managed through the

Regional Services Division (RSD) with the support of Regional Centers (RCs) and Learner Support Centers (LSCs). RCs are established by the University to coordinate and supervise the work of LSCs in the region (IGNOU profile). The LSCs are headed by a Coordinator with other supporting functionaries. The academic counsellors are mostly drawn from the conventional system of higher education. The RCs and LSCs provide facilities in terms of admission, counselling, assignment evaluation, conducting Term End Examination (TEE) etc. The Covid-19 has affected educational systems worldwide, leading to closures of schools, colleges and universities. Most governments temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to reduce the spread of pandemic Covid-19. The only way to stop the spread of this deadly virus was to maintain social distancing. India went under complete lockdown from the 25<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020. It has affected approximately 825 million students due to school closures in response to the pandemic (Wikipedia). In India, more than 32 crores of students have been affected by the various restrictions and the nationwide lockdown for Covid-19. Though it is an exceptional situation in the history of education, Covid-19 has created many challenges and opportunities for educational institutes to strengthen their technical knowledge and infrastructure (Pravat, 2020a). The lockdown has given them a ray of hope for teachers and students to continue their educational activities online. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Govt. of India has taken several digital initiatives to continue learning during the pandemic Covid-19 (Pravat, 2020b). During the lockdown period for Covid-19, online learning is the best platform to keep learners/educators engaged and safe by maintaining social distance. The Govt. of India has initiated different online learning platforms to continue

educational activities during the lockdown period which have also been recognized by UNESCO and World Bank (Pravat, 2020c). IGNOU has not stopped its support to the learners and has been providing online support services during the pandemic Covid-19. Based on the MHRD/UGC order (UGC), IGNOU has also used various platforms and ICT initiatives to reach out to learners all over the country and internationally in partner institutions. In an earlier study, Garg, S et al. (2013) had emphasized on digitization of all support services of IGNOU including admission, counselling, and assessment system. They had also suggested proper training to all stakeholders of IGNOU on digitized support services. Sood, N (2020) has studied the online teaching-learning process of IGNOU during Covid-19 and found that the majority of the learners (about 74 percent) expressed excellent and very good experience on online teaching-learning methods. The study by Agarwal, S et al. (2020) also support that online learning is feasible and student satisfaction is very high. In most of the studies, network connectivity and technical knowledge were the major problems faced by teachers as well learners. In this study, an attempt has been made to understand the effectiveness of online support services provided by IGNOU during Covid-19 times.

### **Objective of the Study**

The objective of the study is to:

- Analyze and understand the effectiveness of online support services during pandemic Covid-19.
- Analyze the views/perceptions of learners and their suggestions for future learners.
- Analyze the views/perceptions of Coordinators/Counsellors and their advice for improvement of the system.

- Suggest corrective measures to improve the online support services of IGNOU.

### Sample Size and Methodology of the Study

An online survey was conducted among IGNOU learners during the lockdown period for Covid-19. The structured questionnaires were distributed to the email addresses of learners, coordinators, and counsellors of IGNOU Regional Centre, Bhubaneswar through Google form. Records of students were obtained from University records. Two sets of questionnaires were prepared, one is for learners and the other is for coordinators/counselors. For learners, the Google form consisted of 20 questions with 1 open-ended question for their comments and 427 learners responded. The Google form for counselors/coordinators consisted of 15 questions with 1 open ended question for their comments and 50 counsellors/coordinators responded. The sample size for analyzing the responses of learners is 427, whereas the sample size for coordinators/ counsellors is 50. The study undertaken includes both primary and secondary data. The primary information for the study was collected through questionnaires. The secondary data was obtained from various journals, books, magazines, and websites. The data collected through questionnaires were put together in the form of tables and a simple percentage method is used for

the analysis. The perceptions/views of learners, coordinators and counsellors are collected and an attempt has been made to understand the effectiveness of online support services of IGNOU during the pandemic Covid-19. Lessons learned on the effectiveness of online support services of IGNOU are personal views of the author which are based on analysis of the data received from the respondents and his own experience.

### Limitations of the Study

Every research study has some limitations. Some of the limitations observed in the study are pointed as below:

- The primary data is collected through a structured questionnaire and the sample size is only limited to 427 learners and 50 coordinators/ counsellors.
- The perception of the respondents is limited to the period of the study.
- The study is limited to the lockdown period due to pandemic Covid-19.

### Findings of the Study

To understand the various factors on the effectiveness of online support services of IGNOU, one online survey was conducted and a total of 427 learners and 50 counsellors/coordinators responded. Their responses are analyzed through the following tabular data and figures:

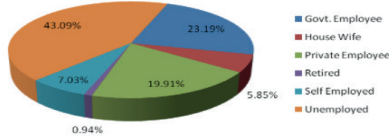
**Table-1: Programme wise classification of Learners**

Programmes	Master's Degree (MDP)	Bachelor's Degree (BDP)	Management (MP)	Bachelor's of Education (B.Ed)	P.G Diploma	Diploma	Certificate
No. of respondents (%)	142 (33.26%)	123 (28.81%)	9 (2.11%)	45 (10.54%)	32 (7.49%)	56 (13.11%)	20 (4.68%)

Among the respondents, it is observed that the highest number of learners from the Master Degree Programme attended online classes, whereas the lowest number of learners of

Management Programmes attended the online classes. Sizable learners from both MDP and BDP are showing interest in online classes as per the present sample.

**Figure-1: Employment status of Learners**



It is observed from Figure-1 that the highest numbers of unemployed learners (43.09 percent) are showing interest in online support services. The Govt. employed learners are showing

more interest than the private and self-employed learners for online activities. The lowest numbers of retired persons are showing interest in online support services.

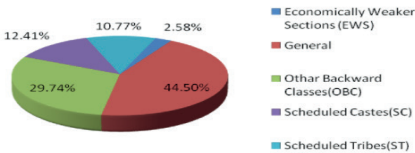
**Table-2: Social status of learners**

Social Status	Married	Unmarried	Male	Female	Rural	Urban	Tribal
No. of respondents (%)	115 (26.93%)	312 (73.07%)	196 (45.90%)	231 (54.10%)	268 (62.76%)	140 (32.79%)	19 (4.45%)

Data shows that more unmarried learners and more female learners are responding in online activities.

Rural learners are found to be more responsive than urban learners for online activity.

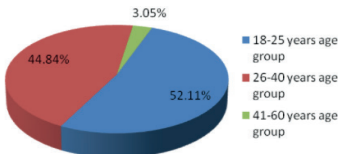
**Figure-2: Social category of learners**



Data of respondents of the sample as shown in figure-2 shows that more General and OBC category learners are

responding towards online activities, whereas fewer responses have been received from SC, ST, and EWS sections.

**Figure-3: Age group of learners**



The figure-3 indicates that more young learners in the age group of 18-25 years are responding in online activities,

whereas very fewer responses are received from the learners in the age group of 41-60 years.

**Table-3: Responses of learners on modes of admission**

Query	What was the mode of your fresh admission in IGNOU?		Do you have internet connection with your own Mobile/Laptop/Computer?		How did you take online admission in IGNOU?			
	Offline mode	Online mode	Yes	No	It was done by myself using Mobile/Laptop/Computer	It was done by Others	It was done by relatives with my knowledge	Not Applicable
<b>No. of respondents (%)</b>	72 (16.86%)	355 (83.14%)	417 (97.66%)	10 (2.34%)	269 (63%)	60 (14.05%)	60 (14.05%)	36 (8.9%)

Analysis of the above data shows that about 83 percent of learners have done their admission through online mode. The above study on the availability of facilities shows that 97 percent of the learners are having internet connectivity

with their mobile/laptop/computer. About 63 percent of learners had done their admission by themselves using their own gadgets, whereas about 28 percent of learners had done their admission through others.

**Table-4: Preference of learners on the mode of admission & type of study materials**

Query	Which mode of admission of IGNOU do you prefer?		Which type of study materials of IGNOU do you prefer to study?	
	Offline mode	Online mode	Hard copies of materials	Soft copies of materials
<b>No. of respondents (%)</b>	51 (11.94%)	376 (88.06%)	353 (82.67%)	74 (17.33%)

It is observed from the above data that about 88 percent of learners prefer the online mode of admission, but about 17 percent of learners prefer soft copy of the study materials. Though maximum learners prefer the online mode of

admission, very few learners like to follow soft copies of the materials. It indicates that learners are more comfortable in using hard copies of study materials during this era also.

**Table-5: Perceptions of learners on online induction meeting**

Query	Have you attended any Online Induction meetings?		If Yes, how did you feel by attending the online Induction meeting of IGNOU?				If NO, what was the reason for not attending the online induction meeting of IGNOU?				
	Yes	No	Satis- fied	Not satisfied	Satisfied to some extent	Not applicable	Did not get any prior informa- tion	Do not have the facility to attend online meet- ings	Faced network connec- tivity problem	Unable to use the tech- nology	Not appli- cable
<b>No. of re- spondents (%)</b>	247 (57.85%)	180 (42.15%)	109 (31.5%)	22 (6.36%)	57 (16.47%)	158 (45.66%)	117 (27.4%)	27 (6.32%)	116 (27.17%)	26 (6.09%)	141 (33.02%)

In this sample, about 58 percent of learners have attended online induction meetings and about 42 percent of learners are satisfied with attending the same. Very few learners (6 percent) are dissatisfied with the online induction meetings. The reason for not attending

the online induction meeting indicates that about 27 percent of learners did not get any prior information, 27 percent faced network connectivity problems, 6 percent had no proper facility and 6 percent could not use proper techniques.

**Table-6: Opinion of learners on online counselling classes**

Query	Have you attended any online coun- selling classes?		If YES, how did you feel about attend- ing online counselling classes?				If NO, what was the reason for not attending online counselling classes?				
	Yes	No	Satisfied	Not satis- fied	Satis- fied to some extent	Not ap- plicable	Did not get any prior informa- tion	Do not have the facility to attend online meet- ings	Faced network connec- tivity problem	Unable to use the tech- nology	Not applica- ble
<b>No. of re- spondents (%)</b>	115 (26.93%)	312 (73.07%)	99 (23.19%)	26 (6.09%)	14 (3.28%)	288 (67.45%)	177 (41.45%)	24 (5.62%)	99 (23.19%)	27 (6.32%)	100 (23.42%)

Table- 6 shows that about 27 percent of total learners have attended online counseling classes and about 73 percent of learners are satisfied in attending the same. Very few learners (6 percent) are dissatisfied with online counselling classes. The reason for not attending

the online counselling classes indicates that more learners (about 41 percent) did not get any prior information, 23 percent faced network connectivity problems, 6 percent had no proper facility and 6 percent could not use proper technique.

**Table-7: Views of learners on online induction meeting & counselling class**

Query	Do you recommend an online induction meeting of IGNOU to continue in future?				Do you recommend the online counselling classes to continue in future by IGNOU?			
	Yes	No	Agree to some extent	Never	Yes	No	Agree to some extent	Never
<b>No. of re- spondents</b>	303 (70.96%)	45 (10.54%)	67 (15.69%)	12 (2.81%)	307 (71.9%)	46 (10.77%)	68 (15.93%)	6 (1.41%)

As per the data of Table-7, maximum learners (about 87 percent) agreed to continue online induction meetings in future, but about 13 percent of learners disagreed with the proposal. Similarly,

more learners (about 88 percent) agreed to continue online counselling classes in future, but about 12 percent of learners disagreed with the plan.

**Table-8: Recommendation of learners on online assessment**

Query	Do you recommend the process of submission of online assignment responses and evaluation by IGNOU?				Do you recommend for conducting TEE and evaluation through online mode by IGNOU?			
	Yes	No	Agree to some extent	Never	Yes	No	Agree to some extent	Never
<b>No. of respondents (%)</b>	247 (57.85%)	90 (21.08%)	70 (16.39%)	20 (4.68%)	199 (46.6%)	122 (28.57%)	75 (17.56%)	31 (7.26%)

Table-8 shows that about 74 percent of learners recommended online submission and evaluation of assignments, but about 26 percent of learners disagreed with the proposal.

Similarly, about 65 percent of learners agreed to conduct TEE and evaluation through online mode, but about 35 percent of learners disagreed with the plan.

**Table-9: Overall perception of learners on online support services**

Query	Your overall experience on online support services provided by IGNOU				
Option	Excellent	Satisfactory	Pleasant	Not satisfactory	Not applicable
<b>No. of respondents (%)</b>	117 (27.4%)	157 (36.77%)	66 (15.46%)	37 (8.67%)	50 (11.71%)

About 27 percent of the learners Stated that their experience on online support services of IGNOU is excellent. Though the majority of the learners (about 52 percent) are satisfied/feel pleasant, about 9 percent did not have such an

experience and are dissatisfied. Hence, a learner-friendly approach from functionaries at all levels of the Open University towards optimizing learner satisfaction would encourage the learners to actively pursue their studies.

**Table-10: Social status of counsellors/coordinators**

Gender		Employment Status				Present location		
Male	Female	Govt. Employee	Private Employee	Retired	Self Employed	Rural	Urban	Tribal
40 (80%)	10 (20%)	31 (62%)	15 (30%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	7 (14%)	39 (78%)	4 (8%)

Data from above Table-10 shows that male respondents are higher than females. About 92 percent of the total counselors/coordinators are employed but very few (4 percent) of them are self-employed. Only 4 percent of

retired counsellors/coordinators have responded to the queries. It is observed that most of the respondents of the sample belong to the urban belt and very few of them belong to the tribal belt.

**Table-11: Preference of counsellors/coordinators on the mode of admission & type of study materials**

Query	Do you have an internet connection with your own Mobile/ Laptop/ Computer?		Which mode of admission of IGNOU do you prefer?		Which type of study materials of IGNOU do you prefer to follow?	
	Yes	No	Offline mode	Online mode	Hard copies of materials	Soft copies of materials
<b>No. of respondents (%)</b>	50 (100%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	49 (98%)	21 (42%)	29 (58%)

It is observed from the above data that almost all respondents are using their own mobile/laptop. 98 percent of counsellors/coordinators prefer the online mode of admission, but only 2 percent prefer the offline mode. Nearly 60 percent of coordinators/counsellors

prefer soft copy of the study material and 40 percent prefer to use hard copies. Though maximum coordinators/counsellors prefer online mode of admission, about half of them like to follow hard copies of the materials.

**Table-12: Perceptions of counsellors/coordinators on online induction meeting**

Query	Have you attended/ conducted any Online Induction meeting of IGNOU?		If Yes, how did you feel by attending/conducting an online Induction meeting of IGNOU?			
	Yes	No	Satisfied	Not satisfied	Satisfied to some extent	Not applicable
<b>No. of respondents (%)</b>	8 (16%)	42 (84%)	8 (16%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	42 (84%)

In this sample, only 16 percent of coordinators/counsellors have conducted/attended online induction

meetings and all of them are satisfied with this online activity.



**Table-13: Perceptions of counsellors/coordinators on online counselling classes**

Query	Have you conducted any online counselling classes of IGNOU?		If Yes, how did you feel by conducting online Counselling classes of IGNOU?			
	Yes	No	Satisfied	Not satisfied	Satisfied to some extent	Not applicable
No. of respondents (%)	13 (26%)	37 (74%)	13 (26%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	37 (74%)

In this sample, only 26 percent of coordinators/counsellors have conducted online counselling classes and all of them are satisfied in conducting the online counselling classes.

**Table-14: Recommendations of counsellors/coordinators on online induction meetings & counselling classes**

Query	Do you recommend an online Induction meeting of IGNOU to continue in future?				Do you recommend the online counselling classes to continue in future by IGNOU?			
	Yes	No	Agree to some extent	Never	Yes	No	Agree to some extent	Never
No. of respondents (%)	39 (78%)	1 (2%)	10 (20%)	0 (0%)	37 (74%)	3 (6%)	10 (20%)	0 (0%)

Table-14 shows that 98 percent of coordinators/counsellors approved the online induction meeting in future, but only 2 percent of coordinators/counsellors disapproved to proposal.

Similarly, 94 percent of coordinators/counsellors approved online counselling classes in future, but only 6 percent disapproved of the plan.

**Table-15: Recommendations of counsellors/coordinators on online assessment**

Query	Do you recommend the process of submission of online assignment responses and evaluation by IGNOU?				Do you recommend conducting TEE and evaluation through online mode by IGNOU?			
	Yes	No	Agree to some extent	Never	Yes	No	Agree to some extent	Never
No. of respondents (%)	38 (76%)	3 (6%)	9 (18%)	0 (0%)	18 (36%)	12 (24%)	19 (38%)	1 (2%)

Table-15 shows that about 94 percent of coordinators/counsellors recommended online submission and evaluation of assignments, but very few coordinators/counsellors (6 percent)

disagreed with the proposal. Similarly, about 74 percent of coordinators/counsellors agreed conducting TEE and evaluation through online mode, but 26 percent disagreed with the plan.

**Table-16: Overall perceptions of counsellors/coordinators on online support services**

Query	Your overall experience on online support services provided by IGNOU				
	Excellent	Satisfactory	Pleasant	Not satisfactory	Not applicable
<b>No. of respondents (%)</b>	15 (30%)	9 (18%)	16 (32%)	2 (4%)	8 (16%)

30 percent of counsellors/coordinators described their experience on online support services of IGNOU as excellent. Though half of the counsellors/coordinators feel satisfactory/pleasant about online support services of IGNOU, 4 percent did not have such an experience and are dissatisfied. One option was also given in the questionnaires for the learners and counsellors/coordinators to share their remarks on any other points on online support services of IGNOU.

- Some learners suggested that offline support services should be provided in addition to online support services.
- Some learners thanked IGNOU for providing online class recordings available on YouTube & Facebook links. Some proposed IGNOU to start a fully online assessment system.

**Some of the important remarks by learners are listed as below:**

**Some of the important remarks by Coordinators/Counsellors may be listed as:**

- The online learning facilities provided by IGNOU are very good, but it needs some improvement. Prior information through SMS should be delivered to the registered mobile numbers so that more learners can participate.
- Some are requesting IGNOU to facilitate the online submission of Dissertation work/Project work. Some are requesting IGNOU to conduct online workshops and practicals also.
- Some learners pointed out that the online classes are not applicable for all learners due to the unavailability of proper network facilities in some remote areas or the lack of technical knowledge of the learners.

- LSCs should be provided with all online facilities with required technical gadgets. Special application software for providing seamless online support services should be developed and implemented by IGNOU.
- All LSC functionaries and counsellors should be oriented properly about the online support services of IGNOU.
- The remuneration of counsellors for the online counselling classes should be higher than face to face counselling classes.

**Discussion & Conclusion**

Analysis of this study reveals some major points as discussed below:

- Most of the learners have done their admissions through online mode using their own mobile/laptop/computer.
- Though maximum learners prefer the online mode of admission, very few learners like to follow soft copies of the materials. It indicates that learners are more comfortable in using hard copies of study materials during this era also.
- More learners are satisfied in attending the online induction meetings and very few of them are dissatisfied. The main reason for not attending the online induction meeting indicates that either they could not get any prior information or faced network connectivity issues.
- The measure reason for not attending the online counselling classes indicates that they could not get any prior information and faced network connectivity problems. So, IGNOU should take the proper initiative to provide prior information regarding the online activities, so that more learners can avail the facility.
- Maximum learners are agreeing to continue online induction meetings (about 87 percent) and online counselling classes (about 88 percent) in future.
- The majority of the learners (about 74 percent) recommended online submission and evaluation of assignments. Similarly, most of the learners agreed to conduct of online examinations and evaluations.
- Though most of the coordinators/counsellors prefer the online mode of admission, about half of them like to follow hard copies of the materials.
- During lockdown for Covid-19, few coordinators/counsellors could conduct online counselling classes with induction meetings and all of them are satisfied.
- The majority of the coordinators/counsellors recommended for continuing the online counseling classes and online induction meetings in future.
- Though half of the total Counsellors/Coordinators felt satisfactory/pleasant about online support services of IGNOU, very few of them did not have such an experience and are dissatisfied.
- IGNOU should strengthen its online support service system to tackle the pandemic situation like Covid-19 and should come forward to resolve the difficulties faced by the stakeholders. From the analysis of the paper, it is clear that most of the stakeholders are comfortable with the online support service system of IGNOU. IGNOU should provide proper orientation to all the counsellors and LSC functionaries on the provision of efficient online support services. The University policies must include various individuals from diverse backgrounds including remote regions, marginalised and minority groups for effective delivery of online support services. As most of the stakeholders of IGNOU are satisfied with online support services, it should be continued after the pandemic Covid-19 also. Further, a detailed statistical study may be undertaken to explore the possibilities of making online support services more effective.

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