Web-Enabled Student Support Services (WESSS) in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system: a case study

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Abstract

The concept of the ODL system focuses on open access to education and training to make the learners free from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning, curriculum or other elements of structure opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. IGNOU is serving its best in developing the attitude and aptitude among the learners for education for those who cannot afford to go far. Effective Student Support Services are a vital means of enabling students to cope with the academic and personal pressures of distance education. This research explored the implementation of Web Enabled student support services by IGNOU Regional Centre Karnal, in order to obtain feedback from the learners amidst COVID 19 pandemic. Keeping in view of the probability of responding to the questionnaire, a random sample was drawn from the 3400 learners of PG, UG, Diploma and Certificates Programmes, admitted for July 2019 (Fresh) under Regional Centre Karnal. An online questionnaire was used for the collection of the primary data that contained 12 Items based on the Likert Scale in addition to 16 open-ended questions. The Likert Scale items ranged (5 Point scale) from (1) strongly disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neither agree nor disagree (4) Agree (5) strongly agree. The other 16 items pertaining to the learner profile and using resources were also included in the questionnaire. The findings indicate a positive attitude among the IGNOU ODL learners towards learning through Web-enabled mode/online mode.

Keywords: ODL, IGNOU, Online Support Services

Introduction

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), one of the world's largest Universities, has continuously endeavoured to build a knowledge society through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system. ODL is a tool for those who have no access to conventional education but want to continue their education to compete in the changing world. Open learning serves as an easy source of education for the marginalized and disadvantaged and inaccessible territories sections of society. Support services are very significant elements for all educational institutions in general; however, for distance learners, these services are more essential than traditional (F2F) counterparts. One of the most important reasons for this is that learners and instructors do not share the same physical environment and that distance learning settings generally require intrapersonal interactions rather than interpersonal ones. Some learners in distance learning programs feel isolated because of this geographical and transactional distance (Moore, 1993). Furthermore, some fail to feel a sense of belonging to the institution because of a lack of self-management skills, lack of motivation levels, and the need of being socialized. This is likely to lead to high drop-out and failure rates and non-

completion of studies as suggestions in the literature indicate (Simpson, 2003; Belawati and Zuhairi, 2007; Fraser and Killen 2006; Nsamba and Makoe, 2017). In order to overcome all these problems, support services have emerged as a critical element for an effective and sustainable distance education system. Student support services are developed by distance education institutions to help students with their learning. These services cater for students' cognitive, emotional and social needs. They serve as the interface between the institution and the student (Krishnan, 2012) because they compensate for the isolated "individual" by making the necessary basic facilities available, in the absence of "live support" from the teacher (Pulist, 2001).

The emergence of the Internet and related networks such as the World Wide Web has had and will increasingly have a radical effect on the transformation of education and training in all sectors. The impact is already significant in all developed countries, and the great majority of developing countries are despite difficulties and fears seeking to take part in the emerging global educational community. Within the context of distance education support services, it is natural to include technology-based and web-based services and also related materials. Moreover, institutions in the education sector are expected to use ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) effectively in order to be successful in educational activities and programs. In terms of the sustainability of the system, an institution should provide distance education services through ICT-enabled processes to support all stakeholders in the system, particularly distance learners. IGNOU today is making a valuable contribution towards the Digital Revolution in the field of education. It is leading the way for promotion of ICT applications across all

its operations, from teaching–learning to provide technology-based support services. The aim of this study is to explore the effective use of technology, digital initiatives in providing for learner's support, and challenges faced by the learners.

Research Methodology

A single case study research design was used in the study. Keeping in view of the probability of responding to the questionnaire, a purposive random sample was drawn from the 3400 Learners of PG, UG, Diploma and Certificates Programmes, those are admitted for July 2019 (Fresh session) at various learner support centres under Regional Centre Karnal. The questionnaire was then administered to all 3400 learners and a later response of 300 learners was received.

Tools and Data Analysis

An Online Questionnaire through Google Forms was developed and used for the collection of the primary data containing 12 Items based on the Likert Scale in addition to 16 open-ended items. The Likert Scale items ranged (5 Point scale) from (1) strongly disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neither agree nor disagree (4) Agree (5) strongly agree. Part 1 consists of questions on personnel information of the students, Part 2 consists of questions on resources and availability of ICT infrastructure and view of the learners on online support services. Part 3 consists of statements about Student Satisfaction with Online Student Support Services. While Part 4 consists of questions i.e. positive aspects of online services and faced problems or challenges during availing the online support services. The raw scores are obtained after scoring the questionnaire. The following Statistical Techniques were adopted to realize the given objectives and to test the hypotheses i.e. (a) Descriptive

Analysis (Mean and S.D) and (b) Test of Significance (t-test). The mean and the standard deviation of the attitude scores of the entire sample were calculated. The mean and standard deviation of the attitude scores of all the sub-samples were also calculated. The test of significance (t-test) was used in order to find out the significance of the difference between any two means of the attitude scores of the sub-samples involved in this study.

Result and Discussion

In the present study, it is observed that 63.67 per cent of male learners showed interest towards education through ODL mode in comparison to females 36.33 per cent. Among these learners, the majority of the respondents were from Master's (PG) and Bachelor's (UG) Degrees (43 per cent and 44 per cent). And very few numbers were recorded from Diploma (9 per cent) and Certificate (4 per cent) programmes (Figure 1).

Data reveal that more than half of the learners pursuing the study through the ODL System are unemployed (70 per cent) and belong to rural (60 per cent) backgrounds followed by employed (30 per cent) and urban backgrounds (40 per cent). In the present scenario, the use of ICT gadgets is also perceived and recorded that 85.33 per cent of learners are using the smartphone for their study as well as fewer are using the laptop (10.67 per cent) and Desktop (4 per cent) (Figure 2). Some financial glitches may be among these learners due to the majority of the rural background learners. Data reveal that the majority of the learners are using the IGNOU Regional centre website (57.33 per cent) and approaching the learner support centres (28.33 per cent) to collect the updated information for their study and a less number of the learners are using other Social media of Regional Centre i.e. Facebook page 4.00 per cent, while negligible numbers are noticed on the way to twitter account (Figure 3).
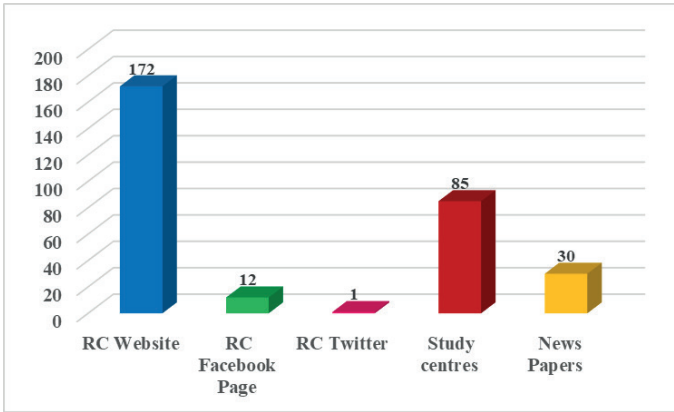
Figure-1: Programme wise number of respondents
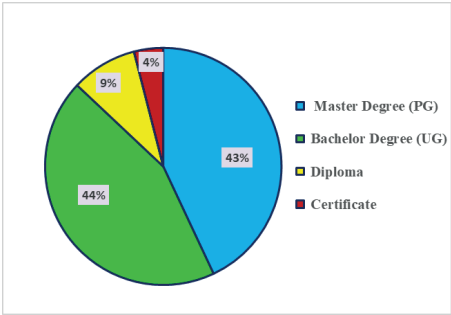
**Figure-2: Acquired Source of IGNOU Online Services**
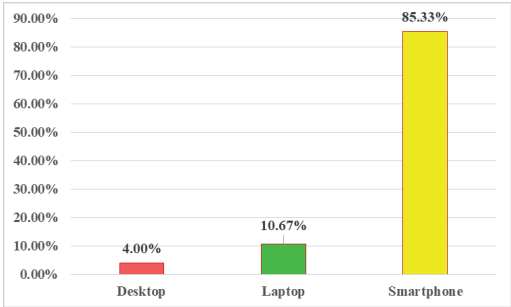
**Figure-3: Source of information about IGNOU Web Enabled Support Services**

As evident from the result (Figure 4), 48.33 per cent of learners are interested to study in offline mode with the ODL system, some of the learners (36.67 per cent) showed their interest in Web Counselling Video sessions, while very less number showed interest to study through Web Counselling Audio (4.33 per cent) and Facebook live session (10.67 per cent). The response of the learners was obtained to evaluate their satisfaction level with IGNOU towards Web Enabled Student Support Services amidst COVID-19. From the data, it is evident that 7 per cent learners strongly appreciated GV/GD/IRC Session of IGNOU, 10 per cent Facebook live sessions, 18.67 per cent Twitter, 14.67 per cent e-Gyankosh and e-Content, 17.33 per cent online submission of assignments, and 11.33 per cent for Online counselling session. On the other hand, more than half recommended these online support services i.e. GV/GD/IRC session (63.33 per cent), Fb live sessions (55.33 per cent), Twitter (63.33 per cent), e-Gyankosh (65.33 per cent) and e-Content (65.33 per cent) online submission of assignments (50 per cent) and online counselling session (70 per cent). While less than 2 per cent showed unwillingness 7.67 per cent online submission of assignments and less than 20 per cent neither agree nor disagree and less than 10 per cent disagree except for Fb Live sessions (12.33 per cent) and online submission of assignments (13.33 per cent) (Figure 5).

**Figure-4: Preferred Mode of Study**
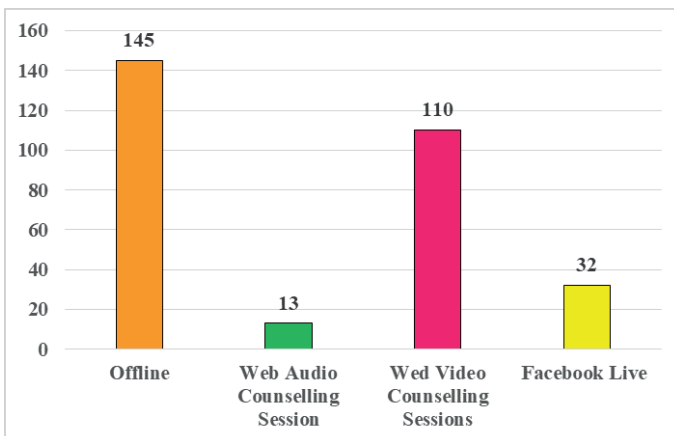
Figure-5: IGNOU Online Support Service including Online Counselling Sessions
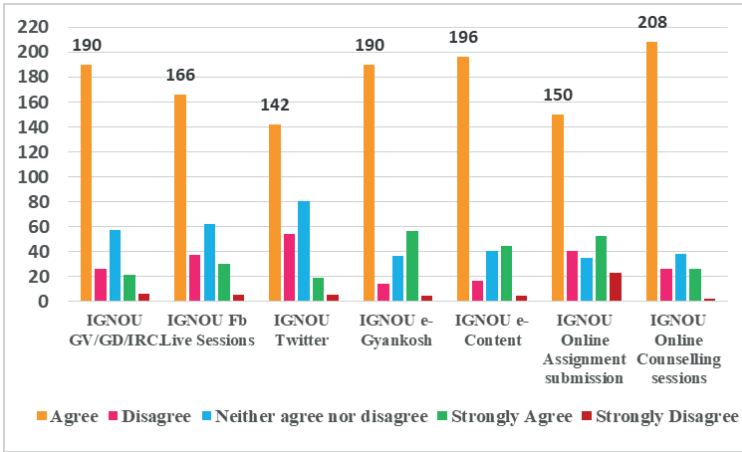

Similarly, more than half learners (51.67 per cent) agreed to study online mode. Results on the basis of respondents show that the open education system is providing qualitative education (69.33 per cent) and they are getting related valuable information through web-linked support services (61.67 per cent). The majority of the learners (73.33 per cent) relied on online support services for smooth study. Though, use of the online support services is a financial challenge recorded (agreed) by 74.67 per cent of learners, while less than 10 per cent strongly agreed and strongly disagreed (Figure 6). However, it is observed from the respondent that overall more than half (63.61) of learners agreed with online support services, less than fifteen per cent neither agree nor disagree (14.39), strongly agree (10.95 per cent), disagree (9.17), and negligible were strongly disagreed (1.89 per cent) with web linked services (Figure 7). Thus, a positive attitude was seen among the learners towards ODL learning through various aspects of online mode amidst COVID-19.

Figure-6: Various sides of Online Student Support Services (OSSs)
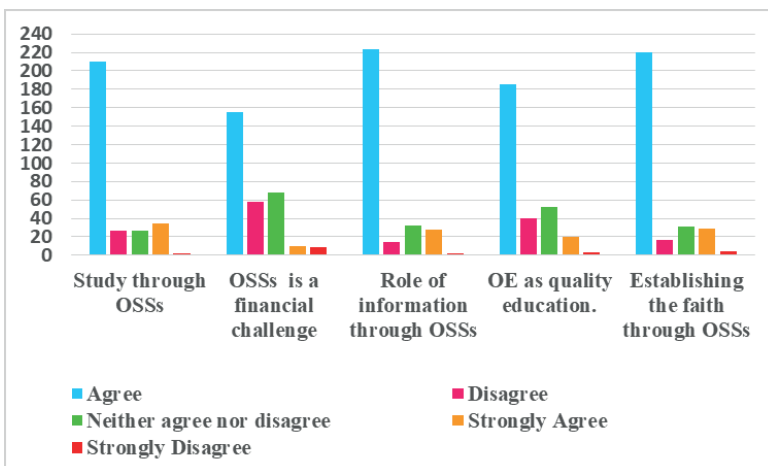
Figure-7: Overall views of learners for Online Support Services
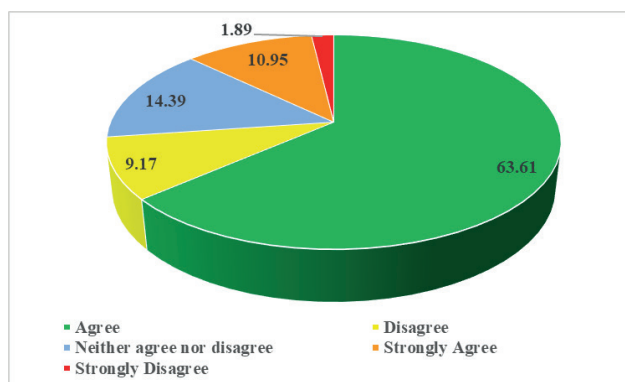
Conclusion

With the advancement in ICTs, heterogeneous and diverse learners' groups who are geographically scattered and have increasing expectations from all concerned, necessitate effective support services to ensure proper guidance and learning conditions in open and distance learning systems. Learner support services include not only the availability of high-quality academic programmes but also ensuring that the students receive their study material on time, assignments are assessed and evaluated within the stipulated time frame and provided academic guidance. Web-linked devices are becoming ubiquitous while technological fluency is becoming a common expectation. It has been found that learners are increasingly using various ICT tools during their studies.

ODL emerged as an effective tool to educate learners, particularly residing in far-flung areas and who are not able to have access to education due to tough geographical conditions, social and financial issues. The ODL system and its associated learner support services need to be extended to reach the unreached and improve the quality of these services.

There is a need to develop ways and means to improve upon the internal and external environment of the distance education system to avoid stagnation. Periodical surveys and feedback from learners and other associates are needed to review and fill the gaps in the present system as well as a centralized system may be developed for providing the web-enabled student support services by the open universities at all levels including learner support centres.

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