

Support Services in Distance Education: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract: Student support services in distance education play a very crucial role for the success of the system as well as the progression curve of the learners. Maximum thrust is therefore put to this area by Distance Education Institutions world over. Student Support Services (SSS) are a cluster of facilities and activities that are provided to make the learning process easier and more interesting for the learner. In distance education, they serve as the interface between the institution and the learner. The effective provision of the SSS is now widely and increasingly being recognized as an essential component of any open and distance learning system. Over the years there is huge expansion in the DE system resulting in the enormous challenges in providing Support services .The major challenges that confronts DE system are mainly in terms of Quantitative Expansion and Quality control. This paper shall give an over view of different challenges faced by DE Institutions as far as providing support services is concerned. Some basic issues that underlie support mechanism in DE system are also described for bringing synergy.

Keywords: Support Support Services, Distance Education (DE), ICT, EDUSAT, CD-ROM, IGNOU, Gyan Vani, Gyan Darshan, Counselling, Quality Assurance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Distance Education System is an effective and alternative educational system which plays a very significant role in educating the masses in the 21st Century. The advancement in the field of science and technology has changed the face of Distance Education completely. The chalk and talk method of learning has been transformed in to a technology oriented learning platform. The revolution brought in to the field of information and communication technology(ICT) plays a very significant role in understanding the programmes, learners, designing learning materials and support activities, managing and evaluating the programme and so on. In Distance Education there is extensive use of ICT and therefore there is a paradigm shift only print medium to a multi-media platform. The virtual learning environment carried out through the web, computer mediated conferencing, CDROM, Gyan darshan, Gyan vani and EDUSAT supported learning etc. have really changed the education system.

At present there is an increasing demand for Distance Courses in India due to its cost effectiveness. Every day new demands are projected for new courses. A number of institutes, universities, boards and councils are initiating courses to meet the demands. The IGNOU which is termed as people's university in India is offering more than 200 academic programmes of study through 3500 courses with student's strength of over 30 lakhs. These constitute 18.2 percent of the total enrolment in higher education in the country. The growth of demand for Distance Education necessitates the maintenance of quality education. Quantitative growth in no way should compromise with the quality.

Before discussing the challenges confronting support services in Distance Education , let us analyze the concept of Distance Education (DE). Distance Education a developed form of distance teaching is based normally on a pre-produced course which is self instructional in nature. It provides a second chance in education for those who have discontinued their studies for one reason or the other and cannot continue in the formal education. In this system face to face contact classes are very rare and the distance is bridged by communication technologies for effective learning.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISTANCE LEARNERS

As the characteristics of the learner determine the quality services and provide a challenge to the Service Providers (Universities, and Institutes of DE), it is necessary to know quite a few of them.

- The Learner may be of any age group starting from school age to the senior citizen level. It is not necessary that the learner should be an adult.
- Learner is a member of many institutions. He may be on employment or not, member of the workshop, family or a student of an organized institute. These take precedence over the institute which provides the course.
- Learning is a part-time secondary activity.
- The learner returns to the role he had some time ago.
- Contact with the fellow learners may not be easy.
- Learners contact with the institute is infrequent, and often takes place across the distance.

3. STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES (SSS)

What is “Student Support in Distance Learners?” is the first issue that needs clarification. It means a range of services including the course materials and learning resources provided both for the individuals and groups by the Distance Education System. Thus it includes different services starting from knowing about the programme to knowing about the placement opportunities after completion of the programme. The services may include the following:

- Information Service Relating to the Course, Admission, Pre-study Advisory Services, Fee Structure of programmes, Counselling, Assignment evaluation, Induction and face to face sessions , Laboratory Work , Field Work, Workshop and Examinations
- Tutoring
- Guidance and Counselling services
- Self Assessment and Credit Transfer
- Study Centres and Examination Centres
- Laboratories and Field Work
- Residential/Hostel Services/Boarding Arrangement During some Contact sessions
- Library/Internet/Computer Services
- Individualized Correspondence Teaching and Assessment
- Monitoring and Management Information System (Record Keeping/Administrative Services)
- Differentiated Services For Students With Special Needs
- Materials For Programme Planning/Individual Instruction
- Materials For Career Planning, Placement and Counselling
- Grievance Redressal Mechanism services
- Financial Aids, Scholarship, Free-ship Etc.
- Mechanism For Prevention /Action Against Sexual Harassment Of Women And Girls Students
- Organising Audio-Video sessions, seminars, lectures etc.

4. FUNCTIONS OF STUDENT SUPPORT

The Student Support Services include wide range of functions which are broadly categorised under the following :

- **Cognitive:** Material Support through Providing Well Developed Course Materials/Course Ware/Learning Resources Both For Individuals/Groups.

- **Affective:** Providing an Environment that Support Students, Creates Commitment And Enhances Self-Esteem. Creation of Study Centres and Regional Centres for support services is very important functions under the affective domain.
- **Systemic:** Establishing Administrative Process and Information Management System which are Effective Transparent And Overall Learner Friendly.
- **Follow Up and Placement:** Providing Information Relating To Further Courses, Employment Opportunities Etc.

5. STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES IN INDIA

The Student Support services in Distance Education in India are quite visible in all open universities and Distance Education Directorates including IGNOU due to their novel and democratic approaches. All DE Institutions have been providing Support services which can be categorized under three broad heads, such as Administrative, Academic and Financial. They are discussed below.

a. Administrative

These include organization of different activities and services relating to administrative matters starting from information service on the programmes to placement and follow up services. These are:

- Publicity and Promotion of Distance Education Programmes (Newsletter, Brochure, Handouts, Pamphlets Leaflets etc.)
- Advertisement on Different Courses (Eligibility, Fee Structure, Study Centre etc.)
- Identification and Creation of Study Centres/Programme Study Centres/special study centres at different Places on the basis of need analysis.
- Identification of Work centres/ Laboratories/ Work Shops/ IT Laboratories for course work/schools for practice teaching/hospitals for internship programmes
- Admission of Students and their allotment in Study/ Programme/special centres including preparation of standard operating procedure.
- Development of Guidelines for Course Work/Field Work/Workshop/Laboratory Work
- Development of Guidelines and norms for Selection of Coordinators, Counsellors and other study centre functionaries
- Development of Guidelines for Student Welfare Services and Establishment of Cells for the Student welfare such as Scholarship, Feeship, Study grant etc.
- Establishment of Cells against sexual harassment of Women and Girl Students
- Establishment of Grievance Redressal Cell
- Establishment of Anti-ragging Cells
- Providing Health Services for the Students during contact period
- Distribution of Study/Learning Materials and Learning Resources
- Development and supply Of different Forms –Personal Data Form, Maintenance of Records
- Monitoring and Information System-both administrative and academic
- Issue of Certificate and Diplomas
- Placement and Follow up Services
- Feedback Services
- Establishment of Information Centres/Help lines for supporting the learners
- Preparation of Calendar of Activities for the learner centres

- Conduct of Meeting of the Coordinators
- Monitoring and Evaluation of the Programme through visits by the Experts
- Development and management of Expert Data Base
- Development of Students Profile
- Creation of Quality Assurance Cell

b. Academic

The academic activities relating to Student Support are as follows:

- Introduction and Orientation Programme
- Conduct of counselling Classes for supporting the learners by assigning Tutors
- Preparation of Guidelines and Instructions for Development of Course Materials
- Preparation of Course Materials/ Academic Materials
- Development of different kinds of Learning Resources both Print and Electronic
- Organization of Web/Broadcasting/Telecasting Programmes
- Preparation of Calendar of Academic Activities/Programmes
- Providing Library Facilities to the Learners
- Providing Computer / ICT / Internet facilities to the Learners
- Tutoring /Counselling/Guiding in Work Shops and Practical Works
- Guidance, Advice and Information to the Students
- Promoting Team Work and Team Spirit at different levels
- Conduct of Term End Examinations/ Tests
- Evaluation of Assignments and Practical Activities.

c. Financial:

In addition to the above Academic as well as Administrative services, Distance Education Institutions perform many financial functions as well. Some of them are

- Preparation of Budget for the entire support system in the country
- Providing grants to different centres for extending effective support services.
- Processing of Expenditure Bills of different DE Centres
- Taking up Financial audit of DE Institutions
- Providing grants for Short Term and Long Term Research in Distance Education.
- Providing grants for organizing Conferences and workshops in DE

6. CHALLENGES IN STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES.

Student Support Services seeks to support disadvantaged students who have potential to meet the challenges of higher education by strengthening and developing their academic and self-management skills. To accomplish these objectives Student Support Services provides services to enhance students' academic success, personal skills, and social skills. Student Support Services in Distance Education faces lots of challenges at the moment be due to large number of learners and vast net work of learners Centres . Some of the Challenges are enumerated below.

- Accommodating large number of students in learner support centres
- Delivery of Large number of Academic programmes
- Creating infrastructure facilities for conducting Counselling/practical sessions for a large group of students
- Delivery of Self Learning Materials to a large number of students
- Bringing motivation in the Distance learners for self study
- Eliminating feeling of Isolation from the minds of Distance Learner
- Helping learners in striking a balance between Study and home work
- Helping learners in Managing time for study
- Identifying competent academic counsellors/Experts in different programmes
- Providing proper library facilities at learner centres with good resources.
- Proper conduct of evaluation related activities in the field level
- Addressing day to day student grievances through face to face , E-Mail and by post.
- Monitoring progress of learner centres in the remote areas
- Supply and management of E-Resources at the DE Institutions
- Liasoning with large stake holders associated with Distance Education for strengthening the support system
- Providing support services to differently abled students in Distance Education
- Orientation of DE functionaries at different levels for effective delivery of programmes
- Providing financial assistance to a large number of SC/ST and differently abled learners
- Ensuring better placement opportunities for the graduates of Distance learning system

In addition to the above the most important challenge confronting the DE System is Quality assurance. From the foregoing discussion, it has been established that the entire process of Teaching Learning and Activities related to it can be termed as “Services’ in general and Student Support Services in particular. The relation between the Service Provider (here Distance Education Institute) and the Consumer (the Students) is inseparable and the Consumer is an integral part of the service process. The entire programme should be in conformity with the fitness for purpose and fitness of things.

7. ENSURING QUALITY ASSURANCE IN STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

In India, in Distance Education, much emphasis is given to the production and distribution of Learning Materials. The quality of printed materials and overall get up are pre-dominants of the entire process. Attention to curriculum renewal, content and language are not given due importance. The most negligible part is the student’s welfare services. In this context, the following dimensions of Student Support Services are to be given importance to ensure quality assurance.

i. Reliability

- To what extent the programme is correct, accurate and up to date is to be examined.
- How well the promises of the Institute and the degree of consistency in the educational process are kept is also important.
- The services are carried out in the way it is promised.

ii. Responsiveness

- The service is carried out promptly according to the needs of the Distance Learners.
- Willingness and readiness of the staff, programme co-ordinator, counsellors and tutors
- Availability of guidance and counselling and attitude to help and giving personal attention

iii. Competence

- Sufficient staff
- The Staff at different levels, the Coordinator and the counsellors have the knowledge and skills required for delivering the service in the proper way.
- They should have theoretical and practical knowledge and presentation skills.
- Supplementary knowledge and skill ,such as use of ICT

iv. Content

- Relevance of curriculum to the job of the students
- Effectiveness
- Containing primary knowledge and skill
- Communication skill and team work
- Flexibility of knowledge

v. Access

- The availability of staff at different places for guidance and advice
- Location of the place (The information Centre /the Study Centre)
- Hour of Opening of the office/centre for providing information

vi. Courtesy

- Positive Attitude towards the students
- Polite, friendly and respectful behaviour of the employees to the students

vii. Communication

- Tutors and Counsellors communicate in the class room need to be cordial
- Staff keep the students informed in a language that is understood to the students

viii. Credibility and Reliability

- Trustworthy, believable and honest Service of the institute
- Giving valid award leading to good recognition.
- Keeping promises and helping the learners to reach their goals
- Handling complaints and solving problems of the students

ix. Security

- Freedom from danger, risks or doubt
- Confidentiality in the information

x. Understanding the Students

- Knowing and understanding the needs and wants of individual students
- Taking in to confidence all the DE functionaries for providing better support services

xi. Availability

- Availability of good infrastructure facilities at Study Centres
- Availability of modern tools and equipments

- Ease of access to all facilities
- Visually appealing environment

xii. Performance

- Primary knowledge and skill required for the students to get in to an academic programme
- Expertise required for the Tutors in dealing with DE learners
- Experience and knowledge of other functionaries associated with Distance Education Institution.

8. CONCLUSION

There is a high demand for Distance Education in India. Students of all ages, all professions, and all categories intend to join Distance Education Courses to earn skills, acquire professional degrees and qualifications. Courses should be designed to meet the demands of the students at an affordable cost. The idea of earning through the professional courses by the DEIs should be abandoned to develop a healthy academic atmosphere and inculcating the culture of quality. The DEIs should plan well designed policy and develop standard procedures to maintain quality in the Support Services. The Distance Education Bureau (DEB), The DEIs, the University Departments of Distance Education, the State Boards of Education and other Service Providing Institutes should work in collaboration for maintaining quality. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council should play a big role to create a Culture of Quality.

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