Distance Learners and Support Services: Current Trends and Prospects

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Abstract: As we all know many learners and prospective learners from all walks of life felt that the quality support services should be made available for them to meet their academic requirements in time. Thoughts and ideas should be derived to see that the nature of services has to be transformed from mechanical phase to digital phase to provide learner support services in a better way. The learners also seek more technical support in meeting their requirements rapidly for their academic achievements. Persuasion of higher studies through distance education is the best possible way for the category of children; young people and of course even older people.   Any institution may have to plan and design to change the operational scenario in the technical mode in view of the conditions prevailing in the digital era.

Are the DE institutions satisfied with the services offered by them? Can they think for any major transformation of activities in the support-services sector for betterment? To answer these questions, the basic support-staff structure, roles and responsibilities of the staff have to be looked into and accordingly modify the structures technically viable wherever necessary. The roles and responsibilities shall be properly defined suiting the technical environment and allocated to the staff at various levels so as to provide effective services to the distance learners.

This paper analyses the support-staff structures of a DE institution and redesign them accordingly on the basis of Feedback received from the learners. In addition, the paper discusses the Internet-based delivery mechanism, technology-enabled methods, and decentralisation of activities; and thereupon recommends suggestions for ensuring quality services in the near future.

INTRODUCTION

Distance Learners

In view of the tremendous learner growth in the distance education sector, many dual-mode institutions are growing to meet the educational requirements of the Society. With vast change in the education sector, the opportunities for younger generation have been increased enormously.

Distance learners are categorised into manifold. They may be younger ones, middle aged and older ones. They might be belonging to literate, semiliterate, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled categories. They also may be employed, physically challenged and differently abled. Most of the learners belong to these categories would like to continue their higher education by using appropriate technological tools.

The learner group will choose the relevant programme of study to continue their studies. The main components which are to be supplied to the learners include self-instructional materials, audio-video cassettes and reference books through libraries. At present, the institutes adopted mechanical delivery system for supply of self-instructional materials and supply information through semi-electronically. At times, learners from research category are attracted towards distance education and try to use DE tools and methodologies to complete their research programmes.

Support Services

In the open distance learning system, learner support services systems (LSSS) will play a pivotal role in the expansion of ODL system across the country. The present system comprises activities of finalisation of admission process, despatch of course materials and post-admission support. Practically, providing support services in a systematic manner may

not be easier task. The SSS has to be designed and developed in such a way which may facilitate learner community.

According to Alan 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 fulfilment 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: organising student support."

Generally every learner is expected better support services from the institution where he has enrolled. The institution shall recognise the basic needs of the learners and try to fulfil them to the best of its abilities. The institutions should understand the effects of the learners when the needs are not fulfilled.

The support services identified mainly in the fields of Establishment of Centres, Registration; Material Distribution; Library; Media; Examination & Evaluation for the distance learner community. Apart from this, the institution should ensure the availability of qualitative study materials before launching any programme of study. The Services and its activities involved are being discussed in the following paragraphs.

1) Establishment & Maintenance of Regional/Study Centres

- Locations should be identified geographically
- The centres should be equipped with minimum educational infrastructural facilities
- Technological facilities should be provided to the centres
- Ensure that the centres should be managed in a purposeful manner.

2) Information Services

- About Academic Programmes,
- Encourage prospective learners who desire to pursue their studies through distance mode.
- To provide information about admission procedures and schedules,
- About the ODL system and methodology including counselling & assignment schedules, induction, library, tele-interactive sessions, despatch of Course materials and Examination System.

3) Pre-Admission Services

The prospectus-cum-application forms for academic programmes should be made available to the prospective learner community at various places where these can be easily accessed by the learners. The information in respect of these programmes should be provided by various means such as posters, mailing, e-mailing and media. These documents should be made available to the learners at affordable prices.

4) Post-Admission Services

- Material Despatch
- Library Services
- Examination & Evaluation Services
- Financial support

- Technological Services
- Media Services
- Other Services
  - *Change of Address*
  - *Change of Electives*
  - *Change of Medium of Instruction*
  - *Processing of Credit Exemption requests*
  - *Inter-centre transfers*
  - *Issue of ID cards*
  - *Issue of Migration Certificate*
  - *Arrangement of contact programmes*

Material Despatch

- Procurement of stationery for despatch of course materials.
- Collection and storage of printed course materials.
- Storing, packaging the materials
- Scheduling the distribution to avoid inconvenience to the learners
- Generating the address labels
- Collection and storage of audio/video programmes
- Distribution of printed materials, and audio/video programmes to the Regional Centres and Study Centres.
- Maintenance of records of course materials received, dispatched, etc.
- Updating the inventory
- Responding to learners' complaints about non-receipt of course materials

Library Services

- To develop appropriate collections in various disciplines to meet the needs of the clientele of the libraries of the University, Regional & Study Centres;

- To provide reading, lending, reference, information and documentation facilities to all categories of staff and students;

- To develop a special collection of distance education books and journals at the libraries

- Circulation service including Inter Library Loan
- Reference & Referral
- User guidance
- Bibliographies/Indexes
- Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC)
- CD-ROM search
- Microform search
- Online Databases
- Reprography
- Lamination & Spiral binding

Examination and Evaluation Services

- Preparation of guidelines for the conduct of examinations and evaluation of assignments.
- Conducting entrance tests for admission to programmes, wherever necessary.
- Selection of examination centres, appointment of paper setters and coordination of all work relating to the setting of question papers.
- Printing, storage and despatch of question papers and answer books to examination centres.
- Arrangements for evaluation of answer scripts, scrutiny of the answer sheets and preparation of award lists.
- Processing of admissions to programmes involving test results, and maintenance of data on courses chosen by students, etc.
- Preparation of labels and lists of candidates admitted to various programmes.
- Evaluation of computer marked assignments and entering the scores in learners' grade cards along with the scores of Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs).

- Preparation of grade cards on the basis of the results of term-end examinations.
- Processing of examination results.
- Despatch of grade/result cards to students.
- Preparation of certificates/diplomas/degrees to be awarded to successful students.
- Consideration of the cases of the use of unfair means in examinations.
- Development of guidelines for assessment of assignments and printing of assessment sheets.
- Continuous assessment of students' performance through assignments and entering the awards in the students' records.
- Collection of project reports and their evaluation.
- Analysis of examination results.
- Development of new methods of assessment/evaluation.

Financial Support

Financial assistance to the needy learners in terms of subsidy in course fee and free course material, etc. may be provided as per the norms of the Institution.

Technological Services

- Set up & Maintenance of Computer Laboratories
- Introduction of Menu-driven training programmes
- Web hosting, development and maintenance
- Providing Networking facilities at Centres
- Providing ICT resources

Media Services

- Production of audio/video programmes;
- Arranging Teleconferencing sessions,
- Interactive radio counselling sessions
- Conduct of Induction Programmes through tele-conferencing mode.

Other Services

Change of Address

Learners will move from one place to another due to their occupational causes or otherwise. The learners' profile need to be updated accordingly. Communication is an important tool in the system; special care has to be taken to update the learner profile. Similarly in respect of change of study centre/regional centre, the institution has to develop a mechanism facilitating the learner.

Change of Medium, Electives and Programme

As part of the flexibility, the learners after having registered once, they may be given a facility to change the subjects and medium of instruction. Such requests shall be processed by the staff as per the provisions made by the institution

Issue of Identity Cards

The ID cards are issued to the learners, which can be used for availing library facilities, attending classes and other purposes

Migration Certificate

Migration Certificate is issued to the learners who have completed the academic programme from the institution

Arrangement of Contact Programmes

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

ANALYSIS OF PERFORMANCE OF THE LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICE SYSTEM(LSSS)

LSSS is the crucial component of success in ODL and learners are attracted when they see value in undergoing education through distance education. Since learners come from a traditional system, in the beginning they are not able to appreciate the unique features of ODL. Counselling is very important before joining and an informative approach has to be adopted to woo the learners. Timely feedback is also very important component in ODL. Feedback can help in increasing retention ratio and completion ratio. In view of the prevailing circumstances in the LSSS, distance learners may be contacted to know what exactly a kind of support they aspire by posing a questionnaire to them.

About 1000 distance learners pursuing different programmes contacted randomly to know about the performance of the services rendered by the DE institution. They have been asked about 25 questions on the services indicated at A to I below.

LEARNER OPINION ON THE SERVICES OFFERED
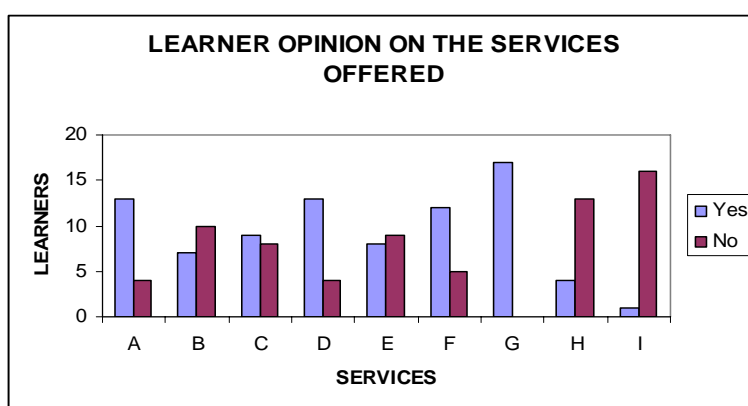
Services

Comfortable in getting Admissions	**A**
Right information on Student Queries	**B**
Availability of Post Admission Activities	**C**
Assignment Services (Problems)	**D**
Examination related Services	**E**
Requirement of ICT Support	**F**
Improvement in the Existing System	**G**
Staff Attitude towards Learners	**H**
Availability of Media facilities	**I**

In response to the questionnaire, 18 learners were responded. In view of my experience in the ODL system and zeal to do something for the learner community, forced me to analyse the data with this meagre statistics. Learners opined that in respect of getting admissions is very comfortable and easy process. But they are not having correct information on their queries. So far as post-admission activities and examination services are concerned the learners are divided into two equal groups. Most of the learners do not have clarity on utilisation of satellite services and audio/video programmes. But they want that the a/v programmes should be available at contact centres. The learners desired to see a big change in the attitude of the staff of the institution. They feel that they are having more problems in the assignments and the reflection of grades in the Grade card. Interestingly, most of the learners would like to have ICT-based support service system. All learners need the improvement of the system. The survey clearly mentioned that there is a need for re-design of the entire support service system.

INSTITUTIONAL IMPERATIVES

Design & Development of Support Service System

The functional units have to be designed and developed in a structural form. The caricatures of these structures should keep in the rooms of Heads of the Units to have clear cut guidance for the staff of the concerned unit. Sometimes, it also helps learners when they want to enter in the room of the head of the Unit to interact with him for a clarification or advice, they will get some answers immediately after having glance the structural form of the unit in the room before the interaction starts with the head. The Units should be designed with technology-enabled structures. Software programmes are to be developed for effective implantation of the activities through technology-enabled methods.

The personnel working in these units feel that they are doing productive jobs. The personnel should be given training on the activities to be performed with firm commitment. In order to provide better services to distance learners effectively and carry out various functions of a functional unit smoothly, it is imperative to have sub-units established within the unit and ICT should be implemented in each of these units. The following three components shall be kept in view while designing the structures for units and sub-units.

Appointment of Staff
Roles and Responsibilities
Training

Appointment of Staff

Institutions are adopting different methods to appoint its staff according to the requirement and necessity. In general, the role at the corporate level management includes evolving strategies and framing policies and guidelines; at the middle level management includes design, formulation, appointment of staff, and assignment of the activities to various units and fix responsibilities; and at the lower level management includes the activities/tasks are actually performed and executed.

It is necessary for the appointment to have a job description which makes clear what is to be assigned and the specification which makes clear the essential and desirable qualifications, experience and skills. The job description i.e. roles and responsibilities should include coordination between job-performer and the job-provider.

Roles and Responsibilities

The responsibilities as stated above are to be re-defined to pave the way for decentralisation and technology orientation and allocated to the staff as per the structure defined for a particular unit. As far as student registration unit is concerned, activities pertaining to that section are mainly student related. These activities could be made up of ICT-support basis to meet the learner requirement. For example, an activity of supply of examination application form and submission of filled-in exam form could be done either through on-line or by way of decentralised process. Like-wise other activities could also be followed in a similar way. When the responsibilities of the units are defined, these should be examined meticulously and sequentially designed without any implications and complications for execution of the jobs smoothly. When the responsibilities are assigned to a staff member, the managers have to ensure that the staff member may not be onerous.

Training

Training programmes have to be conducted for the staff to motivate and for better understanding about the activities to be performed by them at frequent intervals. Apart from this, training programmes on technological applications may also be conducted for the staff to acquaint with ICT-application oriented performance. The management should adopt innovative methods and approaches for organising training programmes for the staff. These training programmes will definitely increase the potential of the employees and motivate them to yield good results.

Monitoring Mechanism

Every institution has to have a Monitoring Cell to monitor the activities of the units within the institution and provide suitable guidance to perform the activities in the right direction. The cell has to take suitable steps to develop systems/software prgoramme to provide quick services to the learners. Feedback exercises on the activities performed have to be conducted to know the exact status. The activities of the cell includes compilation of reports from the regional/study centres, spot inspections and interactions with the staff, compilation of weekly reports, providing suggestions, if necessary for improvement in the system, and execution of tasks on war-footing basis in emergency situations. The Cell has to develop built-in-checks for all operational units of the institution.

CONCLUSION

As of now the paper has discussed about the support services and institutional imperatives. There is no doubt, in case the institutions wanted to provide quick and quality support services to the learner community, they should adopt and adapt appropriate technological tools. It is also suggested that creation of teams having equal rank personnel for a sub-unit to perform the activity. We are of the view that every institution should concentrate on learner complaints, continuous training of the staff, introduction of new techniques, and development of communication channels. With the appropriate use and minimum modifications we can make the programmes also accessible easily to the differently abled learners. The institution should take initiative for web-delivery of course materials. Online support service system should be developed for the learner community along with other electronic media services.

SUGGESTIONS RECEIVED FROM THE LEARNERS

1. Publication of Examination results in time.
2. Introduction of automation in all support services.
3. Supply of audio/video materials to the contact centres
4. Supply of Counselling and Teleconference schedules in advance
5. Despatch of Course materials within time.
6. Updation of assignment grades
7. Increase the number of contact classes
8. Introduction of re-evaluation system
9. Appointment of Experienced Academic Counsellors and Guides
10. Introduction of 'Student Help Guide' in print form
11. Updation of Website time to time
12. Introduction of on-line system

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