

ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Distance education and its relationship to emerging computer technologies have together offered many promises to the field of education. In practice however, the combination often falls short of what it attempts to accomplish some of the shortcomings are due to problems with the technology; others have more to do with administration, instructional methods, or students. This article provides decision maker with some trends that affect distance education and thus enable them to plan accordingly. The issues and problems are organized into categories as they pertain to students and enrollment, faculty members, academics, technology, the economy, and distance education. All such issues and problems were identified during an extensive review of current literature in the field.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a vital role in national development. All nations of the world try their best for their survival in the race of development and progress, and "Education" is being considered as a key element for the purpose.

The growing rate of population and increasing needs of education introduced different approaches to education. So, distance education was an approach under the umbrella of non-formal mode of education which contributed much in the expansion of education. Distance education is going to become more popular and accepted approach for education in the modern era/age. Several considerations have led to wide acceptance and sustained growth of distance education in all over the world. First, it is recognized that education is a key factor in economic development and social change.

Second, in recent years there has been such an increased demand for higher education which cannot be met without developing alternative strategies providing for time and space adjustments.

Third, the personal cost of higher education is quite high especially when account is taken of the foregone earnings during the period of education and the high drop out rates. Distance education programs have to develop a high degree of competitive efficiency and resilience in order to meet these challenges. One has to recognize that it is the international/ national policy on education to have alternative strategies for the acquisition of knowledge.

As one of these alternatives, distance education must learn to stand on its own legs without any external help. This paper deals with the issues and problems in "Distance education".

ISSUES/TRENDS AND PROBLEMS

The problems, issues/trends in distance education viewed by the different researchers and scholars of world are discussed below;

Maintenance of Academic Standards

The main problem faced by the distance universities in all over the world relates to the maintenance of standards. In the absence of formal teaching and education sessions, close and regular interaction of teacher and learner and at the spot guidance and counseling of the learner by the tutor, it is assumed that the input of quality education lack there in non-formal education through distance approach.

Financing Problems

Financing of distance education is a problem of great significance especially in developing countries. The cost of distance education programs vary enormously from one program to another. However, there are many cost-savings possibilities in comparison to those of formal education and that there is a virtue not in low cost per set, but only when low cost is as low as possible while keeping program effectiveness high. The main issues concerning resources are how to get more of them from formal and unconventional sources and how best to deploy whatever resources are available to distance education as a whole.

Organizational Problems

Distance education owes its existence to the economic and social impracticability of providing opportunities for education for all those who are required or who wish to learn. Whereas required education is generally quite restricted in range.

On the one hand, the community philosophy is, that each person should be assisted to expand his personal potential to its limits, and on the other, there is the cost-benefit question to satisfy, because the community's financial resources have to be budgeted and shared with other services. It has been shown that in distance education products, education (as measured by examination results) atleast equal to that produced by formal education. There are figures available to show that distance education at primary and secondary level is less expensive in recurrent cost than formal education.

- The first method with important educational implications is that standard lesson instructions, materials, tests, assignments for each course are sent to each student in that course. These, then, should be very carefully and skillfully prepared, tested, and money and skill invested in those assignments should not cause them to be continued in use without revision, long after it is known are suspected that revision is advisable.
- The second matter is that of the teachers who operate in distance education. They need to believe in this type of education and to be selected on the basis that there aspects are suitable accommodation for the teachers working in this area, supervision and on the job guidance the teachers are given, and the specific training of staff for this work.

Though, some aspects have impact on lesson construction and on the effectiveness of the whole system, however, it is not proposed to look at mechanics of the in-flow, recording, controlling and out-flow of lessons notes and students. With the saving in capital costs in school buildings and amenities, and the servicing costs on these as well as saving in the running costs.

Postal Services

Postal services play an important role in the system of distance education. Unfortunately, these postal services might be slow and unreliable, and there is every likelihood that correspondence units are at times dispatched to the wrong person. Since the students enrolled with distance universities are scattered all over the country and a sizeable number may enroll from semi-urban or from the far-flung rural areas, great care has to be taken to ensure that the delivery of the correspondence units to all the students takes place on time.

Communication

"Communication refers to the processes by which human beings send and receive messages in such a way that a close approximation is achieved between the message as sent and the message as understood by the receiver." The communication is of three types- listening, observing and reading. Communication in distance education system is to a considerable extent carried on through language-spoken and written, while the latter two play a relatively greater role.

Good teaching is more than mere communication. It is not enough if the student merely repeats the same word as conveyed to him. The teacher's concern is that the student should understand the text at ease. True education has occurred only when the act of communication has succeeded in making permanent and meaningful addition to the student's communication skills. The communication in distance education should not be one sided but requires inter communication between student and teacher/tutor. There must be reaction and interaction with constant reciprocal feedback. The system of distance education cannot function properly if the communication system in distance education fails. For this purpose, the tutor should know several things about communication.

The purpose of communication is not dictating tutor's ideas on the student, but, developing communication skills in students is the basic concern of the distance institution. Hence, the tutor must provide ways and means of developing and improving the skills. Barriers to communication arise not only from diversity of purpose, but also due to unclear encoding and selection of a wrong medium communication may fail in certain circumstances, as in the following:

- When facts to be presented, are based on different socio-economic backgrounds.
- When facts are based on alien time dimension and space dimension.

Printing and Publication of Study Material:

Fast printing of study materials is highly important in the system of distance education. In case of any difficulty in printing from outside market, the institution must have;

- Its own printing press with qualified technicians. It will help avoid the delay in printing the materials.
- The institution must have contract with private well established printers/publishers in the country for printing and publication. Study/ correspondence material, which helps the institution to have good quality of printing, at cheap competitive rates.

On the other hand, shortage of paper, which publishers often complain of, could be avoided by giving the printing contract only to well established printers.

Problems related to the Study Centres

Distance education institution/ university has one main campus and few sub-campuses in its jurisdiction, while its learners are spread in all over the country. In this way, it is impossible to build own sub-campuses (study centres) in all of the towns and cities of the country. Therefore, to meet the objective, the university or organization imparting education through distance approach hire the buildings of formal institutions/ privately managed institutions to establish study centres to facilitate its learners. The distance between an institution and study centre counts much in generating problems related to the study centres, because there may be no visit by the university management and due to the lack of proper visits, interaction and coordination may create various types of problems in this regard.

Students Assignments Related Problem

The component of assignments is compulsory one in Open distance education system. Its compulsion is due to its significance and importance. It must be developed/planned carefully, guided properly by the organization tutors, written seriously, evaluated critically and then returned specially well in time to the students. The written feed back by the tutor on students assignment work affects very much the performance of learner and through this feedback they can enhance their education. But, in distance education system, in all over the world, the evaluation, corrections, and their return to the students, etc are being criticized by the observers.

Misuse of Technology

Besides the cost of the technology, there is the possibility of not utilizing all its potential. Some of these problems arise from a lack of training, some from the instructor's attitudes about using the technology, and still others by hardware problems. It seems to be self evident that tutors need to be trained to use distance education technology, but too often they are not.

Once again, it appears that administration may feel that the technology itself will improve the course. Advancement in technology does not lead to effective distance education. The best distance education practices depend on the creative, well-informed tutors (Greenberg, 1998), Bates (1995) suggest that newer technologies are not inherently better than old ones and many of the lessons learned from the application of older technologies will still apply to any newer technology. Again, the instructor should be trained to take advantage of both their experience and being able to adapt that experience to the new environment of distance education.

The tutors must be trained "not only to use technology, but also to shift the way in which they organize and deliver material" (Palooff & Pratt, 2000, p.3). Howell and others listed Thirty two trends affecting Distance education. These are as under;

- The current higher education infrastructure cannot accommodate the growing college-aged population and enrollments, making more distance education programs necessary.
- Students are shopping for courses that meet their schedules and circumstances.
- Higher-education learner profiles, including online, information-age, and adult learners, are changing.
- The percentage of adult, female, and minority learners is increasing.
- Retention rates are concern administrators and faculty members.
- Traditional faculty roles are shifting or "unbundling".
- The need for faculty development, support, and training is growing.

- Faculty tenure is being challenged, allowing for more non-traditional faculty roles in distance education.
- Some faculty members are resisting technological course delivery.
- Faculty members who participate in distance education courses develop better attitudes towards distance education and technology.
- Tutors of distance courses can feel isolated.
- Faculty members demand reduced workload and increased compensation for distance courses.
- Knowledge and information are growing exponentially.
- The institutional landscape of higher education is changing: traditional campuses are declining, for-profit institutions are growing, and public and private institutions are merging.
- There is a shift in organizational structure toward decentralization.
- Instruction is becoming more learner-centred, non linear, and self-directed.
- There is a growing emphasis on academic accountability.
- Academic emphasis is shifting from course-completion to competency.
- Education is becoming more seamless between high school, college, and further studies.
- Higher education outsourcing and partnerships are increasing.
- Some advocate standardizing content in education objects.
- Technological devices are becoming more versatile and ubiquitous.
- There is a huge growth in internal usage.
- Technological fluency is becoming a graduation requirement.
- With the economy in recession, there are fewer resources for higher education and higher education, initiatives, such as distance education.
- Funding challenges are the top IT concern for many.
- Lifelong education is becoming a competitive necessity.
- More courses, degrees, and universities are becoming available through distance-education programs.
- The internet is becoming dominant among other distance-education media.
- The distance between distance and local education is disappearing.
- The need for effective course-management systems and Web services is growing.
- There is and increasing need for education and teaching strategies that exploit the capabilities of technology.

Suggestions for Improvement

The following factors have to be taken into consideration in bringing about improvements in the standards of distance education programme.

- There may be adequate preparation prior to the introduction of distance education courses in relation to the syllabus and its units, methodology and preparation of instructional materials.
- There should be coordination among the different departments/ institutes of distance and open education institutions/universities in such areas as preparation of instructional materials, radio and T.V. broadcasting, conduct of contact programmes and establishment of study centres.
- Measure may be adopted for the effective utilization of financial resources.

- Sufficient funds should be provided to the distance education institutions so that it can function effectively.
- The postal services and communication may be made reliable.
- Printing of courses material may be ensured.
- Library facilities may be provided to all the model study centres throughout the country/world. These libraries may be provided the latest technologies e.g. internet, e-books and others.

CONCLUSION

What we may conclude from the premises of distance education? Are there possibilities for improvement in the future? The technology will undoubtedly keep improving and the price will drop, as technology is prone to do once it comes into general use. Already we see improvement in the delivery systems of compressed video and computer assisted instruction. Despite student problems with distance education, studies indicate they are relatively satisfied with that they are receiving. A study of students at AIOU found 75% were very satisfied with the instruction they received and 90% rating the technology as satisfactory (Fergusin & Wijekumar, 2000).

Another study by Harner et al.(2000) was done on a distance education accounting course at the University of Connecticut. They found that 57.5% would take another such course. Two other findings were generally favorable and included comments on how the course could be improved. The first suggested the tutors needed to be comfortable with the medium, and that the students needed to have more guidance on how to fully take advantage of the presentation (Teaster & Blieszer, 1999). The second showed that students were highly satisfied with the tutors and the course, but that direct interaction with the tutors played no role in the students' satisfaction (Inmam & Kerwin, 1999).

Keegan (1995) shows many excellent ways that tutors can better prepare for the classroom including multimedia use, speaking voice, and even font size considerations. Tutors also need to realize that the technician is an integral part of the experience of distance education and treat them as such.

Tutors must be motivated to prepare adequately for classes. Part of the responsibility for motivation must lie with the administration and their support of the program. "Because teaching a distance education class involves a new role for tutors, administrators must provide them with the time, the tools, and the training to meet these new responsibilities" (Inmam & Kerwin, 1999, p.586).

Administration needs to train and educate tutors on this role and how to meet the challenges. Sherritt (1996, p.4) found in her survey of higher education administrators that "for whatever reasons, higher education administrators and politicians understand the need for technology. But lacking the heart for distance education they cannot bring themselves to support it with adequate personnel, simple supplies, and a reasonable operating budget". This sort of attitude from administration can do nothing but trickle down into the tutors and the students. Administrators need to carefully weigh their goals and objectives when taking on a distance education program.

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