Student Support Services In Distance Learning System
A Case Of DDE, Maharshi Dayanand University

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INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system has shown a tremendous growth during the last few decades due to its unique feature of being a users' friendly system. In this system, the students are free to learn at their own pace and convenience while being away from the institution. This system came into existence with the basic objective to provide wider access to higher education as the conventional system was proving to be unable to cope with the ever-increasing demand. ODL in recent times has thus emerged as an alternative mode for higher education all over the world especially in developing countries like India. In Indian scene, there are at present around 76 Distance Learning Institutions (DLIs) and 10 Open Universities. With the advancement of information technology several DLIs are providing admissions to a large number of students in various programmes. A few years earlier, DLIs were judged by the quality of the materials made available to the learners. But in the changed scenario, emphasis is placed on the quality of Student Support Services (SSS) extended by the DLIs as these have been recognized as an integral and essential component of distance learning system. These SSS guide the learners for self-study and serve as the interface between the institution and the learner. Keeping in view the importance of support system to distance learners, the present paper has been devoted to the student support system operative in the Directorate of Distance Education (DDE) of Maharshi Dayanand University (MDU), Rohtak (Haryana) for the benefit of distance learners enrolled to pursue various undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) programmes.

Maharshi Dayanand University

The Maharshi Dayanand University was established in 1976 and initially started as residential university for promoting study and research in Life Sciences. The character of the university was soon changed to an "affiliaiting university". From a modest beginning, presently the university has bloomed into one of the largest universities in the country. It has in its fold 126 colleges and institutes, which include Degree, Medical, Dental, Ayurvedic, Engineering, and Education Colleges. Besides, it has 13 institutes of Science, Technology and Management. On the campus, the university maintains 26 full fledged teaching departments apart from one National Law College at Gurgaon and one Post Graduate Regional Centre at Rewari. With this infrastructure, the University has approximately 0.16 million students on its roll in regular courses. Further, Directorate of Distance Education (DDE) is imparting education to more than 48,000 students through its study centers.

Directorate of Distance Education (DDE)

For the purpose of providing quality education at the doorsteps and meeting the needs of students, the MDU established B.Ed. correspondence cell in 1988, which was later upgraded as Directorate of Correspondence Courses in 1990 and designated it in 1992 as Directorate of Distance Education. The directorate provided facilities for distance education (DE) initially at B.Ed. level. Encouraged by the successful completion of the programme, the University has expanded its programmes to offer conventional

Undergraduate, Postgraduate Programmes followed by Management, Law, Computer / IT programmes. At present out of 21 programmes being offered by DDE, 12 are leading to postgraduate degree, 6 are Bachelors degree and 3 courses are PG Diplomas. (Refer to Exhibit: 1).

Exhibit - 1
PROGRAMMES OFFERED BY DDE

Programme Offered	Duration	Nature of Programme
1. Prabhakar	Two Year Course	Degree
2. B.A.	Two Year Course	UG Degree
3. B.Com	Three Year Course	UG Degree
4. M.A.(Arts) i) English ii) Hindi iii) Sanskrit	Two Year Course	PG Degree
5. M.A.(Social Sciences) i) History ii) Pol. Sciences iii) Economics iv) Public Administration	Two Year Course	PG Degree
6. M.Com	Two Year Course	
7. M.Sc. (Mathematics)	Two Year Course	PG Degree
8. B.Ed.	Two Year Course (NCTE Recognised)	UG Degree
9. B.L.I.Sc.	One Year Course	UG Degree
10.Management and Law Courses i) Master's Degree in Global Business Management ii) L.L.M. iii) PG Diploma in Labour Law, Labour Welfare,& Personnel Management	Two Year Course Two Year Course Two Year Course One Year Course	PG Degree PG Degree PG Degree PG Diploma
11.Computer/IT Programmes i) M.Sc(Computer Science) ii) B.C.A. iii) APGDCA(Advance Postgraduate Diploma in Computer Application) iv) APGDIT(Advance Postraduate Diploma in Information Technology)	Two Year Course ThreeYear Course One Year Course One Year Course	PG Degree UG Degree PG Diploma PG Diploma

As evident from Exhibit I, the varied programmes offered by the Directorate range from

conventional to management and technical as per the needs of the area and employment opportunities available now-a-days in the country. The salient features of DDE's courses are that it not only caters to the needs of in-service personnel, but also to those, who are working in remote areas or persons who can not get higher education due to their personal reasons. The popularity of DDE programmes of MDU among the students can be judged from the enrolment figures of the session 1998-99, 1999-2000, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 i.e. 16,779, 26,659, 36,689 and 48,938 respectively (Please See Exhibit:2). The reasons for the popularity of its programmes have been on account of carefully designed curriculum, teaching-learning strategies, student support services (SSS) and examination system

Exhibit : 2
Students Strength For Session 1998-1999, 1999-2000, 2000-2001 & 2001-2002

Sr. No	Name of Class	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002
1	B.A.I	4,884	8,165	7,876	7,764
2	B.A. II	2,370	3,778	6,159	5,970
3	B.A. III	1,662	2,593	3,704	5,279
4	B.Com I	168	375	304	268
5	B.Com II	56	113	276	302
6	B.Com III	51	65	116	258
7	B.Ed.	229	250	252	250
8	Prabhakar	-	1,273	944	465
9	L.L.M.	-	-	155	P197 F 88
10	PG Diploma in Labour Laws, Labour Welfare & Personnel Management	-	-	27	15
11	Master Degree in Global Business Management	-	-	36	P17 F19
12	B.L.I.Sc.	-	374	302	263
13	APGDCA - Ist Sem. APGDCA -2nd Sem.	- 	- 	479 -	1,647 422
14	APGDIT - Ist Sem. APGDIT - 2nd Sem.	- 	- 	631 -	605 537
15	M.Sc.(Comp.Sc.) Ist Sem M.Sc.(Comp.Sc.) 2nd Sem	- -	- -	2,705 -	5,577 2,332
16	M.Sc.(Comp. Sc.) Ist Sem M.Sc.(Comp .Sc.) 2nd Sem	- -	1,280 -		2,643 1,259
		-	-	309	

17	B.CA Ist Sem	-	-	-	1,346 -
18	Master Of Arts				
	English Previous Final	1,328 323	1,687 565	1,841 597	1,740 834
	Hindi Previous Final	1,316 874	1,580 1,043	1,636 1,303	1,680 1,330
	Sanskrit Previous Final	278 134	325 222	363 252	443 294
	Political Science Previous Final	759	780	741	439
	Public Admn. Previous Final	115 28	164 57	149 97	75 92
	History Previous Final	503 298	649 364	791 529	765 571
	Economics Previous Final	263 70	327 147	328 169	263 118
	Mathematics Previous Final	- -	372 -	354 122	353 133
	M.Com. Previous Final	517 -	620 346	919 506	868 752
Total		16,779	26,659	36,689	48,938

The teaching - learning strategies employed for effective dissipation of knowledge and mitigating the feeling of isolation of distance learners include Printed Study material in SIM format, Sunday and other holidays classes (40 days) at University approved study centers, Personal Contact Programmes (PCP), Assignments, Internal Tests and well established Labs which include the facility of Video cassettes, E-mail, Internet, CD-Rom, practicals besides counselling (F2F and telephone) by in-house faculty of DDE at headquarters and by resource persons at respective study centers.

Student Support Services (SSS)

The main aim of distance education (DE) is to promote self study or independent study among distance learners in the absence of regular face-to-face (F2F) teaching. To achieve this, every DLI extends support to its learners, which comprises of a cluster of facilities and activities that are intended to make the teaching - learning process easier and more interesting for the learners. All these activities beyond the production and delivery of course material assist in the progress of students in terms of learning, interacting and effective communication (Simpson, 2000) and, therefore, the support system may range from study centre counselling/tutorial support to administrative problem solving (Rumble, 1992).

Two major sub-systems already identified in DE to make distance learning more effective and also to ensure the desired level of quality are Course Production and Student Support Services (Refer to Figure: I).

DE System

Course Production Ist Sub System	Student Support Services 2nd Sub System

Fig 1:System Approach to DE

In fact the success or failure and the overall corporate image of the DE Institution is determined by the strength and weakness of the second major sub-system i.e. Student Support Services (Kishore, 1998). The major responsibilities that are being accomplished under SSS include:
- to create an environment conducive to Distance learning;
- to facilitate the Distance Learning Method;
- to motivate students to continue their education;
- to encourage socialization and to promote team work and team spirit and
- to improve the educational standards of students.

Undoubtedly, the SSS play major role in imparting quality education to distance learners but probably the most difficult task is to manage it (Power et al, 2000). This is because of the spatial separation of different units and facilities; and the considerable diversity in the categories of personnel involved. The management of these personnel to work in co-ordination requires skill, tact and patience. And, thus, due emphasis is assign to these factors while selecting SSS for distance learners in DDE at MDU.

STUDENT SUPPORT ACTIVITIES IN THE DIRECTORATE
Student Support Model in the Directorate of MDU is a two tier system - the headquarters and the study centers. This model is quite helpful in providing effective support to its distance learners because of well-defined functions and activities at headquarters based study center and at the study centers situated in other affiliated institutions.

Student Support Services at Headquarter based Study Centre
Most important services at headquarters are:
a) Administrative,
b) b) Academic,
c) c) Information Collection.

a) ADMINISTRATIVE
i) Publicising and Promoting DDE Programmes
For publicising and promoting DDE programmes both at the state as well as at the national level, the Directorate Headquarter based study centre disseminate information through Newspapers, Information Brochures, Network of Study Centres and Individual guidance to the students by in-house faculty of the DDE.

Admission to various programmes is done by giving advertisement in the National Newspapers. Detailed information is given in the advertisement e.g. regarding DDE programmes, duration of each course, its eligibility, fees structure, List of study centers, Last date of submission of application forms, date of commencement of sessions and availability of Information Brochures/Prospectus along with its cost.

In Information Brochure the students get all the relevant information about the University, the Directorate and other related details of the concerned programme i.e. about the course, its fee structure and eligibility conditions, number of seats for the programme, reservation criteria (if any), concession in prospectus fees, entrance fees and tution fees,Entrance Test, Procedure for submission of Application Form, Admission Schedule, Improtant instructions and schedule of face to face (F2F) counselling in Personal Contact Programmes/40 days teaching, submission of assignments and term-end examination etc. All these informations help the aspirants in getting admission to the programme of their choice.

In programmes, where DDE does not have Information Brochures e.g. in conventional UG&PG programmes, students are provided with general instructions in which they are given full details. These instructions are given to the students along with Admission-cum-Examination Form at a very nominal cost through university approved study centers at the time of admission.

ii) Creation of Study Centres
The headquarter establish and monitor all Study Centres situated in affiliated institutions. These Study Centres are equipped with library facilities and reading rooms.

iii) Registration of Students
Headquarters maintain the student record. Every student is registered with the Directorate with a particular registration number. Every distance learner is asked to do every correspondence with DDE by quoting his or her enrolment number. In this way, the student profile is prepared.

iv) Looking after the admission activities
Faculty at Headquarter based study center play a major role in admission procedures. Faculty prepares all the Information Brochures. Besides this, committees are formed to look into the different activities i.e. preparation of application-cum-examination forms, preparation of guidelines for running DDE programmes smoothly and efficiently, preparation of norms for creating Study Centres etc.

v) Distribution of Study material
Study material is provided to distance learners in B.Ed., B.L.I.Sc. and computer/IT courses. Distribution of study material is done at headquarters either by hand or by post. For assured delivery, the directorate adopted the strategy of delivering the study material by hand to the students at the time of admission and through study centers in computer/IT courses.

vi) Clear Cut Norms
Norms are prepared for establishing study centers both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

vii) Personal Data Form
The headquarter study centre maintain a personal Data Form of its each distance learner in which record about the PCP attendance, assignments submitted and teaching practice completed is maintained.

viii) Enquiry-cum-Reception Centre
Since distance learners have to make a lot of queries about the admission, the PCP, the examination, the assignments, internal tests, the Teaching Practice etc, an Enquiry-cum-Reception Centre is there at headquarter with telephone facilities to respond to the queries of the students.

b) ACADEMIC

i) Introduction-cum-Orientation Programme
An Introduction-cum-Orientation Programme is conducted by the Directorate's Inhouse faculty in the beginning of each academic programme. Guidance is also provided to the candidates after enquiring about the subject combination at plus two and graduation levels. This type of orientation and guidance given at the time of admission make the students aware of the system, DDE programmes and make an assessment of their difficulties.

ii) Personal Support

Close personal support to each student by the faculty of DDE is provided. Every faculty member has been assigned a specific programme and he/she feel responsible for the progress of both the students as well as of the programme.

iii) Preparation of Guidelines and Instructions
Faculty at headquarters prepares guidelines and instructions for all the diplomas and degree programmes. These are provided to all the local co-ordinators of study centres as well as to the applicants so as to apprise them of the procedures of admission to different programmes and to keep uniformity in standards.

iv) Meeting of Local Coordinators
Meeting of local co-ordinators of study centres are held at headquarters so as to know their difficulties and to create a better liaison between headquarters and study centres.

v) Preparation of Calender of Academic Activities
A calender of Academic Activities for the year in the beginning of each session is made available to the distance learners in the beginning of the courses.

vi) Preparation of Study Material
Course-team approach is used for preparation of study material by headquarters. Self Instructional Module (SIM) is prepared in accordance with the scheme of examination and syllabus duly approved by the Academic Council of the University.

vii) Provision of Library Facilities
Good Library facilities at headquarters and study centres help the students in preparation of their assignments. In case of necessity, students are allowed to take books for two or three days during their Personal Contact Programme.

viii) Tutoring
Inhouse faculty at headquarters does limited but organised Interactive F2F tutoring in small groups of students.

ix) Assistance in examinations preparation
Headquarter Study Centre assist in examinations preparation. Roll numbers and schedule of examination is sent to the students through study centres. The University creates examination Centres.

x) Provision of facilities to perform practical tasks
In few courses where labs are needed, headquarter arrange practical in University established labs of the concerned subjects

c) INFORMATION COLLECTION
i) Development of Student Profile:
Student profiles are maintained in the headquarter based Computer Centre. Whenever students want any information from the Directorate, it is provided immediately by seeing the personal record of the student from his/her admission number
ii) Development of Expert Database:
It is prepared in order to do regular supervision of Study Centres. By doing supervision, academic activities of the Study Centres are properly looked in to.
iii) Sample checking of Assignments and Internal Tests:
In order to see whether Study Centres are doing justice to the students in awarding marks in assignments and internal tests, a sample check is done of assignments by the headquarter study centres.

Student Support Services at Study Centres
The most important SSS, which are provided at the Study Centres, are:
a) To provide Application-cum-Examination Form along with General instructions to the

students at the time of admission.

b) To give guidance, advice and information about the programmes to the students.

c) To check the eligibility of the students while collecting Application Forms along with Fees.

d) To identify the counsellors.

e) To distribute course material.

f) To organise counselling as per the schedule given to the students at the time of admission.

g) To provide library facilities to the learners.

h) To evaluate assignments and forward the grades to the headquarters.

i) To conduct term-end-examination.

j) To provide lab facilities for computer/IT programmes.

k) To provide grassroot feed back to headquarters.

l) To promote team work and team spirit.

m) To motivate students to continue their education

CONCLUSION

Open & Distance Learning (ODL) System is innovative in nature. It relaxes entry qualifications, uses specially designed learning materials and modern educational technologies, provides Student Support Services (SSS) and applies advanced method of evaluation. If the learners are not fully aware of this system before joining, they may find themselves in an infamiliar situation. Thus, an attempt has been made in this paper to make students aware of the distance education programmes and student support services available at DDE of MDU. After reading this, distance learner can get pre-admission guidance and counselling for proper selection of the programme.

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