

STUDENT RETENTION IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION: A case study of IGNOU Regional Centre, Mumbai

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ABSTRACT

Student Retention is a function of a number of factors, the most important among them being-the academic response mechanism of an institution, effectiveness in handling administrative queries, counseling at learner support centres, effectiveness in handling practical session and so on. The current paper is an attempt to study the effectiveness of student support services in an era of globalization in distance education institutions, with special reference to IGNOU Regional Centre, Mumbai. It is strongly felt that the results of this study will have a strong bearing on the way support services at conducted at Distance Education institutions. Mathematical complexity has been purposively avoided to make the contents of this paper intelligible to a wider audience.

Keywords: Student Support Services; globalization of education; Student Retention

INTRODUCTION

India is a land of many contradictions. On the one hand, it houses the second largest scientific manpower in the world, while on the other it is home to the largest poor population for a single country. The country is the 7th largest economy in the world, but ranks in the 130s in any Human Development indicator. If we take the measures of poverty and hunger in the country, we can see that 37% of the population falls under BPL while 46% of the children are underweight (Varma, 2010). Gender parity is to the tune of .94 in primary education and .82 in secondary. Under 5 mortality is still high at 75 per 1000 births while maternal mortality is 254 per 100000 live births (Varma, 2010). Safe drinking water is not available to 18% of the population while 51% of the population goes without toilets (Varma, 2010). In this scenario, the retention of learners already enrolled in higher Distance Education assumes great significance.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: A Birds' Eye view

Higher education and national development have a symbiotic relationship. In 1960, Theodore W. Schultz indicated that the development of the human capital such as knowledge, ability, and health contributed to the economic growth to a greater extent than increasing the physical capital and labor supply in the production process. Gary S. Becker built the foundation of the theory of human capital formation and considered it as the basis for all development. From 1980s, Lucas and Romer believed that knowledge and human capital were production factors as the physical resource (Qinhua, Nov.2004).

As far as Gross Enolment Ratio in India goes, it is as low as 12%.If we compare this rate with other countries, we find that the country's position is abysmally poor. For instance North America's GER is 70%, USA's is 85%, Russia's is 70% and even the World average is higher at 25%. Added to this is the lower Gender Disparity Index of the country at 0.7 as against 1.4 of USA, 1.6 of Sweeden, 1.3 of Russia and 0.9 of China.

Even the targets of India are less than ambitious. The country plans to raise its GER to 30% by the year 2020 AD.

This means that there has to be additional enrolment in Higher Education systems of the country to the tune of 288 Lakhs between the years 2012 and 2020 AD. In such a scenario, the role of Open and Distance education systems becomes paramount. In this scenario it becomes imperative that the Distance Education system retains the learners who have entered its stream upto the maximum possible extent.

Globalization of Higher Education

Education till recently was not considered a significant entity in services trade. However, soon it was realised that countries like India had a lot to gain and loose when it came to trade in educational services. The rules of the General Agreement on Trade in services are applicable to trade in educational services as well. The signifiacant rules of the Agreement may be noted as follows that GATS enjoin upon its members certain obligations that can be grouped under two categories:

- General Obligations and
- Specific obligations

The General obligations are those that apply to all the service sectors irrespective of whether a country has made commitments on them or not. These can be noted as follows:

- Most Favoured Nations Treatment (MFN): GATS stipulate the acceptance of Most Favoured Nations Status (MFN) in the case of services too. The MFN status stipulates that any commercial advantage provided to one of the signatories on a particular product must be provided to all other signatories who export a like product to the country. For Example, if Government of India permits Alama Iqbal Open University (Pakistan) to run its programmes in India, the same facility must also be extended to Singapore National University if the latter requests the Government of India for the same.
- Obligations related to rule framing and implementation: GATS enjoins its members to internationally notify/publish changes in laws, rules and regulations that have a bearing on international trade in services. Similarly, any regulation that the members frame to deal with business relations between service providers, especially those dealing with Foreign Service providers must be based on objective criteria and must be applied equally to all service providers (Earth, 2002). Further, "Paragraph 4 of Article VI of the GATS calls upon the Council for Trade in Services to develop new disciplines to ensure that non-discriminatory measures relating to qualification requirements and procedures, technical standards and licensing requirements do not constitute unnecessary barriers to trade. As part of the implementation of this provision, the Services Council established the Working Party on Professional Services (WPPS) with the mandate to develop such disciplines in the area of professional services and designated the sector of accountancy as a priority". (Secretariat, 2003)
- Rules related to the working of Monopolies: The GATS signatories should ensure that working of monopolies for providing services should not in any way violate the working of the country's MFN obligations.

On the other hand Specific Obligations apply only to those service sectors in which a country has made commitments. They are

- **Market Access Obligations:** As regards the market access obligations of member nations, GATS is very categorical in its approach. It states the following:

“When a member undertakes a commitment it must indicate for each mode of supply what limitations, if any, it maintains on market access. Article XVI: 2 of the GATS lists six categories of restrictions, which may not be adopted or maintained unless they are specified in the schedule. All scheduled limitations on market access therefore must fall into one of these categories. They comprise of four types of quantitative restrictions as well as limitations on foreign equity participation and on the types of legal entity permitted.” (Secretariat, 2003)

- **National Treatment Obligation:** GATS in its National Treatment obligation “under Article XVII requires members to accord to services and service suppliers of any member treatment no less favourable than that it accords to services and service suppliers of national origin” (Secretariat, 2003)

Notwithstanding anything that has been mentioned above, the GATS framework like GATT provides for certain explicit exceptions to GATS obligations. These exceptions have been provided under three heads:

Temporary Exceptions, General Exceptions and Security Exceptions.

- Temporary Exceptions to GATS provisions have been provided under Article XII, which provides for appropriate measures to safeguard precarious Balance of Payment positions (BOP) of nations.
- General Exceptions to GATS provisions are provided under Article XIV to
 - Protect public morals and to maintain public order. Public order is defined as “situations where a genuine and sufficiently serious threat is posed to one of the fundamental interests of society” (GATS, 2003)
 - protect human, animal, plant life or health
- Security Exceptions to GATS obligations states “a member is allowed to take any action which it considers necessary for the protection of its essential security interests or in pursuance of its obligations under the United Nations Charter for the maintenance of international peace and security. Members are not required to furnish any information the disclosure of which would be contrary to their essential security interests” (GATS, 2003).

According to Article XXI, specific commitments may be modified subject to well laid down rules and regulations. Countries, which may be affected by such modifications, can request the modifying Member to negotiate compensatory adjustments. The Most Favoured Nations Principle may strictly be observed during such modifications.

Seen in this light, globalisation is sure to bring in greater competition in the higher education field and therefore the issues related to student retention in Distance Education will gain paramount importance.

Further, it might also be remembered that Government of India has given permission for 100% FDI in higher education.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study is based on a random survey of 48 IGNOU learners from various study centres and different programmes.

Broadly, Nine parameters were identified as essential for student retention in a university:

- Over all Response mechanism of the university
- Effectiveness in handling Administrative queries
- Effectiveness of the Response mechanism of Regional Centre
- Effectiveness of counseling at study centres
- Efficiency of the teaching staff at study centres
- Timely return of evaluated assignments
- Effective handling of academic queries
- Proper supply of pre-admission information
- Teaching facilities available at study centres

On the basis of the eleven parameters so identified, a questionnaire was prepared and administered to the learners as mentioned above. The profile of the learners is given below:

Profile of the Learners Surveyed

AGE	
20-30	33
31-40	11
41-50	2
GENDER	
Male	29
Female	17
PROGRAMME	
Arts, Humanities & Commerce	18
Basic Sciences & Technology	28

Chart: 1
Demographic Composition of the Respondents

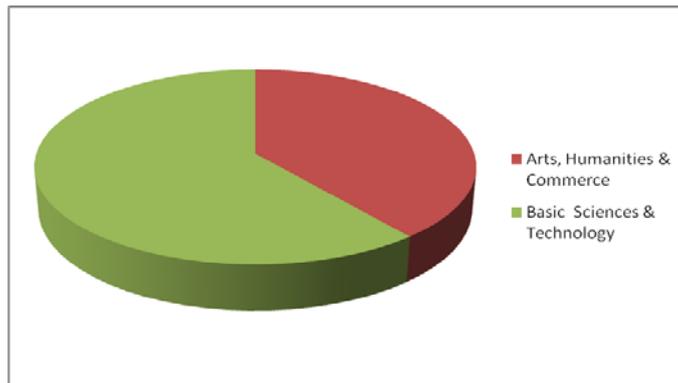


Chart: 2
Gender Profile of the Respondents

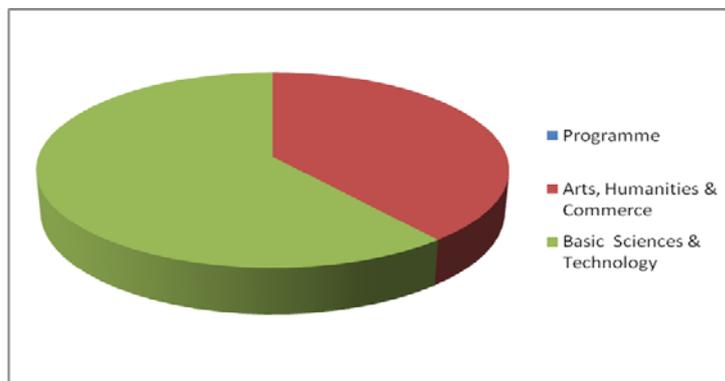
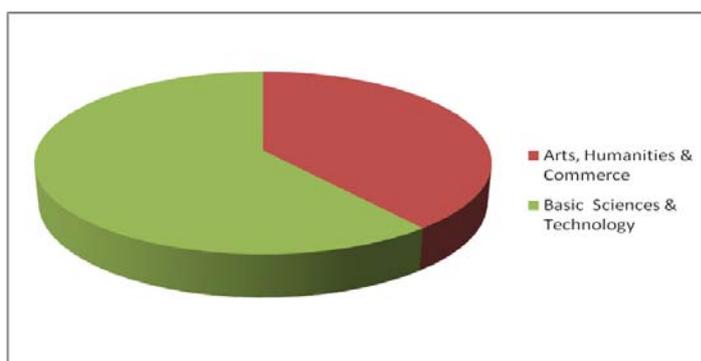


Chart: 3
Programme-Wise Distribution



As is clear from the data presented above, 71% of the respondents belong to the age group 20-30, 24% belong to the age group 31-40 and the rest belong to the age group 41-50 (5%). 63% of the respondents are males and 37% are females.

39% of the respondents are enrolled in Arts, Sciences and Humanities and the rest 61% are enrolled in Basic Sciences and Technology programmes.

Parameter 1: Over all Response mechanism of IGNOU

In order that an university instills faith in its learners, its response mechanism has to be simple, student oriented easily accessible and easy to comprehend. The student response on this parameter is as follows:

Table: 2
Overall Response Mechanism of IGNOU

Age	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Bad
20-30	9	9	14	1
31-40	3	3	5	
41-50		1	1	
Gender				
Male	8	11	9	1
Female	4	2	11	
Programme				
Arts, Humanities & Commerce	4	5	9	
Basic Sciences & Technology	8	8	11	1

From Table: 2, it becomes clear that 27% of the respondents in the age group 20-30 consider IGNOU's overall response mechanism as "Excellent". Another 27% of the respondents in this age group consider it as "Very Good" 42% of the respondents in the age group 20-30 consider the response mechanism as "Good".

In the age group 31-40 45% of the respondents consider the response mechanism as "Good" and 27% of the respondents consider it as Excellent.

Of the male respondents, 38% consider consider IGNOU's response mechanism as "Very Good", while 28% consider the Response Mechanism as "Excellent".

50% of the respondents from the Arts, Humaniites and Commerce faculties consider mechanism as "Good" and the rest consider it either as "Excellent" or "Very Good".

On the other hand, 39% of the respondents among Basic Science and Technology students consider the response mechanism as "Good" while 29% consider it as "Excellent".

Parameter 2: Effectiveness in handling Administrative queries

Effectiveness in handling Administrative queries is another benchmark for measuring the effectiveness of student support services. The response of learners on this parameter is given below.

Table: 3
Effectiveness in handling Administrative queries

Age	Always	Mostly	Sometimes	Never
20-30	7	11	14	1
31-40	5	4	2	
41-50		2		
Gender				
Male	7	10	11	1
Female	5	7	5	
Programme				
Arts, Humanities & Commerce	5	5	7	1
Basic Sciences & Technology	7	12	9	

It can be seen from Table: 3 that 42% of the respondents in the age group 20-30 mentioned that only sometimes they get responses to their administrative queries from the IGNOU study centres, while 33% of the respondents claimed that they "Mostly" get responses to their administrative queries in time. 36% of the respondents in the age group 31-40 reported that they "Mostly" got the responses to their administrative queries in time from IGNOU in time.

38% of the male respondents reported that only "Sometimes" they have received responses to their administrative queries from IGNOU in time, while 42% of the female respondents responded that them "Mostly" got responses to their administrative queries in time.

Again while 39% of the learners from "Arts, Humanities & Commerce" reported that only "Sometimes" they got prompt replies to their Administrative queries, 43% of the respondents from "Basic Sciences & Technology" category stated that they mostly received prompt replies for their administrative queries.

Parameter 3: Effectiveness of counseling at Study Centres

As far as IGNOU is concerned, counseling forms one of the major academic activities. The student responses about the effectiveness of counseling sessions are as follows.

Table: 4
Effectiveness of counseling at Study Centres

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Deeply Dissatisfied
Age				
20-30	3	21	7	1
31-40	1	8		1
41-50		1	1	
Gender				
Male	1	21	3	1
Female	3	9	5	1
Programme				
Arts, Humanities & Commerce	2	9	4	2
Basic Sciences & Technology	2	21	4	

It may be noted that 66% of the surveyed learners in the age group 20-30 feel that they are "Satisfied" with the counseling services provided at their study centres. 80% of the learners in the age group 31-40 feel the same way. 81% of the male candidates feel that they are "Satisfied" with the counseling services at IGNOU study centres, while only 50% of the female students surveyed feel the same way. 53% of the learners surveyed from the group, "Arts, Humanities & Commerce" feel the same way as against 78% of the respondents from the group, "Basic Sciences & Technology". The percentage of "Dissatisfied" learners in the former group was 24%, whereas the same in the latter group was 15%.

Parameter 4: Effectiveness of the Response mechanism of Regional Centre

In the Distance Education system, the Regional Centre plays a pivotal role in successful programme delivery. The student assessment of IGNOU Regional Centre Mumbai's response mechanism is as follows:

Table: 5
Effectiveness of the Response mechanism of Regional Centre

	Always	Mostly	Sometimes	Never
Age				
20-30	14	13	5	1
31-40	6	3	2	
41-50		1	1	
Gender				
Male	13	9	6	1
Female	7	8	2	
Programme				
Arts, Humanities & Commerce	7	5	5	1
Basic Sciences & Technology	13	15		

The data presented above shows that 82% of the respondents from the age group "20-30" feel that either they "Always" get response from the RC or "Mostly" they get response from the regional centre. The percentage for the age group "31-40" who feel that they "Always" get responses in time from the Regional Centre is as high as 55%. 82% feel that either they "Always" get response from the RC or "Mostly" they get response from the regional centre. 45% of the males feel that they "Always" get Prompt responses from the Regional Centre. 47% of the Females feel that they "Mostly" get prompt responses from the Regional Centre. 38% of the learners from the group, "Arts, Humanities & Commerce" feel that they get prompt responses from the Regional Centre and all 100% of the respondents feel that they "Always" or "Mostly" get prompt responses from the regional centre.

Parameter 5: Efficiency of the teaching staff at study Centres

The parameter of the efficiency of the teaching staff at the study centre was assessed through the perspective of the learners. The details are given in the table depicted below.

Table: 6
Efficiency of the teaching staff at study Centres

Age	Very Good	Good	Satisfactory	Bad
20-30	5	12	13	1
31-40	2	5	3	1
41-50		1	1	
Gender				
Male	4	13	10	1
Female	3	5	8	1
Programme				
Arts, Humanities & Commerce	4	6	7	1
Basic Sciences & Technology	3	12	9	1

Most of the respondents cutting across the divides consider the quality of the teaching staff at study centre as either "Good" or "Satisfactory".

81% in the case of age group "20-30" and 73% in the case of the age group 31-40. 23 out of 28 male respondents also feel that the quality of the Teaching staff in study centres is either "Good" or "Satisfactory".

Parameter 6: Timely return of evaluated assignments

Assignments are the most important tools that ensure "Guided Didactic Conversation" between teachers and learners in the case of Distance Education.

The responses of the respondents with regard to this parameter are given below.

Table: 7
Timely return of evaluated assignments

Age	Always	Mostly	Sometimes	Never
20-30	9	13	5	5
31-40	7	2	1	
41-50		1	1	
Gender				
Male	12	11	4	2
Female	4	5	3	3
Programme				
Arts, Humanities & Commerce	5	6	5	2
Basic Sciences & Technology	11	8	3	3

41% of the respondents in the age-group 20-30 feel that they “Mostly” get back the evaluated assignments from the study centre in time. 28% of this group feels that they “Always” get back the evaluated assignments from the study centre in time. Approximately the same relation holds true in the case of the Gender Divide and the Programme Divides.

Parameter 7: Effective handling of academic queries

Handling of academic queries at the study centres also determines upto a great extent the severity of drop outs in from an academic institution. The responses of the selected learners on this count are given below:

Table: 8
Effective handling of academic queries

Age	Always	Mostly	Sometimes	Never
20-30	6	16	7	3
31-40	7	1	3	
41-50		2		
Gender				
Male	10	11	5	1
Female	3	11	6	2
Programme				
Arts, Humanities & Commerce	3	8	7	
Basic Sciences & Technology	10	11	2	3

50% of the respondents in the age group 20-30 feel that Academic Queries are “Mostly” effectively handled at the study centres. 63% of the respondents in the age group 31-40 feel that such queries are “Always” effectively handled at the study centres. Similar, though not identical responses were elicited from all divides including Gender and Programmes.

Parameter 8: Proper supply of pre-admission information

Pre-admission information through its accurate and unhindered supply motivates a candidate to take up the academic programme. Accurate pre-admission information avoids disillusionment during the course of the programme and enhances student retention. The student response with regard to this parameter is given below:

Table: 9
Proper supply of pre-admission information

Age	Always	Mostly	Sometimes	Never
20-30	10	12	6	4
31-40	8	2	1	
41-50		1		1
Gender				
Male	12	12	3	1
Female	6	3	4	4
Programme				
Arts, Humanities & Commerce	5	5	5	3
Basic Sciences & Technology	13	10	2	2

69% of the respondents in the age group 20-30 feel that either “Always” or “Mostly” they get proper Pre-Admission information from the study centres. The proportion for the same in the 31-40 age group is 91%.

Among males this proportion is as high as 86%. A similar pattern is observed among all the other groups. However 11% of all the surveyed students also feel that they “Never” get proper pre-admission information from the study centres.

Parameter 9: Teaching facilities available at Study Centres

Teaching facilities at Study Centres are an important determinant of dropout rate in distance education.

The learner perception with regard to this important variable is given below.

Table: 10
Teaching facilities available at study centres

Age	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Highly Unsatisfactory
20-30	8	13	10	2
31-40	2	4	4	
41-50		1	1	
Gender				
Male	8	8	12	
Female	2	10	3	2
Programme				
Arts, Humanities & Commerce	4	7	6	1
Basic Sciences & Technology	6	11	9	1

Most of the participants feel that teaching facilities available at study centres are either “Excellent”, “Good” or at the least “Satisfactory”. Only 8% of the total surveyed feels that the facilities are “Highly unsatisfactory”.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The results of the study are significant as far as the student support system of IGNOU Regional Centre Mum.bai is concerned. The study has revealed the major strengths and weaknesses of the university. If we take the teaching facilities of the university into consideration, we find that only 4% of the respondents have termed the available facilities at the study centres as unsatisfactory. However on the other hand we find that around 11% of the respondents consider the provision of pre-admission information at IGNOU study centres as extremely wanting. This is a matter of great concern. The respondents were mostly happy with the way academic queries were handled at the study centres. Only 6% of the respondents find it as wanting at the IGNOU study centres. However an area of concern is that of return of evaluated assignments in time.

Not less than 11% of the surveyed students state that they never get back their evaluated assignments in time. Most of the surveyed learners feel that the teaching staff at the study centre is efficient. The dis-satisfaction level with the teaching staff is as less as 5%.

The learners are also extremely happy with the response mechanism available at the Regional Centre. Only 2% of the respondents are dissatisfied with the response mechanism of the regional centre. We also found the learners to be satisfied with the counseling sessions being conducted at the study centres. The dissatisfaction level with the same is less than 4%. The surveyed learners were also happy with the way in which administrative queries were handled at IGNOU. The dissatisfaction about the same was less than 3%. The response regarding the overall response mechanism of IGNOU was also similar.

Lessons for the Future:

The current study brings us face to face with some significant lessons for the future.

- Significant care should be given to response mechanism in Distance Education. Effectiveness of response mechanism can be effected only by ensuring that fully trained staff operate at the regional centres and study centres. The reliance on daily wages and part time staff at the Regional Centres of many institutions including IGNOU may affect the response mechanism very badly.
- The quality of the teaching staff at study centres is another variable that affects student retention. Going by field based experience, it is seen that the current remuneration rates of the ODL institutions are not sufficient to attract the best academics to take up counseling sessions especially in metros like Mumbai.
- The extent of Dis satisfaction seems to be higher regarding the services provided at the Learner Support Centres than those related to the Regional Centre. This calls for establishing an IGNOU full-fledged model study centre in every region, which could set the standards.
- Certain conclusions can also be derived from the expenditure and cost patterns of distance education in the country based on an earlier study by the author using regression models. The study of IGNOU in the particular research clearly indicated a linear relation between student enrolment and expenditure patterns. Needless to state, more students imply the need for additional resources and therefore require outlays on different aspects of distance education like Student Support Services, advertisements, material production and distribution and so on.

Therefore, along with the ever increasing expectations from distance education, there should also be a comparable increase in resource outlay to make the system worthwhile.

CONCLUSION

While there is nothing to suggest that the future of Indian Higher Education does not lie in the hands of Distance Education, issues related to student retention will continue to be hotly debated.

The redemption of the ODL system would lie in improving its service delivery mechanism and thereby making it worthy of the aspirations of its end users.

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