

Learner Support Services in Teacher Education through ODL

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Abstract: *The present global growth and popularity of open and distance learning (ODL) has been attributed to its benefits and advantages, such as flexibility for learners who wish to study while working. Teacher education and open and distance learning (ODL) are separately complex and critically important fields of conation. Used together, they have the potential to enhance the effective, efficient and justified provision of education and to maximize access to such provision by various categories of disadvantaged learners. One of the critical components in ODL is learner support. Learner support has frequently been identified as particularly important for student success in ODL. An open and distance education program must design and apply effective learner support services and systems. Learner support services through ODL played a crucial role in the success of teacher education. In open and distance learning collaboration and networking are called for the teacher development. Collaboration if effectively implemented contributes to enhance or to make positive changes in teacher development standards and expanded views of educative activities. Lack of interpersonal processes related to collaborative practice, resources and team spirit were challenges in trying to promote effective lecturer collaboration in teacher education. The objective of the present paper is to review the challenges in learner support services in teacher education through ODL and role of collaboration and networking for effective teacher education through ODL.*

Key Words: *Teacher education. Open and Distance learning. Learner Support Services. Collaboration.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is very broad and can be defined in various ways. Freeman (2004:6) defines ODL as a combination of two approaches which focus on enjoying access to learning. Learner support is defined in different ways in the distance and online learning literature (Brindley, Walti & Zawacki-Richter 2004). It might cover learning materials, teaching and tutoring and non-academic elements, administrative aspects, guidance and counselling. In this paper learner support refers to all kinds of services including face to face teaching during group discussions or tutoring. Dzakiria (2005:95) and Kelly and Mills (2007:149) add that learner support has frequently been identified by open learning institutions as being of particular importance for student success in ODL. It can be said that learner support is learner-centred and crucial for learner success in ODL. Hence it is important to point out that there is no single all-embracing definition. In ODL philosophy and practice, ODL represents approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from limit of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners (UNESCO 2002:7).

Open and Distance education has created a large number of opportunities for the expansion of educational opportunities. The distance learning institutions all over the world have been challenged to transform their policies and procedures to accommodate the ever growing number of learners. For the completion of this rapid demand, distance education programs must design and apply effective learner support services and systems. In many distance education systems, more means and resources are invested in the technical systems at the expense of the learner support systems. Equivalent or more resources should be invested in the learner support system if the distance education enterprise is to be successful (Gunawardena, 1996, 271).

Thus distance student support services can be divided into three basic categories – Academic, organisation and emotional support.

1.1 Academic support- this support is concerned with development of student's learning and his/her cognitive skills. It involves not just teaching but helping students develop learning skills together with the important skills of assessment and feedback.

The term 'Teaching' includes itself activities such as defining the course territory, explaining concepts, knowledge construction, demonstrating, giving examples, and monitoring student progress.

In teaching process the term 'Assessment' is related with not only formal assessment but also informal feedback to help students reflect on their strengths and weaknesses.

The word 'Developing learning skills' means helping students with numeracy and literacy skills in their teaching learning process.

Academic support includes face-to-face tutorial support as well as other innovations through multimedia technology. Multimedia content is used primarily to supplement print-based materials provided to learners in some subjects.

Feedback on tutor-marked assignments is another critical support system, serving as a platform of dialogue between learner and tutor.

1.2 Organisational support - is about helping a student with the management of their studies. It includes helping students:

- To manage their study time effectively,
- To keep up with the pace of the course,
- To find ways of prioritising work and family life and so on.

The second category of the learners' support is non-academic – the support of learners in the effective and organizational aspects of their studies (Simpson, 2000).

1.3 Emotional support - is about helping students deal with the emotional side of their learning. It includes helping students:

- To develop their learning motivation,
- To develop self-confidence in them as learners,
- To find ways of managing the learning stress, particularly assessment stress.

The third category is Continuous Assessment and Feedback. This forms part of the studies and is very important because it enables learners to assess their academic progress throughout the year. Besides having specific challenging, attainable learning goals and focusing on the task, the first factor that make goal-setting in the classroom effective is feedback. When feedback tells a learner that current effort have fallen short of the goals, the learner can exert more effort or even try another strategy. 'When feedback tells the learner that the goal is reached or exceed, the learner should feel satisfied and competent enough perhaps to set a higher goal for the future. There is evidence that feedback emphasizing progress is most effective (Woolfolk, 1998, 380-381). Organisational and Emotional support together are usually called 'Non-academic' support.

2. EFFECTIVENESS OF LEARNER SUPPORT SYSTEMS:

The learners' support system in Distance Education may be described as all activities beyond the production and the delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of learners in their studies (Simpson, 2000). The provision of learner support services including personal and financial counseling, careers guidance and support for learners is an established part of the support available to learners in all institutions. Besides the more traditional technology such as print, broadcast television and radio talks, open and distance education institutions add new technologies as they strive to enhance the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning. These include use of audiotapes, videotapes, web-based materials.

The learners' support is an important service that needs to be provided by the institution to the learners because of the characteristics of distance learners themselves. They are isolated and come from diverse backgrounds – economic, social, educational and occupational. The provision of such an educational support system given by the institution ensures the facilitation of communication between learners, the academic staff as well as the administration. The provision of learners' support is now widely and increasingly recognized as an essentials component of any open and distance learning system. As learners are the most important stakeholders in any educational system, distance education providers should provide the highest possible effective learner support services possible to all of them as without their presence, a distance education programme will not succeed (Ravisankar & Murthy, 2000).

3. FEATURES OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING SYSTEM:

Flexibility: The system is flexible in regard to modalities, timing, pace, place, age, admission criteria etc. Learners who are unable to continue their education through traditional system due to socio-economic or cultural reason are getting opportunities here. Flexibility in age and qualification to enter in desired academic programs makes the system learners friendly.

Effective Cost: In public and private institutes, expenditure for higher education in the traditional system is very high. Education through distance mode is able to help the students by saving considerable amount of money by removing the cost of transportation and high-priced printed text books of high cost.

Free from rigidity: In the traditional system, students of a certain age group are allowed. Again, for SC, ST and Physically Challenged students some reservation is there. It is very difficult for Trans-Genders to take education in the traditional system. But in ODL system everyone can get education without discrimination.

Teacher upgrading: Open universities, particularly in Asia, have provided a mechanism for reaching large audiences of teachers. In India they have seen teacher education as a priority. Use of multimedia helping to develop teacher's efficiency and teaching methods.

Curricular change and innovation: Open and distance learning has been used both for projects affecting the whole of the curriculum and for narrower purposes. Distance-teaching techniques have also been used to support curricular

change in individual subjects and have played a major role in familiarising teachers with information and communication technologies.

Career development: Open and distance learning has been used to support teachers' career development both through structured programmes, designed for specific groups of teachers, and by providing opportunities for individual teachers to raise the level of their own qualifications. Highly targeted programmes have been used for teachers who have gained, or are seeking, a new role. Larger numbers of teachers, seeking higher qualifications in their own career interest, have been enrolled by open universities on B.Ed. and M.Ed. courses. Universities have increasingly made online courses available internationally with the result that some teachers are now pursuing a crossborder degree.

Open educational resources: As one of the constraints on the development of open and distance learning is the need to invest in the development of teaching materials, there is a case for the sharing, or cooperative development, of materials. They can be used both for open and distance learning and as resources within conventional teaching institutions.

Introduced new technologies: In a rapid evolution, open and distance learning has changed and has embraced a changing mix of technologies. The main purposes of these changes are: to distribute teaching material to learners, and to allow interaction between learner and tutor or among learners. Computer-based technologies have been used with four different functions in teacher education. First, they have been used to distribute teaching materials, avoiding mailing costs or the time constraint of broadcasts, though transferring reproduction costs from the teaching institution to the learner. Computer-based learning (CBL) allows simulated two-way communication. Where there is internet access, learners can communicate with their tutors or with fellow students, taking part in e-learning. Teachers or trainers with internet access can download and use such type of open educational resources.

Distance delivery can address many challenges because it provides flexibility of access, but when the access is to institutions bound by the type of policies we refer to above, and then flexibility of access comes at the expense of openness and flexibility of time and overall pace. One response to this is the development of a series of qualifications that build on one another. Another response is serious attention to the concept of lifelong professional development. These two responses might go some way toward addressing the inevitable tension that arises between student demand for flexibility and the constraints that come with funding.

4. CHALLENGES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING SYSTEM:

Challenges which are facing in ODL are as follows:-

- Inadequate or poor continuous (in-service) teacher development and teacher training facilities;
- Shortage of trained and qualified teachers;
- Lack of opportunities for continuous professional development;
- Shortage of reference and training materials for teachers;
- Underdevelopment and under-utilization of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) to benefit teacher training and development

Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. The principles that underpin open delivery, particularly those of flexible entry and student-controlled time for completion, do not always sit comfortably with funding regimes linked to quality issues in teacher education. For example, the standardisation of a traditional academic year, as well as timetabling designed to move students through a programme to completion within set time frames, works against the principles of flexibility that drive open and distance education. Accreditation agencies often do not recognise teaching qualifications that have been achieved over extended periods or in a somewhat piecemeal manner.

5. CONCLUSION:

The purpose this paper, here is not to provide a representative overview but instead to identify particular aspects of that activity that provide a framework for engaging productively with the possibilities of ODL. It can be said that the Distance Learning system of education is being more popular around the world and in India day by day. In spite of its remarkable success, one can still find some constraints in this learning system. Given the concern noted above about the quality of contemporary teachers and their education, it is important to acknowledge what current trends in teacher education mean for that quality.

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