

Assessing learner support services at IGNOU: A case study of BCA programme

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Abstract

Distance education has moved from the correspondence model through the multimedia model to the current trend of the Tele-learning model and now employs a variety of highly developed and refined materials, video tapes, audio tapes, computer conferencing and computer based courseware. It appears that modern distance education and open learning and communication technology are now almost inseparable. Efforts have been made to provide social interactions in contiguous two way communication channels between student and teacher, student & medium, via a number of communications and electronic technologies in use for distance open teaching in addition, attendance at study centre, provide distance and open learners with ample opportunities for social, psychological and other interactions on a regular basis through the duration of their course. Regional centers are considered as the nerve center of OUs in India because it is through them that various types of support services are provided to the learners. They act as intermediary between the headquarters and the local study centers. Though IGNOU has a vast set up of support services, but there is need to evaluate these services from time to time in order to understand the problem and the grievances of the learners so that a more efficient support system can be provided. For this purpose, we have undertaken a study to evaluate the usefulness of the IGNOU learner support system. The findings of this study will help the University to rejuvenate its learner support system so that the learning experiences of the learners are rewarding.

Keywords: BCA, IGNOU, support services, learners, distance education, open learning, ODL, OUs, RCs, SCs

1. Introduction

Contrary to popular belief, distance and open learning have and need interactivity for effective learning as much as the face-to-face teaching. Bates (1991) ^[1] points out that there are two different types of interactivity in distance learning just as in face-to-face: Social and individual. Social interaction between learners and teachers needs to be balanced in the individual student's interaction with teaching-learning resources including study guides, text books, audiotapes, videotapes and computer assisted learning programmes. Bates categorically states that for both conventional and distance education students, by far the largest part of their studying is done alone, interacting with text books and other learning media (Bates, 1991) ^[1].

The multimedia package is both the back-bone and the eye-catcher in open learning. Such a package might include self-instructional print material, workbooks, video tapes, audio tapes and even computers and interactive video. It might look so accessible, so easy and sometimes may be relatively cheap. But, it may not be that easy, and packages alone may not suffice; learners without support are most susceptible to delay their completion of a programme or to drop out altogether. At the time of need, they have no one to turn to. Simpson (2000) ^[11] defines the learner support system, as including all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their studies. These could be either in the form of academic or nonacademic support. Similarly Garrison (1989, 29) ^[5] observes that in distance education "support is concerned with a range of human and non-human resources to guide and facilitate the educational transaction."

IGNOU has a vast heterogeneous group of students which is demographically diverse, educationally backward and

economically weak. It is the social responsibility of IGNOU to work for the betterment of and provide opportunity to this section of society. Since, such programmes are highly technical, students, therefore, need more support from the institution.

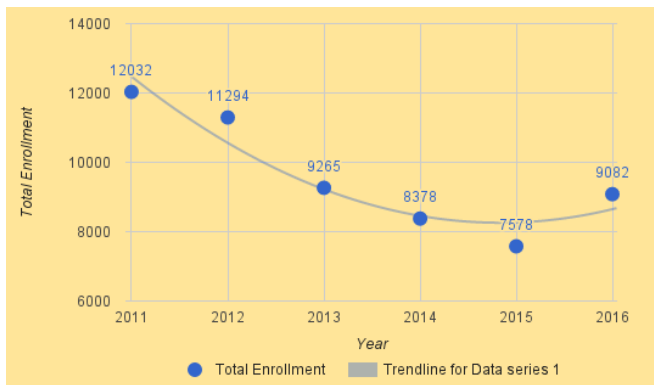
The need to provide extra support to the learners prompted Open Universities in India to take decision regarding the establishment of Special Student Services Division which manages a network of both regional and study centres. Regional centers are considered the nerve center of Open Universities in India because it is through them that various types of support services are provided to the learners. They act as intermediary between the headquarters and the local study centers.

2. Need /objective of the study

IGNOU is offering 228 Programmes at present and has 28, 10, 958 students on-roll. Out of the total programmes offered, Computer programmes are very popular among students. Almost 18.36% of the total students are enrolled in computer programmes till the year 2016.

Table 1: Total Enrollment of BCA programme for last Five Years

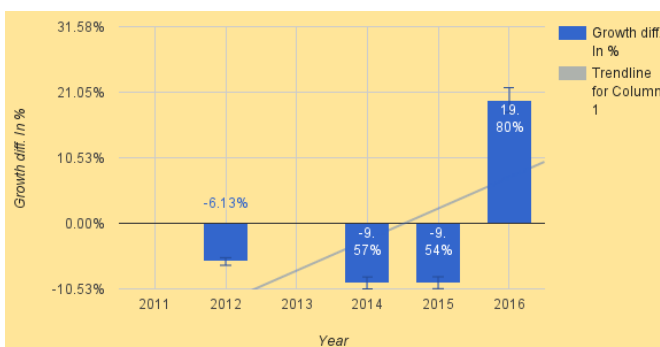
Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total Enrollment	12032	11294	9265	8378	7578	9082
Growth Diff. In Nos.		-738	-2029	-887	-800	1504
Growth diff. In %		-6.13%	-17.96.5%	-9.57%	-9.54%	19.8%



Total Enrollment Vs Year



Growth Diff. In Nos. Vs Year



Growth Diff. In % Vs Year

Table 1 shows that during the last five years, enrolment in BCA programme is going down sharply except in the year 2015-16, there is 19.8% increase in the enrolment. The downward trend is a matter of serious concern, since computer programmes are one of the flagship programmes of the University. Various factors contribute to such a scenario. It is imperative to look into the factors which contribute to the success or failure of the programme. Distance learning students are often placed in a unique situation in which they have to study in isolation, away from teachers or fellow students. Effective distance education requires a strong support system. Declining enrolment in this programme, raised questions regarding the services being provided to the learners. Need to evaluate student support provided to the learners become necessary. One important means of analyzing the effectiveness of the teaching-learning experience in a distance education system in through the analysis of the learner support system. "Support system contribute to the "process" of a course

as do the learning materials" (Hodgson, 1986,56). When evaluation is commissioned internally, it provides regular feedback about the different aspects of the programme such as design and development, self-learning material, media mix and media integration, counseling, practical sessions, communication to students, assignment system etc. Good planning demands a sensitivity to the way students learn and to draft and important plans that fit student's educational background and culture. A sensitivity to the needs of learners will also effect the development of teaching media and technologies. In the present study, support services offered to the BCA students are evaluated. The significance of the study would be to sensitized the planners to plan effective system of student support based on the understanding of the needs of the learners.

3. Design of the study

We took a sample of 1000 students of BCA programme from Delhi, Bihar & Haryana Region. After interacting with them, through questionnaire and interviews, a feedback was provided to sensitize the institution for establishing a comprehensive system of support services for the learners. The study intended to present a framework for establishing a comprehensive system of support to students so that their educational experience were at least as rewarding as that of traditional students at the university support system. Logical and necessary first step in the development of such a system is understanding learning from the perspective of a distance learner.

Descriptive survey method was used in the present study. Questionnaire method was used to gather data. The researcher randomly administrated questionnaires to a sample of 1000 BCA students of 2013-14 session with self-addressed envelopes. 367 students sent back the questionnaires duly filled in. The data thus collected was analysed and presented in tabular form. To get an in-depth understanding of the student's grievances 50 BCA students from Delhi were interviewed and their responses have been duly incorporated in the analysis.

The questionnaire was divided into three broad themes, as follows:

Part-I: Learner's Personal, Demographic and Educational Information

A geographical background, sex, community background, material status employment status, economics status.

Part-II: Learner's ideas before the study

- Reason for joining the course
- Reason for joining IGNOU
- Their expectations after completing the programme.

Part-III: Learner's views regarding Students Support Services (SSS)

- Experience with the multimedia package
- Experience at study centers.
- Counseling Sessions
- Behavior of the staff at SC
- Evaluation process
- Utilizing of assignments
- Advantages/disadvantages of studying at IGNOU

4. Results and Discussion

Part-I: On Profile of the respondents in terms of Age, Gender, Marital status, Employment studies etc.

Table 2: Gender

Gender	No	%
Male	285	77.66%
Female	82	22.34%

Table 2 shows that 77.66% respondents were male corresponding to female (22.34%).

Table 3: Age

Year	No	%
Below 20 Yrs	247	67.34%
20-30 Yrs	119	32.43%
30-40 Yrs	1	0.27%

Table 3 shows that 67.30% respondents belonged to age-group below 20 yrs followed by 32.43% who belonged to 20 to 30 yrs. Only 0.27% belonged to the age group of 30 to 40 yrs.

Table 4: Marital Status

Status	No	%
Married	10	2.73%
Unmarried	357	97.27%

Table 4 shows that majority of the respondents were unmarried whereas only 2.73% were Married.

Table 5: Social Status

Status	No	%
SC	13	3.55%
ST	5	1.36%
OBC	49	13.35%
General	295	80.38%
Not replied	5	1.36%

Table 5 reflects that only 1.36% belonged to Schedule Tribe, 3.55% to Schedule Cast, 13.35% to Other Backward Classes whereas 80.38% belonged to General Category. 1.36% did not replay to this question.

Table 6: Employment Status

Status	No	%
Govt.	36	9.82%
Pvt.	38	10.35%
Professional	2	0.54%
Self-employment	41	11.17%
Agriculture	5	1.36%
Unemployed	228	62.13%
Not- replied	17	4.63%

Table 6 reveals that majority of the students (62.13%) were unemployed 11.17% student were self-employed, 10.35% were in private business, 9.26% were Govt. employees, only 0.54% were professional and 1.36% students were engaged in Agriculture. 4.63 % did not reply to this question.

Part-II: Respondent's ideas before the study

Table 7: Student Objective of enrollment in BCA programme

Choice	Yes	No
Interest	21	5.72
Professional Skills	54	14.71
Better job	196	53.40
Change of Career	17	4.63
Higher qualification	75	20.43
Any Other	4	1.11

Table 7 shows that, 53.40% respondents opted for this programme for getting better jobs, 20.43% for improving their qualification, 14.71% for improving professional skills, 5.72% wanted to do this programme because of their interest in it. The table indicates that the urge to get job got a high response as against to develop skills and to continue education. 4.63% want to change their career graph and 1.11% did not give any specific reason for opting this programme.

Table 8: Reason for Enrolling at IGNOU

Reason	No	%
Missed formal Education	4	1.11
Circumstances Prevented to study	54	14.71
IGNOU fees are less	65	17.71
Quality & Reputation	171	45.59
Relevance to work	6	1.63
Flexible study mode	43	11.71
No alternative where I live	13	3.54
Any Other	11	3.00
Total	367	100%

Table 8 unveils that, 46.59% came to IGNOU for the high quality of the programme and the reputation of the University, 17.71% came because fees for the course is less as compared to other institutions, 14.71% came because their circumstances prevented them to study in conventional system AS a result they opted for an off campus university, 11.71% cited flexible mode of study at IGNOU as the main reason, 3.54% had no alternative but to go to IGNOU because of the Physical and geographical distances, 1.11% came to IGNOU because they missed their formal education and 3.00% did not cite any specific reasons.

Table 9: Expectations after completing the programme

Status	No	%
Up gradation of Knowledge	129	35.15
Promotion	20	5.45
Increments in salary	10	2.72
Better job prospects	150	40.87
Up gradation of Qualification	54	14.71
N.R	4	1.10
Total	367	100

Student were asked about their expectation after completing the programme. Table 09 exhibits that 40.87% student said that they excepted better job prospects, followed by 35.15% students who wanted to upgrade their knowledge and thought that after completing the programme they would be able to

achieve their objective. 14.71% student excepted that this programme would up-grade their qualifications. 5.45% felt that it would help them in getting promotion where as 2.72% enrolled because they excepted an increment in the salary after completing this programme. 1.10% student did not respond to this question.

The above discussion highlighted some interesting facts. Firstly the choice of the programme opted have to be in the line with career ambitions. As a result better job prospects had to be the major factor in the decision making process of the student. Majority of the respondent had the objective of getting better jobs after completion of this course, in mind, though some of them joined the BCA programme to improve their qualification. Secondly, IGNOU is becoming increasing popular among students. We have seen in the 'Part-I' that majority of the students are 12th Pass and are unemployed. The quality of the courses offered and its reputation as distance teaching university attract a large number of students. The University is a boon who missed formal education. Less fees and flexible study mode prompt the student to enroll in various courses offered by it. Thirdly, the students had a clear idea of what they would achieve after completing this programme. Up gradation of knowledge and getting better jobs were the main aim of the respondents. In the competitive world where jobs are scarce and difficult to get, BCA degree would have equipped them with necessary skill to hunt for permanent jobs suitable to their needs & abilities.

Part-III: Student views regarding SSS

The objective of the part is to analyze the utilization of support services provided to BCA students. IGNOU is spending a huge sum of money for extending support service to the learners. Whether the learners are able to take advantage of the support facilities? Does the staff at the Study Centre and Regional centre cooperating the learners to overcome their difficulties? What can be done to make the support services more responsive to the needs of the learners? These are some of the questions addressed in this part of the study.

Table 10: Fulfillment of the objective

Objective Fulfilled	No	%
Yes	140	38.15
No	206	56.13
N.A	21	5.72
Total	367	100

Table 10 reveals that, 56.13% of the respondents said that the objective with which they had joined IGNOU were not fulfilled whereas 38.15% answered in affirmative. 5.72% did not reply.

Table 11: Self-instructional study material of IGNOU

SIM	No	%
Very good & Self-Instructional	129	35.16
Just adequate	9	2.45
Obsolete requiring revision	193	52.59
Useless	6	1.63
N.R	30	8.17
Total	367	100

As seen in the table's No. 11, 35.16% respondents said that the

Self-Instructional Material was of good quality, 2.45% said that it was just adequate whereas 52.59% said that the material was obsolete and it needed revision. 1.63% did not find the SIM useful, 8.17% did not respond to this query.

Table 12: Visit at the study center

Visit	No	%
Twice a week	-	
Once a Week	-	
Once a fortnight	103	28.07
Once in a month	155	42.23
Rarely	73	19.89
Never	31	8.45
N.R	5	1.36
Total	367	100

As depicted in the table no. 12, 42.23% respondents visited the study center once in a month and 28.07% once in a fortnight. 19.89% respondents rarely visited the SC and 8.45% did not visit the SC at all 1.36% did not reply to this question.

Table 13: Reason to visit the study center

Reasons for visiting SC	No	%
For counselling Purpose	203	55.31
For collective study Material		
Watch Video/listen Audio	35	9.54
Collective assignment	49	13.35
Using SC Library	65	17.71
N.R	15	4.09
Total	367	100

Table no 13 shows that respondents 55.31% visited the Study Centre for counseling purpose, 17.71% to use library facilities, 13.35% to collect assignments and 9.54% to watch video and to listen audio tape. 4.09% did not reply to this question.

Table 14: Time taken to reach the study center

Time taken to reach study center	No	%
Less than 1 hr.	73	19.89
1-3 hrs	288	78.47
3-5 hr		
Overnight and more		
N.R	6	1.64
Total	367	100

As depicted in the table no 14, 19.89% respondents said that it took less than one hr to reach study center whereas 78.45% said that it took 1-3 hrs to reach the study center from their home. 1.64% did not respond.

The above discussion provide us some insight regarding the utilization of study centers. Firstly, most students visited the study center only once in a month or once in a fortnight. The reason for their infrequent visit may be attributed to the geographical location of the study center. Majority of the students said that it took one to three hrs for them to reach the study center. In fact, such distant location of the study centers defeat the basic purpose of providing education at the door steps of the learners. It became even more difficult for female students to visit the study center more frequently.

Table 15: Evaluation of assignment and term end exams

Satisfaction or not	No	%
Yes	42	11.44
No	309	84.20
N.R	16	4.36
Total	367	100

Table no 15 shows that, 84.20% said that they were not satisfied with the evaluation of assignments and term end exam answer sheets whereas 11.44% said that they were satisfied. 4.36% did not respond.

Table 16: Assignment Questions

Assignment Question	No	%
Yes	200	54.50
No	155	42.23
N.R	12	3.27
Total	367	100

Table no 16 shows that 54.50% respondents received assignment questions in time whereas 42.23% respondents replied that they did not receive assignment question in time. 3.27% did not respond to this question.

Table 17: Average turnaround time for the assignments after evaluation

Turnaround time	No	%
Fortnight	-	-
1 month	-	-
2 month	41	11.17
More than 2 month	97	26.43
Never returned	219	59.67
N.R	10	2.73
Total	367	100

As shown in table no 17, the students find great difficulty in getting their assignments back after evaluation. 59.67% of the respondents said that their assignment were never returned, 26.43% said that they were returned after more than 2 months and only 11.17% said that they were returned after 2 months. 2.73% respondents did not reply to this query. Regarding assignment, the students faced great difficulties in getting the assignment back after evaluation. 84.20% respondents replied that they were also not much satisfied with the evaluation of their assignments. Though assignments are given to students for the better understanding of the subject but the difficulty in getting back the evaluated assignments work as a demotivating factor.

Table 18: Attitude of the staff at the study center

Attitude	No	%
Positive	52	14.71
Indifferent	58	15.80
Negative	257	70.03
N.R	-	-
Total	367	100

Table 18 shows that 70.03% respondent did not find the attitude of the staff at the study center co-operative. 15.80% were of the opinion that their attitude was indifferent where as 14.17% said that they found the staff cooperative and positive.

Table 19: Schedule for counseling sessions

Schedule	No	%
Yes	210	57.22
No	140	38.15
N.R	17	4.63
Total	367	100

Table 19 shows that 57.22% respondents received counseling schedule for counseling sessions whereas 38.15% did not receive any such information. 4.63% respondents did not reply to this question.

Table 20: The quality of the counseling

Quality	No	%
Very good	35	9.54
Good	97	26.43
Poor	188	51.23
Very Poor	35	9.54
N.R	12	3.26
Total	367	100

Table 20 shows that, 9.54% respondents felt that the quality of the counseling was very good, 26.43% said that it was good, 51.23% said that the counseling was poor whereas 9.54 % said that it was very poor. 3.26% did not respond.

When students were asked about the way counseling was organized at the study center, majority of them answered in negative. They put forward mainly four reason; a) faculty was not good, b) many times faculty was absent c) time wastage in travelling because study center was very far from their residences d) frequent opening and closing of study centers and change of study centers.

The students are also not satisfied with the counseling sessions. Distance learners are heterogeneous group of learners. They have different levels of understanding. Some of them are successful learners where as some of them would need far greater support. The purpose of the counseling session is not to make them totally dependent on it, but to indicate in them learning skills so that they are able to organize their studies on their own. But unfortunately, student do not find such kind of support in the counseling sessions organized at the study centres.

Table 21: Hands-on experience or computer practical

Quality of experience	No	%
Yes	112	30.52
No	240	65.40
N.R	15	4.08
Total	367	100

Table no. 21 depicts that, 30.52% respondents were satisfied with the quality of hands on experiences or computer practical whereas 65.40% were dissatisfied. 4.08% did not respond.

Table 22: Justification of fees

Fees justified	No	%
Yes	167	45.51
No	195	53.13
N.R	5	1.66
Total	367	100

Table no 22 shows that 53.13% respondents felt that the fees paid by them was not justified in view of the benefits achieved whereas 45.51% said that was justified. 1.36% did not respond. In a programme like BCA hands on experience on computers is very essential. But it is found that a number of study centers do not have required number of computers at their study centers. As result hands on experience is not properly provided to the learners.

5. Recommendations

Based on the analysis, relevant issues were highlighted in the study and recommendations were put forth for the improvement in the system:

1. Timely delivery of course materials to the students must be ensured to keep their motivation and enthusiasm.
2. The submission and evaluation of assignments are a source of major frustration of the students. The turnaround time for the corrected assignments should not exceed 2-3 weeks. Complaints of the non-receipt of course material and problems relating to submission of assignment marks should be promptly attended to by the distribution section and Student Registration & Evaluation Division of the university.
3. Adequate face to face contact should be provided. The counseling session at the study centers need to be monitored regularly by faculty at headquarter.
4. The location of the study centers need to be taken into account. Students should be allotted study centre near their place of residences as the counseling session are scheduled mostly in the evening. Time taken in the process for changing study center and Regional Center need to be reduced and the process should be student friendly.
5. The support services provided by the University should be much more organized and in time so that students do not suffer. A proper system of feedback from students need to be evolved in order to bring about improvements in the system. The ambit of education process and feedback from learners is an important characteristic of student support services (Tait A, 2003) [14].
6. For professional courses like BCA more practical sessions need to be organized.
7. A sound monitoring system should be developed to continuously assess the working of the regional and study centers so as to check lapses, delays slipshod work and other weakness of the system. The support systems developed in recognition of student needs help the distance learner become competent and self-confident in learning, social interactions and self-evaluation. Rac (1989)

6. Conclusion

Three general points emerge for planners from this study. First the nature and extent of student services need to be based on an understanding of students, their profile and their needs. Second, despite distance educator's and distance teaching institution's search for parity of esteem, the students attracted to open and distance learning are often from modest educational backgrounds with a limited record of success. The most successful students still tend to go to the more privileged conventional institutions. As a result, it has become the responsibility of distance educators to plan effective systems of student support. Thirdly, individual student support is relatively costly and will not show the economies of scale that

is possible for the large scale development or distribution of learning materials.

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